Behind the Curtain: How Admissions Committees Review Graduate Applications

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There is no recipe for being admitted!

- Admitted students have varying GPAs, GRE scores, research experiences, preparations — yet they *all* were admitted

- Goal is for students to prepare themselves as best as possible

- Set a baseline for increasing preparation and competitiveness

- Admissions is a holistic process that includes multiple areas (not just GRE & GPA)
The Application
The Application

- Statement of Purpose
- Recommendation Letters
- Transcript
- GRE Scores
- Curriculum Vitae
Statement of Purpose: Research, Research, Research

• Definition of Research - It is used for discovery, development and interpretation of methods and systems for advancement in human knowledge.
  • Focus on Quality, not Quantity (although quantity is important)
  • Finding Research - Research can occur outside of a formal “research program” – classes, job experience, etc. – have a conversation with a faculty member
• Academic year and summer research experiences
• Describing
  • Describe thought processes vs. technique
  • Outcomes - Demonstrate a depth of understanding, Highlight the key research, don’t just list everything you have done
• Intent for future study
SURVEY: Research Experience Varies

Survey of 94 current graduate students

- STEM – More likely to have year long research experiences, more likely to have 2-3 experiences prior to starting graduate school.
Statement: Showing “Fit”

- Demonstrating that “homework” has been done on a program/university
- Familiarity with overall departmental research
- Evidence of engagement/contact with faculty, students, campus visit, etc.
- Don’t say “because it’s the best, #1, etc.”
- Evidence of homework/fit should be sprinkled throughout
- Never apply “blindly”
Statement: Formatting

- Formats vary
  - Pay attention to instructions
  - Single essay vs. multiple essays (research experience, research interests, diversity statement)
  - Focus of the statement may vary for fellowships
- The more eyes the better
  - Get multiple outside readers (program directors, faculty, friends)
  - Expect the process to take months (not days or weeks)
Statements: “Managing Square Footage”

- Balancing space and what to include/exclude
  - Who are you?
  - Why this particular program?
  - What research have you done?
  - What are your research interests/are you a fit?
  - Opportunity to address (but not dwell on) “blips”
  - Always mention & explain funding/fellowships!
Statements: “Managing Square Footage” (cont.)

• Good rules of thumb:

• Determine whether to repeat info that can be found elsewhere (i.e. extracurriculars, honors, funding
• Have less focus on your personal life
• Use language you are comfortable with
• Determine whether to discuss diversity. (If they have a separate diversity question, perhaps reduce focus in statement.)
Statements: “Managing Square Footage” (cont.)

• Addressing Weaknesses
  • Talk to faculty, advisor – determine if best to address in personal statement or recommendations; don’t dwell
  • Determine if the best course of action is to defer applying – but only defer if a plan is in place to address weaknesses

• Potential Areas of Weakness/Modifications
  • GPA - post-baccalaureate, masters degree
  • New field – post-baccalaureate, masters degree
  • Lack of research – additional research experience
  • Poor GRE scores – additional test prep, course
Letters of Recommendation

- Need 2-4 letters for most applications
- Are What Committees Weigh the Most
- Can Make or Break an Applicant More Than Any Other Part
- Are The Most Important Part of the Application
Who should students ask to write LORs?

1. Someone who knows them well and thinks highly of them…

2. Someone whose credentials and experience with the student can directly attest to the skills sought for the position …

3. The more senior the better

4. Someone who can write a **strong** letter of recommendation
The Team of Recommenders

• What Are The Skills Sought For The Position?
  • 1. RESEARCH
  • 2. RESEARCH
  • 3. RESEARCH

• How Can Each Team Member Help to Form a Picture of the Applicant?
  • Research Advisors
  • Scientific Industry/Professional Managers
  • Class Professors
  • Program Directors/Coordinators (if PhD)
How should recommenders be approached?

- Asked Reasonably in Advance
  - At least 4 weeks, 8 preferable

- Face to face discussion
  - Student’s Future Interests
  - Why they are asking you

- Receipt of Application Portfolio from Student

- Students should ask - “Can you write me a strong letter of recommendation?”
When should a request be declined?

• If they don’t have anything good to say
• If they are too busy to take appropriate time
• If they don’t know you well enough
• If they are not senior enough
• If they don’t have the correct expertise
• If they are not a good writer (grammar, typos)
• If there are more impactful people who could be writing the letters
How should letter writers be prepared?

• Students should create an Application Portfolio for each of their recommenders:
  • Reviewed Statement of Purpose/Interest Paragraph
  • Student CV, Past Research Experiences, Courses
  • Student GPA, GRE Scores
  • How does the student know the recommender?
  • Any specifics on what should be emphasized?
  • List of Schools/Programs Student is applying to
  • Program Deadlines, Reminders
  • Signed Forms, SASEs (if required)
  • Thank you and contact info
Who is the audience for the recommendation?

• Academic Admissions Committee Members
  • Faculty
• What Do They Want To Know?
  • Can The Student Perform Research Extremely Well?
  • Will I Get A High Return On My Investment?
    • Fellowships
    • Publications
    • Future Research Career or Notable Contribution
• Who Do They Want to Hear it From?
  • People Like Them = Other PIs at Research Institutions
• How Much Should Be Said?
  • Enough to get the point across in 1-2 pages
  • The letter will be read fairly quickly
What should be discussed in a LOR?

