

Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In
With or Without Excellent Grades

Chapter 2 Why More Students Should Consider Graduate School

Grad School? Me? Are You Kidding?
You May Be More Qualified Than You Think

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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 2

Why More Students Should Consider Graduate School

Grad school? Me? Are You Kidding?

You hear the same thing time after time. If you ask undergraduate university or college students whether they plan to go to graduate school and earn an advanced degree (e.g., master's, doctorate), they often reply with something like,

"I'd like to, but I can't afford to spend another five or more years in school. I value my education, but I don't find what I'm studying so interesting that I would want to delve into it any deeper. I just want to get my bachelor's degree and get a job. Besides, my grades aren't good enough to get into grad school."

This kind of response is typical. Unfortunately, it also reflects some of the most common misconceptions and misunderstandings about graduate school.

Consider the first part of the response — the part about not being able to afford to stay in school. Many students have the mis-

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perception that going to graduate school would mean struggling to make financial ends meet the same way that they did when they were undergraduates. It is true that in some cases there can be considerable expense associated with years of graduate study. But, the truth is also that there are many more ways to finance graduate school than undergraduate school. This topic is discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

For now, the important thing for you to realize is that most graduate students are able to maintain a good income while working toward an advanced degree. In fact, most graduate students are *paid* to go to school! The money may be a stipend from a bursary, scholarship, or fellowship, or salary for teaching assistantships or research assistantships, or even a straightforward salary arrangement in which the graduate student receives a stipend from the graduate supervisor's research or teaching grants.

A specific example provides some perspective on the kinds of financial support that are sometimes in place for graduate students: The department that I work in guarantees a minimum level of support of \$14,000 per year for graduate students. That is a minimum — guaranteed. Most of the graduate students in our department are making closer to \$20,000, and some even more. Most of the money is from the supervisor's research grants, but many students also earn a few thousand dollars per year for working as teaching assistants. Meanwhile, they receive the training that will eventually put them into the competition for some of the best jobs in their field.

Financial hardship may be a typical part of being an undergraduate, but it is less common for a graduate student. A typical graduate student's income will not lead to great riches, but it is usually enough to pay tuition and living expenses (rent, groceries, a trip home during holidays, etc.). And that sure beats having to take out a student loan or work at a part-time job in order to get by while you further your education. Many graduate students don't have to look for a summer job every year because they are "employed" all year round. Not all graduate students are able to avoid taking a loan, but many can and do get by without it.

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There are other financial benefits available to graduate students: If you owe money for student loans that you took out while you were an undergraduate, then enrolling in full-time graduate studies may allow you to continue to defer repayment of those loans. Most student loans maintain some kind of interest-relief until the student is entirely finished with full-time study. And as already mentioned, you probably won't need to take out any more loans in order to survive while you are a graduate student. Of course, your advanced degree can help place you into a high-paying career that will make it easier to pay back your previous loans.

Now consider the second part of the typical student's response which began this chapter — the part about not being sufficiently interested in one's undergraduate specialization or major to want to pursue graduate studies. The truth is that graduate school is more rewarding than many people think. Most students find graduate studies to be infinitely more interesting than undergraduate studies. Few undergraduates understand what really happens in graduate school, because no one ever explains it to them.

A common misconception about graduate school is that there is considerable focus on taking classes where you delve deeply into a narrow range of subject matter in order to become an expert or specialist. In fact, course work and in-class testing are relatively minor parts of many graduate programs, especially beyond the masters level. Instead, research and skills development are usually the focus, especially once you are past the master's level. You will be too busy learning *useful* things in graduate school to sit in a classroom for hours each day.

Most undergraduate degree programs are aimed at providing students with a broad understanding of a discipline and the career options that are available within that particular field, but some of them do relatively little to actually train you for a great career. Graduate programs, on the other hand, are aimed at training and developing independent specialists, researchers, scholars, professionals, etc.

Now getting back to our analysis of the typical student's response to the question of whether he or she plans to go to graduate school, consider the part about wanting to finally get out of school and get a job. Well, as we have already discussed, most graduate students earn an income while they work on their master's or doctorate.

