

When Does Graduate School Make Sense?

Generally, your chosen profession will help determine whether graduate school is an option or necessity. If you want to become a physician, veterinarian, lawyer, or pharmacist, you must complete professional school. If you wish to teach at a four-year college or university, in most cases (depends on the field), you'll need a doctorate (Ph.D.).

Some individuals decide to pursue advanced degrees without interruption; others may change careers midstream, seek advancement, or deal with a competitive job market. In those instances, graduate school may enhance their careers or be a required training. While working, students may return to school on a part-time basis.

Why Immediately Attend Graduate School?

- Uninterrupted studies
- May be easier while still in the "student" mode
- Job market isn't good and may be better in the future
- Avoid disrupting career pursuits later in life
- Profession requires additional education
- Admissions and/or entrance exams may be more difficult later
- Assistantships and/or financial assistance is available now

Why Work, Then Return?

- Obtained good position after completing undergraduate education
- Career change
- Advanced degree is necessary to "climb the corporate ladder"
- Practical, hands-on experience makes for more serious, interested student
- Seeking employment after company downsizing requires new skills and knowledge
- Establish solid experience first
- Employer will pay for further education (or a portion of it)
- Technology in the field is changing and skills/knowledge need to be updated

More Education, Less Time Commitment

For working individuals who would like more education without the two-year minimum commitment, many colleges and universities offer graduate certificates with 12-15 hours of coursework. Certificates are available in a variety of fields such as English as a second language, writing, urban leadership, historic preservation, computerized mapping, and women's studies. These certificate programs often do not require admission tests. Check with your local college or university for additional information. If you're uncertain about graduate school timing, consult with an advisor, someone knowledgeable in the profession, or the human resources department.

Accreditation

Colleges and universities in the United States, and their individual academic professional programs, are accredited by nongovernmental agencies concerned with monitoring the quality of education in this country. Agencies with both regional and national jurisdictions grant accreditation to institutions as a whole. Specialized bodies, acting on a nationwide basis, grant accreditation to departments and programs in specific fields.

Institutional and specialized accrediting agencies share the same basic concerns: the purpose and fulfillment an academic unit has set, the adequacy of its financial aid and other resources, the quality of its academic offerings, and the level of services it provides. Agencies that grant institutional accreditation take a broader view. They examine university/college wide services that a specialized agency may lack.

All institutions and programs are reviewed every few years to determine whether they continue to meet the established standards; if they do not, they may lose their accreditation.

In certain professional fields, it is necessary to have graduated from a program that is accredited. This may affect one's eligibility of obtaining licensure to practice. The federal government, for example, makes accreditation a hiring requirement.

Criteria for Evaluating Graduate Programs

Admissions

- What criteria are used to evaluate and select students?
- What are the admissions requirements?
- How important are grade point average and test scores?
- What types of students does the program attract? (Some schools attract highly competitive people while others foster teamwork.)

Programs Offered

- What specializations are available?
- Does the program focus on theory and original research or practical application of knowledge and skills?
- Does the program provide practicums or internships?
- Is the curriculum structured or flexible?
- Are there opportunities to work on research projects?
- What resources are available?

Faculty

- Who are they?
- What are their credentials?
- What is the highest level of degree the professors have obtained?
- What awards, grants, and special recognition have they earned?
- What have they published?
- What research projects have they conducted?
- Do they hold chairs or professorships?
- Does the department have nationally or internationally known scholars in the field?
- Do the top scholars in the program teach or are they primarily involved in research?
- Do they actively participate in the graduate school community?
- Is there diversity?
- What is the faculty/student ratio?

Philosophy Of Education

- What is the average length of time spent in the program?
- Do opportunities exist for specialization in areas of your own interest?
- Is the approach theoretical or pragmatic?

Reputation

- Is the university accredited?
- Is the program nationally ranked?
- When was the program established?
- What are the graduates of the program doing now?
- What is the retention rate of this program?

