

Episode 49 – Am I Ready for Grad School?

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

Today, we'll take a step back from our discussion of your first year in graduate school to revisit the topic of applying to graduate school. We covered most of this last season in Episodes 16 through 21 where we talked about writing effective personal statements, soliciting letters of recommendation, and applying to the right schools. But I want to talk about motivation once again because it's such an important part of how successful you'll be at getting your advanced degree, and we're entering the season of personal reflection and graduate school applications.

We talked about the benefits of getting an advanced degree in Episodes 4 and 11 and 12, and choosing the right school in Episode 23. But we've never really talked about how you go about objectively evaluating whether grad school is right for you. And that's a promise I make in the Intro each week! It's one thing to have a lifelong goal of getting an advanced degree, it's quite another to determine if you should. So, let's talk about whether grad school is right for you, and by that I mean whether you are grad school material or not.

Let me start by saying that none of this should dissuade you from applying to grad school if that is what you really want to do. But if you are a bit on the fence, or others have told you grad school is something you should consider, then here are some things to think about. There are two things that go into evaluating your preparedness for grad school: ability and desire. Ability is backward looking and desire is forward looking. Let's first look at where you've been.

Your academic ability is something for others to judge. Sure, you can do self evaluations – and you should – but in the end it is independent assessments of your talents and accomplishments that you should be looking at. For graduate school, the only two common measures of ability that we have are undergraduate grade point average and standardized tests, both of which are flawed. We're not going to discuss the flaws today – I've done that already in Episodes 18 and 3, respectively – but how to use them to judge your ability. There is well-established research that neither undergraduate GPA nor GRE scores predict success in graduate school [[Feldon et al, 2024](#); [Peterson et al, 2018](#); [Moneta-Koehler et al, 2017](#)]. But I'm not talking about success – I'm talking about preparedness. It's a harsh reality that your abilities are judged on past performance. While it is true that both GPA and GRE are flawed when it comes to evaluating graduate school applications, in terms of **comparative** assessments of ability, they're all we have. I've opined on the importance of undergraduate research before. But completing an undergraduate thesis or publishing a research paper in a peer-reviewed journal are not comparative activities. Okay, maybe you won an award for your thesis or paper – that's different. But in general, we do not line up all the undergraduate theses in the country and rank them from best to worst. These are achievements that either you have or you don't. When it comes to **you** assessing **your** abilities, you want independent, comparative measures, and those are GPA and GRE. If you have a low GPA – especially in your major – and bombed on the GRE, you could simply write those things off as unimportant, biased, or relativistic, but then what are you going to use to evaluate your abilities? Past performance may not be a predictor of future profits as they say in the investment community, but in terms of your abilities as they stand today, past performance is everything. We have this reluctance to be judged – see Episode 22. But without the evaluation of your ability by others, your decision-making process is incomplete. Which leads us to the other half of evaluating your readiness for graduate school: desire.

Desire is for you to survey your path forward. It entails not just how badly you want to do something, but a self-evaluation of the sacrifices you are willing to make to achieve that goal. It includes work ethic, willingness to compromise, and an assessment of life factors that are relevant only to you. Some might say that work ethic and compromise are abilities or skills. But I say that they are also about choices. I know people that struggled through high school, dropped out of third-tier colleges, worked in retail, then decided to apply themselves to go back to college and get their degrees. It was like a light had been switched on – the change was that dramatic. They became successful not because they gained some new skill or ability, but because the desire to attain something finally helped them prioritize. There are all kinds of theories about related concepts like “[grit](#)” and “[persistence](#)” that help explain why people with lesser abilities or faced with obstacles can succeed, but those theories apply **while** you are on the path. What we’re talking about now is evaluating whether you should even start down the path. No theory can explain that to you. Artificial intelligence with all its promise and peril will never be able to evaluate your desire to do something. AI is a backward-looking tool that can only utilize the information that has been amassed to date. It has little to no predictive value when it comes to human desire. The only thing that can judge your desire to do something is you, so don’t outsource it.

Ability and desire and complementary factors in many ways. In other words, what you lack in ability can be made up to some extent by desire and hard work, and what you lack in work ethic can be compensated for by ability. We all know people who get by on their abilities – they’re just better at something and don’t really need to work at it to succeed. Conversely, we probably also know people who aren’t necessarily the best at what they do, but they work really, really hard at it and will themselves to success. In reality, you need a minimal amount of both, or you won’t make it. One cannot completely make up for the other. We’ve also known people who are supremely talented but just can’t apply themselves, and others who want something very badly but just don’t have the minimal skill set to accomplish it.

Finally, ability and desire will take you most of the way to success, but you can’t overlook the third component of success: serendipity. This is true of any venture you may take on. Ability might get you a long way. Desire and hard work can get you a long way, too. But you have to allow for the random happenings in life. These might be opportunities that arise because you are the right person in the right place at the right time, or setbacks that occur just because bad things can happen to good people. Think COVID-19, or sudden changes to immigration policy if you are an international student. I mention serendipity not because it should factor into your evaluation of your readiness to go to graduate school, but because opportunities may arise that you just hadn’t expected. One of my favorite [Yogi Berra’s malapropisms](#) is “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!” There’s an [interesting story behind this quote that I invite you to read](#), but my interpretation of it is that when opportunities present themselves, you should give them serious consideration. If an opportunity to go to graduate school or get into a prestigious program that you weren’t expecting presents itself, you should have already evaluated your abilities and desire so you can make an informed decision.

Thank you for joining me today. My next podcast will be in three weeks with a special guest to celebrate Episode 50! Remember, all of the links provided on my podcasts are available on my website at [grad-post.com](#). There you’ll find additional information and resources to help you satisfy your desire for an advanced degree.

An advanced degree takes ability and desire. And every one of them counts.

Links

<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2007-07951-009.html>

<https://research.ebsco.com/c/evkh36/search/details/xssf57qprz?db=a9h>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00221546.2023.2187177>

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0206570&type=printable>

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0166742>