

THE PEAK: SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY'S INDEPENDENT STUDENT NEWSPAPER SINCE 1965. ON-LINE SINCE 1994.

Features - issue 9, volume 127 — October 29, 2007 — creating new lines to cross since 1965.

On the merits required for ladies and gentlemen to procure admittance into post-graduate pursuits or How to get into grad school

Corwin Odland

Have you ever thought about applying to graduate school, only to tell yourself that you don't have the grades to get in? If you have, you are not alone. There are many undergraduate students that assume a high GPA is the most important requirement when it comes to a graduate school application. Well, there is some good news for all you less-than-perfect students out there: this assumption, along with many other common assumptions, is simply not true.

Dr. David Mumby is an Associate Professor at Concordia University and is the author of the book *Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting In*, which addresses common misconceptions about graduate school, including the assumption that high grades are essential when applying to higher education. While it is never easy to figure out where many of these misconceptions come from, Mumby suspects that one reason students think applications are judged mainly by GPA is because grade-based evaluations are the norm through most secondary and undergraduate education. Entrance into undergraduate programs is almost entirely based on grades, and students are conditioned to focus on their GPA. However, according to Mumby, this intense focus on grades changes when students apply to graduate school.

The evaluation of graduate school applications involves a more rounded and thorough look at each candidate. While grades are still important, they generally do not hurt an applicant's chances until they fall below a certain level. For example, at Simon Fraser University, the minimum required GPA to get into a Master's Program is 3.0, which is a 'B' average. Generally, grades in the 'B+' to 'A-' range and above are satisfactory to most selection committees (the ones who actually decide which students get in). While higher grades do work in your favour, there are times when 'A' students are turned away and 'B' students are accepted, simply because applicants need to demonstrate more than just an ability to get good grades. This means if you are not a straight-'A' student, there are plenty of ways to make up for weaker grades in other areas of your application package — provided you know how to catch the attention of the selection committee.

A few items selection committees look at in addition to grades are applicants' reference letters, transcripts, and personal statements or essays. While different schools and programs usually value different parts of an application package more than others, there are some common principles that are often unknown to undergraduate students. For example, many schools look at the kind of courses a student took in their undergraduate studies. There are often certain courses or subjects in which a selection committee wants to see some background. Also, in many faculties a broad range of course work is preferred to a very narrow range because it indicates a student has a more diverse academic background to draw from. This means that students who have decent grades in a variety of courses may be more appealing than students who have outstanding grades in courses that all study the same subject. Transcripts can also show a student's willingness to try more difficult courses or subjects and can even be used to show improvement over time (which is good because by your last year, it is hard to bring your cumulative GPA up, even if you have a great year).

[Issue 9 Contents](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[About](#)

[Volunteers](#)

[Contact](#)

[Masthead](#)

[Archives](#)

[Search](#)

[Links](#)

ADVERTISING

[Classifieds](#)

[Advertising](#)

Reference letters are another part of a graduate school application that carry as much or more weight than a GPA. One big reason some faculties take reference letters so seriously is, according to Mumby, because they come from other academics who know exactly what it takes to be a successful graduate student. When a professor writes a reference letter to their peers to say that they think you are a great fit for graduate school, it naturally goes a long way. Not only can reference letters tell a lot about your ability to work in an academic environment, but they can also say a lot about your personal character, work ethic, and personality.

While many students realize the importance of reference letters, many unfortunately miss that the most important aspect of them is how they describe you as a person. Graduate students and faculty spend a lot of time together, and so selection committees naturally want to know if you will fit into their culture and be a positive influence on the department. Reference letters are a great way for selection committees to get a sense of who you are from a credible third party. One misconception that some students hold is that it is best to have a reference letter from a professor who is well-known in their field. In reality, a professor's celebrity will never give you a boost if all they can say about you is that you took their class and got an 'A.' It is far better to have a personalized and detailed letter from a professor who knows you well, even if they are relatively unknown in their field.

Not only do selection committees learn who you are through your reference letters, they also learn a lot about you through the personal essay you write. While many students may think that the personal essay is one of the less important pieces in a graduate school application, it actually plays a very important role. It is through an applicant's personal statement that a selection committee learns why the person is applying to graduate school. They want to see that you have thought your commitment to more schooling through and have a clear goal in continuing your education. Personal essays are like a cover letter of a job application, they need to explain why you are a good match for the program to which you are applying, and they need to show that you are not just applying to graduate school because you couldn't find anything better to do.

Not only do personal essays tell a selection committee why you want to be part of their school, they also are a good way to address your strengths and weaknesses. Some academic advisors think it is far better to not shy away from weaknesses (like lower grades) in a personal essay, because if you do not mention them, the selection committee is free to interpret your weaknesses as a strike against you. Mention your weaknesses and explain how you have overcome them and why they are not a problem anymore. Then also be sure to highlight your strengths.

