

Head: The Grad School Question

Subhead: Exploring the possibility of grad school? Get all your questions answered by three experts: a Hub coach, a brand-new grad student, and an experienced alum with dual-degrees

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How do you know that grad school is your best next step?

We spoke with three grad students, current and past, to find out how they decided pursuing an advanced degree was right for them. Learn about these individuals' grad school journeys, and get their advice on what to consider when considering graduate school.

Step one: Recognize the reality of your choice (what)

The first thing to understand about grad school? It's nuanced. There's no cookie cutter grad school experience: it's incredibly individual to your aspirations, the degree program, and industry.

Hub Coach and LSA Grad School Fair coordinator Leslie Tetteh chose to embark on their graduate school journey at U-M immediately after receiving their Bachelor's degree from the State University of New York (SUNY), but they emphasize that this was not a universal experience with the students in her class.

"There is no timeline for when you should go to grad school," Leslie explains. "It's very different from what people usually think about when they're looking at undergrad, where there's that norm of having to go immediately after high school. Grad school is definitely not something you have to do right away, and you can actually anticipate being part of a more diverse learning cohort, taking classes with people who have been in full-time careers or even other graduate programs."

Leslie attributes this program diversity to the unique opportunity graduate programs offer to professionals looking to shift gears and to pivot into new work. Whether they're an established professional interested in a career change, or a new graduate excited to dive into something other than their undergraduate major, grad school can be a catalyst for individuals to transition.

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"You will see folks at a lot of different points in their career, at all different ages and bringing different experiences, because grad school can be an opportunity to make that career change," Leslie explains. "So if you study something in undergrad but you don't feel like you want your expertise and specialization to be in that field, grad school gives you that opportunity to be flexible, to really change your career path and re-orient toward your goals."

Leslie reminds students not to fall into the trap of being pressured to attend grad school immediately after undergrad, encouraging them to take time and space to think through their decision.

“The “grad school question” is definitely not one that needs to be answered overnight,” Leslie affirms. “But if there's even a part of you that's trying to figure out if grad school is the best, don't be afraid to explore. Meet with a coach or advisor, talk to a mentor. Or take a gap year and study abroad, whatever you need to do to gain clarity about those next steps. That could even be jumping into a full-time position with an organization that you're interested in to determine—is this the field you want to specialize in?”

Step two: Be intentional (why)

If you've decided you're interested in attending grad school, then the next step according to LSA alum Tiffany Taylor, is determining how deep that interest runs.

After Tiffany received her undergraduate degree from LSA in 2004, she attended grad school not once, but twice: graduating with a Master's in Education from St. Joseph's University in 2006, and a Master's in Urban Planning from the University of Maryland in 2008.

“When I thought about my next steps after graduating from Michigan, there was always this desire to figure out, *“what does it mean to transform the physical and the social landscape for the next generation?”*” Tiffany explains.

This burning question came from an early understanding of the social systems at work around Tiffany, her family, and her community.

“I grew up on the eastside of Detroit,” Tiffany shares. “Starting at a young age, I was always aware of the power of community and knew. I always had a desire to transform what was before me, and to create better life opportunities for the generation coming after me.”

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When Tiffany got to Michigan, she majored in Sociology and African & African-American studies, learning about systems she had seen at work her entire life. Her subsequent graduate degrees were grounded in a desire to begin shifting those systems. First, an education master's and a job with Teach For America set her on a path to fight for the next generation in the classroom.

“As a teacher, what I recognized is that yes, we are fighting to ensure all students have access to rigorous content and an equitable education that allows them to realize their gifts and their truths, but there's also something to be said about the *built environment* that they're living in,” Tiffany explains. “As teachers, we're providing them this experience eight hours a day in the classroom. And they feel safe, they feel cared for, they have a meal. But on their walk to their

own home, it may not always be safe. Their experience may be similar to mine—they may see abandoned buildings and neighbors lacking access to jobs, efficient public transportation, or grocery stores that provide healthy food.”

Her hands-on experience working with students in the classroom pushed Tiffany to realize she wanted and *needed* to work for change at multiple levels and for her that meant looking to shift that “built environment.” For Tiffany, this moved her toward a Master’s of Urban Planning.

“Education is critical, but schools and teachers alone cannot fully shoulder the responsibility of expanding life opportunities for students” Tiffany explains. “We must provide students with a quality education, but also consider public safety, quality housing, access to jobs, and living wages. I wanted to understand: *“how do we take a comprehensive view to think about future generations and make sure that we are disrupting inequity? How do we ensure we’re creating systems and networks inside their community that will allow them to experience something greater?”* That desire—and the research it ignited—led me to realize that urban planning was the right next step. I really wanted to make that connection and understand how schools could be a catalyst for that community and economic development.”

But despite earning two graduate degrees, Tiffany cautions students against entering grad school without clarity of vision and a set intention, emphasizing that the time wouldn’t have been well spent without her driving desire to give back to her community.

“The questions to consider before pursuing graduate studies are, *“do I need to go to graduate school? Why do I need to go to graduate school? How is this going to support me in reaching my goals and making an impact?”*” Tiffany affirms. “Because if you don’t need to rack up student loan debt, don’t.”

