

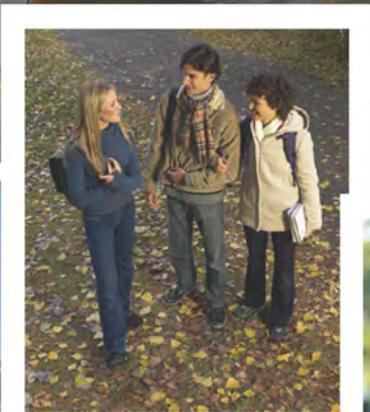
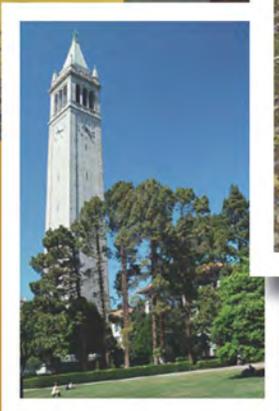
Career Development Services

at Florida Gulf Coast University



FLORIDA
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UNIVERSITY

Graduate School Planning Guide



GRADUATE SCHOOL PLANNING GUIDE

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FGCU Career Development Services supports the mission of the University by promoting student learning and development and helping students fulfill their career expectations. Within this context, we assist students in developing and implementing career, education, and employment plans and decisions.

Overview of Services

Advising on career and major selection, including assessments, major and career information, and assistance in the decision-making process.

Job and internship search advising, including resume/cover letter assistance and preparation for employment interviews and salary negotiation. CDS also assists with student employment, through the use of a web-based job listing system, Eagle Career Link.

Graduate school planning, including assistance with resume/CV/personal statements, graduate school research, and preparation for interviews.

GRADUATE SCHOOL PLANNING

Introduction

Are you thinking of applying to graduate school to pursue an advanced degree? It is a major decision and one that you should give careful thought and preparation. Here is a step-by-step guide to help walk you through the process. **Please keep in mind, though, that the admission and application processes, requirements, policies, procedures, and deadlines for each school and degree program can vary widely. This guide is intended as an overview of the process. Always adhere to the admissions instructions provided by the graduate schools you are applying to.**

(Note: Some advanced degrees, such as MBA's, are conferred through graduate school programs. Some advanced degrees are conferred by professional schools, such as law schools or medical schools. For the purposes of simplicity and readability, in this guide, the terms "graduate degree" and "graduate school" will encompass the entire scope of all advanced degree programs.)

Making the Decision

Make sure you can answer the question, "Why are you going to graduate school?" Graduate school is a significant investment of time, energy, and money, and should be done for the right reasons. Most students pursue an advanced degree because it is a requirement for their career goals. For example, if you want to pursue a career as a lawyer, doctor, CPA, professor, guidance counselor, physical therapist, nurse anesthetist, or other specialized occupation, you must complete the advanced degree requirements for that field.

However, some students see the grad school option as a way to postpone job hunting in a weak job market. Or they may still be undecided about their career and assume they will get it "figured out" while in grad school. While "more education" is typically never a bad idea in life, it may not always be the best strategy for recent grads with Bachelor's degrees. We recommend that you touch base with a Career Center advisor to ensure that pursuing an advanced degree now is the right plan for your particular career goals.

Financing Your Degree

Make sure you understand all the expenses involved. This information is typically available on the school's website. Look into the financing options available, such as:

Assistantships – Paid, part-time employment that may include tuition waivers

Fellowships – Based on academic achievement

Grants and Scholarships – Gifts of money, typically with no obligation for work or repayment, but may be linked to an academic discipline or project

Loans – Low interest loans are available to most graduate students

Financial aid packages, based on both merit and need, are first come, first served. It is to your advantage to submit your application early. Be aware that some programs, like law schools, may limit the amount of time students may work so that they concentrate on academic success.

SELECTING A PROGRAM OF STUDY

The decision of **which** graduate degree to pursue is just as more important. Most Masters Degrees are highly specialized – after all, you are developing a “mastery” in that discipline. Therefore, you need to make sure the degree is correctly aligned with your career goals and the employment marketplace. For example, let’s say you wanted to go into environmental advocacy. Should you pursue a highly technical degree, like an M.S. in Environmental Science, or a Master of Public Administration with an Environmental Policy concentration? That decision is based on many factors and should be thoroughly researched. Here is some other helpful information that will help you understand what all those “letters” mean when people are talking about advanced degree programs.