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In other words, being a graduate student *is* a job! You could think of it as a temporary job — one that lasts a few years.

Going to graduate school is like having a job, but in and of itself graduate studies is certainly not a career. But, neither are many of the jobs that students end up with after obtaining their undergraduate degrees and looking for work. In fact, in today's job market, some people manage to earn a better living by *staying* in school and working on an advanced degree than by finishing with the same run-of-the-mill undergraduate degree as everyone else and finding themselves either unemployed or with only a temporary or second-rate job. An undergraduate degree gives most people a modest job-market advantage over the typical high-school graduate, but an advanced degree gives most people a huge advantage over those with only an undergraduate degree.

For most people, the greatest and most lasting reward that comes from obtaining an advanced degree is not the sense of accomplishment or prestige, but rather the opportunity to do work that holds intrinsic interest for them. For those who obtain professional degrees, it may also be the wide range of exciting career options and the earning power. Some graduate students already have careers, and they wish to upgrade their credentials to facilitate advancement in those careers, or to obtain a wider range of career options.

Why would anyone want to end their formal education with an undergraduate degree when they were within reach of an advanced degree and all of its rewards? It may be true that an advanced degree is not realistically within reach of every student, but it is within reach of tens of thousands of students who mistakenly think that they are not even qualified to try. Graduate school might not be the right choice for everyone, but you owe it to yourself to at least give it some consideration.

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You May Be More Qualified Than You Think

Every year, thousands of students apply to graduate schools in North America. Most of them apply to more than one school, and those who are serious in their desire to get into graduate school are eventually accepted into a program, somewhere. For many, the decision to go to graduate school and obtain an advanced degree has been part of their education and career plans since they first entered college or university. For those individuals, the advanced degree is an absolute prerequisite for their career goals. For others, the decision to go to graduate school came only after they had been in college or university for a few years and began to question how valuable their undergraduate degree would be when they finally entered the job market.

Why grades aren't always the most important factor Now consider the greatest of the common misconceptions about graduate school — the idea that you must have outstanding undergraduate grades to get into graduate school and to succeed once you are there. Do you believe this? I suspect that you probably do...because most students believe it, and because I used to believe it, too.

But it's simply not true! Although outstanding grades certainly help your chances of getting into graduate school, there are ways to get in even if you do not have excellent grades. This book will show you how.

Have you ever been told or have you thought to yourself that you haven't got a hope of ever going to graduate school because you are not an Honors student? That's complete nonsense! I know dozens of Ph.Ds who were never Honors students. I have three degrees: a B.Sc., M.Sc., and a Ph.D, and was never an Honors student.

But what if you have only average or slightly above-average grades? Could you really expect to pass graduate classes? Absolutely! Once you begin your graduate studies, you are just as likely to obtain a master's or doctoral degree as many of your current classmates who get As and A-pluses in all of their classes.

It might be hard to believe that this is true, but it is. It has to do with the ways that students are taught and evaluated in graduate school. The methods of learning and evaluation are so different from

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those of undergraduate school that some students' undergraduate GPA can be a rather poor predictor of their future performance in graduate school.

Although there have been studies that found significant correlations between undergraduate GPA and graduate school success in some disciplines, these analyses typically involved very large groups of students, and many graduate-program faculty members would argue that the correlation is not so apparent when considering only the students in their own program. Even in disciplines in which there are thought to be stronger relations between undergraduate grades and graduate school success, no one would deny that there are frequent exceptions, and almost any graduate-program faculty member knows of cases in which students with suspect undergraduate grades turned out to be among the best graduate students.

Students who get into graduate school and do their best to fulfill the requirements will usually obtain at least one advanced degree, either a master's or a doctorate. Similarly, most students who are accepted into a professional-degree program, and who put in a reasonable effort while they are there, will eventually obtain the degree they are after.

There are graduate programs in which applicants are rejected more or less automatically if their grades are below some ridiculously high minimum. Obviously, you would need higher grades to get into one of the most competitive programs in North America than to get into one of the hundreds of less competitive programs. But as you will soon discover, in the majority of schools and disciplines, the acceptance and rejection of graduate-school applicants is far from being an automatic process based entirely on grades.

