

DECIDING IF, WHEN, AND WHERE TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

*A Practical Guide for
Considering Graduate School*

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Let's start here: **Who are you?** And why are you considering going to graduate school?

- ① Are you a **rising senior in undergrad** weighing the options of continuing your education as soon as you complete your bachelor's?
- ② Have you been out of school for 5 or 10 or more years and you're looking to **redirect your career**?
- ③ Or are you looking to **advance in your current career** and you're realizing you need that next degree — or a different degree — in order to do so?

We **all** have different “whys” for considering graduate school.

Maybe you want to do research, maybe you want to make the jump into upper level management, or maybe you just have a knack for school and a real desire to learn.

Regardless of what your “why” for considering graduate school is, this guide will help you along your journey to “making a decision” by giving you a rundown on the most important things to consider before first, deciding to go to graduate school and second, deciding where to go to graduate school.



UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER OUTLOOK FOR YOUR FIELD

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It's also important to be knowledgeable on up-and-coming trends in your field along with what fields in particular will be more or less relevant in upcoming years.

Let's start by analyzing some of the most pressing questions professionals across a myriad of industries have regarding the career outlook for the next several years.





WHAT JOBS ARE DYING OUT? AND WHAT JOBS ARE EMERGING?

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Careers like computer operators, radio operators, semiconductor processors, office and administrative support workers, and telemarketers are dying out, and if involved in a career that is on a downward path towards extinction, going back to school for your next degree could help you better decide what to do once your initial career is no longer providing for you.

On the other hand, what are the newest professions on the rise? Jobs having to do with green energy, healthcare jobs like nursing informatics, IT professionals in business and management and computer security, along with roles like that of video game designers and virtual reality engineers in entertainment and media are all growing job fields.





HOW HAS STARTUP CULTURE AFFECTED YOUR PROFESSION?

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A startup company is an entrepreneurial venture that incorporates launching new businesses in the form of a company, a partnership, or a temporary organization as a innovative, business model with potential for development (read: Silicon Valley).

This new style of business model focuses on hiring workers who have a natural motivation to work without traditional incentives, which in theory, removes stress from the workplace and allows workers to reach their full potential in their positions.

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In other words, startup companies often need individuals with advanced degrees in order to more efficiently run their entrepreneurial ventures.





WHAT CAREERS WILL REQUIRE AN ADVANCED DEGREE FOR ASPIRING MANAGERS?

A graduate degree in your given field will help you advance in authority over others in your field, along with depths of applicable knowledge that comes with the experience of higher level education.

