

KEYS TO SUCCESS

GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL PREPARATION



Lebanon Valley College

EDWARD AND LYNN BREEN
CENTER FOR GRADUATE SUCCESS

Lebegern Learning Commons | Lower Level, Mund College Center

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Deciding on Graduate School

Graduate school is not just another year (or two or three) of college. It can be as different from your undergraduate work as high school was from college. Graduate programs require that you have a clear direction toward a certain career path. Before making any big decisions, ask yourself some questions:

- Do I need to get an advanced degree to get the job I want?
- What do I expect from a graduate degree? What do I expect it to do for me in the job market? Are these expectations realistic?
- Do I have the motivation and desire to commit myself to the time and effort demanded by graduate school programs?
- What are my reasons for wanting to go to graduate school?

In order to answer these questions, be sure to do some research on your planned career, speak with a staff member in the Breen Center for Graduate Success, or seek out a professional in the field you are considering and request an informational interview. During the interview, be sure to ask: How did they decide to go to graduate school? How did they select a program? What was it like? Consider searching for an alum who has taken a similar career path through the **Lebanon Valley College Professional Network on LinkedIn**.

Is it better to go to graduate school immediately after completing undergraduate study or wait a while and gain some work experience?

- **Option One: going right away.**
 - If an advanced degree is required for you to meet your career goal, you will gain nothing by delaying graduate school
 - After four years of college, you have “academic momentum.” Even though you may not realize it, your classroom skills are polished now. The longer you go without using them, the duller they may become
 - Once you start to earn a regular paycheck, it may become more difficult for you to give up all or part of your salary to become a student again
- **Option Two: going after some time off.**
 - Employers sometimes prefer people with professional work experience and an advanced degree. For example, new hires with an MBA and experience start with higher salaries than those who have an MBA but no experience. Some graduate programs require applicants to have work experience in a particular field before they are admitted
 - Your economic situation may require you to work after graduation. Working can pay off undergraduate bills and help you save for graduate school
 - If you need help to finance your graduate degree, you may want to work for an organization that will pay for all or part of your education
- **What if I combine the two and work while going to school (one or both part-time)?**
 - This plan works for many people, especially if an employer has a tuition remission program. Keep some things in mind:
 - Going to graduate school part time will take longer than going full time
 - Consider your lifestyle; can you work all day and then go to classes and get school work done at night?

How do I choose a graduate program?

The decision on which school to attend requires serious thought and consideration. Finding a program that fits your goals and professional interests is essential to a successful graduate school experience. Consider the following criteria when selecting a program:

- **Admissions requirements:** Do your qualifications (GPA, co-curricular experiences, coursework, test scores, etc.) meet the minimum requirements? What is the acceptance ratio at the institution? Who enrolls in the program?
- **Program Curriculum:** What courses are you required to take as part of the degree? What are your options for electives? Will I be required to do research, an internship, or a thesis? Does the philosophy of the program fit with my interests and values?
- **Faculty:** What is the faculty to student ratio? Are the professors well known in their disciplines? Where did they earn their degrees? What are the faculty specialty areas or research interests? Is there diversity? During the campus visit, arrange to speak with a faculty member.
- **Accreditation:** Ensure that the university/college is accredited as a whole. Also understand the role that specialized accreditation plays in your field as this varies considerably from one discipline to another.
- **Atmosphere:** consider size, location (urban/rural), class size, housing facilities, cost of living, proximity to career environment, your general feeling about the institution.
- **Cost:** Ask about tuition and financial aid. What kinds of financial aid are available? Do out-of-state students pay more? Ask about grants, loans, and scholarships. How many students secure graduate, research or teaching assistantships? What percentage of tuition is covered through these opportunities?

How do I apply to grad school?

Once you have narrowed your schools down to **five or six** (including a school you are certain you will be admitted to, a school you will probably be admitted to, and a school that you might be admitted to), contact the schools to request application information. Different programs have different admissions requirements. It's important to keep track of what each program requires as well as the deadline dates for each. You may want to keep a spreadsheet for each school you are researching. Complete all application materials EXACTLY as instructed. Below are some of the common requirements, depending on the type of program:

