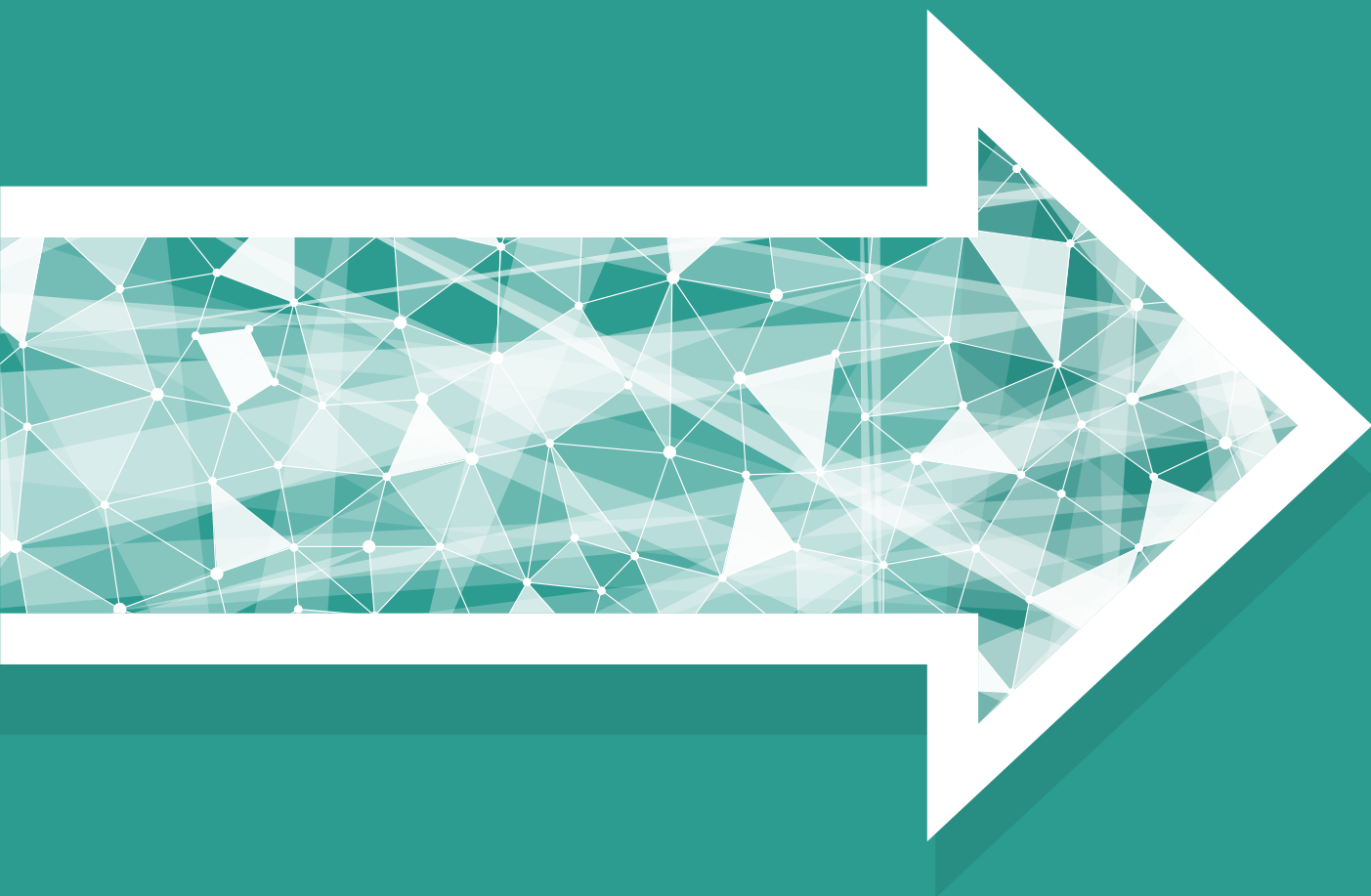




# Graduate School Preparation Toolkit



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## Table of Contents

Should I go to graduate school right after college?	03
Should I apply for Master's programs or Ph.D. programs?	04
How should I select graduate programs to apply for?	05
What application timeline should I follow?	07
How should I prepare for graduate school exams?	08
How can I request a recommendation letter?	10
How can I write a compelling personal statement?	12
How should I choose among multiple offers?	13
How can I fund my graduate education?	14

