Motivators for Obtaining Advanced Degrees in Today’s Society

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Abstract

Graduate school involves a significant commitment of time and money and often delays an individual’s entry into the work force. In today’s shifting economy, the reasons for making this choice are likely to be complicated and varied. This study was designed to examine the many possible factors that motivate people to attend graduate school. An online survey was given to current graduate students as well as undergraduates who are thinking about attending graduate school. Specific motivations were measured such as: the desire of learning more about a particular area of academia; potential career advancement; and personal enrichment. Exploratory, open-ended questions were also included. The exploratory method was used to see if there is a difference of motivations between different groups of people, such as gender, and people in different areas of study such as people who are obtaining advanced STEM degrees (i.e., science, technology, engineering and mathematics) compared to those obtaining advanced humanities degrees.
Graduate school involves a person to commit to a significant amount of time and money, and often delays in an individual’s entry into the work force. There are many motivators behind this desire to obtain advanced education, and in today’s shifting economy, the reasons for making this choice are likely to be varied and complicated. In 2011, 441,000 people enrolled in graduate school for the first time and over 1.73 million people attend graduate school (Council of Graduate Schools, 2011). Though in 2010 and 2011 attendance at graduate schools declined, the unemployment rate was responsible for a significant increase in enrollment of students in graduate school in 2008 and 2009 (Rampell, 2012). Although the lack of job opportunities seems to be the major reasons for attendance in graduate school in 2008 and 2009, there are many possible factors that motivate people to attend graduate school in today’s society.

One motivator that prompts people to attend graduate school is flexibility. Many students are spending extra time and money in graduate so they can have more flexibility in their future careers (Schleef, 2000). Along with being able to have a flexible career that allows the person to be their own boss, or dictate what hours they work, obtaining an advanced degree also allows a person to have more flexibility in their lifestyle with regards to their family. Schleef (2000) found that students who attend graduate school are motivated by the ability to obtain a degree that allows them to have an upper middle class lifestyle that is flexible, and allows them to juggle a hectic career and family. Becker (1991) also found that people attend graduate school so they can be responsible for a career and a family simultaneously, and this occurs because of the flexibility in lifestyle and career that an advanced degree offers.

A desire for greater prestige is another motivator that influences a person’s decision to obtain an advanced degree. The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (2013), which
examined all the reasons students mentioned when discussing why they want to attend graduate school, cited the most common and important motivations students have when they discuss attending graduate school, and noted that prestige was an influential motivator. Students desire to know more about a specific area in academia and want the ability to have independence on a major and influential project. Petersons (2013) also noted that students attend graduate school because of their desire to gain community and national recognition, have travel opportunities, and have access to advanced equipment and research methods.

People may also be motivated to attend graduate school and obtain an advanced degree because of personal enrichment. Scepansky & Bjornsen (2003) found that there are several motivators and personality characteristics that are common among successful graduate school applicants and those who want to attend graduate school, such as the drive to be engaged in activities in the classroom and on campus. Through looking at the acceptance rate of hundreds of applicants, Scepansky & Bjornsen (2003) examined what factors appeared in the students who were accepted to many graduate schools, compared to those students who had little success in their application to graduate schools. They stated that students who were motivated by a thirst for knowledge and enjoyed researching were more likely to want to attend graduate school. Students were motivated simply by the desire to learn more about a specific area of academia in order to better themselves and wanted to learn as much as possible. Oklahoma State University (2010) also examined the most cited reasons stated by students who approached their career center for graduate school guidance, and found that personal enrichment, along with learning more about a specific area of academia, played a big role in motivation to attend graduate school. For example, Oklahoma State University (2010) found that the students they encountered were most likely to attend graduate school because of a passion to learn and a desire to immerse oneself in the study
of a particular academic discipline was most common, while other reasons such as a love of research, a love of teaching, a craving to increase knowledge, wanting to become an expert in a particular field, aspiring to advance in the workplace, and wanting to pursue a new career direction were also common.

Peterson’s Staff (2013) cited the most important and critical motivations a student must have in order to obtain higher education. While they found that some motivators were less serious, such as they student did not know what else to do or they did not want to have a desk job, Peterson’s Staff (2013) found that the serious motivations to attend graduate school were a desire for a greater earning power and a need for a career or job change.

