

Episode 23 – Valhalla or Rivendell: Where Should I Go to 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.

I know, I know. If you read the title, you know that neither Valhalla nor Rivendell are schools. [Valhalla](#) is a place where the dead go. [Rivendell](#) is a sanctuary. Grad school is neither, and yet they have some things in common. The acceptance rate at Valhalla is only 50%, and Rivendell was intended to be a home, so maybe there are some similarities. But that's where the analogies end. I chose these two mythical places because their names conjure up some images of what it might be like to wander their halls, but mostly I don't want to use the names of real universities. All I want you to do is try and visualize yourself going to these places, because that's what selecting a graduate school is like.

Today we'll talk about some things to consider when choosing first where you will apply to, and ultimately where you decide to go for your advanced degree. I'm going to approach this in a totally different way than you might expect. Instead of rankings, instead of return on investment, instead of "fit" – whatever that is – and instead of making my own list of "Grad-post's Top 50 Graduate Schools" and charging you for it, I'm going to ask you to put yourself into one of the following three categories of motivation for going to graduate school: 1) I want to change the world; 2) I want to do better than my parents; or 3) I want to be happy. None of these categories exclude the others. You can be happy, do better than your parents, and still change the world. There are people who simply set out to be happy and end up changing the world. And there are people who do better than their parents but are miserable. You get the idea. These are three types of people I've met in my career, and I think they summarize the academic aspirations of a lot of them. Sure, there are people who fall outside these categories and those who firmly sit at their boundaries, but if you're looking for some way to make sense of the thousands of graduate institutions out there (see [Episode 19](#)), this is one way to start. So, pick one. Are you a world changer, a generational class jumper, or a [eudaemonist](#)? Pick one and let's get started.

I want to change the world. I'm serious about this category. There are some really smart, driven, creative people out there who have always known they were difference makers and planned their academic experiences with one thing in mind: doing something impactful. Would that we could all be in this category, but we're not. And it's just as important that you know your NOT in this category as it is that you are. But if you're that 5.0 GPA for whom most things come easily, then I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is that your path is pretty clear. More on that in a moment. The bad news is that you already have to be on this path. If you are not at a selective undergraduate institution, then chances are that you're not going to get into the highly selective graduate school you need to be a world changer. How do I know this? Just look at the career paths of the world changers. What's a world changer in the context of advanced degrees? We need a proxy. Because I'm not talking about leaders – political, corporate, or otherwise. I'm not talking about the super wealthy. I'm not even talking about the famous. I'm talking about those who have done something truly impactful and lasting with their advanced degrees. Let's use some kind of internationally-recognized award as a proxy for world-changers.

But not [Nobel Prizes](#) – there are too few award winners to draw any reasonable conclusions about career trajectories. If your sole purpose in getting an advanced degree is to earn a Nobel Prize then you will be sorely disappointed. But there are these internationally-recognized awards called the National Medals awarded by the President of the United States to top civilians in their field. There's the [National Medal of Arts](#), the [National Humanities Medal](#), and the [National Medal of Science](#). The National Medal of Arts

tend to go to talented and impactful artists, performers, and musicians as well as organizations that support the arts. Those folks have generally not gone the academic route so it's hard to use them as examples for our discussion. Similarly, the National Humanities Medal recipients also include organizations and projects, but the individual recipients tend to be journalists and authors, many of whom obtained bachelor's degrees but few beyond that. The National Medal of Science winners, however, come from a broad range of fields including behavioral and social sciences, chemistry, physics, mathematics, and engineering. I'm in no way trying to put these disciplines above the arts and humanities. I'm saving my rant on the rise of STEM at the expense of the liberal arts for another podcast, but know that I'm a strong supporter of a liberal undergraduate education and the need for artists and humanists in a civilized society. But when analyzing career paths and the impact of selecting a graduate school on career success, the pathways to certain outcomes in the sciences are very clear.

