Applying to PhD Programs

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Undergraduate and Graduate (PhD) Cultures

Undergraduate:
Student “at a school”

- Courses and grades driven
- More objective evaluations of performance
- Competition
- Individualism
- Perceived scarcity of resources

Graduate:
Student of “Dr. Z”

- Research focus
- More subjective evaluations
- Collaboration
- Relationship-driven
- Peon syndrome

What faculty on admissions committees know...

Faculty advisor-advisee relationships:

- Begin in grad school but collaborative relationships may continue long after PhD is received.
- Result in PhDs who will represent the department, PhDs whose achievements reflect on the department.
- Are about the work, first and foremost...as in WHICH applicant will be productive and...help faculty be more productive?
- Are volatile, can be very rewarding and/or frustrating
- Are relationships whose quality can be hard to predict based on application packet

PhD admissions committees wrestle with this big question...

Which applicants will we choose to train? They’ll admit those with these attributes:

- Academic ability in the specific field or a similar one (Think of Grades and GRE as most obvious indicators, if they are high enough, your app stays in game...after that grades and GREs don’t matter as much, statement and letters matter more.)
- Persistence/Motivation
- Creativity/Vision
- Ability to multitask
- Writing ability (scholars publish their work)
- Ability to collaborate productively with faculty and peers and subordinates (undergrads)
- Those with experiences, background, perspective that translate to potential for productivity
- Preparation for success in graduate school and beyond
- This all adds up to one word...PRODUCTIVITY...and you must use EVERY element of the application to persuade the admissions committee that you will be very productive IF you are admitted.
Picking a graduate program to apply to:

1) Look up universities that have strong programs in areas of interest
   - Talk to professors at your university
   - Think broadly! Many disciplines may address your topic of interest
   - Look at trade magazines, journals for the research/scholarship being done
   - Talk to people in the field, at conferences
   - A word about rankings: There is not much difference between top ranked program (1 vs. 10); more important is whether a program has at least two faculty whose work interests you
   - Be sure you review program website (many questions about graduate programs and the application details are answered on the dept/program website or the university's graduate admissions website)

2) Look up authors who are doing interesting work that broadly fits your research interests
   - Find the author’s university/dept/program
   - Check out at least two of author's most recent papers/articles
   - Look for author's website—CV and publications (see if he/she has a lab website)
   - Make contact (Be professional; Do NOT expect too much, faculty are busy, but it’s worth a try.)
     - E-mail: Should be short and to the point...
       - Paragraph 1: After introducing yourself, write, ‘I read your article on widgets...I have a question or two about the research...' Then ask the question or questions.
       - Paragraph 2: ‘I intend to apply to your graduate program, and I’m interested in your research, are you taking students this year?’ OR ‘I am interested in doing research on widgets and how they affect cancer cells, if I were admitted would I be able to do that work with you?’ If you get no response, no worries, faculty are busy, wait a week or two then try again. Still no response? They are busy, don’t worry about it.
     - Before you e-mail...DO YOUR HOMEWORK! Do NOT waste people’s valuable time asking questions that could be easily answered by your reading the relevant websites and papers!
     - Talk to graduate recruiters, graduate student services officers/grad admin’s (typically staff listed on dept website who work with faculty to make sure grad program runs smoothly), and current graduate students (these three groups of people, recruiters, administrators, and current students are typically more available than faculty and will also provide useful information.)
     - Visit the campus and talk to all four groups of people: faculty, students, recruiters, and admin’s

3) Check out the program/university/town
   - Is it a good match for you given your interests?
   - Is there a match between you and dept culture?
   - What is the faculty of interest’s approach to training students? Hands on or hands off? Which do you prefer?
   - Size of department and size of research groups
   - Are your grades/scores competitive?
   - Can you live in the town? Find friends, inside department and out?
   - How long is the program? What do graduates usually do?
   - Grad student organizations, campus community centers for your life outside the department/program?
   - What are the requirements for the Ph.D.?
   - Can you enter without M.A./M.S.?
Considerations for applying to graduate school...

Assess your qualifications...

1) A “Star”? Then apply to 5-6 highly ranked programs...what do we mean by “Star”?
   • 3.5 GPA or higher (same or higher in your major)
   • 161Q (80th percentile) on GREs or better (those are VERY rough goalposts, adjust for your programs of interest! Stanford is closer to 165); verbal scores are less of an issue
   • Research Methods/Statistics courses (Social/natural sciences, you’ve taken more than required number)
   • Research Experience (multiple experiences, with one experience lasting at least 9 months)
   • Strong letters of recommendation (with at least one from prof/PhD who has supervised you in research, not merely taught you in a class) that tell detailed personal stories about you as a researcher/scholar and compare you to others who have gone on to success in graduate school
   • Relevant jobs, coursework, & participation in research programs (summer programs, for example)
   • Proficient Writing Ability

Not a “Star”? Then apply to 8 or more programs
   • Pick both top tier and second tier programs
   • Don’t rule yourself out of admission to a top tier program! You have to apply to be admitted
   • All programs should have at least two faculty you’d be happy to work with
   • Importance of strong recommendations & excellent research experience increases
   • Have recommender or two address significant blemishes and explain why blemishes (low grades or scores, for example) don’t reflect your true promise OR address blemishes in your personal statement (or do both, address blemishes in letters of rec and statement)

