



Approaching Grad School: Four Critical Questions to Ask

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Would I be able to make it academically?

Would I be able to make good friends or would I find myself all alone?

How would I deal with all the pressures of grad school?

Would I be able to make it emotionally?

Finally, what would happen in my relationship with God?

It was the summer of 1998. I (Ashley) was getting ready to move to Ann Arbor, Michigan from a little town near Raleigh, NC to start grad school in chemistry at the University of Michigan. And I had no idea what to expect when I got there. I was really excited about earning another degree and the opportunities that degree could give me. But I was also aware of and worried about the challenges of grad school. Would I be able to make it academically? Would I be able to make good friends or would I find myself all alone? How would I deal with all the pressures of grad school? Would I be able to make it emotionally?

Finally, what would happen in my relationship with God? I had seen God do tremendous things in my life the previous two years, and I really wanted that to continue. But, I didn't know how that would work out in grad school.

Well, fast-forward several weeks. I arrived at Michigan and found that God had already gone ahead of me there. Cru (the campus ministry formerly known as Campus Crusade For Christ) had active grad student ministry only on 3 campuses in the country and Michigan "just so happened" to be one of them. Amazing! God used that community to completely transform my life. I learned how to walk with Jesus and trust Him for the challenges of grad school. I made lifelong friends. I met my wife there. I saw my best friend in the chemistry department receive Christ and mentored him for the next four years. And God captured my heart and sent me on an amazing adventure with Jesus that I am still loving today.

It's been more than fifteen years since my first year in grad school, so I have had a little bit of time to think about what made my time in grad school so fruitful and satisfying. I think there are three major options in dealing with the dreams and challenges of grad school.



survive

Buy into grad school
attitude, presumptions
(boot-camp mentality)

THE 3 OPTIONS

The first one is to buy into the grad school attitude that nothing else matters during the next two to six years of your life other than performing academically and doing so better than anyone else. Everything else should be placed on hold and then picked back up (maybe) after grad school. This option promises that you will academically thrive if you will only choose to survive emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. However, the reality is that this option, at best, leads to one only surviving emotionally, relationally, spiritually, and academically. Though one may finish academically proficient and superior to their peers, he or she really can't thrive academically having merely survived in the other areas of his/her life. And many don't finish academically proficient. Some burn out and don't finish at all.



dabble

Settle for low
expectations.
(whatever happens
mentality)

The second option is to have good intentions for every area of one's life but to believe that grad school is just too hard to truly thrive in every area. The first option suggests that you shouldn't pursue the non-academic areas of your life. This second option suggests that even if you should pursue those areas fully, you can't. So, you are left with settling for lower expectations and doing whatever you can. This option promises that you will academically thrive if you will only choose to dabble emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. It lures you to believe that you can superficially engage in these areas without harm and can then return to fully thriving in them after grad school. The reality, however, is that this option, at best, leads you to dabbling emotionally, relationally, spiritually and academically. It creates a new way of living that dulls your desire to fully embrace and thrive in any area of life—including the academic one. By not learning how to fully integrate the different parts of your life, you inhibit your ability to do so after grad school. Contrary to popular belief, life does not get easier after grad school. If anything, it gets more difficult and complex.



thrive

Embrace the Gospel.
(Kingdom mentality)

The third option is to encounter Jesus. It is to trust God that despite the difficulty of fully embracing and thriving in every area of life in grad school, it is neither impossible nor undesirable given the ongoing redemptive work that Jesus can and wants to do in our life.. The first two options are “either-or,”

whereas this option is “both-and.” This option involves adopting an integrated view of life where Jesus is King over all and where He is actively working to accomplish His purposes in and through every area of your life. It both promises—and delivers—that you can and will thrive emotionally, relationally, spiritually, and academically as you stay connected to Jesus. How cool is that?

To pursue this grander vision of thriving in grad school, there are four critical questions that we believe you should be asking before beginning grad school and/or as you pursue your grad degree.

