

# HOW TO GET INTO GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL



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## Choosing the Right Career

**Choose a career because you have a passion and a talent for it.** There are many career options, and making a decision about which one to pursue is often very difficult. The first question you have to ask yourself is “Do I have the talent for it?”. If you are not very proficient at math, then physics and engineering are not good career choices. Likewise, if you do not have the temperament for dealing with sick people, then nursing is not a good option for you.

Having a passion for your career choice is also important. You will be spending years of your life studying and then most of the rest of your life working in this field. It will be very hard to succeed if you do not like what you are studying or have little interest in pursuing a particular career path. If you are not 100% sure of what you want to do (and often, even if you are), try out various options. Take a number of classes and see what you like. Most importantly do volunteer work in that field. That way, you can see what the profession is like on a day-to-day basis. Too often, people choose a career without understanding what the job entails only to be disappointed when they finally achieve their career goals.

### **Don’t choose a career based on notions such as:**

**“When my family member was sick, her health care provider helped her, so I want to do that for others.”** Helping others is a noble goal, but you should not idealize what it means to be a health care provider. Much of any job is tedious and boring. There are many ways to help people. Volunteering is a good way to see if this really is the profession for you.

**“I will earn a lot of money.”** Health and science professionals often earn very good salaries. Don’t forget however, the cost of education and the long hours required in many professions. There are a lot of jobs where you can earn even more money and not have to spend as long in school, so salary should not be your primary motivation.

**“I like children, therefore I will be a pediatrician or pediatric nurse.”** You shouldn’t go into a health care career if you do not like dealing with people, so of course you should like children. Remember that as a health care provider, you will be dealing with sick children and their distraught parents. You will need to perform painful procedures on them, and they may hate you for it. If your goal is to make children happy, consider a career in early childhood education. The pay is not bad, you get summers off, and you get to interact with children.

**“My parents want me to go into this profession.”** It’s nice when your parents take an interest in your future, but you have to live your own life. Your parents want what is good for you, not necessarily what is best for you. If you don’t have a passion for this career, you will probably not succeed and even if you do, you will hate your life. That is not what your parents want for you.

**“I will cure cancer or eliminate global warming.”** Great. We all want you to. Don’t be naive, however, when choosing your career path. You should choose a career because you like it. If you end up doing good, all the better.

# Choosing the Right School

Obviously, the most important thing is to get into the profession of your choice, so choosing the “right school” is of secondary importance. You should apply to a number of schools, especially if you are trying to get into a competitive program. You may need to take some extra classes so that you can apply to more than one school, but that only serves to enhance your application to all of them. Most programs prefer to accept those who have done more than the bare minimum necessary to apply.

## **Undergraduate Schools:**

Many students agonize over the decision of should they go to a Cal. State, U.C. or private school for their Bachelor’s degrees. It doesn’t matter! If you plan on applying for graduate or professional school after your Bachelor’s degree, the type of undergraduate school you went to will have little, if any, impact on your potential for admission.

The criteria that matter most in an undergraduate education are the following: Does the school offer the right courses for your needs? Can you earn good grades there? Can you make a sufficient connection with a faculty member to be able to get a good letter of recommendation? If you are planning to go into a science field, can you get an opportunity to do research?

Choose a school on the basis of whether you feel comfortable there. Do you prefer a semester system or quarter system? Will you be able to make friends? If you like where you are, you will do better. That is the most important thing.

## **Professional Schools:**

**Don’t worry about the cost.** Some schools are less expensive than others, but if you weigh your potential salary against the cost of tuition, the costs become almost trivial. You will not be able to work while getting your professional degree, so you will probably have to take out loans. Unless you are rich or planning on going into the military, it is the only way to finance your education, so learn to accept it. Also, sometimes it takes longer to complete the less expensive program, especially taking into account waiting to be admitted. When you calculate that time into potential earnings, the “cost” may not be as different as it appears.

**Don’t worry about the school’s prestige.** All schools train you to pass the necessary board exams. Once you are working, no one will care where you went to school. More important than the prestige of the school is: “Do you feel comfortable there?” You are going to be spending a few years at a place, so make sure you are happy and successful there. Just make sure the school is accredited.

**Apply to schools outside of Southern California.** Many programs in California are highly impacted and very difficult to get in to. In many other regions of the country it is much easier to gain admission to the program of your choice. If at all possible, you should widen your search.

## **Graduate Schools:**

**Make sure the graduate school has the exact program you want.**

Are there a number of potential graduate advisors available to you at the school? How long does it take graduate students to finish their programs? How stable is the funding of the graduate program? Is the school able to pay you for your entire graduate education?

