

CUNY School Professional Studies | Roundtable for Students Considering Grad School

INTRODUCTIONS

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Good evening and welcome to this roundtable, which is for SPS students who are considering applying to graduate school. We have four panelists who are going to go around and answer common questions about [INAUDIBLE]. Without further ado, I will have each panelists introduce themselves in the order that they will be speaking. And so the first panelist is Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay.

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay: Hi, my name is Elizabeth Macaulay. I am at the CUNY Graduate Center. My role is as the executive officer of the MA program in liberal studies. That's one of the largest and oldest master's programs at the Graduate Center, founded in 1981. It is an interdisciplinary master's degree with an emphasis, really, on the humanities and social sciences.

And I am an archeologist by training and an architectural historian. And I look at how antiquity intersects with modernity. And I'm here to tell you a little bit about my experience running the program, having run admissions as well, and kind of how admissions work a little bit at the CUNY Graduate Center.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Great. Thank you so much. And next up, Milan Fredricks, if you could briefly introduce yourself.

Milan Fredricks: Hi, everyone. So again, my name is Milan Fredricks. I'm an SPS alum. I graduated in 2019 in the communications and media program. I currently work as a strategic communications manager for Columbia University Irving Medical Center, Department of Pathology and Cell Biology, a very large educational, research, and basic science department.

As an internal communications professional, my job every day is to inform the employees who I work with, inspire them, and help them to engage better with their work. And I take that job very seriously. So I got a graduate degree to help me be better at that job, and I'm learning every day post-degree, which is something you will experience if you decide to continue your education with a graduate degree.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you so much. And next is Lisa Sheridan.

Lisa Sheridan: Hi, everyone. First of all, Sarah, thank you so much for organizing this. It's great to see old friends like my undergrad bestie, Milan, and make new friends. I am also an SPS alum. I graduated in '20 from the communications and media department, and then after that, I went to grad school at Brooklyn College. I currently work at Brooklyn College as a first-year composition instructor on an adjunct basis.

And on a full-time basis, I work at CUNY SPS in the communications and marketing department as a writer. So I write-- much like Milan, I do a lot of internal communications and newsletters. But I also write press releases and speeches and blog posts and-yeah. Yeah, that. Thanks.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you. And Tony, if you could introduce yourself next.

Tony Maldonado: Hi, my name is Tony Maldonado. I'm the executive creative director at IGRP. Basically, we are a subsidiary of one of the major labels in the industry. My job, basically, is to basically direct all the artwork and all the productions that we do for our third-party companies, like Warner Brothers and Sony Entertainment.

As far as education is concerned, I've studied at NYU, University College of London, and CUNY SPS. And I believe that a graduate degree is no longer an option. It's a necessity necessary tool, to be quite honest, because nowadays, because of AI and everything else that we've been pushing forward in the industries, everything that you can use at this given stage, especially every single graduate degree that you can obtain, will be of your benefit long-term.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Great. Thank you so much. So I am going to go around and ask the roundtable participants questions. And each question, the answer will take about five to seven minutes. And then like I said toward the end, we'll have 10 to 15 minutes for student questions. So please stick around until the end.

I also made up a list of resources for students that I'm going to share towards the end of the Round Table. All right. So the first question is for Dr. Macaulay.

First Question

And it is, **how should I begin to research graduate programs? How can I find out if a certain graduate degree will likely lead to a job?**

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay: Those are two great and very connected questions. I'm going to start with the first one. So really, the first question when you're trying to think about researching graduate programs is kind of what-- in a sense, basically, why do you want to go to grad school? What subject, what questions, what are your goals?

Because before you can really figure out which program you want to go to and what might be best for you, you need to ask some questions first. Is it that you started doing something as an undergrad that you didn't have an opportunity to finish, or that you came to later in your undergraduate degree that you now want to take a little bit further and do some more work? Is there a particular intellectual area?

But it could also be skills-related. I often think intellectual endeavors and skills go kind of hand in hand. There's a tendency to say, well, you're developing skills versus you're developing

something academic. Those are really intertwined. Writing is a skill, but you cannot do good academic work without it. But you also need to be able to write well, to send good emails and communicate.

So I think, for example, understanding what your goals might be or why you want to do it is really important. So again, are you-want to go into more depth in something that you have not had a chance to do? Are there certain skills or questions that you want to?-- and I talk about the question piece because I went to grad school for a master's degree partially because I had a question I couldn't answer, and I wanted to understand that question.

And so I think initially, there f some self-reflection that is really important to do as kind of a first step. Second step, for research, well, yes, the internet is absolutely your friend. Google. You don't always have to use AI, but AI is also good. But the other most obvious resource are your faculty members. And actually, generally, they're better, because they have a lot of knowledge and expertise. They've also stayed in academia and have not gone off, necessarily, outside of the academy.

And so if you're saying-- if you're interested in, say, staying in New York City, there aren't that many kind of institutions in town.

