

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 10 Putting It All Together for a Winning Application

Overcoming the Psychological Challenges
Making and Following a Plan

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This book is designed to provide information concerning the subject matter covered. Its purpose is not to reprint all of the information that is otherwise available to the author and/or publisher, but rather to complement, clarify, and supplement the material in other texts. For more information, see the many references listed in the *Resources* section near the back of this book.

The book deals with topics on which opinions may vary. It offers advice that reflects the opinions of the author, and it should not be expected that all other individuals within the academic community will agree, entirely and unconditionally, with all of the ideas that are expressed. The author shall have neither liability nor responsibility to any person who fails to get into graduate school after reading this book.

Chapter 10

Putting It All Together For a Winning Application

Overcoming Psychological Challenges

The process of applying to graduate school presents most students with a number of psychological challenges. You may experience doubts about your qualifications as you research various graduate programs. You may feel awkward while soliciting letters of recommendation from professors. You may be overcome with anxiety as you try to write your personal statement, or with boredom as you spend hours filling out tedious application forms.

Not only do these emotions feel uncomfortable, but they can also cause procrastination when it comes to initiating or completing essential tasks. I cannot counsel you on how to overcome procrastination, other than to refer you to a book: *The Now Habit: A Strategic Program For Overcoming Procrastination and Enjoying Play*, by N.A. Fiore. There are other self-help books on overcoming procrastination, but Fiore's book is as good as any I have ever seen on this topic.

Someone whose judgment you trust, perhaps a professor or a career counsellor, might suggest that because of your mediocre grades you do not have a realistic chance of getting into graduate school. You

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might be disheartened to hear someone voice a doubtful opinion of your chances, but you should not put too much stock into only one person's opinion. Someone's low estimation of your chances of getting into a graduate program may be based on the assumption that you will approach the application process the way that most students do. If this were true, then perhaps your chances of getting in *would* be slim. But, that is not the approach you are going to take. You are going to do things to set yourself apart from the typical applicant.

Many students wage a fierce battle with self-doubt throughout the application process. Still, it is easy to see why this happens, and books like this one can be part of the problem! We have discussed a great number of factors that could potentially play some role in determining the fate of your graduate school or professional school application. Based on this information and advice, one could, in principle, imagine the perfect applicant. Many students compare themselves to this imaginary *perfect* applicant, and feel despondent upon realizing that they don't measure up in all respects. Reality does not usually justify this concern because no applicants have everything going their way like the fantasy applicant does — not even those who will eventually be accepted into the most competitive programs in their field.

Armed with the information and advice in this book, you are now prepared to take the necessary steps to set yourself apart from the typical applicant. But first, you need some measure of self-confidence that you can do it. Without this confidence, most students won't even begin the process of applying to graduate school. If self-doubt is a problem area for you, then you will find that after you have a detailed plan of action down on paper, as discussed later in this chapter, the much needed sense of confidence and control will begin to emerge.

Avoid costly mistakes after the application deadline One of the most formidable psychological challenges comes after you have done all that you need to do. The application deadline is past, and you have confirmed that your file is complete at each of the programs to which you have applied. Decisions won't be announced for several more weeks. The wait may seem unbearable, and you may find yourself

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having all sorts of irrational ideas about what might be going on.

Is it true what you have heard others say — “No news is good news?” Or have the selections already been made and the program forgot to inform you? Should you just call and find out what’s going on?

It is understandable that there would be some anxiety while you wait out this period, but you must not let it cause you to act impulsively. Resist all temptation to call and ask about the status of your application or how the admissions committee is coming along with their selections. An exception could be made if a program had informed you about a decision date that has already passed by more than a week without a word. In some cases, however, you may actually hurt your chances of a favorable decision on your application by calling about these things. Such a call might be perceived as an attempt to manipulate the decision makers. Or it could give the impression that you are egocentric, imagining your candidacy is of monumental importance to the program. Or it could suggest that you are impulsive or neurotic. If someone from a program wants to talk with you about your application, that person will call you.

Applicants to graduate school often overlook the influence that the graduate program secretary can have on how their application is processed. Yet they are likely to end up speaking with this person every time they call the program about something. This important staff member plays a critical role in the admissions procedure, as he or she will be responsible for receiving and sorting all of the application materials into separate files, and assisting the admissions committee or other faculty members in dealing with all of the information.

Whenever applicants call to ask about something, the graduate program secretary will try to find the answer — unless, of course, the caller is overbearing or rude. The program secretaries can be helpful friends, or significant foes. You do not want to annoy these individuals. Treat them with the respect they deserve, and do not pester them with inappropriate calls and inquiries.

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