A general note on graduate schools for Macalester International Studies majors, I.S. graduates, and others

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Over the years I have received many questions about graduate school from my Macalester students and alumni. This brief note summarizes my general views on the subject. I'd be glad to consult with you on specific issues as well.

First, it is highly likely but by no means obligatory that Mac graduates will receive a graduate degree within the first 5-8 years after graduation. More and more these days, a graduate degree (MA, MBA, MPH (Public Health), MIA (International Affairs), JD, MD, PhD, and many more) is seen as the basic professional qualification in serious fields. To be sure, many people have fine and rewarding careers without such degrees, but this is less and less the case – and in some fields, it's almost never the case.

When should you go? Typically but not always, Macalester students get 1-3 years of concrete post-Mac field experience before returning to graduate school. This is especially important in "hands-on" fields. Most of the best MIA, MBA, and MPP (Public Policy) programs, for example, will not even read applications from those coming straight out of an undergraduate degree. Applicants to medical school, to choose another example, formerly were almost always straight out of the B.A. – but the entry-age for medical school has been trending slowly upwards for two decades, often including applicants who had no thought of premed as undergraduates. The main thing is to go when you are ready, and when you know what you want. Only you will know when that is.

Once you have chosen a particular field or degree, you've got to choose the specific schools themselves. When choosing schools, keep in mind that *prestige can count as much as exact fit*. Indeed, in many ways the key question in choosing a specific graduate program is the somewhat mercenary "what will the concrete and practical result be for me?" What sort of job placement, alumni network, and credential cachet will this school offer me, and in which communities? What have recent graduates of this program gone on to do? Graduate school is a financial and career decision much more than your undergraduate decision was. You must ask: where – to what broad range of places – can this school get me, at what price, with what sort of debt: and is that what and where I eventually want to be?

Having offered this general preface, let me say a quick word about several types of degree. This is not a discussion of every type of graduate degree – there are hundreds – but it does encompass most of the major flavors.

The Masters in International Affairs is a common destination for International Studies majors. It goes by many names, including Masters of Arts in Law and Diplomacy, Masters of Public Management, Masters in International Relations, etc. The MIA is classic for those intending careers in development, non-governmental aid, diplomacy, international affairs, trade, and related fields. (Human Rights practitioners are served by this degree – but in that field often a law degree is even better.) Since the MIA is a frequent destination for Macalester International Studies majors, I offer more extensive commentary on the main schools and options on a fresh page linked from the *bottom* of this page.

Many students pursue the MIA because they wish to "do the right thing" or fight the good fight. However, two other, more classic degrees, which progressive students usually shun, thinking they are too "establishment" or "corporate," can also be very effective in facilitating the right thing.

The first is the **JD, or Juris Doctor** – the law degree. As a colleague once said, "with a general Masters you can write a letter, but with a JD you can stop them cold in court." A JD can be useful for international or domestic work, enjoys wide recognition, and is the central gateway for practitioner work in human rights. One tricky factor here for many I.S. majors is that most law schools channel most frequently to business, corporate, or otherwise mainstream legal careers – with nonprofit, NGO, and other post-JD outcomes less common. There is a wide range of schools available, with different flavors and often with progressive tracks. Law school in the U.S. takes three years. Law school admissions in the U.S. places a higher weight on the LSAT score than almost every other type of grad-school than I know – so study hard for this. Financial aid for a JD is possible but not necessarily abundant, since graduates are often assumed to be going on to well-paying careers.

The second is the **MBA, or Masters in Business Administration**. Some time ago a former student – one of Mac's most famous recent activists, who is now really fighting the good fight in a profoundly international way – came to me and marveled that for all the political theory she'd taken at Macalester, what she really needed to know at a crisis point in her organization was accounting. No organization can be effective if badly financed or badly run. The MBA is a "hard-headed" degree which has wide respect for its practicality, even among progressive organizations. As with the JD, an MBA can be useful for international or domestic work. There are a broad range of schools available, with different flavors, and sometimes (only sometimes) with progressive tracks, or combined tracks such as healthcare. MBA students tend to be more conservative and, of course, business oriented, than those at other schools. An MBA takes two years, and financial aid is possible but not abundant.

