

SHOULD I PURSUE A MASTER'S OR A PH.D.?

If you are thinking about graduate school, the first step is deciding which degree is best for your interests and career goals—a master's (M.A. or M.S.) or a doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.). Here are some points to consider:

What are your career goals?

- **Professional master's:** A good choice if you want to move forward in a specific field or develop new skills. Typically, they are more course-based and structured with a schedule of lectures, seminars and labs consisting of core courses and electives. Many professional master's conclude with a thesis or capstone project. Other programs may end with a comprehensive exam and some are entirely course based.
- **Academic/Research master's:** An academic master's involves course work and often times a final project or capstone. A research master's typically includes a research project or thesis and comprehensive exams in addition to coursework and provides experience in both research and scholarship. It has a heavy emphasis on self-directed work so you should be prepared to learn independently and be self-disciplined. For an extended research project, you will have a research advisor who will offer guidance and support.
- **Ph.D. (doctor of philosophy):** If you are considering this option your goal is to be more heavily involved in an independent research project. Ph.D. training can help you improve your skills such as writing, research, teaching, data analysis, and communicating complex topics. These skills can translate into many sectors, including academia, industry, government, and nonprofits. Most programs include two years of formal coursework at the beginning.

Typically, scientists with a Ph.D. are more involved in managing and supervising research projects compared to scientists with a master's so it depends on your goals as to which degree suits you best.

How much time do you have to pursue a graduate degree?

Master's degrees typically take two years to complete, while Ph.D. programs generally take between four to seven years. This is a significant difference in commitment and opportunity costs. It might play a key role in deciding which factors take higher priority as you evaluate a program or graduate degree. How does the length of study fit with your career and family plans?

How long are you able or willing to go on a limited income while in graduate school and miss out on earning potential?

How much can you afford to pay for a graduate degree?

Consider your personal financial situation, as well as how much financial aid you can get in the different programs. Master's and Ph.D. programs differ greatly in the amount of financial aid available. Most Ph.D. programs offer significantly more financial support than master's programs, often with research or teaching requirements.

A typical Ph.D. financial aid package usually includes coverage of tuition and fees, a monthly stipend, and health insurance for a set number of years. Within an institution, the level of financial support often differs across programs, so be sure to ask your specific program about the financial aid it offers. There are also many government organizations and foundations that provide competitive fellowships and scholarships for graduate students. If you are employed, many companies offer tuition assistance for graduate training.

Most master's programs do not provide funding for students in the program. Here are informative sites on how to plan for funding a master's program:

- [Harvard Kenneth C. Griffin Graduate School of Arts and Sciences](#)
- [Brown University Master's funding](#)
- [US News & World Report](#)
- [Forbes.com](#)