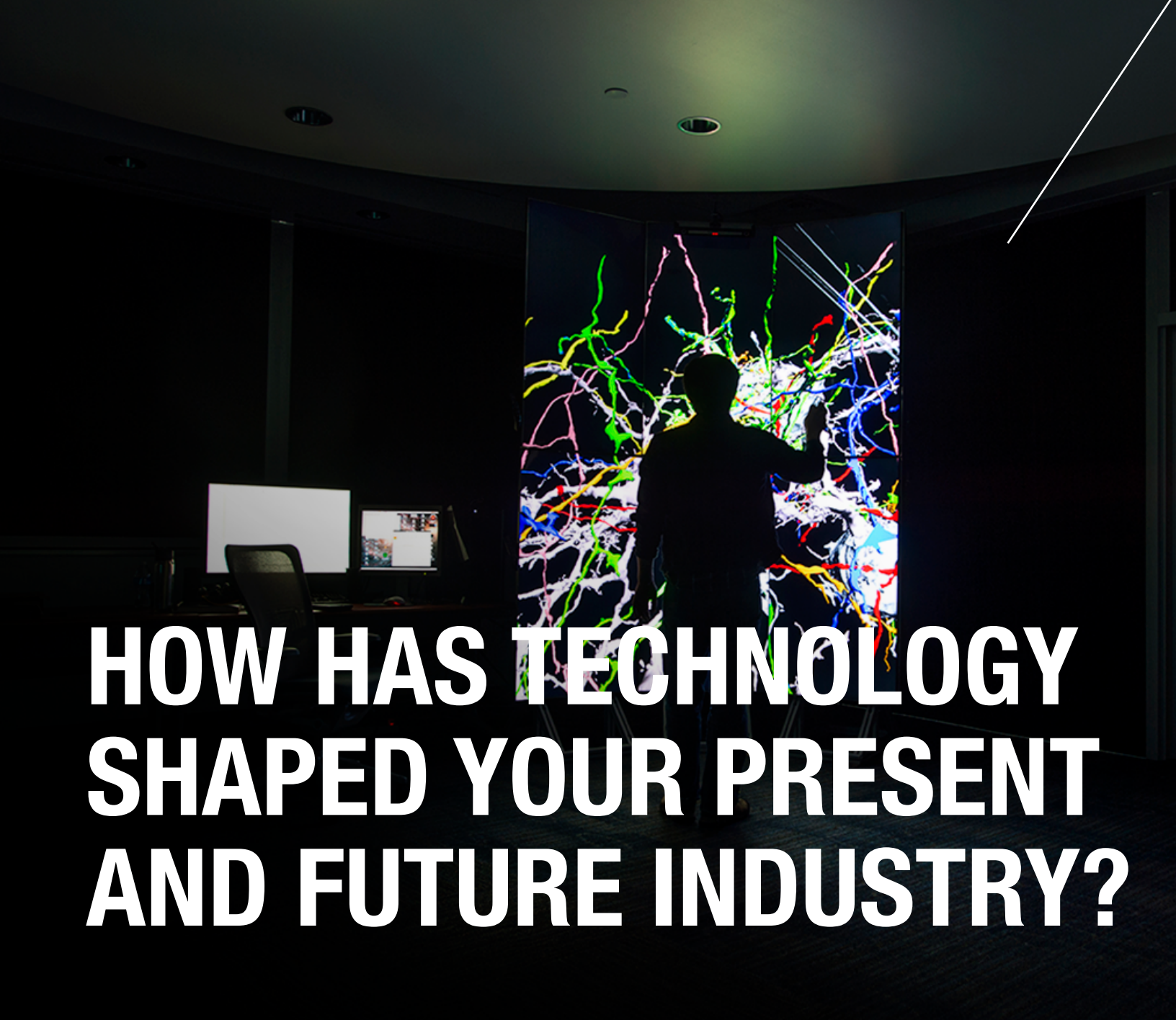
WHAT CAREERS WILL REQUIRE AN ADVANCED DEGREE FOR ASPIRING MANAGERS?

No matter your industry, if one of your professional goals includes managing people, then earning a graduate degree will help you develop the skills necessary to advance within your chosen field.

Your undergraduate degree most likely focused on the disciplinary aspects of your field, while a graduate degree will put emphasis on critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and managerial capabilities.

Thus, in order to advance to a position of authority over others in your field, you will need to consider pursuing a graduate degree in whatever your chosen field is.





HOW HAS TECHNOLOGY SHAPED YOUR PRESENT AND FUTURE INDUSTRY?

