



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

PURSuing A GRADUATE DEGREE:
**QUESTIONS AND
ANSWERS FROM START
TO FINISH**

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Thinking about going to grad school is both exciting and a little intimidating. It is certainly not a decision anyone should take lightly, as it requires a strong commitment of both time and resources. Yet, there are many reasons why it could be the best path for you to build your skill set and advance your current (or future) career! This guide will help you decide whether graduate school is the right decision for you, and how you can best prepare for this huge life change.

REASONS YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO EARN A GRADUATE DEGREE

Whether you are still an undergraduate student, a recent grad with a few years of work experience, or a seasoned professional looking for ways to further your career, there are several distinct benefits to earning a graduate degree. Here are just four of the many reasons people decide to earn an advanced degree:



Personal and Professional Goals

Maybe you've always wanted to be a social worker, or after five years as a business analyst — you're ready for a leadership role. Whatever your dreams and aspirations, realizing a personal or professional goal is not only satisfying but can be extraordinarily empowering. Graduate school allows you to delve into topics that you find fascinating and want to explore further.



Career Change

Today, job changes from one industry to another are very common — especially after the 2020 pandemic, where [the quit rate rose from 1.6 percent in April 2020 to 3.0 percent in November 2021](#). Whether it is due to dissatisfaction in their current job, or evolving skill sets and professional preferences — nearly [50 percent of American workers](#) will make this type of shift during their careers. And it is not just younger workers, either. In fact, the average age of those who make a career change is 39.



Career Requirements

Whether you anticipate a complete change in careers or want to move up in your current field, a graduate degree may be necessary before you can receive a license in certain fields (e.g. FNP-DNP or CPA). Licensure requirements differ, depending on where you live, so make sure your graduate program meets your state's requirements.



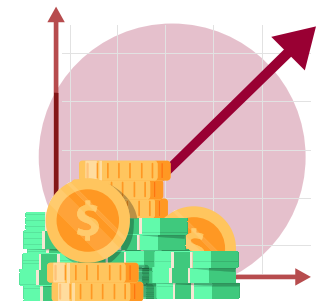
Job Security

Competition in today's job market is growing. Gone are the days where an employee could bank on a position in the organization throughout the entirety of their career. If you want to remain competitive (and equip yourself with added job security), graduate school is a great option. A [study from Georgetown University](#) found that **graduate degree holders were 2X less likely to experience unemployment** compared to those with an undergraduate degree.

IS GRAD SCHOOL A SMART CHOICE? STATISTICS SUGGEST IT IS...

Graduate school is a big step, and making the decision to invest in a degree is not always easy. Many wonder about the return on their investment and how it will help them in their professional future. If you're looking for more information to make an informed decision, check out some of these hard facts:

- Employers are raising the minimum level of education hiring. Between 2016 and 2026, the number of jobs requiring a master's degree will increase by 17 percent, compared to only a 10 percent increase in jobs for bachelor's degree holders.
- According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment rates of those with a Master's degree or higher are more than 3.5% lower than that of those with less than a Master's.
- The mean salary of someone with a graduate degree is over 200 dollars a week higher than those with just an undergraduate degree.



With thousands of different graduate programs to choose from, the process of finding the right program can feel overwhelming — but there is help! If you are still an undergraduate student, you can ask your academic advisor for suggestions. Otherwise, try to speak with recent graduates or current grad students at the schools you are considering to find out what they like, and more importantly, dislike about the program.





WHEN SELECTING A PROGRAM, CONSIDER THESE 8 IMPORTANT FACTORS:

01

School/Program Reputation

The benefits of a grad degree are only as good as the school's reputation. Research your prospective program, try to get in touch with alumni to ask about their experience, and talk to potential employers to learn how the industry views that graduate program. Remember, a graduate program's reputation may differ from the graduate school's ranking, so ask around.

02

Program Emphasis

You can't know what you will learn in a program without thoroughly reviewing the curriculum. Even programs with similar or even the same name can differ widely among schools. It is essential to ask each of the schools you apply to for their program course list. Doing this will help you verify whether the program's curriculum fits your future plans.

03 **Research Opportunities**

Depending on your field of study, research may play a large role in building your resume for future employment. Learn about the current and past research projects that have been conducted in the program and pay attention to any limitations that may prevent you from meeting your research needs.

04 **Faculty Expertise**

No matter how excellent a program's reputation may be, it is the faculty that will make the most significant impact on your learning experience. If you want to get the most out of grad school, make sure the faculty is top-notch. Find out who is currently teaching in the program, their reputation, and what research they are working on to determine if it matches your interests. Ask current students for their opinions about professors as well as other faculty members.