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Leslie agrees, re-emphasizing the specificity of grad school programs.

“Especially as a liberal arts student, you have a really cool opportunity to build out your skill sets across different subjects,” Leslie explains. “But grad school is really the place where you can become an expert in the field that you’re passionate about.”

That expertise can be a means to an end—a job—or expertise for the sake of expertise, Tiffany explains.

“When you eventually make that grad school decision, be incredibly clear on how that experience is going to benefit you,” Tiffany emphasizes. “That benefit isn’t necessarily a direct relationship, a 1:1, like ‘this degree will help me get a better job.’ It can also be something you’re deeply passionate about and want to explore more extensively to become an expert in this

particular area. But you have to have that clarity—don't go simply because you don't know what to do.”

For students feeling conflicted or confused, Tiffany advises taking a step back, and points to the flexibility of graduate programs—they aren't going anywhere in the months, years, or decades it takes to make a decision. The option is always open.

“Take a break, take a nap,” Tiffany advises. “Pause before you make that investment, because it needs to be purposeful—you're going to be giving so much of yourself and your time, you're going to be making sacrifices, so it needs to be something that you're passionate about. Depending on how specialized your graduate degree is, I would take some time to work inside the specific industry. Gain some exposure. Talk to people who have taken that path, and find out if what you think you want to do, is actually what you want to do.”

Step three: Become a grad student (how)

Stephany Mendez Ortega knew she wanted to eventually attend medical school, but she wasn't so sure about embarking on that journey directly after undergrad. But, like Tiffany, Stephany has a desire to change the systems she wants to work in, and she believes a graduate degree in Health Management Policy from U-M's School of Public Health will help her to do that.

“I just wasn't ready to apply to medical school,” Stephany affirms. “And I felt that a graduate education was going to give me the knowledge and the skill set to reach my career goal: becoming a physician. I really believe that the policy work I do now is going to provide me with the knowledge to not only help patients with their medical conditions, but to also help them understand what possibilities exist for them in regards to insurance, or finding a good route to take if they don't have insurance.”

As Tiffany and Leslie alluded to, Stephany's graduate education is an extension of her undergraduate liberal arts degree: a double major in Communications and Neuroscience. She hopes to carry both her STEM and communications knowledge into grad school, and eventually into her role as a physician.

“I know on the back-end, grad school is going to help me overall with just being a good communicator,” Stephany affirms. “It's so critical to be able to communicate with patients, so knowing I'll be able to expand and grow in that area, and get the expertise of public health experts, feels incredibly valuable.”

“What are some of the things that you're hoping grad school will bring you that you didn't receive in undergrad?”

She admits she did have concerns about continuing her education immediately after graduation, but, per Tiffany's advice, Stephany identified a deep and abiding interest that she looks forward to pursuing in her Master's program next year.

“Since I am a transfer student, I’m a little bit older than the typical college student,” Stephany explains. “So continuing education wasn’t a negative factor for me, I saw it as a positive thing—I didn’t want to go directly into medical school but I wanted to make sure I was spending my time in what I felt was a valuable way.”

So what did Stephany’s exploration, application, and decision process actually look like? For her, it was fairly straightforward. She identified her interest in management and policy and began looking at grad schools. Originally Ross’s Master’s program was one of her top options, but when she got an email from SPH, something clicked, and she applied. A few months later she was in.

Leslie acknowledges that every student’s journey isn’t that linear, but they identify the actual decision to attend graduate school as the most difficult part for most potential grad students. After that turning point, grad school applications are similar to undergraduate college applications: a bit more nuanced and specific by program, rather than school, but still following the same general structure.

Leslie shares a question they like to ask students when they come to her for a coaching session with questions about attending graduate school: “What are some of the things that you’re hoping grad school will bring you that you didn’t receive in undergrad?”

Once students have made the decision to attend, Leslie explains, listing out needs and wants for graduate programs is a great place for students to start.

“No matter what, students are not navigating this on their own.”

“Similar to applying for college, a lot of the first steps are really looking at the different programs to see what some of your dream schools are, based on location, cost etc.” Leslie explains. “So build up a list based on that. From there, most places will have a difference in some of the admission requirements, so look into those and figure out if there are any limiting factors. Then look into crafting the professional statement, and really taking some time to kind of reflect on how you can bridge the experiences you’ve had already to what the program is looking for. And finally, creating a list of folks that you can reach out to when it comes to letters of recommendation.”

Leslie emphasizes that this is not a comprehensive checklist, and encourages students to take advantage of on campus career resources like [Hub career coaching](#), the [Hub’s Canvas Modules](#), and [events](#) like the Grad School Fair.

Stephany also emphasizes the importance of networking.

“Talk to individuals who are in grad programs already, or stop at the Hub and talk to a coach,” Stephany advises students. “And then focus on connecting with admissions for the programs you’re interested in—those individuals are willing to help you throughout the process and

answer any questions about the program prior to applying, which can be really valuable. And finally, explore what kind of communities exist within the grad programs you're interested in, and see if they're a good fit for you."

But wherever students are in the grad school process—exploration, application, or preparation—Leslie emphasizes the importance of community support. From peers, advisors and professors, and the Hub coaches.

"No matter what, students are not navigating this on their own," Leslie confirms.