

## When grades go on the back-burner

**Author discusses other important aspects of getting into grad school  
by Arielle Napp**

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Dave Mumby, an associate professor at Concordia University, will readily admit he has no idea how he came to be where he is today. Mumby has recently written a book about getting into graduate school; however, he personally admits good fortune was a key factor in his academic success.

"I fluked my way into graduate school," Mumby says. "I look back on it now and it's a miracle I got in at all. I know for a fact that I had no idea what I was doing."

It is due to this revelation that Mumby felt it was his duty to inform undergraduate students applying to graduate programs of what they should be doing.

In his book, "Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting In With or Without Excellent Grades," Mumby aims

to dispel some of the common misconceptions that undergraduates have about applying to graduate school. He is

quick to explain the reasoning behind the book's title.

"This is not a book for students who have poor grades, to tell them how they can cheat or trick their way into a

program," he says. "This is for students who do have good grades and are relying on them to gain admission into

a school, when their other areas may be lacking."

The "other areas" that Mumby instructs students to consider are what he calls the objective and non-objective

factors of an application. The objective category includes grade point average, standardized test scores and

application paperwork. The non-objective factors are the personal statement, letters of recommendation and

personal interviews.

Mumby says students need to focus more of their effort on the personal, non-objective parts of their application.

"Students often don't realize that how they come across as a person has a huge impact on if they will be accepted

or not," he says.

The best way for students to improve the more personalized parts of their application, he says, is to become

involved in activities outside of the classroom.

"It is not enough for a student to show up to class on time, be polite, do well on exams [and] write good papers,"

Mumby says. "They need to get involved in activities through their departments."

He says that way professors get to know their students on a more personal level and can better guide them toward

appropriate graduate programs, connect them with other professionals in the field and write convincing letters of

recommendation.

The best letters of recommendation are not just going to say the student does their work well and comes to class. They are going to consider a student's work habits and their character attributes," he says. "This information is not going to come from a relationship that exists only within a classroom."

Junior Lauren Caminsky says she has a hard time believing that grades, attendance and performance in class would come second on an application to personal relationships with class instructors.

"It just sucks that I can study hard and kill myself over my homework and my papers, and that my parents pressure me to get good grades," Caminsky says, "but in the end, if my professors don't think I have good character or just haven't gotten to know me very well, that may hurt my chances to go to grad school."

Graduate student Andrew Bozanic, president of the Graduate Student Senate, is working on a Ph.D. in history and also emphasizes the importance of grades.

"There are a lot of important factors in an application, and GPA and GRE scores may be rough numbers, but they will reflect work ethic and time management," he says. "One of the hardest things as a grad student is budgeting your time and having the personal will power to get your work done. If you do that, it will show in your grades, and you'll be successful in grad school."

He says he agrees with Mumby that making personal connections with professionals who work in the field a student is studying can be beneficial.

"Your professors are writing, teaching, researching within their field," Bozanic says. "They know their colleagues, and they can help you establish good relationships with them."

As an undergraduate at the University of Alberta in Canada, where he also completed his Master's degree, Mumby didn't have access to this type of advice. Although he says he had a decent GPA, he didn't think that it would be enough to get him into graduate school.

"While I was doing my Master's at Alberta, I wasn't thinking too much about how I had gotten in," Mumby says. "I was just glad to be there."

Later, however, when Mumby was working on his Ph.D. at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, and while doing post-doctoral work at the University of New Mexico, he began to realize many of the students around him shared misunderstandings about graduate school.

"No matter where I was, or what the discipline students were studying, they had such similar stories and shared the same confusion that I had had as an undergraduate," he says. "There was an information gap about how the selection process actually works."

What started as a single sheet of paper with some insightful tips about selecting, applying and getting accepted into graduate schools quickly became a thicker information packet as more students looked to Mumby for advice.

After approximately one year of informally advising students, and after conferring with some colleagues, Mumby says he had the idea to create a book on the subject.

"I was just thinking, 'Why has no one else written a book about this?' So I finally did," he says.

A year and a half later, in early 1997, the book was completed, Mumby says.

He says he's currently working on a second edition of the book due to come out in June 2008.

"It's roughly nine years old, and we're reworking it a little, but none of the basic information has changed," he says. "Technology is different, some things are different, but the basic points that I address are no different today than they were when I first started passing out sheets of paper."

In keeping up with technological advances, Mumby created a Web site, MyGraduateSchool.com, where students can go to find information about the author, as well as updated tips about applying to schools. Students also have the option of downloading individual chapters of the book, or the entire thing.

Mumby says the book also includes a timetable to advise students about what steps they should be taking toward graduate school while they are still undergraduates.

"Take little steps each year, like getting to know professors, and then around the end of junior year, start planning and preparing," he says. "Get involved early and set yourself up for some strong recommendations."

Caminsky says one of the most difficult issues she has encountered is that applying to graduate school is different from applying to undergraduate school.

"In high school, it's like most students plan on graduating and going to college," she says. "Acceptance into college is the ultimate goal. Someone is holding your hand the entire time because everyone assumes that you want to go to college -- there's no question about it."

Caminsky says in college, there is less guidance because not all students plan on going to graduate school.

"I had to take it upon myself to decide whether grad school is for me or not," she says. "Because not everyone plans on going forward with their education, there is no set standard for what classes to take. I felt like I was completely on my own when I researched schools and figured out what credits I needed."

Mumby says not every undergraduate should consider graduate school.

"Graduate school is not the next logical step for everyone," he says. "Each student has to decide whether they want to charter a career or course that involves graduate school. Become aware of the career options available to you, because you never know where your education can lead."

For the students who know graduate school is for them, Mumby says he hopes his advice helps.

"Along my way, I realized that I was making impressions and building relationships that I didn't know would help me in the future, and it worked for me," he says. "I relied on good fortune to get me from undergraduate school to graduate school. My hope is that with my

advice, other students won't have to."