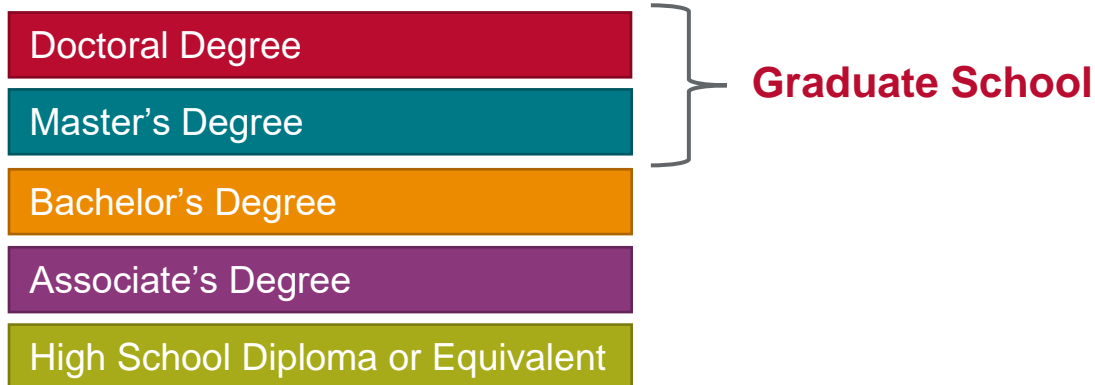


# Graduate School

Graduate school is an umbrella term referring to any degree program beyond the bachelor's level. A graduate degree is required to practice certain professions. People also choose to attend graduate school to earn more money, advance in their field, or immerse themselves in a subject they love. UNM offers many services to help students prepare for and apply to graduate school, including [Career Services](#), the [Graduate Resource Center](#), and the [McNair Scholar's Program](#).



## Types of Graduate Degrees

Graduate programs fall into two main categories. **Professional programs** prepare graduates for work in a specific profession and often include a hands-on internship or practicum component. **Research programs** prepare graduates for high-level scholarship in their field and typically include writing a thesis or dissertation.

- **Professional master's degrees** prepare graduates to work in a specific profession and are required for certain occupations. This degree is also called a **terminal master's degree** because it is the highest credential available for certain fields. Examples include a Master of Business Administration (MBA), Master of Social Work (MSW) and Master of Fine Arts (MFA).
- **Professional doctorates** prepare graduates to work in a specific profession and are required for certain occupations. Examples of this type of degree include the Juris Doctor (JD, or law degree) and Doctor of Medicine (MD).
- **Research master's degrees** prepare graduates to conduct scholarship in their field. This type of degree is typically earned as a step towards completing a doctorate, though some graduates choose to stop at this level. This degree is usually called a Master of Arts (MA) or Master of Science (MS) in a given field.
- **Research doctorates** prepare graduates to lead high-level scholarship in their field. Students in these programs must create a substantial work of original research called a dissertation. Graduates often go on to work as university faculty or as researchers in other settings. This degree is called a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

## **To Go or Not to Go?**

Graduate school is a huge commitment of time, money and effort. Though a graduate degree is required for certain jobs, it is by no means the only route to a successful career. Before making any decisions, it is important to take time to do research and reflect on your goals and priorities. Use resources like [O\\*NET](#) and the [Occupational Outlook Handbook](#) to learn more about the careers that interest you, and come to [Career Services](#) to explore your options and create a strategy. In addition to ensuring you make an informed decision, this will allow you to articulate a clear rationale for pursuing graduate study, a crucial component of the application process.

## **Applying to Graduate School**

It's a good idea to begin preparing to apply to graduate school at least one year before the application deadline. Most graduate programs are competitive. To be a strong candidate, you will need to get plenty of experience in your field in addition to completing your bachelor's degree. If you've gotten experience through activities like internships, volunteer work, paid work, and job shadowing, then you have already started preparing. The application process itself is also quite difficult and time-consuming. Expect to spend about one to two years getting experience and about three to six months actively working on your applications.