Before we go any further, it's important that we clarify something: Although I have been emphasizing that students can get into graduate school without an outstanding undergraduate GPA, it definitely *is* true that in most graduate programs, the quality of undergraduate grades is an important criterion for evaluating applicants. What many students fail to realize, however, is that this is only *one* of the important criteria, and that a shortcoming in terms of undergraduate

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GPA can often be compensated for by excellent performance on some of the other important criteria.

It is equally important to emphasize here what I mean when referring to grades that are not outstanding, but still good enough to get into graduate school: In most areas of study, this includes students with a GPA between B-minus and B-plus. Very few programs in any discipline would accept applicants with a GPA lower than B-minus, no matter what other strengths such an applicant possessed, although there may be rare exceptions in some disciplines.

The relative importance of undergraduate grades varies widely across programs within a particular field, depending on the prestige or competitiveness of the program. Not surprisingly, the differences *across* disciplines are even greater.

Some programs have minimum entry requirements with respect to undergraduate GPA, but these are usually not very high, and few applicants are weeded out because their grades are too low. Moreover, these minimum-requirement rules are not always written in stone, and you can sometimes get around them if you know what to do. More on this later.

It is easy to see why students would mistakenly assume that admission to graduate school depends mainly on obtaining or surpassing some minimum grade-point requirement. After all, that is the main qualification for admission to many undergraduate programs. Without ever being told otherwise, why wouldn't a student assume that the same is true for graduate school admission?

A special message to students with excellent grades Even if you have an outstanding GPA and the highest grades in your graduating class, you cannot afford to be complacent or overconfident in your approach to graduate school application. Your outstanding grades are no guarantee that you will be accepted into the graduate program of your choice...or even into any graduate program at all!

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Many students with top grades fail to get into graduate school because they have no idea what they are doing when they apply. They don't really understand what graduate admissions committees are looking for in an applicant, so they unwittingly sabotage their own chances by revealing their naivete or by not dealing properly with certain parts of the application.

By the time you are finished reading this book, you will understand why you need more than your good grades in order to get into the graduate program you want. As you will see, it comes down to this: Graduate program admissions committees aim to accept the best *people*, not necessarily the best credentials.

Do you need to be in an Honors program? First, you need to understand that there are at least two different ways that the term "Honors" is used in undergraduate programs. The first way, which is also the most common usage, is simply as a designation which recognizes that a particular student has an outstanding GPA. Outstanding undergraduate grades are more important when applying to graduate school in some fields than in others, and most master's programs in these fields will insist that an applicant has achieved undergraduate Honors. But even though undergraduate Honors may be listed as a program requirement, this doesn't always mean that you can't get into these programs without an Honors GPA. A GPA that is less than outstanding will often be adequate if you can demonstrate that your grades do not fairly reflect your real academic potential. You will see in later chapters that there may be ways to justify a shortcoming in one's grades. In chapter 6, we will discuss strategies for improving your GPA, even if you are graduating at the end of the current semester.

Some students quit graduate studies during or soon after their first year because they had entered graduate school with misconceptions about what would be expected of them, and they were not able to adjust to a new style of learning and evaluation. They believed that they were preparing well for graduate school by developing an ability to retain vast amounts of information from lectures or textbooks and to later recall it verbatim during tests. This style of studying gets them nowhere in graduate school.

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Another way that the term “Honors” is used is in reference to a special “Honors program” that students in some undergraduate programs are allowed to enrol in if they have an outstanding GPA. These students have Honors GPAs, and by virtue of this, they qualify to take special courses or seminars. Some undergraduate Honors programs require students to complete a special thesis. A student could have an Honors GPA, but for one reason or another choose not to enrol in an Honors program. As we have already discussed, it is not absolutely necessary to be in an Honors program in order to later get into graduate school, but it can help in many cases. When it is helpful, it can be for reasons different than you might think.

