Is Graduate School Right for You?

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Many people graduate from college with a bachelor’s degree and begin working in their field. From there, it is their accumulating experience that moves them forward. However, the ability to find good work with a bachelor’s degree in hand is different from major to major. The need for graduate school also differs with your occupational goal.

Psychology majors can work in many fields with a bachelor’s degree. But to work as a clinical psychologist or licensed social worker, the same Psych student would need additional schooling. Physics students staying true to physics often find themselves headed to graduate school. But physics students who focus on the data manipulation skills may be able to find work in diverse areas on the basis of a bachelor’s degree and knowledge of certain software and statistics. For students in the life sciences or chemistry, you can likely find work in someone’s wet lab with a bachelor’s degree and your acquired lab skills displayed on your resume. But, if you want to run that lab and make decisions about what will be researched and how, then you will likely need a graduate degree.

For some people, graduate school is an opportunity to expand one’s education with a tighter focus. Imagine if your favorite class at UMass was just one of 12 similar classes offered by your future graduate school. Imagine not doing “gen ed” courses because you are specializing your research efforts in a quest to generate a new contribution of knowledge to your field. Don’t apply to a graduate school as a mere backup plan. Apply because you have fallen in love with that particular graduate program and can explain why. Graduate school is intense and difficult. If you aren’t in love with what you want to do, or if you don’t feel “called” to do something, then pursuing graduate school probably isn’t for you.

When you apply to a graduate school you are really applying to a specific graduate program within a larger university. The admissions committee is less concerned with whether you are “good enough” to manage graduate school. If you have completed the application process you probably are. They are more concerned with what your research interests are, what new contribution to the field you seek to make, and why you feel that you need to attend their specific program rather than a similar graduate program elsewhere. They want to see that you are the right match for their particular program. The personal statement you write for the application should answer these questions for them.

Graduate programs have different application deadlines, but most follow the general college rhythm – apply in December/January, gain acceptance in April, and begin attendance in September. If you are considering graduate school but aren’t sure, it is recommended to take the GRE exam as soon after your graduation date as possible. With preparation, this is when you are most likely to get your best score. Your GRE score is good for 5 years, so taking the exam at graduation gives you 5 years to decide if you want to apply for a graduate program.

Some programs, particularly at wealthy universities, can offer you scholarships to defray the costs of tuition. Some will offer paid teaching or research assistantships towards this goal. Graduate programs are quite small, so when there is money available, it is often spread to students with significant generosity. It should be noted that medical schools, and graduate programs with high costs for required technologies or labs may be less able to offer funding. The bottom line is that you should not let the cost of graduate school led your decision about whether or not to apply.