Are You Considering Graduate School?
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Are you considering going to graduate school? Having a master's degree affords many benefits, such as a credential and expertise in your field or discipline, but be cautious about doing it just for the sake of doing it. Graduate school is an investment, both in time and money, and you want to make sure that you are doing what is best for your future. We’ve consulted with Dr. Scott Higgins, Dean of the WCU Graduate School, as well as Dr. Chris Cooper of the WCU Political Science and Public Policy Department to get some advice on when and why you should pursue a master's degree, or higher.

Making the switch from an undergraduate program to a graduate program is a big transition. Cooper says that going to graduate school is “not just an extension of your undergraduate [study], but requires a change in the student’s mindset,” and a willingness to pursue opportunities outside of class. “Graduate school gives you the chance to work with experts on campus and in the community,” Higgins adds, and that is something that you want to take advantage of as you plan for your career.

There is no one path to graduate school. Some students jump right in after their undergraduate degree, building on the momentum they already have. “[Performing well in] graduate school is a skill like any other,” Cooper says, “You continue to learn how to write papers and take tests.” Taking this direct route makes sense for people who know what they want to do, such as be a professor or a doctor or work in healthcare. Other people come in from different routes; they get experience in the real world, and start to form an idea of what they want to focus on in their careers. “It depends on what your needs are,” Higgins adds, “Different kinds of students are attending graduate school. Some have been laid off, while others have employers who require additional skills beyond the bachelor’s degree. They go back to learn or enhance skills, to make themselves more marketable.”

Whatever the reason, students entering now are more focused and more selective in their pursuit of higher education. “Students are pursuing programs where there are known jobs or potential for job growth,” Higgins says. It’s important to take a good look at the job market and research where it is growing, and whether or not it will benefit you to continue your education in your field. “The unknown is there,” Higgins continues, “Will it be worth my time and money to continue my education?”

So, what are the benefits of graduate school? Cooper says that the biggest difference between undergraduate work and graduate work is that you move from being a consumer of information to a producer of it. “As an undergraduate, you know a little about a lot, but when you are a graduate student, you become more focused and know a lot about one subject. You’re doing a lot more in graduate school, learning how to apply what you’ve learned to real world situations.” Higgins agrees, “Graduate level work causes you to focus on a specific discipline; you’re becoming an expert in your field.”

Plus, you learn to think critically and analytically, something employers value. “Graduate school teaches you to make better decisions,” Higgins elaborates, “You read more, and get a broader perspective … you develop problem solving skills, and the ability to communicate solutions to problems both verbally and in writing. It’s a higher order of thinking.”

“When the economy is bad, there is a way to use it to your advantage. Graduate school is a great example of how you can do that,” Cooper explains. “It [Graduate school] allows you to take on things, to be more deliberate about building your resume. But it’s not enough anymore just to do the work to get the grade – it’s about making yourself better and more marketable.”

Pursuing a graduate degree outside your bachelor’s field is an option as well. It may require that you take prerequisites to be on the same level as your peers, but Higgins says that if you have good grades, good test scores, and interview well, you have a good chance at being successful. “Dedication is much more
important than intelligence [in a graduate program],” Cooper says, “It’s all about your willingness to succeed.”

Choosing which graduate school to apply to and attend is a big decision. When picking graduate schools, you need to give yourself plenty of time to compile application materials, write essays, put together portfolios, and request letters of recommendation, transcripts and test scores. Many programs have fixed deadlines for when application materials are due, so be aware of these and plan accordingly.

The other thing to consider in your graduate school search is location. Do you want to attend the same school where you completed your undergraduate? Or do you want to try something different? Both options are viable. “If you have a choice, you should get two different perspectives from two different institutions,” Higgins continues; “Having said that, there are good programs at Western that would serve our students well.” Cooper affirms this, saying that the stigma associated with attending the same institution for multiple degrees no longer exists. If you want to stay in the region, then consider WCU as an option. “It will allow you to make professional contacts in the region.”

Higgins says that it is important to talk to students who attend a program you are considering, and to visit the campus and meet with faculty. “You can tell really quickly what is a good fit for you after talking to faculty. Size and fit are critical, and it depends upon the student. The size of the school does not necessarily equal the quality of the experience you will receive.” Cooper also adds that you should make sure look at the outcome of programs to which you are applying, because results are important. “Where do their students get jobs? What are they doing with their degrees?” These are just some of the questions you should ask when exploring graduate programs.

“Your choice should revolve around the academic reputation of a university or institution,” Higgins says, “Look at the available money or support that the program offers, and the focus of what you are going to study, their curriculum or program. You want to match your strengths and weaknesses with that of the graduate program.”

Western currently has 2,000 students enrolled in its graduate school, in 30 programs with 55 different options. Many of our programs in the Arts & Sciences are considered to be at the top of the game.

“We’re about creating the best (most meaningful) graduate experience for each student who comes here. We’re interested in recruiting top graduate students from diverse populations with diverse interests. Scholarship is a hallmark of the Graduate School & Research, especially scholarship that is focused on improving the communities in our region,” Higgins says.

Western has programs that focus on real, marketable skills, and they are available to you. Admissions requirements for Western’s graduate school can be found at http://www.wcu.edu/244.asp. Make sure to check departmental sites for additional requirements. Deadlines for admission are four weeks prior to the start of your first term. International students have different requirements, and those can be found in the Dates & Deadlines section of the Graduate School webpage.

Any student or alum considering graduate school is welcome to take advantage of our career counseling services. We’ll be happy to help you see where graduate school fits into your career plan and decide if it’s the right choice for you.