In this study, an exploratory method was used, meaning that there was no theory or hypothesis behind the study. We expected to find that there would be a difference of motivations between different groups of people, such as men and women, and people in different areas of study such as people who are obtaining advanced STEM degrees (i.e., science, technology, engineering and mathematics) compared to those obtaining advanced humanities degrees.

Method

Participants

A total of 115 participants took the online survey. The participants were current graduate students (N=16) or undergraduate students who are thinking about attending graduate school (N=99). Two participants were omitted due to zero variance in their responses, and seven were omitted because the participant was under the age of 18. The ages of the participants ranged from 18-years-old to 59-years-old, with the average participant being 26.35-years-old. 66.6% of the participants were female, 30.50% of the participants were male, and 2.90% did not specify their
Materials

Materials required for this study included a computer to access the online survey. The survey was built through SurveyBuildR and posted on Krantz’s (2013) website, Psychological Research on the Net. The comprehensive list of factors that were used in the survey was created by reading literature that pertained to motivators for obtaining advanced degrees, and the most common and significant motivators were noted. Also, people with advanced degrees were asked what their motivations to obtain an advanced degree were, and then were asked to look at the survey to see if the list of motivators was comprehensive and included all significant motivators.

There were nine motivators listed in the survey, along with two open-ended questions. Specific motivations were measured such as: the desire of learning more about a particular area of academia; potential career advancement; personal enrichment; greater prestige; do not know what else to do; success in undergraduate courses; advanced degree gives more flexibility for family life or schedule; and a lack of current job opportunities. The question asked, “One a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being very untrue for me and 7 being very true for me, please rate how influential the following factors were in your decision to attend graduate school.” The two open-ended questions were, “Please state any other motivations behind your decision to attend graduate school” and, “In your own words, can you please explain why you choose (are thinking about) graduate school”. See Appendix A for the survey.

To be able to better analyze the data, eight of the initial motivators were combined into three categories for analysis: Career Motivators (higher potential earning power, lack of current job opportunities, and career advancement), Academic Motivators (success in undergraduate
courses and learning more about a specific area of academia), and Self-improvement Motivators (prestige and personal enrichment). After running a reliability analysis, Cronbach’s alphas for the categories was 0.70 for Career Motivators, 0.0789 Academic Motivators, and 0.725 for Self-improvement Motivators. The Career Motivators included motivators that influence a person’s career, involve work that occur outside of academics, and describe future career plans of the participant. Academic motivators are the motivators that influence a person during their time as a graduate student, and occur during the time period the student is involved in academics. Self-improvement motivators are the motivators that are internal in the person, meaning the motivators that influence a person to better their self.

Participants were also grouped into categories for analysis, such as age (18 to 22-year-olds, 23 to 29-year-olds, 30 to 40-year-olds, and 40-year-old and above), gender (male or female), academic area of interest (law, STEM, humanities, or business), and residence (United States of American or other country).

Procedure

Participants were shown an informed consent form at the beginning of the survey. On this form, they were told the study was designed to ask questions of people who obtain higher education. The participants then answered the questions on the survey, taking on average 10 minutes to complete. After completing the survey, the participants were taken to a debriefing screen and were dismissed.

Results

Results will be described according to the following specific populations: the gender of the participant, the area of academia the participant is interested in, the age of the participant, and the enrollment status in graduate school of the participant. Within each specific population, the
results were either analyzed through the Motivator categories (Academic Motivators, Career Motivators and Self-Improvement Motivators) or through a singular question (the original nine Likert scale questions in the survey).

*Descriptive Statistics*

See Appendix B for more descriptive statistics and graphs.

*Figure 1.* The overall means of the nine original motivators.

*Figure 2.* The comparative means categorized by gender for each of the nine motivators.

**Gender Results**

**Motivator Category Results**

There was a significant difference in results for the Career Motivators for women (M=5.06, SD=0.87) and men (M=4.63, SD=1.08); t(99)=-2.09, p=0.040. There was a slight difference in results for the Academic Motivators for women (M=4.65, SD=1.37) and men (M=4.16, SD=0.92); t(99)=-1.84, p=0.06.

