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How to find the best grad school for you

ERIANNE LEWIS
Staff Writer

As the semester comes to an end and graduation quickly approaches, current seniors are beginning to imagine their lives outside of college. That can come with a lot of worry and stress. However, the Baylor University Career Center is available with expertise, no matter what post-graduation plans students may be considering.

Donna Sparks, a career success professional in the Career Center's Academic Affairs office, said the Career Center helps steer students in the right direction when making a graduate school decision.

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>
> **DONNA SPARKS | CAREER SUCCESS PROFESSIONAL**

"We definitely would love to collaborate with students and help them navigate," Sparks said. "It's not just a simple 'pick this website and find the right program,' and so we are more than happy look at lots of different factors."

Sparks said the Career Center urges students to consider their motives behind attending graduate school before they begin the research process.

"Going to grad school to delay becoming an adult or to delay looking for a job, or that kind of thing, we don't recommend that at all. It's just more debt and less direction," Sparks said. "We would encourage you to kind of think through, 'Is grad school for me?' and ask yourself, 'Why do I want to attend grad school?' 'Am I ready to make this substantial investment of time and money?' If the answer to these questions is no, or I'm not sure, then they should do a little more reflection first."

Sparks said students should attend graduate school right after undergrad if they feel that is the best decision for them.

"That is going to vary person by person. Some people, it makes sense for them to go straight into grad school. To be competitive in an MBA program, you might be required to have three to five years of work experience," Sparks said. "Websites alone will not be the magic answer. There is a lot of thought and discovery, and I would encourage students to dig a little deeper. I'm not suggesting that they just go to these websites and they'll know which grad school is right for them, but they are tools and they can be helpful."

Photo Illustration by Christina Cannady | Photographer

READY TO HELP The Baylor Career Center, along with current graduate students, gives advice for choosing the right grad school.

Molly Lewis, a doctoral candidate in the English department, said she initially went to graduate school at the University of Edinburg and decided to take a year off due to the difficulty balancing applications and coursework in her final year. Lewis said she was uncertain about getting a Ph.D. and decided to hold off until she was more confident in her decision.

"A lot of people choose grad school because they're unsure of what else to do. That didn't seem like a wise decision. It took 10 years of living in different places, working odd jobs, making mistakes and growing in confidence and clarity before I knew I needed to go back for my Ph.D.," Lewis said.

Emma Cartisano, a doctoral candidate in the higher education and leadership department, said she decided to delay attending grad school right after undergrad because she wanted to gain more research experience in her field, ultimately deciding to change her major to higher education.

"I graduated with my bachelor's in 2015, and at that time I thought I wanted to get a Ph.D in neuroscience, so I got some more experience working in a research lab for a few years, just to try and hone my research interests," Cartisano said. "In that process I realized that neuroscience wasn't what I wanted to do, then I kind of just fell into higher education. So, three years after I got my bachelor's, I went back and got my master's degree in higher ed. Then I went straight from my master's to my Ph.D here at Baylor."

Sparks said the best time to begin researching graduate schools is junior year because it becomes more stressful the longer students wait.

"We can condense that timeline and work with you in however much time you have, but ideally, in a perfect situation, you would start your junior year. We do encourage students to interview people who are in the program, who graduated from the program and the faculty [to] really get a snapshot of what the program is all about," Sparks said.

Before anything else, students should start forming connections with faculty members during their first semesters at Baylor, Sparks said. These connections will significantly help in the long run.

"Something you can be doing, even your freshman year, is building relationships with faculty," Sparks said. "It's really hard, especially when you are an online student right now during COVID, to navigate relationships with faculty. So you want to make sure that you are invested in faculty and in your relationships with professors so that they know you and will want to recommend you."

COVID-19 has changed many of the admission qualifications for graduate programs in the United States, Sparks said.

"A lot of programs are being more lenient as far as requirements go," Sparks said. "Some of them waived admission tests, some of them waived requirements for a shadowing or clinical hour."

Under the Success Data tab on the Career Center's website, there is an interactive chart for students to see where other students are going to graduate school and what degrees they are seeking. This information could be helpful to students who are interested in graduate school and want to take inspiration from other Baylor students.

Cartisano said she has been closely observing Baylor for the last few years because of the phenomenal advancements the university has been making.

"I've been interested in Baylor probably for the last eight or nine years, and I'm not really sure how that started," Cartisano said. "I've just watched Baylor in the news and kind of from the margins, and it's been really fascinating to see what all Baylor's doing in the research world, especially as a Christian college."

Cartisano said she chose Baylor's higher education and leadership graduate program because of the smaller class sizes and the ability to connect with faculty and students on a more personal level.