Masters Degrees provide additional training, experience, research, and scholarship in a particular discipline.

For example:

- M.S. – Master of Science
- M.A. – Master of Arts
- M.B.A. – Master of Business Administration
- M.Ed. – Master of Education
- M.S.N. – Master of Science in Nursing
- M.S.W. – Master of Science in Social Work

What is the difference between the M.S. and M.A. degrees? It varies by school, but generally speaking, the **M.A. degree** has a broader scope, with a strong emphasis on the humanities, theoretical and general knowledge in a recognized discipline, interdisciplinary field, or of a professional study. The **M.S. degree** is more of a focused approach with a science base to include a balance of liberal arts, technological knowledge, and practical skills needed for a particular discipline within the field.

A **professional degree** provides training to acquire specific skills and knowledge necessary to work in a particular profession. For example:

- J.D. – Juris Doctorate (law)
- M.D. – Medical Doctor
- D.V.M. – Doctor of Veterinary Medicine
- Pharm.D. – Doctor of Pharmacy
- D.D.S. – Doctor of Dental Surgery
- D.O. – Doctor of Osteopathic Medicine
- D.P.T. – Doctor of Physical Therapy

The highest degrees awarded are **Doctoral Degrees**, which require completion of an academic program of studies, a comprehensive examination, and often a dissertation, which is a significant work of original research. For example: Ph.D. (Doctor of Philosophy), Ed.D. (Doctor of Education), or Psy.D. (Doctor of Psychiatry).

Specialist and Advanced Masters Degrees are study beyond the masters but less extensive than the doctoral.

For example: Ed.S. (Education Specialist). And **Post-Doctorate** degrees are simply advanced study/research/training in a particular area, not really “degrees.”

SELECTING A SCHOOL

Once you have determined that graduate school is right for you and you have selected a program of study, it's time to start researching schools. The research and application process can be very time consuming, so start early. Ideally, start the entire process a year and a half before you wish to enroll.

As part of the school selection process, consider these factors:

- Tuition costs (public vs. private)
- Geographic location of the school (in-state vs. out-of-state, travel and housing considerations)
- Reputation and quality of the program (accreditation, ranking)
- Selectivity of the program (your chances of getting in)
- "Culture" of the program (collegiality among and between students and faculty; emphasis on research or practice)
- Will the schools program meet the necessary educational requirements for licensure or certification?
- When classes are offered – some schools have evening programs which allows students to work full-time while attending classes

Most prospective graduate students will apply to several programs, often ranging from a few highly-selective "reach" schools (your chances of acceptance are lower) to schools where you are relatively competitive to back-up schools (your chances of acceptance are good.)

Gather as much information about the schools as you can. Ask your professors if they know about the schools you are interested in. Use guides such as those published by Peterson's. However, sometimes there is no substitute to actually going to the school for a visit. A school visit will enable you to tour the campus and surrounding community, check out the housing options, speak with admissions representatives, sit in on classes, and meet current students and faculty. Frequently a campus will have a "feel" to it that you can't experience without being there. Some graduate schools host open houses. It may not be financially feasible to visit all the schools you wish to attend, so do as much research as possible to narrow your list to the school's you are most interested in.

MyPlan.com is a great one-stop-shop for graduate school information! Go to www.MyPlan.com and click on the "Colleges" tab. This site includes:

- A comprehensive database of schools
- College rankings
- Test prep information
- Financial aid information
- Media library with virtual tours

If you are accepted to multiple programs (always a good problem to have!), compare each school based on the factors discussed in the section, "Picking the school that is right for you." If you are not accepted or are placed on a waiting list, contact the school. If you are on a wait list, see if you can find out if the list is ranked and what percentage of the wait list is usually admitted. Ask if supplementing your file with updated transcripts or additional letters of recommendation will improve your ranking. You may also consider asking what you could improve on in the event you apply again. Some schools may allow you to take a few classes to improve your GPA or "prove yourself" and may reevaluate their decision to admit you. Some schools may allow you to take up to three classes in the program as a non-degree seeking student while you take/retake admissions tests or get ready to apply again.

SAMPLE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION TIMELINE

This graduate school application process requires you to stay organized, especially when you are applying to multiple schools. This guide is an example of the timeline you may want to create for yourself. Please keep in mind that admission and application deadlines and requirements can vary widely between schools. You should always adhere to the admissions timelines and instructions provided by the graduate schools to which you are applying.

