Quintessential Careers: Criteria for Choosing a Graduate Program
source: http://www.quintcareers.com/graduate_school_criteria.html
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Note: If you have not done so already, please read Considering Graduate School? Answer These Five Questions Before You Decide.

There are any number of criteria people can use when trying to evaluate various graduate programs. This list is not meant to be inclusive, but to provide you with the most common criteria people use when choosing a graduate school. You'll find the information you need to evaluate each program in various graduate school guides and directories, as well as from the catalogs and Websites of the individual graduate programs that interest you.

Presented in alphabetical order:

Accreditation: There are two main types of accreditation: institutional and program-specific. You should determine the proper accreditation degree programs in your field require. While accreditation is not so much an indicator of quality as much as process, you could face negative consequences if the program does not have accreditation. For example, students who attend an unaccredited law school may not be allowed to sit for the bar exam (whose passage is needed to be a practicing lawyer). Note: a school that is not properly accredited may not openly volunteer this information -- so dig deeply.

Admission Standards: You want a graduate program with tough admissions standards; it's better to be among the select few than with a larger group that may end up lowering the quality of your graduate education. Most schools publish this kind of information, so look for the number of applicants compared to the number of acceptances. You could also look at base requirements for admission, which usually include undergraduate grade-point-average and standardized test scores.

Career Assistance: One of your main goals for earning an advanced degree most likely revolves around career advancement -- either getting a new job or entering a new field. You should examine the amount of career development and placement assistance each program provides to graduates. While this assistance should just be a small part of your overall job search upon earning your degree, it's still an important one. You should also look at where each school's graduates are working (along with their salaries, if possible).

Cost/Financial Aid: If we all had unlimited resources, then cost would not be an issue; for most of us, however, this is usually a top issue. Make sure you examine all associated costs, including tuition, books and supplies, housing, and miscellaneous fees and expenses. Then review the types of financial assistance each program is offering you, including grants, loans, and fellowships. Don't be afraid to negotiate with your top schools; if a school really wants you in their program, they will find additional resources for you.

Culture: Just as all organizations have corporate cultures -- "the way things are done around here" -- so too with graduate schools. You need to identify schools with cultures that fit your style and comfort-level so that you'll have a better chance to excel. Some call this concept the philosophy of education. For example, we know of one program where there were major factions among faculty and students, with these groups competing for resources and recognitions; would you prefer that kind of super competitive environment, or one that was more nurturing for all students?

Degrees Offered: Probably the most fundamental criterion; if a graduate school does not offer the degree or certificate program you seek, then it does not make any sense to investigate the program any further. Just make sure you know the specific degree/certificate you need to take you to that next career step you are seeking. Don't compromise or consider a lesser degree.

Faculty: A graduate program is only as good as the faculty who teach in it. It's important to work with faculty who are respected and known in your field. You need to establish a method to evaluate each program. The most basic measure is looking at the percentage of classes taught by full-time, terminally qualified faculty. But you could also investigate the reputation of the faculty by examining things such as the number of scholarly publications, the national or regional acclaim of faculty members, and/or the professional experiences of the faculty.

Location: Just as with your undergraduate choice, location is an important factor. Depending upon the degree you're seeking, you're going to be living in that geographic area for several years. More importantly, except for top-tier programs, the value of an advanced degree is typically strongest in the region where the school is located and known. So, if you
want to eventually live in the Pacific Northwest, it makes more sense to attend a graduate school in that region rather than one on the East Coast.

**Multicultural/Diversity Opportunities:** Better programs tend to be diverse -- because diversity (of all types) often leads to a broader world view. Examine both the faculty and student composition. You need to determine a mix where you'll feel most comfortable. Also, if you are interested, you might see if the programs offer an international study opportunity.

**Physical Facilities:** What is the condition of the building(s) of each program? Do they have all the tools you need for your specific interests? Investigate programs that stress "state-of-the-art" facilities to see if they really are state-of-the-art. More fundamentally, make sure the programs have the types of facilities you need. For example, if you plan to specialize in market research, you'll want a program that not only has great computer facilities, but also one that has behavioral labs for events such as focus groups.

**Reputation/Ranking:** Lots of different organizations rank graduate programs, so while rankings are an important measure of quality, you also need to investigate the source of the rankings. Examples of organizations that rank graduate programs include *U.S. News* and *Business Week*. But ranking may not be as important as other criteria here because of the flaws in the ranking process, including the ability for a school to have a high ranking while the program that interests you could still be weak. Go to our bookstore for a complete list of graduate school related books.

**Research/Academic Focus:** Graduate programs tend to have a specific strength or focus in one or two areas within a specific discipline, and you should fully investigate the faculty interests and research areas of each program. For example, Stetson University's College of Law excels at trial and litigation (one of the top in the country), but is not as strong in other areas of law, such as environmental law; thus, if you're interest lies in being a trial attorney, Stetson should be on your list.

**Resources:** This is sort of a catch-all category. We used to talk mainly about library resources here (number of volumes, periodicals, etc. in your field), but resources really means just about anything that supports the graduate program, including endowments and foundations that support student research and publications.

**Size:** There are two aspects of size that you should evaluate -- size of the program and size of the entire university. Just as with your undergraduate school, you need to find a size that feels right for you - whether to be a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond. The size of the university is important in terms of resources available (see above) and whether you like that kind of environment; more important, however, is the size the graduate program -- where you'll spend the bulk of your time. Examine the faculty/student ratios.

**State Regulations & Residency Requirements:** If you are looking at graduate programs at state universities, you need to examine admission requirements and costs for in-state residents versus all other applicants. If you have your heart set on a specific state university and you do not currently live in that state, you might consider relocating to that state and establishing residency there before applying to the graduate program.

**Surrounding Community:** You're going to have to live there for a number of years, so you better be able to at least tolerate the surrounding areas. What are you looking for -- an urban, rural, or suburban setting; do you want to live in a large city or small town? There is a joke here at Stetson University among undergraduates because the university is located in a small, quiet, and quaint town named DeLand - which most of the faculty love - but which many students refer to as “Dead-Land.”

*Have you taken advantage of all our graduate school resources?* Find everything you ever wanted to know about locating and attending graduate school -- as well as jobs for job-seekers with advanced degrees.