"We have a really small cohort, so it's very intentional. I really get to know my professors and my classmates as well. We are all going through it together, so we all work on campus, take classes together, which is different from some of the other programs I looked at," Cartisano said. "Of course, the Christian environment too since I want to work at a Christian college when I graduate. I think it's important to be trained here too so I can bring my Christian faith into what I'm learning."

Lewis said it is important that students find a program that best covers all their needs, especially cost.

"You should really only consider programs that offer full tuition. Unless you're independently wealthy or guaranteed a lucrative job on the other side of your degree, it simply isn't worth garnering debt you will spend the rest of your life failing to pay off," Lewis said. "Full-tuition coverage also offers some assurance that your program is invested in you doing well, and you simply can't do well in grad school if you're also trying to work off your tuition and pay your usual bills at the same time. A program that fully supports you will almost always be the best option."

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Need help with grad school?

As graduation quickly approaches, current seniors are beginning to imagine their lives outside of college, feeling worried and stressed. However, the Baylor University Career Center is available as a resource for students considering a variety of post-graduation plans.

Career Success Professional Donna Sparks said the Career Center helps direct students in the right direction when making a graduate school decision.

"We definitely would love to collaborate with students and help them navigate," Sparks said.

Sparks said the Career Center urges students to consider their motives behind attending graduate school before they begin the research process.

"Going to grad school to delay becoming an adult or to delay looking for a job, or that kind of thing, we don't recommend that at all," Sparks said. "It's just more debt and less direction."

Points to consider

Sparks said students should ask the following questions:

- Is graduate school for me?
- Why do I want to attend grad school?
- Am I ready to invest the time and money?

Sparks said websites are helpful tools to finding the right grad school.

"Websites alone will not be the magic answer," Sparks said. "There is a lot of thought and discovery, and I would encourage students to dig a little deeper."

Molly Lewis, a doctoral candidate in the English department, said she took a year off due to difficulties and uncertainty.

"A lot of people choose grad school because they're unsure of what else to do," Lewis said. "That didn't seem like a wise decision.

"It took 10 years of living in different places, working odd jobs, making mistakes and growing in confidence and clarity before I knew I needed to go back for my Ph.D.," Lewis said.

Emma Cartisano, another doctoral candidate, said she wanted to gain more research experience in her field and later changed her major.

“I got some more experience working in a research lab for a few years, just to try and hone my research interests,” Cartisano said.

She said she realized she wanted to study something different and “fell into higher education.”

Getting the timing right

Sparks said it’s best to begin researching graduate schools junior year because it becomes more stressful the longer student wait.

“We can condense that timeline and work with you in however much time you have, but ideally, in a perfect situation, you would start your junior year,” Sparks said.

Students should start forming connections with faculty members during their first semesters at Baylor, Sparks said. She also said she encourages students to interview people involved in the program.

Networking is vital

“Something you can be doing, even your freshman year, is building relationships with faculty,” Sparks said. “You want to make sure that you are invested in faculty and in your relationships with professors.”

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“A lot of programs are being more lenient as far as requirements go,” Sparks said. “Some of them waived admission tests, some of them waived requirements for a shadowing or clinical hour.”

What other students are doing

Under the Success Data tab on the Career Center’s website, there is an interactive chart. It allows students to see where other students are going to graduate school and what degrees they are seeking.

This information is a resource for students who are interested in graduate school and want to take inspiration from other Baylor students.

Cartisano said she has been observing Baylor because of the phenomenal advancements the university has been making. She said she’s been interested in Baylor for the last eight or nine years.

"I've just watched Baylor in the news and kind of from the margins," Cartisano said. "It's been really fascinating to see what all Baylor's doing in the research world, especially as a Christian college."

Baylor's program stands out

Cartisano chose Baylor's higher education and leadership graduate program. She said she chose Baylor because of the smaller class sizes and the ability to connect with faculty and students more personally.

"We have a really small cohort, so it's very intentional. I really get to know my professors and my classmates as well," Cartisano said.

Cartisano said Baylor's program is different from other programs she looked at.

"We are all going through it together, so we all work on campus, take classes together," Cartisano said.

Cartisano also said the Christian environment stood out because she wants to work at a Christian college when she graduates.

"I think it's important to be trained here too so I can bring my Christian faith into what I'm learning," Cartisano said.

Count the cost

Lewis said it is important that students find a program that best covers all their needs, especially cost.

"You should really only consider programs that offer full tuition," Lewis said.

Lewis said unless students are independently wealthy or pursuing a lucrative job, they should be careful of tuition costs.

"It simply isn't worth garnering debt you will spend the rest of your life failing to pay off," Lewis said.

Lewis said grad school is more challenging if you're trying to work off your tuition and pay other bills simultaneously.

"Full-tuition coverage also offers some assurance that your program is invested in you doing well," Lewis said. "A program that fully supports you will almost always be the best option."