

SHOULD YOU GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL OR GET A JOB?



Should you get a job right after undergraduate school or go directly on to a graduate program? With employers hiring far fewer college graduates than a few years ago, more students than ever are wondering whether they should sit out the bad job market and accelerate their plans to pursue a master's degree.

It's a hard call, but as a college professor and someone who's been to grad school and taught graduate students, I can shed light on this issue. I'll give you my opinion, but not until the end of this article. Don't cheat and skip ahead. Instead, review some of the factors affecting this decision and what other students decided.

You May Be Clueless

After three years of college, many seniors still don't have a clue about what they want to do with their lives. Studies of employee burnout and job unhappiness confirm the importance of discovering your real interests. One common finding is that early career decisions often are prompted by students' desire to please their parents, not interest in the field. For instance, a study of Harvard University graduates from the classes of 1940 and 1942 who were surveyed 20 years after graduation showed that many of them had entered careers their parents preferred but were deeply unhappy with these choices. The project, called the Grant Study of Adult Development, is still ongoing.

Take the time you need to choose a career path before you **decide if and where you should go to graduate school**. "Many students who are still worn out from undergraduate school are choosing graduate programs for which they have no real aptitude, interest, or ability just to bide their time until the job market turns around," says Dr. Steven Frankel.

The outcome? Stressed out and unhappy grad students. "They really dislike what they're doing and don't think they have any other options," Dr. Frankel says. "If you're going on to graduate school, you should do it because you like the field and you want to make it a career, not as a way of biding your time."

My daughter, Amy Stein, 25, graduated from college in 2013 when the job market was slow. Finding a good job was difficult, but eventually, an internship with The Iowa Commission on the Status for Women working with lawyers representing women's organizations helped her make networking contacts that led to a job offer. She's currently coordinator of the Volunteer Lawyers Program for Southern Arizona Legal Aid in Tucson, Ariz.

She never seriously considered attending graduate school immediately following her senior year because she wasn't sure what field she should study, but working has helped her decide on a master's program to pursue. "After three years, I'm ready to go on to graduate school in public health, a field that combines advocacy and direct helping," she says. "I know I would have been unhappy going directly on to graduate school. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life and, honestly, I was really tired of school."

You Can Go Part Time

If you find a good job, consider attending graduate school part time. To accommodate working students, many universities offer part-time and weekend graduate programs. Some companies and organizations help pay tuitions for employees seeking graduate degrees in their professions and who agree to stay at their companies for a certain period afterwards. These firms may give employees time off to attend school.

When choosing a part-time program, be aware that some may use untested faculty with little teaching experience. Look for those that offer courses with the same instructors teaching in the full-time program.

From summer jobs and volunteer experiences, Arthur Watson, 24, a 2014 graduate of the University of California, Riverside, from Moreno Valley, Calif., always knew he wanted to be a social worker. He went directly to graduate school full time after college. Although having a master's degree in social work qualifies him for jobs he otherwise couldn't get, he wouldn't recommend going on immediately after senior year to everyone.

One reason is that he had to work part time at a sales job to support himself during his studies. Another is that the quality of instructors who taught night classes in his program wasn't as high as he wanted. "Some of the teachers were not full-time faculty, and the teaching was pretty uneven," he says. "I'm not sure the experience of graduate school is as great as I thought it would be, but the work itself is just plain wonderful."

The Experience Advantage

As with Watson, having a master's degree usually leads to better-paying jobs and more interesting work. In many professions, you must have an advanced degree to work in the field. College teaching, public administration, research in the social and physical sciences and law are examples.

But timing is everything. Graduate school is no picnic. If you fail and have to withdraw, you not only lose your initial investment of time and money, but you also may have difficulty convincing another graduate-admissions committee to give you a second chance when you're settled and know what you want to do.

Find out if working first will improve your chances of being admitted. Even if you know you'll need a graduate degree to pursue the career of your choice, taking a job in your field may give you a better chance of getting into the school you want.

In applied disciplines, where you're trained to do a specific job -- for instance, business, social work, public administration and law -- students are encouraged to gain experience before enrolling in a graduate program. This helps applicants decide whether they're suited to careers in their chosen fields. At many top graduate business schools, in fact, having several years of prior work experience is practically a requirement.

And in other areas of study as well, it's wise to have a year or two of paid or volunteer experience in the field before enrolling in a graduate program. Then, if you find you don't like it, you've saved yourself the expense and effort of two more years of school.

"I've hired a number of well-intentioned people directly out of graduate school, and while some of them were naturals, a number of them just didn't like working with sick people," says Geri Danzig, a management consultant in San Diego and former chief executive officer of the American Lung Association of Long Island, N.Y. "Because they have few other job options with a graduate degree in the helping professions, they work in social agencies, hate the work, and fail to serve the troubled people they're supposedly helping."

Take Time to Mature

Working for a year or two also can help you become more settled emotionally. You can still take a graduate course or two to see how you feel about graduate programs you may be interested in, or do volunteer work in a field you'd consider for graduate school.

"It's been an adjustment," Watson says of grad school. "You're asked to learn a lot, not only about yourself, but also about material that's pretty new and sometimes at odds with what you believe. I think you need some time to gel as a person."

Of course, some students see grad school as a means to an end. A 2013 business-administration graduate from the University of Iowa who wants to be a

political consultant enrolled immediately in the university's graduate political-science program. He finds political science boring but sees having the master's degree as "a way to get big-time consulting work."

"I have a lot more clout with a graduate degree in political science than with a B.A. in business," says the 24-year-old. "There are always political campaigns and the job market is always great, if you're any good. I'm going to continue working on campaigns while I go to school, but the graduate degree gives me a chance to work at a very high level, where the B.A. in business would have kept me pretty much where I've been... just helping out on campaigns with not much of a future."

My Turn to Deliver

OK, so what do I think? I believe that most college graduates should take time out to enjoy life before making serious career decisions. Travel, read, explore and do other activities you couldn't do while in college. You'll be working 40 years or more. Taking a year or two to clear your head and experience life may provide the maturity and direction you need to choose a career that passes the test of time.

Work if you're burned out on school or still not certain what field to pursue. If you really want to attend graduate school, choose well. Be aware that four to six years of education is a long time. I completed a two-year master's degree immediately after college. For five years after that, I couldn't read a serious book without getting a headache. I then waited 11 years after earning a master's degree leading to my doctorate. It was the right decision. I was ready, and I actually had fun in school.

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