

The Observer, December 7, 2007

Volume XL, Issue 13

Graduate school success requires an early start

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'Tis the season for papers, finals, and projects, but for many seniors there is an extra chill in the air these days. That's right: graduate school applications. While other undergraduates spend their final weeks before winter break planning ski trips and reunions with friends, visions of test scores and school ratings dance in these seniors' heads. Applying to graduate school is a complicated process, and even the most hardened fifth-year seniors can find themselves overwhelmed by the task. The difference between reading the perfect application as it appears in

a graduate school prep book and creating an equally ideal application can truly be daunting. Confounding matters further are common misapprehensions about the application and admissions process that could make or break the chances of getting into the dream graduate program.

But just as things are appearing bleak for the forlorn applicant, hope springs eternal. There is a veritable library of books dealing with precisely the topic of graduate school, how to get in, and how to apply. These publications are often geared toward one specific type of graduate school or another, but it can often be helpful to first gain an understanding of the graduate school process as a whole.

It is hard to imagine then, that similar strategies can be used with success for graduate applications across a broad variety of disciplines. Yet there actually are common factors, argues Dave Mumby, a veteran member of admissions committees, and author of *Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting in With or Without Excellent Grades*. In his book, Mumby explains the common mistakes that plague prospective graduate school applicants across the board and how they can be avoided. Electronic copies of this book, along with other helpful insights into the graduate school application process, can be obtained at MyGraduateSchool.com.

A common theme through Mumby's work is the importance of early preparation. He is especially insistent on the early cultivation of good references through research experience and positive interaction inside and outside of class. Many students fail to properly form these key relationships with the researchers and educators in their desired field of study, and must end up scrambling for references at the last minute. Other students are intimidated by the entire recommendation process, knowing that many of their competitors will be obtaining recommendation letters from powerful political and financial leaders. Confronted with this concern, Mumby replied, "In the vast majority of cases, what is going to be relevant to the person looking at the recommendation is that it credibly attests to strengths that are relevant to your ability to do well [in that particular program]...Persons of stature don't necessarily provide this credibility – the better thing is to have people who know you well and have worked with you."

Students also have a tendency to overestimate the value and emphasis placed by admission committees on grades. Mumby counsels students not to be overly concerned with grades. He says, "What many students fail to realize...is that [grades are] only one of the important criteria and that a shortcoming in terms of undergraduate GPA can often be compensated for by excellent performance on some of the other important criteria." Other potential deal-makers can be the test scores and personal statements that accompany graduate applications.

Graduate school admission tests are other aspects of the application that benefit from early preparation. Some of this preparation comes from classes in the undergraduate sequence, especially in pre-professional study tracks. Further preparation can be obtained through private or professional tutoring. Keys to the preparation process are taking past tests and practice tests to gauge progress. But if the test results are less than ideal for graduate school application, remember that it's always possible to retake the tests. According to Dr. Mumby, retaking a test need not hurt the applicant's chances, provided they achieve a better score the second time around – since the original lower scores will remain on the test report the school receives. He says, "...if you improve substantially it can be an indication that the first scores were an inaccurate assessment of your skills, but it also says something about the person's determination in going to school." Not a bad first impression to make at all.

Finally, the personal statement. This section of graduate school applications can be most troubling to applicants, who

have a tendency to neglect it. Mumby's advice for a personal statement is simple: "Anecdotes are quite important – [the statement] needs to go beyond concise, rational points. You do have to draw a line between who and where you are in your life, and where you desire to be in the future, and how going through this particular program is going to help you through this process." Including personal information that illustrates the growth of the applicant, as well as their goals and how they will be furthered through a particular graduate program, allows the writer to maintain a steady flow throughout the personal statement while demonstrating their unique character and personality.

With a little planning and preparation, the graduate school application process can be pleasant as well as successful. All it takes is confidence and the willingness to find the right strategies that will transform the harsh fall application experience into a winter wonderland.

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