**Singular Question Results**

There was a significant difference for the motivator of lack of current job opportunities as a motivation to attend graduate school between women (M=5.52, SD=1.09) and men (M=4.77, SD=1.50); t(98)=-2.807, p=0.006. There was an slight difference in results for the motivator of wanting to learn more about a specific area of academia as a motivation to attend graduate school between women (M=5.19, SD=1.33) and men (M=4.69, SD=1.31); t(99)=-1.770, p=0.08. There was a slight difference for the factor of not knowing what else to do as a motivation to attend graduate school between women (M=3.86, SD=1.76) and men (M=3.19, SD=1.635); t(99)=--
The results from a two-way ANOVA found an interaction between gender and area of academic interest on the Academics Motivator, $F(3,92)=4.06$, $p=0.009$. See *Figure 1*.

**Areas of Academia Results**

*Motivator Category Results*

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the three categories against areas of academic interest of the participants. The Academic Motivators significantly differed for those in the academic area of business, $F(4,99)=3.10$, $p=0.019$. The Career Motivators significantly differed for those in the academic area of business, $F(4,99)=3.21$, $p=0.016$.

**Singular Question Results**

A one-way ANOVA was used to test for area of interest among the different motivators for attending graduate school. Learning more about a specific area of academia significantly differed for the areas of interest for those obtaining business degrees, $F(4,100)=6.657$, $p=0.00$; Higher earning potential as motivator significantly differed for those obtaining business degrees, $F(4,100)=2.43$, $p=0.05$; Career advancement as motivator slightly differed for those obtaining business degrees, $F(4,100)=2.187$, $p=0.076$; Personal enrichment as a motivator differed significantly for those obtaining a business degree, $F(4,99)=4.346$, $p=0.003$.

**Age and Enrollment Status Results**

* Singular Question Results

There was a significant difference for the factor of greater prestige as a motivation to attend graduate school between those in graduate school ($M=2.50$, $SD=2.25$) and those not currently enrolled in a graduate program ($M=1.44$, $SD=1.76$), $t(103)=2.13$, $p=0.036$. There was a significant difference for the factor of success in undergraduate courses as a motivation to attend graduate school between those in graduate school ($M=2.81$, $SD=2.19$) and those not currently
enrolled in a graduate program (M=4.20, SD=1.70), t(102)=-2.871, p=0.005. A one-way ANOVA was used to test for age among the different motivators for attending graduate school. Career advancement differed slightly for the age range of 30-40-year olds, $F(3,101)=2.031, p=.114$; Success in undergraduate courses differed significantly for the age range of 18-22-year-olds, $F(3,100)=2.751, p=0.047$

**Residence Results**

*Motivator Category Results*

There was a significant difference for the Academics Motivators for participants residing in the United States of America, (M=4.64, SD=1.12) and for participants residing somewhere other than the United States of America, (M=3.00, SD=1.71); $t(102)=-3.99, p=0.00$. There was a significant difference for the Career Motivators for participants residing in the United States of America, (M=5.04, SD=0.87) and for participants residing somewhere other than the United States of America, (M=3.88, SD=1.09); $t(102)=-3.70, p=0.00$. 
**Figure 3.** A two-way ANOVA shows the interaction between gender and area of academic interest on the Academic Motivators. Females in the humanities field were more likely to attend graduate school because of academics.

**Discussion**

In our exploratory approach, we centered our research question on the idea that a group of people will differ in their reasoning to attend graduate school. Through running analyses of our data, we have seen that business students and people who hope to attend graduate school for a business degree differ in their motivations than people in other areas of academia, such as STEM, humanities, and law. There was a standard deviation of 0 for the question of, “How important is personal enrichment for you to attend graduate school” for business participants, with the answer being a 7, the highest answer possible. Participants in business were more likely to attend graduate school because of wanting to learn more about a specific area of academia,
more flexibility in their schedule, a desire for a higher potential earning power, career advancement, and for academic reasons compared to their counterparts in other academic disciplines.