- **Application.** Ensure that your application is complete and correct. Be sure to submit all of your application materials by the deadline. If the school has "rolling admissions," do not wait to send in your application. Rolling admissions considers applications in the order in which they arrive. Your chances of being accepted are greater the earlier you apply.
- **Official undergraduate transcript** obtained through the registrar's office.
- **Letters of recommendation.** You will need two or three. Think carefully before you decide on references. If possible, choose people who not only know you well, but who are also familiar with the graduate school you want to attend. Depending on the program, you may want to use faculty members and professionals in your field.
 - Give them plenty of time to write a reference for you. Bring them the recommendation form and self-addressed envelope. Supply your references with a copy of your resume and relevant class work to assist them when writing your recommendation letter and/or written evaluation.
- **Personal essay/statement.** You will probably be asked to write a personal statement about why you want to attend graduate school in general or a specific program in particular. Requirements about length, format, and topic vary widely. These writing samples should be taken very seriously. Your essays

should be tailored to the specific schools to which you're applying. *For advice on writing your essays or to have them critiqued, contact the Breen Center for Graduate Success.*

- **Graduate Admissions Tests.** Institutions usually require a specific graduate admissions test. Your test scores are compared against those of previous students to evaluate the likelihood of your success in a given program. Some example tests are: GRE, MAT, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, PCAT, and DAT. These exams often require a fee to register for and take them. Resources online and free practice tests for many of these exams can be found at the Kaplan Test Prep website: <https://www.kaptest.com/>.
- **Interview.** Some programs require an in-person interview before they make their final decision. It is critical that you take the time to practice. We recommend a **mock interview** with the Breen Center staff to prepare. Treat a graduate school interview just as you would a job interview.
- **Application fees.** Some programs will waive application fees if you attend an open house or other recruiting event, so do your research. Remember, it can be expensive to apply to graduate school; plan carefully.

Sample Interview Questions

Background

Tell me about yourself.

Why do you want to pursue graduate school for _____?

What impacted your decision to go to graduate school?

Why did you select this program/school?

What did you hope to do with a graduate degree in this field?

Education

Tell me about your undergraduate experience at Lebanon Valley College. How did it prepare you for grad school?

What was your involvement like outside of the classroom?

Tell me about a time that you worked on a team project. What was your role? What were the outcomes?

How would your faculty describe you?

What would you contribute to our program?

Experience

What related experience have you had? What did you learn from those experiences?

Tell me about a particular experience which has helped you recognize your interests and strengths.

Personal

What motivates you to do your best work?

What do you see as the biggest challenges you will face in graduate school?

What are your strengths? Weaknesses?

How do you handle stress?

What is your favorite book?

What is your proudest accomplishment?

What do you like to do in your spare time?

Why should you be accepted into this program?

What questions do you have for us?

Practice without pressure using...



Visit <https://lvc.biginterview.com/> to create an account. Practice as often as you wish, and watch the recording to self-assess or invite Breen Center staff to provide feedback.

Graduate School Exploration Exercise

Assessing Your Interests: what are the career areas you are most interested in exploring?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Selecting a Program: Before selecting a graduate program, it is important to know your priorities. Rank (in order with 1 being most important) the following factors for selecting a program

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Geographic location | <input type="checkbox"/> Reputation |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cost/affordability | <input type="checkbox"/> Success of graduates |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Financial aid availability | <input type="checkbox"/> Quality of program/school faculty |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student/faculty ratio | <input type="checkbox"/> Experiential opportunities |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Type of institution | <input type="checkbox"/> Facilities/technology |

Checklist of Resources: there are many useful resources as you consider and make decisions about graduate school. It is up to you to take advantage of them as early and often as possible.

- Mentors with experience in your field of interest
- Faculty in your department and academic advisors
- Alumni who have taken a similar path (LVC Professional Network on LinkedIn)
- Professional associations within your field of interest
- Free graduate school practice exams (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, PCAT, MCAT) are offered online at kaptest.com
- Web Resources
 - Breen Center for Graduate Success [website](#)
 - Gradschools.com
 - Petersons.com
 - Specific graduate program websites

Researching Graduate Programs: Using some of the resources mentioned above, practice researching programs of interest. Select one program/school to investigate. Try to gather as much of the following information as possible. You may need to contact the program/school directly to obtain some of this information.

Name of School/Program

Description of geographic area

Type of program

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Masters | <input type="checkbox"/> Seminary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Doctoral | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Type of school (check all that apply)

- | | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Public | <input type="checkbox"/> Research-based |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Private | <input type="checkbox"/> Faith-based |

Is the program accredited by reputable accrediting bodies?

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|

What is the acceptance rate? _____

Number of credits needed to graduate: _____

Approximate time to complete the program: Full-Time: _____ Part-Time: _____

Other requirements:

- | | | |
|---|---|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thesis | <input type="checkbox"/> Dissertation | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Research Project | <input type="checkbox"/> Field Experience | |

Admissions Requirements:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Specific prerequisites (major/courses) | <input type="checkbox"/> Essay/personal statement |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Formal application | <input type="checkbox"/> Recommendations (# _____) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grades/official transcript (min. GPA _____) | <input type="checkbox"/> Work samples |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Admissions test (test _____ min. score _____) | <input type="checkbox"/> Interview |

Types of experience sought in applicants:

- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Related coursework/major | <input type="checkbox"/> Research |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Career-related experience | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Coursework: read through the courses that are required to complete the program. Do they sound appealing? Do they seem to fit with you interests and abilities?

