



TAKE  
YOUR  
**next step**

Thinking About Grad  
School?

WATERLOO | CENTRE FOR CAREER ACTION



SLIDE TEXT:

Thinking about Grad School?



## Learning Goals

- » By the end of this presentation, participants will be able to:
1. Identify factors important for them in choosing a graduate program that is right for them
  2. Assess their motivations for pursuing a graduate degree from another perspective
  3. Develop a plan to research different programs and reach out to potential supervisors



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

Alright, so welcome to Thinking about Grad School. Our goals for you for the end of our time together today are that by the end, certainly by the Q&A, you'll be able to identify the factors that are important to you in choosing a graduate program that fits you and your goals, you'll be able to assess your motivations for going to grad school in the first place - maybe from a different perspective than you had been thinking about before, and you'll be able to develop a plan to research programs and supervisors and go about the application process in an effective way.



## Overview

- » Who are we?
- » What do you need to know about grad school?
- » Considerations for choosing a program
- » Things to keep in mind about the application process
- » How can you start preparing now?
- » Q & A

3



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

And this is how we're going to take you through that.



## Graduate programs in academic subjects

- » Course-based Master's degree:
  - » Complete # of grad courses + project work
- » Research-based Master's degree:
  - » Complete grad courses + thesis + defence
- » Doctoral or PhD degree
  - » Completion of original research as dissertation
  - » Generally, research-based Master's needed
  - » Sometimes, direct admission (academically competitive)
- » Completion times vary (program, supervisor, country, university, and so on)

4



KATIE DENOMME:

Before we get into a little bit more about who we are and the graduate paths that we took, I wanted to introduce you to a couple of the different paths that you can take when thinking about graduate school. In putting this together I thought that it would be a good idea - we're going to get into a little bit more about specifically how both of us went through graduate school and we'll tell you a bit more about how we applied those skills. But in order to figure out if you want to go to grad school, you need to know your options. So thinking about a course-based Master's degree is something that a lot of people don't know. It's maybe not what you traditionally think of when you think about graduate school and the research environment. A course-based Master's degree is usually about a year-long program where you do courses and focus on more specific details about your topic, instead of doing a research project like a thesis. You typically can't escape research entirely in a course-based Master's program, but you do focus a little bit more on a larger research project, or getting to do a larger report, instead of an independent thesis like you would if you did a research-based Master's degree.

Typically in Canada you're doing a research-based Master's degree; that's where you are maybe taking a couple of courses, but focusing most of the time on working with a supervisor, whether it's in a lab or doing qualitative research, and working

through your thesis. Typically a research-based Master's degree is what would lead to the next step, if you're interested, in doing a PhD degree. It's very tough to move from a course-based Masters into a very heavy research-based PhD program. It's definitely possible. There are some specific programs that are out there that are meant for that, but if you're thinking about moving forward and completing a PhD, you generally want to be looking at a research-based Master's degree. In the PhD where it really differs from doing a couple of courses and then defending your thesis is much more original research, so you're much more independently conducting your research topic. You have to have completed your dissertation, and occasionally you can directly enter a PhD program. It's a lot more common in the U.S.

There are some programs, I even know that it's happened here at the University of Waterloo, where you can start your Master's and decide that you actually want to switch over and go right into your PhD, and move a little bit quicker through it, because the completion time of doing all of these steps can be longer than you think. It varies per program, so as I mentioned the course-based programs are about a year usually, a research-based Master's is going to be hopefully around 2 years. But it really does depend on your supervisor, how your results are going, and a lot of other factors in terms of funding your research as well. And then if you think about your Doctoral degree, so if you're thinking about going all the way through to a PhD, you can count on a minimum of 6 years and that's if everything goes really well.

CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

That's really fast.

KATIE DENOMME:

Yeah. You will hear about some of our specific experience with that a little bit later. So when you're thinking about planning, it's important that you know the type of program that you are targeting. Is it research-based? Is it course-based? And often that depends on your end goal. So again, if you want to continue with research and that's something you really like, you'd be looking at the research-based Master's programs. If you're looking to maybe specialize in something and move right into industry, there's a lot of really great course-based programs out there that can help you do that.



## Who am I?

- » Christine Kampen Robinson
  - » Bachelor of Arts, Honours degree in Translation Studies from University of Winnipeg (including one year studying abroad in Heidelberg, Germany)
  - » Master of Arts in German from University of Waterloo
  - » PhD Candidate in Applied Linguistics at the University of Waterloo
  - » Career Advisor for graduate students at the University of Waterloo



### CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

Alright, so just to introduce myself a little bit, my name is Christine Kampen Robinson. I am originally from Winnipeg, where I did my Honours Bachelor degree in Translation Studies. I came here to Waterloo to do my Master's in Applied Linguistics and German, and I am set to defend my PhD dissertation in February of the Winter term. Knock on all the wood. So, that's a little bit about my background in terms of my academics. I also work full-time here at the University of Waterloo as a career advisor for graduate students, so what I'm hoping to weave together today in terms of advice for you is partly due to my own experiences and also from talking to hundreds of Master's, PhDs, and post-docs who have been doing their work here at the University of Waterloo.