You have CUNY with all the different CUNY parts. So you could have the Grad Center, you could go to Hunter, you could go to Brooklyn, you could go to Staten Island, kind of depending on what the program you have-- sometimes those are multiple different CUNY campuses. Sometimes they're not.

But then you're also possibly going to be having NYU, Columbia, Pace, possibly Long Island University, Rutgers, other things like that. So if you're looking at that, there's a geographical feature. There's also, of course, a cost dynamic, which everyone always does have to think about too.

But you should start, in a sense, there's almost-- I would say make a spreadsheet. I'm a little nerdy. I'm very pro-spreadsheet. But that way, you could put in what you're looking for, understanding first what you're looking for, but then also what the different programs offer. Like, do you need to go to school part-time? There's going to be some comments about that.

But this is where talking to your faculty members are really, really a good resource. We have gotten-- I would say-- so when I sit on our admissions committee, and I talk to a lot of students, a lot of students get referred to me by their faculty. People will be like, I want to do this interdisciplinary work. And somebody will say, well, go talk to Professor Macaulay because she runs this program, and we chat.

And then I can find out the best way and the best program. And if someone says, I really want to do, game design, I'll be like, that's great. We cannot do that for you. However, you might want to go talk to this person or look at this program. So part of it is using your existing faculty, but then also reaching out to faculty, reaching out to whoever's the head of admissions in a program or to an executive officer or a chair is a great way to do it. And so that's one piece.

And so I would say, though, just talk to your faculty. One of the great things-- I know SPS, a lot of students are online. So you may not always have as much immediate contact the way you would if you were doing an in-person degree. I know from having had students from SPS in our graduate program, they're wonderful, they're chatty, they're talking, but they clearly did actually talk to their faculty members, like Professor Alsop. And that's how they've ended up with us. So I would say, talk to your faculty.

And culture and particular programs are really important because if all the students in one program are there full-time and you need to be there part-time, you're going to-- you might feel like a fish out of water, where another program-- like, our program is 80% part-time and only-- people are full-time. So it's just some of those intangibles. Understanding the culture of the degrees is really important.

And so the second question is, how will I find out if a certain graduate degree will likely lead to a job? So that is another question you can ask whoever's running a program. You can also look to see if people have that information on their website. Sometimes they do. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes there are degrees that naturally feed into certain careers. Sometimes there are naturally degrees that feed into more school because people want to go and get PhDs.

I think the other thing that's really important to look at is the career services and professional development office at that school, because really, that entity is the entity that's going to help you move forward towards a degree-- or, sorry, move towards a job.

And so there may be faculty who can help. But most of us have not left academia, because we're faculty. But I think that's where going and using that service and that center, which, almost every university has one. Every school at CUNY has one. I think that's really a critical resource that you need to use once you get there.

And there are a lot of different services, webinars. People will help you write your CV. People will help you learn how to network. People will help you figure out how to do your LinkedIn profile. And so I think you can do a certain amount of research to find out who gets jobs how.

But I also think the other thing is you have to go and investigate that, because one of the other questions-- and then I know--because I'm trying to make sure I don't talk for too long. The other thing is, sometimes people decide that they're going to go and get a master's degree to pivot

and to change careers. And if you're going to use the degree to change careers, then the reason why you're going may be very different.

And so then figuring out how to do a career transition will really involve career services, because they're going to make you fill in these assessments and careers, and what you like doing, and are you personable? Do you want to be social? Would you rather not talk to anybody? And all of those things to then actually figure out what those possible careers look like.

Because the question is, there's a job and then there's a career, and how are those different? But also, if you wanted to go and work in a certain sector, how do you use a master's degree to go do that? And by having that conversation, you may have to reverse engineer your work. But going to ask that question the day you show up should give you some opportunities. So I think that keeps me at about six minutes, and I will now be quiet. And I think it will move on to the next panelist.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Sure. Did anyone want to address that question in another way, about how to research programs or make sure that there is a job at the end of the program? OK. If not, I'm going to go on to the next respondent, Milan.

Second Question

The question is, can I go to grad school while working full- or part-time? How can I find grad programs that might give me employment as part of the program? So those are two different questions. But please go ahead.

Milan Fredricks: Yeah, two different questions. But also, to Dr. Macaulay's point, they make sense together. So to answer the first part, can I go to grad school while working full- or part-time, yes, you can. And I know it's possible because I did it.

I worked full-time and completed my graduate degree at Columbia University and a part-time program that was designed for working professionals, people who, for a myriad of real-life reasons, just cannot do a traditional program. And that experience overall made me-- I believe made me a better student, because I could apply what I was learning in real-time in my work. So it's very doable.

That being said, the type of program that you choose really makes all the difference. Part-time and hybrid programs have gotten really popular since COVID, and a lot more schools are offering them now because they see that there's a need for it and there is a desire for it. So there's more options than ever.

