



**Kathryn M. Buder Center
for American Indian Studies**

Brown School

Getting In

A Guidebook for Students
Applying to Graduate School



Washington University in St. Louis

Buder Center 2020

Current Edition: Kellie Thompson, Lynn Mitchell, Wynette Whitegoat

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This guide can be found online at [**buder.wustl.edu**](http://buder.wustl.edu)

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PREFACE

This guide was developed to answer the questions most frequently asked by prospective graduate students. It is meant to acquaint you with the importance of a graduate education, the nature of the graduate school experience, the application process, and to suggest options for financing your graduate education.

Knowing what to expect can help prepare you to get the most value for your graduate degree.

Considering Graduate School?



Students join the Brown School community to gain analytical skills and knowledge to make great change happen. Scholars at the Brown School's Kathryn M. Buder Center learn to apply these skills to impact the future of Indian Country.

What is Graduate School?

Graduate schools award advanced academic degrees with the general requirement that students have earned an undergraduate (bachelor's) degree.

Some graduate programs require that you have work experience as well. Graduate schools offer academic degrees such as master's and doctoral degrees, allowing you to specialize within a field. Degrees are offered in, but are not limited to, the fields of agriculture, business, engineering, geology, music, political science, psychology, public health, social work, and sociology. These often expand on your undergraduate education and can be tailored to your current and future career goals.

How Long Do Graduate Programs Take to Complete?

A master's degree will take you approximately two to three years to complete. The program entails coursework and exams, internship or other applied experience. Some programs require a written thesis, others offer an option between a thesis, team project and presentation, or comprehensive exam.

Dual degrees generally take three to four years to complete. For example, a dual degree in social work and law at Washington University in St. Louis takes about four years to complete. You will spend three semesters earning 48 credit hours in the social work program at Washington University's Brown School, and five semesters earning 76 credit hours in the School of Law.

A dual degree in social work and public health at the Brown School generally takes about three years to complete. Many courses, particularly electives and practicum experiences, will count towards both degrees. A doctoral degree is a more advanced degree. A PhD could take four to eight years to complete. PhD programs entail two to three years of coursework and a dissertation.

What Should I Expect in Graduate School?

Professors who teach graduate-level courses assume that you have been preparing for graduate school during your undergraduate program, as well as from your internships, professional and volunteer experiences. You are considered an adult learner and professors will expect you to:

- Write papers
- Lead discussions and participate in seminars
- Take good lecture notes
- Take part in practicum or internships
- Engage in research
- Ask questions & take initiative to get answers
- Read large quantities of material

----- TIP -----

Many students pursue a graduate degree that is entirely unrelated to their undergraduate degree

Is Graduate School Right for Me?

There is no easy answer to this question. The best way to start is by asking yourself, “Should I go to graduate school?” If you are not sure, then spend time doing some self-reflection and think about your career goals.

You should go to graduate school if you want to:

- Add breadth and depth to your academic background.
- Specialize in a particular area of interest.
- Gain critical research techniques and writing skills.
- Position yourself for career advancement
- Increase your earning power over time.
- Make a meaningful contribution to your field.

Reasons to reconsider a graduate degree:

- You are stalling on making a career decision.
- You are not ready to get a job.
- Everyone else is doing it.

----- TIP -----

Research different professions that are of interest to you and determine if a master’s degree is needed for that field.

Am I Ready for Graduate School?

- Do you welcome challenging papers and test questions?
- Can you concentrate on studies for a long period of time?
- Do you organize your time well?
- Are you prepared to live on a lower income while studying and postpone financial rewards?

Planning for Graduate Education as an Undergraduate Student

Freshman Year:

- Determine your major and/or minor of study
- Establish a good GPA
- Volunteer at local organizations, this will help determine your interests
- Develop a good relationship with at least one of your professors (letter of recommendation)
- Update your resume

Sophomore Year:

- Establish a good GPA
- Get help with academic setbacks
- Develop a good relationship with another professor and work supervisor (letters of recommendation)
- Continue volunteering at local organizations
- Update your resume

Junior Year:

- Meet with your college advisor at least once a semester.
- Establish a good GPA.
- Get help with academic setbacks.
- Start exploring financial aid resources.
- Research standardized exams needed for applications.
- Research graduate programs through the career library, Internet, or talking with graduate students or instructors.
- Research fellowship and scholarship opportunities
- Secure an internship or job that is related to your interests or career goal.