# My Research & Teaching

Research	Teaching
Sociolinguistics	German language
Identity	German literature
Multilingualism	Language learning pedagogy
Language learning	Theatre pedagogy
Transnational space	German culture
Conversation Analysis	Linguistics
Study-abroad experiences	Conversation Analysis
Access to education	Intercultural communication
Intercultural communication	



**CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:**

One of the things that you have to become comfortable with in an academic context is talking about yourself in relation to your areas of expertise. That's one of the ways that academics tend to refer to themselves: in terms of both the areas that they like to research and the areas that they're comfortable teaching. So, these are mine. I, as I've said, am doing my PhD in Applied Linguistics. I've done research on identity and second language learning, but as you can see, the teaching and the research columns look kind of different. There is some overlap, and certainly my research informs my teaching, but there's all kinds of things on my teaching side that aren't necessarily things that I research. Part of that is because by the time you've done a PhD, you've done course work in so many different areas, that you have experience and knowledge in a wide variety of topics that you can then also teach. And the thing here I want to emphasize: teaching is a really important component of a lot of Master's degrees and certainly all of the PhD programs I've ever heard of. So in addition to managing the research that you do, you're going to be going into classrooms and teaching undergraduates. Whether that's in a lab or in the classroom, sometimes managing your own course, or more often as a teaching assistant.





## Who am I?

### » Katie Denomme

- » Bachelor of Arts, Honours degree in Psychology (Co-op option) with Human Resources Specialization from University of Waterloo
- » Master of Industrial Relations and Human Resources from University of Toronto (course based)
- » Career Development Practitioner Graduate Certificate from Conestoga College
- » Career Advisor specializing in Further Education at the University of Waterloo



### KATIE DENOMME:

I took a little bit of a different path. I'm also a career advisor at the University of Waterloo, but I specialize in further education, and so that's where a lot of what I have to add today is going to be about the application process. So, if you are thinking of coming into the career centre and booking an appointment with someone to talk a little bit about your plan for graduate school, or professional school, any type of further education - maybe go over and review your application, or if you have an interview, practice for that - I'm one of the advisors that you would see. My name is Katie Denomme and my colleague, Pam Waechter, is the other further education career advisor, and we would love to work with you on your plans for this process. I did my undergrad here at the University of Waterloo in Psychology with a Human Resources specialization, and then I went to the University of Toronto, where I completed a course-based Master's: a Master's of Industrial Relations and Human Resources. I also have a career development practitioner certificate, so I even did some post-grad training after I graduated and finished my Master's to be a little more applicable to some of the things that I'm doing here now, and I did that part-time while I was working. So there's a whole host of different experiences here in the career centre and we're always happy to share them and to work through your plans with you as well.





# Vocabulary Primer

Words that changed their meaning in grad school	What it means
Abstract	Short summary of a research paper, including an overview of the main argument and keywords
Conference presentation	15-30 minute presentation of research findings at an academic conference
Citation	Time you were quoted by someone else in an article
Stipend	The amount of money you get from your institution to study there
Article	Piece of writing found in an academic journal; peer review required
Peer review	Experts in the field read submission; evaluate soundness and originality
Thesis	Really long piece of writing about a particular topic; idea is to fill a knowledge gap
Defense	Discussion/examination during which you orally justify the choices you made in your thesis



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

Alright, so I was showing you a chart of words that I would use to talk about myself and my academic experience before. Those were really disciplinarily specific, and whatever your disciplinary background is, you're going to have different areas of expertise. There are a whole host of words though that are important in an academic context. I know when I first started grad school, I felt like I had joined a club that I did not know the secret handshake to. A lot of it had to do with the specific words and what they meant, because some of the words that I knew - I mean, I knew the word abstract, but I didn't know it in an academic context. Or I knew the word article, but the first thing I thought of there was a newspaper, or a blog post. And so it's important that you recognize that there's a vocabulary that's different and if you see some of these words and you're like, "I don't really know what that means," that you start thinking about how you can find the answers. Because there's a lot of things that you don't know when you start grad school and it can be really unsettling. In part because grad school is very different from undergrad. Undergrad teaches you in a lot of ways how to do the things that you're going to need to do in grad school, but grad school is where you're actually doing the things that you're being taught how to do in undergrad. So, maybe we'll move to the next slide.



## Reality Check

- » Grad school is really different from undergrad
  - » Self-directed, more pressure, very competitive
- » The academic job market is **bad**
  - » **HOWEVER:** you develop so many skills during grad school that many doors are open to you!



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

And part of that really is the aspect of independence. At the undergrad level, certainly by the senior thesis level, if you are doing a senior thesis at the undergraduate level, there is a lot of independence. But just the standards are different when you're doing a similar type of project at the Master's level. It's usually bigger, the scope is broader, and so it's important to recognize that it's a pretty big transition from undergrad to grad. A lot of that is due to the fact that grad school is a lot more self-directed. At the undergraduate level, you have a certain number of courses that you need to take, and you might be doing a thesis option or you might not, you might be doing a major research paper at the senior level, but a lot of your time is set out for you. You have to do things in a certain order.

At the grad level there is a lot more flexibility. You have to be a lot more self-directed and a lot more responsible for what you are doing with your time. There aren't the same kinds of deadlines at the same intervals at the grad level that you encounter at the undergrad level. The other thing that is important to consider: if you are thinking about becoming a professor as an option for you, it's important to recognize that less than 20% of PhD holders become professors. So if being a professor is your goal, that's a great goal, it's a wonderful career, but you have to be realistic about what the steps are that you need to take to get there and to set

yourself up to be competitive in a very tough academic market right now. This is not meant to be all doom and gloom and sadness. I am so grateful for the opportunities that I've had through my graduate education, but it's been really important that I've planned and been strategic in the choices that I made throughout my graduate career. That's one of the main things that I want you to take away from this, is that you're planning and being strategic so that you see grad school as a part of your life and a part of your goals, whatever your career goals are - that it will help you meet those goals.