The main components of a graduate school application are application forms, an application fee, exam scores, transcripts of undergraduate work, a CV or resume describing relevant experience, an application essay, letters of recommendation, and an interview.

## **Applications Forms and Fees**

Application forms are usually the simplest part of any graduate school application. Expect to complete some straightforward documents that ask for information like your name, address, and a list of schools you have attended. Sometimes the application form includes a few brief questions about your experience and interest in the program. You will usually need to submit one brief, general form to the university and a longer, more specific form to the department. The department has decision-making authority over admissions; the university just keeps records and verifies your information. In most cases, you can expect to pay an application fee about \$50 to \$100 per application.

## **Exam Scores**

Some graduate programs require candidates to submit exam scores. Do some research to determine whether exams are used in your field. Some programs really value exam scores; a higher score will greatly improve your chance of admission. Other programs have a minimum score they expect applicants to meet, but don't place much weight on the score beyond that. Other programs don't ask for exams at all. Some widely used exams are the LSAT (law school), MCAT (medical school), and GRE (a general exam used in many fields).

If an exam is required in your field, consider using resources like books, practice tests and preparation courses. You may be able to find free preparation courses and materials with a bit of research. For example, the Graduate Resource Center keeps current copies of exam prep books that students can use. Also look into when and where the exam is proctored. You may want to allow time to retake the exam if necessary. It usually costs about \$150 to \$300 each time you sit for an exam.

### **Transcripts**

You will be asked to submit official transcripts showing your bachelor's degree. Graduate programs may also look at transcripts to confirm your GPA and any prerequisite coursework. You can expect to be asked to submit transcripts from every college or university you attended. If you earned college credit at more than one school—for example, if you attended CNM before transferring to UNM—look into the process for ordering official transcripts from each institution. It can take a few weeks for schools to process your transcript order, so don't leave it until the last minute. You may be charged a fee of about \$10 for each copy of your official transcripts. If you request paper transcripts sent directly to you, do not open the envelope! They must remain sealed to be considered official. You will not usually be required to submit high school transcripts.

### **CV or Resume**

Most applications will ask that you submit a CV or resume. This is your chance to show the breadth of your experience, including relevant paid work, volunteer work, internships, research, projects, presentations, job shadowing, skills, certifications, and any other relevant information. Just like you would for a job application, you should carefully tailor this document to be as specific and persuasive as possible for this graduate program. Ideally, you will have at least a year or so of experience you can discuss. Relevant experience includes anything you've done in your field, as well as any other experience that has helped you to develop the skills and knowledge you will need to be successful in graduate school and beyond. For graduate school applications, your CV or resume can be several pages long. See the CV and resume guides from Career Services for more information.

### **Application Essay**

Most programs will ask you to submit an application essay. This is another chance to show off your experience and persuade the committee to select you. Application essays are usually about 500 to 750 words. Expect to spend a lot of time brainstorming and to work through many different drafts. Get feedback from knowledgeable people and plan to spend at least six to eight weeks consistently working on your essay. The final draft should be impeccable.

There are two main kinds of application essays. A **letter of intent**, also called a **statement of purpose**, is a formal, professional document in which you explain your skills and accomplishments and discuss your future goals. A **personal statement** is a work of creative nonfiction in which you tell a story about who you are, the life you have

lived, and why you belong in this program. Letters on intent are often used for research programs, while professional programs often personal statements. Graduate programs sometimes use different terms. You may also be asked for a hybrid of these two types of essays.

Look to the prompt to learn what kind of essay the admissions committee wants. Be sure to follow the prompt closely and answer all questions completely. It is important to show both why you are qualified for graduate study in general and why you are a good fit for this program specifically. See the application essay guide from Career Services for more information.

### **Letters of Recommendation**

You will be expected to submit letters of recommendation. Most programs ask for three letters. You should ask for letters from people who know you well, like you, believe you are qualified, and who will be seen as convincing and relevant by the admissions committee. Typically, this includes professors and professionals in your field. This is another reason why the preparation process begins so far in advance—it takes time to develop the strong relationships necessary for high-quality recommendations.

