



Selecting the Right Graduate School for You

People go on to graduate school for many different reasons. Some examples include:

- a. securing a promotion or a higher pay on a *current* profession - These individuals typically enroll in a non-thesis master's program, a coursework-based degree with minimum research requirements where the degree is granted after approximately 30 graduate credits.
- b. acquiring the advanced degree that is recommended or required for the chosen career path - In many careers, a B.S. degree only qualifies the candidate for an entry-level position, which often involves doing basic tasks reserved for those individuals that *do not* have advanced degrees. Graduate school training may be necessary to obtain higher-paying, more challenging or decision-making level positions in an era where employers have an extended pool of candidates holding a "basic" B.S. degree.
- c. the desire to explore and become an expert in a particular subject area.

There is a consensus on the basic requirements to be admitted to graduate school in Biomedical Sciences: good undergraduate grades, good graduate school admission test scores, strong letters of recommendations and previous research experience. Selecting where to go, on the contrary, is a highly personal decision. Programs may seem similar at a glance but they can vary significantly on important aspects including: emphasis, philosophy, curriculum, graduation requirements, accreditation, faculty quality, research facilities, ranking, selectivity, cost and location.

When identifying prospective graduate programs, bear in mind that where you earn your degree can have a great impact on the direction of your future career. Aim high and do not underestimate your competitiveness. Applying can be expensive, so become familiar with the entrance requirements such as minimum test scores, GPA, and curricular requirements of your prospective programs to make sure that your choices are ambitious but realistic. The rest of this handout discusses different issues that must be factored in when considering enrolling to graduate school. Ultimately, you will have to decide how to weigh these criteria to come up with "the formula" that is right for you.

1. Have a **clear** idea of your career goals - Where do you ideally see yourself working after completing your degree? What kind of degree is required to achieve your goals? What specific scientific areas interest you the most? What are you passionate about? Knowing yourself, where you want to go and how to get there is the most important step in the graduate school selection process because your goals will determine the path to be followed. For example, if you aspire to be a college faculty or a lead scientific researcher, you will not be considered for those positions unless you hold a doctorate degree. On the other hand, if you see yourself working for the biopharmaceutical industry or for a government agency, a M.S. may be a good choice. If research is not for you, a M.A. may open the door to non-research related appointments.

2. Know what to expect - Many undergraduates mistakenly assume that graduate school is “just more of the same” (i.e., more classes and more tests but probably harder). Indeed, some coursework is involved in getting a graduate degree. Most courses are related to your broad area of interest and professors that are actively doing research in the specific subjects covered in the courses often teach them. Unlike the usual textbook format used for many undergraduate lectures, most of the graduate course time is spent examining recent research articles from scientific journals and the students are expected to discuss and debate the methods used to perform the experiments, the validity of the results reported in these articles as well as their implications for the advancement of the current state of knowledge in that particular field. Even though coursework is an important component of all graduate programs, conducting original research remains the main focus of the traditional graduate degrees in Biomedical Science (i.e., M.S. and Ph.D.).

Graduate students do research on questions that nobody has ever studied before under the guidance of a professor who is an expert in the student’s chosen area of interest. After years of conducting experiments that require dedication, perseverance and personal sacrifice, the results are written up in a thesis or a dissertation and are normally published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

3. Review your family commitments and your lifestyle before you select a graduate program. People who have family obligations or full-time jobs may have to select from a limited number of local programs or focus their search on institutions with distance learning options because they may find it increasingly difficult to relocate or to enroll on traditional programs that only offer courses on campus. If personal constraints are not an issue, you should be willing to relocate to enroll in the best graduate program available taking in consideration the other criteria discussed in this handout (i.e., the quality of the potential supervisor, the department, and the financial aid available). On the other hand, do not hesitate to take personal preferences into consideration. There are excellent programs across the United States and abroad and it is important to select a location where you will feel comfortable living in for the next 2 to 6 years.
4. Find several graduate programs that address your interest –
 - Contact the faculty members in your institution that conduct research in your particular area of interest or teach courses in that area and request suggestions for good graduate programs.
 - Browse Internet resources that compile graduate program information (e.g., Peterson’s Guide, GradSchools.com, GradPortal.org, PhDs.org). These compendia include hundreds of graduate program summaries, including the program’s faculty members and their interests. They also give general information about programs of study, research facilities, costs, financial aid, student life and general application requirements.
 - Browse recent literature in your area of interest – Use PubMed to find out who is publishing in this area. All published work contains the names, affiliation and contact information for all authors. Visit the department’s website to find out more information about their programs.
 - Participate in the graduate school fairs offered by your institution – Most institutions hold graduate school fairs where officers from various graduate programs spend a day on campus to talk to potential students.

5. Narrow your options down – Once you have identified a few potential programs, it is time to study them in more detail before you make your decision. Concentrate on matching your specific interests with the faculty members and the research projects that are available at your choice schools. Since graduate work involves a close relationship with a faculty member who guides and assists you in your research, it is important to select an institution with several potential mentors in your area of choice that are actively publishing their research on high quality journals.

If possible, visit the schools to which you are applying because a visit can be an important source of information and impressions. It can reveal a sense of the school and the program atmosphere, provide a first-hand view of the facilities and offer a chance to meet and talk with potential mentors as well as current graduate students. Try to go while the school is in session.

Learn about the current research performed by your preferred mentors and be prepared to make educated questions about their findings because showing awareness of particular faculty members and their work will give you the opportunity to measure the affinity between you and your potential advisers. Inquire about the realistic range of the available research and job training opportunities, the expected timetables for completing the different phases of the program, the possibilities for switching laboratories or projects, the rate of student attrition, post-graduate fates and the assortment of the graduate courses offered (not all courses listed in a catalog are taught on a regular basis).

Other important issues include faculty and student diversity, housing arrangements and costs, as well as general student happiness and satisfaction with the program. It is important to discuss these questions both with faculty members and with current graduate students. If a personal visit is not possible, try to use other means of communication to obtain as much information as possible from the graduate admission officer, from possible mentors and current graduate students.

6. Figure out how much money you will be expected to spend on your graduate education – Ph.D. students are usually offered a stipend and a tuition waiver. On the other hand, M.S. students may be expected to cover the cost of their education, depending on the program. Inquire about the types of financial aid available for the students enrolled in your program of interest as well as the criteria used to determine financial assistance eligibility.

References:

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Additional Resources:

Peterson's Guide to Graduate Schools - <http://www.petersons.com/graduate-schools.aspx>

Diverse Issues in Higher Education – Rankings of graduate programs based on minority student participation. <http://diverseeducation.com/top100/>