## 1. Should I go to graduate school right after college?

YES!	NOT NECESSARILY...
Your desired professional field may require that you have a graduate degree.	You are avoiding personal/family/financial obligations.
It can improve your career and increase your options and professional prospects.	You are avoiding or having difficulty in the job hunt.
It can satisfy your intellectual curiosity and spark your passion.	You don't know what to do with your life.
You enjoy long-term and extensive research and writing (Ph.D.).	You have always been curious about X.
You have research/ professional interests that align with faculty's specializations at your program of interest.	You have always wanted to live in X.
	It may be beneficial to accumulate work experience in your field prior to pursuing a degree.

### Tips for Weighing Your Options

- Before you consider graduate school, you need to know what you want to do - conduct self-assessment and more research. Here are some resources for your reference:
  1. Is grad school worth the cost?  
<https://www.themuse.com/advice/is-grad-school-worth-the-cost>
  2. Is graduate school right for me?  
<https://careervision.org/graduate-school-right/>
- If you are considering graduate school because you have no idea what you should do after college, reconsider it.
- Talk to professors, graduate students and people who work right after college.
- Explore more options, try some volunteer jobs or internships.
- Ask yourself if you are ready to handle life as a graduate student:
  1. You are fine with not having a "real job"
  2. You have the financial resources to pay and/ or are willing to take on debt to finance your graduate career
  3. You are ready for academic challenges
  4. You are prepared to make your own decisions
  5. Your academic curiosity for your subject will persist
  6. You are willing to share your research and discoveries

#### References:

<http://idealistgradschool.org/good-reasons-going-grad-school/>  
<http://idealistgradschool.org/bad-reasons-going-grad-school/>

Thorpe, J. R. (2015). Thinking About Graduate School? Here Are 9 Signs That You're Ready To Handle Life As A Grad Student.

## 2. Should I apply for Master's programs or Ph.D. programs?

### Differences between a Research and a Professional Degree

In academia, a typical research degree is Doctor of Philosophy, which consists of two phases of study. The first phase, usually the first one to three years of the Ph.D. program, requires the candidate to complete certain coursework. It is often followed by a Ph.D. candidacy exam. The second phase requires a comprehensive written dissertation and oral examination.

A professional degree is a degree earned by the holder to practice in a particular profession. For some fields like medicine, law, or teaching, there are differences among a first professional degree, an advanced professional degree, and a terminal academic degree. A first professional degree prepares the holder for a particular career or profession. An advanced professional degree provides the holder with deeper training in a specialized area.

### Differences between a Master's and a Ph.D.

A Master's degree program typically involves lectures, seminars, and lab sessions. You will work on several smaller projects before completing a final thesis. The main purpose of a Master's is to advance your subject knowledge within a specific area of your chosen field. Students in Master's programs typically go into applied professional fields, especially if the Master's is not a terminal degree.

However, a Ph.D is more like a long, intensive research, analysis, and writing project. The focus is on your independent research. You will take intensive coursework and you must pass a series of qualifying examinations. You will benefit from expert supervision, conduct original research, get deep training in methodology, and will likely serve as a teaching assistant and/ or research assistant.

A Master's program is usually 1-2 years while a Ph.D. program lasts 4 years or longer. Ph.D. programs involve more dedication and hard work over a much longer period of time than a Master's. While Master's courses advance your subject knowledge, the purpose of a Ph.D. is for you to contribute new knowledge to your field.

### Reasons For a Master's vs. a Ph.D.

If you are not sure about your career path, you should pursue a Master's degree instead of a Ph.D. If you are changing your field of study or plan to advance your knowledge in your current field, a Master's is also a better choice.

If you are certain that you will pursue a career in teaching and research, you should choose a Ph.D. program. If you don't have a strong academic background, you may need to pursue a Master's degree first in order to demonstrate that you are capable of doctoral-level work.

