

Thinking About Grad School?

If you're like many Vassar students, you've probably given some thought to attending graduate or professional school. Success in grad school can depend on the extent to which you have thought through your career and educational goals. It's a decision that deserves careful consideration. Here are some issues to think about:

Why are you motivated to attend?

The best reasons for enrolling in a graduate program are 1) you love a particular subject and want to study it in depth, and/or 2) you need an advanced degree to enter the profession of your choice. If factors other than these are shaping your decision, you may want to think carefully before proceeding.

For instance, people who are apprehensive about venturing into the job market may view grad school as a way to postpone difficult career decisions. While an advanced degree can make you more marketable for some occupations, it's not necessarily

the key to finding satisfying employment.

Many students also face pressure to attend graduate school from parents, peers, or well-meaning mentors. Perhaps law school is a tradition in your family, or as a high achiever you've been urged to pursue an academic career. Make sure the advice you heed from others reaffirms your personal goals. Graduate study is focused and highly self-directed--it's difficult to make a go of it when you're not motivated from within.

Are you ready to commit to a particular field of study?

Perhaps you're sold on the idea of graduate school, but are unable to choose a specific field. You may be able to define your interests before graduation by researching areas of study in the Career Library, talking to professors, and reading institutional literature. If that doesn't help, a year or more away from school may give you a clearer perspective. Many professional schools actually prefer that applicants have a few years'

work experience before they apply.

Also consider how interested you are in studying a particular body of knowledge. Are you turned on by theory and research, or is it the degree at the end of the program that excites you? An advanced degree may not be the only way to achievement. In the performing arts, for example, or the business world, real-life experience can be more valuable than graduate seminars. Understanding your preferred learning style can help you not only to choose what sort of program would be most appropriate, but also to assess the benefits of graduate or professional school in general.

Have you thought about long-range career and lifestyle goals?

Whatever your motives for going to graduate school, it's a good idea to think about the impact that experience will have on your life. Will the degree prepare you for a specific occupation or career field? If so, what is the

employment outlook like?

When you select a graduate field of study, you're also to some degree defining a professional and a lifestyle. Can you envision yourself as a physician, an art history professor, or a psychologist? Make arrangements to talk with practitioners in the field (Vassar professors, alumnae/i, family friends) about the rewards and drawbacks of the path you're considering. Currently enrolled graduate students can provide valuable insights as well.

A full-time Master's program usually takes one to two years, while Ph.D's and some professional degrees require three or more. During this period you'll focus intensely on your academic subjects and the people in your program, forfeiting salary, workday routine, and free time. Are you comfortable with the thought of spending a few more years as a student? Perspective is important, and a sense of long-term direction can make your graduate school experience more meaningful.

Is it worth the financial investment?

Given the costs you and/or your family have incurred at Vassar over the past few years, this can be a legitimate concern. Everyone places a different value on education, and

ultimately you'll have to decide if graduate study is worth a financial sacrifice. Before making that decision, however, you should familiarize yourself with potential funding sources.

Fellowships, or scholarships, may be awarded by individual departments or institutions, as well as by outside organizations. Institution-based aid most frequently takes the form of a graduate assistantship. Graduate (or teaching, or research) assistants work part-time in exchange for a stipend and tuition reimbursement. Loans are the primary source of government assistance. If you are open to the thought of working full time and taking classes on the side, there are some employers who offer tuition reimbursement as part of their benefit package.

The types of aid available to you will vary tremendously from one institution or program to another. Make sure you investigate fully before closing off your options. The Office for Pre-Professional Advising and Fellowships (M-N162) has information on both Vassar and national fellowships.

Where can you locate more specific information?

Graduate and professional school information is housed in various places on campus. Our office has assorted directories, descriptive information on a

wide range of programs, and selected catalogs and brochures from professional schools. We have bulletins for many graduate admission tests (GRE, GMAT, etc.). The CAP database may also be searched to identify alums who attended particular schools or studied in specific areas.

Prospective medical and law students, as well as those interested in fellowships, can find assistance in the Office for Pre-Professional Advising and Fellowships (M-N162). Most academic departments maintain information on graduate programs in their disciplines, and college and university catalogs are on microfiche in the main library or often on the Internet. Early consultation with faculty members in the discipline is strongly encouraged.

For more information on applying to Graduate and Professional School see *Career Brief 6: Applying to Graduate and Professional School*.