Generally speaking, it is not advisable to wait until the last minute to submit your application. Create a timeline that allows for considerable flexibility in case you decide you want to retake a standardized exam or your letters of recommendation are delayed. Also, some schools have a window of time that they accept applications, and they will start accepting candidates prior to the application deadline. If you wait until the deadline, there may be fewer spots in the program, and it could be even more competitive to get in.

Assuming your goal is to submit a completed application package by January 1st.

Junior Year – Second Semester

- Read the “Graduate School Guide” provided by FGCU Career Development Services.
- Start researching the graduate schools that interest you.
- Get organized. Create a file for each school with the admission requirements and timelines.
- Talk with your faculty about your decision and what schools they recommend.
- Make a plan for completing an internship, research project, and/or volunteer activity in the next six months that will enhance your professional skills as well as enhance your graduate school candidacy

Summer Before Senior Year

- Register and start studying for the required standardized exam(s).
- Optional: Register for a test preparation course if you think it is necessary.
- Start conducting research on how you are going to finance degree.
- Start working on personal statement.
- Start working on resume/CV.
- If a portfolio is required, start assembling all your materials.

Early Fall

- Finalize personal statement and resume/CV.
- Request letters of recommendation from faculty. Include personal statement and resume/CV with request.
- Order transcripts from all post-secondary institutions and request official copies to be sent to schools.
- Take standardized exams and request that your scores be sent to the appropriate schools.
- Keep your grades up.

Mid-Late Fall

- Complete application forms.
- Make copies of all application materials for your records.
- Complete portfolio (if required).
- Follow-up with any faculty that have yet to submit a letter of recommendation.

December

- Submit all application materials to all schools.
- Start making plans for any campus visits (optional).

THE APPLICATION PACKAGE

Every degree program has a set of “Admissions Requirements” which must be fulfilled to be considered as an applicant. It is critical that you know exactly what is required and when. The application procedures and deadlines can vary from institution to institution. We recommend that you create a timeline/checklist for each school you are applying to in order to keep yourself organized and on track. Remember, start the entire process a year and a half before you wish to enroll. Generally speaking, it is better to apply early rather than later. Monitor the schools website to keep abreast of any changes in deadlines or requirements.

The graduate school admittance process can be very competitive. Many graduate programs receive many more applications than they have space available, and can therefore be selective. Graduate schools look at a number of factors in deciding whom to admit. The goal is to pick people who are likely to have the skills, abilities, preparation, experience, and personal qualities necessary to be successful in their graduate program (and, if applicable, in the profession.) Schools typically look at some combination of factors in making their decisions, including: grades and coursework in college; test scores; research experience; and experiences related to your field. Community service, *extracurricular activities*, and honors/awards are also helpful. The relative weight that each program gives to these factors varies. To gather this information, they will look at your test scores, transcripts, resume, letters of recommendation, personal statement (if required), and perhaps even conduct an interview.

Let’s look at these areas in more details to help you better understand what selection committees are looking for in candidates. They are arranged in alphabetical order, not order of importance. A resume/CV, personal statement, and letters of recommendation are also part of the application package, but they will be addressed separately in the guide.

Coursework – Have you completed the required degree and/or coursework for admittance? This information should be available from the graduate school’s website. However, some programs, like law school, do not have a specific degree requirement. Although law school admissions committees tend to look favorably upon highly rigorous programs (math, sciences, economics, engineering), those that require a significant amount of writing (English and history), or those that develop analytical skills (philosophy.)

Community Service – Some degree programs, like law schools, often have an “advocacy” element to their mission. Consequently, they want students who believe in the importance of volunteering and giving back. Spread your community service over all four years of your bachelor’s degree – don’t cram it all into your senior year or admissions committee will assume you volunteered to enhance your admissions prospects.

Curriculum Vitae (CV) – *see separate section devoted to this topic later on in guide.*

Extracurricular Activities – While graduate schools want to attract students who are involved on campus, are well-rounded, and have demonstrated leadership skills, it is not always a major factor in the acceptance decision. Being a member of numerous clubs and organizations without evidence of substantial involvement isn’t too helpful. You are probably better off being an active participant and leader in a few key organizations than simply being a member of a plethora of them.