Planning for Graduate Education as an Undergraduate Student

Senior Year:

- Study for and complete any standardized tests needed for graduate program of choice.
- Obtain fellowship applications. Be aware of application deadlines for fellowships and assistantships.
- Manage your time and create a checklist of activities and deadlines for each program to which you are applying.
- Speak with faculty members who are willing to write strong, positive letters of recommendation for you.
- Speak with the contact person in the department to which you are applying. Ask for advice on completing the application.
- Order academic transcripts as required.
- Complete required essays for each application.
- Complete your application by the deadline. Review both graduate division and department requirements
- Complete the FAFSA

Evaluating Programs



Brown School graduate students have opportunities to educate others by participating in events. AISA officers Matthew Moore and Apryl Joe share information about American Indian/Alaska Native culture.

How Do I Figure Out Which Graduate Program Is Right for Me?

- What is the program's reputation?
- What are the program's alumni doing? What type of careers do they have? What type of positions do they hold?
- How many faculty are full time? How many courses are taught by tenure-track faculty or adjuncts faculty?
- Does the faculty research align with your interests?
- Are there research fellowships, teaching assistantships, or other opportunities available?

How Can I Finance My Education?

Several types of financial assistance are available to you including:

- Tuition fee waivers
- Teaching and research assistantships
- Federal and private loans
- Scholarships (departmental, minority, etc.)
- Fellowships
- Full or part-time jobs

At most institutions, an assessment of financial status is performed prior to allocating funds to students for academic support. Your financial status is determined based on information provided by you on the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). For additional information on financial assistance programs for graduate study, contact the financial aid offices of the schools to which you are applying.

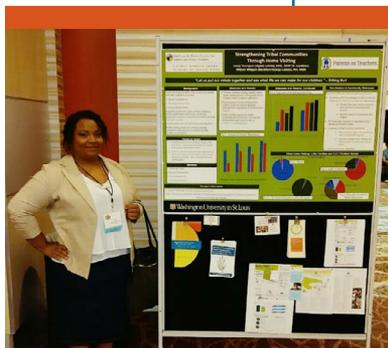
----- TIP -----

Applying early may give you an advantage when being considered for a competitive program or scholarship.

BEFORE YOU START THE APPLICATION PROCESS

- ❑ *Make a list of what is important to you in a graduate program (focus of program, financial assistance, faculty to student ratio, research facilities, recreation opportunities, support systems, etc.)*
- ❑ *Search the Internet, databases and other resources for programs that match these interests.*
- ❑ *For each program, compile a list of any required course work, test scores, GPA requirements, volunteer and leadership experience, application deadlines, and fee deadlines.*
- ❑ *Set a timeline for completing each part of the application process such as writing the statement of purpose, gathering transcripts, and asking for reference letters.*
- ❑ *Study for and take any required admissions tests (GMAT, GRE). A variety of study aids are available - preparatory courses, online trainings, books, cds, free trial tests, and specialized tutoring.*
- ❑ *Develop your resume and ask a faculty member or advisor to review it. A sample resume is included in the appendix.*
- ❑ *Contact potential reference writers. Ask if they are willing to give you a good, strong, supportive reference. DO NOT leave this to the last minute.*
- ❑ *Arrange to have all transcripts sent to the appropriate schools. Most schools require sealed transcripts sent directly from undergraduate institutions.*

The Application Process



Brown School graduate students have the opportunity to attend a variety of conferences. Lacey Thompson is presenting her research at the 2015 Parents as Teachers Conference

What Does the Application Procedure Involve?

The graduate school application generally consists of your resume/CV, transcript, admissions test score, letters of recommendation, and your statement of purpose and/or essay. Some schools also require you to do an interview.

Transcript

Your transcript is an important support documents. It provides a valuable indication of your ability to succeed in a specific field of study.