05 **Hands-on or Experiential Learning Opportunities**

Does the grad school's instructional style align with your preferred learning style? Today, many schools are replacing traditional lectures with project-based learning and group work, giving students valuable first-hand experiences. For those who prefer to learn by doing, this interactive approach is more relevant and fruitful than attending lectures.



06 Graduate Outcomes

One of the best ways to determine if a graduate program is a good investment in your future is to look at how the program's alumni are doing. Most schools showcase their star graduates, but you can always look on LinkedIn to get a bigger picture of the typical student success rate (just search for the school of your choice to see how their grad students are faring).

07 Location/Program Delivery Models

Consider how far a graduate program is from where you currently live or work. Will attending a particular grad school require moving? Many grad schools offer online or hybrid programs that significantly reduce the amount of time you need to spend on campus, so look for the program that best fits your needs.

08 Personal Obligations

Figuring out how to make grad school fit into an already busy work and home life is complicated. But some schools make it a little easier by offering flexible classes and minimum credit requirements. Before applying to a program, learn about their course delivery options and what accommodations they make for working students.

After deciding to go to grad school, your next step is to complete your application. Many future graduate students get hung up at this stage with fear over making a mistake or not presenting themselves in the best possible light. Our best advice? Start early, take your time, have a group of peers proof-read it for you, read, re-read, edit and revise — and then submit your application with confidence.



GOAL
PLAN
ACTION

Nothing is ever perfect, but if you follow these steps (and keep in mind our tips below) your application will be a great representation of what you will bring to the program.

Important Things to Keep in Mind When Filling Out Your Application

Each school will have its own set of requirements, but these items are pretty standard across all graduate schools:

Application

All graduate programs have a standard online application that you will need to submit. Some programs may even require two, one for the school, and another for the specific program you want to attend. While it is tempting to breeze through this portion of the application, take your time, and double-check your work. You don't want to make a wrong impression with a simple mistake.

Pro-tip: Submitting the online application usually marks the beginning of your submission. Every program is different, but most include some or all of the items below and may also require an in-person (or virtual) interview.

1. Full legal name
Last First Middle or Former Last Name Used

2. Social Security number
Area Code

3. Birthdate
Month Day Year

4. Telephone number

5. Email address

Transcripts

Almost all graduate-level programs require a minimum undergraduate GPA for acceptance. Some programs also require specific prerequisite coursework. If you meet the minimum requirements and decide to submit an application, you will need to request an official transcript from your undergraduate institution.

Pro-tip: *There is a difference between an official and an unofficial transcript. Schools generally require an official transcript which means that they are certified and sent directly from one institution to the other.*

Letters of Recommendation

Typically, graduate schools require two or three recommendation letters from people who can offer insight into the applicant's potential for successfully completing a graduate degree. The best letters come from someone who is well respected in your chosen field such as a former professor, research colleague, or internship director. Bottom line: ask someone who can speak to your ability to succeed in your graduate degree and beyond.

Pro-tip: *When requesting letters of recommendation, give the writer a minimum of 1-month heads up. You will want to give them ample time to write you a stellar letter of recommendation.*

Personal Statement

Whatever you do, don't take your personal statement lightly. Especially when you are applying to multiple graduate programs, it is the best way for the grad school's admission office to get to know you. The best personal statements are specific, memorable, honest,

and demonstrate how you would be an asset to the program as a student.

Pro-tip: *Never use the same personal statement for all applications. You can use the same structure, but each statement should be uniquely crafted for that particular school and program.*

Resume

You probably already have a resume, but it is well worth the effort to craft a new one with the specific goal of getting a 'job' as a graduate student. A good grad school resume concentrates on your academic history and relevant work experience, along with anything that may help you to get noticed, such as grants, fellowships, publications, or other awards. Remember to include any certifications that relate to your field of study.

Pro-tip: *Your resume should follow a logical order and should stick to only relevant experiences. This is not the time or place to "pad" your resume just for the sake of having a long list of accomplishments. A short, but highly relevant summary is much more valuable.*



GRE/Standardized Tests

Most graduate schools require applicants to submit their scores from a standardized test like the GRE or GMAT. Since you will have to register and prepare for these tests, consider registering for the required test at least six months before submitting your applications. If the test score is optional (not required) and you scored well, it may be in your best interest to submit your scores with your application.

Pro-tip: Not all graduate schools require standardized test scores. Check with your program of interest before signing up for a test!

