

Grad school myths can dissuade students

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Most students have serious misconceptions about graduate school and what it takes to get into a graduate program. Each year thousands of students apply to graduate school and fail to get in. Contrary to what they believe to be the main reason, it is not because they are beaten out by other applicants with better grades. They fail to get in because they make naive mistakes during the application process -- mistakes that could easily be avoided if only they had a better idea of what they should and shouldn't be doing. The cruelest irony is that A+ students are sometimes rejected by a program while applicants with GPAs in the B+ range are accepted into the same program. The message is clear: even students with excellent GPAs cannot afford to be complacent or overconfident in their approach to graduate school applications. Their grades are no guarantee that they will get into the program of their choice --or any program at all. The myth about the ultimate importance of excellent grades has another unfortunate consequence: countless students won't even consider graduate school because they think their grades are not good enough. Many of them are wrong. In fact, most of them would have a very good chance of getting into a program despite their grades -- if they knew what steps to take. Most students do realize that there are important factors in addition to grades and most can list two or three; such as standardized test scores, good letters of recommendation and relevant work or research experience in their field. But this just barely skims the surface, and a complete list of relevant criteria would consist of a few dozen items, not just three or four. Professors who advise students inadvertently perpetuate the misconceptions, including those about grades -- not by giving bad advice but by failing to fully explain certain things. For example, students are seldom told that how they come across as a person is crucial. The social environment of graduate school favors those who are reasonable, likeable and easy to communicate with, and admissions committees want to fill their programs with students who fit this bill. Interpersonal skills are on display at several points during the application process, but it does not even occur to most applicants that they are being evaluated on these dimensions. For more information and tips on applying successfully to graduate school visit www.mygraduateschool.com.