But you have to be honest with yourself about your personal bandwidth. Working while pursuing a graduate degree requires real discipline, and not every program is necessarily

designed to support that. So when you're researching graduate programs, I would recommend filtering specifically for those that are designed for working adults. The program structure, the course schedule, and the student culture is going to be different from those of a traditional program. Even if it's within the same school, it'll feel very different.

Also, I would advise-- and this is something important, finances are important-- looking into whether your employer offers tuition reimbursement, whether it's full or partial, to help make grad school more financially viable. A lot of people will leave that money on the table because they just never asked. They assumed that their job doesn't have one or that they don't qualify for it. So I would say, make sure you do that research and that due diligence, because even if it's a partial reimbursement, that will be significant in helping you afford to pay for grad school.

To the second part about finding grad programs that might give you employment, I would say the best question that you can ask any program is, what does employment look like for your students during the program and also after, but not just after? How many students are working professionals?

Even if the program isn't designed specifically for working professionals, find out, if you can, how many current and former students were working while completing the program. How much support does the program offer-- [CLEAR THROAT] excuse me-- under the program or for working students.

So look for programs that offer a robust graduate support, that have strong relationships with local employers and industries. And don't be shy about using LinkedIn to find current students and alums from the programs that you're considering and you're interested in and just asking them, did this program help you find work? Or did this program help you get a promotion at the job that you're in? See where they landed and whether they were working while they were in the program.

And that's real information that you won't find anywhere else other than talking to these very real people. And as Dr. Macaulay mentioned, make full use of the career services, at SPS and also if you decide to go to grad school. See how full and robust their offerings are. That's really important. If you can talk to someone there before you apply, that's really important.

It's going to require a lot of research. And applying to grad school is almost a full-time job. It's a lot of work that goes into it. I don't want to discourage anyone. Of course not. But do have to do a lot of planning and preparation and just thinking about what you want to do and what schools you want to apply to, and then the actual application itself. So those are just some of the things that I would advise in relation to working while in grad school and finding programs that might help you with employment afterwards.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Great. Thank you so much. Does anyone have anything else that they would want to add to that?

Tony Maldonado: Actually, I would like to add a little bit to part one of Milan's response. I think that if you're considering graduate school, you need to take a self-assessment of yourself. Graduate school is very intense, of course. And it's a commitment that you have to make fulltime. If you're working at the same time, how dedicated can you be to the program?

You honestly need to ask yourself that question. Can you set aside the time to actually work on that program? Because of course, we're not talking about minor papers. We're not talking about minor assignments. This is something that will contribute to your professional skills in the long term. And graduate school is very demanding.

So I'm not trying to discourage anyone. I just want you to be honest with yourself to say, well, if I want to study law, I have to be dedicated to this. And I know that I have to commit X number of hours per week in intense studying and intense writing and stuff like that. So it's something for you to assess, I would think.

Third Question

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you. So the next question is for Lisa Sheridan. **And it is, what should I be doing now to make myself a better candidate for grad school?**

Lisa Sheridan: Thank you. I love that question. When I was an undergrad-- and I would recommend this for everybody-- is I really try to be involved in the community and find avenues to expand my portfolio, so to speak. Jumping off of what Dr. Macaulay had said earlier, I went to get my BA, and even my master's, to initiate a career pivot. I had been a fashion designer for umpteen years, and truthfully, aged out. And so I needed to find a new career.

And so when I was at SPS, I looked for projects that could enhance my writing pivot. And Milan and I launched a new site, which really helped to solidify my credibility as a writer and was a big help when I started applying to grad school. Also, I was involved in the community, in student government. I mean, you find your venues, find what works for you.

But if you're giving back to the community within your education-- well, you're at SPS now. If you're giving back to the CUNY SPS community, that shows that you're going to be committed to your graduate program.

And feeding off of what the previous question had been, which was balancing work and going to school, I think SPS well situates you for going on to grad school and working full-time because you're already working in a very self-motivated way. Now, if you take that a step further and start getting involved in the community, you're really learning about budgeting time and

developing the discipline that it takes to work full-time and pursue a master's. But it is very, very doable.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you. And does anyone else want to add to that question?

Dr. Elizabeth Alsop: Sarah, I'm not a panelist, so I'm hesitant to jump in, but since I know Lisa, I just want to say that Lisa also developed really great relationships with her faculty. And I know this because as a faculty member-- and I think, I have to imagine, that resulted in really great letters of recommendation for your applications, too. So I think you are a little modest, Lisa, but I think that piece of what you were doing during your time is worth, also, highlighting in this-- I think, in this forum.

Lisa Sheridan: Thank you. Yeah, that is a good point. Definitely, use your academic network. And they're your friends. Your professors are your friends. And if you can develop relationships even beyond the office hours-- I mean, definitely use office hours.

But if you can arrange to meet for lunch, or a coffee, or even a Zoom, and have a private session, it really is invaluable, particularly in an online environment, because there is an inherent distance, and you want to bridge that distance. And so any kind of personal relationship you can develop with your faculty is-- it's money in the bank.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: I see Milan.