# Application Essay

The personal statement you write for your application is an opportunity for you to introduce yourself to the admissions committee and to demonstrate your writing ability. It is best to address question of how your life has led you to want to go to this school and what characteristics you have that would make you stand out in your chosen field. The essay should highlight aspects of your life that set you apart from other students. Perhaps you have a unique cultural background that broadens your perspective. Perhaps you have had particularly inspiring volunteer or research experience. Imagine what you would want to tell an interviewer about your unique qualifications and write it down. Don't whine. Even if you had some misfortunes in your life, turn that into a positive thing. (E.g., "My father's death when I was sixteen has made me a more mature and responsible person because ..." or, "Having to work my way through school has given me an appreciation for...") Don't be modest about your strengths. It's great if you are an academic star, but it's also nice to be a well-rounded, sensitive person with some perspective on your life experience and some vision of your role in your chosen field.

Your essay can also be the place where you provide explanations for any major weaknesses in your application. For example, if you earned poor grades your first year in college, don't gloss over that fact. Explain that you were an immature freshman who didn't study sufficiently, but now your grades are very competitive. Or, maybe it took you six years to earn your Bachelor's degree because you started out as an Art History major and changed your mind after two years. Be careful however not to overemphasize your weaknesses or whine about your life. The personal statement should also allude to your professional aspirations. Be as specific as possible without making up goals. For example, if you have a desire to do research in a particular area, or focus on prevention and public health, say what your professional career ideally would entail. You are not locking yourself into a particular career path by doing this. Everyone realizes that goals can change remarkably over the course of time, but being specific gives readers a sense of how your experiences have led to your current plans and your level of maturity. Even if you are unsure what area appeals to you, don't ever say "I want to help people." or "I want to win the Nobel Prize." Be more specific; e.g. "I am interested in providing primary health care to underprivileged children."

## **Characteristics of a well-written personal statement and some tips:**

1. Have a clear and unifying theme with a clear introduction, body, and conclusion.
2. Focus on something that you feel quite passionate about; show enthusiasm and present a realistic perspective on yourself and your future.
3. Present what makes you unique as an individual. Let your personality and individuality come through in your writing. Present yourself accurately but positively.
4. Address your motives in specifics beyond mere interest in people and love of science.
5. Don't write a narrative resume. Only mention information that is not mentioned elsewhere on the application.
6. Explain any major weakness in your application.
7. Steer clear of strong or controversial opinions on such areas as politics and religion.
8. Share your personal statement with others (advisor, teacher) to get feedback.
9. Make sure the statement is grammatically correct (spelling, punctuation). You are writing for professionals so make sure you are professional in your word choice and writing style.
12. Let your statement evolve overtime. The final product is likely to look quite different

from the original draft. Start early enough to ensure that you will be submitting the application in time.

## Transcript

The single most important part of any application to professional or graduate school is your transcript. The transcript not only represents your academic performance, but also your dedication and commitment to your education. Your transcript will probably be reviewed with more attention to detail than any other part of your application. The admissions committee will look at which courses you took, and your individual grade in each course.

A transcript is much more than the cumulative grade point average. While your GPA is important, it is not, by any means, the most important part of your application. No one expects, or even wants, a 4.0 GPA. A good transcript with a 3.4 GPA, even if it includes a couple of “C’s” will look better than a poor transcript with a 4.0 GPA. When an admissions committee reviews a transcript, they look for the following items:

1. Did you take only the minimum number of courses necessary for admission, or did you take other courses that pertain to your field or interests? For example, a particular school might require only one semester of organic chemistry, but if most of the applicants have two semesters, you are at a disadvantage in your application if you have taken only one.

2. If two versions of a course were offered, did you take the easier version or the harder version? Many schools offer more than one version of a particular course. For example, here at Fullerton College, we offer three different levels of physics. A “B” in an easier one semester class will not look as good as a “C” and “B” in a harder two semester class.

3. What grade did you get in each individual class? If you have a high GPA because you took a lot easy classes (and everyone knows what they are) it will be taken into consideration. Many professional schools ask for two GPA’s, one for science classes and one for non-science classes. In addition, there are certain classes which are weighted more heavily than others. English Composition is one such class. Writing is considered to be very important by all schools. If you get a low grade in a given course, take a more advance course and do better in it. For example, if you earned a “C” in English 100, take higher level English classes and do well in those. Likewise, a “C” in Chemistry 111A will be ignored if you do better in your later chemistry classes. If you earn an “A” in Organic Chemistry, no one will care what got in an introductory class.