Grades – Some programs have a minimum GPA, below which you typically will not make the “cut” unless you have some outstanding compensating factor. Some programs do not have a minimum GPA requirement, but they may provide the average GPA of their students to give you an idea as to how selective the school is (and what your chances are.) It is important to “finish strong” in your bachelor’s degree since most programs look at your last 60 hours of upper division coursework. Academic honors and awards are also important.

THE APPLICATION PACKAGE

The Interview – Once you are a finalist for admission to a program, some graduate programs may ask you to interview with them, either in person or by telephone. The interview is a way for a program to meet you and to see how well you "fit" with their program. It is an important way for you to showcase your qualities, passion, and professionalism. Treat this like a job interview. Be prepared, dress professionally, and sell yourself!

Letters of Recommendation – *see separate section devoted to this topic later on in guide.*

Personal Statement – *see separate section devoted to this topic later on in guide.*

Related Experience – Sometimes related experience is required, sometimes it is preferred, and sometimes it is not necessary. If you do not have professional experience in the field, prior to graduation pursue opportunities such as internships (even unpaid), part-time jobs, or community service. Experience is valuable and this will show you dedication to the field.

Research Experience – Degree programs can vary widely in the amount and intensity of the research expected. Some programs even require a "statement of research goals." For these types of programs, ensure that your resume includes all the research projects you have been involved with. You may even want to create a portfolio showcasing your efforts.

Resume – *see separate section devoted to this topic later on in guide.*

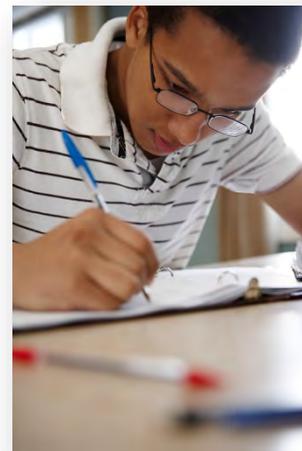
Test Scores – Most graduate schools require that you take a standardized test for admission. The test needed will depend on the field you plan to enter. The most widely used are the GRE, GMAT, MAT, LSAT, MCAT, and DAT. The time needed to study and prepare can be substantial. For example, most law school applicants will study in excess of 9 months for the LSAT. You may also want to build in time in case you choose to retake the test. These factors should be accounted for in your planning timeline. Determine whether you want or need a test prep class. It is a highly individual choice and can often depend on your learning style and level of discipline.

Transcripts – Graduate schools require that you send an official record, or transcript, of all undergraduate coursework from all schools that you attended. The official transcript bears the institutions' seal and will be sent directly to the graduate school's admissions office. If you are applying to graduate school while still finishing your undergraduate degree, have the registrar send your current incomplete transcript, and arrange for a final transcript to be sent after you finish the degree

WRITING YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT

Personal statements are sometimes called an “application essay” or “statement of goals.” Admission committees use these to help further assess your qualifications and your “fit” with the program. Some schools may provide guidelines for the statement or ask you to answer a specific question, while others leave the content up to your discretion. However, it is not intended to be a review of your resume. Personal statements are very “personal,” so yours should be different from other candidates since you have your own story to tell. Here are some of the elements you may consider including on a personal statement:

- Interest and motivation in the occupation, program, field, and institution.
 - Discuss how you became interested in the field and your career goals
 - Why you want to attend that particular school/program
- Reasons why you believe you will be successful in this particular academic program or the field
 - Include personal characteristics (i.e. integrity, perseverance), special skills, or related experiences
 - Any unique qualifications that may differentiate you from other applicants
- If appropriate and relevant, discuss any obstacles/hardships you have overcome



Make sure your personal statement leaves an impression that is consistent with your qualifications. For example, in your law school essay, if you state that you are committed to advocacy and social welfare, there had better be some evidence of that in your resume, perhaps as part of your service learning.

In terms of writing style, there is no one “correct” way. However, here are some style suggestions:

- Write naturally, but concisely, without using large overly-pretentious words.
- Avoid using gimmicky or “meaningful” quotations unless they perfectly fit the tone and content of your statement. Otherwise they come across as cliché’s or unimaginative.
- Be specific and focused. Students often try to cover too much material. You are better off providing full, detailed descriptions that enable you to personalize your essay better.
- Use the active voice, not the passive voice. (Active: “The student jumped over the box.”
Passive: “The box was jumped over by the student.”)

