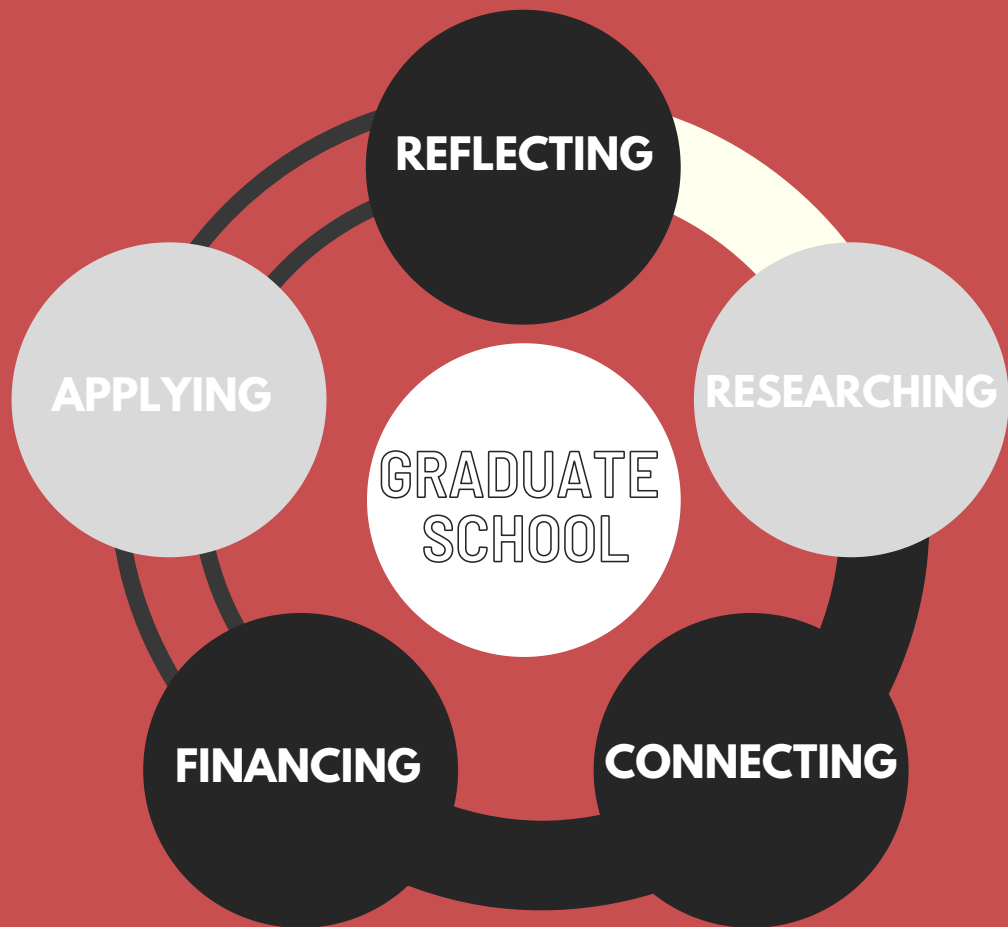




UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO

CREATE YOUR OWN PATH TOWARDS GRADUATE OR PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL



REFLECTION

STEP 1

Start Here

Why am considering a graduate and/or professional degree right now?

Examples:

- I am interested in ... (career)
- I am interested in learning more about ... (topic)
- I want to do... (action)

Does this career or interest require a graduate/professional degree?

Yes/ No /Maybe

If you aren't sure consider:

- research through [O*NET Online](#)
- meeting with a career advisor
[LAS Career Advising](#)
[UIC Career Advisor](#)
- schedule an [informational interview](#) with a professional in that field

If it isn't required, why are you interested in continuing your studies?

- I enjoy learning
- I am unsure of my next step after graduation
- I decided to go in a different direction than my undergraduate degree
- Other:

Think about the factors you considered when choosing UIC.
How do those apply or not apply to choosing a graduate school?

GRADUATE SCHOOL TIMELINE

Please note that this timeline is fluid and is by no means the only way to prepare for graduate school.

Use this guide to help you with a general idea for planning purposes.

Note: Remember to conduct research on your own graduate programs of interest.

This suggested timeline is assuming a Fall admission and a December application deadline, please adjust accordingly.



