To be sure going to Graduate or Professional School is right for you, here are some considerations:

- Use your personal network to seek out names of recent alumni/ae who are attending, or who have recently attended graduate school and ask them about their experiences and how it affected their careers.

- Talk with faculty members in the discipline you are considering. What kind of graduate work did they do, and how has it meshed with their goals?

- Talk to members of professions that you are interested in potentially pursuing. Did they need a graduate degree to get where they are? How has having/not having a graduate degree helped/hurt them?
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“You do not want to earn a degree from a program that is not properly accredited”

Graduate School Versus Professional School
Typically, “professional schools” are considered to include schools of medicine, law, dentistry, veterinary medicine, engineering, architecture, and several other specialized fields. “Graduate school” is the term used to refer to most other types of post-undergraduate programs—for example, programs in psychology, history, art, etc.

Graduate School Is More Focused
Graduate studies are much more tightly focused around a specific academic discipline than undergraduate studies. It is important that you both deeply love your chosen field of study and are committed to working on it night and day for an extended period of time.

Reputation Of The School
Probably the single most important criterion to consider is the quality of the overall program and of instruction. In addition to the general reputation of the school, you need to consider the reputation of the particular department or program in which you are interested. To find out about the prestige of particular departments, you should talk to faculty who are in the discipline in which you plan to pursue your graduate studies.

Reputation Of The Faculty
It is very helpful to enter a program with highly-respected scholars in their field. How do you find out how prestigious the faculty are? One way is to get a list of the faculty members’ names in the department in which you are interested, then run a quick search through the literature in your field. Are these people actively publishing, and presenting at conferences? Is their work cited by other scholars working in the same field? Are they names you’ve run across in your own studies?

Accessibility Of The Faculty
Determine how accessible those faculty are to graduate students. A program may be filled with internationally-known scholars, but none of them ever meet or work with graduate students. You can often get valuable information about these issues from graduate students already in the department. Typically, if you call a department, and explain that you are potentially interested in their program, they can provide the names of graduate students who would be willing to talk with you about it. Follow up, and call those students. They can often give you the “inside scoop” that isn’t available from the department’s or school’s literature.

Admissions Standards
Another important factor has to do with the program’s admission standards. Are they taking everyone who applies, or are they selective? If they are selective, what are the criteria they consider important?

Program Accreditation
You do not want to earn a degree from a program that is not properly accredited. If you are in a professional program (e.g., in dentistry, in mental health) that is not accredited, you might be unable to gain certification or licensure to practice your profession after graduation. To find out what kinds of accreditation are important in your future career field, find out from faculty here, and/or by writing to state accreditation boards in your field of interest.
**Requirements**

You need to know what courses and other learning experiences (e.g., internships, field experiences, etc.) are required to complete the graduate degree you are contemplating. All of these requirements affect the amount of time required to complete the program.

**Time To Complete the Program**

Find out the average length of time required to complete the program. The time to complete a Ph.D. in a particular field might range as much as 4 years at one school to 12 years at another.

**Number of Students Who Finish**

You also need to know the number of students who do complete the degree program in which you’re interested each year. You do want a program that offers you a reasonable chance of success at finishing your degree in some reasonable length of time.

**Size of the Institution & Size of the Department**

Both small departments and large ones have their relative advantages and disadvantages. Small departments may offer a higher degree of collegiality, but fewer course selections and fewer opportunities to engage in research. Large departments may have more resources and more opportunities, but a greater likelihood of you as an individual getting “lost in the shuffle.”

**Support Services**

Do they have good health care facilities? Is health care available for both you and your partner or spouse, and/or for your other dependents? Do they provide counseling? If you have children, is there a good day-care or preschool program available for young children, and/or good local schools available for older children? Are there any programs to provide career services to your partner or spouse, if that is desirable?

**The Program’s Admissions Standards**

Typically, students with high GPAs, excellent test scores, and wonderful letters of recommendation will be admitted to very good programs, although perhaps not to all of the programs to which they apply. Evaluate what the standards are for each program, and how well you match them.

**Sources of Financial Support**

There are three basic kinds of financial support available to support graduate education. They are:

- Education-related salaries, typically in the form of teaching or research assistantships, but sometimes including administrative assistantships and dormitory or counseling assistantships
- Outright grants and fellowships
- Government or institutional loans or loans from private sources

**Graduate Admissions Process**

Graduate school admissions requirements usually include a minimum GPA, particular scores or score ranges on one or more standardized tests (e.g., the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT, etc.), official transcripts from your undergraduate institution, letters of recommendation, a thoughtful application essay, and a nonrefundable application fee. Some schools will also ask for samples of previous academic work, some will require the completion of particular courses in an academic area, or completion of a particular major, and some will require a personal interview. Where an interview is required, applicants will typically have to pay for their travel and other expenses themselves.
The Application Essay

The Application Essay (sometimes called a “candidate statement” or “statement of professional intent”) are used by the graduate schools not only to evaluate your writing ability, but to evaluate your commitment to (and to some degree, understanding of) the field you wish to pursue. They should show careful thoughtfulness about who you are, what your goals are, and how those goals are connected to the graduate pursuits you are considering.

Required Tests

The most common standardized tests required for admission to various kinds of graduate programs in the U.S. are the Graduate Records Exam (GRE), the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT), and the Miller Analogies Test (MAT). Professional schools more typically require the Law School Admission Test (LSAT), the Medical College Admissions Test (MCAT), and the Dental Admission Test (DAT). The deadlines for registering to take these tests are far in advance (usually several months) of the actual test dates, and most are given only a few times a year.

Letters of Recommendation

Many representatives of graduate schools indicate that candidates’ letters of recommendation are what make or break them in terms of admissions. The standard range of recommendations is between 3 and 5. As a very general rule, most (if not all) of your recommendations should come from faculty members, but it does depend on the requirements of the specific schools and whether you have engaged in other career-related work (e.g., internships or summer jobs) in which your supervisor could provide an appropriate recommendation.

How Do You Actually Get Them?

The ground work for getting good recommendations actually needs to be laid throughout your undergraduate career. Hopefully, you have gotten to know several of your professors well enough that they are able to comment knowledgeably and positively on your abilities and your potential. If you have not developed such relationships, you need to work now and engage in a genuine conversation about your involvement in that person’s class or research or both, and how that involvement is related to your goals and future plans. Talk to potential recommenders about what you want to do, and why you want to do it. Ask if they feel they know your work and abilities well enough to write a letter of recommendation for you, and if they would be willing to do so. If the professor agrees to write a letter for you, you should provide her or him with a statement of your goals, objectives, and purpose (related to your application), a curriculum vitae or resume, the recommendation forms provided by the graduate schools (if any), stamped envelopes, and a list of names and addresses of schools, and their deadlines.

Deadlines

Although deadlines vary from school to school, most are in early January or slightly later. Some schools do, however, have deadlines as early as late November, so be sure to check carefully. Get your materials in on time! Check with the graduate school at least 3 weeks before their final deadline and ask whether your materials have been received.

Career Services Website

Career Services provides a “one-stop” website with all the resources you need for graduate and professional schools. www.unf.edu/careerservices/GraduateProfessionalSchool.aspx