Milan Fredericks: Yeah, I just wanted to say really quickly, to add to what Lisa was saying, when you're applying to grad school, your personal statement, your resume, that's all part of the package. The admissions committee, they're looking for a well-rounded individual.

And they're looking to see who would be the best fit for their mix, for their cohort.

And you having shown a discipline and an interest in your community, showing that you have established yourself, left a mark in your undergrad community, that's going to play in your favor when they're deciding their cohort mix for the upcoming class. That's something you have to consider and think about. And it plays to your strengths, and it makes you stand out amongst people who might have similar education, and maybe GRE scores, but oh, this person is really involved in their community. We really like how they did X, Y, Z. That might be what you need to put you over the top.

Fourth Question

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Great, thank you. So the next question goes to Tony. **And the question is, in practical terms, how much do a program's reputation and alumni network shape long-term opportunity?**

Tony Maldonado: Well, from a positioning standpoint, I would think that beyond ranking and name recognition in isolation, I would think more about signaling. It's a competitive environment out there right now, so credentials function as shorthand. They communicate training and your standards and your peer group.

But a program's reputation can influence how influence, how quickly you're trusted in a room and an environment, sometimes before you've even spoken. So equally important is the alumni network-- I would say not just the size of it. I would say, basically the accessibility and engagement with it. It's all about relationships. It's all about networking.

You need to know who answers emails, who takes meetings, who mentors, who hires from within the ecosystem that we develop. And over time, those relationships can compound in many ways that you won't see it on graduation day, but you will see it on the long term. So the real questions that I would pose to students wouldn't be, will this degree get me a job, I'll say more, what doors does the affiliation-- let's say, for example, with SPS, what doors will it open for me in the next four, five, 10 years?

Because the marketplace has changed so much and everything's so profound right now, especially with AI, and everything's up in the air whether we will all have jobs or not, whether it's from academia or in the industry of music and film, you have to be prepared to network. And you have to be very open to that.

So if you are an introverted person, I would suggest, at this given stage, to try to shy away from that little by little. Again, as was stated previously, cultivate a good network with the faculty. You'll be very surprised. I would say that attending NYU and attending University College London, when I went to SPS, I was really surprised about the relationships you develop. It's a very close network. And I'm still in touch with my professors, believe it or not. And more than just about academia, actually on a personal level, where we can bounce ideas off one another.

So I would say that looking at SPS or any other school that you care to attend to, don't just look at the standards, don't just look at the ranking, and don't consider grad school just an educational tool for you. It's about affiliation. And that carries a lot of weight.

It's about networking.

And again, like I said, it's about cultivating a long-term relationship so that you actually can be successful, because you're going to have either more than just one or two master's degrees. And your career pathway may change many times. You may go in different directions before you end up in your final role. So cultivate that if you could. That's what I would suggest.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Does anyone have anything to add about alumni networking or the program's reputation?

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay: I would second what Tony has said, that networking, getting to know people, both professors and through those different networks, events, that come through the institution, is really important. But again, names only go so far. What an institution is known for and where geographically also it's located can make a huge difference. And so I think those are things to consider. Consider all of those things. So can only second what Tony has said.

Fifth Question

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Great. So the next question is for Dr. Macaulay. **And it is, how can I learn about what makes a grad school application successful, especially as a non-traditional student?**

Dr. Elizabeth Macaulay: In some ways, this builds off of what Lisa has already just said. The fact that it's kind of a similar thing of, how do you make yourself a good candidate, by doing all of those things, that sets you up already for a successful application. And there are a couple of things to say that supports a successful application.

So first of all, again, relationships with your faculty. You need two letter-- for most grad schools, you need at least two letters of recommendation, and maybe three sometimes, depending on what you're doing. So really, having faculty who know you, who can speak to your academic strengths, your resiliency, your curiosity is really, really important. So again, taking the opportunity, taking the time to know your faculty is really critical, because you don't want to come to the end of a four-year undergraduate degree and say, well, no one knows me. And that's not entirely a professor's fault.

So even if you're-- Milan, I see you know that you're an introvert. And that's one of those things where even if you are introverted, most professors have office hours. They want to meet people. They want to know. So take that time. It's just a way to build on success. So get to know your professors. So that's really-- a key thing. I mean, you want to do well in the subjects that you are interested in.

So academics and grades do matter in that sense. If you know that you want to-- maybe you started undergrad, and you were like I'm going to be a biochem major, organic or inorganic chemistry. And I mean, I wouldn't-- you couldn't pay me to take an organic chemistry. My mother loved it. But that's why she's more of a scientist, and I'm not.

But if you don't do great in organic chemistry and you want to go to liberal studies, that's fine-- or to a humanities degree. But thinking-- considering your curriculum, considering your strengths. And then if you do get interested in something, building on that to show that there's at least a-- even if you come to it later, a kind of curiosity that's building towards a more substantial set of interests.

