THINGS TO CONSIDER IN DECIDING TO PURSUE A MASTER'S DEGREE

going graduate

by

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Making the Choice

Making the decision to attend graduate school is never an easy one. How do you know if you're ready or even if you should go? How do you make the commitment? How do you pick a school and an appropriate program? Once there, what are the expectations? How do you become successful as a student? A lot to think about, you betcha. The decision can seem overwhelming, but taking it one step at a time can help simplify the process and ensure that you're making the best decision for yourself.

Should You Go?

Entering any graduate program is an investment in yourself, your future and your career. Like any investment, you must determine if it's a wise one. Not all careers require a higher degree, so you must first determine what you expect to gain from the experience.

Knowledge is always a powerful tool, and learning for learning's sake is valid in itself. That's what drove me to earn my master's degree in English. I loved the subject I chose and I knew that, no matter what, the knowledge would improve my thinking and help shape my future. However, most of us pursue higher degrees to reach specific career goals, and in all honesty, this is the most logical reason for choosing to go to graduate school.

- Determine whether the degree will mean a higher salary.

According to a study conducted in 2000 (Day and Newburger, p.4), over the course of a lifetime, a full-time worker who has earned a bachelor's degree will earn about $2.1 million, a third more than workers who did not finish college. The holder of a master's degree will earn approximately $2.5 in a lifetime, and the holders of doctoral degrees ($3.4 million) and professional degrees ($4.4 million) will make out even better.

Although higher degrees generally yield more money, this is not always the case. Some trades are very lucrative and usually require only a bachelor's degree. If the job you want does not require more schooling, obtaining a higher degree most likely would not be beneficial. In either case, a little research can help you decide.

- Determine whether the degree will be useful in your chosen field.

If you have a specific job in mind, find out what paths others in the field took to get to where they are now. When I was considering my graduate degree, I wanted to pursue a career in editing and publishing. I arranged a meeting with an alumnus working as an editor in New York City. She made it clear that, master's degree or not, I would have to start at the bottom and work my way up—a master’s degree would not enhance my opportunities in the field. However, a bachelor's degree in psychology, for instance, is often not highly valued if the graduate remains in the field without pursuing a higher degree.

Make an appointment with a career counselor to learn what employers are seeking. In some cases, a master's degree can actually make finding a job more difficult by over-qualifying candidates for a position—employers may be afraid they either will have to pay these individuals more or that the higher degree holders will not stay in the position long-term.

If you're unsure what you want to do, graduate school would likely not be the best option at the moment. Although an advanced degree can greatly enhance the opportunity to land a good job, it can also pigeonhole you into a certain field. For example, a master's in business will not improve your chances of landing a job as a marine biologist. Find your passion first before you invest.

- Decide whether you have the time required to pursue a degree.

Also, take time into consideration—do you have it? If you plan to work full-time while earning your degree, prepare to feel overwhelmed at times. Also, make sure you have a realistic timeline in mind to avoid frustration. Taking more than one class at a time with a full-time job would likely have a negative effect on your grades. Although taking one class at a time may make the end seem out of sight, it will be worth it in the long run because you'll learn more and enjoy reduced stress levels.

Working full-time while pursuing a graduate degree is a common practice, but if you're not careful, doing so will affect your performance at work and will change your home life significantly. Add children into the mix and things get even more complicated—but it is possible! Your level of commitment will be of utmost importance in this case.

If you choose to enroll as a full-time student, time, as in when you’ll finish, becomes a factor. A full-time student is not bringing in money, so the faster the better, but not to the detriment of your GPA. Be sure to keep close communication with your advisor to avoid too heavy a schedule.

Are You Ready?

- Clear the hurdles.

Going to graduate school is no piece of cake. Committing to another few years of school may seem torturous. If the thought makes you cringe, don't do it. Just going through the application process can be grueling in itself. Most graduate programs require a place-
ment test, a GRE, LSAT, MSTAT, etc., for consideration. But these are small hurdles. If they seem unreachable, you’re not ready to commit. Graduate school requires an immense amount of time, patience, dedication and passion. Your grades will reflect your dedication to the subject even more so than in undergraduate studies.

- Accept good advice.

I’d like to share the advice my advisor gave me during graduate school when we discussed my uncertain desire to earn a doctoral degree. I expressed concern about feeling burned out from all the work and that I wasn’t completely sure what kind of doctorate I should seek. “Don’t do it,” he told me. Puzzled, I asked why. “Work first and make sure you’re sure,” was his advice. He was absolutely right. I now have an opportunity to learn more about different fields I may want to pursue, what I want to specialize in and what is demanded of me in that career. When I am ready to return to school, I will be confident about my choice and committed to the program. The level of commitment needed to pursue higher degrees does not allow for uncertainty and second-guessing.

Can You Afford it?

