Start your future now….

Graduate School Considerations

Office of Career Services: Carroll Hall, Room 311
Phone: 540-464-7560
Website: http://www.vmi.edu/careerservices

Before you consider attending Graduate School, it is first important to ask yourself "WHY?" There are good reasons, and some not so good reasons for planning to continue your education.

Good Reasons to consider Graduate School:

- The job you are seeking requires an advanced degree
- You are interested in learning more in-depth knowledge of a specific academic discipline
- You want to change career direction from your undergraduate studies without getting another undergraduate degree

Bad Reasons to consider Graduate School:

- I really like being a student and don't want to leave
- I have no idea what I want to do, so I'll stay in school
- I don't want to start working yet, there will be plenty of time for that later!

Pursuing additional education in Graduate or Professional School can give you real benefits like increased salary potential, access to jobs with higher level responsibility, entry into certain professions which require advanced degrees, and the opportunity to develop a special area of expertise. Attending graduate school requires significant amounts of time, money and effort on your part. It is important that you are going for the right reasons and with clear career goals in mind.

When you apply to Graduate School, you typically apply to a very specific program. All your classes are connected to that program, with no opportunity enter with an "Undeclared" major and explore until you find the right program for you like you may have had in your Undergraduate School.

When should you attend?

Once you have determined that there are valid reasons for pursuing advanced education, you must decide the best time to attend. "Should I go right away after I complete my undergraduate program?" OR "Should I wait for awhile before I start additional education?"

Going to Graduate School Immediately after Undergrad

Advantages:

- You are in the habit of being a student, so the routine is familiar to you
- Your study and test taking skills are fine tuned and working at full potential
- You may not have major family/home/work commitments which would be interrupted
- Some career paths require advanced degrees even for entry level opportunities

Disadvantages:

- You may be feeling burned out from completing undergraduate studies and could benefit from a break
- You may have limited relevant experience to put your studies into perspective
- Putting your earning potential on hold for 2 or more years could result in financial concerns

Taking Some Time to Work Before Returning to School

Advantages:

- You can gain relevant experience and clarify career goals
- Earn money to help pay for school, or work for an employer who offers educational benefits
- Spend time gaining experiences which enhance the competitiveness of your application - some programs actually require certain levels of work experience to be considered

Disadvantages:

- You may feel "rusty" when not involved in activities like note taking, test preparation, and homework for a period of time - it may take awhile to get back into the routine of being a student
- You may have additional family/home/job responsibilities that were not present in your undergraduate days and create unique time management challenges.

Consider your own situation, work style, personal circumstances, career goals and graduate school opportunities to help you make a decision that is right for you.

What to do, and When to do it

Getting into Graduate School requires plenty of time, consideration, planning and research. The best way to make this process more manageable and increase your chances of success is to start early.

3rd Class/2nd Class Year

- Explore career options to identify your goal and determine if graduate school would enhance your preparation.
- Begin talking to your Academic Advisor and Career Counselors in Career Services about Graduate School Options. Explore programs to consider, and identify experiences to seek out or undergraduate courses to take which might strengthen your application
- Discuss your interest in graduate school with faculty connected to your field of interest. They can provide insight, personal experiences, and points of contact.
- Begin researching possible programs by attending Graduate School Fairs, review directories or visit websites.
- Become familiar with entrance test requirements, and begin preparation by taking a practice test or enrolling in a preparation course. Consider taking required entrance tests in spring of your 2nd Class year so you can compare your scores to the profile of accepted applicants and determine if you need to retake it to adjust your preparation.

1st Class Year
Early Fall Semester

- Register for required entrance tests and take as early in 1st Class year as possible.
- Review materials from schools you are considering to determine which you are most interested in, and how many you will apply to.
- Collect all application materials and review carefully. Make note of deadlines, essay questions, and reference forms
- Write draft of application essays or statements of purpose. Have these carefully reviewed by faculty, your advisor, or the Writing Center to help you finalize a draft.
- Identify the number and types of references needed, and approach potential

Mid- Fall Semester

- Print and fill out a Transcript Request Form and submit in person to the Registrar's Office in Carroll Hall. Request that the Transcript be held until Fall semester grades are posted.
- Investigate financial assistance like assistantships, fellowships, or financial aid options; complete necessary application procedures for these funding sources

Late Fall Semester

- Complete all materials needed for programs you are submitting applications to.
- Submit your application materials in the requested format (mail, online, etc)
- Keep records of your application process for each school, noting date submitted, confirmation received, follow-up necessary.

