CHOOSING THE RIGHT GRADUATE PROGRAM

With the amount of time and effort required to apply to attend graduate school—not to mention the cost—it's crucial to carefully study the many variables to ensure that you choose the right program.

You'll want to apply to multiple graduate programs to maximize your options, but avoid the scattershot approach. It's better to concentrate your efforts on a few carefully selected programs. Consider the following factors:

1. ## Specialization

Each school and program is strong in specific areas of focus. Do your homework to identify the programs that align best with your interests. Many graduate study concentrations can be completed in a variety of fields and subfields. How much flexibility does each program offer?

2. ## Reputation

You'll want any program and institution to have an excellent reputation, maximizing the career value of a degree you earn. One way to evaluate reputation is to check with professional associations and other sites such as US News and World Report. It's also instructive to look at what the program itself emphasizes as differentiators in its marketing and course materials.

3. ## Requirements

Carefully review each program structure and number of required courses and seminars, along with their focus. How long does it typically take students to complete the program's requirements?

4. ## Program Size

Are you most comfortable attending a program offered at a large or smaller campus? Would you prefer a program with a smaller number of students or a larger group? Are you willing to relocate?

5 Community Setting

Take a look at the on-campus and off-campus communities. Is the on-campus culture—faculty access, social life, etc.—what you're looking for? Off campus, does the area have the amenities you want and need? Is it in a city or a small college town?

6 Faculty

Your relationship with faculty will be a huge factor in your educational experience. Learn the names, departmental positions and academic credentials of the professors you'd be working with.

7 Resources

Research can require significant out-of-pocket costs. Find out about resources available at the institution that can reduce these costs. What kinds of research facilities do they offer? Because research often involves travel, is there a travel stipend?

8 Cost/funding

Tuition and fees will be an obvious consideration, but you should also take into account living expenses, which can vary widely by region. What sort of stipends and funding programs are available? What are the work requirements?

9 Career Outcomes

What are the career outcomes for program alumni and how does the program support students and alumni in professional development?

10 Best fit

As you go through the process of evaluating graduate programs against the above factors and criteria, also take into account your instinct. Which "feel" best? If at all possible, you'll want to visit each institution, speak to faculty and current students, and contact program alumni—this will provide the best opportunity to ensure that you apply to the programs that fit you and your goals best.