Stay with me here. If you’ve made it this far, you can afford it. If you’re dedicated, you’ll be willing to make the rest fall into place. It takes a bit more research, but there are a lot of resources out there to help make graduate school affordable. On average, graduate school is more expensive, but unlike undergraduate school, a vast majority of graduate students pay their own way.

- Seek financial aid.

Fortunately, there are many more opportunities for scholarships, grants, extremely low-interest loans and other ways of making it through school at little to sometimes no cost. Most schools also have low-cost health insurance options, and some have opportunities to live on campus at inexpensive rates.

Although nearly 13.4 million Americans are enrolled in bachelor’s degree programs, only 3.3 million of those students go on to higher studies, according to a US Census Bureau report released in October 2003 (Shin, pp. 9-11). Because graduate students are on their own to foot the bill, financial aid packages tend to be much stronger.

Of the 3.3 million students enrolled in graduate studies, financial aid packages for full-time graduate students covered approximately 71 percent of their schooling expenses, according to another US Census Bureau report for the 1996-97 academic year.

- Obtain a graduate assistantship.

Graduate assistantships are also liberally available to help offset the cost of school. They offer experience in the field, which will improve job placement after graduation. Many programs require students to hold tutorials and teach classes at the college, for which they are paid a stipend. Some programs offer many classes at night for part-time students, creating the possibility of holding a part-time job, or even a full-time job while working toward a master’s degree.

If you will be relying primarily on scholarships when considering where to apply, get the stats on how many scholarships are awarded each semester. This information is often on a school’s Web site. If not, contacting the graduate or admissions office is another fast and easy way to get this information.

If your dream job requires experience you can gain by working for a college or university, apply for a job there. Many will allow you to take classes while working, so you could end up with a degree and experience!

Choosing a Program

There are thousands of graduate programs to choose from, but many have specific reputations for different programs. This is another good time to use your own school as a resource.

- Talk to professors.

Talk to professors about which programs they know to be good—after all, they’ve all attended graduate school themselves.

- Meet with a career counselor.

Career counselors can also help guide you in the right direction. They receive hundreds of brochures from programs all over the world and they can help you find the one that’s right for you. They’ll also help you to be realistic with respect to where you apply. They can help you understand how grades, test scores,
collegiate experience and work experience are all taken into consideration in the application process. They also have helpful information about studying for and taking standardized placement tests.

- **Explore the Internet.**
  Use the Internet. There is a great Web site, PhDs.org: Science, Math, and Engineering Career Resources (www.phds.org/rankings/), which allows users to choose aspects of graduate programs they deem most important. This can tell you which schools award the highest number of scholarships each year, the student-teacher ratio, which schools tend to get students through programs the fastest, which ones allow for part-time attendance and more.

- **Determine if the program is right for you.**
  Take a look at the program you’re considering itself—is it what you need? Will it give you a degree in what you specifically want to specialize? I found that some graduate schools specialized in Medieval literature, while others had a great linguistics program. Not everyone knows what they want to specialize in when applying, but if you do know, you’re one step ahead.
  Talk to current students or graduates from the programs you’re considering. Call the admissions departments of different schools you are interested in and get a first-hand account of the professors, workload, etc. The alumni department can put you in touch with graduates from the program to give you the scoop.

**Once You’re in Graduate School, What Comes Next?**

There are many services available for students to help with the adjustments you will need to make—you’re paying for them, so take advantage of them.

- **Meet with advisors and professors.**
  I found that my advisor and professors were the most valuable tools for me. I made appointments with them frequently for advice, not only on specific classes, but on more general topics. I often inquired about job opportunities available to people with my degree, about how to most effectively research specific topics and about learning opportunities outside the classroom.

- **Avail yourself of alumni department services.**
  Once again, the alumni department on campus can also provide a valuable service to you during your studies. They can tell you what other alumni in your major are doing and can provide you with connections to talk to these graduates. Knowing what others in your position have done with their degrees is a great motivator. It can encourage you to keep your goals in the forefront, which can help you get through a particularly hard assignment or class.

- **Rely on classmates.**
  Classmates are another great resource. They are interested in the same subject matter, are struggling just as you are and have different educational experiences that can help enhance what is being taught in the classroom. Form study or discussion groups outside of class and meet regularly. This will also keep motivation levels high and will allow the opportunity to vent frustrations or voice opinions on class material.

- **Get to know the graduate office.**
  Many schools also have graduate offices. Offerings vary vastly, depending on the size of the graduate programs and by the distribution of college services. Find out what your graduate office offers and take advantage of it. Many offer speakers, extra support, organized study groups, a separate career counseling division and other programs and services.

**A Life-Changing Decision**

The decision to continue schooling is a significant one that will affect your future and the rest of your life. If you are one of only 3.3 million to continue your education, you have much to look forward to. If not, remember that graduate school isn’t for everyone and you can always go back—if it fits your goals and aspirations later.

**References**


PhDs.org: Science, Math, and Engineering Career Resources. Web site available online at www.phds.org/rankings/.


**About the Author**

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