

Should I Go to Grad School?

This can be a very scary question for undergraduate students, particularly juniors and seniors. Lots of students struggle with this decision because it can often determine the next few years of life after graduation. Career Services is committed to helping students find direction toward their future academic and career goals.

Here are some preliminary questions to ask yourself:

WHY: Is grad school right for me, and for my career direction?

Perhaps you're considering graduate school as a way to increase your salary. Or, maybe you're looking to stay marketable, keep your skills current, or get promoted. These all may be very compelling reasons to pursue a graduate degree. But, no matter what your specific circumstances, perhaps the most important thing you need to consider is whether an advanced degree will help you attain your career goals. Do you have a clear understanding of what you want to do? If not, now is probably not the time to starting filling out grad school applications! Instead, focus on self-assessment and career planning as your first step.

If you already have clearly-defined career goals, you need to evaluate whether a graduate degree will help you achieve them. There are certain careers that require an advanced degree - psychologist or attorney, for instance. Yet, there are many careers where an undergraduate degree will suffice. There are even some situations where a graduate degree may be to your detriment, if you have little or no job experience. On the other hand, if you are seeking to make a significant career change, getting an advanced degree may be the best option.

WHEN: Should I go now or later?

The answer to this question depends on your goals and circumstances. You should consider the pros and cons to both options carefully as they relate your specific situation. Of course, you should also keep in mind that there are some graduate programs that require applicants to have prior work experience--many Master of Business Administration programs, for example. Below are some pros and cons you may want to consider about when to attend graduate school.

Option 1: Go Straight to Graduate School from Undergrad

Advantages:

- You're already used to studying, writing papers, taking tests, and being a student.
- You might not have some of the same obligations (financial, family or otherwise) in your early twenties that you are likely encounter in your thirties or forties.

Disadvantages:

- You may be already paying off substantial student loans, and taking on more debt may be challenging.
- Without relevant work experience, it will be more difficult to apply what you are learning to real life situations. Subject matter may remain too theoretical.

Option 2: Get Work Experience Before Going to Graduate School

Advantages:

- Prior work experience can provide you with a deeper understanding of your field and industry and can help you clarify your future career goals.
- You can save money to fund your education.
- Your employer may offer tuition reimbursement as part of your benefits package.

Disadvantages:

- If you plan to go to graduate school full-time (working part-time or not at all), you may find it hard to give up that steady paycheck and live on a student's budget again.

WHAT: What kind of program should I pursue?

What's the best program for you? Again, that depends on your career goals and your particular situation. For instance, consider whether you need or want to work while in school. Generally speaking, it's fairly common to hold a job while pursuing your master's, but not while working toward your doctorate.

Also, different degrees have different purposes. For example, master's-level degrees, which typically take 2-3 years to complete can be professional or academic. A professional degree (i.e., Master of Business Administration) helps you transition into or advance in a particular field. An academic degree is designed to enhance intellectual growth; it may also be a pre-requisite for doctoral work.

Like the master's, doctoral degrees can be professional or academic. Professional doctoral degrees are intended to stress the practical application of specific skills and knowledge. The Doctor of Medicine (M.D.) is one such example. An academic doctoral degree (Doctor of Philosophy or Ph.D.) is designed to advance knowledge through original research in a specific field. A Ph.D. may take anywhere from three to seven years to complete, depending on the field of study.

Going to graduate school is a big commitment of time, money, and effort. Career Services encourages you to take your time and think about your options thoroughly. Before you think about the “where”, think about the “why, when, and what” of the graduate school decision.

*Adapted from <http://www.bu.edu/careers/graduate-school/> and http://www.careervision.org/about/Graduate_School_Right_For_Me.htm