Applying to Graduate School

Human Biology, Health & Society (HBHS)
Nutritional Sciences – CHE (NS-CHE)
Nutritional Sciences – CALS (NS-CALS)

Preparation for a specific career?
New area of interest?
Research careers?

After completing your Cornell degree, you may want to pursue a graduate degree. NS-CHE, NS-CALS, and HBHS majors often go to graduate school to acquire more specialized training in nutrition or health or to study in a new field. Some of the graduate degree programs that attract graduates in NS-CALS, NS-CHE and HBHS include:

- Public Health or Community Nutrition
- International Nutrition
- Biochemistry or Genomics
- Health Administration or Policy
- Food Science
- Education or Communications
- Exercise Science or Physiology
- Pharmacy or Toxicology

There are various types of graduate degrees with some focusing more on professional skills and courses and others focusing more on research. In general, M.S. and Ph.D. programs have a strong emphasis on research and expect the graduate student to design, conduct, and report on a substantial research project.

Graduate study can be an exciting experience that allows you to focus full-time on particular areas of study and be surrounded by people in academic pursuits. In addition, a graduate degree generally enhances your career options. However, deciding to go to graduate school is a big decision. Graduate school is a major investment of your time and someone’s money. Most graduate programs expect students to be very self-directed, highly committed to their academic programs, and able to handle demands from courses as well as from pre-professional placements and/or research.

You need to think carefully and be as clear as you can about your readiness and goals for going to graduate school. Some students find that going to graduate school immediately after their undergraduate program is the most efficient way to reach their goals. These students feel that they have the personal energy and resources to continue in an intense academic lifestyle. Other students feel that they need a break from academic work, need real world or work experience to define their goals, or want to earn some money before investing in another degree program.

Check the Cornell Career Service website:
http://www.career.cornell.edu/pdfs/graduate/index.cfm
JUNIOR YEAR: EXPLORE AND GET READY

Starting early is the best way to explore the options that graduate school has to offer. Cornell abounds with sources of information about graduate schools including printed resources and guides as well as faculty members who have all been graduate students at one time and at many different universities. If you are having trouble defining your interests or the types of programs that might be appropriate, speak with your faculty advisor or college career development office.

Once you have defined the field in which you would like to study, identify programs of possible interest. Talk to your faculty advisor, or if you wish to study in a different field, find a faculty member in that field at Cornell or elsewhere. Use printed guides (in the library or University Career Center) and World Wide Web searches to make a list of schools and programs of possible interest. Check the departmental bulletin boards to look for information about various programs and how to get more detailed information.

For programs that interest you, you should learn about admission requirements, degree options and curriculum, faculty interests, specialized facilities, and financial aid options. A director of graduate studies coordinates most programs, and it is important to know this person and his/her assistant.

TAKE THE REQUIRED STANDARDIZED TESTS

Most programs require that applicants take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) or another standardized test. The University Career Center has information about when these tests are given and how to register to take them. Be sure to take the test early enough for your scores to be sent to programs in time for their deadlines.

SENIOR YEAR: APPLICATION PROCESS

Whereas some graduate schools have a rolling acceptance process, many graduate schools have an application deadline, often January 1 for the students wishing to enter the following fall. To maximize your chances of being accepted and being offered financial aid, you need to meet the deadline. In addition to standardized test scores, you will need to send undergraduate transcripts, a completed application form, and letters of recommendation.

Most applications require an essay or personal statement that has an important influence on how your application is evaluated. Admissions committees use the statement to judge: your understanding of the field and degree program to which you are applying, whether your particular interests in the field are a good match for the program faculty and facilities, your writing skills, your motivation for applying to the program, and any particularly relevant qualifications you may have such as work experience or technical skills. Therefore, take the time to prepare a well-written and clear statement. Be as specific as you can about the aspects of the program that interest you including the faculty with whom you wish to work. Before writing the statement, do some background reading about faculty interests.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM FACULTY

A key component of your application will be letters of recommendation. Many graduate programs prefer letters of recommendation from faculty members who can write about your potential for graduate study because they can evaluate your academic abilities and potential in research. However, programs that emphasize professional practice may ask for some letters from employers or field placement supervisors. The following faculty members may be appropriate people to ask to write letters of reference for you: a faculty member who has supervised you in research or independent study, a faculty member for whom you have worked as an employee, your faculty advisor, or a faculty member who knows your work through a course. These faculty
members will be asked to write about your motivation for graduate work; creativity and originality; critical thinking and problem-solving skills; and abilities to work under stress, independently, and with others. When asking for letters of recommendation you need to provide the person with the appropriate forms, as well as any other information that the person needs such as a transcript, resume, or personal statement. Provide all the necessary envelopes and GIVE THE PERSON THE MATERIALS WELL IN ADVANCE OF THE DEADLINE -- ONE MONTH AHEAD IS A GOOD IDEA. In most cases, once a faculty member has prepared one letter, it is fairly easy for him/her to send additional letters to other schools.

THE IMPORTANT PERSONAL VISIT

If you can, visit the programs that interest you before or after you apply. A personal visit usually will enhance your chances of acceptance and/or being offered financial aid. In general, faculty members are much more involved in the acceptance of graduate students than they are in the acceptance of undergraduate students. A personal visit allows you to meet with the director of graduate studies and/or the faculty in whose work you are interested. You will be able to describe your interests and qualifications as they relate to their interests and expectations. Bring a resume and be prepared to ask questions about the graduate program or the research topic as appropriate. Find out how competitive you will be as an applicant. Will you need to take additional courses? If you have not applied yet, are their particular types of information you should include in your application to be competitive?

A visit will also give you the chance to find out important information such as: the number of students in the program, the average time to program completion, and what program graduates do. How are students matched with advisors? Will you have access to faculty members with whom you wish to work? Talk to students in the program and learn about their experiences.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Many graduate programs offer financial assistance to their students in the form of fellowships, teaching assistantships and research assistantships. Most of the time financial aid for graduate students is handled differently than it is for undergraduate education. Financial aid at the graduate level is generally competitive and based on academic and experiential qualifications; financial need is usually less important. For many graduate programs, financial aid in the form of fellowships and assistantships is coordinated at the department or program level. Therefore, ask the director of graduate studies for the department or program or his/her assistant how to find out about all possible sources of assistance, how to apply, and the application deadlines. Find out about the selection criteria for different types of assistance. Prior experience in research or as a teaching assistant may be important. Also ask about the schedule for making financial aid decisions. For example, letters of acceptance and offers of financial aid for graduate students are usually made on a rolling basis.