So I think knowing who your-- knowing the faculty who can write for you, having a strong transcript. It does not have to be a perfect transcript. It does not have to be straight A's. But it needs to be good in the areas that you're interested in pursuing in that sense. So I think that's important.

The other thing is, you will have to submit a writing sample, a lot of times. And there are oftentimes two types of writing samples. There may be a personal statement. And the personal statement is really important. It should not just be your CV or your resume regurgitated. I can read that. I can find that information. It needs to tell your story of why you're right for that degree. What are you trying to achieve? What is your background, What attracts you to that place?

So rather than being like, OK, I'm going to apply to 10 grad schools because I'm not sure and I want to get in someplace, first of all, that's expensive, because you're going to have to pay fees because they have to process it. So almost everybody has an application fee. But what we find in reading applications, because faculty-- and this is true. Like I sit on a number of admissions committees in a number of different programs, the Graduate Center, like somebody is like, I want to come and study film, and this is what I'm interested in.

And I see that you have some film professors, so maybe I'd want to study with them. And I like aesthetics of film, but I'm also interested in theory and history. I was like, wow, this person has done their research. They seem to have interest. OK. They've got, like, two film classes. And maybe they say, I was a comparative literature major, and I only realized I really wanted to study film when I was a senior. So I'm coming to you because I want to do that.

And you're like, oh, there's a story. There's a thoughtfulness. There's a fact that somebody has really-- really has a good fit. Fit is something that starts to matter more when you get to graduate school. And it continues. If you do a master's degree, fit matters, then for a doctoral degree, fit is, like, essential. So I think that that's really important. And then you will submit a writing sample of some sort.

And I will say, if-- you really should submit a paper from a class that you've done. It could be 5, 10 pages. It doesn't have to be on exactly what you want to work on. But people really do read them because they want to see that you can communicate clearly. Also, I would say the other thing is-- because AI is an issue. If we see discrepancies, so one piece of writing looks very polished and one does not, I mean, the AI detectors are not great and I don't use them, but we really will go, huh, that seems very incongruous.

So if somebody's writing sample was perfect, but they have not gotten above a C in an English class, you will sit there and you will do some math. And so think hard. And if there is an issue on your transcript, acknowledge it. Take the white elephant, turn it into part of your story as

opposed to something that you're like, oh, I can't apply because I did badly at this or I didn't do well my first two years. It's like, no, no, apply.

Because a lot of things also, at least, will be done. In CUNY, people can sometimes take a class as a non-matriculated student. We'll say, like, you're just borderline. Take a class as a non-matriculated student. You do well in that class, Reapply that has a very high success rate. So that's one thing.

The other thing is, nontraditional students, I think, in a lot of programs-- I think if you're-- 20 years ago, people would be like, oh, well, that's a bit odd. But I think that's really changed because of the dynamics of people at an undergraduate level. It's not just SPS. I mean, I think of Lehman. But one of the largest populations of students are people who are in their 30s or 40s who have, like, 40 or 60 credits, who never finished. And they go back to finish and they are coming ahead. And so they don't have a normal background.

And one of the things I can say, also, is that we have students who are, like, 22, and we have students who are 70. I love that mix.

And I would also say most of our stories, the most of our students who come back who are in their 40s or in their 50s or in their 60s or even in their 70s-- we have one in their 90s. That is an outlier, even for us. I mean, I would love to be 94 and still going to school. Maybe not, but I'm still impressed with the intellectual endeavor.

Is, I think the piece is that you have life experience. And life experience goes a long way, because you're like, I can manage having a class and having-- I might have parents I have to take care of. I might have a kid I have to take care of. And also, because you're coming back, because you haven't-- you've had to go out and be in the real world. The real world is occasionally fun. I mean, I only like to visit.

But I think because of those things, you may come back-- and I would say some of our most motivated students would be described as nontraditional just because they're not 25. And they're awesome. And they bring a different perspective. And...what I see, which is fabulous in the class, is you get students who are younger and students who are older, who have different backgrounds, different experiences.

And they start to learn from each other in a way that is really fantastic, that if you were in, maybe, a certain type more traditional environment, that wouldn't happen. But it's really something that I think is not-- something we see not only in liberal studies, but something we see at the Graduate Center, something we see across a number of the CUNY schools, which makes it a very special type of environment.

So that's a long way to say, get to know your professors. Do as well as you can. If there are bumps in the road on your transcript or in your experience, own it. Tell it. It's part of your narrative. I think Milan just said that in one of the chats. And Cherry's also saying this whole point about being non-traditional. One of our great students that we have now came from SPS. A student who worked in IT and internet technology came to us because of Professor Alsop, was in my seminar last-- two falls ago, 2024.

And he's a blast. He's a great. He works with me as a research assistant. He's awesome. He's so great. And he's-- like, we talk about how his kids are all graduating from college. And so that's a person that has great lived experience. Super-- so curious. And I can't wait to supervise his thesis.