Multicultural Opportunities

- What is faculty and student composition?
- Will you have an opportunity to work with students from other cultures?
- What foreign exchange or study abroad programs are available?
- Is it possible to study foreign languages?
- What multicultural experiences do the faculty bring to the classroom?

- Are international concerns substantially integrated into the curriculum?

Library

- Is there a comprehensive reference collection in your area of specialization? If so, how many volumes?
- What special collections are available?
- Is the material accessible?
- Is a computerized system available?
- How many trained staff members are there?
- How extensive is the online database? Is it easily accessible?
- Are there quiet study rooms and group rooms catering to different studying techniques?

Physical Facilities

- Are there areas for student interaction?
- Are the surroundings attractive and pleasant?
- Does the overall environment feel like home?

Cost

- What are the tuition and fees?
- What financial aid is available (loans, scholarships, internships, work study)?
- Are teaching and research assistantships available?
- How much is a non-resident tuition?

Geographic Location

- Consider weather and political/social climate.
- Would you be happier in a small town or a large urban area?
- Does the area offer cultural and recreational activities?
- Is this a place where you might want to stay after graduation?
- What kind of impact will this location have on family and friends?
- What are the employment opportunities in the area?

Size

Look at the size of the department as well as the university. A large institution will have more extensive facilities and libraries. A smaller school will offer more personal attention and a sense of community.

State Regulations and Residency Requirements

Many state universities are required by law to give admission preference to in-state residents. These regulations apply to your legal residence and may affect the cost of tuition.

Career Assistance

- What career planning and job search assistance is available through the department?
- Is there an on-campus career center that offers counseling, job search training, employment leads, and library resources?
- Does the program provide work experience such as practicums, cooperative programs, or internships?

Networking Contacts

If you hope to develop relationships with industry leaders, select a school that gives you opportunities to meet/network with experienced professionals in your field. You might want to seek a school with a well-developed Alumni Relations' Office.

Steps for Graduate Student Success

Step 1: Learn about the value of graduate education.

- Is a graduate degree required for your chosen career?
- How is graduate education different from undergraduate study?
- Will a graduate degree improve your marketability?
- What careers are available for people with degrees in your area of study?
- What is the job market like in your field of study?

Step 2: Gather information to help you make your decisions-- narrowing the field.

- Should you attend graduate school at this time?
- Who is a trusted faculty member you can consult with?
- What areas of specialization are available within your chosen subject?
- Are there well-known professors with whom you'd like to study?
- What schools offer graduate degrees in your subject?
- Which of these fit your overall needs?
- What alternatives do you have if you're not admitted to any of your chosen schools?
- Which schools should you visit?

Step 3: Figure out how to pay for it!

- How much does graduate study cost at each of your chosen schools?
- Will the school financially support your education?
- Are assistantships, scholarships, or fellowships available? How many students receive them?
- Do assistantships and fellowships include fee remission, insurance, and other benefits?
- What are the duties and expectations of graduate assistants at each school?
- Will your employer help with the bill?
- What is the cost of living in that geographic area?
- What housing options are available on and off campus?
- Are jobs available in the community?

Step 4: Complete and submit application materials.

- What are the deadlines?
- What admission test is required and how do you register for it?
- What supporting materials will you need (e.g., personal statement, recommendation letters, essay)?
- What questions can you expect during the interview?
- Have you kept copies of everything?

Step 5: Choose among the offers for graduate school or employment.

- How do the financial aid packages compare?
- How do the reputations and locations of the programs compare?
- How well do you feel you will fit into each program?
- Which offer most closely fits your needs and interests?
- What will you do if you don't receive any offers?

Step 6: Begin your graduate student adventure.

- Get to know your cohort and departmental faculty and support staff.
- Select a mentor.
- Establish a research agenda.
- Become familiar with the library and its website.
- Network – take advantage of all lectures and special events, and meet with the speakers.
- Join relevant professional associations as a student member.
- Read newsletters and journal articles of professional associations.
- Attend professional conferences.