KATIE DENOMME:

I would just like to emphasize that with a course-based program it is just as self-directed. As Christine was describing, what you have been going through in your undergrad - a course-based Master's is not the same as your undergrad. So yes, you are still taking courses, but they're definitely more specialized and there's a lot more discussion and participation, and what you get out of your learning is entirely up to you. It's not about, "Oh I will learn this because it's on the test next week," or just coming to class because there are participation marks. It is very different. So even though a course-based Master's sounds like it follows a lot of the same things that your undergraduate program did, it is definitely not as structured. For example, my program only had two hours per course a week, but a lot more work than that. There were no tutorials scheduled for me. I had to get together groups of friends to work through our stats project to get through our research paper. So it's very much on you and you need to be aware that it's going to be a challenge moving into that.



## Choosing a Program

- » What should you consider?
  - » **What you are hoping to get out of the experience**
  - » Funding opportunities
  - » Opportunities provided in a particular program that others don't have
    - Travel, internships, industry partnerships



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

Alright, so in terms of choosing a program, I've already mentioned the fact that you want to consider how this grad program is helping you achieve the goals that you have, and really that needs to be the starting point. People, when they start considering programs, start at all kinds of different places, but really that's the place that you want to be starting. Why am I considering this? What is motivating me to do this? Grad school is amazing. You have wonderful opportunities to work with amazing people in cutting edge research, solving interesting problems and answering interesting questions. But it's a lot of work to do just for a credential. While there are lots of parts of it that are going to be really awesome, there are other parts of it that are really hard, and powering through the hard parts with just, "Oh the Master's is the new Bachelor, so I need to do this in order to become employed" is not enough of a motivator to get you through these times.

Also that's not really true, by the way. That's a feeling that a lot of people seem to have, like "Oh I need to just check this credential box." Checking a credential box is not enough reason to do a degree. It can be a part of your reason, but you want to make sure that you have motivators from inside of you that are the reasons - the main reasons - why you're pursuing something. Because you're really passionate about science, or you're really excited about reading about historical artifacts, or

whatever the motivation that you have is; you want it to be coming from you. Given that as a starting point, you want to make sure that you're doing your research about the different programs that are available to you and considering things like funding. How much are you going to get paid to do this? And a piece of advice that I heard before I started grad school is that you shouldn't plan to do a research-based program without adequate funding. You shouldn't have to pay for it. There are all kinds of professional degrees where that is not the case, but certainly for a research-based program, in order to really engage in the academic environment, you have to do stuff like go to conferences. You have to think about doing things like writing journal articles to publish. You can't do that if you're also working 3 part-time jobs just to afford your tuition, because the work load is much different and you want to make sure that you're getting the most learning that you can out of all the different opportunities.

So, you want to make sure that you're doing research about who is going to give you the money that you need to have the life that you want in the grad school context. And then, the other thing you want to consider is: what kinds of opportunities is this program going to give me above and beyond the credential? Is there a built-in internship involved in this program? Is there a travel opportunity or a semester abroad that's built in that I'm going to get out of it? Are there specific industry partnership projects that I could gain access to by working with this supervisor and this department? Those are some of the things that you want to consider when you are evaluating the program for you.

One of those other things that I wanted to talk about is the issue of ranking or reputation. Canada is not a country that does a lot of very detailed ranking of all kinds of different programs. We have some, so there are different kinds of rankings available, but a lot of them rank institutions instead of individual programs. And there's a significant difference between the ranking of an institution and the reputation of an individual program. If you're taking this into consideration, you want it to just a) be a part of your consideration, it's not even necessarily the most important consideration you just want it to be a part of the consideration, and b) you want to think carefully about the difference between the rankings and the reputation. So Waterloo is an institution that's known for its engineering and tech. What I can tell you from my own experience here is the German department is the biggest German department in Canada, which is not something that you would necessarily associate with the University of Waterloo unless you'd sort of dug in and figured some of that stuff out. It's also one of the first institutions that has a dual degree program with a German institution, so where you would walk out of your Master's degree with two degrees from two different countries. That's just an example of some of the things that you need to do to just drill down beyond the ranking of a particular institution.

KATIE DENOMME:

So it's really important to do your research on your Master's program or PhD program, whatever it is you're looking at. To give you a bit of a head start on that and help you get organized, because there's a lot of different information out there, on the Centre for Career Action website there's a link to our CareerHub. That's where we store all of our resources, and that's where we have a bunch of activities that you need to complete before you come in to have an appointment. But in the further education section of CareerHub there is a section on what you need to know, as well as a specific program section on Master's and PhD programs. In there we go through the process of all the things you want to be thinking about when you're going to determine what you want to study or what programs are out there, including some videos, short tips, and some links - some PDF links - in terms of search engines, how to figure out where the programs that I want to study are. So there's a whole bunch of resources in CareerHub in the further education section. That's your number one stop. Start there and use the advice in the search engines to kind of narrow down, or maybe broaden, the list of programs you're interested in, and then start conducting your research. Go to the school website and start talking to people at those universities in the program you're interested in to figure out if you want to go to that institution.





