

## TOP 4 THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE GOING GRADUATE SCHOOL



**Summary:** *It probably took you a while to decide what undergraduate college to attend and your major would be. So why shouldn't it take a while to determine if and where you should go to graduate school? Whether you enroll directly after college or later, consider these four suggestions to help you make a wise choice.*

### 1. Seek advice if you don't know what you want to do professionally.

If you're uncertain about a field or profession, find out about your aptitude and work interests by talking with a professional counselor in your college's career center. Test some of his or her suggestions for career choices in [summer](#) and [part-time jobs](#). You can also do a university internship or two to get hands-on practice in a particular field.

Consider taking one or more assessment tests to learn the type of work that suits you. The college career center likely offers various testing instruments that can evaluate your level of interest and aptitude for a specific field and help you interpret the results.

One caution: assessment tests aren't always precise and using them may not narrow your career choice. If the results show that you're suited to several fields, consider working in a variety of jobs until you find one that's right for you.

A surprising number of professionals don't find their true career love until their 30s or 40s. You can attend graduate school later in life. In fact, many universities say older students with life and work experience are more serious, enthusiastic and committed to graduate education than younger students.

### 2. Make sure your grades and references are adequate.

The competition is tougher than ever. More Graduate Management Admission Tests were taken in 2002 than at any time in the history of the GMAT, reports the Graduate Management Admission Council. In all, 249,632 tests were taken, a 22% gain from 2000. Of those, 162,502 were taken in the U.S. and 87,130 were taken elsewhere. Meanwhile, the number of Law School Admission Tests taken increased by 36% between 2000 and 2002.

This increase means graduate schools are going to be highly selective. You'll need good grades and references from your employers in jobs or internships during college and from instructors willing to go to bat for you. It's time to be serious about your undergraduate experience.

If you need to strengthen your resume for acceptance into competitive fields or universities, seek work that will provide you with excellent experience. That might mean working in a geographically undesirable place or for a low salary for a year or two.

### 3. Know how far your chosen graduate degree can take you.

In many professions, such as education, social work and business, a master's degree is adequate. In other fields, including the academic professions (most of the social sciences, humanities and the physical sciences) you may need a Ph.D. to pursue certain career paths. Getting a doctorate may require as much as six or more years of schooling after earning your bachelor's degree. In medicine, you'll need four years of medical school, a year of residency and then three to five more years for certain specialties.

### 4. Choose a graduate program wisely.

Whether you enroll directly after undergraduate studies or later, do the legwork to select the right program for you. Review the [rankings of graduate schools](#) prepared annually by [major news magazines](#) for many academic fields. Ask undergraduate professors to help you make appointments to visit graduate schools you find interesting.

Make certain the program is accredited and find out what its graduates do with advanced degrees, the school's job-placement success rates, and available financial assistance. Also ask how long it takes to earn an advanced degree. Some schools are notorious for prolonging graduate school so students will continue working as low-paid research or teaching assistants. All graduate programs should give you this information. If they don't, they're hiding something or aren't sufficiently responsive to students.

Investigate average class size and the quality of admitted students and faculty. Talk to recent graduates to get the inside scoop about the program. The Internet can be a big help. Remember that part-time and weekend programs frequently use untested faculty with little teaching experience. A quality part-time program will use many of the same faculty who teach in the full-time program.