A look at the educational background of the [National Medal of Science winners](#) shows that the vast majority of recipients obtained their advanced degrees from a handful of east coast and west coast schools: Stanford, Harvard, UC Berkeley, MIT, Caltech, and Princeton. Since 2000, the list is a little different, but still contains most of the same suspects: Harvard, MIT, Berkeley, Columbia, and University of Chicago. There's no surprise here. These are the elite graduate institutions in our country; all belong to the American Association of Universities. But dig a little deeper and you find that these National Medal of Science winners not only went to AAU institutions for their graduate work, **but for their undergraduate studies as well**. There is more variability here, with a number of small, liberal arts colleges well represented at the undergraduate degree level, but not surprisingly, recipients went to some of the same level of institution for their bachelor's degrees as for their doctorates. There are some studies in the literature that support this prestigious undergraduate-graduate institutional link.

In terms of return on investment – which you know I abhor - there's a study from [2019 by Joni Hersch of the Vanderbilt Law School](#) that finds going to an elite graduate program in order to compensate for attending a less prestigious undergraduate institution does not make up the future earnings premium of attending a selective undergraduate institution. This approach is called “scrubbing” – using the graduate degree from a prestigious institution to “scrub” away the degree from a less prestigious – and presumably less expensive - undergraduate institution.

There are lots of problems with this study and others like it that look only at where you obtained your degree and how much money you make. But you have to remember where most of these studies come from: law schools, business schools, and schools of medicine - professions that pay at the highest end of the earnings scale. They purport to use broad disciplinary categories and look at students across all demographics, but they are still focused solely on earnings and return on investment as the sole determinant of career success.

Regardless of whether you look at earnings or national awards, the “bad” news for you would-be world changers is that – at least for the National Medal of Science - pedigree matters. You also have to be a male and born in the United States, but those are larger topics for another day. I wish none of these things were true, but honesty compels me to shine light on those things that need change: If you want to be enshrined in the annals of history, you'd better go to Valhalla for both undergraduate and graduate school.

The rest of we mere mortals tend to fall into one of the two remaining categories of motivation for selecting a graduate institution. Next up is **I want to do better than my parents**. This is where I sat – and still sit. I knew I would never be a world changer. All I wanted to do was not be a financial burden to my parents. I told some of that story in [Episode 6](#), so you know that I didn't always have a choice of Valhalla or Rivendell, but at least I had a pathway to modest success. A lot of we first-generation college

completers fall into this category. If you come from a family where one parent is a lawyer and the other is a medical doctor, then you might have difficulty doing financially better than them, but there are still some ways to step up. Maybe it's not getting further than your parents but getting where they are faster. What are the grad school options for those of us in this category? Let's again dig into the literature.

As a counter to the Hersch study described earlier that you can't "scrub" a less-selective undergraduate institution from your career earnings by attending a more prestigious graduate program, one of my favorite higher education studies was done by [Dale and Krueger in 2014](#). This study was done on undergraduate students, not graduate students, so the extension to our discussion should be done carefully, but the results should make you take pause when considering that highly selective grad school. Like the Hersch study, they compared the career outcomes of students who went to a highly selective institution over those who did not - again, at the undergraduate level. On the surface, when you compare the earnings of students who graduated from a highly selective institution to those who did not, the earning gain is sizeable for those who went to the more selective institution. But they re-analyzed the earnings results using something called selection-adjustment. When they looked at a group of graduates who were accepted to **both** types of institutions - highly selective and less selective - the earnings advantage went away. In other words, those who got into a highly selective institution but attended a less selective institution by choice did just as well over their earnings career as if they had gone to the more selective institution. There are problems with this study, too, like a small sample size and the fact that most participants still came from selective institutions even if they didn't attend a highly selective one. There are a lot of additional caveats and conditions, so I invite you to read these papers yourself. But don't take it on faith that you must go to a Valhalla, or that going to Rivendell limits your ability to succeed. It's not the school or degree that makes you successful, it's you. You are either inclined to be successful, or not. If you want to get a good education and continue that generational climb from immigrant family to working class family to the upper-middle class, then there are many paths to getting there. Pick whichever one makes you feel most comfortable, Valhalla or Rivendell - it doesn't really matter.

