

Plotting Graduate School



Career Services Office • St. John's College, Santa Fe, NM

Introduction

During this workshop we will utilize the *Information Search Process* to provide a model for St. John's students to prepare for their next step after college – this model can be used to plan most major changes in life, including, in the case of students: preparing for internships, planning to study abroad, getting a job, and preparing to travel.

Part of what we would like to emphasize is the importance of using the resources you have at the College: the Career Services Office, Meem Library, faculty, staff, and other students.

The information-gathering process includes: contemplating the task and considering possible topics, selecting a topic, exploring and gathering the specific information you need, and concluding with a presentation, or in this case a completed graduate school application.

As you are gathering information, please always keep in mind the importance of evaluating the information and its sources – who is the author, what is the bias, is the information verifiable and what is the timeliness of the information?

The information-gathering process involves:

- I. Initiation** – Beginning the inquiry. *“What am I trying to accomplish?”*
- II. Investigation** – Brainstorming. *“What do I find personally interesting?”*
- III. Exploration** – Exploring information. *“What are my options?”*
- IV. Formulation** – Forming a focused perspective. *“I’ll try this!”*
- V. Collection** – Collecting information. *“Now what do I need to know?”*
- VI. Presentation** – Submitting a completed application and fulfilling all the related components (interviews, arrangements, other documentation).
- VII. Assessment** – Assessing the process. *“What did I learn from this?”*

I. Initiation: *“What am I trying to accomplish?”*

The problem is introduced.

Example: I am interested in becoming a librarian. From what I gather I will need to go to graduate school in order to find employment beyond the paraprofessional level. [A paraprofessional is a nonprofessional helping with professional work; a trained assistant to a professional person.]

Question: *“What do I need to do to get a job as a professional librarian?”*

II. Investigation: *“What do I find personally interesting?”*

Identification of general areas for investigation. Brainstorm: gather information to help you to visualize ideas, identify a focus, and raise questions for further exploration. Imagine anything is possible. Editing comes later.

Example: *“What sort of library would I like to work in?”* Types of libraries: academic, public, school, law, medical, archives, special, research.

Assessment.

A. Do a survey of your skills and interests.

- What do you like to do?
- What are you good at?
- What do you want to become more proficient in?
- What have you done in the past and enjoyed?

B. Do you know someone with a career you think you would like to try?

C. What do you see yourself doing for a living? Is it sustainable?

D. Is there a specific job (doctor, teacher) or a particular field (medicine, education) you are interested in knowing more about?

E. What challenges do you want to face (from your career)?

These websites will help when **considering a career.**

- <http://www.mapping-your-future.org>
- the Occupational Outlook Handbook <http://www.bls.gov/oco/>

If you are having trouble deciding on a specific focus in the field you wish to pursue, survey the literature to see what is being written in the field, who is publishing it, and where the work is being done. Knowing the secondary sources in your field is a major part of graduate and post graduate work. You will need to know what's being written, who's writing it and – in some fields – what your opinions are.

Use the library databases of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and **First Search** – both available under “Electronic Resources” on the library’s page of the SJC’s website. You will need to use your student id number to access these databases.

III. Exploration: “What are my options?”

A. Schools - Which schools are offering the programs you’re interested in? Where are they?

Resources: <http://www.petersons.com>, <http://gradschools.com>, *Testing & Education Reference Center* link on the library web page (through Electronic Resources). These sites will **help you view majors, programs and schools by location and cost.**

1. Weigh the differences between first, second, and third tier schools. First tier are ivy leagues and can get you into high profile positions within your career, but you generally don’t get much, if any, funding to attend these programs. This could leave you in a lot of debt. If you test well on the GRE, LSAT, MCAT, etc.; you should be able to make it easily into the second tier schools and come out with less debt (particularly if you can get funding, although that varies depending on the degree). Third tier schools may provide easier access to professors and opportunities or they may be attractive because of their location. The importance of the tier system varies depending on the field; it is more applicable if you are interested in specific areas of law or medicine.
2. Professional organizations can point you toward education, funding, and jobs in your field of interest. Student memberships are often available at a reduced cost; attending one

of their annual conventions may be a way to meet up with professionals. See **Appendix 1** for a list of professional organizations in a wide variety of fields.

