Application Process: Deciding Where to Apply and Preparing a Competitive Application

Graduate, Professional and Online Programs

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Today’s Focus
• Why attend graduate school
• How to choose the right program
• What does Engineering at Illinois have to offer

Class Outcomes
• Deciding Where to Apply
• Preparing a Competitive Application
• Personal Statement & Letters of Recommendation
Questions to Consider

• Why are you interested in a graduate school?

• What factors should you consider when choosing where to apply?
Deciding Where to Apply

It is important to select a graduate program and university that

- Fit your learning styles based on the program’s curriculum (e.g., professionally vs. research-oriented)
- Fit your educational and career goals (e.g., program duration, future career opportunities, career support)
- Offer costs you can afford
- Have research and/or internship opportunities that interest you
- Have faculty mentors and resources that match your research interest
- Offer culture that will help you thrive
- Offer location that fits your needs
Important Factors Beyond Research Interests…

• **Personality** – is this a faculty member you can see yourself having a good relationship with?

• **Management Style** – will I work best under this faculty member’s management style? Visit with current graduate students to learn more.

• **Mentoring** – what type of professional development and moral support will this faculty member give me?
Most Common Application Materials

- Resume/CV
- College transcripts
- GRE test score
- English Proficiency Test Scores (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS)
- Letters of Recommendation
- Statement of Purpose or Personal Statement
- Program-specific Essays and/or Writing Samples
A competitive application starts with a strong personal statement and excellent letters of recommendation.
Letters of recommendation are an important part of the application. They provide the admission committee with a non-objective evaluation of who you are – your character traits, abilities, and potential to succeed.
Letters of Recommendation

A recommender should be able to address the following in a letter:

• Your academic aptitude
• Your personality
• Your research abilities (if it’s a research program)
**Recommendation Letters**

Most applications ask the recommender to:

- Explain in what capacity they know the student (e.g., teacher, advisor, research supervisor)
- Rank the student as compared to other students in the department and/or your group – top 5%, 10%, 25% or 50%
- Rate your different skills – e.g., critical and analytical thinking, communication, leadership, maturity, ability to adapt to change

These rating forms are generally used to provide a common set of attributes to evaluate all the applicants.
Requesting a Letter

• Ask your recommender at least six weeks in advance!
• Provide them with the following documents:
  • Your resume
  • A copy of your transcripts
  • Your personal statement
  • List of schools you are applying to
  • How to submit the letter
• Follow up with your recommender to ensure the letter is submitted on time – a friendly reminder is good.
• Thank your recommender and inform them of your final decision.
Personal Statement

• Shows your desire and ability to be successful in the program
• Demonstrates your professionalism
• Documents how well you can articulate your educational and career goals
• Illustrates your maturity
• Highlights why you want to study at this specific university

GRAINGER ENGINEERING
Three Key Components in a Personal Statement

• **Selectivity of Content** – must explain your interest in your field of study and your motivation to succeed

• **Originality** – does it tell your story and grab the reader’s attention at the start?

• **Clarity** – is it concise and to the point?

A strong personal statement takes time and should go through many drafts
A personal statement should be approximately 2 pages and takes time to develop. You should complete several drafts and have others – faculty or graduate students – read through it and provide feedback.
Summary

- Decide on a degree type – professionally-oriented master’s, master’s with thesis, or a Ph.D.
- Research different institutions and programs
- Understand application requirements and deadlines
- For MS w-thesis / Ph.D. program, undergraduate research strengthens your application
- Prepare application materials well in advance and submit at least two weeks prior to the deadline
- Follow-up to ensure all materials were received
Resources:

- The Career Center: https://www.careercenter.illinois.edu/service/personal-statement-reviews
- Graduate, Professional and Online Program:
  - Diana Gonzalez
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