

Deciding if Graduate School Is Right for You

Before applying for further education, you should be fully aware of the working conditions, employment prospects, and physical and mental demands of the field you plan to pursue. Believe it or not, graduate school will most likely be even *more* intense than your Grinnell experience! You are lucky, though, to have experience with building a program of study that suits your particular interests and goals, since a core aim of graduate or professional school is for you to find your own particular niche in a broader field.

Some questions to consider:

What are your values, interests, and priorities for your career and life? Use **Worksheet A** to explore your values, interests, priorities, and goals. The more you understand about yourself, your values, your work style, and your goals, the more likely you will be to find a post-Grinnell step that is right for you.

Do you have a clear purpose and goal for attending graduate school? Use **Worksheet B** to explore what you want out of a graduate program. What would you like a graduate degree to do for you? How will a graduate degree benefit your personal and career goals?

Have you researched the graduate school option in many different ways? Make sure you understand the field you are pursuing and its place in the workforce, and remember that there is no “right” or “wrong” way to pave your career path (so don’t listen to what only one person or source tells you). Triangulating information from many sources—people, websites, other media—will allow you to obtain a more nuanced understanding of various possibilities and how your choice may affect your life and personal goals. Use **Worksheet C** to assess your research options.

Are you using graduate school to postpone making a career decision? If so, don’t! Some individuals enter graduate study with the idea that they can postpone the inevitable—deciding on a career and searching for a job—for another year or two. *If this is your sole motivation for entering graduate school, it could have serious implications for your career development.*

Are you simply perceiving graduate school as the automatic “next step”? If you do, you may not be prepared for the focused direction that graduate school requires. Two of the reasons most frequently given by students who have dropped out of graduate programs are a dislike of concentrated academic work and a realization that they have not defined their career goals clearly enough.

Invest some time carefully thinking about each of these questions and then talk with your adviser and other faculty members about your ideas and plans. Advisers at the Center for Careers, Life, and Service would also be happy to discuss your post-Grinnell plans with you at any time. In short, **make an intentional choice to go to graduate school because you are working toward a concrete goal.** Graduate or professional study can be a worthwhile and rewarding life and career additive; it should not be a disappointing employment alternative.

WORKSHEET A: Evaluating Career and Life Values, Interests, and Priorities

What are your values, interests, and priorities for your career and life?

1. What do I want in my lifetime?

2. What is important to me?

3. What kinds of work and experiences do I find meaningful?

4. What tools and skills do I already have? Do I need to enlarge or expand these tools and skills in order to have a meaningful life?

WORKSHEET B: Knowing One's Purpose and Goal for Attending Graduate School

Do you have a clear purpose and goal for attending graduate school?

1. What are my long- and short-term goals?
2. What skills and knowledge are necessary for me to achieve these goals?
3. How much interest do I have in graduate study?
4. What would be the benefits of *not* going to graduate school?
5. What will a graduate degree do for me personally?
6. How will a graduate degree add to my career direction?

WORKSHEET C: Seeking Multiple Perspectives on Graduate School

Have you researched the graduate school option in many different ways?

1. What are the different kinds of programs in my field, and which will most benefit my goals?
2. What information do I have available? How do I feel about the information presented?
3. What mentors do I have available (e.g., faculty, family, friends, professionals)? How do I feel about their perspectives and advice?
4. With whom could I conduct an **informational interview** to build my understanding of graduate or professional programs? What can I ask so I can further evaluate my options?
5. What are the time and money investments to take on a graduate or professional degree? How will those affect me? What about opportunity costs—the costs of making one choice over another?
6. Do I see myself succeeding in a graduate or professional program?
7. What can I do *without* a graduate or professional degree?

Deciding When to Attend

Should you go into a graduate program immediately after graduation from Grinnell, or wait a year or more? Many students don't want to lose the momentum of being in "school mode," but others benefit from a break or need additional time to clarify their professional goals. Some professional graduate programs—for example, those in business—prefer to receive applications from individuals with at least a couple years of full-time work experience. The best advice is to evaluate all factors in your life when determining the ideal time to begin graduate study.

In conjunction with your responses on the "Deciding if Graduate School Is Right for You" worksheets (Worksheets A through C), fill out the pro/con table below. If you can, take this page to your faculty adviser, alumni, or students currently enrolled in programs of interest in order to reflect on your ideas and hear other perspectives.

<u>Immediately after Graduation</u>		<u>Another Time</u>	
Pros	Cons	Pros	Cons

If you plan to pursue graduate study not immediately after graduation but within three to five years, you may want to take the appropriate standardized entrance examinations during your senior year (or shortly thereafter). Scores on most standardized tests are generally reportable for three to five years—though some schools or programs may want scores from exams taken within an even more recent timeframe. (See "Graduate Admission Exams" for further information.)