**Advice for Applying to Graduate School**

**Know why you want to go to grad school.** There are three primary avenues of postgraduate study. You could pursue a professional degree, such as an MD, JD, or MPT, that is a necessary credential for a specific career. You could pursue a master’s degree that offers career advancement and focused study, such as an MBA, an MPA, or any number of specialized degrees. Or you could pursue a PhD, which usually leads to a career in scholarship and teaching. Regardless of which pathway you choose, it is important to be intentional about what you plan to study. Often, students approach graduate school as an extension of college. Don’t go to graduate school simply because you don’t know what else to do after college. In fact, you should seriously consider taking at least a couple of years away from school before applying to graduate school. Contrary to what you may believe, a break can both sharpen your focus and make you a stronger applicant for graduate programs.

**Research programs extensively**. There are hundreds of graduate programs across the country, and one of the hardest parts of applying to programs is finding one that fits you. Too often, students choose a program based primarily on convenience or cost. Explore programs beyond the Southeast, and consider prestigious programs. If you are a good student at Mercer, you can compete with good students from anywhere, so don’t limit your options unnecessarily. The internet is your friend, and you can just as easily explore programs in California and Massachusetts as Florida and Alabama. Expect to apply to several programs, and keep your options open.

**The personal statement is the most important part of the application.** Most applications will ask you to write a brief statement about why you want to pursue this degree in this program. The personal statement is your opportunity to make an argument about why you are a good fit for this specific program. Explain how you became interested in this area of study, describe your qualifications for the program, and make a case for why you want to study at this specific school. You can also address any problems with your application in the personal statement. Each application should have a slightly tailored personal statement. If the application includes a prompt or question for the personal statement, be sure you answer the question directly.

**Study for the placement test**. Most graduate programs require a standardized gateway test, such as the LSAT, MCAT, GMAT, or GRE, and your score on these tests can make a difference in your applications. It is worth your while to invest some time and money in test preparation. Familiarizing yourself with the question formats, learning some vocabulary words, and refreshing some mathematical formulas can make a difference in your score.

**Request strong letters of recommendation**. Request letters of recommendation from people who know you well as a student. In most cases, letters should come from professors who have taught you in class or supervised your research. Less often, letters may come from someone who supervised you in a work or internship setting. You should always choose people who know you as a student over people who seem to be famous or powerful. To request the letter, have a face to face meeting with the writer, if possible. Discuss your plans with them, and ask if they could write you a strong letter of recommendation. If they agree, give them as much information as you can to help them write a letter for you, including a copy of your personal statement, a resume or list of relevant activities, and information about any related research or learning experiences. When given the choice, you should waive your right to review the letter of recommendation. This protects the integrity of the process and gives the writer the latitude to write a full and honest assessment of your ability. Request your letters four to six weeks in advance of the deadline.

**Make contact with your prospective schools**. The application should not be the first and only contact you have with a program. Every program has admission representatives who are charged with answering questions and offering information about their programs. You will undoubtedly have questions, so it is worth your while to develop a relationship with these people. For many programs, it is also normal and expected for prospective students to initiate contact with faculty members in their area of study. Ask your faculty mentors here for advice on how to proceed. In doctoral programs, for example, faculty make the actual admission decisions, and a student who has made a connection with a potential mentor is much more likely to be admitted than a student who has had no contact with the program.

**Learn how the funding model for your intended program works**. In most cases, professional programs offer little to no tuition assistance. Master’s degree programs vary widely depending upon the field of study and specific school. This is one of the key issues you will want to discuss when you speak with a representative of the program. Doctoral programs usually offer full funding, often in the form of assistantships, to admitted students.

**Make an informed decision.** Applying to graduate schools is a long, tedious, expensive, stressful process. Manage it by beginning early and staying organized throughout the process. Use your support network of friends, family, and faculty to help you manage the stress and uncertainty. Apply to as many programs as you can afford, and only apply to programs that you would actually want to attend and where you think you will find a good fit. Don’t choose where to apply based solely on location, convenience, or anticipated cost. Choose where to apply based on quality of program and fit with your interests. Once you have received all of your offers of admission and information about cost and funding, choose from among your options based on the best fit and value for your goals.

**Have a contingency plan.** Ultimately, you don’t have control of the application process. It is always possible that you may not be admitted to any of the schools you apply to, so it’s a good idea to have a contingency plan of some sort in mind. You do, though, have control over whether you go to graduate school. No one says you absolutely have to go to graduate school for any reason, and if you do go, you can always leave if you wish to. Control what you can control, relax about what you can’t control, keep your options open, and make the best decision for you.