## Choosing a Program: Your Supervisor

- » Choosing the right supervisor is very important!
- » You need to determine the availability of a supervisor who:
  - Researches in an area compatible with your proposed project
  - You can get along with



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

So in addition to choosing the program that's right for you, a consideration that's extremely, extremely important is choosing a supervisor that's right for you. You are going to be spending a lot of time with that person and having conversations with them. You're choosing someone to mentor you, and so you want to make sure you're choosing wisely. In the same way I was just talking about the ranking or reputation of the institution or the program not being everything, the reputation of a particular individual is also not everything. You don't want to necessarily choose someone just because they're a big name in the field. A lot of the time, it's not always the case, but a lot of the time what having a big name means is that you're really busy because you're involved in all kinds of different things, you're turning out a lot of different publications. What that often results in is not having a whole lot of time for the people you are supervising and mentoring.

So that is something you definitely want to consider when you're choosing a supervisor or trying to find a supervisor, because you know what you need most in a supervisor. Do you work best if you're left alone and they just sort of check in every once in a while? You might be a person who needs a lot more, or you work best with

a lot more formative feedback as you're going along. So you need to sort of reflect on that a little bit and then take that into consideration when you're considering supervisors. The other thing that you want to make sure you're paying attention to is whether or not the person is available. We were talking before about how long a particular degree is. If all of a sudden your supervisor goes on sabbatical in the middle of your program, especially in a Master's program, that can put a huge addition to your timeline and keep you in grad school for a lot longer than you might want to be because your supervisor isn't available. So that's a logistics question, but it's an important logistics question. Are they going to be around to supervise you the way that you need to be supervised?

KATIE DENOMME:

So one important thing to note for course-based Master's programs: you usually do not need a supervisor. Because you're not conducting research with a supervisor, that's not something you need to look into or contact anybody ahead of time for. But it doesn't hurt to look into the faculty. It's important that you know if this program is right for you and what they're going to be teaching. With a lot of course-based programs, there are industry practitioners that are coming in to teach your classes. So if you know specifically the area that you want to get into, it might attract you more to a certain program because of who is teaching the classes you're going to be taking, or connections that you might be making, or that research project that I mentioned you can't escape. There's an opportunity to collaborate with industry and see who the network and the connections might be. So it doesn't hurt for a course-based program to do that research, but you don't need to reach out and connect with anyone to have a supervisor before you apply to a course-based program like you would with a research-based program.



## Choosing a Program: Approaching Potential Supervisors

- » When you email potential supervisors:
  - » Be specific about supervisor's area of research (refer to articles)
  - » Connect your experience with what they are doing (& provide PROOF!)
  - » Ask for time to meet
  - » Attach marks, résumé, published papers, abstracts from conference presentations



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

So, what that means is that for a research-based program, a lot of the time you're trying to identify and connect with a supervisor in advance of ever starting your program. That's not true in all programs. Some, especially a small program like mine, we found our supervisors after. During the coursework we got to know the different professors and then we found the supervisor that was best aligned with our interests, but for a lot - I would say the majority of programs - it's your responsibility to reach out to a supervisor before you apply. That means you actually have to reach out to them and ideally have some conversations with them too, so unless they explicitly say, "do not contact potential supervisors," that is something that you will want to be doing. Usually the easiest way to reach out initially is to send an email.

What's important to recognize here is that some people say, "Oh, what? I need to reach out to some strange professor that I don't know?" Yes, but professors want to work with motivated and engaged students. So take the initiative to reach out to somebody and say, "I read this paper and that paper and I'm really interested in that. Can we have a conversation? I am interested in working with you for a Master's, or for a PhD." If you are having difficulty identifying who you might want to reach out to, ask professors that you are working with now. Ask TAs that you have developed a bit of a relationship with. They're involved in the academic

community in a way that you are not yet, or that you're probably not yet. They go to academic conferences, they know colleagues at different institutions, and they can make suggestions and ideally introduce you. When they say, "I've been working with this student they're really great. They're interested in doing a Master's degree at your institution. Can you set something up?" That is very likely, very much more likely to get a yes, at least for a conversation.

So, the thing to remember here though in part is timing. Professors are very busy and may not respond immediately to your email, so you don't want to reach out to them one day before the application to that program is due. That is not a good strategy. You want to get out in front of it as much as possible so that you can already start developing a relationship with that potential supervisor, because that will increase your chances of being accepted once you do apply to the program, and also give you much better insight into whether that program is the right fit for you. You can ask that supervisor all kinds of different questions. So when you initially reach out to them, you want to send a short email, so about 200 words, that is an introduction to you and your area of interest and why you are reaching out to them. You want to make explicit connections between what it is that you've done and what it is that you're interested in doing that demonstrate that you can do what you say you can do. They will be able to tell immediately if you're making this up, so you want to make sure that whatever you're doing in that email is true and substantiated and that you're pointing to specific evidence.