B. Funding your education & choosing a location

1. **Funding.** Funding is an important issue for your education, obviously. You should know when to expect funding for higher education and when to expect to get more loans. Consider what your debt load will look like and how you will pay it off. The budget sheet available at the Federal Student Aid website can help you to think more clearly about where your money will be going:
<http://www.ed.gov/offices/OSFAP/DirectLoan/BudgetCalc/budget.html>
 - (a) *How are you paying for school?* How much debt have you accrued already? How much more debt can you realistically take on? These are important questions to consider when you're thinking about attending graduate school. Being saddled with enormous debt for most of your life will make things much harder than they need to be.
 - (b) *In some fields, if a school accepts you but doesn't offer you any funding, it is tantamount to being rejected.* Schools in the Humanities and Sciences should offer to cover your tuition and often offer a stipend for being a Teaching or Research Assistant.
 - (c) *State schools* can be a great way to go because it's easier to get the in-state tuition covered and many state schools have solid programs in a wide variety of fields. Prestigious schools may sound more appealing for the name value, but keep in mind what kind of career you are actually aiming for; don't pay for a name that you can't afford and don't really need.
 - (d) *Teaching Assistantships and Research Assistantships* can be a great support in funding your education. Many schools offer TA and RA positions to help support their Master's and PhD students.
2. **Location.** Do you want to live in and be associated with a particular region of the country? Much of the purpose of graduate school is to be trained to be a professional in your field and you'll be making important professional connections in that school's region. Consider what your cost of living will be, it varies greatly between Albuquerque and New York City. A cost of living calculator can help you figure out the financial differences between the cities and towns you might be considering:
<http://www.bestplaces.net/COL/>.

Transition

- Survey your notes.
- List possible options.
- Choose a particular focus while discarding others or combine several themes.

IV. Formulation: “I’ll try this!”

Forming a focused perspective. See what bubbles up to the top. Make your choice and prepare to investigate it in detail. This is the time to explore, read and reflect to form a personal perspective of focus. It is the most difficult stage. You may encounter inconsistent information and begin to doubt the appropriateness of your inquiry, the adequacy of your information sources and your ability to complete the process. Remember you are exploring to find a focus, not to support a decision at this point.

$$\text{Resources (\$) + Time + Possibilities (degrees) = Focus}$$

V. Collection: “Now what do I need to know?”

Collecting information. Investigate the information you collected along with the results provided by Career Services from your research request. Use library databases for a survey of the publications to see what potential advisers are publishing. Use what you’ve researched to help write a strong **statement of purpose**. The more information you can include about the program, the faculty, and why you specifically want to attend that specific school, the more seriously the admissions officers will take your application.

A. Timeline

Create a timeline and stick to it. Look at the application deadline and work your way backwards to the present. It can be very helpful to give yourself a false deadline 2-3 weeks prior to the actual deadline; that way you get everything in early and if there is a hitch in the plans you have some breathing room. Keep track of all the materials you will need from other people, such as **letters of recommendation** and **transcripts**, and get those going as early as possible. Most tutors need at least a month of advance notice on letters of recommendation. Be aware that transcripts from any prior institution can typically take 4-6 weeks. Start early! Read the article by Kyle Simmons on the importance of time in the application process in **Appendix 2**.

B. Tests

Take the necessary tests. Nearly all schools require the GRE (Graduate Records Examination); if you’re applying to Law, Medical, or Business school, they require specific tests (LSAT, MCAT, GMAT). **Two to three months of study is suggested before you take any of these tests.** There are organizations that offer classes and tutoring in the art of taking the various tests; these courses can be costly, but they are also very effective. See **Appendix 3** for a list of testing sites and study help. The Career Services Library has study guides for most of the major tests.

C. Letters of Recommendation

Be selective when asking for letters of recommendation; some tutors have said that it is the single most important part of being accepted by a program. Ask individuals who know you well and be sure that you did well in their classes. Check your transcripts to see what your grades are: This is not always what St. John’s espouses, but it is necessary information for *all* aspects of your graduate school application. Make sure to give your recommenders all of the necessary

forms and the information they might need. Giving them a copy of your statement of purpose (even if just a draft) can help them write more effective letter.

Be polite and timely when asking for letters of recommendation. Although you shouldn't feel that you are asking tutors for a favor – this is, after all, part of their job – please remember that tutors receive multiple requests, especially during application periods, and it takes time to craft a good letter. If they say no, that's because they didn't think they could do you justice. They are doing you a favor by declining; acknowledge their honesty. For those who do write letters, make sure you provide them with all the information they need, give them enough time to write, thank them profusely, and keep them apprised of your progress.