Finally, what if money, accolades, or others' perception of you do not motivate you? Then you probably just want to do what makes you happy. I don't mean hedonism - doing what makes you feel good - I mean eudaimonism - leading a well-lived life. That leads us to our final category for selecting a graduate school.

I want to be happy. Don't we all belong in this category? Well, yes and no. I'm not going into all the psychology of happiness or try to correlate personality profiles with graduate school selection, but let's just say that yes - in the broadest sense - we all want to be happy. But Aristotle's view of happiness requires that we sometimes make difficult choices in order to be fulfilled. That's what I'm talking about here. It's not about selecting a graduate school that makes you happy, it's about making a decision that leads to happiness. Think of it as a journey rather than a destination. Unlike changing the world or doing better than your parents, your personal well-being is what controls your decisions. This may sound selfish or self-centered, but the truth is that no one can live your life for you, so you have to make the best choice for you. Not for the world, not for your parents. For you. This is what I'm calling the Rivendell choice. Maybe Valhalla will make you happy. I'm not suggesting that these are unhappy places. I'm just saying that the Valhalla choice is often made for other reasons as we've discussed, and besides, you might not be able to get into Valhalla. A place where you feel comfortable and able to excel might be the best choice for your personal fulfillment. Sometimes, the Rivendell choice is made for you (reference my [Origin Story of Episode 6](#)), and sometimes you make the choice yourself. But important journeys were launched from Rivendell - one even saved a mythical world. You never know.

“Thanks for the obtuse literary references, Graddean, but can you please give me some advice I can use?” Okay, here it is. Apply to at least one of each: one Valhalla school and one Rivendell. Broadly speaking - but not true in all disciplines - the [Carnegie Research Classifications](#) discussed in [Episodes 14](#) and [19](#) give you these two categories. Very High Research Activity institutions are the Valhallas of the academic world and High Research Activity institutions are the Rivendells. To narrow the Valhalla list down even further, look at the [American Association of Universities \(AAU\) institutions](#) of which there are less than 70. Keep in mind that there’s wide variation in these classifications. Those National Medal of Science schools I discussed earlier are at the very tippy-top of the Very High Research activity institutions. Even the bottom of the AAU institutions are not that different from the top of the High Research activity institutions. There’s always the Doctoral/Professional institutions in the third Carnegie classification group to toss in with the Rivendells, but the number of programs to pick from can be limited. They may not even offer advanced degrees in your area of interest. But include them if you want. By applying to at least one in each group, you’re giving yourself options and leaving open possibilities that you might not have considered. Maybe you’re a world changer and you just don’t know it. Maybe you think you could get in to any grad school in the country but the admissions committees come to another conclusion. Options help mitigate miscalculations.

There are plenty of other reasons to pick a graduate school to apply to, but try to be realistic about your chances of being accepted at your preferred school and more importantly understand your own reasons for picking one school over another. Valhalla and Rivendell are very different places.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in my podcasts are available at grad-post.com. There, you’ll find additional resources and information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

As Tolkien taught us, “All that is gold does not glitter; Not all those who wander are lost.” So, whether you wander the golden halls of Valhalla, or revel in the relative comfort of Rivendell, every degree will count.

Links

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valhalla>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rivendell>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nobel_Prize

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Medal_of_Arts

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Humanities_Medal

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Medal_of_Science

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_National_Medal_of_Science_laureates

<https://doi.org/10.1017/bca.2019.29>

<https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.49.2.323>

<https://carnegieclassifications.acenet.edu/>

<https://www.aau.edu/who-we-are/our-members>