

Student Notebook: To Work or Not to Work

April 30, 2021



Right now, many undergraduates looking to pursue a career in psychology might be considering whether to enter the workforce or go straight to graduate school. If that's you, I would like to share what I found to be some pros and cons of working full-time outside of academia before returning to school to pursue my PhD.

My work experience breathes life into academic texts. As I read articles or think about research ideas, I have workplace experiences that I can tie in to what I'm doing.

In the spring of 2015, I was in my senior year at Rice University. I was finishing up my senior thesis project, which had sparked my curiosity about research as a potential career path, but I was too late in the game to apply to start grad school in the fall. I had to decide—should I look for post-bac research opportunities and plan to apply next cycle, or apply for full-time jobs that didn't involve research? In the end, I worked at a public charter school system, helping teachers navigate the alternative certification process. Although I felt that taking a few years off to work before returning to graduate school for my PhD was absolutely the right call for me, any number of factors might affect the decision for you. Work experience during your undergrad degree, as well as issues related to citizenship status, family, or financial concerns can all factor heavily into your decision. Additionally, not all jobs are created equal (I

should know, as I study I/O psychology!), so you may get completely different things out of your work experience than I got out of mine.

The pros of working before starting graduate school

The first (and most obvious) benefit is that you'll be making money! This could enable you to start paying down any existing debt, travel, or contribute to your personal savings, retirement, or health savings accounts. Having money saved could also provide you with additional flexibility to cover fees and costs associated with graduate school.

For me, one of the most attractive parts of working was the ability to take a breather from the “always-on” mentality of college. Though workplace stressors can be significant in their own way, you will likely have some true “off the clock” time without the nagging thought that you should be studying or working instead. This could help you get into a routine and break some of the bad habits you may have formed in college, like procrastinating or pulling all-nighters.

At work, there is no syllabus to follow. You must learn which strategies for organization, management, and motivation work for you.

As you build your post-college routine, you'll get to know yourself better. After all, although college can feel relatively unstructured, it does impose certain norms and restrictions on your lifestyle. At work, there is no syllabus to follow and no grades against which to measure your success—you must learn which strategies for organization, management, and motivation work for you. You learn how you prefer to work, what you like to work on, how you like to be managed, and how to communicate those preferences to others. In addition, you're more able to explore interests outside of work.

In college, you are likely surrounded by people who are relatively similar to you just by virtue of being in a similar stage of life and at the same university. In your post-college friends and coworkers, you can build a network of people with diverse life experiences, interests, and ages. When you start graduate school, you can keep spending time with them in ways that have nothing to do with school, which can be incredibly refreshing once you are surrounded by classmates who often default to discussing schoolwork or research.

One thing that I carried with me to grad school was the knowledge that the grass is not always greener outside of the academic world. At times when my studies seem overwhelming, it helps to know that the working world can be just as challenging, if not more so, in its own way. Thanks to my work experience, I'm not under the illusion that my stress will magically disappear once I graduate and start working. This has given me more of an appreciation for the positive sides of grad school, such as autonomy, growth, mentorship, and the community of like-minded people who share my interests. I don't take these things for granted because I remember when I was sitting at my desk job wishing for them.

You may also start working and find a pathway to your goals that doesn't require a graduate degree at all. This would certainly spare you time, money, and the stressful experience of going through grad school unnecessarily. For me, it did the opposite, cementing my desire to continue my education.

However it shakes out for you, it's a win-win situation!

Finally, a benefit specific to my research as an I/O psychologist is that my work experience breathes life into academic texts. As I read articles or think about research ideas, I have workplace experiences that I can tie in to what I'm doing now. I'm sure that my classmates and professors are sick and tired of hearing about these experiences, but I cannot say enough about the benefit of having real situations to tie to more abstract concepts.

Consider the cons

Undergraduates may worry that work in any capacity other than a research position will make them a less desirable grad school applicant. It can also feel intimidating to solicit reference letters from former professors and wonder whether they even remember you or if current undergraduates are getting stronger recommendations. Adding to this, prospective grad students are often advised to seek only academic reference letters. To manage this, be sure to keep in touch with professors who could serve as references down the road. Ultimately, being able to talk about the skills and knowledge you developed during your time in the workplace can be a compelling differentiator in your application.

Moreover, once you overcome these hurdles and start your program, the transition may not be easy. Getting back into the rhythm of school can be tough, and you may find homework and test-taking newly foreign concepts. Scaling back your lifestyle from a salary to a stipend can be an additional challenge. And if your program does not offer a stipend or you self-fund, this transition can be even more jarring.

So, what should you do?

Going to grad school is a huge decision that should not be taken lightly. If you choose to continue your education, do so because you want to, not because you can't think of a better alternative. Taking a job outside of academia isn't a consolation prize or a failure—it can actually set you up for success by clarifying your decision of whether to go to grad school and equipping you with knowledge, experiences, and skills to become a better grad student.

Feedback on this article? Email apsobserver@psychologicalscience.org or scroll down to comment.

Student Notebook serves as a forum in which APS Student Caucus members communicate their ideas, suggestions, and experiences. [Read other Student Notebook columns here](#), and learn about [the benefits of Student Membership](#).

Interested in submitting a Student Notebook article of your own? Learn more and indicate your interest by [clicking here](#) (logged-in APS members only).