D. Writing Sample

If your application requires a writing sample you'll need to think about what you might use for that. Senior Essay? Seminar papers? Tutorial papers? What matters most is that it be a piece of good writing. Look at your tutor comments and have others read it (including Career Services!) for their opinion. You can edit an already written paper for length and content. It's easiest to use something you've already written; don't add stress to an already stressful process.

E. Funding

Do your FAFSA as soon as you can, let the colleges you're applying to know that you're interested in financial support, check out scholarship options and apply as soon as possible. Look at your loan options with the various lenders. Be as timely as you can about finding the money for your next round of school.

Resources for academic literature through Meem Library and the Career Services

Library:

1. **Academic Search Premier** – many full text current articles.
2. **JSTOR** – archive of full text articles
3. **FirstSearch** – order books through Interlibrary; read texts important to the field.
4. **Career Services Library** – check out books on graduate school application process, writing resumes and statements of purpose and more. [**Appendix 4**]

VI. Presentation: Applications, resumes, references, and interviews

- **Organize your materials.**
- **Review your tasks.**
- **Write your documents.**
(letters of intent, applications, requests for letters of recommendation)
- **Know your time limits and what you need to accomplish.**

The application process is a test, another hoop to jump through to prove you can complete assigned tasks on time. If you can't get your graduate application submitted in the time constraints and with the appropriate forms, admissions councils will assume you will have the same problem with your graduate work. No extensions exist. Know when your application, letters of recommendations, transcripts, and any other forms are due; work backwards from that date and give yourself a new deadline of a month before the official one. Having everything in

early makes you look good and lowers your stress level. It is also very important to mail all your forms rather than email or fax them; remember that the mail doesn't always deliver on time. Career Services is available to help you with the mailing process.

- Start writing rough drafts of your letter of intent or statement of purpose early and have Career Services, tutors, and others whom you trust look over your drafts and give suggestions.
- If your application is to be done entirely online be sure that you've informed your letter writers of that, it can be a confusing process for some tutors and it will be helpful to them if you can explain how the process works.
- Proofread, proofread, proofread! And then have someone else proofread.
- Make sure you have *all* the forms you need; for example many schools require cover sheets or waivers for letters of recommendation. Keep everything in order and make sure all papers are signed and dated correctly.
- Take your time whenever you have to fill out a form by hand. Your writing should be neat and legible, preferably in black ink. Be aware that good penmanship is an important character attribute at many institutions abroad. Typewriters are available in Career Services.
- Use the research you've unearthed. Demonstrate that you are making an informed choice, whatever you may be applying for. Showing you have done your research and are confident about your decision is attractive and impressive to admissions decision-makers.
- Talk about your goals, interests, and what has specifically attracted you to the school and program. If a certain professor, research project, or program has drawn you to apply, mention it in your letter of intent; it is very helpful for the people looking at your application.
- If an interview is required, schedule a mock interview with Career Services.

VII. Assessment: “What did I learn from this?”

Regardless of the outcome of your efforts, there are things you can learn from the experience. The answers can help you approach other major decisions throughout your lifetime.

- **What worked?**
- **What would you do differently next time?**
- **How well did you manage time and stress?**

Other Considerations

- You don't have to go directly into graduate school out of St. John's.
- Online and distance degrees can be a great option if you're concerned about the cost of relocating. They are more and more respected and can be a great way to work full-time in a place you're happy in while furthering your education.

- It is still very important and helpful to think about career and graduate school choices now while you have the resources of the college at your finger tips. You don't have to commit to anything until you're ready, however it can really help your choices down the line if you start researching them now.
- Don't rush, always continue researching and refining your goals throughout your life.
- Career Services is available to alumni as well as current students, whether you need help with graduate school applications or job hunting. Be sure to stay in touch with the College.
- Taking time off to pursue other interests, like traveling or getting an internship in a field that interests you, can be an ideal choice. Consider trying some classes in a more technical-training atmosphere, like culinary arts or nursing, at your nearest community college.
- Taking time before you attend graduate school never harms your candidacy, it can only help you; you'll have experienced more of the world and know more about yourself and your interests.
- After you graduate, joining the Alumni Association at St. John's can be an incredibly useful decision. Through alumni connections you'll be able to find Johnnies wherever you move in the country and the world. You can find other alums who work in your fields. Alumni have access to a career center and job search engine that can be very helpful: <http://alumni.stjohnscollege.edu/?AlumniAssociation>.