FRESHMAN YEAR

- Focus on major and career exploration
- Take time to explore your interests through coursework both within and outside of your area of study
- Focus on getting acclimated into university life

SOPHOMORE YEAR

- Continue exploring your interests and ensuring you are on track with your major coursework
- Consider making plans for internship opportunities and gaining volunteer experience related to your career interests
- Consider gaining research experience
- Identify extracurricular activities, leadership positions, clubs, tutoring, fraternities/sororities and organizations you may have interest in joining to build useful skills
- Cultivate relationships with faculty members and mentors both on and off campus

JUNIOR YEAR

- Plan to have your volunteer and internship experience completed by the end of this year if you want to be able to include it in your graduate program application
- Focus on completing a workable resume

WINTER AND SPRING

- Gather Information!
- Near the end of your Junior year, start identifying which schools and programs you want to apply to
- Consider conducting informational interviews with professionals within your intended career field, with people who have completed the degree you are seeking and with program administrators
- Begin making a plan for your year ahead and ensuring you will have the time in your schedule to complete everything needed (test prep, completing applications, gathering recommendation letters, etc.)
- Take practice GRE/GMAT/LSAT/MCAT and consider securing test prep courses and materials by Spring
- Begin working on your personal statement

SUMMER BEFORE SENIOR YEAR

- Testing and Application Materials! The timeline of when you will need to take any standardized exam for graduate entry varies based on the program.
- Continue study for respective test (GRE/GMAT/LSAT/MCAT), schedule a test date, and take exam

Note: Due to COVID-19, most exams are now available to be taken at home using a live remote proctor.

- Begin writing your personal statement
- Ensure you request transcripts for any coursework taken at another institution

GRADUATE SCHOOL TIMELINE



SENIOR YEAR

FALL: Apply!

- Be aware of each program's application cycle
- Request recommendation letters from instructors early! Give as much time as possible for your letter to be completed (4 weeks or more)
- Start applications, gather materials, send your standardized testing scores and retake tests if necessary
- Many early deadlines or rolling admissions begin in early fall, if possible treat the priority deadline as your hard deadline.

WINTER:

- Submit Application by Deadline!
- Plan to complete your applications by the deadline. Many schools have varying deadlines from fall through out early spring.
- In January, complete the FAFSA online
- Conduct any graduate school or admissions interviews

SPRING: The hard part.. waiting

- Trust that you did your best and await admissions decisions which may come at various times throughout the spring
- Make your final decision on which program you will attend, contact schools or make plans on moving forward with a strong gap year experience

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Does your field value work experience before entering a graduate program?
- Could you benefit from taking time off or a gap year to work, explore your interests or take prerequisite coursework to prepare you for your desired program?
- Are you able to submit a strong application now (Undergraduate GPA, Recommendation that are compelling, good GRE/MCAT/GMAT score, and strong personal statement)

WAYS TO STRENGTHEN YOUR APPLICATION WHILE WAITING TO APPLY:

- Volunteer Experience
- Research Assistant
- Work an Internship (paid or unpaid)
- Cultivate Mentors
- Take classes

STEP 2:

RESEARCH

FINDING THE RIGHT GRADUATE PROGRAM

Graduate program rankings are important but are just one of the many factors to put into consideration when seeking to find the right graduate program. However, most importantly, everyone must determine the central factors for them and then dive into researching details about each programs ability to accommodate your central factors.

Factors that students want to investigate to determine if a program is a good fit include cost, location, time commitment, program values, etc. Below are some questions that you may consider asking before you apply to programs of interest. It's recommended that you apply to more than one program.

Characteristics *Program 1* *Program 2* *Program 3*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Program 1</i>	<i>Program 2</i>	<i>Program 3</i>
LOCATION COST			
SPECIALIZATIONS			
TIME COMMITMENT			
PROGRAM VALUES			

RESEARCH

FINDING THE RIGHT GRADUATE PROGRAM

Graduate school studies can take several years. Therefore, the environment or school location becomes an important factor because you will be living there for a good amount of time and likely practicing/working in the area you obtain your degree. One's environment affects academic performance, and if you dislike being in a large city, then a large metropolitan place, bustling with activity may not be the right choice. Due to the need to resort to virtual learning, many programs have online options. This means, more opportunities and flexibility for students. However, if you elect to take this path, it's recommended to still do research and make sure the program is *accredited just as their traditional counterpart*.

START BROADLY- Review 10-20 schools if possible and do an initial review on each. Thankfully, there are a lot of good resources out there, both in print and online services. For example, U.S News and World Report offers graduate school rankings by field of study based on expert opinion and subjective data. Remember, rankings are only a portion of finding out the right program. These will help you narrow down your program selection list.