So I think that's a way you can see where a student who is not 25 and did undergrad in four years-- this is somebody who didn't. They finished their undergrad like two years ago. It's a really cool thing. So I think, own it, lean into it, and make it part of your story. Because it is. Yes, it is Grant Bremer, who I adore, who's great. So anyway, I'll be quiet now and see if anyone else has additional comments.

Sixth Question

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: So because of time constraints, let's move on to the next question, which is for Milan. **And it is, should I plan to attend grad school immediately after graduating from SPS or are there advantages to waiting?**

Milan Fredricks: Yeah, this is a very personal decision. And honestly, I don't think there's any universally right answer. My path was anything but linear. So I feel like I can really speak to both sides. I had a nine-year gap between when I stopped my undergraduate studies initially, many, many, many, many moons ago at Lehman, and when I came back to finish at SPS.

Then once I graduated from SPS, I went right to Columbia for grad school. So I've experienced both the pause and the momentum of going directly. So I would push back a little on anyone who maybe believes that there's a right timeline for grad school. And as nontraditional students, we already know that there's no such thing as right time or a perfect time. It's the time that's right for you.

So what I would say to that is, if you truly have a clear sense of what you want to study and why, and you can fund it in a way that doesn't set you back financially-- because that's important, and I will always bring that up. It's a bit of a downer, but money is important. Going directly can make a lot of sense. You're already in academic mode. You're already thinking like a student. Your habits are already locked in. They're still sharp. And you can build on that energy.

But if you're not sure yet-- and that's OK-- waiting is not a failure. I repeat, waiting is not a failure. Anyone who makes you feel that way, poo-poo on them. Work experience, life experience, even just taking a moment to reflect for a few months, those things can really sharpen your sense of purpose in ways that make grad school a much more meaningful and more productive experience.

And it also can make you a stronger applicant and a more grounded grad student when you're there.

And many programs actually prefer applicants to have work experience, which is why they want to see a resume. They want to see what you have done, what you've experienced, whether that's W-2 work or you volunteered. At one point, you owned your own business. They want to see this because it paints a portrait of you as a person, and they care about you holistically as a student--at least, the good programs do.

Avoid any program that sees you transactionally and doesn't really care about the picture you paint as a full individual. They should want to know as much about you as possible, because as I said earlier, they're trying to pick the best mix of their cohort. They should be, anyway. They want some people who have this experience, A experience here. They want some people from B experience.

They want some people who maybe were more traditional. They want nontraditional. They want older. They want younger. They want a mix. So don't-- [CLEARS THROAT] excuse me. I'm sorry. So just don't underestimate the importance of your work experience and how it can actually make your application to graduate school stronger, increase your chances of being accepted, and when you go, make you better prepared to actually be the kind of grad student that you want to be.

And it's also going to help when you're doing your personal statement. All the things that you've done in the interim between SPS and grad school, you will be able to add in your life experience in your personal statement. But going directly, that works too, especially if you have clarity and momentum. So the key question to ask yourself is, do I know enough about what I want from a graduate program to make it worth the time and the money right now?

And no matter what your answer, do not let anyone make you feel as if you've fallen behind some arbitrary deadline, some arbitrary timeline, because you decide that maybe you need a little bit more time in between. So that's what I would say.

Whichever choice you make is going to be right for you in that moment.

Seventh Question

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you. So I think we have time for one more question, and then we're going to go to student questions. So if you're a student, now is a good time to start thinking about what you might want to ask. And so the last question is for Lisa Sheridan. **And it is, what does a typical timeline of applying to grad school look like? How many programs should I apply to?**

Lisa Sheridan: I'm going to have to kind of echo what Milan said and say this is a very, very personal approach, also. When I applied to grad school, I had, initially, one program in mind. I wanted to get an MFA. And MFAs are really, really competitive and have, like, a 1% acceptance rate. And so after trying that route, I was like, I don't think that's going to work for me.

So I pivoted again. I'm really good at pivots. And I went for a general MA in English instead of an MFA in creative writing. And that worked really well for me. But those kind of things, you have to work out and do your research on your own. And the timeline for applying, I think you really need to plan on three to six months, depending on the program.

You may have to take special tests to get in. I did not. But there's LSATs, there's GMATs. There's all kinds of tests that may be required. So you've got to allow for that. You've got to allow for gathering up your recommendation letters, all the personal statements, writing statements. When I applied to the MFA, I think I must have done a short story, like, in about 100 iterations, I actually saved all the printouts of the various iterations, and someday, I'll turn it into pulp and then make a chapbook out of it or something.