What is it about business and business students that make them rate each motivation higher as group for many reasons than students in other areas of academia? Unlike other graduate program, business schools strive to work with students of all ages, and are more likely to be able to cater to people with hectic schedules (Finn, 2012). Business students often go back to school after many years in the workforce, and often are parents with rigid schedules who are looking for a way to make their career more flexible and a way to become their own boss so they can have independence in their schedules (Finn, 2012). Because of this desire to be in control of their schedule and to have more flexibility with their careers, business students are more motivated than students in other areas of academia to obtain a degree that will allow them more knowledge into the field, as well as a degree that gives them the flexibility they want. Business students know if they attend graduate school, they can advance in their career, and that ultimately will allow them for freedom and independence in their career that they so desire.

The other group that differed from their counterparts, with regards to the average mean of the ratings, was the female participants. While there was no significant gender differences other than the women in the academic area of humanities were more likely to attend graduate school because of academic categories such as higher potential earning power, lack of current job opportunities, and career advancement than men in humanities, the average means show that women were more likely to rate the “softer” motivators, such as more flexibility for a family schedule or lack of current job opportunities, higher than males. Males were more likely to report that the more “serious” motivators were motivators for their decision to obtain an advanced
degree than females, such as personal enrichment and prestige. This could mean that women are similar to business students who are looking for more flexibility and control of their lives, where as males are more likely to attend graduate school because of their careers and the requirements they may face to achieve their goals. Schab (1974), when studying why women attend college and higher education, found that women frequently chose nonprofessional reasons as their explanation of why they chose higher education, which is consistent with our findings. Schab (1974) states that women were more likely to state that they chose to obtain higher education not for professional preparation reasons, but for reasons that allowed them to improve their minds, be able to better rear children, know more about life, and to have more fun. In the open-ended questions, females were more likely to explain that their decision to attend graduate school was so they could have a better lifestyle and flexible schedule for their family. For example, one female participant stated, “I am enrolling in grad school in the fall in order to make better life for myself and my son. It will open many more doors in the future that my teaching degree may not have on its own.” Another female participant stated, when asked about why they would to attend graduate school, “So I can become a well maintained professional working adult and be able to provide for my son.” While answers similar in nature to these examples were a common answer among female participants, no males mentioned their family or schedule in the open-ended questions.

Seven out of the nine motivation questions in the survey had a mean of 3.50 (on a 7-point Likert scale) or higher, meaning that for these seven factors, the answers were skewed right and participants rated the motivations as all somewhat important to their motivation to obtain an advanced degree. However, the question of “How important is prestige to you in your decision to obtain advanced degree?” had a mean of 1.60. We found this rating shocking, and sense that
people are hesitant to admit that prestige is a motivation for them while rating factors. For example, while most participants rated prestige as a 1 in importance, in the open-ended questions several participants stated they were obtaining an advanced degree to, “become famous”, “gain respect from students at their university”, and “to be receive recognition for my achievements”. This outcome has made us come up with two answers for why participants rated this question in such a low manner. First, we hypothesize that while people with Ph.D.s only make up less than 1% of the United States (Peterson’s Staff, 2013), the number of people who hold Ph.D.s has increased exponentially, while the average salary for those with a Ph.D. has decreased (Segeste, 2012). This increase in Ph.D. holders could mean that potential graduate students and current graduate students do not see advanced degrees as prestigious as they once were, and long with the pay decrease, they truly strive for an advanced degree for other reasons that prestige and honor. However, we believe there may be another reason behind this finding, since an advanced degree does come with a status seen by many people. Second, we hypothesize that there is a knee-jerk reaction for the participant to admit they are somewhat motivated by prestige or status that may come along with an advanced degree. The social desirability bias could say that this knee-jerk reaction to admitting prestige is a motivation does not showing their self in a good light, since being motivated by prestige. Also, this knee-jerk reaction can be explain by asking the participants to explain something they do not know about their motivations, since people do not always have a direct introspective access to their mental processes (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). While other factors such as a more flexible schedule or more career opportunities could not be affected by this lack of introspective access since they are a concrete observation, prestige could be an internal motivator that acts as an unconscious motivator.

**Limitations and Future Studies**
There was some noise and variability in our data, which can be due to having many participants in one category, and a limited amount in another. For instance, we had few male participants who were interested in the academic area of business, so the confidence intervals of results that were found when gender and academia area of interest was analyzed was quite large. Also, due to the variability in our data, it is possible to conclude that the pursuit of an advanced degree is not a unified rationale, and can be a culturally complex role that is not the same across similar populations.