RESEARCH specific curricula and courses- A great way to find out if a program is a good fit is to review the curriculum and course descriptions. The program's course catalog will reveal course variety and diversity of course offerings and help you determine where you might fit in the program. You will likely be more successful in a program whose course work reflects your interests.

NETWORK AND COMMUNICATE: By this time, the list of potential programs should be getting shorter as the research deepens. You can't gather all of your information online, so the next step is to talk one on one with program staff, students, and alumni. Utilize the list of questions below to help gather information.

- **Faculty** -Connect with your undergraduate faculty as they will offer a wealth of information. Faculty usually stay in touch with their former students who have gone to graduate school and they can be a great source of information from programs at other institutions.
- **Current Students and Alumni** -LinkedIn is a great way to connect with peers or ask the program admissions representatives
- **Admission Representatives** - Utilize the list of questions below and attend info sessions and graduate school fairs

In Person Visit- Once your list has been narrowed down to the likely programs, it can be helpful to take time for in person visits to these campuses.

CONNECTING

STEP 3

QUESTIONS TO ASK GRADUATE SCHOOL RECRUITERS

*BE RESPECTFUL AND INTERACT PROFESSIONALLY WITH ADMISSION REPS.
ASK FOR BUSINESS CARDS/CONTACT INFORMATION IN CASE YOU WANT TO FOLLOW UP.
SELECT THE PROGRAM THAT IS BEST FOR YOU BASED ON THE COMPONENTS OF THE PROGRAM.*

Admissions related questions

- What factors are most important when considering applicants for admission into the program? (i.e. personal statement, undergrad GPA, test scores, etc.)
- What can a candidate do to make himself/ herself a more competitive applicant? (Especially if an applicant does not meet admission criteria)?
- What is the timeline for admission into the program? Is there an advantage in applying before admission deadline?
- Does the program prefer applicants to have work experience or are individuals admitted directly after completing undergraduate degree?

Program Related Questions

- What is the program known for? What are the program's areas of expertise?
- What makes the program different from other similar graduate programs?
- How much interaction is there between faculty and graduate students?
- Are students required to write a thesis and/or dissertation?
- What is the average timeline for students to complete the program?
- Is the program in person or online (and/or a combination)?
- Are there part-time and full-time options?
- Are there opportunities to sit in and observe a graduate school class?
- Would I be able to talk to current students and/or alumni of the program?
- Is there support for the needs of students from all backgrounds?
- What kinds of social events does the graduate school /university sponsor?
- How much professional development programming is there for graduate students?
- What kind of resources and support are there for students with children?
- Do most students live near campus? What is it like to live in this area as a graduate student?
- What applied experiences are included in the program (internships). Can you share some internship placement examples?
- Do most students publish or present a paper before graduation?
- How are mentoring and advising relationships established? Are advisors assigned?
- Do curricula address ethnic, gender, race and cultural issues?
- What research opportunities are there for graduate students?
- Does the program have a strong English Language resource for international students?
- What kind of formal and informal support networks exist in the department, graduate school and the university?

CONNECTING

STEP 3 CONTINUED

Financial Aid Related Questions

- What is the overall cost of the program? (Tuition, fees, etc.)
- What types of scholarship and/or funding is available for individuals in the graduate program?
 - What type of criteria is used to award funding/scholarships?
- Are TA/GA positions offered? Do positions come with tuition waivers?
 - What is the process for applying for any TA/GA positions?
- How do most students in the program finance their education?

Career Development Related Questions

- Are internships or other real-world experience (i.e. clinical placements) part of the graduate program? If yes, how do students get connected with placements?
- What type of career advising support is offered to students in the program? Is there a dedicated career advisor/office for students in the program?
- What percentage of students who graduate from the program are employed full-time in a related career field six months to a year after graduation?
- What interactions do students have with alumni of the program? Is there a way for current students to connect with alumni?



STEP 4

FINANCING

Cost and Financial Aid Availability

Graduate school is expensive; however, tuition and other cost do vary considerably from program to program. Be realistic about what you can afford, how much loan you want to take out and how long you want to be paying for the loans taken out. Investigate types of financial aid opportunities available for your programs of choice and look at work-study or graduate assistantships.