If you're not sure who to ask, a good place to start is by getting to know your professors a bit better. Think of a professor you especially like. Consider staying after class or visiting their office hours. You might discuss something from class that piqued your interest or a topic within the field that intrigues you. You can also ask them to suggest further reading on a subject you're curious about. Consider taking a few classes with professors you like and asking whether they have any opportunities for students to assist with their research. Don't be discouraged if you don't immediately form a connection—try talking to a few of your professors and see who shares your interests. You can use similar strategies with a professional you are shadowing, your supervisor at an internship or volunteer site, your manager at a job that has some connection to your intended field of study, and so on. The goal is to build professional relationships with a few people in your field.

It is customary to ask for letters of recommendation at least six to eight weeks before the deadline. Don't feel too awkward about asking—writing letters of recommendation is a standard part of teaching and mentoring college students. Your recommenders may ask to see your CV or your application essay so they can write a more detailed letter. Recommenders will submit their letter directly to the admissions committee. You will only see the letter if the recommender chooses to share it with you. Usually, you will provide the graduate program with the recommenders' email addresses, and the program will send each of them a private link to upload their letter. It is important to stay in touch throughout the process to politely remind your recommenders of the deadline and make sure all the letters are submitted on time. You should send each person a thank you message once your application is complete. It is also nice to update them if you are accepted to the program.

## Interview

Some applications include an interview. This is usually the final stage in the admissions process. Interview protocols vary widely and may be as brief as thirty minutes or as long as a full day including several interview sessions and a tour of the campus. It is important to do your homework and learn as much as you can about interview practices in your field and at the specific programs to which you apply. Some types of interviews used in graduate school admissions are:

- **Group interview.** Several candidates interviewed together.
- **Panel interview.** One candidate interviewed by a group of faculty members.
- **Multiple mini interview (MMI).** Candidates progress through a series of stations, responding to hypothetical scenarios. [Learn more about MMI.](#)

Business professional attire is recommended. It is important to carefully prepare and get plenty of practice. Visit [Career Services](#) to learn about interview skills and schedule a mock interview.

## Costs and Funding

Tuition costs vary widely by program. There are not as many grants and scholarships available for graduate study as for undergraduate degrees, but it is still possible to get help paying for graduate school. Do some research to see what grants and scholarships are available for your field and the programs you are considering.

PhD programs often offer assistantships in which all or part of a student's tuition is waived. In exchange, the student works for the department by teaching undergraduates or assisting faculty with research. Students who are awarded assistantships may also receive a stipend, effectively getting paid to go to school. Assistantships are highly competitive. Assistantships are not usually available to students pursuing a research master's only.

Professional programs, such as JD and MBA programs, do not usually offer assistantships. Students are expected to pay using their own funds and student loans. It is important to consider your expected future salary in your decisions about student loans. One rule of thumb is that your total student debt should be no more than your expected starting salary.

In some cases, employers pay for employees' graduate study in a program directly related to their job duties. Some employers offer to pay off a specific amount of an employee's student loans after the employee works there for a certain amount of time.

National and community service also offer opportunities to pay for graduate study. Veterans may be able to use their GI Bill benefits to pay for graduate school, and servicemembers in the [National Guard](#) are often eligible for extensive state and federal tuition assistance. Some graduates choose to gain experience and earn money for graduate school by serving in the [Peace Corps](#) or [AmeriCorps](#). Both programs provide volunteers with substantial funds and access to special scholarships when they

complete their service. Graduates who work in the public sector may be eligible for [Public Service Loan Forgiveness](#). There are also targeted state and federal loan forgiveness programs for people in specific professions, like lawyers, teachers and healthcare providers, who practice in high-need areas.

### **What's Next?**

That was a lot of information! Applying to graduate school is a complex process, and there's no "one size fits all" approach. Come to [Career Services](#) to get help weighing your options, planning your next steps, and putting together an excellent application.