One might suspect that the impressive thing about students who are in Honors programs is their grades. After all, you have to have good grades to get into the Honors program in most departments, right? That is true. But it is often the case that once a student is in an Honors program it becomes easier to maintain good grades, because in some of these programs grades below B or B-plus are seldom given in the few special courses that only Honors students take. Even in other courses that non-Honors students also take, some professors hesitate to give anything less than a B or B-plus to an Honors student because they do not want anyone (such as the Honors Program Director or the student) to think that they are undermining the student’s career plans.

Whether or not the perception that “easy grades” are administered to students in some Honors programs is truly accurate, many people believe that it is, and they may actually view a non-Honors student’s GPA as more impressive than an equivalent GPA obtained by an Honors student! When I look at the transcripts of graduate school applicants, I ignore any Honors seminars or other courses that only Honors students are allowed to take, and I consider only the courses that non-Honors students also take. Some of my colleagues have told me that they do the same sort of thing. The point is that some admissions committee members may not care whether an applicant received a B or an A-plus in a special Honors seminar.

The real advantage of being in an Honors program stems from the purported aim of most of these programs: Honors programs are supposed to prepare aspiring students for some of the things that will be required of them in graduate school. For example, many

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Honors programs require students to do an independent research project and write a thesis. The Honors thesis can resemble a master's thesis in many respects, without the same standards of evaluation. Doing independent research for an Honors thesis is an excellent way for some students to get their first glimpse of an important aspect of graduate school.

Although being in an Honors program is a good way to get useful experience and acquire a few skills relevant to graduate school, you can also attain these without being in an Honors program. The main difference is that if you are in an Honors program, you will probably be led by the hand and placed into beneficial situations. It is impressive when students without this advantage take matters into their own hands and seek other opportunities to obtain relevant experience. By doing so, they demonstrate some of the most important traits of a successful graduate student — good judgment and awareness, self-motivation, initiative, and creativity.

Of course, many Honors students possess these important traits, too, and I am not suggesting here that you should avoid being in an Honors program if you are qualified. Nor am I advising you against working harder to accomplish grades that will qualify you for enrollment in an Honors program. The point is simply that it is by no means *necessary* to be in an undergraduate Honors program in order to get into graduate school. Students who are not in an Honors program can volunteer to help professors with their research for a couple of semesters, or they can apply for part-time research-assistant jobs. In most fields, students can often get work or volunteer experience related to their intended areas of graduate study. If you are not qualified to be an Honors student because your grades don't measure up, do not worry. You are still in the game.

Summary Two common misconceptions are that one must have outstanding grades to get into graduate school, and that outstanding grades are all one needs. Grades definitely *are* important, but so are many other factors. Students with only average or slightly above-average grades can get into graduate school if they have other strengths, and if they take certain steps and avoid mistakes during the application process.

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There is considerable variability across graduate programs in terms of the importance of grades. Minimum entry requirements published in application packages and directories are usually not written in stone; exceptions may be made for students with other strengths.

Students with excellent grades, and those who are in Honors programs, should not assume that this is all they need to get into graduate school. These things can definitely help, but are neither necessary nor sufficient. Many students with excellent grades fail to get in because they come up short on other important dimensions, or because they make mistakes during the application process.

The following chapters will explain important aspects of graduate or professional school application and offer advice that students with or without excellent grades can use to improve their chances of getting in.

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Most law, medical, and dental schools in the United States have subscribed to the services of central processing agencies. These agencies receive data and other materials from applicants and then summarize them into uniform formats before passing them on to the appropriate schools. These services ease both the burden on applicants and the clerical costs for the schools involved. Students should ascertain whether the programs they wish to apply to are among those that employ the services of these agencies. If so, they should write to the relevant agency to request Application Request Cards:

Law School Admission Service (LSAS)
Law Services, Box 2400
Newton, Pa., 18940-0977

American Medical College Application Service (AMCAS)
Section for Student Services
AAMC, 2450 N St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20037-1131

American Association of Dental Schools Application Service
(AADSAS)
1625 Massachusetts Ave., NW, #101
Washington, D.C. 20036

Some of the schools that use these services charge their own application fees in addition to those charged by the central processing agencies.

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