

Choosing a Graduate School: Frequently Asked Questions

Congratulations! You have decided to go to graduate school, but now you face a daunting question: What university should I choose? Several factors that you should consider, in no particular order, are:

Should I attend a university different from my undergraduate institution?

There is no real consensus to this question. Some employers or institutions may feel that attending different universities is of an advantage because it exposes you to different view points and ways of conceptualizing issues. Additionally, unless your undergraduate work was in a different field, you may be limited in the availability of new courses and learning opportunities. On the other hand, continuing your education at the same university may be to your advantage if the faculty know you and perceive you well, especially if you have done undergraduate research. Whatever university you attend, you should feel comfortable with faculty and students you will be acquainted with and know the program is right for you.

How much is the cost of attendance?

For most graduate students, cost is usually a top issue. Within the sciences, most students receive financial support in the form of a teaching assistantship or a research assistantship. An assistantship requires the graduate student to perform tasks for the university in exchange for a tuition waiver and a modest salary. The tasks for the beginning graduate student with a teaching assistantship usually involve either assisting a professor in teaching a course and/or grading papers. A research assistantship involves helping a faculty member on designated research projects. The stipend that is given to the student in addition to the tuition waiver varies from institution to institution, but is generally adequate for basic living expenses and may or may not include summer support.

Graduate schools vary widely in terms of tuition and required fees, so it is important to really understand the conditions of your financial support. Even if you receive a tuition waiver, you may still be required to pay other school fees, and these are not always minimal. For example, typically health insurance is not covered under a tuition waiver, and the cost of insurance can vary widely depending on if the university subsidizes the student insurance.

When comparing schools and financial packages, consider such questions as: "Does it pay well enough to live on?", "What type of work is expected of you as an incoming graduate student?", "How much work is expected of you?", and "When are you expected to teach a class and what kind of preparation for teaching is there?". Also, be aware of the conditions of the funding. Some funding may only be provided for a set period of time or have to be reapplied for on a yearly basis. Know what factors would disqualify you from funding and how that funding might change throughout your studies. However, know that you CAN negotiate with your top schools; if a school really wants you in their program, they will find additional financial resources for you.

Where is the school located?

Just as with your choice for undergraduate education, location is an important factor to consider. Depending upon the degree that you're seeking, you're going to be living in that geographic area for several years. What are you looking for -- an urban, rural, or suburban setting; do you want to live in a large city or small town? Some factors to consider include geographic location, preferred climate, availability of public/university transportation, availability of affordable housing (house or apartment vs. university housing?), social and entertainment opportunities, and the "two-body problem" -- does the location suit your partner?

If possible, visit each school, spending some time touring both the campus and local community. Try to get a sense for what the community is like and where you might live. Know if you want to move away to attend graduate school or if you would prefer to remain closer to family and friends. Think about your own needs and wishes and then prepare a list of pros and cons for each area. Consider the location seriously; it may weigh heavily into your personal well-being and academic success you experience while in graduate school.

Should I attend a large or small university?

Often related to the location of the university is its size. There are two aspects of size that you should evaluate -- size of the university and size of the program. 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 available resources and whether you like that kind of environment.

More important, however, is the size of the graduate program -- where you'll spend the bulk of your time. At a smaller school, you may feel like you won't get lost in the crowd and you may have access to more personal attention from professors and other faculty. On the other hand, at a larger school, you may have more access to internship and practical experiences and more cultural diversity. At a larger school, you may also have access to a wider range of study areas, which may be especially advantageous if you don't already know exactly what you want to study. Examine the faculty and student composition, the faculty/student ratios, the number of students at the university and in your graduate program, and the resources available to students. You need to determine a mix where you'll feel most comfortable.

What kind of career assistance is available?

One of your main reasons 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. Investigate how many and which companies typically recruit students at each university, where past graduates are working (along with their salaries, if possible).

Investigate the possibility of conducting graduate assistantships, internships, and practicum experiences while in graduate school. Typically, such opportunities are

offered through individual university offices and departments. Some allow for tuition remission as well as a monthly stipend. In addition to the possible monetary value associated with them, graduate assistantships, internships, and practicum experiences will enable you to gain valuable work experience that will be critical when pursuing full-time employment upon graduating.

What is the condition of the physical facilities?

The research and work you conduct while in graduate school may be limited by the facilities available to you as a student. What is the condition of the building(s) of each program you are interested in? 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. Also, look at the availability of lab and office space. Are students given a separate workstation for “office” work? More fundamentally, make sure the programs have the types of facilities you need in terms of lab equipment, computers, office space, etc.

What is the “culture” of each program and university?