You want to focus on the value that you have in terms of the skills that you have and the experience that you've had in different areas, rather than focusing on what they as a supervisor or what the program can do for you. You're just initially reaching out right now, so you want to make sure that you're focused on what you are going to offer the program. Then, ideally in that initial email, you want to set up a time to actually talk to them. I know that's the scary part. It feels easier to send an email. Again, this connects to - if this is a potential supervisor that you're going to be spending a lot of time with, if you can't even have a reasonably pleasant phone conversation with them, the likelihood of you being unhappy with them as your supervisor is pretty high, right? So, you want to at least kind of test out how it is having a conversation with this person. Do they have an approach that I feel would work well with what I need? Are they interesting to talk to? Are they asking questions that get me to think differently? So even if you physically can't get somewhere, try to set up a phone conversation or a skype call so that you can really have that conversation. Because somebody who looks perfect on paper might in conversation be totally awkward and you might feel uncomfortable. So you want to make sure that you're testing that out in advance.

That's the other way that you are going to sort of figure out if the research is going to be a good fit for you, in addition to whether the person is going to be a good fit for you. So ideally, if you can, you want to be setting up some of these meetings or conversations in your third or fourth year, so you have a little bit of time to figure it out. If you're past that, it's ok. The sooner you get on it, the better for you, because

the less stressed you are about the timeline, the more kinds of meaningful conversations you'll be able to have with different people. So when you send that initial email to a potential supervisor, I recommend that you include a resume, or a CV if you've developed one already, and potentially your transcript as well if your marks are competitive. If that's one of the parts of your record that you're less thrilled about, then wait on that one until you've been able to have a conversation and convince them that you're motivated and enthusiastic

KATIE DENOMME:

So there are a lot of resources as I mentioned in CareerHub, and specifically there is a tips video on how to go about doing this and contacting potential supervisors, so please make sure you check out the further education section of CareerHub. One of the links we actually provide you with there is to the Canadian Association for Graduate Students. They have some great publications on questions to ask potential supervisors to really get you thinking about these conversations you might be having and how to approach them and make them feel a little bit less daunting.



## Application Process: Documents

- » Get your documents in order:
  - » CV or résumé
  - » Letter of Intent/Personal Statement
  - » Transcripts
  - » Writing Sample



KATIE DENOMME:

So now I want to talk a little bit more about the specifics of your application process and the typical documents that you're going to be asked for. Every single program at every institution is going to have a little bit of their own way of doing things. They will have their own application system in process. They will ask you for the same things, maybe in a little bit of a different way, but this covers generally all of the main things that you are going to need. So if you are thinking about graduate school in the future, you want to start thinking about how you would get these documents together now.

The first thing is a CV, or a resume. A lot of people panic because maybe they have a resume from part time work or a co-op position, but they haven't ever really heard of or started working on a CV before. For your graduate school application, you are going to be able to use your resume and just make it academically focused and tailored to the program that you're going to apply to. So in reality, the main difference between a CV and a resume is that a CV can be as long as you need it to be, and that it's going to be academically focused. So there's a lot of different resources out there, and internationally the term resume isn't really used, the term CV is used. Before you get all caught up in all kinds of other advice that is out there, I



recommend that you go to CareerHub again and check out the self-marketing section. There are a lot of great guidelines in terms of putting together your resume. Focus on that piece and making it academically focused and tailored to your program. Then you can definitely bring it in for an application review appointment with your other documents: your letter of intent, or personal statement, or essays, or statement of intent, or whatever the program decides to call it because there is not one universal name for it.

But essentially what they need with this letter is a statement of why you want to apply to this program. If it's a research-based program, what your research interests are. Maybe 1 to 3 supervisors that you're interested in working with. Experiences that you've had that have prepared you to be successful in this graduate program. And then, what your plans are for after. So, even if you're not quite sure yet, there has to be a reason why you are getting this graduate degree. It can't just be to get those credentials and check off that box. So you need to know why you want to go to graduate school because you've got to tell them that in your application. We have a whole host of resources, templates, and samples on how to put this together in CareerHub as well. So in the further education section there's an applying section, and you'll find all kinds of information on personal statements and letters of intent to get you started on that.

So if you work through CareerHub first and kind of get a draft together of your documents, then you could come in for an appointment and meet with my colleague Pam Waechter or myself, and we can go over what you've put together and answer any questions that you have at that point in time. A few other typical things that you may be asked for: definitely your transcripts, so again sometimes you have to get them sent from the registrar's office. Sometimes they have a great system depending on the program that you're applying to that you can just upload unofficial transcripts. Everything is going to be dependent on the program, so it's really important that you go to the school website and that you follow their directions specifically, but the resources in CareerHub can get you started. The one last thing is that, depending on your discipline, they might ask you for a writing sample. But that is more typical in Humanities than in some of the STEM fields, the science and engineering.



## Application Process: References

- » Find referees who will give you **\*good\*** references
  - » Give them copies of your application documents
  - » Give them a timeline and check in with them periodically
  - » Don't wait until the last minute!!



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

Alright, another important component of your application is references. Every program there ever was will ask you for references, because they want to determine whether not only you think you're going to be successful in grad school, but other people that you've worked with before think that you're going to be successful in grad school. So usually that's about 2, and normally they ask for academic references specifically, and that means professors. So depending on what kinds of courses you've been taking, you might be taking courses with graduate students as your teachers. You want to, if possible, aim for references who are themselves professors and not grad students. Although those grad students you've been taught by either in your labs or in your courses can be really great resources for researching the different programs and talking to about what grad school is like, what their transition was like from under grad to grad, and what tips and advice they might have for you, they tend not to be really great references in consideration.

