Students

Decision Making: Graduate School and Beyond

Exhilarating, difficult, easy, uncomfortable, enjoyable, important, demanding, frustrating, awkward, inconsequential, amusing, embarrassing, tedious, exciting, terrifying, stressful. These are words that describe how we may feel about life-changing decisions that occur naturally during college and career development. Now and in the future, decisions will loom before us and demand our attention. Robert Frost once described a traveler in such a situation: “Two roads diverged in a yellow wood, and sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood and looked down one as far as I could to where it bent in the undergrowth.” Similarly, in traveling our individual career paths, we often reach a crossroad of sorts and hesitate as to what course is superior. Embodied in the following experiences from my own life are three principles of decision making that replace the hesitation with direction.

Principle 1: Look Inward Before Outward

“Do what you know until you know what to do” is the advice my father received from his father and passed down to me. Following this guidance, I began my undergraduate degree in agricultural business without thought to what I wanted in the long term. I meandered aimlessly a couple semesters until I waded into the tedious task of discovering my lifelong goals and desires. I realized that an agronomy degree accommodated what I wanted not only in a career but in other aspects of life, and I quickly changed course. As I found with my undergraduate degree, understanding personal life goals and dreams adds clarity in the moment of decision and provides the whole picture that options and opportunities may be weighed against. Since goals and dreams are not static—which I learned after marrying my wife, Samantha—routine reflection will keep you aware of your ever-developing, personal objectives.

Principle 2: Research, Research, Research

Throughout the last year of my undergraduate degree, I began actively researching graduate schools and applied to those that fit me well. I received assistantship offers from several excellent programs, and all appeared to align with my end goals. Consequently, deciding between them was difficult and stressful. I gathered data on the programs, the potential advisers, and the locations through every avenue of information I could imagine. I searched the internet, queried my networking contacts and school professors, called current students, visited the campus where possible, and examined the potential adviser’s past and present research. I looked up locations on Google Maps and delved into the area’s cost of living. I built a list of characteristics I wished for my graduate experience, ordered them from most important to the least, and compared the offers together. The more information I acquired, the easier and more educated the decision became. In the end, I narrowed down the options until two schools remained.

Principle 3: Be Aware of Your Impressions

Samantha and I flew out to tour the campus of one of the remaining offers, and we had a marvelous experience. The faculty were welcoming and warm, the area was beautiful, and exciting research opportunities were available. All in all, the tour was positive and rewarding, and the position appeared to be a good fit. Yet, as I pondered the visit on the flight home and during the days following, I felt hesitant to accept the offer. Samantha was similarly impressed; the position did not feel right for us. We carefully reviewed both options again and decided to accept the alternative offer located in Arkansas. Within a few months, Samantha and I realized that the University of Arkansas fulfilled all hopes and expectations—the research team became a second family, and Arkansas a second home. Some call it a gut feeling and others inspiration from a higher being, yet those impressions are valuable and should be taken into consideration during the decision-making process.

Through graduate school and beyond, countless decisions must be made. Yet, regardless of the decisions you currently face, employing these three principles will increase your confidence in decision making and lead to accomplished goals and dreams; for it is our choices that determine the ultimate destination of life and career. My hope is to someday look back on life with satisfaction and say, like Robert Frost’s traveler, that the road I took “made all the difference.” May you find success through all the exhilarating, difficult, easy, uncomfortable, enjoyable, important, demanding, frustrating, awkward, inconsequential, amusing, embarrassing, tedious, exciting, terrifying, and stressful decisions of graduate school.