

GRAD SCHOOL:

NOW OR LATER?

by Ashley Collins, AgCareers.com
Education & Marketing Manager

YOU'VE REACHED THE PINNACLE of four, maybe a little more, years of hard work: your college graduation! Late night study groups, hours in lectures and labs, miles logged on your FitBit crossing campus. Now you're thinking about signing up for two, or more, years. Wait, what?

What about a career? A career where you are rewarded with money, the same amount of money every few weeks, direct deposited! A career with bonuses, a retirement plan, lunch-n-learns for crying out loud!

For some, like those pursuing careers such as plant breeders or veterinarians, this decision is easy. They've chosen a career where an advanced degree is required. "Do not pass go," do not collect your first paycheck, without additional education. Then there are those careers ripe for the picking where advanced education would be nice but not necessarily required.

While it can be daunting, if you've reached this fork in the road and find yourself asking "Grad School: Now or Later?" here is some advice from various stakeholders to help you make your decision.

"Gaining work experience for at least two years before starting graduate studies provides you focus on what you really need to learn. Also, the work experience will help you discover some of the things you do and don't want to do in your future. Overall, your work experience will enhance the value of the master's degree."

John Blue - Chief of Community Creation,
Truffle Media; Earned master's degree
after working for 5 years

"Consider your finances. If there is no assistantship offered to help offset the costs, entering the workforce first may be a better route. You can save up some money yourself to help cover the costs, or your employer may offer some level of tuition reimbursement. 77% of agribusiness employers participating in the 2014 AgCareers.com AGRIBUSINESS HR REVIEW™ reported offering tuition reimbursement for their employees."

Mary Barefoot - HR Services Manager,
AgCareers.com; Earned MBA while working &
5 years after earning bachelor's degree

"The graduate school decision should be driven by the educational requirements for the career path you've chosen. Otherwise, joining the working world after attaining your four-year degree is an excellent start to setting the course for the rest of your life. Focus on jobs, in your field of study, where you can learn, develop and grow. The value of real work experience cannot be overstated. 'Hands-on' experience displays talent that's highly sought in today's market. If you decide to go to school later, you'll go with maturity and a strategic vision to aid in your success."

Joyce Manning - Manager, Human Resources
& Compliance, Southern States Cooperative

"I went straight into grad school because I wasn't ready to start a 'real' job yet, and I had no idea what I wanted to do. It was one of the best decisions I've made. Now, after working for four years, I couldn't imagine going back to school. I've never heard anyone regret getting more education. If so inclined, go for it!"

Meghan Cline - Press Secretary, U.S. Senate
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition
& Forestry; Earned Masters of
Science in Ag Communications

"The work experience requirements of many grad programs ensure students have familiarity with their job so they can immediately make direct application of material learned in class. Improving skills and getting better at your job are the first steps to developing your career and the best reasons to start a grad program. If you are ready to begin your studies prior to the work experience required, contact the university about a strategy to help you start classes before formally joining. Good programs will recommend courses that will easily transfer and allow you to 'test the waters' for timing and fit."

Deborah Kohl - Coordinator, Master of
Agribusiness Program at Kansas State University

"Do not choose grad school because you can't find a job or because you don't know exactly what career to pursue. If you go without a definite career plan in mind, you will find yourself in the same boat job searching in two years but with additional debt. A smarter move is to find a job that interests you and work for a bit before deciding what additional education will benefit you."

Paula Beecher - Director of Bookhart Student
Services Center at Clemson University

"By spending time in a career first, you will have a better understanding of how assignments apply to your field. I highly suggest completing an internship during college. Because of a semester-long "internship," I knew that I wanted to be a teacher, so staying an additional year and a half to complete a master's degree was an easy decision. After five years of teaching at the secondary level, I chose to pursue my doctorate so I could teach at the university level. By teaching for five years, I was able to gain the necessary experiences and knowledge that allow me to have credibility when teaching at the university level."

Dr. Joy Morgan - Lecturer within the Agricultural &
Extension Education Dept. at NC State

