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Getting in

Understanding the misconceptions of grad school applications

Garth Paulson

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Midterms. Presentations. Term papers. Lab assignments. Required readings. Group projects. Cramming.



Credit: [Danny Kirk](#) / the Gauntlet

During lazy summer months any one of these terms has the power to incite dread in vacationing students, reminding them of the upcoming onslaught of schoolwork the passage from summer to fall will produce. By the time things get to November though, the dread is replaced by grudging acceptance. The rigours of school still aren't welcome, but they are too much a part of day-to-day reality to truly scorn. Professors try to squish as many course requirements into the dwindling fall semester as they can, and students are forced to wrap up another semester while preparing for exams. It's not fun, but it's the way things work.

Some students feel this isn't enough and actively seek an added chunk of school-related work around this time--applying for graduate studies. With Canadian universities requiring grad school applications sometime between December and February, the last few weeks of fall semester include an added pressure for those students with aspirations beyond a bachelor's degree. This pressure is compounded when students realize applying for graduate studies is unlike anything else they've previously encountered. Much more comprehensive than applying for undergraduate studies, the process of grad school application is complex. Not surprisingly, many students looking for a master's degree don't know where to begin. In his academic career, Concordia University professor Dr. Dave **MUMBY** encounters this problem frequently. In an effort to dispel some of the myths about grad school and to make the application process simpler for students, **MUMBY** authored the book *Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting in With or Without Excellent Grades*.

Testing the waters

"Certainly the most important thing is to find out what you need to know to make the right choices about where to apply," **MUMBY** says. "A common mistake is assuming that all programs that offer a particular degree in a particular discipline are relatively

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equivalent. All the differences start right after you get past the name of the degree and the discipline. Every graduate program in most disciplines is unique in itself even though there might be hundreds of programs that offer the same degree. That particular unique expertise a program offers is, of course, directly related to the expertise of the faculty members that supervise and administer the graduate programs. The professors' specializations determine the range of specialization the students can get at particular programs."

Before readying an application students should put in a good deal of research to determine their options and thereby lessen the chance of applying for something they aren't suited for. When determining where to apply, students should consider more than just what city they would like to live in and the reputation of the school. Often less-reputable universities offer possibilities for study more suited to a particular student than they would be able to find at the most distinguished schools.

"You really have to have a good idea of what you're looking for, what kind of training you want and what kind of career you're trying to get your training for," **MUMBY** explains. "You really have to have a long term view of your career and the rest of your life. It doesn't mean you have to lock into something. For many students they just assume they'll apply for graduate school at the same place they are doing their undergraduate studies, or maybe at a school at the other side of the city. Quite often you can't get what you're really looking for at that place. People don't realize until they start to apply for graduate school that, 'Hey, I'm supposed to indicate who I want as my supervisor and why would I want one over the other?' That's one of the most important aspects of choosing who's going to get in, making sure they can be matched with the faculty member [they indicate]."

Students should start thinking about grad school at an early date in their undergraduate studies. The earlier a student starts to look into grad school, the easier it is for them to complete the necessary requirements when the time comes to apply. Students can still discover the possibilities of graduate school late in their undergrad degrees, but it certainly helps potential applicants to start thinking about what their options are at an early date.

"It does [help to have an early plan], even though the particular plan might change several times along the way," **MUMBY** says. "If the student has a plan that he or she thinks is going to be their plan in three years they should still go about discovering the different types of training that are available in that discipline so they can start to learn about the range of programs for that discipline. Even if they change their plans a few years later they'll still be aware that the first thing they have to do is find out where people are and what they're doing."

What to put in

Once students have completed this preliminary research and know which schools they are interested in applying to, the real process begins. Like applying for a job, students need to gather a good deal of information about themselves and make sure it is all relevant to what they are applying for. In doing so, **MUMBY** finds students often place too much importance on certain characteristics and neglect others. Most students share a common set of misconceptions about what is and isn't important on an application. These misconceptions transcend programs, schools and faculties and only serve to weaken applicants' chances.

"The [misconception] that ends up restricting the imagination or good judgement of students during the grad school application process is the widespread idea that what really matters the most is what kinds of grades you get in your undergraduate classes," **MUMBY** reveals. "It's always been the case, it probably always will be the case and it should be the case that it's just not enough to be smart. When you're talking about taking a step into an area of advanced study people don't really understand that it doesn't matter if they get all A-pluses. It's not going to make them an ideal candidate for a graduate program in almost any field. There are probably a few where it's a very good predictor of their success in graduate school, but there're many disciplines where after you get above the B-plus or A-minus range there's no real correlation between the likelihood that someone's going to do well in their graduate studies."

Though he is quick to stress the importance of decent grades, he cautions students against thinking they are the be-all, end-all. Though a 4.0 average as an undergrad will certainly look good on any application, it is not enough to ensure success. When applying for grad school students need to focus on many facets of their personality as well as their experiences.

"It's really the overall package," **MUMBY** says. "Different programs and different disciplines within the program will have their own idiosyncrasies about what special things they might prioritize in the candidates, but in almost all cases the most important thing is the personal qualities and the character attributes of the individuals. Academic abilities, to the extent that they might be able to tell you something about the suitability of an applicant, aren't enough. You need to know about the person's maturity, integrity, judgement and their ability to deal with complex information.

The focus on grades leads students to pay too little attention to other important requirements in any application. One element **MUMBY** emphasizes is letters of recommendation. Good letters of recommendation from professors are crucial to application committees as they demonstrate a student's ability to work well in an academic situation and that the student possesses the necessary drive to succeed in graduate studies. Unfortunately, they can be hard to come by.