INSIDER TIPS TO HELP YOUR APPLICATION STAND OUT

TIP#1: Get started early and make a plan to stay organized — Get started early and make a plan to stay organized — Tracking and meeting deadlines can be challenging, especially when you are applying to a large number of schools. Try creating a digital schedule with frequent reminders to keep everything straight. In addition to keeping track of admission deadlines, you need to record testing dates, when you submitted requests for recommendation letters, when you submitted applications, and when you should hear back from each of the schools (just a rough estimate).

TIP #2: Understand your WHY — Understanding the real reason you want to go to grad school will help you streamline your application and increase the likelihood of accomplishing your goals. While it may feel a little uncomfortable to admit your primary aim is to increase your earning potential or gain more professional leadership roles, being honest with yourself at this stage of the process is critical if you want to be satisfied with your choices later on.

TIP #3: Learn about your program of interest — Researching and learning about the program and school you're applying to enables you to tailor your application package for the greatest impact. When you mention specific program features and even faculty members in your personal statement, you show the admission office you have researched the program and want to attend this school in particular.

TIP #4: Work ahead and review your work — Compiling and reviewing all application materials well in advance will give you the time to make sure you have everything you need. While most graduate schools only require the items listed in the section above, some schools may ask for unique items such as portfolios, videos, or copies of your past publications. When you look over your applications in advance, you will have more time to prepare these additional pieces.

TIP #5: Ask questions and ask for help — There is absolutely nothing wrong with asking for support throughout the application process. When you have questions, ask your designated admission counselor. When you are done with one of the application items, ask a friend or family member to review it. You can also use your university's academic advising center and career development center if you are still an undergraduate student; otherwise, pull together your own support team. People who have experienced the graduate school process, family members, and friends can all be part of your support system.



A graduate degree is an investment of resources — time, energy, and money. When thinking about graduate school, the first question on everyone's minds is usually: How will I pay for a graduate degree?

The great news is there are several funding and financial assistance options open to anyone who would like to advance their education. The key to securing adequate funding for your degree is to start early and apply to as many grants and assistantships as possible. You may not be selected for every one, but the more applications you put out, the more likely you are to receive the funding you need.

Pro-tip: [Check out this article — Financing Graduate School: An Overview for Future Graduate Students](#) — to learn more about the financial aid process and your options.



Grants

Grants offer free money towards graduate school expenses and can be awarded on merit (selected based on academic or other measures of worthiness) or through a need-based system. Some grants may be tied to the applicant's ethnicity or gender, while others are based on a specific field of study or a commitment to working in a particular occupation after graduation. The federal and state governments, as well as private or non-profit organizations, are all sources for grants.

With so many grants out there, it can be time-consuming to find the ones that match your qualifications. There are several search engines that can help you find the right grants. Try sites like [GoGrad](#) or [Sallie Mae](#). It is important to note that some grants, like the federal [TEACH program](#), come with obligations that require repayment of the grant if not fulfilled.

Fellowships and Assistantships

Although these two financial assistance categories are often lumped together, they are not the same. There are distinct differences between receiving a fellowship, sometimes called a true fellow, and getting an assistantship, often referred to as a graduate assistantship.

Fellowships award a stipend for education and living expenses without requiring anything in return. True fellows are free to pursue their own research. On the other hand, someone who has an assistantship is considered a part-time employee of the school and has to fulfill specific duties such as teaching, conducting research on behalf of the program, or assisting with administrative tasks.



Before applying for or accepting a graduate assistantship, make sure you understand all the responsibilities that are tied to the stipend. You can find both types of fellowship opportunities on your school's website. It is worth noting that these are incredibly competitive financial aid packages, and many programs only allow you to apply for a fellowship after being admitted to the program.

Employer Reimbursement

If you're currently working, contact your HR department to see if your company will pay for a portion of your degree. Surprisingly, [according to a recent study](#), more than 90 percent of medium and large-size companies offer some sort of tuition reimbursement program. Frequently, these offers come with strings attached, such as continued full-time employment and restrictions on the focus of the program you enter — so make sure to inquire what requirements and terms will accompany this financial assistance.

Graduate PLUS Loans

Graduate PLUS loans are for graduate-level students who are currently enrolled in the Stafford Loan program. It is important to remember that Graduate PLUS Loans are not free money. Like many loans for graduate school, interest begins to accrue immediately after you get your money, and there is an origination fee that is taken out of your loan package.