## Strategies to Maximize Your Options

Applications must be made thoughtfully and strategically. That said, you may not be 100% sure in October of senior year if you will be best off pursuing a Master's or Ph.D. Your decision might depend on a range of factors: funding offers, faculty, timing, admissions or whether a Master's might help you toward a stronger PhD program.

If you are considering various options, don't be afraid to pursue a "mixed portfolio". As long as you know why each program is an exciting fit for you, this might just open more doors. What if, for instance, instead of starting a 5+year Ph.D. in the US immediately, you were able to defer that offer and take up a fully-funded 1-year Master's fellowship in a related field in the UK? Could you gain research experience in a related field, take a break, and lay the groundwork for that Ph.D. work? How might you mix and match different kinds of programs to strengthen your profile?

Dream big, think diverse, and explore different national contexts and disciplines.

### Recommended Books:

- Goldsmith, J. A., Komlos J., & Gold, P.S. (2001). *A Portable Mentor for Scholars from Graduate School through Tenure*.
- Chakrabarty, P. (2012). *Getting into and Surviving Grad School, Postdocs, and a Research Job*

References:

Francis, C. (2017). Masters or PhD: Which is the Best Option for You?

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terminal\\_degree](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terminal_degree)

## 3. How should I select graduate programs to apply for?

### Useful Websites for Graduate Programs Search

- U.S. News and World Report: Here you can browse graduate school rankings by discipline. You can also find articles that provide application and financing advice.
- Gradschools.com: You can use this website to search for graduate programs by major, institution, degree type, and location. It also provides additional information on financial aid, scholarships, and student loans.

### Advice on Compiling a List of Target Programs

1. Start your search early
- Begin researching potential graduate programs at least one year before you plan to apply, so you can plan out your courses, extracurricular activities, and internships accordingly

## 2. Identify your priorities

- Think about what factors matter to you the most when selecting a graduate program. Try using a graduate school scoring rubric, such as this one below, which suggests the following categories for you to consider:
  - (1) "Career Opportunities: How well does this school set you up for future career opportunities? Does it specialize in a particular industry you're interested in? Cost: What is the final price tag? Is there any financial aid or scholarship money available for the program?
  - (2) People: What will your fellow students be like? Is it a diverse class? Do students seem like people you'd want to be friends with?
  - (3) Location: Is the school located somewhere you could see yourself living for two (or more) years?
  - (4) Academics: What does the curriculum look like? Is there a balance between classroom learning and hands-on projects?
  - (5) School Culture: What is the overall "vibe" of the school? Do people seem laid-back or competitive? Are there a lot of clubs on campus you would be interested in?
  - (6) Intangibles: Is there anything that you can't put your finger on that makes this school feel extra special? Did you visit and absolutely love it?"
- Take advantage of campus resources
- Attend graduate school info sessions and other related events
- Reach out to your advisor and the Career Development Center to discuss how different programs can influence your academic and professional careers

## 4. Network

- Contact admissions departments for more information, and visit some potential schools if possible.
- Ph.D. students: Contact faculty who might be willing to supervise your research
- Build a professional network through online social media (e.g. LinkedIn) and consult students and alumni from the graduate programs you are interested in.

## 5. Strategize

- In addition to your dream schools, be sure to include in your list of prospective programs at least two safety schools based on your estimated chances of admission.

## References:

<https://www.princetonreview.com/grad-school-advice/choosing-a-school>

<https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/choosing-university/choosing-graduate-degree>

<https://www.themuse.com/advice/the-simple-tool-that-will-help-you-pick-the-right-grad-school>

## 4. What application timeline should I follow?

A timeline is a good planning tool for your graduate school applications. When you are working on your timeline, make sure you know exactly what to do and when to do it. To give yourself enough time, you will want to start working on your graduate school timeline at least a year before you're planning on going to graduate school. It is even better if you can give yourself two years.

### Sample Graduate School Application Timeline

#### Spring of Junior Year

- Sit down with professors who might be writing your letters and discuss your academic plans. Ask if they might write for you in the future and get their advice.
- If you are a student with dedicated academic research and leadership interests, consider fellowships and begin your planning with Global Awards for September/October deadlines.
- Are you a Chinese student looking toward policy, business, economics, etc? Watch out for early deadlines: the Schwarzman Scholars application for Tsinghua is due in May.

