

# SHOULD I GO TO GRAD SCHOOL?

## A guide for current AmeriCorps members

### Good reasons for going to grad school

- A graduate degree is necessary for your desired profession
- An advanced degree may further or improve your career
- It may give you more or better career options
- You want to pursue your passion

### Bad reasons for going to grad school

- You are having difficulty finding a job/you do not like your current job
- You are not sure what you want to do with your life
- You are avoiding personal, financial, or other obligations
- You have always wanted to move to a new location

### How do I apply to grad school?

- Take the Graduate Record Examination (GRE)
  - o Find an affordable way to study: you don't necessarily have to pay for expensive test prep courses! There are several good self-study books available, such as Princeton Review's *Cracking the GRE*.
  - o There are also fee reductions and waivers available if you're having a difficult time paying for the cost of taking the test- a quick online search will yield several results.
  - o Some programs do not require the GRE; check with your prospective graduate program(s) to make sure.
- Find the school(s)/program(s) that interest you, and do your research. What types of jobs do graduates have? What types of financial aid do they offer? What are the requirements of the program?
- Write a personal statement
  - o This is where you can really make your service experience and values stand out. A well written personal statement shows maturity, passion, diverse experience, and a range of practical knowledge, which can make you stand out from other applicants.
- Write an application essay
  - o Separate from the personal statement, this is where you specify just how you would be a good fit for the program. Use this essay to weave a story of how you arrived at this program and what your career goals are. The essay should be highly focused; this is not an undergraduate application.
- Pay an application fee. Often, graduate schools will waive the application fee if you have served with AmeriCorps; call the admissions department and explain your situation and ask if you can receive a fee waiver.
- Obtain college transcripts and letters of recommendation. Try to get a variety of recommenders that can attest to both your academic and professional qualifications. Professors, job supervisors, volunteer site supervisors, and/or clergy are all good possibilities. Choose people that are familiar with you and your work.

### Timeline

- August/September/October
  - o Take the GRE, the earlier the better. If you're not happy with your scores, you can always take it again.
  - o Contact your recommenders and send them any relevant supplemental information.
  - o Have a draft version of your personal statement completed.
  - o Request official transcripts from your undergraduate institution.
  - o Research possible financial aid sources (scholarships, fellowships, assistantships, etc.)

- November/December/January
  - o Revise and put the finishing touches on your personal statement.
  - o Complete and submit all applications. Make sure you keep copies for yourself.
  - o Confirm that your recommendations have been received by the schools.
  - o Fill out the FAFSA online and continue to explore possible sources of financial aid.
- March/April
  - o Visit schools that have accepted you.
  - o Meet with faculty in your program.
  - o Speak with representatives of the admissions and financial aid departments.
  - o Notify your chosen school of your acceptance, but don't forget to notify the others that you're declining.

### **Using your Education Award/Paying for grad school**

- Many schools will match the Segal Education Award, but if the school that you're interested in doesn't do so, ask! It's possible that they will match it upon request.
- Inquire about scholarships for service-based experience, even if your school doesn't have anything listed on its website.
- Some schools go above and beyond and provide a premium match to the Ed Award, while others provide a general match. AmeriCorps Alums has put together a great list of these institutions: <http://www.americorpsalums.org/?SegalACEdAwardMatch>

### **Key factors to consider**

- Make sure it's what you want to do. Grad school will require a large investment of your time and often, a large financial investment as well.
- If you're still hesitant on whether or not to go when acceptance deadlines approach, don't. Another semester or year of work experience likely will not hurt your chances at admission in the future.
- Grad school is very different from the undergraduate experience. Don't go to grad school if you solely want to be back in school or in an academic setting.
- Apply to as many schools as you'd like that interest you, but only commit to a program if you are absolutely certain that it is what you want to focus on professionally. Grad school is not the time to explore broadly varied academic interests.
- Talk to professionals in your field—what was their path to get to where they are? Do they recommend grad school?
- Admitted to your dream program, but leaning toward another VISTA year or a different professional experience? Check with your school to see if they allow you to defer your admission.

**Above all else, ASK QUESTIONS! Sometimes you will be surprised with the results.**

If you want to learn more, Idealist has a great resource for prospective grad school applicants: <http://www.idealists.org/info/GradEducation>