"Hopefully the person has taken some steps like giving themselves some exposure to faculty members in their department that in some capacity allow those members to learn about them and their strengths," **MUMBY** says. "That way that person can then be asked for a letter of recommendation later and they might be able to say something meaningful. Believe me those letters of recommendation are important. To some people they are the most important part of the package. Some of us would just like to get letters of recommendation and not much else, [except] a GPA maybe."

The common mistake students make is assuming attending lectures and receiving a good mark in a class is enough to merit a decent letter of recommendation. This isn't the case; acquiring a good recommendation involves a much more active role from students.

"Undergraduates don't appreciate how much work and research is going on behind those doors that don't have classes in them, and that work is being done by the same people who are teaching many of their classes," **MUMBY** points out. "You have to try to get involved in what they are doing to demonstrate your suitability to do that kind of thing yourself. You want to put yourself in a position to be evaluated along all those important personality and character dimensions I mentioned earlier. If you aren't able

to put yourself in situations where professors can learn these things about you you'll be hard pressed to come up with effective letters of recommendation and you might come up with letters that might actually hurt your application more than they help it."

"No matter what your discipline is that you decide to pursue in graduate studies, getting involved in someone's research program is important," he continues. "It doesn't really matter how directly their research matches with the area you're planning on specializing in. In fact, it doesn't even have to be the same discipline because what's really important here are all of these character attributes and they really transfer across disciplines."

Another thing admissions committees look at is extra-curricular activities, like volunteer work. These aren't as important to the overall application as academic qualities but they can help set a candidate apart from the pack. **MUMBY** cautions students about being over-zealous with what extra-curricular activities they include in their application. Only relevant activities should be included.

"[Extra-curricular activities] certainly can be an influence in many different ways, and in some cases they might not be relevant at all," **MUMBY** explains. "If the student is thinking about going into any field where it really requires a certain set of clinical or social skills they would be most important. They might not be as important in other fields but there's probably [an activity] in any field that one could not help but give a positive impression [with]. Especially if a person has obviously been very generous in some volunteer capacity with their time and at the same time has received really good grades, which demonstrates that they're able to handle a busy life. Those types of positive impressions can be helpful."

The year off

A common thing for students to do after completing their undergraduate degree is to take some time off before they dive back into the academic world. This time off is taken for a variety of reasons, ranging from exhaustion to economic necessity. Many professors warn students about taking time off before their graduate studies, saying it will only harm their chances. **MUMBY** does not adopt this reasoning entirely. He believes time off can be beneficial to a student's application if they use it effectively.

"It's really a matter of why you're taking a year, or more, off and what you're going to do with that time," **MUMBY** points out. "It's not a good idea if it ever becomes clear that you decided to take a year off after your undergraduate degree because you've been in school all these years and it's time for a break and you just want the time for yourself. That doesn't impress people that you're really determined and that you have a passion for this career move you're making. If it's to really help you make the right decision it's good to use that time, but during that time you have to be involved in whatever [your] discipline is. Maybe you have to use that time to set up letters of recommendation. Those types of uses of that year off can make the difference between not getting in if [you] applied right out of undergraduate school and getting in because [you] took that year."

A competitive future?

Another thing undergraduate students often hear is talk of the value of a bachelor's degree diminishing. The argument states that with more people entering university, a bachelor's degree is no longer as strong of a factor in determining future success as it

once was. Completing graduate studies is starting to be seen as the only way to ensure a comfortable future. This has led some to fear that grad schools will not increase the number of people accepted each year to meet increased demand, leading to more competition for few spots. Some believe the value of good grades will become even more important in such a scenario, resulting in graduate schools being effectively closed to all except those with impossibly high averages. **MUMBY** disagrees.

"If you simply increase the number of people you have applying to graduate school it becomes even easier to find the right people," he remarks. "Having more applicants won't really make it more competitive unless all we do is add really good applicants, but that really isn't what happens. I think there is some reality to the idea that the value of the bachelor's degree in ensuring one's future career isn't what it used to be, but it was never really the case that you got an automatic career from that. What is happening is we have a growing population of people that are in their most productive years of their lives and are trying to secure a good future. It can no longer be done as easily with just an undergraduate education, nor can it be done as easily with an advanced education, to be honest. The number of jobs hasn't grown in proportion to the working age population. To be one of the people who ends up on top, or at least successful, you have a much better chance with an advanced degree. However, that's really only true if you're limiting your choices to a type of career that requires an advanced education."

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For most students, going through the four to seven years of this it will take them to complete their undergraduate degree is more than enough. For others though, the academic life is appealing and a four-year bachelor's sprint can easily become a 10-year marathon to a PhD. The only thing standing between them and their goal is the need to actually get into graduate studies--well, that and all the work, of course. To most undergrads this is a daunting task often performed improperly. In reality, this is because most students don't understand what they need to do to be successful in their application. Once they have the right information and have abandoned the misconceptions surrounding grad school, applying should be a fairly painless process accomplished in those fleeting moments of free time the busy semester allows.

Professors

Every prof has applied for grad school and many sit on admissions committees.

Teaching assistants

Being grad students themselves, TAs have all been recently successful in the application process.

www.mygraduateschool.com

The website for Dr. **MUMBY**'s book provides a plethora of tips for free.

www.gradschooltips.com

Another good site offering comprehensive pointers for would-be grad students.

Political science grad school application workshop

Though targeted at poli-jocks, this workshop should provide useful information for any student. The work shop takes place Fri., Dec. 1 from 12-1:30 in Science A, room 147.

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