Early Spring Semester

- Some programs include Interviews as part of the admissions process, and these are often conducted in early spring semester (but check with the programs you are applying to for specific dates and details). Prepare yourself for interviews by considering ways to articulate why you are interested in each program, questions you interested in asking, and practicing your interview skills. Don't forget to send Thank You notes after each interview!
- Fill out and submit any Financial Aid forms needed.

Late Spring Semester

- Keep track of your acceptances and rejections as they come in. Discuss your options, decisions or concerns with your advisor, faculty mentors or a career counselor.
- Send correspondence to the program you accept admission to, and to the programs you decline admission offers to.
- Complete another Transcript Request Form, and ask the Registrar to hold the request until spring grades are posted.

POINTS of CONTACT for Graduate and Professional School Advice at VMI:

- **Business, Economics and MBA Programs**: LTC Barry Cobb.
- **Pre-Law Advisor**: Mr. Chris Russell (International Studies) at Email: russellcb@vmi.edu or Phone: 540-464-7762.
- **Education**: The PRAXIS is the graduate school test for teaching.
- **Medicine and Allied Health professions**: LTC Wade E. Bell.
- **Information on National Scholarship Programs**: Col. Rob McDonald.

Overall TIPS for attending graduate/professional school:

- Talk with professors in your major department and with the appropriate pre-professional advisor.
- Click on Graduate School in the Cadet portion of the Career Services web pages.
- Look at the materials on graduate/professional programs in the Career Resource Center.
- Decide which schools you will apply to and download their application materials from their websites.
- Make copies of the application materials and work with the copies first.
- Get admissions testing materials from Career Services and meet published deadline.
- Pay attention to Financial Aid deadlines; these are often before Admissions deadlines.
- Identify external scholarships you can qualify for and write for application information.*
- Begin to think about what professors you want to ask for recommendations. Ask professors if they are willing to write a letter of recommendation; if so, give each the appropriate forms and a stamped, addressed envelope.
- Pay particular attention to the Personal Statement and any other essays required on applications.
- Seek out faculty readers to critique essay drafts.
- Make sure all application materials are submitted prior to each graduate school's published deadline.
- GRE Testing booklets are available in Career Services.

Criteria for Choosing a Graduate Program

by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

There are any number of criteria people can use when trying to evaluate various graduate programs. This list is not meant to be inclusive, but to provide you with the most common criteria people use when choosing a graduate school. You'll find the information you need to evaluate each program in various graduate school guides and directories, as well as from the catalogs and Websites of the individual graduate programs that interest you.

Presented in alphabetical order:

Accreditation: There are two main types of accreditation: institutional and program-specific. You should determine the proper accreditation degree programs in your field require. While accreditation is not so much an indicator of quality as much as process, you could face negative consequences if the program does not have accreditation. For example, students who attend an unaccredited law school may not be allowed to sit for the bar exam (whose passage is needed to be a practicing lawyer). Note: a school that is not properly accredited may not openly volunteer this information -- so dig deeply.

Admission Standards: You want a graduate program with tough admissions standards; it's better to be among the select few than with a larger group that may end up lowering the quality of your graduate education. Most schools publish this kind of information, so look for the number of applicants compared to the number of acceptances. You could also look at base requirements for admission, which usually include undergraduate grade-point-average and standardized test scores.

Career Assistance: One of your main goals for earning an advanced degree most likely revolves around career advancement -- either getting a new job or entering a new field. You should examine the amount of career development and placement assistance each program provides to graduates. While this assistance should just be a small part of your overall job search upon earning your degree, it's still an important one. You should also look at where each school's graduates are working (along with their salaries, if possible).

Cost/Financial Aid: If we all had unlimited resources, then cost would not be an issue; for most of us, however, this is usually a top issue. Make sure you examine all associated costs, including tuition, books and supplies, housing, and miscellaneous fees and expenses. Then review the types of financial assistance each program is offering you, including grants, loans, and fellowships. Don't be afraid to negotiate with your top schools; if a school really wants you in their program, they will find additional resources for you.

Culture: Just as all organizations have corporate cultures -- "the way things are done around here" -- so too with graduate schools. You need to identify schools with cultures that fit your style and comfort-level so that you'll have a better chance to excel. Some call this concept the philosophy of education. For example, we know of one program where there were major factions among faculty and students, with these groups competing for resources and recognitions; would you prefer that kind of super competitive environment, or one that was more nurturing for all students?

Degrees Offered: Probably the most fundamental criterion; if a graduate school does not offer the degree or certificate program you seek, then it does not make any sense to investigate the program any further. Just make sure you know the specific degree/certificate you need to take you to that next career step you are seeking. Don't compromise or consider a lesser degree.

