

Why go to graduate school for a Ph.D.?

Brita Munsinger

Research Methods (CS 7123)

August 19, 2015

The decision to commit to a Ph.D. program is not one to be taken lightly. It involves not only a large commitment of time, but also of focus and energy, not to mention forgoing potentially lucrative income opportunities. The latter is especially acute in our field, computer science. Yet here we are in this class, all of us having made the commitment to this graduate program.

Many of us have heard, perhaps from parents or from our undergraduate professors, that to succeed in graduate school requires passion for our chosen subject. What do they mean? When I finished college I didn't yet understand what that really meant. It's not uncommon for students to enter graduate school as a default choice, because they are not sure what they want to do. This can be a mistake if they are not fortunate enough to discover their path while still in school.

In my case, I worked in industry for a

while, trying to find my niche. Eventually it became clear I could not do the kind of work I wanted to do in the environment I wanted to work without further education. The job opportunities I was offered were of limited scope and impact. The type of research I find most exciting involves finding new ways of using technology to help people. One inspiring example I came across while researching schools to apply to was John Quarles' work using virtual reality systems to assist people with disabilities.

I understand that doing research is not a straight line from inspiration to result. There are many side roads and blind alleys that must be overcome. Sometimes the work can be tedious and the outcome uncertain. This is why passion is critical. To commit to graduate school is to make a conscious and deliberate choice to pursue an open-ended career rather than a well-worn path. Once you've made that decision there's no going back.