#### Summer of Junior Year

- Define your goals
- Research graduate programs
- Prepare for or take admission exams
- Research further funding opportunities (fellowships, assistantships, financial aids etc.)

#### Fall of Senior Year

- Create your short list of where you want to go
- Outline your achievements for your personal statement
- Provide your professors with detailed guidance on recommendation letters
- Take your admission exams
- Begin submitting applications for fellowships and first rounds of graduate programs

#### Winter of Senior Year

- Start writing early and edit as much as possible
- Fill out the FAFSA if applicable
- Get everything together, including transcripts, essays, and test scores
- Send your scores and make sure your prospective schools receive all your materials
- Application due dates are typically November- early January depending on program. This could be different for US vs. rest of the world

## Spring of Senior Year

- Compare offers and make a decision
- Consider alternatives if you don't get a satisfying offer
- Get ready to go!

## Customizing Your Timeline

- Create relevant tasks on your grad school timeline for each school you are looking at
- Record the application due dates and any other important dates and data

Download this Graduate School Application Sample Timeline for your reference.

## Additional Resources:

- <https://www.unh.edu/career/planning-timetable>
- Boyington, B. (2015). Follow a Graduate School Application Timeline. *U.S. News*.

Reference:

<https://www.petersons.com/blog/Grad-School-Timeline-Charting-a-course-to-success/>

## 5. How should I prepare for graduate school exams?

### Types of Graduate School Admission Exams

If you plan to attend graduate school, you will probably need to take a graduate admission exam. The specific exam that you need to take depends on the graduate program you are interested in. Law school applicants will need to take the LSAT, whereas medical school applicants will need to take the MCAT. Most business schools require the GMAT. However, some programs also accept GRE scores. The GRE is an exam that most graduate programs accept. Some don't require any! It is important to know which exam your prospective programs require.

You can learn more about different graduate school admission exams here:

<https://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools/gre-gmat-test-prep.aspx>

### How to Prepare for Graduate Admission Exams

- **Research**
  1. Research the prospective programs' test requirements
  2. Don't assume every program accepts GRE
- **Take a Diagnostic test**
  1. Enroll in a course and/or buy a test prep book
  2. See where you stand and what you need to improve
- **Develop a Testing Timeline**
  1. Identify when you plan to apply to your specific program
  2. Plan out your test dates according to specific program application deadlines

3. Note that LSAT and MCAT have limited test dates and locations

- **Practice Test-Taking Strategies**

1. Know when to skip questions and go back to them later, especially on the GRE
2. Use process of elimination
3. Consider all the answer choices before selecting an answer
4. Make educated guesses

- **Take Practice Tests Under Test Day Conditions**

1. Get used to the format and the physical demands of the test
2. Become familiar with the pacing in the time allowed

- **Seek Help If Needed**

1. Seek tutoring help or enroll in preparation classes if needed
2. Take advantage of free online resources (e.g. ETS, Khan Academy)

Preparing for graduate admission exams is the first step on your journey toward advancing your education and career through a graduate degree program. Be sure to start planning early and only sit for an exam if you're fully prepared.

**Additional Resources:**

- NYU Shanghai Academic Resource Center: GRE Society Workshop Series
- NYU Shanghai Library  
<https://guides.nyu.edu/c.php?g=277131&p=4038189>
- Navigating Graduate Examination Guides  
<https://www.gograd.org/exam-prep/>

Reference:

<https://www.ivywise.com/ivywise-knowledgebase/newsletter/article/preparing-for-graduate-admission-exams-tips-for-the-gre-gmat-lsat-and-more/>

## 6. How can I request a recommendation letter?

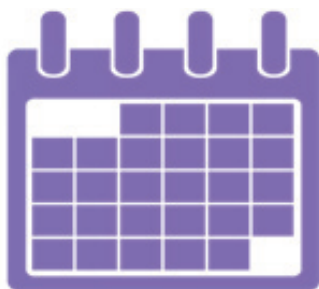
### WHO TO ASK?



Faculty or professionals who...

