

So You Want to Go to Graduate School: What to Consider

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In this session we will focus on considerations in the decision to pursue a graduate degree, preparation for the next degree while you are an undergraduate, and what to expect out of a graduate education. The decision to go to graduate school has a big impact on your professional career as well as your life. You should ask yourself the following questions before you commit time, effort and money to pursue a graduate degree:

- Should I go to graduate school?
- When should I go to graduate school?
- Where should I go to graduate school?
- How do I prepare for graduate school?
- What degree should I pursue?
- What is expected of me in graduate school?

Should I Go to Graduate School?

The assigned title for this session begs the question of *why* you want to go to graduate school. There are many good reasons to pursue a graduate degree in meat science, but there are some poor reasons as well. Most good reasons are centered on the idea that you want to improve your understanding of the application of science and technology in our industry. Your personal career goals also influence this decision. Where do you want to be in 10 years? 20 years? You ultimately have to be the judge of your own answer to this question.

When Should I Go to Graduate School?

This is a question that many undergraduate students do not consider. The most common approach is to matriculate directly after completion of the previous degree. This approach is convenient because students are in the "student mode" and usually do not have significant financial obligations. Another approach that works for some is to choose to take an entry-level position in the industry for several years

before pursuing a graduate degree. Students that take this approach have the significant advantage of industry experience and an understanding of the issues that impact success in the meat industry. This perspective allows you to generate your own ideas about what research questions need to be addressed and helps you develop your own program of study in your graduate program. If a student chooses this plan, they need to realize that it will take a lot of discipline to give up a salary to return to school.

Where Should I Go to Graduate School?

The answer to this question often has to include personal and family considerations. The key to making the best decision is to separate the personal and family solicitudes from educational and professional objectives. Ultimately, all factors will have to be considered. The answer to our first question should help you start. Where are the great programs in the disciplines that excite you and fit your professional goals? Talk to your current professors, talk to AMSA professional members and other students. Always consider several programs. Once you have identified several programs, contact faculty at those institutions and plan a campus visit. Sometimes schools will help you with travel expenses, but you need to view this as an investment in your future. Once you finish your visit, you should have answers to the following questions.

Many of the questions you may ask during visits will need to cater to your individual goals and expectations. General questions regarding financial issues are appropriate to ask; hopefully, they are not exclusively used to make a decision; but they undoubtedly will play an important role in whatever decision you make.

- Are assistantships available and what do they pay?
- Is healthcare insurance provided, including vision and dental coverage?
- What are typical tuition fees for each semester, and is there departmental assistance with tuition?
- Differences in cost of living (especially if you are moving from one region of the country to another).

You may generate many specific questions regarding programs at each school you visit.

- Inquiries into current and future areas of research.

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- Opportunities to work with extension programs and build industry relationships.
- Opportunities to teach classes or laboratory sections.
- Meat science curriculum and other course requirements for each program.

Additionally, discussions with current and former graduate students at each program may provide valuable information in the decision making process.

How Do I Prepare for Graduate School?

You should have a list of required courses for the programs you are considering. The first thing you need to do is make sure you have completed the prerequisite coursework for those core classes defined in the graduate program. This is just a start. Internships, work experience in chemistry, microbiology and meat laboratories, and undergraduate research projects all are valuable components to your preparation for graduate school. Although not specifically required, these experiences make your application for admission in the graduate school more competitive.

What Degree Should I Pursue?

The answer to this question is in your career goals. If you want to be a faculty member at a University or a Director of R&D in an industry lab, you will need a Ph.D. degree. If you want your graduate experience to make you more marketable, improve your earning potential, or increase your

technical skills in a new area, a Master of Science degree may be your choice. Although having an M.S. degree is not a requirement to pursue a Ph.D., most would agree that the M.S. experience is a valuable preparation for a Ph.D. degree.

What is Expected of Me in Graduate School?

Expectations from different programs vary. One thing that you can count on is that graduate school is a significant step up in rigor and work from your undergraduate studies. Many students expect to be responsible for their course work and research project. However, contributions to the efforts of the department and meat science program are also expected through extension, teaching and other research projects. Beyond generating new technical information through your own research, the development of teamwork and leadership skills are valuable outcomes of any graduate program.

Conclusion

The motivation to go to graduate school has its foundation in our intellectual curiosity and drive to excel. A graduate degree is a means to reach our professional goals. It is a personal and a very serious decision. No person or discussion session can make the decision for you. Our goal in this session is to stimulate you to think critically about your professional career.