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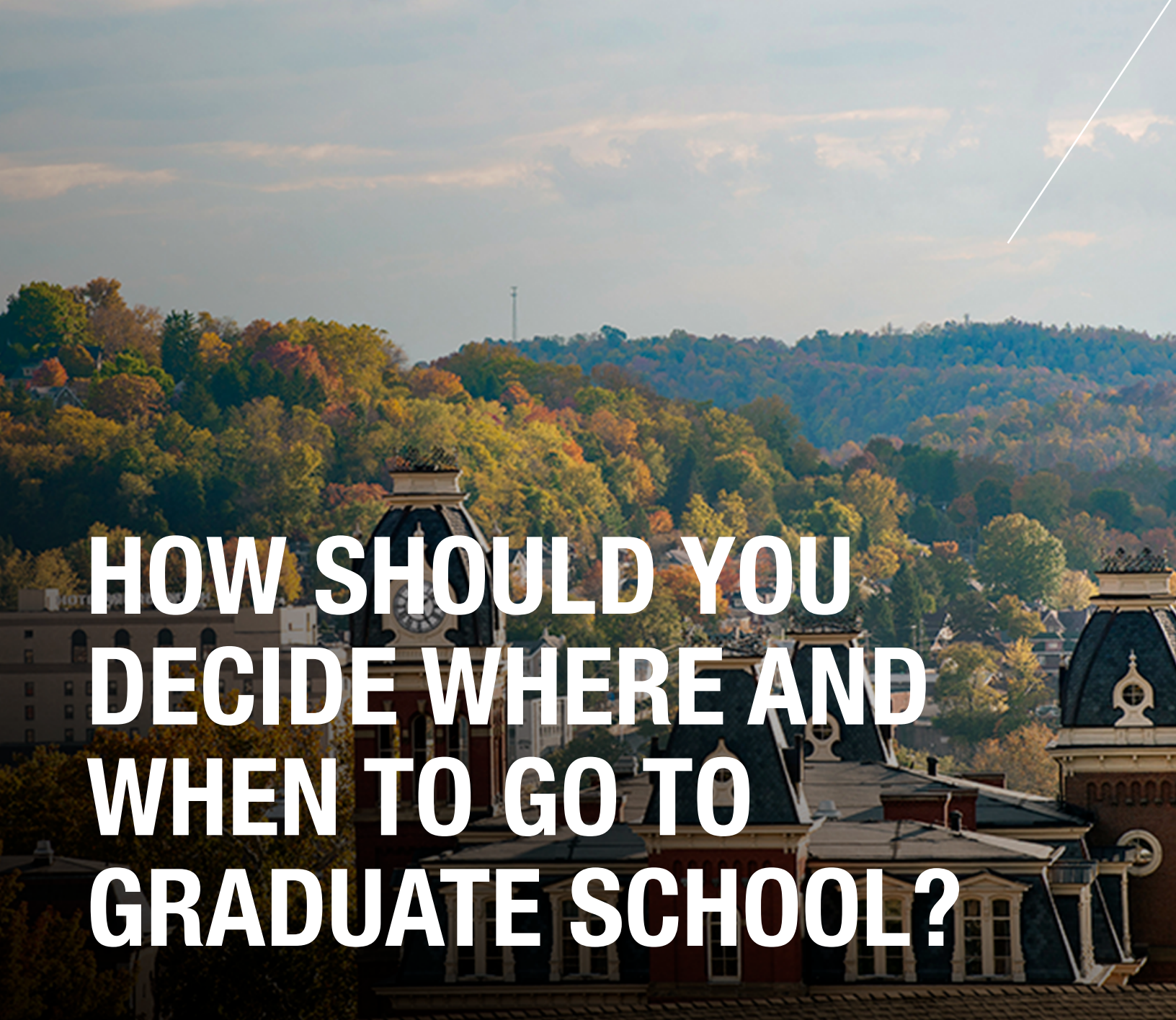
As one MBA holder says, “technology and the Internet have revolutionized” many aspects of professional development and industry advancement.

Today’s technology-dominated marketplace changes the way that professionals communicate, the way efficiency is accomplished, and the way industries advertise.

The field of cybersecurity, for instance, continues to evolve with technology. Due to the increasingly connected world we live in, industries will always have a need for cybersecurity professionals. Technology continues to permeate areas of daily life in more ways than just your computer, thus making the need for cybersecurity analysts a continuing priority.

Keeping up-to-date on the way in which technology continues to evolve and change requires a more in-depth understanding of technology as a whole and how it affects specific industries differently. Gaining a more critical understanding of technology and how it has and will continue to affect your industry will require an advanced degree.





HOW SHOULD YOU DECIDE WHERE AND WHEN TO GO TO GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Ultimately, there is no definitively right time for you to go to graduate school. The decision on when to pursue a graduate degree has to be one that you make with much consideration regarding what works best for you.

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Where:

While there are many factors to consider when choosing a graduate school — rankings, school reputation, success of alumni, faculty expertise, and networking opportunities — it's also important to strategically pick an institution based on your area of study. For instance, if you choose to study agricultural sciences, agronomy, or forestry, it might make sense to pick a program based out of a more rural area.