4. Do you have more than one or two “W’s” on your transcripts? The reader assumes the “W” means that you were failing a class and decided to drop it rather than get a “D” or “F”. If you drop class and retake it and then get a “C” it will look really bad on your transcript. So, if you have to drop a class, make sure you are really ready to take it and succeed the second time. The only exception to this rule is if you were sick and had to drop all your classes in a particular semester. Likewise, if you earn a “D” or “F”, and then retake the class hoping for, or even earning an “A”, the poor grades remain on your transcript. While the GPA calculated at Fullerton College only counts the higher grade, many professional schools will recalculate the GPA, or note the pattern of taking classes more than once to earn the higher grades.

5. How many units did you take each semester? Taking too few units, even if you are earning a high GPA will weaken your transcript. Obviously, if you are living on your own and need to work 40-50 hours per week to pay for rent and food, you are not expected to take 15 units each semester. If you are living at home and have a part-time job, you should be able to handle at least 12 units per semester. Don’t take too many units either. Taking 20 units and not doing very well is seen as a sign of immaturity; you are not able to evaluate your own abilities

effectively. This may also be interpreted as trying to check requirements off a list as quickly as possible, rather than trying to learn the material that the program believes you should know before admission.

# Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation are essential to any application. The people who review your application rely on the opinions of professors and supervisors who have direct experience with your work. Therefore, it is very important that you plan early and make contacts throughout your undergraduate career with people who will be able to write detailed and enthusiastic letters for you.

You should ask for letters from professors, employers, supervisors, or other people in positions of authority who will be able to say something substantial about you, that is, something more than that they know your name or that you passed their class. Ask people who have a sense of your personality and have high opinion of you. Sometimes you may have to make a concerted effort to make an impression, especially if your potential letter writer is a busy person or if you are one student in a class of 200. That is why it is essential to plan early and cultivate relationships with people who will be able to attest to your character later. If you have contact with someone who could be a reference, make sure he or she gets to know who you are and what you are doing, and above all, do it well. Keep in touch with that person. Professors and employers with whom you have little day-to-day contact will forget quickly the qualities which made you notable earlier. Also, the longer they know you, the better the letter they can write.

Schools are very interested in finding out about your oral skills, interpersonal skills, leadership abilities, research abilities and writing skills. Letters can focus on any one or all of these topics. Or you may choose to seek letters of recommendation from people who have knowledge of your performance in any one of these areas. You will probably want to provide a resume and a copy of your application essays to your professor so that he or she can address particular topics that are unique to you. Remember, the more detailed the letter of recommendation, the better it is.

If you are not sure of your reference's opinion of your work, ask whether he or she is able to write a "strong" letter for you to make sure they are willing to write something substantial and positive. If not, ask someone else. The last thing you need is a superficial or lukewarm letter, which could make someone reviewing your application think twice.

Letters of recommendation should always be written on letterhead stationery. If the letter is being given to you to mail in with your application, the letter should be in a sealed envelope with the recommender's signature over the flap.



# Interviews

Being invited for an interview is a good sign because it means you have made it past the initial application screening. The interview is the admission committee's chance to observe how you interact and decide whether you would fit well in their program. They will use the interview as an opportunity to assess your communication skills, critical thinking abilities, and motivation. It is also your chance to evaluate the program they offer to determine how well it suits your needs. For these reasons, the interview is an important opportunity for you make a good impression.

You may be interviewed alone by a single admissions person, alone by a group of admissions people, or with other applicants by a panel of admissions people. In some cases, the interviewer will have access to and knowledge of your academic and personal accomplishments. In other cases, the interviewer will have no knowledge of these things.

Regardless of the circumstances, the following tips may make your interview experience as pleasant and productive as possible.

Be prepared. Imagine what kind of questions you would ask an applicant and be ready to answer them. Also, have a few questions of your own about the program or school. Be ready to explain why you are interested in this particular school. Have some information about the specific program to which you are applying. Also, be able to explain what draws you to this field. Practice interviewing with a friend, or schedule an interview with a Health Professions Advisor. Some books on applying to medical schools list sample questions you may be asked. You do not need to prepare by creating canned responses or producing a script. Rather, you should form a framework for your ideas, interests, and experiences from which to respond. You should also be prepared for the unexpected question and have the candor to say "I'm not sure of that" or "I haven't really thought through that issue."

Try to relax and be confident but not arrogant. Try to keep the interview conversational, but don't get rattled if you feel as though you are being grilled. Just answer honestly and be yourself (as long as you are someone who is responsible, professional and sincere). Interviewers will be listening for responses that reflect both insight into the profession and the requisite motivation to achieve educational and professional objectives.

Be on time and dress professionally. Make sure know where you are going and leave plenty of time for traffic problems. Men should wear a suit and tie and women should wear a suit or business dress. Interviewers take their responsibilities seriously. Both you and the interviewer endeavor to play a role in shaping the future.