However, it is important to note that some graduate programs consider your professional development, leadership and volunteer experience to be as important as your grades.

Admissions Tests

A commonly used admissions test is the GRE (Graduate Record Examination). The GRE consists of the General and the Subject tests. The General Test measures verbal and quantitative reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills. The Subject Tests measure knowledge of a specific academic field.

Letters of Recommendation

One of the most devastating mistakes you can make when applying is to submit weak letters of recommendation or letters from sources that are not credible. With this in mind, select three or four persons, such as professors, advisors, or supervisors, who know you well and will communicate your work habits, your academic ability, and your character positively.

----- TIP -----

Seek outside assistance and criticism. The more eyes that read your work and offer positive suggestions, the stronger your final product will be.

As soon as possible, provide your references with:

- Your plans for graduate work
- The schools to which you are applying
- Links or email addresses to the appropriate schools or individuals
- Resume and/or written statement of your plans
- Forms, requests, and guidelines for the letters
- Pre-addressed stamped envelopes if needed

Request all recommendation letters at least one month in advance of the deadline and confirm that they have been submitted and inform them where you decided to attend. You should follow up with a thank you note.

Resume/CV

Your resume/CV is a compilation of leadership, skills, and experiences that summarizes and captures your qualifications and accomplishments. The document should be reviewed to include concise language with no grammatical errors, honest, accurate and professional. Be sure to indicate the amount of time spent at each experience and to properly categorize sections (work or non-work related).

The following may be helpful as you structure your resume/CV:

- **Education** Include name of college/university, degree, graduation date, major, minor, GPA.
- **Academic Experience, Course/Internship Highlights** Use this space to showcase any relevant internships or experiential learning that you may have completed.
- **Employment** List the most recent job positions that you deem relevant and reflect your skillset. Indicate the time range spent at the job. Under each job heading list 2-3 bulleted points that summarizes the skills and experiences gained at each position using action words (ex. developed, created, trained, engaged, etc.).
- **Volunteer or Community Involvement** Include any community involvement or other volunteer opportunities that highlight the causes you are passionate about or how you chose to give back to your community.
- **Research/Publications/Presentations** When sharing published works and professional presentation, ensure proper citation using APA, MLA, or other citation styles that are commonly used in the field you wish to pursue.

- **Certifications and/or Professional Development Trainings** List any trainings that you received that speak to your skillset. Certifications and trainings contribute to your added qualifications that show investment, commitment and a willingness to learn beyond the classroom.
- **Additional Categories** Other headings or sections that you might include are “Grants, Fellowships & Awards”, “Professional Memberships or Affiliations”, “Leadership Experience”, “Skills”.

Statement of Purpose

The statement of purpose is an essay in which you should communicate to the admissions board your educational and professional goals and background that relate to your goals and commitment to pursue a graduate degree.

In developing your statement of purpose, be sure to answer all questions asked of you in the application. The following may be helpful as you structure your responses:

- **Summarize** your experiences both in and out of the classroom which have had an impact on your life and career choices.
- **Describe** factors which inspired you in your decision to pursue graduate study (including research, internships, interest in teaching, etc.).
- **Relate** any personal or academic hardships which may have affected your undergraduate or professional work (illness, working to put yourself through school, etc.).
- **Map** out your plans for graduate work.
- **Define** your career objectives and how they relate to graduate school.
- **Conclude** your statement by describing your reasons for applying to the particular school or program. This is your chance to communicate to the admissions board that your goals are a match for their program and that you will be an asset to their school.

----- TIP -----

Plan, write, edit, rewrite, and CAREFULLY proof your essays. Besides being well-written, your essay should offer insight to your goals and interests.

Interview

Some graduate programs require the applicant to visit with the department chair or members of the faculty for a personal interview. Here are some tips for making a great impression:

- Research and enhance your knowledge of the program, university, and faculty prior to the interview.
- Prepare questions in advance.
- Dress professionally, as though for a job interview.

What if I am Returning to Graduate School After a Long Hiatus?

If you are a prospective student who is married with a family, is over the age of 35, or plans to continue to work while attending graduate school, you will have to make additional considerations when making the choice of schools to attend.

