

# Excalibur

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## Tips and tricks for prospective graduate students

Written by Marc Sahagun, Editorial Intern  
Wednesday, 17 October 2007

Dr. David Mumby is an academic advisor for the psychology department at Concordia University and frequently holds workshops on graduate schools and the application process. He supervises numerous graduate students and has served on many graduate admissions committees.

**Excalibur:** What is the best way for students to go about finding an appropriate graduate school?

**David Mumby:** The process starts with having a very good idea of what types of specific advanced training you want. Your longer-term goal requires something that a master's or a PhD makes sense for; it's not for every type of career. It's really about trying to figure out where the matches are between your interests and your objectives and the people out there doing research in this field or that field and the particular programs at the particular schools. People need to understand that different programs differ in terms of the specific areas of expertise they can offer training in, and that varies as a function of the expertise of the faculty members or the professors in that department. So you have to do your homework; that's the whole point.

**E:** Why do some students with high grades get overlooked by graduate schools?

**DM:** The general answer to that is they failed to show other attributes that they have that make them suitable for graduate studies. They often tend to overestimate the importance of grades, not that grades are not important, but there's much more to it than that. If you don't demonstrate your character attributes that are associated with success in graduate school and other parts of your application and all you do is submit applications hoping that your grades are going to be sufficient, well those students are unaware of the many things that the selection process is really based on.

**E:** How can students with lower grades raise their chances of getting into graduate school?

**DM:** One's personality or character is a pretty important factor. A prospective graduate supervisor, usually the person whose decisions carry the most weight in determining whether a student is going to get in or not, will be observing the student. Students need to make an effort while they're undergraduates to get involved in activities beyond just going to their classes, attending lectures, writing exams and writing good papers. They have to get involved in the research or other creative activities that are conducted by the various professors and their graduate students. Getting undergraduate research experience is extremely important because it puts you in a position, as a student, to demonstrate that you have all the right attributes and abilities needed to be successful in graduate school.

**E:** When the graduate hiring board interviews a student, what does the board look for and what can the student do to sell themselves?

**DM:** First, it is important to understand that that aspect of the selection process is only part of the process in, realistically, a minority of graduate programs and disciplines. In most disciplines, one of the most important things is making sure that students have a really good understanding of what the special aspects of that program are, and

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that there is a good match between a student's specific goals, career goals, educational plans and specific areas of expertise that that program can offer training in. It's important that the students have a very good reason to be applying to a particular program and convey that during the interview.

**E:** What advice could you give to students facing discouragement in terms of trying to get into graduate school?

**DM:** I would advise that he or she really reconfirm whether their long-term goals are really the ones that require that they get the advanced degree. In other words, take time to reevaluate. If it is still something that the person is determined to do, they should apply the following year and take stock of everything that they might do to position themselves better. A student should know everything they need to know about the selection process. They need to do things like visit advisement grad websites or go see an academic supervisor. Chin up, keep determined and if you're sure you want to do it, try again.

**E:** What advice could you give to the undergraduate student struggling and stressing to prepare an application for graduate school?

**DM:** Well, those students can calm down and keep in mind that they could also take a long-term reevaluation. They could follow through on their applications; they could try to get whatever knowledge they can about how it works even at this late stage, and they can keep in mind that in only a few months later they can be reapplying all over again after having equipped themselves better. Not all is lost if you don't get in on your first shot. It may delay things, but it's a blessing in disguise when you don't get into the program that wasn't right for you.

*—A second edition of Mumby's book, *Graduate School: Winning strategies for getting in with or without excellent grades, will be available in May or June of 2008.**

*—Visit [www.mygraduateschool.com](http://www.mygraduateschool.com) for the first edition at a fraction of the price.*

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