Searchable Grant Programs, Databases and Engines

- Grants.gov
- Grants Forward
- Nationally Coveted College Scholarships, Graduate Fellowships and Post-Doctoral Awards
- Pivot- Educational and other grant funding- includes national and global funding
- International Financial Aid College Scholarship- for students interested in studying in a foreign country
- National Institute of Health- funding related to research on human health and diseases
- National Science Foundation- funding related to science education and engineering

Student Loans

Stafford loans- these are low cost. They are fixed and limited with a relatively low interest rate. You do not have to begin paying them back while in school. To apply, submit the -Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application.

Graduate PLUS loans- these are federally guaranteed loans that pay the total cost of attendance -including living expenses, minus any financial assistance received. They have a higher interest rate and are based on the applicant's credit history. Payments begin on final disbursement, though you may be eligible for deferment of payment while in school.

Perkins loans - these are federal loans provided to students based on need. Graduate students can borrow up to \$ 8,000per year for a total of \$60, 000 excluding the previous undergraduate Perkins debt. To qualify, you must attend a participating program.



STEP 4

FINANCING

Cost and Financial Aid Availability

Grants, scholarship and fellowships

These funds are available to students and they do not have to be paid back. Grants are mostly need-based, scholarships are need and merit based while fellowships are almost always merit-based. Grants and scholarships are sponsored by federal and state governments, individual colleges and universities and by private and nonprofit organizations. Eligibility varies by amount and type of grant or scholarship. Application for some federal and school grants may require FAFSA submission. Information on finding and applying to these scholarships and fellowships can be found at- U.S. Government Department of Education Federal Student Aid website.

Teaching and research assistantships

These are different from the other options discussed above because the assistants work for the funds they receive. Teaching assistants (TAs) work with professors and may require some teaching responsibilities while the Research assistants (RAs) are hired by the graduate school to assist in steering academic research. Teaching Assistants and Research Assistants are hired directly by professors and receive a fixed salary on quarter or semester contracts.

Campus work-study programs

These are closely associated with teaching and research assistantships. In many institutions, these programs overlap. However, campus work-study programs offer a larger variety of employment positions than TA and RA programs. The positions may include library aid, clerical positions and other jobs that help in the daily running of a college or university campus. The Federal Work-Study programs (FWS) provide funding directly to institutions to pay for need-based students. If interested, contact the Work-Study services at their specific institutions.

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION

THE APPLICATION FORM:

The actual graduate school application may encompass multiple smaller applications. There may be a University-wide form in addition to a separate application form for the specific department or program that you are applying to. Be sure to verify if there are multiple applications needed to appropriately apply for your prospective program. Take time to research in detail any specializations or concentrations offered within your program, to ensure you are on the track that best aligns with your goals.

In the actual application, be prepared to detail standard biographical information, employment history, potential research experience as well as academic/professional references. This truly is your first impression.

STANDARDIZED TESTS:

Many graduate programs require students to take some form of a standardized test in order to demonstrate their aptitude and preparedness for graduate level studies. It is also becoming increasingly common for some schools not to require standardized testing, as research has indicated standardized testing to not be a strong predictor of academic success. Nonetheless, below are the main standardized tests that you may encounter as a requirement for your Graduate Program. Be sure to research your specific test early, as testing dates might fill up months in advance. It is helpful to give yourself ample time to study, take the exam and re-take the exam if necessary.

--The GRE General Test is the most common exam for a wide range of graduate academic programs. It is administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS). The GRE is meant to model the type of thinking you will most likely do in a graduate program. It is based on three main categories: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning and Analytical Reasoning. The test is computer based, although there are some options for a paper-based version. Test time is approximately 3 hours and 45 minutes and costs \$205. For more information about this exam, visit: https://www.ets.org/gre/revise_general/about

--The Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) is the exam required for most MBA or business-related graduate programs. The GMAT is broken into four scored sections, Analytical Writing Assessment, Integrated Reasoning, Quantitative and Verbal, however test takers have the option to choose the order that they take the sections in. The GMAT takes around 3.5 hours to complete, and as of February 4th, 2020 it cost \$250 to take the exam, which includes the cost to send score reports to 5 programs of choice.

--The Law School Admission Test (LSAT) is the exam required by over 98% of law schools. It is administered in two parts, the first part is a multiple choice exam with sections in reading comprehension, analytical reasoning and logical reasoning. The second part is a written essay that is not scored, but sent to all law schools that you apply to. It is only offered 7 times a year so be sure to plan your test dates out in advance. It lasts around 3 hours and 30 minutes, and costs \$200 (but other fees may be required).

