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Column: Ask Marta



Dear Marta,

I am an undergraduate student who is interested in Cognitive Science and am considering applying into graduate programs next year in both Cognitive and Computer Science. However, I am concerned about how my opportunities to find a job might be affected if I choose to continue in a Cognitive Science track, versus going with a more traditional field like Computer Science. Also, I am not completely sure if I'd like to stay in academia or go into industry either. So, I would also like to know if I would be better off in one field or another, depending on if I chose an academic or industry job.

- *Career Cogitator*

Dear *Career Cogitator*,

I applaud your cogitating. These are indeed the sorts of issues that you need to be considering at this time. Any school? Which school? Which department? And, which advisor and what research topic, etc.? If you have a solid background and are intelligent, serious, creative, have your heart in what you do, have the right personality for the type of job that you choose, and are at least somewhat lucky or at least not unlucky, you will do well and be happy whatever your choices. And, yes I do believe that, always have. Sometimes taking the traditional path is easier, but not always. Where you start need not necessarily determine where you end up. Academia is a way of life, so is industry; they are just different ways of life which will fill your days in different ways (I'm sure you can find people who would be willing to tell you the differences, but I don't think it's that easy to generalize). You may be well-suited for both, for just one or perhaps neither; that's something you will have to learn about yourself as you make your choices.

Of course, it is almost impossible to answer your question as I don't know what type of job you will ultimately want and what your concerns are. Naturally, these will make a big difference. If you stay in academia then the main considerations are what you want to work on for the next few years, whom you want to work with, what you plan to be able to teach, and whom do you wish

to have as your colleagues/collaborators. Graduate school is a non-trivial chunk of your adult life. The topic matter of computer science and cognitive science are typically quite different. Which excites you? Which entices you? Which makes you lose sleep at night? Which do you feel more comfortable with? The "which" is the area that I would choose. Once the field is narrowed down then check out the mentor situation. What do you want to do in the way of research? Who would you like to have as a mentor? How do you want to be trained? The answers to these questions can help you decide which specific program is best for you or put you in an even bigger quandry. A mentor is important so check whether or not they are affiliated with more than one graduate department or program - unless you don't care that much about research per se and you care more about the graduate program than the mentor. If you do care about the mentor read what they write, send them emails, visit the school, and talk to those who've worked with them. Gather info!! Of course, evaluating it requires that you know what you want. But, not to worry if you don't, some successful people were in your shoes, once.

One of my colleagues thinks "...you may have better chances of a good job in Cognitive Science: being a Cognitive Scientist means that you can apply to Psychology, Cognitive Science, and possibly even Computer Science departments when you graduate. On the other hand, Computer Science will lead to higher pay scales." That's probabilistically the case, though I know of professors in cognitive science and in psychology departments who got their PhD in computer science and of cognitive science professors with different degrees who are paid off-scale salaries (because they can show that they could make more money in another department or in industry). Academics negotiate their salaries just as non-academics do. Probably you are more likely to make more money if you go to industry; but while money is a good thing especially in San Diego, it isn't everything.

Another suggested that it is a "good idea to get undergraduate and graduate degrees in different but related fields so that you'll have two perspectives." This is the same idea that underlies the difficult advice that we often give to a good undergraduate in our department who wants to go to graduate school in cognitive science -- go somewhere else and expose yourself to a different view.

Where you get your degree is clearly less important than what you know and how well you know it, though I can't argue that at least some evaluators may assume you know more "computer science" for example if you actually got a degree in that field. I wouldn't necessarily assume that, but then I am not the one evaluating you. Given that this might be a concern keep it in mind and be prepared to respond to it -- . Assuming you have the right computer science skills also having a degree in cognitive science can only be a plus; it not only makes you stand out in a group of applicants with computer science degrees but actually makes you a better candidate for certain types of jobs in industry. Are those the kinds of jobs that would interest you? I recommend talking with some of the people at the sorts of places that you might consider working at. At UCSD you can have your cake and eat it to by taking a computer science degree together with an interdisciplinary degree in cognitive science. I don't know how many places offer this option.

In any case, not everyone who goes to graduate school intends to be a professor. Graduate school can give you many skills in talking, writing, thinking analytically and critically, working collaboratively as well as independently -- that will prove extremely useful whether you stay in academia or go into industry. And, certainly moving up the ladder in a company into management positions often happens faster if at all for people with these sorts of skills (and often an associated degree). That said, one thing graduate programs don't typically teach but should is management, because running a lab also requires dealing with personnel issues, budgetary issues, and general management issues. Whatever direction you go don't assume that being a good manager is

in your genes.

Finally, don't be afraid to change your mind if you find that a choice you made turns out not to suit your personality and/or needs. There's no shame and much courage in switching gears if the road you're on seems to be closing in on you.

Good luck.

Special thank yous to Rik Belew, Gary Cottrell, Jeff Elman, Jochen Triesch, and Emo Todorov for their thoughtful comments to my queries.

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In this section of *Cognitive Science Online*, UCSD Professor Marta Kutas answers questions from our readers. If you have any questions you'd like to ask Marta, please **contact the editors**. While personal questions relating to life in academia or graduate school may be appropriate, please keep in mind that this column mainly serves to provide advice and guidance on professional matters such as teaching and academic issues. Also keep in mind that this is an *advice* column and neither Dr. Kutas nor the journal will assume any responsibility regarding the consequences of following or disregarding the advice provided. Take advice responsibly!