Colleges appreciate the diversity that students with more work and life experience bring to the classroom. Many admissions boards recognize that older students have proven to be particularly successful graduate students with exceptionally strong commitments to their education. Many graduate schools, particularly business schools, want people with at least 5 years of work experience.

You should distinguish your application by sharing unique experiences and abilities through professional references, the statement of purpose, and interviews

Professional References and Letters of Recommendation

Academic letters of recommendation may be hard to come by if you haven't recently been in school. Whether or not you have held jobs in your area of graduate school interest, professional references and letters of recommendation can highlight your potential for success in graduate school. Transferable skills and positive attributes demonstrated on the job can greatly influence an admissions committee toward accepting you.

----- TIP -----

Accomplishments, leadership, and community service experiences are great tools in showcasing your strengths.

What if I Don't Meet All of the School's Requirements?

If a low GPA or admissions test score is not a true indicator of your potential, use other parts of your application to correct the false impression. Here are some ways you can accomplish this:

- Request additional letters from faculty or supervisors to stress your academic abilities and other professional attributes.
- Build your research skills.
- Seek out professional development opportunities related to your field of interest. Skills and attributes you should include in a strong letter of recommendation are:
 - Responsibility, dependability, & character
 - Overcoming difficult situations
 - Strong communication skills (i.e. writing, public speaking)
 - Specific management or leadership roles
 - Specific performance measures
 - Ability to function under pressure
 - Ability to work with others effectively

Statement of Purpose

A clear, well-organized statement of purpose should:

- Outline strengths in your educational and professional background.
- Define your educational and professional goals.
- Explain how and why you came to set these goals.
- Describe how the goals will fit into your family and professional life.
- Draw from life experiences and professional experiences that are significant in your decision to return to school.

Formal Interviews

This is the venue where you really have a chance to stand out from the rest of the admissions pool. Life experiences, which the traditional undergraduate may not have had, can work to your advantage. In answering the interviewers' questions, keep in mind and draw from experiences such as:

- Supporting yourself in and out of school
- Raising a family
- Traveling to different places
- Observing and learning from the world

How is the Application Processed?

- Your file is created.
- Your file is reviewed by the school when all materials have been received.
- Your file is sent to a specific department.
- Your application is reviewed by the department.
- The department makes a recommendation to the admissions board regarding your admission and you are notified.

Checklist of Activities

Creating checklists may be the most important step of your application process. The process of applying to graduate school can be up to two years full of requirements and deadlines, during which your checklist and calendar will be indispensable.

CALENDAR CHECKLIST

- Written application deadline*
- Letter of recommendation deadline*
- Date academic transcripts must be received by*
- Admissions test dates, including test registration deadlines as well as actual test dates*
- Date by which test scores must be received by the school(s) to which you are applying (this will determine the date by which you have to take a particular test)*
- Financial aid information submission deadline*

After the Application



Buder Blessing graduating ceremony from left: Jen Van Schuyver, Kyndall Noah, Sierra Ayres, Jo Malia Milner, Brandon Smith, Kacheena Lucas, Krista Catron, and Melody Delmar

What Steps Do I Take Once I Am Accepted?

Make an informed decision about whether or not you are still considering the particular school. As a successful applicant, you will be given a set time period to notify the school as to whether or not you will be attending. This may be a difficult choice, since you may not have yet heard from a more preferred institution. Sometimes it is possible to ask a school for an extension if you're still waiting to hear from other schools.

Once you have made your decision:

- Immediately notify your chosen school in writing that you will be attending that particular institution.
- Notify schools you have decided not to attend, so they can fill your space with another applicant.
- Research the area where your school is located to find housing and employment opportunities near the campus.
- Solidify financial aid arrangements.

What Does it Mean if I'm Put on a Wait List?

If you are “wait-listed”, the college has not yet made a decision regarding your admissions status. Sometimes, admissions boards are expecting more applications. Also, schools sometimes accept more students than they have room for with the expectation that some students will choose to attend different schools. After as many spaces as possible are filled with students from the “accepted” list, they will begin opening up spaces for the “waitlisted” students.