Faculty: A graduate program is only as good as the faculty who teach in it. It's important to work with faculty who are respected and known in your field. You need to establish a method to evaluate each

program. The most basic measure is looking at the percentage of classes taught by full-time, terminally qualified faculty. But you could also investigate the reputation of the faculty by examining things such as the number of scholarly publications, the national or regional acclaim of faculty members, and/or the professional experiences of the faculty.

Location: Just as with your undergraduate choice, location is an important factor. Depending upon the degree you're seeking, you're going to be living in that geographic area for several years. More importantly, except for top-tier programs, the value of an advanced degree is typically strongest in the region where the school is located and known. So, if you want to eventually live in the Pacific Northwest, it makes more sense to attend a graduate school in that region rather than one on the East Coast.

Multicultural/Diversity Opportunities: Better programs tend to be diverse -- because diversity (of all types) often leads to a broader world view. Examine both the faculty and student composition. You need to determine a mix where you'll feel most comfortable. Also, if you are interested, you might see if the programs offer an international study opportunity.

Physical Facilities: What is the condition of the building(s) of each program? Do they have all the tools you need for your specific interests? Investigate programs that stress "state-of-the-art" facilities to see if they really are state-of-the-art. More fundamentally, make sure the programs have the types of facilities you need. For example, if you plan to specialize in market research, you'll want a program that not only has great computer facilities, but also one that has behavioral labs for events such as focus groups.

Reputation/Ranking: Lots of different organizations rank graduate programs, so while rankings are an important measure of quality, you also need to investigate the source of the rankings. Examples of organizations that rank graduate programs include *U.S. News* and *Business Week*. But ranking may not be as important as other criteria here because of the flaws in the ranking process, including the ability for a school to have a high ranking while the program that interests you could still be weak. Go to our bookstore for a complete list of graduate school related books.

Research/Academic Focus: Graduate programs tend to have a specific strength or focus in one or two areas within a specific discipline, and you should fully investigate the faculty interests and research areas of each program. For example, Stetson University's College of Law excels at trial and litigation (one of the top in the country), but is not as strong in other areas of law, such as environmental law; thus, if you're interest lies in being a trial attorney, Stetson should be on your list.

Resources: This is sort of a catch-all category. We used to talk mainly about library resources here (number of volumes, periodicals, etc. in your field), but resources really means just about anything that supports the graduate program, including endowments and foundations that support student research and publications.

Size: There are two aspects of size that you should evaluate -- size of the program and size of the entire university. Just as with your undergraduate school, you need to find a size that feels right for you - whether to be a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond. The size of the university is important in terms of resources available (see above) and whether you like that kind of environment; more important, however, is the size the graduate program -- where you'll spend the bulk of your time. Examine the faculty/student ratios.

State Regulations & Residency Requirements: If you are looking at graduate programs at state universities, you need to examine admission requirements and costs for in-state residents versus all other applicants. If you have your heart set on a specific state university and you do not currently live in that state, you might consider relocating to that state and establishing residency there before applying to the graduate program.

Surrounding Community: You're going to have to live there for a number of years, so you better be able to at least tolerate the surrounding areas. What are you looking for -- an urban, rural, or suburban setting; do you want to live in a large city or small town? There is a joke here at Stetson University among undergraduates because the university is located in a small, quiet, and quaint town named DeLand - which most of the faculty love - but which many students refer to as "Dead-Land."

Have you taken advantage of all our graduate school resources? *Find everything you ever wanted to know about locating and attending graduate school -- as well as jobs for job-seekers with advanced degrees.*

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Considering Graduate School? Answer These Five Questions Before You Decide

by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.

Deciding to seek one or more graduate degrees is a major commitment of time and money; a decision not to take lightly. You will face several years of intense work and research -- a much more demanding course load than in your undergraduate program. Before deciding your next step, you should take the time to honestly answer these five questions.

Why are you considering a graduate degree?
Career Goal: You need to have a clear understanding of what you want to do with your career -- and how earning a graduate degree will help you reach that goal. If you have any doubt at all about your professional goals, consider putting off graduate school and, instead, spend some time working on some self-assessment and career planning. If you go to graduate school without a clear goal, you will probably end up wasting both time and money.

While certain careers definitely require an advanced degree -- doctors and lawyers, for example -- many other careers offer plenty of job opportunities for job-seekers with just an undergraduate degree. In fact, in some situations having an advanced degree can actually hurt you in a job search if you also have little or no job experience.

Compensation: Most studies show that people with advanced degrees earn more on average than people with bachelor's degrees. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1998 the average worker with a bachelor's degree earned $40,478, while a worker with a master's degree earned $51,183, and a worker with a doctorate earned $77,445.

Staying Marketable: While a graduate degree is not required for many "entry-level" jobs, you may need to earn an advanced degree to keep your training and skills current -- and make you more marketable for career advancement.