Significant accomplishments of the program/school/faculty?

Typical career paths of graduates of the program?

Financial aid options:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student loans | <input type="checkbox"/> Research assistantships |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Graduate assistantships | <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching assistantships |

Deadlines for application: _____ Is there rolling admission? _____

Tips for Affording Graduate School

Consider Public Schools

Public institutions offer quality education at a much more affordable price than private institutions. The savings are most noticeable for in-state residents. Review each graduate school's catalogue regarding obtaining residency status before beginning the program.

Federal Work Study Program

this provides students with financial need the option for employment opportunities. The positions are usually within the institution the student is attending or another non-profit organization. Some institutions only provide work-study to undergraduate students, and not all have work-study funding available for graduate students. To qualify, you must be a US citizen, national, or permanent resident, and be enrolled in a degree-seeking or certificate program, and you have to be making satisfactory progress toward completion of your program of study.

University Funding

Review the school's catalogue to discover all funding options from that institution. It is more likely that you can pay for graduate school using university funding than it is using funding from other sources. University funding comes in a variety of forms: service and non-service, need-based, and merit. Consider, especially, service awards such as research and teaching assistantships that will give you work experience in your subject area.

Teaching Assistantships

These opportunities are available who is completing graduate work in a subject area which also offers courses at the undergraduate level. Psychology is an example of a subject that is taught at the freshmen level by graduate teaching assistants. In a teaching assistantship, you will facilitate lectures, grade papers, review assignments, teach labs, and meet with students.

Research Assistantships

These positions usually work directly with a professor. This type of assistantship may not be available for first-year students. You should contact the academic department of the institution to which you plan to attend for more information about this option.

Government Loans

Government loans can pay for much of your education at a low interest rate. Consider loans as a good source of aid, but secondary, after other funding sources have been applied.

Working Part-Time

Get a part-time job to supplement financial aid. You may be able to use some of the income from the part-time job to help pay tuition, fees, or other graduate school expenses.

Developing a Plan B

The graduate school application process is competitive. While you may be an excellent candidate, you may be one of many with similar skills and experiences. Once you have identified the programs and begun the application process, take some time to consider: *What am I going to do if I don't get into graduate school this year?*

You will need to develop a timeline for your Plan B, and the staff in the Breen Center is available to assist you with that plan. Consider the following:

- Take a year off to build your skills to enhance your application. Work or volunteer in your field.
- Explore post-grad internships in your field. This is a great way to gain experience!

Writing Effective Graduate School Essays

As stated above, the essay topics will vary. Always remember to follow the prompt to ensure that your essay answers the questions. No matter what the question, keep in mind that the admissions committee wants to know:

1. **Are you realistic about the field?** The applicant who wants to get a Master's degree in Social Work to "feed all of the hungry children in the world" is simply not realistic. Someone who does not have a clear understanding of his or her field of study is probably not realistic about the demands of a graduate program either. Most graduate schools are looking for students who know what they are getting into and who have a realistic plan for success in that field.
2. **What makes you a unique candidate?** Admissions committees value diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Consider your life experiences -- what have you been exposed to or learned about that you could contribute to the classroom? What unique challenges or obstacles (economic, familial, physical, etc.) have you overcome?
3. **Are you articulate?** Can you express your thoughts and experiences in writing? Graduate schools want students who can express themselves in an intelligent way, using proper logic, form, grammar, and punctuation. It is not only what you write that is important, but how you write it. Follow all instructions when writing your essay.
4. **How do your qualifications meet admissions criteria?** Demonstrate that you have done your research about the program and communicate what features interest you most. Identify specific factors that make you an ideal "fit" and that would set you up for success in the field. Provide details and specifics that aren't found elsewhere on your application. Consider offering a valid and thoughtful explanation for any significant weaknesses in your academic record. This may be more suitable in an appendix to your essay.

Essay Do's and Don'ts

DO:

- Be sure to answer the question being asked of you
- Create a strong opening paragraph to entice the reader to continue reading
- Consider using story-telling, themes, anecdotes, or analogies to illustrate your decision-making
- Relay detailed, concrete examples rather than generalities
- Use strong action verbs
- Use "buzz words" commonly used in your field of interest
- Focus on depth rather than breadth
- *Evaluate* and *reflect* on experience as opposed to just describing it
- Focus on the positive
- Customize your essays by school/program
- Your potential for success is often based on how you write about past experiences

- Have several individuals proofread your essays. Content, mechanics, and grammar matter!