- know you well academically or professionally
- know you long enough to write with authority
- know your work
- describe your work positively
- have a high opinion of you
- know where you are applying
- know your educational and career goals
- be able to favorably compare you with your peers
- be well known
- be able to write a polished letter

### WHEN TO REQUEST?



- Prepare in your 1st and 2nd academic years
  1. Accumulate research and applied experiences (can be important sources of experience, for admissions essays and recommendation letters)
  2. Focus on obtaining mentoring and other experience that will let faculty get to know you.
- Request recommendation letters at least three months before application deadlines

### HOW TO REQUEST?



- Carefully interpret a response and its subtle cues
- Appreciate a positive response and accept a negative one
- Give enough notice
- Approach when recommenders have the time to discuss it with you and consider it without time pressure
- Have all your supporting materials with you and provide your documentation all at once
- Anything you provide must be neat and free of errors
- A friendly reminder sent a week or two before the deadline is helpful
- Tell your recommender how to submit the letter online

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## WHAT TO PROVIDE?



- Transcript
- Resume or CV
- Admissions essays
- Courses you've taken with recommenders (clearly list course number, course name, semester and academic year)
- Research experience
- Internship and other applied experiences
- Honor societies to which you belong
- Awards you've won
- Work experience
- Professional goals
- Copy of the application recommendation forms (if a paper/hard copy letter is required and if the forms are provided by the institution)
- List of the schools and programs to which you are applying
- Deadline for each application

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## EMAIL EXAMPLES



- 3 Email Templates for Asking for a Letter of Recommendation  
<https://edityour.net/email-templates-for-asking-for-a-letter-of-recommendation/>

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## FOLLOW-UP



- Inquire if your recommenders need more information
- Remind your recommenders of the submission deadlines
- Write a thank you note or card afterward
- Update your recommenders with your application results

## 7. How can I write a compelling personal statement?

When you compete with a group of candidates with equally high GPAs and test scores, an effective personal statement can make you stand out. You should present a unique “you” story that is complementary to the rest of your application. Specifically, how is your experience special and meaningful? How does that connect you to a particular field of study?

- Some questions to ask yourself before you write:  
[https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job\\_search\\_writing/preparing\\_an\\_application/writing\\_the\\_personal\\_statement/index.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/job_search_writing/preparing_an_application/writing_the_personal_statement/index.html)
- Advice on how to develop a draft:  
<https://www.nyu.edu/academics/awards-and-highlights/global-awards/support-and-resources/personal-statement-recommendations.html>
- Tailor your essay to each school:

Consider what each of your selected schools is looking for in prospective students. Visit universities’ websites, analyze their mission statements, and talk to their current students or alumni to get a sense of the school culture and values. Some institutions prefer certain characteristics over others. They might look for students who demonstrate similar values and strengths because these students are more likely to be well-suited to the culture and become assets to the university community.

Application questions required by many schools are somewhat similar, but it is not wise to use the same statement for all your applications. It is essential to provide different answers to each question so that your answer fits the question being asked. If a school wants to know why you prefer it over other schools, do some research to find out what sets your choice apart from other universities or programs, such as academic and cultural factors.

- Writing tips: Dos and Don’ts  
<http://www.cws.illinois.edu/workshop/writers/tips/personalstatement/>

### Additional Resources:

- If you’d like to read more sample essays, *50 Successful IVY LEAGUE Application Essays* might be helpful.
- If you are stuck in the writing process or just want more general feedback, the Academic Resource Center at NYU Shanghai provides one-on-one consultations for personal statement writing. Just make an appointment with a Writing & Speaking Fellow here:<https://nyus.mywconline.com/>.

Reference:

<https://www.unifrog.org/blog/supplemental-essays-tailor-your-strengths-to-each-university>

## 8. How should I choose among multiple offers?

Choosing a graduate program is all about fit -- academic and social fit. Think about your priorities -- what factors matter to you the most when making a decision? Some factors to consider include:

- Program quality
- Reputation
- Location
- Culture
- Social life
- Cost
- Research, internship or practicum opportunities

While it is important to research the different programs you are accepted by, remember that you are not alone. Take advantage of the resources around you and seek advice from people who are knowledgeable in the area you are pursuing. For example, consider reaching out to:

- Faculty
- Program staff
- Students who have attended the program

### Programs Decision Matrix

If you still find yourself debating among different offers, try using the following decision matrix, which allows you to take multiple factors into account when comparing options.