Just as all organizations have corporate cultures -- "the way things are done around here" -- so too will 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. When visiting the program and visiting with both faculty and students, try to identify what the general atmosphere is like, how much contact there is with undergraduates, what the gender ratio among students and faculty is, what the ratio of American to International students is, and do graduate students generally seem happy there? If the students are happy, chances are you will be too.

Should I pursue a master's degree or a doctoral degree?

Another factor to consider is the type of degree you should pursue -- a master's or doctoral (Ph.D.) degree. When making such a decision, it is crucial that you assess your personal and professional interests as well as short-term and long-term career goals. Many master's degree programs will enable you to secure higher-level positions within your particular field of interest than if you only held a bachelor's degree. In comparison, many Ph.D. programs are focused on preparing you for academic careers in college or university teaching although this may depend on the particular university and specific program. Research your field of interest and employment outlook noting whether most new graduates have bachelor's, master's or doctoral degrees.

What is the learning environment like and what are the graduation requirements?

This question may be the most important and most fundamental when researching graduate degree programs. First, examine the overall academic reputation and quality of the university and program. “Top-tier” programs may reflect positively on students when applying for full-time jobs. Next, research the program itself. Identify if the program offers a particular research topic you are interested in and if the program has faculty members with similar research interests. Consider the amount of time it takes to obtain the degree. Also, investigate when (and how) you choose an advisor. Do you have to be accepted by an advisor before gaining admission to the program or do you

choose an advisor after entering the program? Also, how easy is it to change advisors? Lastly, look into how the program is set-up, for example, how structured is the coursework and what do they expect you to already know? Some questions to consider:

How many credit hours does the graduate program require?

What types of courses will you be required to complete?

How many classes do you take at a time?

Will you be able to take elective courses to pursue some of your other interests?

When do I choose an advisor?

In most cases when an advisor is providing you with an assistantship, the advisor must select you for admission into his/her lab before you will be granted admission to the graduate program. If you accept admission to that program, you also are selecting that person as an advisor. Alternatively, some universities have you select an advisor after completing the first year of graduate study. In either case, ideally, when applying to graduate school, you should decide on potential research areas and potential advisors at the schools where you are applying. To help make the best decision, consult with the faculty, post-doctoral staff and students you may be working with in a research laboratory. Alternatively, discuss selecting potential research advisers with your undergraduate advisor and faculty who teach courses in the areas that most interest you. When visiting each school, meet with each potential advisor and ask questions designed to help you get a feel for what working in those labs would be like.

What should I consider when choosing an advisor (major professor)?

Generally, you should choose an advisor that you will feel comfortable working with, and remember that the reputation of your work will be a reflection of your advisor. You should consider the research discipline of your advisor and be sure that this is something that you want to pursue, because your future job prospects may be limited by your choice of specialty. Know your personality, goals, and work habits and try to find an advisor that is compatible with you. Know how much independence you want in determining your own work and how much motivation and critique you desire. You are encouraged to meet with as many faculty members within the chosen specialty as possible. When meeting with the faculty, be sure to ask about the advisor's work ethic; what hours of the day should you be present, what kind of work will you be asked to do outside of your own research, their policy on taking vacation days, their expectations for you in terms of course load and requirements, the availability of attending industry conferences, any expectations for publishing papers, how long it takes most students to earn their degrees, etc.

You want to choose an advisor you are comfortable with; you do not want to choose an advisor just because he or she is well-known. Similarly, choosing an advisor and a research topic simply because they come with funding should be avoided. Most importantly, you must always feel that you can have an open relationship with your advisor and don't be afraid to contact them at any time for any questions you may have. Also, consult with the advisor's current students for more first-hand knowledge of working in that lab group and don't be afraid to ask the advisor for their contact information.

What are the deadlines for accepting/declining an offer?

Each university has their own deadlines for accepting/declining an offer into their program and it is extremely important to know what they are for each school you have applied to. The commonly used deadline is April 15, although some students may be accepted after this deadline on an as-needed basis with individual advisors. Once you have decided that a program is right for you, call the advisor or graduate program coordinator to accept their offer and send them a written acceptance. Similarly, once you have crossed a school off your list, or accepted another offer, immediately contact the other schools and faculty you are applying to and let them know you plan to study elsewhere. Your rejection is just as important as your acceptance because your rejection means another student may be accepted and he or she will greatly appreciate your timely decisions.

***These are just some of the questions you should ask and factors you should consider when choosing a graduate school. This list is by no means exhaustive. Ideally, you should visit all potential graduate schools prior to accepting admission into a program. Talk with faculty and current graduate school students before making a decision. Above all, you must feel comfortable with the university and program you choose. Good luck!