DON'T:

- Mention potentially controversial topics unless appropriate (politics, religion, etc.)
- Include high school information. Generally, you should keep to the last 4 years
- Use extreme, unrealistic language
- Use clichés- "I want to change the world." "I chose this field because I want to help people."
- Regurgitate your resume
- Go off on tangents that are irrelevant to the essay questions
- Try to be someone you're not. Admissions committees can pick up on this pretty quickly

Graduate School Timeline

You should begin the application process **no later than the summer before your senior year of college**, or at least a year before you start graduate school. *The following timeline is approximate- individual timelines will vary by person and by program.*

Summer/September

- If you have not already done so, take the necessary standardized test for admissions
- Finalize your graduate program research and narrow down your choices to **no more than six programs**
- Consider attending open houses or info sessions to learn more about the programs
- Consider which faculty members to ask for recommendations

September/October

- Research sources of financial aid
- Carefully examine all of the program applications. Note any questions or essay topics to be completed
- Write a draft of your essay/personal statement
- *Make an appointment with Breen Center staff or come to drop in hours to have your draft reviewed*
- Ask faculty for letters of recommendation. Provide a copy of your resume, your transcript, each program's recommendation form, and your personal statement

November/December

- Arrange for your official transcript to be sent to each program upon the completion of the fall semester
- Finalize your essay/personal statement. Do not forget to have the final draft reviewed one last time!
- Apply for fellowships/assistantships or other sources of financial aid, if applicable
- Check and record the due date for each application. Keep a spreadsheet to stay organized

December/January

- Complete the application forms for each program. Double check to ensure that there are no errors
- Mail/email/submit your applications and all supplemental materials required
- **Relax and breathe!**
- Most schools will send an email or postcard upon receipt of an application. Keep track of this. If you do not receive notice that your application was received, contact the admissions office to follow up

February

- Start planning for the admissions interviews, if applicable
- Schedule a mock interview with a staff member in the Breen Center to practice
- Complete the FAFSA application. You will need your tax forms to do this

March/April

- Visit schools where you have been accepted
- Discuss acceptances/rejections with a faculty member or career counselor
- If you have multiple acceptances, make a decision, and notify the program of your acceptance
- As a courtesy, notify the programs that you are declining
- **Celebrate your success!**
- Send thank you notes to all those who helped/supported you through the process

Graduate School Resumes

It is a good idea to include your resume (or curriculum vitae or CV) with your application, whether or not the graduate program requests it. It is a professional way of presenting your experiences, skills, and credentials. A resume will be helpful or required when applying for teaching or research assistantships. For graduate school, the emphasis will be on experiences relevant to the program to which you are applying. This is your chance to expand on research and other activities related to graduate school. It is appropriate for your resume to be longer than one page in order to provide details about your background and experiences.

Consider the following:

- What experiences have you had that led you in the direction you are heading?
- What significant course projects or papers have you done that are relevant?
- Have you developed skills (lab techniques, research analysis, etc.)?
- How can you develop a strong case for your potential success in graduate school?
- Have you already taken any graduate coursework?
- Have you done independent study or research?
- Have you attended/presented at conferences?
- Do you have teaching or tutoring experience to highlight?
- Have you been the author or co-author of any publications?

See the example resumes below that demonstrate how to identify these experiences in your resume.

Need help perfecting your resume? Creating or updating your resume for graduate school applications takes time. Once you have a good draft created, contact the **Breen Center for Graduate Success** to make an appointment with a staff member for a resume review!

LVC Grad Student

138 Raven Street • Barn, PA (555) 123-5555 • studentX@lvc.edu

EDUCATION

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA

Sociology Major

Politics Minor

Cumulative GPA: 3.88

Bachelor of Arts Anticipated May 20XX

Honors

Dean's List (all semesters); Psi Chi (National Psychology Honor Society), 20XX; Omicron Delta Kappa (National Leadership Honor Society), 20XX

PUBLICATIONS and PRESENTATIONS

- Student, LVC & Kab, T. (in press). What does it mean to be Autistic? Inter-state variation in special education criteria for Autism services. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.
- Kab, T., Student, LVC & Avery, L.M. (in press). What's in a name? The inconsistencies of special education diagnoses and labels. In *Multimedia in Education and Special Education*. NY: Nova Science Publishers, Inc.
- Student, LVC, & Kab, T. (2015). Interstate variability in special education diagnostics policies for autism. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, San Diego, CA in April 20XX.
- Kab, T., Cope, E.J., Landon, S. Student, LVC., & Steel, L. (2016). Changes in the WISC norms over time: Implications for children with disabilities. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Education Research Association, New York, NY.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA

January 20XX-Present

Independent Study

- Studied motivation and self-efficacy in students who request tutors
- Ran statistical analyses using SPSS
- Gained further experience in APA style writing

Advanced Lab (Senior Capstone Class)

August 20XX-December 20XX

- Conducted experimental study on stress and coping in college students
- Gained further experience with SPSS and APA style writing
- Improved oral communication skills
- Gained experience with various research methodologies such as observational, survey design, and content analysis

Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA

June-July 20XX

Research Assistant

- Coded IQ data for analyses in a developmental psychology research lab

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA

May-July 20XX

Independent Study

- One of seven recipients of a student summer research grant
- Reviewed archival data on autism as a special education category
- Ran statistical analyses on Microsoft Excel and coded state-by-state criteria for autism eligibility services
- Started drafting manuscript for publication

LVC Grad Student
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Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA
Research Assistant

January-May 20XX

- Conducted research on changing IQ norms over time in a developmental psychology research lab

OTHER RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA
Learning Assistant, Academic Resource Center
Learning assistant for psychological statistics classes

January 20XX-Present

- Attend all classes with students and assist with class work and SPSS
- Run weekly workshop outside of class time to review class material
- Prepare practice problems and exams for students

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA
Writing Tutor, Center for Writing & Tutoring Resources

August 20XX-Present

- Assist students in a freshmen seminar class with writing over the course of semester
- Guide students in any discipline with writing in a drop-in center
- Serve as a one-on-one writing mentor
- Nominated by faculty for position

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA
Peer Tutor, Center for Writing & Tutoring Resources

August 20XX-Present

- Tutor students one-on-one weekly in psychological statistics
- Nominated by faculty for position

SKILLS

- Strong organizational, communication, leadership, writing, interpersonal skills
- Proficient in SPSS, Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint
- Experience in social, developmental, health psychology and educational policy

LVC Grad Student

53 Anywhere Street | Anywhere, PA 18004
SS123456@lvc.edu | 555-922-5209

EDUCATION

Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA

Bachelor of Arts Degree, *Double Major*: Psychology and History, Expected May 20XX

Psychology Major GPA: 4.0, Cumulative GPA: 3.882

Honors: Psi Chi, Psychology Honor Society, Dean's List every semester

STUDY ABROAD

University of London, Goldsmiths College, Fall 20XX

Gained appreciation for social, educational, and cultural differences.

RESEARCH and CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE

Psychology Summer Research Collaboration

Psychology Department, Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA, Summer 20XX

- Collaborated with two other students. Conducted a survey design assessing the satisfaction of alumni who graduated with an undergraduate degree in psychology. Computed means of standard deviations for various aspects of the department and wrote report in APA style.
- Transcribed previously recorded interviews regarding participants' perceptions of different childcare arrangements. Formulated a coding scheme using several common themes throughout the interviews.
- Compared analyses of consistency and agreement. Presented to class and faculty.

Research Assistant for Institutional Assessment

President's Office, Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA, Summer 20XX

- Transcribed and processed data into SPSS for external reporting. Analyzed data and generated tables for distribution in order to support the growth and development of the institution.

Perceptions of Mothers Independent Research

Psychology Department, Lebanon Valley College, Annville, PA, Spring 20XX

- Designed study with four students and two professors. Documented and tape recorded one-on-one interviews uncovering students' perceptions of different childcare arrangements. Discussed overall themes and group observations among five childcare situations. Wrote APA style paper and presented to faculty.

LVAIC Undergraduate Psychology Conference

Lehigh Valley Association of Independent Colleges, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, PA, Spring 20XX

- Presented PowerPoint on "Perception of Childcare Choices" study with three students.
- Displayed poster on "Color Perception and Its Effect on a Word Search Task" study with one student.

LEADERSHIP/ACTIVITIES

Delta Zeta Sorority, Member 20XX - Present

- Risk Management Executive Position, Spring 20XX
- Parliamentarian & Active Member, Spring 20XX

Office of Admissions, Spring 20XX - Present

- Valley Ambassador, Spring 20XX - Spring 20XX
- Student Assistant, 20XX

WORK EXPERIENCE

Lifeguard, Sparkling Pool Services, Inc., Anywhere, NJ, Summers 20XX – 20XX

Cashier/Food Preparer, Panera Bread Restaurant, Anywhere, NJ, Spring-Summer 20XX