Having discussed these two classic degrees, I will not discuss the **MD, MAT** (Masters of Arts in Teaching), or **M.Div** (Masters of Divinity), whose utility should be self-evident.

The **MPH**, or Master's in Public Health, is pursued by Mac I.S. graduates with surprising frequency – often after a post-Mac experience which has exposed them to the real conditions of global and community health. Typically, Mac I.S. grads pursuing this degree left Mac with weak preparation in the sciences – though they often acquire this in the years after Mac. Macalester's recent establishment of the Global and Community Health concentration, and increased coursework in Medical Anthropology – as well as new I.S./Bio and I.S./Geology links, offer more direct exposure here. For what it's worth, I'm a personal fan of this degree.

The scholarly MA and scholarly PhD are widely recognized degrees. Typically a PhD takes 5-6 years and is designed for those pursuing academic or scholarly careers. Given the great difficulties of the academic job market, which seem unlikely to improve in the foreseeable future, only the truly top students in most of the humanities and social sciences (e.g. literature, religion, cultural studies, sociology, history, etc.) should pursue a PhD. At times, folks with PhDs in semi-practical fields such as anthropology or political science can find good non-scholarly opportunities, such as in policy shops or field/practitioner communities. But generally humanities and social-science PhDs are strictly for future academics. It is too much of a commitment to pursue this degree and then not get the academic position that you seek.

A broader range of students (i.e., not just the ultra-top Mac students) might wish to pursue the PhD in other, more practical fields which have more of an "external market" for degree-holders. Examples include PhDs in economics, finance, computer science, engineering, public health, and many of the sciences. Financial aid is widely available for PhD programs in all disciplines, with the sciences especially well funded. Top programs in strong fields, even in the humanities, can offer full tuition remission plus substantial, livable stipends guaranteed for years. Most strong PhD programs admit BA's directly into PhD study, awarding candidates their MA's along the way.

An **MA-only in a scholarly field** – that is, Masters programs that do not have guaranteed continuation onto a PhD program – are a dicier proposition. Financial aid is only rarely available, and the programs are often "money-makers" for the schools. People often use MA-only programs to try out a field they are considering pursuing a PhD in. Still, if this is your intention, apply directly for a PhD, and drop out after receiving your MA from that school if you do not like it: you will be better funded and better treated. Or, if you don't think you have the credentials for a top PhD program, but want to be in one, don't get there by pursuing an independent MA first. Instead, try to pursue a well-funded PhD at an "average" school and use your good record there to transfer to an elite program.

Having offered these cautions about MA-only programs, I will say that later in one's career – and especially for secondary-school and other teachers – a locally based scholarly MA can be a fine intellectual and career enhancer.

Importantly, **combined-degree programs** are the right choice for small but increasing numbers of students. To be sure, these programs increase the cost and time involved. But they can add special distinction to already distinctive degrees. Some examples would include MBA plus Masters in Environmental Studies, MD plus MPH, MD plus PhD (for medical professors), MIA plus JD, MAT plus scholarly MA, or JD plus MBA (for business warriors). Sometimes these programs are offered as already-existing linkages at major multi-school universities. But almost as often they are custom-designed by the students themselves, and sometimes are achieved with work at two different universities. Importantly, often the total-time-to-degree can be reduced by combining requirements. For example, a JD (three years) plus MIA (two years) might be completed in four years total.

This completes my "general" narrative on grad-schools and grad-school choices, targeted to the wide range of things that Macalester International Studies alumni go on to do. On separate pages, you will find more-specific discussion of, first,

The MIA, or Master's of International Affairs degree, and

The MFA in Writing and/or the M.A. in Journalism.

I hope that readers will find this main site and the two linked sites of some use!