But you just need to know the program that you're applying to and know what is involved. And some programs take a lot longer, and you need to be prepared for that. And it will really vary. So the moral of the story is, do your homework here and know what the program requires.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you so much. Thanks, everyone, for sharing your wisdom. And if you're a student and you have a question, you can either raise your hand and say it or you can type it in the chat. I'm looking to see if anyone has a question. Oops. Looks like—

Eighth Question

Dr. Elizabeth Alsop: Sarah, I'm not a student, but I'm passing along a question that a student asked me over email, and they were kind of embarrassed. And they're like, this isn't a real question. I like, it's absolutely a real question. But their question was that-- they're actually fairly early on in the program, and they wanted to **what kinds of graduate degrees students from SPS, and our program in particular, have done just to get a sense of, what is the landscape of possibility?** And I think Dr. Macaulay alluded a little bit to some of the different options.

But I just wanted to say out loud, since we're recording, for anyone listening, that our students have gone on to do an incredible variety of graduate degrees. So we've had students get MLS or

MLIS, library science degrees, go to social work school, go to law school, right? And that was something that came up at the beginning of this call. Go into MA programs.

We've had, I think, one student since I've been here. PhDs have been less common in recent memory. But that's not to say that I think probably some of our MA students have gone on to do those. So all of which is to say that just because you got your BA in communication and media, some of our students, like Milan, for instance, do go on to do strategic comms and to keep working in that field. But a lot of other people pivot, again, at that moment.

And I've had recently at least one conversation with a student who's kind of abashed. I think I want to go do a liberal arts degree, kind of over whispering on the side. That's great. You want to keep working at the job you have. You don't need to necessarily be pursuing some new professional pathway.

All of which is to just affirm the variety of programs that our students have pursued for whoever's out there asking that question. And I think that we have a number of different faculty who can speak to some of those different programs. So I'll stop talking now and let actual students ask questions.

Ninth Question

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Great. Yeah, I see a question from Cherry in the chat. And if anyone else has a question that comes up, feel free to raise your hand or type it in the chat and we'll get to you next. So Cherry's question is, "**Hi, I'm curious what your thoughts are on getting a master's and job hirers considering you overqualified for a role. I'm pivoting into an adjacent field, but some would consider positions I'm researching entry-level. So is it dangerous to be overqualified?**" And if anyone on the panel wants to take that, you can maybe raise your hand or just start speaking.

Milan Fredricks: I can get us started. Oh, I'm sorry, Tony, I'll be pretty quick. Tony mentioned it earlier when he was speaking. It's probably why he raised his hand to talk. So I'll make it quick so he can say it. I don't want to take his words. But getting a master's degree is going to be kind of the standard soon. So I wouldn't want you to be dissuaded because you feel like it would make you overqualified.

At some point, we might all need PhDs to do certain jobs. So do it because it's something that you are actually genuinely interested in studying and learning. I'm considering applying to graduate school myself, actually, at CUNY Law-- that was Dr. AlSabah, speaking of-- because I have been fascinated with law and advocacy for a very long time, but I've always been disinterested in traditional law schools and the type of lawyers that they pump out.

I am more for advocacy and less about making rich people richer. So a public law degree, a public law education, appealed to me more. And I am interested in how I could pivot my current degree and my current work in communications, strategic communications, with law. There is an intersection there that I'm excited to navigate. So that's something that you should think about.

What is something that you'd be excited about navigating, learning more about? And whatever degree you have right now and any other interdisciplinary you have-- licenses that you have-- how can you use that to make yourself employable, to not make yourself overqualified? They say, oh, I have to get Cherry because she has all these things that we need?

I don't want to take up too much more time. But yeah, that is a-- it's a complicated question, and I understand where it's coming from, but I don't want that to dissuade you from getting the education that you actually are excited about getting.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thanks, Milan. And I think, Tony, you wanted to--

Tony Maldonado: Well, I wanted to add to the fact that in today's job marketplace, many people are overqualified for their roles, to be quite honest. So the fear of having a-- obtaining your degree in the field that you want to go to or enter should not stop you at this given stage. I know a lot of people who are starting entry-level jobs right now who have masters and even PhDs. So don't be afraid to get well qualified for what you want to attain at this given stage.

We're in a flux right now in the marketplace-- job marketplace. And I think it will last the next three to four or five years, to be quite honest. By that time, if you have a degree in the position that you want, you'll be very well-positioned to actually, basically, attack at that given stage and gain what you want. So don't be afraid of that.

Financial Aid

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you so much. Thank you. I really appreciate those answers.

Great. So did any of the students have any question that comes to mind? So in that case, I think we could reserve the last five minutes for maybe some last words, like, maybe some unusual tips or strategies that are uncommon. Or if you want to just say your own bit of wisdom, that would be great.

Yes.

I—oh, it looks like, Hassan, did you have a question?

Hassan (student): Yes. I'm thinking about going for my master's, so I'm just soaking in the knowledge from today, because I'm learning a lot with the graduate programs and how they could reimburse you for your tuition at the same time. I didn't know that until recently, too.

Milan Fredricks: Yeah, don't leave that money on the table, Hassan. If you can get-- grad school is not cheap. Even an affordable education like CUNY, it's still going to be expensive. So finding ways to subsidize that through your employer, if you can, take advantage of it.

