

Evaluating Graduate Programs

How Does Grad School Differ from Undergraduate?

Courses

Graduate school often initially feels like college—your first quarter or year may be entirely centered on taking classes. But very soon, even that experience will differ markedly. Your classes will get progressively smaller, and you will become increasingly involved in academic seminars. Seminars require a great deal of class participation and are often run entirely in discussion format to develop your ability to present information and to hone your critical and analytical skills. Material for graduate-level courses is often not covered during class time, requiring that you study and learn on your own. Academically, graduate school is highly individualized, a goal which is accomplished by maximizing the use of your independent learning skills.

Some graduate students experience loneliness and lack of direction because of this. But if you enter graduate school with a clear idea of what you want to learn and what your research will focus on, you will make effective use of seminars and the individualized learning environment to progress towards your degree. Don't be alarmed, but the attrition (dropout) rate from graduate school varies from 30% to 50%. To make sure you don't run out of steam before you finish graduate school, hit the ground running!

Research

The central experience of any graduate program, be it in education, counseling, or the traditional disciplines, is research. The major exception to this is the Master of Fine Arts (MFA), which is a terminal degree. A terminal degree is a degree after which can go no higher in the discipline. The MFA is a degree intended to focus on creative endeavors, such as Studio Art, Dance, Creative Writing or Design. MFA programs require the submission of an extensive body of creative work in a show and/or portfolio.

For M.A., M.S. and Ph.D. programs, research is demonstrated in a variety of ways, from completing a project or writing a review of current research to performing original and complex research of your own and developing it into a thesis or dissertation. The ability to conduct or at least evaluate research is a highly valued skill not only in academic circles but in many professional environments. Research is simply the process of answering original questions, or age-old questions with original methods. Being able to do research says that you can think independently and critically, and not simply absorb and regurgitate information. It says you can be self-motivated and manage a project from beginning to end. In short, research ability is a marketable skill.

If you talk to most graduate students, though, performing research involves one key realization—it takes time. Master's programs are especially short for completing a project: two years is not very long. But even in a 5 to 12 year Ph.D. program, it can seem like entire quarters come and go without success in research. In both cases, you'll be better off in graduate school if you can hit the ground running on the research front. Otherwise, by the time

you need to write up your work (which is arguably one of the toughest aspects of graduate school), you'll already be burned out.

Because they differ so widely in their focus and specializations, graduate school rankings are rarely useful for all but a few disciplines. In some disciplines, such as economics and physics, competition between programs is severe and programs are closely followed and ranked. But for most disciplines, the best programs are those with strong support for the specialization in which you're interested.

All these aspects mean you want to make sure that you are headed to a graduate school that accommodates your research interests. Your passion for a topic—and the program's ability to support that passion—will be the one thing that provides you the energy to carry you to completion.

Additional Factors to Consider

Beyond a program's fit with your desired specialization, there are additional factors you may consider:

Faculty

Because research and intellectual development are so key to your decision, take a close look at the faculty at each program, and make sure there are two or three you could work with. The mentoring you will receive from faculty will define your graduate school experience. If there is only one faculty member there who interests you and that person turns out to have no inclination or funding for additional students, it could put you in a very difficult situation. If your program requires a thesis or dissertation, the final completion of your degree will be decided by a committee of at least three faculty—another good reason to look for several faculty of interest. Once you have identified faculty of interest, make an effort to read some of their papers and/or contact them to find out if your interests complement each other. The first year can often be exploratory, as you “try out” different professors or research interests, so you'll want to go to a school where faculty will accommodate your needs and desires.

Geography

By the time students are ready for graduate school, they're often geographically limited. Wanting to be close to loved ones and friends is not a bad thing; in fact, ensuring that you will find emotional support is important to your success too. So don't feel bad for considering geography in your decision. Some professional programs, such as those in education or counseling, will have strong “practicum” or hands-on elements, and these experiences working in the community can develop into a network for finding a first job, so geography can be very important professionally too.

Funding

For traditional M.A., M.S. and Ph.D. degrees, funding is often available for students in the form of fellowships, Research Assistantships (“RAships”) or Teaching Assistantships (“TAsships”). Many other forms of support exist as well, such as grants, work-study, or loans. If you are evaluating several offers of acceptance, some may come with offers of financial aid and some without. These offers are often not final, and there may be room for negotiation. Use your

offers from other programs to leverage more aid from your first-choice. In the UC system, faculty can hire graduate students as research assistants under the title of “Graduate Student Researchers,” for which there is a range of salaries. If you are offered acceptance along with a GSR I rank, you may be able to negotiate a higher starting rank if you already come with research experience. Funding in a three- to five-year program often changes from year to year, but the first year of funding is often a benchmark of things to come. This is a good question to ask graduate students currently in the program. They’ll also be able to tell you if the financial support they receive is sufficient to cover the cost of living in their area.

Facilities

Facilities can be hard to assess from far away. All fields of study require some form of facilities: scientists need labs and instrumentation, humanists need an extensive research library, counselors need a center in which to receive mentored training in counseling, etc. Other kinds of facilities can include cross-disciplinary research institutes, specialized databases, computing resources, and just plain workspace. If you can visit the schools you are considering, evaluate these kinds of elements as well. You may want to do cutting-edge research, but if your program has obsolete facilities, you may be going into an impossible situation.

Collegiality

This is a significant factor that can impact your happiness in graduate school. The atmosphere of graduate programs can vary a great deal—even within a single campus—from formal to informal, friendly to cold. Whether you thrive in these departments depends on your temperament. To find out the kind of environment each program offers, try to speak to current graduate students in the program. Graduate coordinators (“graduate secretaries”) are also a great source of information. Students and staff will know which professors seem to do well with their students and whether a program as a whole is an energetic or a demoralized one.

In short, now is the time to really take charge of your education. Arm yourself with information. Ideally, you should visit the graduate programs you’re applying to, and some schools will even help pay for such trips, but if you can’t, try to use the web, send e-mail, and make phone calls. Enlist the help of other people—professors, grad students, advisers, mentors, trusted friends and family members—to assess your choices. But don’t try to over-plan your future. Trying to plan for every eventuality of life will probably drive you crazy!