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7 Critical Steps to Find the Right Grad School

Do your research so you can make an informed decision, a former graduate school admissions dean says.

By **Dr. Don Martin**, Contributor April 6, 2012, at 7:00 a.m.

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DURING MY 28-YEAR career in enrollment and student services, I regularly hosted "open" office hours to avail myself to students. Often, those who came to see me were unhappy and sometimes angry. At the core, many complaints came from a belief that the student had been misled about the [graduate school program](#)—that it was "not at all" what he or she had expected.

When I asked how the decision to come to our institution was made, the reply was often "Well, you're highly ranked" or "I know someone who went here and said it was great." I was astounded by how many times students said they made the decision to attend my program almost entirely because of its ranking and word-of-mouth reputation.

[Learn how to [use U.S. News's graduate school rankings wisely](#).]

Let me be clear: Predicating your graduate school choice largely on prestige and the recommendations of others is a mistake. There are a number of factors you need to consider. Therefore, apply the due diligence and take the necessary time to find the program that's best for you. After all, your graduate education is yours. It is your time, your effort, and your money.

As you embark on your graduate school exploration, here are seven critical components to include in your research in order to discover the school that's right for you.

1. Allow enough time: Waiting a few weeks before the application deadline to conduct your research is way too late. Allow at least six months before you apply to review websites, gather information, and contact individuals you believe will help clarify your grad school options. As you will read below, finding time to conduct a campus visit is highly recommended.

2. Know your industry: This is huge. It is important to learn as much as possible about what professionals in your chosen career do every day. I cannot tell you how many times students with whom I met had never considered the professional realities of their career choice or whether they'd actually like the work. Please, don't be one of those students. Interview individuals in the field you are considering. Ask if you can "shadow" them for a few hours. And ask if they had it to do over again, would they choose the same profession.

[Get information and advice on [paying for graduate school](#).]

3. Toss a wide net: Start out with a large number of options on your grad school list and check out each one. Begin with at least 15 to 20 schools. Do an Internet search utilizing broad keywords such as "graduate programs in business" or law, medicine, education, arts and sciences, etc. And don't be afraid to include overseas schools. Because you are starting with a very wide net, rankings provide a good resource here, but they should not be your only resource. Go to the websites of at least 20 to 30 schools and do a little reading.

4. Create a spreadsheet: This is so important! Make a compare and contrast spreadsheet. Put the names of your graduate school options on the left hand column. Across the top of the page, add the aspects that are most important to you in considering what programs are best (e.g. location, financial aid, cost). This will take some time, but it is well worth it. You'll likely discover programs and schools that are of much greater interest. Conversely, programs and schools that were originally high on the list may lose their luster.

5. Test the admissions office: Choose an important question you don't have the answer to, and cannot find the answer for, on the school's website (e.g., "What types of career services are made available to students?") Send an E-mail to each admissions office and add two columns on your spreadsheet to compare answers for these questions: How long did it take to hear back? Was my question answered and was it in a friendly, professional manner? If you are treated poorly as prospective student—and you have not even paid your first tuition bill—how will you be treated after you are enrolled in the program?

[Ask six questions about your [grad school admissions experience](#).]

6. Visit the campus: Do you know what it would feel like to be on the campus? If you don't do a campus visit, you won't know. You could be unpleasantly surprised when you show up for orientation, but by then it's too late. Keep in mind that you'll be on campus nearly every day for the next one to two years, if not longer. Ask yourself: Will the physical and cultural environments be something with which you are comfortable? Are the facilities up to date? Will you feel at home there?

7. Talk to current students and alumni: The importance of doing this cannot be stressed enough. Create a list of a few questions for both students and alumni. Ask around to find currently enrolled or recently graduated individuals. Contact them and

request a few minutes of their time. Ask them to be completely candid with you. What you hear might surprise you and may be extremely helpful.

Having taken the time to do the above, you will be in a much better position to make an informed decision about where you want to apply. And I can assure you that when the time comes to enroll, you'll be more confident about your decision and have a much richer student experience.

Dr. Don Martin, Ph.D., is a higher education admissions expert, author, and former admissions dean at [Columbia University](#), [Northwestern University](#), [Wheaton College](#), and University of Chicago [Booth School of Business](#). To learn more about graduate admissions, visit [gradschoolroadmap.com](#).

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