While there were over 100 participants in this study, there was not an equal distribution of people from different locations or people in all areas of academia, and the number of female participants greatly outnumbered the number of male participants. This lack of variance did not allow us to compare different countries; only the differences between the United States of America and all other countries were examined. In future studies with a sample of people that represent all geographical locations, it would be interesting to look at how people of different nationalities and in different geographical locations differ in their motivations to obtain an advanced degree. Since different areas of the world require different levels of education to be seen as successful, and different groups of people such as men and women are only allowed to be educated in specific areas, examining the different motivators could tell about how academics and motivations are seen across the world. Also, there was a lack of participants from medical school and the medicinal profession, which did not allow us to examine if medical students differ from other types of students.

Open-ended questions that were asked at the end of the interview were, for the most part, repetitive of the questions that were asked on the survey. Most participants did not give insight into their motivations to obtain an advanced degree, and when they did answer the open-ended
questions, they gave brief answers without much depth. Without this explanation, we were not able to use the open-ended questions as much as we had hoped.

Along with different geographical locations, the differences between people of various ethnicities could be examined in a future study to see if different races or ethnicities differ in their motivations to obtain graduate degrees.

Our study did not look at social economic status of a participant’s family, nor did it examine a participant’s family education level. A future study could conducted to examine the motivations behind different education levels in families, and to analyze if a person who is the first person in their family to obtain an advanced degree motivations differ from a person’s motivations who is the second of third person in their family to obtain an advanced degree.

Conclusion

This study, which used an exploratory method, examined the many possible motivators that influence people to attend graduate school. Specific motivations were measured such as: the desire of learning more about a particular area of academia; potential career advancement; personal enrichment; and a lack of current job opportunities. Open-ended questions were also included in the survey. Different groups of people, such as people of different areas of academic interests, gender, age and enrollment status, and residence were examined to see if there was a difference of motivations between different groups of people. Most notably was the difference between students in business compared to students in other academic areas. Business students were more likely to attend graduate school because of wanting to learn more about a specific area of academia, more flexibility in their schedule, a desire for a higher potential earning power, career advancement, and for academic reasons compared to their counterparts in other academic disciplines. Another notable difference was female participants were more likely to rate the
“softer” motivators, such as more flexibility for a family schedule or lack of current job opportunities, than male participants. Lastly, a notable finding was that people were hesitant to mention prestige as a motivator (M=1.60), several participants noted the factor as a motivation in their decision to attend graduate school.

References


Retrieved from [http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/03/phd-doctorate-higher-education-love-money](http://www.guardian.co.uk/higher-education-network/blog/2012/may/03/phd-doctorate-higher-education-love-money)

Appendix A

Survey
Gender:
Age (in years):
Are you currently enrolled in Graduate School:
   If yes: Degrees received:
      - Years of graduate work:
   If no: Have you applied or are planning to apply to Graduate School:
Current location:
What area of study (If not currently enrolled on graduate school, what area are you most interested in):  

One a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 being very untrue for me and 7 being very true for me, please rate how influential the following factors were in your decision to attend graduate school:

1. Learning more about a specific area of academia
2. Higher potential earning power
3. Lack of current job opportunities
4. Career advancement/ more options in career choices
5. Personal enrichment
6. Greater prestige
7. Do not know what else to do
8. Success in undergraduate courses
9. Advanced degree gives more flexibility for family life or schedule

Please state any other motivations behind your decision to attend graduate school:

Optional-- In your own words, can you please explain why you choose (are thinking about) graduate school:

Appendix B

Descriptive Statistics

Figure 4. The comparative means categorized by specific area of academic interest.

Figure 5. The comparative means categorized by law students.

Figure 6. The comparative means categorized by humanities students.

Figure 7. The comparative means categorized by business students.
Figure 8. The comparative means categorized by ages 18 to 22.

Figure 9. The comparative means categorized by ages 23 to 29.

Figure 10. The comparative means categorized by ages 30 to 40.

Figure 11. The comparative means categorized by ages 40 and over.