What Do I Do if I am Not Admitted?

If you are not admitted to graduate school, it does not mean that you are not suitable for graduate level work. The schools may have had an overwhelming number of qualified applicants. Here is what you can do if you are not admitted to graduate school.

- Ask admissions staff members what you can do to strengthen your application.
- Improve references, test scores, and essays.
- Gain work experience in a related field.
- Apply to different schools or reapply to your current choices the following year.

What are the Most Common Reasons for Non-Admission?

- Failure to meet minimum requirements
- Failure to complete the application process
- Limited space in graduate department

Appendix



Brown School graduate students often present research and team projects to fellow classmates and the community. Clara Stenstrom, Eric Pinto and Adria Brown are presenting at the Steps to Sovereignty event.

Sample Resume

Jane Smith

Cell: (314) 555-1234

jsmith@wustl.edu

www.linkedin.com/in/jane-smith-a11b1123

EDUCATION

Washington University, Olin Business School St. Louis, MO May 2017
Master of Business Administration
Concentrations in Strategy and Management

Washington University, Brown School St. Louis, MO May 2017
Master of Social Work
Concentrations in Social and Economic Development
Specialization in Social Entrepreneurship

Georgetown University Washington, DC May 2011
Bachelor in Arts and Economic Science; Minor in Social Work
Concentrations in Social and Economic Development
Specialization in Social Entrepreneurship

EXPERIENCE

(include work experiences and internships)

Accenture Chicago, IL May 2016-August 2016
Strategy Consulting Intern

- Designed strategic planning for an Accenture client in order to increase their social media presence by 10% within the national market regarding stake holder awareness of their social impact initiatives
 - Researched and analyzed historical sales data as well as industry trends in order to develop strategic plans to increase revenue by 17% over three years
 - Consulted social entrepreneurs on redefining their competitive advantage, operating expenses, management plans in order to solidify industry leadership for the indefinite future
-

ACADEMIC INVOLVEMENT

Native American Student Association St. Louis, MO August 2004 - May 2006
Co-Chair

- Co-developed and managed three fundraisers raising \$5,000 for local pow wow
- Co-organized several school-wide events to spread awareness in the college and local community about Native American culture and issues in Indian Country

Community Advisor

Provided support for more than fifty college freshman in a residential setting

- Planned floor events to create cohesion and to educate the freshmen on topics such as stress management and sexual health

COMMUNITY SERVICE AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

(include volunteer work)

Sky, Anywhere, ME

Mentor, September 2006-Present

- Tutor a Native children in academics and ribbon work once a week

James Outdoor Club, Anywhere, ME

Trip Leader, August 2002-May 2006

- Participated in numerous outdoor excursions to build community with other students
- Lead pre-orientation trips for incoming freshmen to teach them about outdoor living skills and ecology

Salud Major, Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico

Mentor, February 2004-May 2004

- Volunteered and mentored formerly homeless indigenous, adolescent girls on a weekly basis with school work and reading skills

PUBLICATIONS

(include any published work)

PRESENTATIONS

(include any presentations made at professional events such as conferences)

LEADERSHIP & HONORS

Selected as a recipient for the The Gates Scholarship 2017

Selected as MSW Commencement Marshal, Brown School, 2017

Recipient of the Outstanding Practicum Student Award, Brown School, 2017

CERTIFICATIONS/ AFFILIATIONS

Tribe's Women Society

Wilderness First Aid

First Aid/CPR

Fluent in Spanish

Buder Center - Sample Statement of Purpose

I am deeply invested in community-driven solutions to mental health disparities. I am particularly interested in issues related to youth suicide prevention and working with youth in the juvenile justice system. Three experiences in particular have impacted my passion for mental health equity: my childhood experiences on the reservation, my research on youth suicide in college, and my work for a Native American policy non-profit. For these reasons, I plan to pursue a dual degree in social work and public health and hope the Social Work School at [University] will support me on this path.

