

So, You Wanna Go to Grad School?

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The triumphant day has come. After four years of hard work, you are finally getting your degree. Proud par-ents and relatives pack the aisles at graduation to see you walk across the podium in your black gown, smile, and take your diploma. After the ceremony, you decide to finally break the news... “Mom, Dad, I want to go to graduate school!”

After your Mom recovers from fainting and that vein in your Dad’s head gradually recedes, you try to explain to them why you are planning on going to school for another four or five or six years. “I’m just not ready to get a job yet.” Wrong. “I want to be a doctor, but med school sounds way too hard.” Strike two.

FIGURING IT OUT

Many undergraduates wonder if graduate school is the right choice for them. The answer is very clear: it depends. If you want any sort of career in academic psychology (e.g. research, teaching, etc.), then chances are you will need some sort of graduate degree. If you want to counsel people or become a clinician, the waters become a bit murkier. This article is for those interested in research and teaching.

How do you figure out the answer in the first place? Research is a big part of getting your PhD (or even your MA), so if research doesn’t really do it for you, think long and hard about spending the next five years of your life being dedicated to it. Regional and national events, like the APS Annual Convention, are a wonderful way to learn how graduate students and faculty spend their time.

There are plenty of other resources to help you figure out whether graduate school is the right place for you. Your professors, for example, would probably be more than happy to sit down with you and discuss your future educational plans. The APS Student Caucus Web site has contact information for a number of graduate student mentors who can answer questions about anything from the application process to the nuts and bolts of daily graduate student life. There are also a number of books about gaining admission to graduate school; one in particular is *Getting In: A Step-By-Step Plan for Gaining Admission to Graduate School in Psychology*. Although mostly “how-to” in nature, these books also provide some answers to the “what-for” question.

NOW WHAT?

You’ve figured out that graduate school is the right place for you. Now you just have to figure out where to go, how to get there, and how to pay for it. Probably the best advice that I ever received about choosing a graduate program is to apply to a professor, not a school. Many times who you are working with is more important than where you are working. Once you have figured out what your research interests are, start reading the relevant literature and see what names keep popping up over and over again. National conferences can also provide you with the opportunity to meet face to face with faculty with whom you may be interested in working. When considering a graduate program, you may wish to consider its national ranking (*U.S. News & World Report* publishes an annual ranking) and how much

federal and private funding the department receives.

You've picked out your school, so how do you get in? There are a number of good books that provide detailed guidelines for gaining admission to graduate programs in psychology. The four things that every graduate school is going to look at (in no particular order) are GPA, GRE scores, research experience, and letters of recommendation.

Once you've been accepted, you have to figure out how to pay for it. If you plan to stop after your master's degree, you may just be able to take out loans. Funding a PhD is a bit more daunting. No one wants to take out loans for another five years. Fortunately, the selectivity of psychology graduate programs works in your favor. A typical graduate program prospectus says the department is committed to funding graduate students for a period of five years. Basically, the department wants you to find all the funding you can through agencies like the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health. The balance is generally taken care of through teaching and research assistantships.

CONCLUSION

Tackling graduate school isn't anyone's idea of fun, though the right kind of knowledge and preparation sure make it much less stressful. And after reading this article, you should have a better idea of what to tell Mom and Dad.