In addition to reference letters and personal essays, selection committees sometimes learn a lot about applicants simply through observation. Even if a student has excellent grades and puts together a perfect application package, it is important that they put their best foot forward in every interaction with the university. From the e-mail you send to ask for an application to the first time you meet a potential thesis supervisor, it is important to make sure you always present yourself in a respectful, personable, and professional light. There are some schools that keep a file of all your correspondence, and you never know if a poorly worded e-mail sent to a seemingly unimportant person is going to come back to haunt you.

While misunderstanding the application process and criteria sometimes prevents students from pursuing graduate school, financial concern can also be a block. In reality, graduate school does cost more than undergraduate studies and many students do not think they can afford it. However, the other side of this coin that many undergraduates do not know is that there are a lot more opportunities for financial aid as a graduate student and, if you know where to look for money, life in graduate school does not have to be one of poverty.

Graduate students not only have scholarships and loans available to them like undergraduates, but they also have a few additional options. Fellowships and grants are offered by both the provincial and federal governments, and some universities offer their own fellowships and grants to their graduate students. While these finances are generally distributed on the basis of merit and not need, they provide a good option for graduate students. Another way of financing graduate school is to work as either a research or teaching assistant. These options not only provide students with some income, but they also provide teaching and research experience. Stipends are sometimes also paid to students if their thesis is similar to other research being done at their university. A stipend essentially pays a student to research and write their thesis as part of a professor's larger research project. On top of all these options, bursaries are also usually available to be distributed based on need. Continuing to study is definitely not a money-making venture, but by using these sources of

financing, among others, graduate school doesn't have to bankrupt you. So now that the common misconceptions about graduate school are cleared up, what can you do as an undergraduate student if you're thinking graduate school is for you?

For starters, keep your grades up. While grades are not the sole deciding factor for graduate school selection committees, having good grades will only help your application. Not only will a decent GPA help you get into graduate school, but forming good habits in your undergraduate career will often ensure you have good habits when you start studying at higher levels. Many argue that undergraduate grades are not a reliable predictor of how a student will perform at the graduate level, but there is some evidence that suggests a correlation between good undergraduate grades and success as a graduate student.

Another important step to take as an undergraduate is to get to know your professors. In larger universities, simply going to class will likely not help a professor get to know you enough to write a strong reference letter. Going to office hours frequently can help solve this problem, but students should also look for ways to work with their professors outside of the classroom setting. If there are opportunities to help a professor with research, take them. If there are extra-curricular events or clubs where students and professors work together, join them. The more a professor gets to know you outside of the lecture hall, the more effectively they can write your letter of reference. Not only will getting involved in research and special events enhance your reference letters, but getting involved is also a great way to see if you like research and other aspects of the life you will encounter as a graduate student.

Finally, an undergraduate student should do some serious self-analysis and research before applying to graduate school. Learn about universities you may want to attend when you finish your bachelor's degree. Find out what graduate school is like in your department and see what special requirements they have for admission. Speak to professors and current graduate students to find out what it is like and if you are suited for the program. The internet is also a great resource when thinking about graduate school. Almost every university has a website explaining what graduate programs they offer, and you can even look up professors that share your research interests to find someone you think would be a good thesis supervisor. Not only can specific schools be found online, but there is an endless amount of information on applying to graduate school in general, including e-books like Dr. Mumby's.

However the most important thing you can do as an undergraduate student is decide what you generally want to do with your life and evaluate how graduate school fits into that plan. Knowing what you hope to achieve by continuing with your education not only makes your application much stronger, but it also gives your studies a purpose and hopefully provides you with motivation. After you know what you want to do, go for it — don't let any misconceptions prevent you from pursuing further education.

Your graduate school application package:

An application form

This comes directly from the school. Just follow the instructions carefully and be sure to submit the form by the deadline.

Transcripts

Be sure you get transcripts for your whole academic career and find out if the school you are applying to wants transcripts to be mailed directly from the sending institution.

Reference letters

Again, be sure you follow the instructions of the university; some schools want certain information included in the letter and want it sent to them a certain way.

Test scores

Standardized testing is fairly common for graduate school entrance (for example, the Graduate Management Admissions Test or GMAT). Different schools may want different test scores, so be sure you check which tests you need to take. In some cases, language proficiency tests may also be required.

Curriculum vitae (CV)

A CV is basically a detailed academic resume. It may include professional and academic

achievements and publications. Be sure to find out what information should be included in a CV for your discipline.

A personal essay

It is important to explain why you are a good match for the program to which you are applying. Be sure to explain what your goals in life are and how graduate school fits into those goals.

Work samples

Depending on the discipline, you may be asked to provide samples of work you completed as an undergraduate.