Getting references tends to be one of the things that people freak out about the most. Like, "how do I reach out to somebody? Are they even going to do this?" or "the professor doesn't even know me," or that sort of thing. Firstly, writing references is part of every professor's job, so you aren't inconveniencing them by asking them to write you a reference. You are somewhat inconveniencing them if

you ask them the day before you need the reference. You don't want to be doing that – that's inappropriate. So really this is about kind of a long game, because you want to make sure that people are able to write you a good reference, and it's not enough to just say "yes, this person was in a couple of my courses but I don't really know who they are." They need to be able to speak competently about what your achievements have been in the courses that you've taken. Ideally, you're aiming for professors you've had more than one course with, and if you haven't done that yet you want to maybe think about enrolling in a course that that professor is teaching so that you have multiple iterations with that professor.

You want to think about, if you're still in third or fourth year now, going to office hours. Professors really like it when you go to office hours, because a lot of the time they sit there and they wait for people to come see them in their office hours. Office hours are there for you to ask questions, of course. But if you're considering grad school, professors get really excited about that, and if you come and talk to them and say "hey, I would like some advice. I'm considering these different programs," or "I'm considering this supervisor or that supervisor," or "I'm wondering about this direction or that direction," professors are going to be really excited to talk to you about that. That's the same as the potential supervisors being really excited to work with motivated and engaged students. So you want to show up as a motivated and engaged student as early as possible, because then they're able to write you a more comprehensive and better reference.

So, connected to getting good references, you want to make sure that they're actually going to give you a good reference. You can actually ask them whether they can do that, and if they can't they will tell you. Like "I feel like I don't know you well enough," or "I'd need to see more writing samples," or "I would need to see examples of other work you've done in other courses because I can't evaluate it based on your performance in my course." But you need to have that conversation with them, and most of the time professors are really open to that because they want to work with people who are taking initiative. So again, in terms of timing, you want to get as far out in front of this as you possibly can. But at the very minimum, six weeks before you need a reference is when you want to talk to them. At the minimum. Ideally you want before that. Because they're not going to, once you ask them, run off to their computer and start typing it out immediately. They need to fit it in with all the other things they need to do.

So you want to give them enough time and enough information. You're sending them all of the documentation that we just talked about that you want to be submitting for your grad application, so that they can have an idea of how you're presenting yourself so that they can begin to speak to those things. The better you know a particular professor, you can also ask them to focus in their reference letter on specific components. But that kind of a question is really only something that you can ask of somebody who you have a better relationship with. Six weeks out before the deadline you reach out initially, and then you need to follow up so that you're not freaking out a day before the thing is due because they haven't done anything

yet. So you want to be not annoying, but respectfully following up so it doesn't fall off their radar.

In addition to the application documents that you're going to send to them, you want to have also a more general conversation about what your motivations are, because that's usually also something that they want to integrate into their reference letters. And in terms of really cultivating those relationships with professors, that's not just to get a good reference letter. You will actually find that you get more out of your learning if you're showing initiative and you're having those extra conversations with your professors and your T.A's. You'll get more out of it, and have a much better sense of what kind of a grad program you might want to pursue, or what kinds of topics you're really interested in, or whether grad school is something that you want to do. Those are important conversations that you really want to have as part of that process of figuring out what's the best fit for you.

KATIE DENOMME:

So Christine mentioned that typically you'll come across a requirement for about 2 academic references, sometimes it's three. You will more than likely see 3 academic references if you're looking at U.S. programs or direct-entry PhD programs. It's really important that you have academic references that can speak to your research abilities and also your ability to succeed at the graduate level; that's the whole point of having an academic reference. So even if they're not in the exact topic that you're going to be researching, if they can speak to your critical thinking skills and your research skills and the fact that you can then apply those skills at the graduate level, that is really important for an academic referee. With a course-based Master's program, it is more likely that you'll notice that you can actually use professional references either in combination with or instead of an academic reference. So the most common thing that you'll find with the course-based programs is one academic and one professional. That could be an employer or a volunteer supervisor; it really depends on the field that you want to go into that connects to your course-based program.



## Application Process: Admission Procedures

- » Sit for admission tests
  - » GRE: [www.ets.org](http://www.ets.org)
- » Minimum GPA requirements
  - » cGPA: 75%
  - » Last 20 0.5 credits ~78%
- » Pre-reqs
- » Interview (rare for research and course-based programs)



KATIE DENOMME:

So, a few other pieces of the admissions process: yes, getting your documents together and working on that early is really important, just like the references, but sometimes there are a few other requirements that you have to make sure that you hit. In terms of an admissions test, the GRE - the Graduate Record Examination - is something that some grad programs look for. If you're looking at programs in the U.S. you'll definitely have to write the GRE. Across Canada, it's a lot less common. More often than not you'll find it in specific subjects like psychology and biology. Physics is another common one. So that's why it's important to start your research and get your list of programs and go to their websites early, because this is something that you might have to factor into your timeline in terms of preparing.

The general GRE is a computer-based test, so you have to book it in advance and go to a testing center. You spend the day writing the exam. It's three and a half hours and it's all done on a computer. You get your results, and it can take up to six weeks for those results to be sent to the schools that you're applying to. So you have to factor in your prep time for this. A lot of students tell us that they spend about three months preparing for the GRE in terms of doing practice material and looking at different types of questions. The types of things that you could find on the GRE are actually going to be discussed in a workshop that's being held just after this.