Finally, send a thank-you note to your interviewers. Keep it short, but highlight aspects of the program that particularly interested you. After that, relax and watch your mail.

## **Volunteering**

Many students misunderstand the reasons why professional schools want people to do volunteer work. Volunteering in a position just so you can say you volunteered is a waste of your time. No one cares that you spent six hours per week filing papers in a hospital. Volunteer work should be a meaningful experience for you and the people with whom you interact. Your choice of volunteer activity should demonstrate your abilities and talents.

First and foremost a volunteer position should give you some insight into what the profession is all about. There are many students whose career goals have changed once they experienced the profession from a first hand perspective. Professional schools want to be sure that you know what you are getting yourself into.

The other reason to volunteer is to enrich your own life by helping others. Medical schools, for example, would much prefer you coaching a Little League team than pushing gurneys in a hospital. Coaching shows leadership and commitment while wheeling patients says nothing about you.

## **Undergraduate Research**

If you are thinking of a career in research, then it would behoove you to have research experience as an undergraduate. Many graduate schools prefer students who have had research experience because it lets them know that you have some knowledge about your career choice. No one expects you to make great discoveries as an undergraduate. If all you get to do in a lab is wash test tubes and help some graduate students, that's fine; you are part of that lab. If you are planning to enter a health career, then undergraduate research is less important. Medical schools, for example, would much prefer you working in a clinic or coaching a Little League team than washing test tubes in a lab.

## **Social Media**

Using social media such as Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn is popular and widespread. Admissions committee members and prospective employers are very aware that they can learn a lot about a candidate beyond the materials submitted in an application, by finding the applicant's social media presence. You are certainly welcome to use social media sites, but be sure that what you say or post will not embarrass you when you apply to a program or for a job.

## Questions to Assess Your Study Habits

While not everyone can accomplish all of these ideas for good study, they are highly effective, and the more you acquire, the more you will take from your courses.

Do you study in a location and area that is conducive to concentration, minimal interruptions, and focused study?

Do you review your notes from a specific class that same day (taking advantage of your short term memory) to fill in the gaps and clearly identify your questions? Do you leave room in your notes to enter additional information?

Are you able to carve out a minimum of four hours a day, six days a week, to study?

When you have an hour between classes, do you take advantage of the time (e.g., to review notes)? Have you inventoried and evaluated how you use your time in a typical day?

Do you know which hours during the day you are best able to concentrate for intense study and which hours are least conducive? How much time do you waste in a day?

Do you keep a regular daily schedule? Do you try to avoid getting up early some days and sleeping late others?

How far in advance of a test do you begin the process of reviewing/studying? Do you have a system for condensing material, remembering material, and testing yourself?

Do you have an efficient means of keeping track of what needs to be done and what your priorities should be weekly? Daily? Do you keep short and long term goals?

Do you attempt to set up and/or participate in study groups when appropriate?

Do you see your teachers during their regular office hours? Have you ever shared your approach to studying with your professor (particularly if you are having problems)?

How much do you study extraneous material that ends up not being covered in class or on a future test?

Do you find time each day to do something for you (exercising, reading, etc.)?

## Average Pay for Various Professions\*

### Professions Requiring an AA degree

|                            |        |
|----------------------------|--------|
| Dental Hygienist           | 69,760 |
| Licensed Vocational Nurse  | 42,040 |
| Physical Therapy Assistant | 51,110 |
| Radiological Technician    | 56,760 |
| Registered Nurse**         | 69,110 |
| Respiratory Therapist      | 56,280 |

### Professions Requiring a Bachelor's degree

|                                  |        |
|----------------------------------|--------|
| Chemical Technician              | 44,560 |
| Dietician                        | 58,460 |
| Engineer                         | 92,260 |
| Environmental Science Technician | 45,270 |
| Teacher (Elementary)             | 55,270 |
| Teacher (High School)            | 56,760 |

### Professions Requiring a Master's degree

|                         |        |
|-------------------------|--------|
| Physician Assistant     | 89,470 |
| Social Worker (Medical) | 50,500 |
| Speech Pathologist      | 72,000 |

### Professions Requiring a Doctorate degree

|                              |         |
|------------------------------|---------|
| Biochemist                   | 87,640  |
| Biology Professor            | 86,060  |
| Chiropractor                 | 78,780  |
| Dentist                      | 127,000 |
| Optometrist                  | 83,000  |
| Pharmacist                   | 101,000 |
| Physical Therapist           | 68,000  |
| Physician (General Practice) | 151,000 |
| Physician (Surgeon)          | 153,000 |
| Podiatrist                   | 76,000  |

\*U.S. Dept. of Labor, May 2011. Note that these are average salaries, not starting salaries.

\*\* Many nurses are now being required to earn a Bachelor's degree.