- Student’s Research Ability/Analytical Thinking
- Student’s Ability to Perform Independently/Leadership
- Oral and Written Communication Ability
- How They Compare to Other Students
- Student’s Future Interests
- How You Know The Student
- Writer’s Credibility (explain, or include in signature or letterhead)
- Firm, Confident Statements
Application component: Transcript

- GPA – overall and major
- Key courses
- Concerns should be addressed in Statement or Recommendations
  - Particularly low grades in key courses
  - Low overall GPA (<3.0)
  - Low major GPA (<3.5)
Application component: GRE

- GRE Scores – General and Subject (if required)
  - Importance of Subject GRE varies by field

- New format & scoring in September 2011

- Encourage students to prepare formally (online resources, books, courses)

- Encourage students to take the GRE early (by Summer following Junior year at latest)

- Encourage students to apply for GRE fee reduction waiver (even if they don’t need it)
  - Can be used to waive application fees
SURVEY: Test Scores/GPA vary  
Survey of 94 current graduate students

- 28% of students had undergraduate GPA of 3.4 or less
- Less than 600 GRE – field differences
  - Quantitative – 8% STEM, 30% Hum/SS/Ed/Bus
  - Verbal – 66% STEM, 25% Hum/SS/Ed/Bus
APPLICATION components: Other

- Writing Sample (if required)
  - Rework existing document – not a time to start from scratch

- Curriculum Vitae (CV) – *not* 1-page resume
  - Includes publications, presentations, research descriptions, extracurricular activities, honors

- Previous interactions with the applicant (email, phone, visits)
The Total Package Matters

• No one component of the application will guarantee admission

• Even outstanding students may not be admitted by every university
What does the admissions process look like?
Design of the Admissions Committee

- Every admissions committee is different
  - Made up of faculty in the department (entire department or a subset)
  - Review may be segmented by research interest
  - Composition varies from year to year

- Faculty are people
  - Personalities, politics, policies & biases all impact deliberation
  - Application components will impact each reviewer in different ways
Admissions Outcomes

- Not admissible – not qualified for admission
- Admissible – qualified for admission
- Admitted – selected for admission
- Admitted & Funded

*Not to scale
The Review Process

- Submit app online
- Staff check apps for completeness
- Faculty read apps
- Initial review (committees, rounds, interviews*)
- Determine offers of admission & funding

Identify admissible pool

$, bias, politics, previous cohorts, diversity, space, dept needs, faculty leaves, field balance

*when required
Factors that Impact Initial Review & Whittling Process

- Was the application *completed* before the deadline (recommendations & GRE scores)?
  - Applications may not be reviewed until they are complete – can put applicant at disadvantage for funding

- Were communication and interactions with the applicant positive?

- The Reviewers (faculty on admissions committee)
  - Thought process, approach, vantage point, circumstances for reviewer
  - Are the recommenders well known or personally known by the reviewers?
Factors that Impact (cont.)

- Department situation/context
  - Financial resources
  - Field diversity
  - Subfield targets
  - Demographic diversity
  - Faculty availability
  - Applicant pool
  - Current student population

- All aspects can change from year to year
Student Profiles

**Cream** - Outstanding scores, GPA, recommendations and research

**Solid** - Strong scores, GPA, recommendations; good research

**Marginal Hold** - OK scores & GPA, good research and recommendations

**Champion Required** - Low scores or GPA; 1 or more weak recommendations; good research

**Not qualified** – Lack of significant research; weak recommendations

Definitely Admissible (but no guarantee of actual admission!)

A subset will be seriously considered for admission

Could be admissible

Not admissible
Gaining Champions

• Champions recognize a “spark” often communicated by a recommender

• Goal of the applicant – get as many champions on the committee as possible; the more champions an applicant has, the easier it is to be seriously considered for admission and to be admitted!

• How can an applicant gain more champions?
  • Be “on point” in as many aspects of the application as possible
  • Choose recommenders wisely
  • Make it easy for the reviewers to imagine the applicant as a colleague
Department Fit

- Department Fit – match between applicant research interests and interests of the faculty
- Fit is very important
  - Want to be at an institution that can support research agenda
- Even a great fit and “Cream” profile does not guarantee admission
Final Decisions

• Holistic vs. Fit

• Context of program

• Strength of recommendation letters
  • Often make the difference, particularly for students with lower GPA/GRE

• Depth and breadth of research experience

• Weight of GREs & GPA – they can get you in the door, but don’t guarantee admission

• What can the applicant do? Research & apply to multiple institutions
Questions?
CONTEXT: Who is a doctoral student?

- Survey of 94 current Stanford graduate students - targeted at students with (self-described) diverse backgrounds

- Respondents were:
  - 90% doctoral students
  - 53% STEM (Science/Engineering)
  - 66% underrepresented minorities
  - 39% 1st generation college students
  - 61% 1st generation graduate students
  - 37% low socio-economic status
  - 47% public undergrad institutions
  - 8% transferred from community college

- Does this represent your student population?
SURVEY: Making the Decision  
Survey of 94 current graduate students

- Students in Humanities, Social Science & Education tend to decide later than STEM peers
- Participation in grad prep programs – significant impact on students, provided understanding and confidence to pursue graduate studies
SURVEY: Applying  
Survey of 94 current graduate students

- Students in STEM fields submitted more applications; were admitted into more programs
Other Ways to Advocate

- Provide students with a timeline for preparing for graduate school
  - Emphasize taking the GRE in Jr. year
  - Encourage students to apply in Jr., Sr. year for funding
- Provide Workshops on key aspects of application
  - Utilize campus resources
- Put in a good word/Build Credibility
  - If you have a stellar student, let us know
  - Tell us who is applying from your program
  - Follow up after admissions decisions to possibly determine why or why not a student was accepted
- Understand graduate school rules for Int’l and undocumented students
- Share Tips for Writing Good Letters with Faculty
- Help Students Get a Wide Exposure to Research