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Going to grad school is no easy escape hatch

[Chicago Final Edition]

Chicago Tribune - Chicago, Ill.

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Date: Jun 25, 2003
Start Page: 1
Section: Working
Text Word Count: 474

Document Text

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Heading back to grad school may sound like just the right escape from that wave of job rejections and unreturned phone calls. And, indeed, as may be inferred from the increasing numbers of those taking grad-school entrance exams, plenty of disillusioned job hunters are likely looking to school as a safe haven.

But that haven does present challenges, especially for the recent grad, and we won't even go into the further debt that may be incurred. First, you have to get in. And clearly you are competing with those same job market competitors, many with two, three, four years of work experience under their belts.

As with employers, this is a time when admissions committees at the top-notch schools "don't have to make tradeoffs" when it comes to grad school candidates, said Justin Serrano, executive director of Kaplan Test Prep, which helps applicants prepare for entrance exams.

For this reason, prospective students are applying to eight to 10 schools, instead of the regular three or four, Serrano added. (Hotshot schools may have filled their seats for this fall, but others with rolling admissions are still making decisions.)

The ultimate value of getting an advanced degree for college graduates is often debated. Some say the added credential gives one a tremendous advantage. Others say getting work experience first would count more.

Another issue is that a graduate degree alone does not lead to nirvana. We see that from those folks who flocked to get advanced degrees in computer science in the hope of locking in a nice income and job security. What are they doing now? Scanning online job boards and shooting out resumes, just like you.

That's why you're wise to focus on your true interests, say career experts. Mark Shay, president of Educational Directories Unlimited, parent of GradSchools.com, says he's seeing an increased interest in programs such as social work and creative writing, neither of which leads to stellar salaries.

After seeing other seemingly hot industries crash and burn, "students will hopefully fall back to things that truly interest them," he said. That's of value because you're more apt to be persistent and creative if you're in a field for which you have passion, even during down times.

And a final consideration: Students who think grad school is a mirror image of undergrad may have a rude awakening. Indeed, one of its functions is to help young people transition from student mode to professional mode.

That means "learning to manipulate instead of being the passive good student waiting to be automatically rescued," said Adele Scheele, author of "Jumpstart Your Career in College" (Kaplan, \$12).

But it's manipulation in a strategic sense, connecting with professors as professionals and taking on projects that put you in touch with those who can help you. "Graduate school only pays off if you use it well," Scheele said.

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