### Program Decision Matrix Template

School/Program	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Criteria (optional weights)	Score with a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the least ideal and 5 the most ideal. You can add weight to certain factors that may be more important to you.				
Program quality					
Reputation/Ranking					
Location					
Culture					
Social life					
Cost					
Other opportunities					

## Programs Decision Matrix Example

School/Program	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Criteria (optional weights)	Score with a scale of 1-5 with 1 being the least ideal and 5 the most ideal. You can add weight to certain factors that may be more important to you.				
Program quality	$5 \times 2 = 10$	$5 \times 2 = 10$	$4 \times 2 = 8$	$4 \times 2 = 8$	$3 \times 2 = 6$
Reputation/Ranking	$5 \times 2 = 10$	$5 \times 2 = 10$	$3 \times 2 = 6$	$3 \times 2 = 6$	$2 \times 2 = 4$
Location	5	4	3	5	3
Culture	5	5	4	3	2
Social life	4	4	4	5	3
Cost	3	3	3	2	3
Other opportunities	4	4	4	4	3
Total score	41	40	32	33	24

### Additional Resources:

- Choosing a Graduate Program After Multiple Offers  
<http://blog.gradschoolmatch.com/choosing-a-graduate-program/>
- How to Make the Final Grad School Enrollment Decision  
<https://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/graduate-school-road-map/2013/04/18/how-to-make-the-final-grad-school-enrollment-decision>

## 9. How can I fund my graduate education?

### Major Scholarships and Fellowships

Are you conducting research or leading initiatives, with strong academic standing? Do you have a passion, a goal, and a commitment? Are you excited to learn from peers across fields? If so, start your research early on Global Awards and Fellowships, such as the Rhodes Scholarship for China or Knight-Hennessy Scholars at Stanford University. Business students can launch start-ups, data scientists can work on Machine Learning at Cambridge, Oxford or Stanford; social science students can fight for criminal justice reform, and much more. Fellowships can change your life, your scholarly perspective, and they pay entirely for grad school.

Will you win? Maybe. The odds are, not. But that's the point: competing at the highest levels, representing your beliefs and ideas, is how committed NYU Shanghai students focus their ideas and academic careers. Applying gives you several advantages: individual advising on personal statements, internally edited faculty letters, interview training, clarity about your plans... and perhaps even a prestigious finalist opportunity that will bring you a resume boost and, just maybe, an opportunity you never dreamed of. Be in touch early with Prof. Anna Kendrick ([shanghai.global.awards@nyu.edu](mailto:shanghai.global.awards@nyu.edu)) to build and enact your plan.

## Sources of Graduate Funding

Many types of funding are available for graduate students, from merit-based, need-based, and need-blind financial aid and scholarships to funding that is specific to a particular country, demography, university, subject area, or career path. Some of the most common sources of graduate funding include:

- Graduate assistantships
  1. Teaching assistant
  2. Program/project assistant
  3. Research assistant
- Resident assistantships
- Work-study
- Internal grants, fellowships, and scholarships
- Outside grants, fellowships, and scholarships
- Student loans
- Employer tuition reimbursement (if applicable)

## How to get funding

Your admitted school or program is the best information source. Ask your program for listings of internal grant and scholarship opportunities that new students are eligible for. To maximize your chances for free financial aid, apply to your program early — that way you'll be on your department's radar as opportunities arise. If you don't think you get enough financial aid, you can email or speak to your department and the financial aid office for reconsideration.

You may also be able to work for your department through a research or teaching assistantship. These programs typically cover a portion of tuition and provide a stipend. You will also gain valuable experience. Connect with faculty members whose work aligns with your topic of study and inquire opportunities.

## Additional Resources:

- Scholarship and fellowship search engines such as Scholars4Dev  
<http://www.scholars4dev.com/>
- Use These 5 Strategies to Pay for Graduate School  
<https://www.usnews.com/education/best-graduate-schools/paying/articles/2013/03/12/use-these-5-strategies-to-pay-for-graduate-school>

Reference:

<https://www.topuniversities.com/student-info/student-finance/guide-funding-your-graduate-studies>



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