

Foster Care to Academic Success

Selecting a Graduate School

Making the Decision to Attend

Graduate school can be an incredibly rewarding experience. However, before committing to a program it is essential to decide whether graduate school is actually the best possible choice. In some cases, people may decide on a program because it is perceived as the logical next step or due to the expectations of others, or simply as a way to escape the pressures of a job search. Graduate school is the best possible choice if it's selected because it will truly give one the knowledge, skills, or experience that will result in a career.

Important Factors in the Decision Process

- Selection committees often seek candidates who have **job experience** after receiving a BA. This can make a student more likely to succeed in a program, because they have a varied and more practical set of skills to draw upon. In addition, committees always seek a diverse pool of candidates. The work you did after a BA can help you become a unique candidate that attracts the committee's attention. Anything that helps you stand apart from a large pool of applicants is a great thing.

The other advantage of practical job experience is that it will help you know what you really want to study. A field that seemed appealing for graduate school may not be ideal once you actually have the chance to work within it. Seek out entry level positions in an area before applying to grad school.

- **Cost** can never be overlooked. There are various ways of seeking funding for graduate school: assistantships, fellowships, scholarships—just to name a few. All of these sources of funding are competitive, but still possible to get with a strong application. What makes an application strong is the ability to show a dedicated interest in a field and experience that means you will likely be successful once admitted into a program. Smaller graduate schools can often be more helpful in assisting a student with sources of funding than larger graduate programs.
- Potential **faculty members** are always a critical factor when evaluating a graduate program. Their research interests shape the content of a program. Applicants must be careful in placing too much emphasis on faculty members though. In a two year Master's program, it is possible for a professor to be on sabbatical away from campus for one of those years. Asking about any planned sabbaticals is a logical question during

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an initial email correspondence with a professor. Before emailing, it is essential to do your research! Google the professor, read everything about him or her on the university's web page, and find a copy of the CV or academic resume. Then send an email during the exploration/application phase. Here are the various parts of an introductory email:

1. **Identity yourself.** This identification can include your current work position or where you just finished your BA, as well as what you studied. It's also a good idea to mention any research projects or special academic activities. This helps distinguish you.
 2. **State your purpose.** "I am interested in applying to the Business Administration program at your university. I noticed that you focus especially on organizational informatics. Would it be possible to get a little more information about the program and whether you might be able to be a potential advisor for me?"
 3. **It's okay to mention a planned campus visit in this email.** Meeting a professor in person is ideal and many are more than willing to meet with you. In some cases, a university may want students to wait on a visit until they've already been admitted. However, universities should want to sell you on their program.
 4. **Thank the professor for his or her time and end with your excitement about the program.**
- **Location** is an important factor. In some cases, students may need to stay close to family or be limited by the costs of attending a college or university away from their home state. Some factors related to location that should NOT influence the decision process: weather (you will be okay if it's freezing cold in the winter and you're used to lots of sunshine or vice versa), traffic conditions (there are always ways to negotiate this), family history (your aunt may have once lived in a place and said it was amazing. However, you may not feel the same way).
 - **Campus resources** can be a critical part of the decision process. Some resources to consider: libraries (How many do they have? Do they have archival sources or unique collections that will be able to support your research?), tutoring services (Will you be forced to take statistics in your graduate program? Does the college or university offer services assisting students in this area?), museums or institutions where you might be able to work or intern (This is especially important for grad students in the Humanities. What resources are available for me to get professional job experience while I'm a grad student?), career services (Will I have help in my job search after grad school?).

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How to Decide

1. Think very deeply about your life including personal factors that may limit or encourage your ability to focus on graduate level coursework. Consider whether you truly need graduate education to reach your goals.
2. Talk to people. This includes former undergraduate professors, advisors, and friends and family members who may currently be enrolled in graduate school. Get their input, incorporate all of their thoughts into your decision process. However, remember that the ultimate decision always has to be yours.
3. Make a spreadsheet or find a way of keeping track of all potential graduate programs. If you are really into organizing, you can create a variety of different categories representing each area that impacts your decision.
4. Do the research.
5. Contact potential faculty members or people who may be assisting you within the program.
6. Evaluate all factors and decide whether to complete the application or not.

Whatever your decision - good luck!