

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 4 Making The Right Choices

Choosing the Right Program
Choosing the Right Graduate Supervisor

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This book is designed to provide information concerning the subject matter covered. Its purpose is not to reprint all of the information that is otherwise available to the author and/or publisher, but rather to complement, clarify, and supplement the material in other texts. For more information, see the many references listed in the *Resources* section near the back of this book.

The book deals with topics on which opinions may vary. It offers advice that reflects the opinions of the author, and it should not be expected that all other individuals within the academic community will agree, entirely and unconditionally, with all of the ideas that are expressed. The author shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person who fails to get into graduate school after reading this book.

Chapter 4

Making the Right Choices

The purpose behind graduate and professional degree programs is to turn promising students into competent specialists well-suited to a specific range of careers. Accordingly, the most important consideration when choosing which degree to pursue is whether it will give you the qualifications you need for the career you want. The title of the particular degree obtained, however, often obscures the specialized nature of the competence that is acquired in obtaining it. Individuals with the same degree in the same field may differ a great deal in terms of the nature of their acquired expertise.

The amount of success you have in applying to graduate or professional school will depend to a large extent on whether you pick the right programs. **The programs you apply to must match your specific objectives in terms of the kinds of training you want and the type of career you are hoping to have afterward.** Do not underestimate the importance of this match. It is one of the main things that admissions committees are looking for when they evaluate applicants to their programs.

In many fields, the importance of making choices based on one's specific interests and objectives goes beyond the selection of the right graduate program. Doctoral programs involve independent research, which is conducted under the supervision and guidance of an individual faculty member. Master's students in some programs also do a research thesis under the guidance of a graduate supervisor.

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These programs are particularly concerned with matching students with faculty. This matching is usually done on the basis of common research interests; no matter how impressive their qualifications are, applicants are sure to be rejected if they cannot be properly matched with a faculty member. This is not an issue in master's programs where students do not have a specific graduate supervisor.

There is an important distinction between *terminal* and *non-terminal* master's programs. A nonterminal master's degree usually precedes entry into a doctoral program (although there is an increasing number of doctoral programs that do not require a master's degree). By contrast, terminal programs specifically train people for occupations that require only a master's degree. Therefore, you need at least a general idea of your career objectives in order to choose between a terminal and nonterminal master's degree. You will probably choose a nonterminal master's program, unless you know for sure that you won't want to pursue a doctorate later on.

Choosing the Right Graduate Program

If you are considering seeking an advanced degree, you need to understand that programs that offer the same degree can be very different in terms of the types of training they offer and the types of specialists they are designed to create. For example, one program in Economics might offer expertise in econometrics, microeconomics, macroeconomics, economic development and planning, or financial and monetary economics, whereas another program might have its strengths in the areas of labor economics, environmental and natural resources economics, public economics, or industrial organization. The particular strengths of a program will depend on the expertise of its faculty members. Programs vary in terms of how flexible they are in permitting the creation of thesis research outside of their particular realms of specialization.

The importance of choosing a program that matches your objectives means that before you can choose an appropriate graduate program you should decide what type of career you want to pursue afterwards. It is beyond the scope of this book to offer detailed advice

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on how to go about making that decision. Apart from going to your library and researching the kinds of careers available to someone with an advanced degree in your field, the best way to learn about career options is from faculty members of your department, as was recommended in chapter 3, or from career counsellors, if such resource people exist at your school.

Where to begin your search The reference sections of most college libraries have calendars or brochures for graduate schools across North America and abroad. This is a good place to begin, but remember that these brochures are a form of advertising and will, therefore, paint a rosy picture of the program, the university, the campus, the city, etc.

Most college libraries will also have the most current volumes of *Peterson's Guides to Graduate and Professional Programs*. These comprehensive directories list almost all of the professional and graduate programs in North America, along with their areas of expertise, and information on such things as the number of faculty members, and who to contact for an application or other information. There are separate volumes for Business, Health, Education, and Law; Engineering and Applied Sciences; Biological and Agricultural Sciences; Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences; and for the Physical Sciences and Mathematics.

The internet is another means of finding even more information this way. There are thousands of graduate programs with informative sites. You can find links to all sorts of information about a program, its faculty and students, and about the university, the city, and much more. Some of them allow you to download their application package.

Some programs are more competitive than others, in terms of accepting only students with exceptional credentials, and this is another important factor to consider when choosing where to apply. Students with mediocre grades and standardized test scores may not have much chance of getting into one of the more competitive and high-profile programs.

It may not be prudent to spend time and money applying to programs are clearly not realistic for you in light of your qualifica-

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