

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 5 Applying Successfully With or Without Excellent Grades

The Easiest Ways to Improve the Odds
A General Strategy for a Winning Application
The Importance of Relevant Experience

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Chapter 5

Applying Successfully With or Without Excellent Grades

Some Easy Ways To Improve the Odds

One suggestion that you will hear often is, “Apply to more than just one school!” You should definitely follow this advice. By now, you should be starting to understand why it is important to apply to several programs.

The key reasons have to do with how the selection process works. The decisions of admissions committees and graduate supervisors are products of human judgment, based on the consideration of several factors, both objective and subjective. With so much subjectivity in the process, there is no way of knowing whether you will be successful in striking the fancy of any particular group of admission committee members. In many cases, the prospective supervisor is the one who ultimately decides on the application, and there could be any one of several possible reasons why that person might not accept any particular applicant.

The point is that getting into graduate school can be capricious even for the students with really good grades. No students should take it for granted that they will be accepted into any particular program.

Chapter 5 Applying Successfully With or Without Excellent Grades

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Although you would be wise to apply to more than one program, there is no advantage in applying to a large number of indiscriminately chosen programs. You will not improve the odds if you are unrealistic about which programs you apply to. Choices must be made on the basis of your research into what each of them has to offer, how well they match your interests and goals, how competitive they are, and how your own credentials (including grades) are likely to stack up against the competition.

Students with weak grades and mediocre standardized test scores, and who come from small and less prestigious undergraduate colleges, may not have much chance of getting into one of the more competitive and high-profile programs in their field. Applying to several such programs will just lead to more rejection letters and a bigger blow to the student's self-esteem. It might not be worth the time and effort, or the application fees, for such students to apply to these programs. But there are dozens of other programs for which their application might be quite competitive. If you do the kind of research that was suggested in chapter 4, then you should have little problem figuring out which programs are realistic for you, in light of your qualifications and the competitiveness of the various programs.

A similar consideration applies to students applying to programs in which they compete with others to have a particular faculty member agree to supervise their graduate studies. In general, the more well-known and highly regarded the prospective supervisor is in their field, the more highly qualified students there are likely to be applying to work with them each year. This stacks the deck against the students who have less sterling credentials. It is important to remember that although there may be some advantages to having a graduate supervisor who is highly accomplished and well known, this does not necessarily mean that he or she will be a better supervisor than someone who is less known. In fact, some brilliant researchers and scholars make lousy graduate supervisors. They often have more distractions that limit the amount of time they can spend with their graduate students.

How many programs should you apply to? There is no simple answer to this question, as it depends on several factors. One factor to

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consider is the cost. For each application, you will have to pay for transcripts, standardized test scores, postage, and probably a nonrefundable application fee, which is typically in the range of \$50. For some programs the application fees are considerably higher. You will need to follow up on each of your applications to make sure that all the materials have arrived (this topic is covered in detail in chapter 9). This may involve long-distance phone calls, the costs of which can quickly add up.

Although it is generally advisable that students do not choose potential programs based on the tuition or other costs associated with being a student there, this is a different issue, because paying for an education is one of the best personal investments you can make. By contrast, you are just wasting money by applying to more than a reasonable number of programs, or to only programs that you are clearly unlikely to get into.

There is also a limit to how much you can improve your chances of being accepted by simply increasing the number of programs you apply to. As you first increase the number of applications, the odds of being accepted into a suitable program increase accordingly. However, the law of diminishing returns begins to set in at some point. If you apply to too many programs, you may not be able to spend enough time on any one of the applications, and you will probably end up with some applications that fall short of the quality that could have been there.

Consider, for example, the quality of your personal statements or essays. The most effective ones will be somewhat customized for each particular program. How likely are you to do the best possible job of this with two dozen statements or essays? Even properly filling out an application form can take a lot of time. Thus, applying to too many programs can actually *decrease* your chances of getting into graduate school.

You also have to consider the amount of time your referees will be able to spend writing your letters of recommendation and filling out recommendation forms. If there are substantial differences among the programs you are applying to in terms of their focus areas, then you want your referees to be able to write letters that are somewhat customized to suit each program. It might be easy enough to ask for a small number of letters, but asking a busy professor to write two

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