--The Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) is required for admission to most all medical schools. It is a computer-based exam that assesses knowledge on the natural, behavioral and social sciences surrounding the medical field. There are four main sections of the MCAT, Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems, Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems, Psychological, Social and Biological Foundations of Behavior and Critical Analysis Reasoning Skills. The MCAT is a 7 hour and 30 minute test and costs \$315 to take (If you register more than 2 weeks before the test date).

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION

RESUME:

A resume may be required as part of your graduate school application in order to assess your skills, experience, interest and background education. This is a document that Admissions Committees use to learn more about you, so it is a crucial part of the application. Be sure to focus on your education, and highlight majors/minors, graduation dates and GPA. It is appropriate to include major test scores you feel will enhance your suitability into a program. Relevant work experience can be listed but does not need to be exhaustive. Be sure to include extracurricular clubs, honors, presentations, achievements, research experience and awards.

PERSONAL STATEMENT:

Graduate school applications often require applicants to write a Personal Statement. This helps admissions committees get an idea of who the person is behind the application. Quantitative factors like GPA and test scores only capture a limited view of who a student is, and are very impersonal. The personal statement is the part of the application where a student can share more about who they are and their personal reasons for pursuing that particular graduate program. This is a very important opportunity to illustrate more of who you are and talk about your journey. Below are a few tips to consider as you create your own personal statement:

Read the instructions – Be sure you are aware of the format, context and any specific guidelines that were provided in the instructions for your personal statement. Some programs give loose instructions, others may be very specific in terms of the topic, word count, length requirement and submission method.

Self-reflect – Before you write, spend a significant amount of time thinking about what strengths and qualities that you want to communicate to the admissions committee. Take time to think about what makes you special and unique. What qualities can you bring that graduate program as well as your future classmates? Be sure that your final product reflects you and that you took some time to take a self-inventory to share yourself.

Talk to Friends and Family – It can be difficult to write an essay about yourself, and even identify the best parts that you wish to highlight. Take some time to talk to the people who know you the best. Ask those who have been there throughout your journey for feedback and qualities that they have observed in you.

Be Authentic - This is a common phrase but Admissions committees truly can smell “phony”. They can tell when you are using words that are outside of your vocabulary or when you are exaggerating an experience. Make sure your words are written with authenticity and represent a true account of who are and what you care about.

Address potential shortcomings – Personal statements are a great opportunity to provide context or tell a story about gaps in education, less than stellar grades or moments where things didn’t go according to plan. Whenever addressing potential “weak” points be sure to demonstrate perseverance, improvement, new perspectives gained but do not make excuses. Having the maturity to reflect on these moments and frame them within your life path can be beneficial to telling your story.

Draft, Edit and Repeat – The actual weight of a personal statement can vary between programs, but you will want to be sure it is not an essay that is just thrown together. Give yourself adequate time to write several drafts, edit, proofread, have others give feedback and re-write it. Pay special attention to grammar and spelling and be sure your final draft is polished.

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION

LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION:

Recommendation letters are another crucial part of your graduate school application. Similar to the personal statement, they can be a part of your application that helps to tell a story about who you are outside of your GPA and test scores. Be intentional about who you ask to write your letter of recommendation. Consider faculty members, administrators, internship or educational supervisors and other staff who:

- Know you well
- Have known you long enough to speak about you with authority
- Are familiar with your work and how you work
- Would describe your work positively
- Know your educational and career goals
- Have a high opinion of you

Attempt to submit a diverse set of recommendation letters from individuals who can speak to the range of your skills (i.e. – academic, work/supervisory related, leadership, etc.) It is best to ask for recommendation letters at least a month early, to provide the person adequate time to complete your letter. Remember that person may be writing several students letters, and will likely appreciate considerate timing. Be sure to provide your recommender with information necessary to assist them in representing you. This could include transcripts, a resume, essays, courses you have taken with a professor, professional goals, work experience, honors and awards, a list of qualities you feel they have observed in you, and a due date for the application.

TRANSCRIPTS:

Official and sealed academic transcripts from your undergraduate institution is a requirement of all graduate programs. Transcripts can be requested online through the Office of the Registrar and often are accompanied with differing fees, depending on the type of transcript and the delivery method. Be sure to pay attention to the timeline of delivery because this is one document that is usually sent directly from your Undergraduate Institution to the Graduate program. Give yourself enough time in the event something becomes lost in the mail and you are forced to re-send your transcripts. Also, plan for some time after graduating for your final coursework and degree to be posted to your final transcripts before sending.