Career Change: A graduate degree can often make sense for a job-seeker who is looking to make a career change, In this case, you would be earning the graduate degree in the field you plan to enter. Read more about career change strategies in our article, The 10-Step Plan to Career Change.

When should you consider obtaining a graduate degree?
One of the questions most often debated is when is the best time to consider a graduate degree. Is it better to attend graduate school right after you complete your bachelor's degree, or is it better to wait a few years and gain some work/life experience first. As mentioned above, certainly do *not* consider going immediately to graduate school as a default move -- or to avoid getting a job.

The reasons for going straight to graduate school after earning your bachelor's degree:

- you are accustomed to being a student -- and have momentum;
- your study skills are sharp;
- you have few obligations;
- some occupations require an advanced degree even for "entry-level" positions.

The reasons for working for a few years before going to graduate school:

- you can better know your career goals by working in the field for a few years;

- some graduate programs require work experience;
- you bring a broader world view to your studies;
- you have a more mature outlook on school and work;
- many employers will pay some or all of your graduate school expenses;
- you can gain solid financial footing;
- you can improve your chances for acceptance to graduate programs -- especially if you were not the best student in your undergraduate program.

What is the best graduate degree for you?
There are two traditional categories of graduate degrees -- master's and doctoral -- although there are also numerous hybrid combined-degree and certificate programs at many universities.

Master's: Master's degree programs are growing and evolving, with degrees offered in just about all fields. Master's degrees can be professional or academic. Professional degrees, such as a Master of Business Administration (MBA), are designed for employment or advancement within a given field. Academic degrees, such as a Master of Science, are designed for intellectual growth and (sometimes) a prerequisite for doctoral work within a given field. Master's degrees may take one to three years to complete.

Doctorate: Doctoral degrees, the highest possible earned academic degree, can also be professional or academic. Professional doctoral degrees, such as the Doctor of Medicine (MD) and the Juris Doctor (JD), stress the practical application of knowledge and skills. Academic doctoral degrees, the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), focus on advancing knowledge through original research in a given academic field. Doctorates may take three to six years to complete.

What is the best graduate school/program for you?
Just as important a decision as whether to go to graduate school is the decision of *where* to go to graduate school. In fact, some experts say your choice of a graduate school is much more important than your choice of an undergraduate school.

We've developed a list of criteria you could use to evaluate various programs.

A more fundamental question for many, though, is whether to simply continue graduate studies at the college where you earned your bachelor's degree. Unless you attended a top-tier undergraduate college, most experts suggest that you should seek a graduate program at a different college from where you earned your bachelor's degree. The idea is that by attending a different school, you are exposed to different faculty, different perspectives, and different resources -- all designed to broaden your knowledge and experiences within your field. It's a lot harder than simply continuing on at your alma mater, but change is almost always a good thing, especially in graduate education.

Can you afford graduate school?
Just as with your undergraduate college, it is crucial to look at the costs of the various graduate programs that interest you and determine what mix of financial aid will make attending the programs feasible. It's best to study the literature each school sends you and then talk with a financial aid adviser at those schools that interest you. Besides some of the same types of financial aid offered at the undergraduate level, most graduate programs also offer fellowships (for teaching or research assistance). And if you're currently employed, don't forget to see if your employer has an tuition reimbursement program.

Other Resources Related to Graduate School:
Gradschools.com. An online directory of 18,000 graduate and post-graduate programs worldwide including descriptions, contact information, and institutional advertising. Also includes chapters from *The Grad School Handbook*.

Graduate Education. An entire section devoted to articles about graduate programs, trends in graduate education, and rankings of the best graduate programs. From U.S. News Online's .edu.

EssayEdge. With more than 100 free sample college and graduate school application essays and pages and pages of essay writing tips, this site is the Net's largest resource for admissions essay consulting and editing.

Should I Go to Graduate School? From Oregon Graduate Institute's Department of Computer Science and Engineering. While this tutorial has somewhat of a science perspective, it raises many useful questions common to any graduate program.

Have you taken advantage of all our graduate school resources? *Find everything you ever wanted to know about locating and attending graduate school -- as well as jobs for job-seekers with advanced degrees.*

Questions about some of the terminology used in this article? Get more information (definitions and links) on key college, career, and job-search terms by going to our Job-Seeker's Glossary of Job-Hunting Terms.

Dr. Randall Hansen is Founder of Quintessential Careers, as well as publisher of its electronic newsletter, QuintZine. *He writes a biweekly career advice column under the name,* The Career Doctor. *He is also a tenured, professor of marketing in the School of Business Administration at Stetson University in DeLand, Florida. He can be reached at randall@quintcareers.com. Read more about Dr. Hansen.*