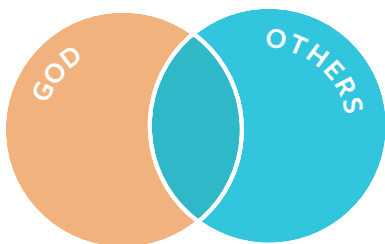
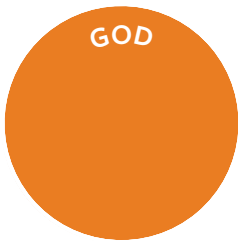
THE 4 QUESTIONS

Whom will I live for? When it comes to deciding whom you will ultimately live for during grad school, there are a lot of options. Of course, you can choose to live for yourself. You also could choose to live for your parents, your advisor, or even your peers in grad school (the peer pressure to perform at any and all costs can be great). However, to thrive in grad school, there is only one option. God invites us to experience real and satisfying intimacy with Himself and passionately pursues us so that we will. Scripture says that He draws us (“woos” us, literally) to Himself. As we enter that intimacy, we experience all that God offers us—life, healing, forgiveness, transformation, and most importantly, Himself.

Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:34-35).

How will I think about and treat people—peers, professors, and students?

Many faculty members and fellow grad students will “tell” you that grad school is the time to focus on yourself and not to be all that concerned about your peers in grad school, the faculty members in your department, and the students you teach. They may not say so explicitly, but they communicate it clearly in the advice they give and the priorities they press you to embrace. However, the Apostle Paul implores you to “count others more significant than yourselves.



Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). He goes on to say that we should have the same humble, others-focused attitude that Jesus had.



Why am I going to grad school? Take a look at Ephesians 2:10. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” God has a purpose for each one of us, and has set aside specific things He wants us to do. God calls us to be His followers, His witnesses, friends to one another, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers. But, He has also called us to our vocations. He has called each of us to something in which we love, serve, and bless others; help change the world around us; and further unveil His glory. Hopefully, you pursue grad school because God has called you to. So, what does that mean? What does it look like for you to fully embrace your calling as a grad student? Thriving requires that you seek to answer that question.

Can I be a part of something bigger than myself? At the same time, there is something bigger than earning your masters or PhD, than landing your dream job, than earning tenure, than even curing cancer or resolving one of the world’s worst social ills and winning the Nobel Prize. The greatest thing happening in the world today and that has ever happened is that God is drawing a people to Himself. He invites you—actually, He calls you—to join Him in it all. Scripture tells us that He “gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ”. (2 Cor. 5:18-20). You don’t have to give up grad school to join the Lord in reconciling the world back to Himself. He wants you to join Him as a grad student, not in spite of being a grad student or in competition with being a grad student.



Living for God. Loving well and investing in the lives of those around you. Using your degree to glorify God and help change the world. Joining with others to take the hope of Jesus to the whole campus and to the whole world. Can you think of a grander vision for grad school?

NEXT STEPS

Well, to thrive in grad school and beyond, you'll need a big vision. And you'll also need other grad students to share that vision with you and to help one another trust God for it. You'll need a plan. You'll need ongoing equipping. And you'll need someone to coach or mentor you. In light of that, we would like to suggest some next steps.

Pray. Ask God to give you a greater vision for grad school and what He wants for you there.

You'll need other grad students to share that vision with you and to help one another trust God for it. You'll need a plan. You'll need ongoing equipping. You'll need someone to coach or mentor you.

Connect with other grad students who want to grow in their understanding of who Jesus is and how to follow Him in grad school. If you are/were involved with Cru as an undergrad, seek out other Cru students headed to grad school.. Maybe you will find that God has so orchestrated things that you find others going to the same school as you are. How cool would that be?!

Connect with Cru at the university you go to for grad school before you show up. Talk with them about joining or perhaps starting a small group of grad students within the Cru movement there.

Stay connected with us. We have some resources and strategies that we have been developing that we think could be helpful to you. We'd love to connect you to other Cru students going to grad school. And we'd love to learn what the Lord is teaching and showing you as you follow Him to and in grad school.

In the meantime, know that we are praying for you. We can't wait to see what the Lord will do in your life and through your life during your time in grad school.