Source: Kuhlthau, Carol Collier (Fall 1989). **Information Search Process: A Summary of Research and Implications for School Library Media Programs.** SLMQ, 18 (1)

Appendix 1

Professional Organizations

American Library Association <http://www.ala.org/>

American Bar Association <http://www.abanet.org/>

American Association for Applied Linguistics <http://www.aal.org/>

American Institute of Architects <http://www.aia.org/>

American Medical Association <http://www.ama-assn.org/>

American Political Science Association <http://www.apsanet.org/>

American Philosophical Association <http://www.apaonline.org/>

Modern Language Association <http://www.mla.org/>

Council of American Overseas Research Centers <http://www.caorc.org/>

American Translator's Association <http://www.atanet.org/index.php>

Cognitive Science Society <http://www.cognitivesciencesociety.org/index.html>

Psychology Professional Societies <http://www.dialogical.net/psychology/societies.html>

National Association of Mathematics <http://www.nam-math.org/>

National Society of Professional Engineers <http://www.nspe.org/index.html>

Professional Association for the Advancement of Technology <http://ieee.org>

National Education Association <http://www.nea.org/index.html>

American Historical Association <http://www.historians.org>

Appendix 2

A Little Advice from a fellow Johnny:

It's About Time (Taking the Stress Out of Applying to a PhD Program)

Of course there are many steps involved when it comes to applying to a PhD program, and each demands attention to detail, serious preparation, mindful consideration, and a truthful introspection about what you would like to attain. Such things I leave to you to tackle, as you see fit, and do not presume to tell you how to personally deal with them. But, what I would like to address in this essay is Time: specifically the management and awareness of Time as it relates to applying to a PhD Program.

The Rolling Stones brag: “Oh, time is on my side, yes it is,” as Pink Floyd laments about the subject: “the time is gone, the song is over, thought I’d something more to say,” and The Byrds philosophize that there is: “a time for every purpose under heaven.” Why am I quoting classic rock songs, rather than the authors of the Great Books we all read at St. John’s College? It’s because these songs ring with the truth of a classic text, yet seep into the brain musically, refusing to let go; thus making them effective. And it’s effectiveness that I want to get at the heart of: *the effective use of time!*

Be effective!

To effectively utilize your time in this most important of endeavors (or at least it sure feels most important while doing it), I recommend planning to take longer to apply than not. *More is always better when it comes to time management, but only if you use the time wisely!* Test scores, seeking letters of recommendations, obtaining transcripts, mental-guessing and second-guessing, writing/editing essays, following up on all the previously mentioned (especially letters of recommendation) all takes time, and the reality of the matter is: one or more of these steps might not conform to the closest deadline you have selected. Therefore, if you grant yourself the luxury of planning ahead with an eye on more time, then minor bumps along the way will not matter and you will be more relaxed and less pressured by the application process.

Know Deadlines!

Deadlines are the crux of the matter when applying for a PhD: *Sing to me, O Muse, sing of the anguish of the PhD applicant!* Deadlines are the song you must come to know, love and sing (I doubt it will be its praises - but sing them you must), so embrace their reality and work effectively within their given bounds. These deadlines are as much for your benefit as they are for the school(s) you have chosen. Take a moment and pretend you are the school(s) receiving X number of applications and all the supporting materials that accompany these applications. It quickly becomes about many people applying and a limited number of offers available – it’s less about you the individual and more about the right fit for the school(s) and about meeting the deadline.

Deadlines partially help determine if you fit with the school and if the school fits with you, by examining your administrative and organization abilities: both of which are crucial skills for TA’s and meeting all subsequent departmental requirements. Deadlines also serve to inform you

how much time you have to prepare, apply, and wait for a response to your application; knowing this truth, work backwards from the application deadline (realistically) and determine how much time you need to accomplish each step in the application process. This goes back to the idea of effective use of time and it may necessitate a semester or a year longer prep-time than originally considered – as the application and its completeness is the first and sometimes only representation of you that a school will ever know. While you cannot make the school(s) choice directly, you can use the deadlines to indirectly bolster your chances of acceptance, at least guaranteeing yourself an honest consideration over those that did not manage to complete the steps of the application process effectively.