The first repayment is due six months after graduating, if you withdraw from school, or when enrolling in less than half the credits that the school deems as a full load. There are multiple steps to applying for a Graduate PLUS loan, but it all starts by [filling out a FAFSA application form online](#) and being approved for a Stafford loan. When you are ready, you can complete the Graduate PLUS loan application process [by following these steps](#).

KEEP THESE TIPS IN MIND WHEN APPLYING FOR FINANCIAL AID

Qualifying for enough financial aid can be the difference between having the funds necessary to attend a school or putting your graduate school dreams on hold. These tips can help give you the best possible chance of getting the financial aid you need.

Don't disqualify yourself from free federal and state funds. Fill out a [Free Application for Federal Student Aid \(FAFSA\)](#) form. Most people qualify for a financial aid package, so it is well worth your time.

You'll need to fill in a new FAFSA form each year to determine whether you are still eligible for financial aid. Fill out the form as soon as the government releases it every year to avoid missing the federal and state deadlines.

Determine if you should fill out your FAFSA application as a dependent or independent. Knowing which category you fall into can make a huge difference in the amount of money you receive, as independent applicants do not have to include their family's financial information on the FAFSA application.

There are financial aid options available for almost every student. Don't assume you won't qualify because of your current financial or academic situation. Put in the time researching all of your options, and remember that these programs are in place for students like you.

Ensure you know what you are getting into before taking out a student loan that you have to pay back. Talk with a trusted financial advisor or mentor to make sure you are not in for a shock after graduation.

Before submitting any forms or information, ask someone to look them over for you. It is easy to make a minor mistake that can wind up costing you. An extra pair of eyes never hurts.

Getting into a graduate program and securing financial aid are just the first steps of your graduate school journey. In order to get the most out of your courses, you need to be proactive by taking advantage of the opportunities you have, both in and out of the classroom.

To start on the right footing, you need to understand what to expect from your courses and how graduate school differs from your previous undergraduate classes.

The fundamental difference at the graduate level is the scope of the curriculum. While undergraduate classes, even those you encountered as a junior or senior, were still generally broad in their content, the topics covered in graduate school are much more specialized. This narrowing of the subject matter naturally limits the course's appeal and leads to smaller class sizes and closer academic interactions between students and professors.

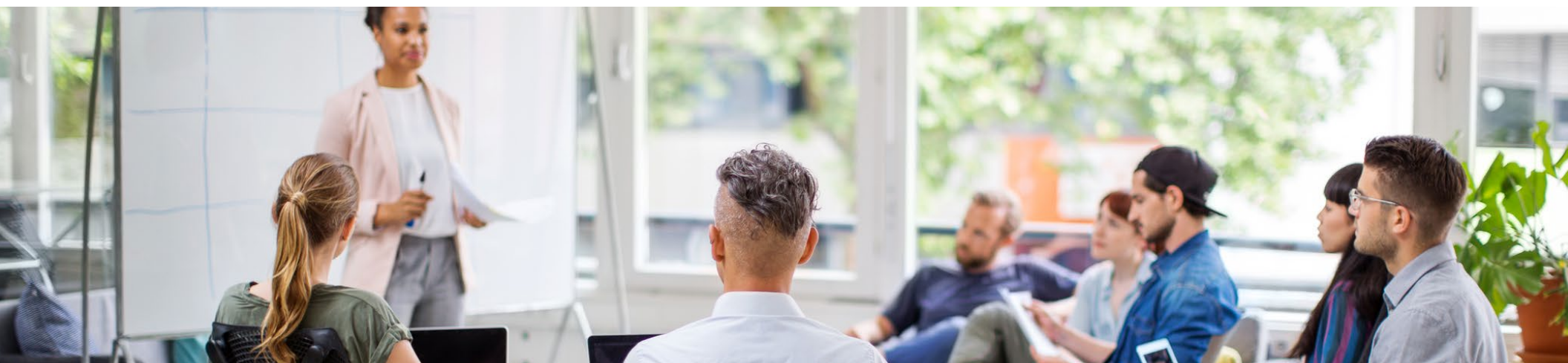
For those who are only familiar with lecture-style classes and used to having limited interactions with their professors, this change can be very off-putting at first. However, most people quickly adapt and come to appreciate this more inclusive and personalized approach to coursework.