APPLICATION FEE:

The two major costs associated with graduate school are the application fee (average of \$100) and testing fees (average of \$225). These are all non-refundable fees that will certainly add up quickly if you are applying to multiple programs. There are fee reduction waivers that students can request from testing administrators or schools directly, but may require students to prove a form of financial hardship. If you qualify, you could be eligible for a fee reduction voucher but be sure to find out each school's policy. Be sure you have done adequate research before applying to be cautious of the cost of applying to your selection of programs.

MAXIMIZING A GAP YEAR EXPERIENCE

WHAT IS A GAP YEAR?

A gap year is an intentional experience spent between life stages. For example, graduation and whatever is next (graduate school, employment, etc.)

Define your goals for a gap year.

Think as strategically as possible. You may be interested in:

- Gaining career experience (to explore career options)
- Strengthening research skills/abilities
- Prepping for and applying to graduate school
- Making money/saving money
- Giving back (volunteering, AmeriCorps, Peace Corps, Teach for America, Jesuit Volunteer Corps etc.)
- Teaching abroad/traveling abroad

If you are considering a gap year, what are your goals for the experience?



MAXIMIZING A GAP YEAR EXPERIENCE

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT WHEN CONSIDERING A GAP YEAR

- How will the experience help you in the future?
- Does it cost \$ or do you get paid \$? How much?
- Is health insurance provided? What is included in it?
- How long is the program/position?
- Is housing provided or do you need to pay for/find it?
- What do people generally do AFTER the position/program?

What do graduate schools/employers think about gap years?

- Graduate schools and employers want to see intentionality

AMERICORPS & AMERICORPS-LIKE PROGRAMS

- AmeriCorps is part of the U.S. govt. that encourages permanent residents/citizens to give back to a community in the U.S.
- You do service in exchange for an educational award.
- You put federal loans in forbearance - you don't pay while you are in the program. After you finish, the govt pays the interest.
- Service can be direct (w/people) or indirect (like in an office).
- Service can be a year, 10 months, six months or a summer.
- Similar programs are Jesuit Volunteer Corps, Peace Corps, and National Health Corps
<https://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/amicorps/join-amicorps>

LIVING ABROAD/TEACHING ENGLISH ABROAD

If you are thinking about teaching English abroad, common reasons to do so are:

- o Interest in traveling abroad
- o Being immersed in a new culture and/or learn a new language
- o Opportunity to make a salary
- o Opportunity to grow professionally and personally

In some (not all) countries, individuals who want to teach English need to complete the TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) certification.

- o The TEFL = you are qualified to teach English to non-native English speakers.
- o TEFL can be completed online or in person (and you may need to pay for it).
- o You do not need to have studied English/Education as a major in order to teach, but you need to have completed a bachelors degree.

Things to consider when thinking about where to teach:

- o Do you need TEFL to teach in the country where you want to teach?
- o Cost of living in that country - would you be able to afford expenses and/or save money?
- o Language - do you need to know a foreign language?
- o Research culture of country - how might you fit in?
- o Salary (on average) of teachers in that country
- o Length of time you would teach abroad
- o Costs of program (flight, health insurance, any program costs) AND Reputation/information about school or program
- o Are there citizenship requirements



UIC RESOURCES

UIC Career Services

<https://careerservices.uic.edu/>

(312) 996-2300 (call to make an appointment)

LAS Career Development & Internships

<https://career.las.uic.edu/>

iAdvise (my.uic.edu – Advising)

Public Health Career Services

<https://publichealth.uic.edu/academics/career-services/>

Schedule an appointment through Handshake

Business Career Center

<https://businessconnect.uic.edu/business-career-center/>

Schedule an appointment through UICcareers.com

Engineering Career Center

<https://ecc.uic.edu/>

Schedule an appointment through Handshake

Alumni Career Services

<https://advance.uic.edu/alumni-association/career-services/>

Office of External Fellowships

<https://oef.uic.edu/>

INSPIRING TED TALKS

Walking the Curved Line to the PhD, Courtney Cain

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7E09fnZojrQ>

Reimagining the PhD, Nadia Jaber

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rHitLGBPsj8>

Academic
Advisors

Mentors

You

Faculty

Counseling

- Talk to your professors, mentors, and advisors about your ideas and plans. Ask for feedback.
- Do they know any recent alums who have done/are doing what you are thinking about?

The decision about what's next after graduation can be overwhelming and anxiety-producing. Take advantage of UIC's Counseling Center to help identify positive coping skills to implement throughout this process and beyond!



NOTES

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