Options for undergraduates

Imagine that you are planning your last semester as an undergraduate and are looking forward to finishing school and finally receiving your degree after years of hard work. Your mind begins to wander towards the future, and you try to picture yourself in a year, out of school, diploma in hand, heading off to ... to ... to what? You begin to get that sinking feeling in your stomach, the same feeling that came around when it was your turn in public speaking class. You breathe heavier and faster, and your mind begins to spin and twirl, trying to visualize your options. Thoughts come at you from all sides, like a swarm of gnats. Graduate school? Travel? Work to gain experience? The military? Peace Corps? There are so many choices, but which one is best for you? Your mind races. The thoughts continue to bombard you until your head begins to swell and expand from all of the pressure and then ... BAM! You wake up in a cold sweat, realizing it was only a dream.

Sound familiar? Most likely your worries haven’t reached such an extreme level, but you are probably no different than any other undergraduate and have experienced some anxiety about what the future may hold. At the end of every semester, legions of natural resource majors across the country enter the postgraduate world with their degrees in hand but no clear idea of what options exist for them. Many feel that they need to go to graduate school to earn an advanced degree, but they wonder if they should take time off first and try their hand at something else.

As I headed into my final year of school and my graduation dawned on the horizon, I began to sort through publications that would help guide my future and give me some ideas about what avenues were available to me as a graduate in the natural resources profession. Unfortunately my search was cut short because none of the major career books on the market were directed toward wildlife, fishery, forestry, or other natural resource majors. These books offered insightful advice on how to interview or get a job in a traditional biology field (e.g., microbiology), but none examined the different paths available to natural resource majors after graduation. Recognizing that there was an immediate need for this type of information, I met with a professor and designed a questionnaire to examine the different avenues taken by graduate students and professors in our department after receiving their undergraduate degrees.

I distributed this questionnaire to 85 faculty members and graduate students in the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, who fell into 1 of the following categories: (1) a graduate student working towards an M.S. degree, (2) a graduate student working towards a Ph.D. degree, or (3) a faculty member. Questionnaires were distributed in fall 1995 and approximately 1/3 were returned (27 of 85). Following are the 5 questions posed, coupled with the answers given by respondents.

**Question 1: Did you take time off?**

The majority of respondents (19 of 27) took time off before entering graduate school for an advanced degree. Most worked to get more field experience, some worked to make money so that they could attend graduate school, and a few decided to travel.

**Question 2: How was taking time off beneficial to you?**

Of the respondents who took time off between degrees, only 1 of 19 felt that taking time off was not beneficial. Most said that time off helped them because they gained experience and realized the need for an advanced degree, while others said that it narrowed their focus and gave them a taste for living in the real world.

**Question 3: Why did you decide to go to graduate school?**

Most respondents said they decided to pursue advanced degrees because their career goals required a higher degree, they wanted to improve their job prospects, they liked research, or they wanted to continue learning.

**Question 4: How did you decide on graduate school(s)?**

The factors that were most influential when choosing a graduate school were the reputation of the school, the reputation of the faculty or a particular professor, the location of the school, or the financial support that was offered.

**Question 5: What other options exist instead of attending graduate school?**

Respondents listed a variety of options other than
graduate school: working to gain experience, joining the Peace Corps or Vista, internships, traveling, volunteer work, and working for nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

Typically, respondents took time off after receiving their undergraduate degrees and worked to get experience or to make money. Most of those who took time off (18 of 19) found that the time off was beneficial; it helped them to gain experience while realizing the need for graduate school, and it taught them about life in the real world.

While doing this, I received a lot of good advice from graduate students and faculty and have compiled some tips to remember:

1. **Relax.** If you're stressed out over the thought of going to graduate school, don't panic. Many people find that taking time off from school helps them to gain experience and hone their interests until they become sure of what they want to study in graduate school.

2. **Be persistent.** Phone *and* write potential employers and introduce yourself. Be courteous, honest, friendly, and be yourself. Be sure to show them that you're the best person for the position. Always make yourself available for follow-up interviews and return all calls and letters as soon as possible.

3. **Résumé.** Always have a good résumé ready to give to potential employers or graduate school contacts. Keep résumés updated with projects you are working on, and be ready to tailor a résumé for a certain job or individual. Always include 3 good references who know you and your work well and who are willing to recommend you for the right position.

Remember that there are plenty of opportunities out there but you've got to work hard to overcome the competition. Above all else, keep all of your options open for the future. Good luck!—**James W. Rivers** is a senior undergraduate Wildlife Biology major in the Department of Forestry and Wildlife Management at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. James headed off to Argentina after his graduation in December to work on a project examining avian community dynamics along elevational gradients in montane forests.

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