From a young age, I witnessed how a lack of access to mental health care, historic trauma, and substance abuse impacted my family living on my home reservation. At the same time, I grew up picking medicinal plants with my family, continuing to use the knowledge and traditions of our ancestors for contemporary issues like arthritis and pain relief. These experiences painted two distinct realities: the deep impacts that poverty and structural racism have on health in tribal communities, and the opportunity for community-based solutions and Indigenous knowledge to intervene and address these issues.

I first began to explore the intersections of mental health and racial justice in college. My sophomore year, I conducted research on Native American youth suicide for a methods class in Sociology. I was fascinated with – and disturbed by – the prevalence of mental health issues in Native American communities, including my own family, and began to explore causes and potential solutions. I revisited this research for my senior thesis, a year-long project focused on youth suicide in my own tribe. Through interviews with community health workers, school counselors, and social workers, I identified three specific issues impacting tribal youth: absentee parents, substance abuse, and cultural loss. My thesis highlighted the importance of recognizing the structure of settler-colonialism in combatting youth suicide, as well as the radical potential of culturally-based prevention initiatives on my reservation.

In addition to my studies, I was involved with several leadership opportunities at my undergraduate college. I worked for the Department of Multicultural Life, was a representative for student government, and tutored youth for three years at a local after-school program serving Native American youth. As part of student government, I helped bring Mental Health First Aid classes to my college, giving students the opportunity to learn how to respond to mental health crises. I also co-edited a zine on students' experiences with mental illness to help advocate for increased access to mental health services on campus.

After graduation, I expanded upon my thesis research while working in a Native-run policy advocacy organization and re-approached it from a policy perspective. In this position, I researched, drafted and produced memos, correspondence and blog posts on policy related to American Indian physical and mental health. This allowed me to learn about policy advocacy on a state and tribal level and strengthened my ability to communicate to a diverse set of audiences and partners. For example, I assisted in drafting a “lobby day” packet for volunteers who were advocating for Medicaid expansion to our state government. The packet included data on how Medicaid expansion would impact our tribal communities and provided talking-points on how to best frame Medicaid expansion depending on the Representative with whom they were meeting. Though I have experience in community-based research and policy advocacy, I hope to gain practical skills in quantitative research, community engagement, and policy analysis that would provide me with the tools I need to enact innovative interventions and policy reform in Indian Country.

I am particularly interested in [University] dual master’s degree in social work and public health because of your intentional focus on health equity and pursuing health policy and interventions that benefit the most marginalized individuals nationally and globally. Your faculty’s research on the roles that racism and stigma, neighborhood segregation, and community engagement play in health outcomes excites me and would deeply develop my ability to impact community health and influence health policy.

My passion for serving Native American communities, combined with my diverse work skills – from conducting policy research for a Native non-profit to coordinating community-based public health projects – has prepared me to succeed in a master’s program. I look forward to the opportunity to interact with and learn from the faculty and students at the Social Work School at [University] as I take this next step.

----- TIP -----

Remember, a statement of purpose is not only for your graduate school to learn more about you – it also serves as a writing sample. Be sure to edit it!

Graduate Program Locators & Rankings

PhDs.org

phds.org/rankings

This site allows the user to indicate the importance of a variety of factors and rank programs according to those criteria. This site also includes articles about applying to graduate school.

Gradschools.com

Gradschools.com offers many articles about graduate education and tips about the graduate admissions process. The site includes a search function for identifying graduate programs by discipline.

Diverse Issues in Higher Education

[Diverseeducation.com](https://diverseeducation.com)

Petersons.com

Petersons.com guides you through the education planning process with its personalized resources.

US News & World Report Rankings

colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com

Additional Resources

If you are not admitted to graduate school, it does not mean that you are not suitable for graduate level work. The schools may have had an overwhelming number of qualified applicants. Here is what you can do if you are not admitted to graduate school.

- Lingua Franca's Real Guide to Graduate School
- Getting What You Came For: The Smart Student's Guide to Earning an M.A. or a Ph.D. by Robert Peters
- Finaid.org
- 1-800-GRE-CALL (1-800-473-2255) or www.ets.org/gre/
- FAFSA: Free Application for Federal Student Aid (<http://www.fafsa.ed.gov/>)

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