Conversely, if you are interested in pursuing an advanced degree in IT or business management, it would make sense to choose an institution in an industrial area known for being a hotbed of technology and corporations.



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When:

Statistics show that, in many institutions, the average graduate student is in his/her mid to late 30s. Waiting to attend graduate school until you have some real-life experiences (both personal and professional) could help you pinpoint exactly what you want to study, help you prepare financially for a graduate program, and give you time to mature.

Thus, while there is no stigma in going back to school as an older student, many studies will show that it's an easier transition if you go straight from undergrad to graduate school. Many people find it difficult to go back to school after an extended period of time away from an academic program.

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PRACTICALLY SPEAKING: MAKING YOUR DECISION

So you're closer to making the decision to attend graduate school. But now you might be wondering, what *are* your options for actually getting graduate school done while handling the multiplicity of other roles you're juggling in your life?

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But now you might be wondering, what are your options for actually getting graduate school done while handling the multiplicity of other roles you're juggling in your life?

In other words, what degree option makes the most sense for you and your "why?" Before deciding what makes the most sense for you, consider the pros and cons of each degree option.





WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN THINKING ABOUT AN ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAM

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Online classes can be time-friendly graduate program options

Online classes often allow students to study and interact with the material when and where they choose. Whether you're traveling for business, on vacation, or want to "attend" class from the comfort of your couch, online learning gives you the option to learn at a place and time of your choosing. The networking opportunities from the geographic diversity of students and faculty are endless, as students travel and work just like you.

On the other hand, online classes make it much more difficult to have face-to-face interactions with peers and instructors, and if you work/learn better in a physical classroom setting, an online program might not be the best option for you.





WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN THINKING ABOUT A NIGHT/WEEKEND DEGREE PROGRAM

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If you have a day job, engaging in a weekend or night class program might be the best degree option for you, as it — arguably — will affect your day-to-day routine the least. Choosing one of these degree options can be incredibly handy for those who can't afford to quit their day jobs in order to start graduate school.

Participating in a night or weekend degree program while juggling the stress and responsibility of a full-time job, though, can come with a myriad of stress that could potentially affect your performance within your chosen program. Choosing to participate in a graduate program while maintaining a full-time job will require time-management skills and realistic expectations of your abilities to handle both commitments.





SO SERIOUSLY — WHAT'S THE REAL R.O.I. OF GRADUATE SCHOOL?

Many people want to know that spending the time and money to pursue a master's degree will result in an increase in salary in their given job field. The answer to this question largely depends on your area of study.

SO SERIOUSLY — WHAT'S THE REAL R.O.I. OF GRADUATE SCHOOL?

While getting a graduate degree can help you hone in on a specific career direction as well as sharpen your critical thinking skills, many people want to know that spending the time and money to pursue a master's degree will result in an increase in salary in their given job field. The answer to this question largely depends on your area of study.

As an article in The Washington Post states:
“Indeed, outcomes vary by major. Working as an engineer? Getting a graduate degree will probably lead to a big raise. For a journalist, not so much.”

In addition, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the jobless rate for people with master's degrees is lower compared to people with only a bachelor's degree. And while the payoff varies, the median annual earnings for people with a master's degree is an average of \$12k higher than for those with an undergrad degree.



CLOSING THOUGHTS

- Advancing your education is highly important in today's **increasingly competitive** job market.
- In addition, in an ever-changing landscape of technology, information, and research, it's becoming increasingly clear that an undergraduate degree is often **not enough** to land that solid, lucrative job that will sustain you and your family in the long term.
- Earning an advanced degree means a better chance of you reaching your full potential, and in turn, **advancing your career** in our evolving professional landscape.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Shelly Quance

Shelly Quance is the Director of Enrollment Management and Services of Graduate Admissions & Recruitment at West Virginia University. Shelly helps to develop and implement marketing strategies that focus on increasing graduate student enrollment across West Virginia University. She also serves as a liaison with each College, School and Unit to support increased growth among the graduate student population.

ABOUT GRADUATE SCHOOL AT WVU:

To learn more about graduate school at West Virginia University, visit us online at graduate.wvu.edu.

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