Ever dreamed of having a Ph.D. next to your name or walking across the stage to receive your master’s degree? You’re not alone. A vast number of people consider returning to graduate school every year—but a much smaller number are willing to leap into the academic deep end. Despite the bleak economic news, there remains a great deal of potential for advanced-degree holders; in fact, a graduate education can really pay off.

While Iman Sadeghi was finishing his undergraduate studies at Sharif University of Technology in Tehran, Iran, back in 2006, he was already dreaming of his next step: a master’s degree and, eventually, a Ph.D. in Computer Science. Only a little more than six years later, Sadeghi is enjoying a fulfilling career as a software engineer at Google Los Angeles after completing his doctorate degree at the University of California, San Diego in 2011. But Sadeghi’s current career tells only a part of his story: During his time at UC San Diego he also did two internships with Walt Disney Animation Studios, where he focused on improving techniques for rendering hair in animation. His work was seen on the big screen in the movie
Tangled, which tells the story of the most famous long-haired character of all time, Rapunzel. Sadeghi credits his career success to his time spent in pursuit of an advanced degree. "I was surrounded by brilliant faculty members and students; everyone I met at UC San Diego was smart, hardworking and friendly," Sadeghi says. "I also liked the cultural diversity on campus. I participated in a lot of international gatherings and mixers and made a lot of friends from a variety of backgrounds. The weather of San Diego was also a huge plus as well. You can’t really complain about ocean view graduate housing!

Of course, the decision to pursue an advanced degree, whether it be a master’s or a Ph.D., isn’t always an easy one—especially given the current economic climate. The good news is that, while a master’s or doctorate degree won’t guarantee you a higher starting salary, there are several benefits you can count on: demonstrate your deep commitment to a particular area; and hone your expertise in your chosen field. "We live in an increasingly complex society," says Kim E. Barrett, Ph.D. and dean of graduate studies at UC San Diego. "To advance in many of the industries that are on the ascendency in the United States, people seem to need a greater depth of understanding of their subject matter that you can really only get from a graduate education."

Graduate school is also not as expensive as many think, particularly if you decide to pursue a doctoral degree. Most Ph.D. students at research universities are actually supported with full tuition and cost-of-living stipends. Although students pursuing a master’s degree are frequently self-supporting, a robust amount of evidence shows it will enhance earnings down the road. Many universities also now offer flexible class schedules and online learning.

**CONSIDERING A PH.D.?**

Kim E. Barrett, Ph.D. and dean of graduate studies at UC San Diego, recommends asking yourself these six questions:

1. Do I have a deep love for my chosen subject that will carry me through inevitable setbacks?
2. Am I intellectually curious—the sort of person who needs to know how things work, why they don’t work and how to make things better?
3. Am I comfortable marshaling arguments and defending my position and using critique to push myself to improve?
4. Can I work independently—but also in teams—to get things done?
5. Can I delay gratification for several years while classmates are getting well-paid jobs (with the payoff being that not only will I likely end up with a career that is more intellectually satisfying, but in the end I’ll make more money over my lifetime)?
6. Do I want to make the sorts of contributions that go well beyond individual interactions, even if the ultimate impact of my work may take years to recognize?
as options for those unable to leave the workforce and attend school full-time. California Miramar University, for example, has pioneered what they call a "Hybrid MBA." Course structure allows busy professionals to attend class in person just one night a week, and the rest of the class is conducted online. Courses are in session for eight consecutive weeks and the university is located in San Diego, Calif.

"The hybrid format has provided us an education with flexibility, but it has also provided a structured format with face-time with the professor and other students," says Michael Hager, a CMU MBA student whose wife is also enrolled in the program. "We wanted an environment that would give us the best education, and the in-class discussions have been just as invaluable as the ability to attend classes online." In addition to the Hybrid MBA, California Miramar University offers 100 percent online business programs.

Despite the number of people who return to graduate school from the workforce each year, a perception still exists that the pursuit of an advanced degree can take a student further away from real-world experience. That's a perception that Idaho State University President Arthur C. Vailas has been working hard to erase, creating the innovative Career Path Internship program and making it available not just for undergraduates, but the graduate population as well. Through the program, area businesses and faculty members are able to offer work to bright students who need a job and real work experience.

"We fund more than 200 positions enabling both undergraduate and graduate students the opportunity to work on projects related to their academic major and intellectual interests," Vailas says. "In the research laboratories, business community and in our classrooms, students have made great strides not only training for a future, but helping to improve the quality of life and breadth of knowledge. In turn, they gain relevant career-related experiences and training that will help them succeed in an increasingly competitive job market."

The ability to complete intensive, real-world internships was a deciding factor in Iman Sadeghi's choice to pursue his doctoral degree at UC San Diego, where high-profile laboratory research tells just a small part of the university's academic story.

"All of my internships gave me the experience of working on products that will be used or seen potentially by millions of people, which is similar to my current job at Google," says Sadeghi. "In both cases, I have to come up with novel solutions for challenging practical problems, implement my solution in complex systems and make sure that other team members will be able to maintain my work later on."

It is important to remember, however, that the success of any education depends on how one chooses to utilize it. Once committed to the graduate school route, choose carefully based on your interests, available funding and geographic location. The latter will become even more important if you decide to pursue your doctoral degree, when a few years back in school can make you realize just how important graduate housing is when it comes with an ocean view.

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