Quantum Test Prep is a local test prep company that's coming in, so at four o'clock they're actually going to be down the hall in TC 1112, and they can talk more about the GRE and the different sections that are on it. There's a vocabulary section and there's a quantitative section.

But make sure that you are prepared to write that if you need to be, because in the States your standardized test scores mean a lot as part of your application process. There's also something called the GRE subject test. So in some of those subjects that I mentioned that maybe the GRE is required for in Canada, like psychology or biology, sometimes they have you write the general test and the subject test. Again, you'll have to go to a testing center, but this time it's paper and pencil and it's like a PSCYH 101 or a topic 101 really long multiple choice test of all of the material in your subject. Again, there's lots of prep materials online and you can learn more about it from Quantum Test Prep at four o'clock, but it's something that's only held once or twice a year. So whereas the general GRE testing they have sites all over the place and you can go out and book a couple weeks in advance - typically I'd recommend more than that so it's part of your plan and you know when you're going to be going out to write it - with the subject test it's not offered that often. So if you're going to need it as part of your graduate application, it's something you need to know in advance and plan into your timeline. The other piece is grades; so again, this will vary by program - every program will have a little bit of something that's different - but typically there's a few different minimum GPA requirements.

So your cumulative GPA - that's every undergraduate course you've ever taken, not just your major course - usually needs to be around 75, or occasionally some programs will just look at your last two years and they'll set a minimum around 75 or 78. Meeting the minimums does not guarantee that you get in though. What it does guarantee is that they will at least take a look at your application. This is where if your grades are meeting the minimum requirements, so the graduate studies department will be satisfied, but you're reaching out to potential supervisors in advance and you're making these connections, and there's a supervisor who's really interested in working with you on research and would go to bat for you and really likes your experience, that step in the process can really help someone who's just meeting the minimum requirements of grades move through the admissions process. There are never any guarantees, but it helps a lot. Some programs do have prerequisites. Typically, most graduate programs won't have anything specific other than a stats course, but there are some certain fields that may require certain courses. So economics for example: you might have to have taken at least six undergraduate economics courses. So you may find some differences in terms of your background, but typically they just look for somebody who has a Bachelor's degree, or has studied something in a similar environment.

It is pretty rare that you would have an interview as part of your graduate process for your Master's program, but it can happen. Sometimes, it's part of the program's set-up for you to come in and talk to different supervisors ahead of time. So if that is part of your process, please know that you can come in and meet with Pam or



myself and we can do a one-on-one mock interview and help you prepare for that process.



## Application Process: Scholarship Applications

- » To apply for external (governmental) funding such as Tri-Council (NSERC, SSHRC, CIHC) you must:
  - » Usually apply for the scholarship BEFORE you apply to the program
  - » Present a feasible research plan in 1-2 pages
  - » Make the argument why YOU are the right person to complete the research



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

Alright, so I talked briefly about funding before. One of the things that you're going to be doing as part of your grad school - either as part of the application or later on during grad school - is applying for different kinds of scholarships. Similarly to references, this is something you usually want to get way out in advance of, because scholarship deadlines are often way before application deadlines for programs. Here, the Graduate Studies Office has information sessions every Fall. They've past already this year, but they have them every Fall about the Tri-Council Awards - so those are the big main ones - on how to apply and what that looks like and what you need to do. They are usually very happy to make the slides available. So even though the presentation is over, you can request the slides. And if you have an application that you've completed or a research statement, that usually is a part of one of the Tri-Council applications, the Writing Center is where I would strongly recommend you go to have that reviewed for clarity and persuasiveness.

KATIE DENOMME:

So for a course-based Master's program, because you're not conducting research, getting money from the government to do research is pretty rare. I have seen it happen in different disciplines where someone in a course-based Master's program has received a Tri-Council award, but it's usually not possible. You usually have to rely on Ontario Graduate Scholarships, OSAP loans, private scholarships, and funding that the schools have for you when it comes to a course-based Master's program. But if you have questions about scholarships and the application process, you can always start with the Graduate Studies Office here. They have a whole host of funding information in their Funding and Awards section of their website, including how to go about all of these different applications, who to talk to, and who your department scholarship coordinator would be, so that you could talk to them about coming up with a plan about what scholarships you might apply to and where other opportunities might be.



## Tips from the Trenches

- » Choose a topic you care about (you will be spending a lot of time with it!)
- » Choose your advisor carefully (a big name isn't everything)
- » Build balance into your life



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

So, in terms of my own experiences and the experiences of the people that I work with on a regular basis, there's basically a top three that I would tell you. Firstly, and I've stressed it a little before, you want to pick a topic that gets you excited. There are a lot of graduate students that I work with who are working on a project that their supervisor wanted to work on, and they really wanted to work with that supervisor. They're working on a topic that just doesn't get them that jazzed anymore. So you want to think about a topic that motivates you, or some component of the topic that motivates you. You want it to be coming from you. Because as I mentioned already, there are parts that are going to be hard, so you want to really care about what you're spending so much of your time doing and those research questions that you're trying to answer.

Secondly is choosing a supervisor that you want to work with and that you know you can work with well. I've worked with a lot of graduate students who are frustrated because they didn't spend as much time as they maybe could have or should have really figuring out whether that supervisor was a good fit for them. Because you're spending so much time one-on-one with that person and you're

choosing them as a mentor as part of your career, you want to make sure that you're choosing that person really carefully.

