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Graduate school without great grades

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GRAPHIC BY MIKE STAPLETON

Understanding the process will make the experience successful (and tolerable), even without perfect grades

Understanding what graduate school is all about is vital for someone who considers applying.

The first step is to identify whether it's the right choice in the first place. This can be done by evaluating the career options that are available after graduate school. Many students make the mistake of assuming that it is the next logical step after undergraduate studies, even though the career options available to them are really not what they are looking for.

Graduate degrees provide very specific training in a very specific area, which has a narrow applicability in the workplace, as compared to an undergraduate degree that provides much broader training. A graduate degree should, at the very least, be a means to an end and, with that in mind, the student should be looking for graduate programs that provide training for a career the student is actually interested in.

Ideally, interested students should start looking at the kinds of career paths graduate students in their field of interest tend to have during the first year of undergraduate studies. It is particularly important for students to understand the range and types of careers available. This will allow them to get an idea of what options they may have in that particular field.

The best source for this kind of information is the faculty of the department to which the student wants to apply. Those who are already studying in their prospective department are especially fortunate, since these faculty members are readily available in the courses they are already taking. It also gives these students the ability to ask their professor about the educational (as well as extracurricular) steps that they should be taking to help them get into graduate school.

While the best time to start planning to apply to graduate studies is in first year, it is not too late to start in the third or fourth year. The main difference between applying earlier versus applying later is simply the availability of time and the pace at which everything must be done.

Students need to make connections with professors who will get to know them for their work, personality and general character strengths and weaknesses. This is crucial in the application process as two or three academic or work references in the relevant field are required for almost all graduate programs.

In order to develop these relationships, students can volunteer with professors in labs and get involved in their research activities. While students who have started planning early can volunteer at one lab per

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year or try to get noticed in only one course at a time, students starting later would have to start forming relationships with a few professors at once. The basic process is the same for students deciding to apply to graduate school in any year: Take the required courses, form appropriate relationships with professors for references and plan the application.

While relationships are being formed, maintaining good grades is also important. Almost all graduate programs will require applicants to have at least a "B+" average while many will require at least an "A" average. Impressive grades can significantly increase one's chances of acceptance into graduate school, but not because grades predict success in graduate school, but rather because grades determine receipt of scholarships and fellowships. A student with a scholarship or fellowship is an attractive option for a supervising professor for financial reasons.

Graduate students are generally guaranteed a minimum income for their cost of living, which comes in the form of teaching assistantship, research assistantship and funding from the supervisor's research grant. The students who are awarded funding do not cost their supervisor nearly as much and are therefore considered less of a risk.

Grades generally do not predict performance in graduate school due to the nature of the kind of work graduate students do. While students in undergraduate studies applying to graduate school tend to assume that graduate studies just means taking more courses on a complex subject matter, this is only true to a limited extent; students in graduate school actually take fewer courses and spend more time doing other types of work, like research.

Ultimately, not having the best grades translates into students having to understand the application process that much better. The following are important points to consider:

1. The decision to accept a student into graduate school is generally made by only one or two people and is almost always made by the supervising professor whom the student requested.
2. The supervising professor almost always has the final say as to whether the student is accepted or not.
3. Matching the interests of the student and the supervising professor is essential.
4. There is a limit to how many students can be supervised by one professor.

Based on these points, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Students should appeal to the professor's interests in all parts of their application, especially where there is a chance for them to express their interests from a personal perspective.
2. If students have a supervising professor in mind well in advance, they should contact that professor by e-mail as soon as possible to offer introductions and find out if the professor is accepting new graduate students in the following year.

Contacting a potential supervising professor is one of the biggest factors that can set an application apart from the rest. This initial contact allows both professors and students to learn more about each other before the application is submitted.

Students can find out what kind of person their potential supervisor is: A warm response offering additional information and asking to learn more about the student will reveal that the professor will be sympathetic to the student's needs in the future. A cold response, on the other hand, would tell the student the opposite and may actually dissuade the student from requesting that professor to be their supervisor.

It often happens that the supervising professor may decide to accept a particular student into the graduate program in this pre-application stage. As the student and the potential supervising professor get to know each other and realize that their interests match, the professor may be excited to see the student's application.

The vast majority of applicants do not make this pre-application contact. Just making that kind of contact would reveal to a professor that the student has enough good judgment to try to find out more about the person who could be supervising and evaluating him/her for the following two years or more.

One of the most common mistakes that most students make is to focus too strongly on getting good grades and becoming great book-

readers, exam-writers and lecture-note-takers. These skills are not enough in graduate studies, and thus, being more than a bookworm is important.

Students that are planning to apply should have a careful strategy in order to increase their chances of acceptance. They must remember that the evaluation starts with the pre-application contact and continues in the cover letter and other areas of the application that articulate the student's personality.

A successful graduate school application requires a good plan, a good execution of that plan and, of course, some luck.

-Information in this article was derived from an interview with Dr. Dave G. Mumby, author of Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting In With or Without Excellent Grades, graduate student supervisor and the student advisor and member of many graduate acceptance committees.

-You can find more information about the graduate school application process and links to downloading Dr. Mumby's e-book at the My Graduate School Web site www.mygraduateschool.com

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