Pro-tip: We wrote an article about the [8 Major Differences Between a Graduate and Undergraduate Degree](#). [Read about it on our blog to learn more!](#)

GRADUATE SCHOOL IS A BIG COMMITMENT THAT CAN PAY OFF IN A BIG WAY

The benefits of a graduate degree extend well beyond the classroom. Think back on your most formative experiences as an undergraduate student. You probably learned as much, or even more, outside the classroom as you did in it. Informal and casual learning takes place at an even higher degree at the graduate level. You can leverage your graduate school experience by:

- **Attend speaking events and conferences:** Most universities sponsor campus speakers, and if you go to school in a major city, you can usually find professional organizations that host industry-related events. These learning opportunities expose you to a deeper level of learning and new areas of thought leadership.



- **Building your network:** Networking and making connections should not end with other students. Besides forming academic relationships with your professors, you need to consider joining a local chapter of a relevant professional organization. If no local organizations exist in your area, be sure to become a member of at least one national professional organization in your field of study. You can also build relationships with others in your industry through online discussion groups. The more connections you make while you are still in school, the easier your future job search will be.
- **Learn from your classmates:** Learning from the experiences of your classmates is a fantastic way to gain a new perspective on what you are taught in your course, while at the same time, discovering what actually works in the real world. Your fellow students may be able to give you a sneak peek of what you can expect when you graduate if you are not currently working in the industry.
- **Make the connection in your career:** When you take what you're learning and apply to your current job, your practical experience multiplies. Using theoretical knowledge immediately and seeing the results not only will reinforce what you are learning but it will give you new confidence in your abilities and satisfaction in knowing your studies are being put to good use.

Since 1963, Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, has provided exceptional educational opportunities to its students. We offer business, science, education, and healthcare programs and currently have approximately 3,000 students enrolled in more than 40 masters and doctoral degrees across our five different colleges. If you are searching for a place where you can reach your academic and professional ambitions, Sacred Heart University can help you achieve them.

At SHU, we have five different colleges that offer graduate programs:



[The College of Arts & Sciences](#) is the largest college at Sacred Heart University and offers the widest variety of graduate programs. Graduate students can earn a range of degrees from I/O Psychology to Communications and everything in between.

**Explore Degrees in the
College of Arts & Sciences**



The [Jack Welch College of Business & Technology](#) is accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and offers a strong focus on applied learning. The majority of the college's graduate students are working professionals, and almost all of the full-time faculty members have Ph.D.'s in addition to decades of business experience in the real world.

**Explore Degrees in the
College of Business & Technology**



The [College of Health Professions](#) offers coursework in their state-of-the-art Center for Healthcare Education to ensure students have exposure to the latest in medical technology. Graduate students can earn degrees in courses such as Exercise & Sport Science and Physician Assistant Studies (MPAS).

**Explore Degrees in the
College of Health Professions**



The [Davis & Henley College of Nursing](#) shares the same high-tech building with the College of Health Professions and is fully accredited by the Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE).

**Explore Degrees in the
College of Nursing**



The [Farrington College of Education & Human Development](#) is accredited by The Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and approved by the Connecticut State Department of Education. Students can enroll in a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), leading to teacher certification or other programs, including a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership.

**Explore Degree in the College of
Education & Human Development**

OUR GRADUATE PROGRAMS ARE DESIGNED TO FIT YOUR NEEDS

Why should SHU matter to you?

Over the last 15 years, Sacred Heart has experienced university-wide enrollment and physical growth, and we continue to be recognized as one of the most vibrant universities on the east coast. We were recently named one of the **"fastest-growing Catholic colleges in the country"** by the Chronicle of Higher Education and our graduate program offerings have grown **300% over the last decade.**

At Sacred Heart, we also understand that you need a quality education and the flexibility to work and/or attend to your current personal obligations. Many of our degree programs offer flexible class schedules, including hybrid and 100 percent online classes, making it easier to balance studying with the rest of your life.

It is our **Growth Mindset, Flexible Degree Offerings, Location, Top-tier Facilities, Notable Alumni, and Strategic Partnerships** that make Sacred Heart stand out as a leader in graduate education.

Learn about
**6 Hidden Gems within
SHU'S Graduate Programs**

No matter your reason, whether you want to increase your earning potential, secure a steady career for your future, earn an advanced license or certificate, or dive into a new field that will fuel your career change — a graduate degree is the perfect vehicle to help you accomplish your goals.

Whether you are just beginning to research a graduate program or are exploring one of the graduate degrees at Sacred Heart University, we would love to help you through the process and answer any questions you may have. You can reach out to us by email (gradstudies@sacredheart.edu) or you can [schedule a one-on-one call](#) with one of our admission counselor to get started. We look forward to hearing from you and accompanying you on this exciting journey!

Request More Information

Schedule A Call

Attend an Event