Do not try explaining why you may have had a poor GPA your freshman year or other issues in your qualifications. Some programs allow you to submit an “addendum” to your application where you can address them.

Be sure to seek feedback from others before submitting the document. It must be perfect in terms of grammar and spelling. This document is also a demonstration of your ability to write clearly and effectively, which is critical for most graduate programs.

WRITING YOUR RESUME

In terms of overall format, the resume that you would use for a graduate school application is not that different from one you would use in the job search. The main difference is that you should include as much information as possible about your academic achievements and experiences. (By the way, sometimes graduate schools will ask you to submit a “CV,” or “curriculum vitae.” Refer to that section in this guide.) Your graduate school resume can include the following items - These are arranged in alphabetical order, not order of importance or order on the resume itself.

- Academic awards, scholarships, and recognition
- Certificates and licensure
- Campus involvement
- Community service
- Education (with most recent institution on top)
- Employment experience
- Foreign study and travel abroad
- Internships or field experience
- Language competencies
- Leadership experience
- Professional association membership
- Publications or professional presentations
- Research experience and interests and/or class projects completed
- Special training
- Technical and computer skills (if more than just MS Office)

Some creative programs, like art or graphic design, may require you to submit a portfolio of work samples. Some writing intensive programs, like English or journalism, may require writing samples.

Sample resumes are available on the Career Development Services website. Contact the staff if you need assistance or would like your resume reviewed.



WRITING YOUR CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

A curriculum vita, or “CV,” is a comprehensive statement of your education, research, teaching, and work experiences. (The term “curriculum vitae” is roughly translated from Latin as “course of your life.”) It is most commonly used for applying to employment positions in higher education. However, some graduate school programs will ask prospective students to submit a CV as part of the application process.

Resumes and CV’s look similar, and sometimes the terms are used interchangeably. The primary difference between a resume and CV is the *amount* of content. Think of it this way – resumes are a “selection” of your experiences and skills that relate highly to a particular field of job, while a CV tends to read like a “collection” of your qualifications. Consequently, resumes tend to be shorter, typically one page for recent college graduates, so they can be scanned rather quickly. CV’s do not have a page limit since they are intended to reflect the range of your interests and depth of your knowledge. CV’s are often read quite thoroughly.

An advisor from Career Development Services can help you write your CV. However, prior to making an appointment, collect all the information listed below into a Word document. A sample CV is posted on our website, under “Students & Alumni,” then “Career Center Handouts.” Also, we strongly suggest that you obtain feedback from faculty, especially those in your field of study.

For students creating a CV for application to a graduate school program, here are some elements that are typically included. However, the content of your own CV will depend highly on the type of program you are applying to and your background/qualifications. You can follow the order in which they sections are listed below, although it is not required. Content within sections should be in reverse-chronological order:

EDUCATION

- List all institutions from which you earned a degree in reverse-chronological order
- You can include institutions you attended but did not earn a degree if it was a substantial amount of time (more than a year) or it is highly regarded school
- Specific coursework completed if it helps describe your academic preparation
- Membership in the Honors program

ACADEMIC HONORS & AWARDS

- Your GPA if it is above 3.0; Dean’s List, President’s List
- Scholarships you received only if they were highly competitive – this does not include Bright Futures

RESEARCH

- Include any substantial research projects; especially those that were completed under the supervision of a faculty member are most valuable.
- Provide details - what was the purpose of the research, and what did you learn
- You may also include a separate statement of your research interests
- FGCU Research Day participations

RELATED EXPERIENCE

- *Example:* You are applying to a M.S in Environmental Science program – include your internship with the Rookery Bay Restoration Project and your part-time job at The Nature Conservancy

WRITING YOUR CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

RELATED SKILLS

- May include computer skills, knowledge of another language, experience with certain lab equipment or research software, or anything directly related to the field

RELATED CERTIFICATIONS

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

- Membership in the professional associated related to your field – indicate level of involvement

LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE

- Examples may include the following positions: Orientation Leader, Housing RA, Student Government, Sorority/Fraternity officer, student club/organization officer, Intercollegiate athletics captain, or a position of high responsibility in a fundraising endeavor.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- Conferences and workshops attended

CAMPUS AND COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- Participation in student clubs/organizations and volunteer experiences in the community

OTHER WORK EXPERIENCE

- Any jobs you have held. Don't need to include ALL of them (such as the two weeks spent cutting lawns in the summer)
- Don't need long job descriptions, especially for basic positions (such as retail clerk or restaurant server)

REFERENCES

- Provide person's name, title, university (or employer), and contact information, and identify your professional relationship with that person.