It is important to remember that there will be additional deadlines competing with your time, especially those relating to financial aid, and each financial aid deadline will require effective time management of their own. Financial aid deadlines vary, dependent upon whether is federal (FAFSA), college specific, or departmentally specific: like TA-ships and subject oriented scholarships/fellowships. There are also independent grant and scholarship deadlines to keep in mind: each will require separate essays, transcripts, and applications of their own. I know this all sounds daunting, but it's manageable if you are organized and utilize your time effectively.

Be Honest!

Honesty is crucial to effectively managing your time and applying to a PhD Program. Be honest with yourself and consider all of your time commitments: give your application the time it deserves, give it your truthful attention, and give it your genuine best effort. Don't rush or force an application deadline – there's always another. Be up-front and sincere with all your letter of recommendation requests and don't be afraid to include dates and deadlines with your requests. Follow up on all component parts of the application in a professional and sincere manner: this is not only a pragmatic step it also alleviates anything escaping completion and reduces surprises.

Honestly deal with your academic strengths as well as your weaknesses. Make sure your application essay has focus and clearly expresses your academic aspirations. Write, read, review, edit, and rewrite with honesty. You know when you have done your best work, so don't complete a deadline just to meet the deadline without accomplishing your best work. Remember that while a school's deadline is mandatory for the school, the mandatory deadline you have selected is voluntary - give yourself the gift of more time if you need it.

Best Wishes!

Best of luck on applying to your PhD Program; I hope you take the time to enjoy the process, and the look forward it invites, by reflecting upon all the years of education behind you. Let those experiences serve you well, especially the memories of getting something done at the last minute and how stressful that feels, versus the times when you planned ahead and were done well in advance of their deadline. Allow such experiences to be effective learning tools that speak to this matter conclusively and honestly.

Written by Kyle Simmons, an alum of both the LA and EC Graduate programs at SJC and a current PhD candidate at the University of Texas, Dallas, in the History of Ideas program.

Appendix 3

Helpful sites for Graduate School Preparation

Funding:

<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>

Free Application for Federal Student Aid

<http://www.staffordloan.com/federal-student-loans/perkins.php>

Stafford Federal Student Loans

<http://www.fastweb.com>

Fastweb: Scholarships, Financial aid, & Colleges

<http://www.scholarships.com/>

Scholarships & Financial Aid

http://www.cic.edu/projects_services/grants/americangrad.asp

American Graduate Fellowships

<http://www.jkcf.org/scholarships>

Jack Kent Cooke Foundation: Graduate Scholarships

Testing/study help:

<http://www.ets.org/portal/site/ets/menuitem>

Educational Testing Service

<http://www.aamc.org/students/mcat/>

Association of American Medical Colleges

<http://www.lsat.org/>

Law School Admission Test

<http://www.mba.com/mba/TaketheGMAT>

Graduate Management Admission Test

<http://www.mygretutor.com/default.aspx>

Preparation & Help for the GRE (Graduate Record Examination)

<http://www.studyguidezone.com/>

Free Online Study Guides

Appendix 4

Career Services Library Graduate School Book List

Take Control of Your Student Loan Debt by Attorney Robin Leonard

The Graduate Student's Complete Scholarship Book by Student Services, L.L.C

Paying for College Without Going Broke by Kalman A. Chany with Geoff Martz

Getting into Medical School by Barron's

Health Professions Admissions Guide edited by Carol Baffi-Dugan and Robert E. Cannon

The Ph.D Process: A Students' Guide to Graduate School in the Sciences by Dale F. Bloom, Jonathan D. Karp and Nicholas Cohen

Inside the Law Schools: A Guide by Students for Students edited by Carol-June Cassidy with S.F. Goldfarb

Making a Difference: College and Graduate Guide, Outstanding Colleges to Help You Make a Better World by Miriam Weinstein

Jumping Through the Hoops: A Survival Guide to Graduate School by Mark Merki, C.P.A and Don Merki, Ph.D.

Graduate School Companion by Peter Diffley and the staff of the Princeton Review

How to Write a Winning Personal Statement for Graduate and Professional School by Richard J. Stelzer

Graduate Admission Essays by Donald Asher

The Career Services Library also keeps current editions of study guides for the GRE, MCAT, LSAT and GMAT. All these books and more are available to be checked out through the Career Services office in the basement of Weigle Hall between 9am and 5pm, weekdays.