Hassan (student): Hmm. Will do. Will do.

Lisa Sheridan: Yeah. To Milan's point, also, there aren't a lot of scholarships in grad school the way there are in undergrad. So if you can find--yeah, if your employer offers education reimbursement, or even partial payment towards a degree, it's totally worth it.

I will say the obvious thing. If you are a CUNY employee and you go to graduate school in CUNY, there are funds that usually work that way. I think maybe up to two classes per term, undergrad, grad. So there are lots of ways that you can do that if you're in the CUNY system. So just keep that in mind, too.

Hassan (student): Thanks, yeah. Thank you.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: OK, great. And yeah, Hassan, there are a lot of programs that will give you full fellowships to go to grad school. For my PhD program, I was able to teach during the program, and I took out zero loans, and I took an embarrassingly long time to finish the program. But I didn't go into debt.

And it really varies on the type of program. Like, if you're going for an MBA, there's very little chance that you'll get a full ride. But if you are going to be an elementary school teacher, there are fellowships and programs where you can basically pay zero tuition.

So do your research and maybe find some people that have graduated from the type of program that you want to attend.

And so I'm going to paste this link in the chat. For the students, I made a list of resources for those of you that are looking into grad school. It's that Google Doc link that I just posted. And some of those resources include information about financial aid, but it's really a program by program sort of thing, how much aid you're going to get.

And I just wanted to give one little bit of wisdom that I experienced. I went to two different grad programs, and both times, I didn't get any funding or I got very low amounts of scholarship funding. And I actually went to the directors of the program after I was admitted and I told them my sort of story. Oh, I don't think I can afford to attend your program without more funding.

And both times, one of them offered me a job. And the other one offered to consider me for more funding, and I ended up getting more funding. So you kind of have to put yourself out there. Sometimes, it even takes going to the director of the program in person. And you'll be surprised what could happen. So don't be afraid to put yourself out there. Does anyone else,

any students, have any questions, Or does anyone want to give a little bit of wisdom to close out?

Milan Fredricks: Yeah, I wanted to-- I'm sorry. Just quickly to add to this maybe lesser-known strategies or ideas when you're applying. Considering how you time your applications is important. Some programs have rolling admissions-- I know mine did-- which means applying early can significantly improve your chances of admission. The closer you get to the rolling admissions deadline, the more competitive the selection process becomes. So help yourself and your chances of getting admitted by submitting a strong application as early as you possibly can.

Tony Maldonado: If I could, I would like to add to this, Dr. Macaulay, and also Milan, pointed to this. In your personal statement, write your story. Use very good storytelling. Don't just be very plain to say, I'm applying for this degree because of such and such. Let them know. Let the committee know who you are, to be quite honest, where you come from. If it means that your family went through struggles, and for example, if you had to eat rice and beans every single day just so you can afford to go to school, say that. But say it in a great way that it's a compelling story of yourself.

What you want to do is be able to shine. And I think Dr. Macaulay actually said that very clearly in that regard, that when you're at a committee at this given stage, you're reading so many applications, you want to basically focus on the ones that stand out the most, because that's the one that is really going to add to the cohort.

So do yourself a favor. Take time to take stock of yourself-- like I said before, a self-assessment-- and write that story. But don't write it once. Write it many times over so that you know exactly what you're writing and who you're writing for at that given stage.

Milan Fredricks: Yes, kill your darlings, as a professor of mine said. Don't be scared to edit your writing. I'm sorry. I just wanted to say that. Some people get terrified about editing their writing and cutting it down. Don't be scared to kill your darlings. You can love what you wrote. Read it, love it, delete it. Most of it is not necessary. I learned that in Professor [INAUDIBLE] class, and also in my graduate program. Do not be scared to edit yourself. Just wanted to add that. Writing is super important in grad school.

Lisa Sheridan: Agreed. And I'm going to throw in one more. Sometimes programs have prerequisites, and in my case, I didn't have some of the prerequisites. So I went to the director of the program, the grad program I was applying to, and I asked if I could get a delayed acceptance, or get accepted and then take those prereqs that I needed to.

And fortunately, because I approached him, he was just like, don't worry about it. Your grades are solid enough and you're-everything here is solid enough. Just come on and enter the

program. But the point is, if there is a prereq that looks like it's daunting, ask for delayed acceptance and try to pursue it that way. And talk to the director of the program.

Dr. Sarah Ruth Jacobs: Thank you to the panelists for kindly giving their time. And thank you for everyone who attended this roundtable.

Thank you.

We hope that our advice and our experience was helpful to you.

Dr. Elizabeth Alsop: Thank you, everyone. This was so amazing to hear. Even as someone who knows about this process, this was a tremendous amount of wisdom coming together in the room. And we're going to share this recording with all of our students, and I know everyone will benefit from, again, your collective wisdom and insight. So thank everyone so much. Sarah, thank you for organizing this.

Best of luck to everybody.