For students that have completed a Master's Level program and are applying to a Doctoral level program, here are some additional elements to include (if applicable to your background.)

Dissertation

Fellowships/Grants

Publications and Published Work

- *Could be journal articles and research reports, or, for example, an English major may have poems or short stories that have been published*

Work Submitted/Work in Progress

Presentations

Teaching Experience/Courses Taught

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION

As part of the graduate school application process, you will likely be required to provide letters of recommendation (sometimes called letters of reference.) These are important to graduate school selection committees as the letters provide an opportunity for people who know you well to describe your skills, personality, and potential for success – something that cannot always be gleaned by grades and scores.

Some schools want the letters from faculty, while others may want them from professionals in the field. Follow the guidelines for each school.

Here are suggestions for asking faculty members for letters of recommendation:

If possible, ask for your reference from the faculty member in person. This way the faculty can put a face with your name. Most faculty members know their students pretty well, but it is best not to make assumptions.

Sample verbiage: *“Dr. Smith, I plan to attend law school in the fall and must provide a letter of recommendation with my application package. Do you feel you know me well enough to provide a reference that will describe my skills and potential for success in law school?”*

If they agree, follow the directions below:

- Send the faculty member an email confirming your discussion. Include in the email:
 - A copy of your personal statement and resume, and tell them which schools and academic programs to which you are applying. (For example: FSU M.S. of Library Science.)
 - It is acceptable to ask (nicely) the faculty member to focus on a particular area. For example, your leadership qualities or your research skills.
 - How the references are to be submitted:
 - Some graduate schools require the faculty to log on to a website and submit the reference electronically.
 - Some graduate schools require the reference to be mailed directly to the school. In this case, provide the faculty member with a stamped, addressed envelope.
- Send a thank you note to all your references, and let them know which program you decided to attend.

IMPORTANT: Make sure you give faculty members plenty of time to write the reference letter - at the very least four weeks prior to the deadline. And tell them exactly when the deadline date is!

Even if your current plans do not include going to graduate school, it is advisable to obtain the letters from the faculty NOW while their connection to you is strongest...not five years from now when they may not remember you as well. For these letters, let the faculty know that you are undecided about your immediate graduate schools plans, so they can write the letter in more general terms. If the letters are in hard copy form, scan them into a PDF document to ensure their safe storage, and keep them on file.

If you are asking current/ former employers for letters of recommendation for either graduate school or future employment, follow the same guidelines as described above.

CAMPUS VISITS

When researching graduate schools, brochures and websites are helpful. But when you really want to see and experience what a school is like, consider visiting the campus. Here are some helpful tips for planning your trip.

- ❑ Build a travel agenda for your visit that includes an official campus tour, your own tour of campus, and a trip around town (especially if you are considering off-campus housing)
- ❑ The school you choose will be your home for at least the next 2 -3 years. Consider the campus atmosphere and the surrounding environment. Keep in mind that many graduates accept jobs within the region where they attended school. Thus, you may want to consider where you eventually would like to work as you evaluate schools.
- ❑ If you are more comfortable traveling with someone, that's fine, but make sure it is clear that your priority is gathering as much information as you can. Graduate school is a huge investment, and you want to make the most informed choice.
- ❑ Make a list of questions before your visit and have questions ready to ask your tour guide/admissions counselor.
 - What is the “culture” of the program? (For example, is there a high degree of collegiality among and between students and faculty?)
 - Gain insight into your acceptance chances. Are there any summer programs?
 - Does the school have certain specialties?
 - Does the school have connections to employment and internship opportunities?
 - Where are the graduates employed?
 - How difficult is it to get on-campus housing?
 - What are the financial aid options?
- ❑ Dress professionally but comfortably. You want to make a positive impression possible on the admissions representatives – that may help when it comes time for them to review applications. But, since you may be spending a considerable part of your day walking around campus, make the outfit functional and comfortable.
- ❑ Talk to current students on campus. Find out their “likes and dislikes” of the school. (Being dressed professionally helps.)
- ❑ After you have completed your school visit(s), compare your notes against your decision criteria.