And thirdly, you want to think now about building balance into your life. Part of the self-direction of grad school is this panic that sets in that you should be researching all of the time, because you feel like everyone is researching all of the time and if you're not researching all of the time you're doing something wrong. You're not going to magically develop good work-life balance in grad school, because it's not set up for you to be able to do that. So you want to think now about what are the things that matter to me that I want to make sure that I'm definitely continuing. Whether that's fixing bikes, or baking vegan muffins, or whatever it is that you love to do, that you like to do, you want to make sure that you're carving out time and making sure that that's a priority, even when you're going into grad school. Because that will just swallow up so many parts of your life.

KATIE DENOMME:

So from the perspective of a course-based Master's, I can't emphasize building balance enough. So in my course-based program, I was gaining specialized knowledge in some of the same topics that I had studied in my undergrad but in-depth, but it was really important that I was aware of why I was there. I was there to build a network, to work with our industry partners and our lecturers that were from industry to learn more about what my field was all about. I needed to make sure that I spent the time working on my network, and having balance, and being able to socialize and meet new people while I was in the program as well. It was really important that I went out to the wine and cheese night with the law firm after our labor relations trial that we did, because that's how I learned a little bit more about how that type of human resources and labor relations roles would be applied and what skills were necessary, and I figured out that it wasn't for me. But if I had been really interested, I know I had contacts and connections that I could've moved forward to learn more about it to gain potential experience. So having balance is about self-care, but it's also about being able to meet other people and network and take advantage of the opportunities that you are placed in front of when you're in your graduate program.



## What can you do NOW?

- » Cultivate relationships with professors you respect and admire
- » Position yourself to get research experience
- » Do your research
  - » What programs are right for you?
  - » Make sure you know what you're getting into!
- » Talk to current grad students!



CHRISTINE KAMPEN ROBINSON:

So what can you do right now to set yourself up to be successful in picking a program, finding a supervisor, and getting into grad school? Firstly, and we've addressed that already, is start cultivating - if you haven't already - relationships with professors that you respect and admire. If you want your professors to know you, you have to actually talk to them. They welcome that, they want that, they're excited to talk to you. Don't be afraid of that; they're not so far above you that you can't have that conversation. Also, try your best to get some research experience. Research-based Master's and PhD programs are all about research, and you want to figure out if that's something that you like to do, something that motivates you, something that you want to spend the next 6 or 7 or 8 or 10 years of your life doing. It's awful to get 5 years in and then realize 'Oh gosh, this isn't what I want to be doing, I actually hate this.' So the more experience you can gain as an undergrad in research specifically, the better set up you are to make the right decision for you in terms of grad school.

The other thing I want to emphasize really is figuring out that you don't like research doesn't mean you're not smart, doesn't mean you're not capable of doing the work, but you have to ask yourself whether it's a good idea to pursue a research-based Master's or a PhD if it's not something that you're enjoying. That's a lot of years of time doing something that you're not very excited about. Because you need

to make the right decision for you, and that goes back again to how it's not just about checking the credential box. There are so many different opportunities out there for you, and you want to make sure that you're making the right decision for you and what your goals are.

KATIE DENOMME:

So make sure that you reflect on the experiences that you've had here as you're going through your research and figuring out what programs that you want to apply to. Talk to other grad students to help with your research and to get an idea of what it's really like. So definitely use our resources that we have in the further education section of CareerHub for those search engines to narrow down your programs list.

# Professional School & POST - DEGREE

day

- » 100+ booths
- » Canadian and international institutions
- » Program information and funding options

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 24**  
10:00 am - 1:00 pm | SLC

- » Education
- » Health
- » Optometry
- » Pharmacy
- » Social Work
- » Various college programs

**MONDAY, OCTOBER 24**  
2:00 pm - 5:00 pm | SLC

- » MBA
- » Law
- » Engineering
- » Various university graduate programs
- » Veterinary

[uwaterloo.ca/career-action](http://uwaterloo.ca/career-action)

WATERLOO | CENTRE FOR CAREER ACTION







## Resources available

- » Centre for Career Action
  - » Books
- » [uwaterloo.ca/career-action](http://uwaterloo.ca/career-action)
  - » Career-related websites
- » Appointments
  - Professional/Graduate School Planning
  - Professional/Graduate School Application Review
  - Professional School Mock Interview
  - Career Development
- » Drop-in hours: 12-1 all term
- » CareerHub > Further Education



KATIE DENOMME:

So as I mentioned a few times, there are a lot of resources available for you in this search. You're not alone in it; yes, we want you to start online and to do the leg work, but we are here in so many different capacities to strategize with you and work with you through this process. There are a lot of different books that we have. If you didn't know, we have a small library in the Centre for Career Action that has a lot of different books on different professional programs that can give you some insight into what the application process is like. We have career related websites, and CareerHub and that further education section have recently been updated with a lot of resources with great activities to get you started not just on your documents, but on your planning as well.

To book appointments to come in to talk about graduate school or career development, you could go to the Centre for Career Action website, and on the left hand side you'll find a link to booking appointments. We have professional school and graduate school planning and application review, and a mock interview if necessary where you can meet with my colleague Pam or I. We also have career counselors where you can meet to talk about career development in terms of learning a little bit more about yourself, your values, your skills, and the skills that you have that you actually want to use, and figuring out a plan and how that might fit with either a few different programs out there or a few different career paths. So

please make sure that you take full advantage of all of these resources that are here for you on campus.