

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 6 Enhancing the Objective Components of Your Application

Undergraduate Grades and Coursework
Standardized Tests
Application Forms

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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 6

Enhancing the Objective Components of Your Application

How do graduate admissions committees decide who is acceptable for their programs? One common misconception is that the only important components of a graduate school application are the quality of the student's grades and standardized test scores. This is not true at all! The letters of recommendation and the applicant's personal statement or essays are also very important. They are often the difference between a successful application and an unsuccessful one. Even the way an application form is filled out can make a difference.

The various people looking at your application may differ in how they weigh its assorted components. Therefore, you should pay close attention to each one of them. At the same time, keep in mind that few applicants achieve excellence on all of the important dimensions, so you should not be discouraged if you think you come up a bit short on one or two of them. If you make selective and appropriate use of the information and advice in this book, you should do fine.

Some shortcomings are easier to overcome than others. For example, if you lack work or research experience in your area, or other relevant background, you can probably correct that. On the other hand, if you have already written your standardized tests and

Chapter 6

Enhancing the Objective Components

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obtained poor scores, there is nothing you can do to erase them completely from your record. Likewise, there is little you can do to hide poor grades that appear on your transcripts. By contrast, you still have plenty of time to arrange for good letters of recommendation and to prepare an effective personal statement. And as you will see, there is a multitude of other things that you can do to make yourself an attractive candidate. Do not worry about things you can do nothing about. Optimize what you can — it might make up for any irreversible weaknesses.

The next two chapters deal with the five common components of most graduate or professional school applications — application forms, official transcripts of all college or university courses you have taken and the grades you obtained, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, and the personal statement, essay, or essays. There is a major section devoted to each of these, explaining how they are used by admissions committees and prospective supervisors, and how you can enhance their quality in your own application.

This chapter deals with the objective components of your application — your transcripts and standardized test scores. In the last section of this chapter, we will discuss the pitfalls of filling out application forms and how to do it right. Chapter 7 deals with the nonobjective elements of the application, including the personal statement and letters of recommendation, and also the preselection interviews that are administered by some programs.

Undergraduate Grades and Coursework

Something emphasized throughout this book is that many students can overcome a less-than-outstanding GPA and still get into graduate school. But it has also been repeatedly acknowledged that students' chances of success are better if they do have excellent grades. Unless you are in your final semester of your senior year, there is still time to improve your grades and thereby enhance your graduate school prospects. I won't insult your common sense by suggesting that you

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study harder. You have already thought of that. There are reasons why you have the GPA that you have, and only you know what those reasons are. Only you know whether it is possible for you to work harder than you already do.

Not all equal grades are equal One of the problems with discriminating between applicants on the basis of their GPAs is that it is not always clear what a particular GPA actually means about a student's academic ability. For instance, suppose that student A graduated from college A and student B graduated from college B. They took similar undergraduate courses and their GPAs are exactly the same. Does this mean that their academic performances were equal? No, of course it doesn't. They didn't take exactly the same courses with the same professors — they didn't even go to the same school. Every student knows that some professors tend to give higher grades than others, and that certain courses are much harder than others. Admissions committees know this too, and that is one reason why they look beyond the simple numeric value of a GPA to determine an applicant's academic credentials. Still, you can count on your GPA being the *first* thing that is looked at when you are compared to other applicants.

The extent to which undergraduate GPA is a good predictor of graduate school performance depends upon the field of study and on the relative emphasis that a particular program places on course work as a degree requirement. However, all programs that involve course work will have some interest in an applicant's GPA. After all, students have to pass their graduate courses before they can earn their graduate degree. Most students assume that graduate courses are significantly more difficult than undergraduate courses. In fact, many students are pleasantly surprised to discover that their

Before you get too despondent over your less-than-stellar GPA, ask yourself the following questions about your record: Did you get most of your poor grades in your freshman and sophomore years?

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