2) GRE
   • Start preparing early (Junior year)
   • Take practice exam to determine where you currently stand (free from ‘www.kaplan.com’ or ‘www.review.com’ or buy ETS’ Official Guide to the GRE Revised General Test and take the paper GRE)
   • Utilize online & university resources (a full computer revised GRE is in ETS’ own GRE Powerprep II, with math review, info on analytical writing, available from ‘www.gre.org’ and included with the above book on a CDROM)
   • Take a course. Even if you don’t, get both Kaplan/PR GRE prep book, each comes with CDROM containing 3/4 practice computer GRE’s (get both books for the practice exams that come with each)
   • Find out how far you are from scores you need to be competitive...
   • If you’re scoring pretty well, focus on...
     - Getting more familiar with computer-based exam and its format
     - Learn the way the different question types work and the types of wrong answers associated with certain question types (PR/Kaplan books very helpful here!)
     - Get comfortable using educated guessing when stumped
     - Increase your stamina, endurance, focus
   • If you’re farther away from good scores...take MORE time to study and...
     - Focus on replacing your current problem solving approaches with PR/Kaplan methods
     - To learn and increase your score, STOP worrying about how you do during study!
     - Focus on observing your problem solving and improving it
     - Embrace your mistakes and errors, learn from them so you don’t make same errors on exam
     - While you’re studying practice managing anxiety, tension, attention for optimal performance
3) Get applications
- Write university or get online application started
- Find out about application fees, ask about fee waivers (request info at least month before deadline)
- Is there a separate app for financial support?
- Mark deadlines and take them seriously!
- Find out testing, course requirements for program
  - GRE Subject Test (recommended or required?)
  - Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)
  - Test of Spoken English (TSE)
- Start early!

4) Funding graduate studies...

- Fellowships
  - Usually cover tuition + stipend for your living expenses
  - Attractive to faculty (“free” labor)
  - External fellowships: Can use at any accredited program
  - Start looking early (Google, dedicated websites, and books useful)
  - Many restricted to US Citizens/Permanent residents
  - University sponsored fellowships
    - Based on faculty/dept nominations
    - Important to get to know several faculty

- Research Assistantships (RA)
  - Can cover tuition + stipend
  - Perform research as directed by faculty
  - May not be related to thesis

- Teaching Assistantships (TA)
  - Usually includes salary + tuition covered
  - Grade papers, teach, hold office hours
  - Required for some departments for degree
  - English proficiency - may be required to obtain additional language training

5) Work on Statement of Purpose

Obvious aspects...
- On individual sheets write answers to each of the following questions below:
  - Why are you applying to graduate school?
  - What has led you to pursue grad study?
  - What relevant research experiences (and any other experiences) have you had and what have you taken from those experiences?
  - What are your research interests (do they match faculty interests)?
  - What faculty do you want to work with and why are you applying to this specific program?
- Mention more than one faculty member (have more than one faculty member that interests you!)
- Work on these short essays without regard to length...once you have some length, begin editing essays for clarity and concision, then put them together in one essay, play around with order, and write transitions
- Tailor statement (no more than two single-spaced pages) to each university and program’s instructions
- Get detailed critical feedback from LOTS of people, particularly faculty at your home institution
Subtler aspects...
- Think in terms of *engaging faculty in a conversation* rather than *pleading with them that you should be admitted*...ask reviewers to read drafts with this concern in mind
- With later drafts work on developing an overall narrative theme (see if one emerges as you work)
- Take at least ten drafts and expect your thinking and the essay to change quite a bit over time
- Read drafts out loud...easier to catch errors
- Expect the ‘you’ that emerges in essay to be incomplete...that’s OK
- Deal with any significant blemishes concisely and later in statement (let a positive impression develop before you address any blemishes)...explain rather than provide excuses, meaning that you should address issue, provide the explanation and provide supporting evidence, them move on...draft it, then work to make it as concise as possible; get feedback from others to see if explanation is working as you want it to
- No humor (do you really know what middle-aged academics find funny?); skip flashy opening, it’s unnecessary; think of pitching essay to educated person in the field, but not necessarily in your specialty; avoid emotionally laden words (such as love or passion...remember, your audience is a bunch of professors! Emotional appeals make them uncomfortable...they are looking for scholarly colleagues!)
- Good to mention your diverse status, but you should tie it specifically to how it has a) shaped your academic journey or b) informed your interests (forget about any Oprah-esque ‘overcoming all barriers’ and ‘I’m the little engine that could’ appeals) or c) affected what you want to do with your graduate degree

6) Recommendations
- Give faculty the forms/online URLs early, at least 4-5 weeks before deadline
- Give faculty a deadline two weeks BEFORE actual deadline
- Include self-addressed stamped postcard that faculty will send to you so you know when letters have been sent or uploaded. Remind faculty a week before your due date if no indicator postcard has been sent
- Be polite and thankful...faculty have many letters to write, yours is not the only one

How to get strong letters of recommendation
- Approach faculty in your major/field early (start thinking beginning of junior year, not fall sr. year)
  - Make sure faculty get to know you (see them during office hours, OFTEN)
  - Ask faculty why they decided to go to grad school, why they decided to become professors
  - Ask them of papers/books you should be reading, then FOLLOW UP!
  - Ask them of conferences you should attend, faculty or grad programs they would recommend
- When time comes, thank faculty for advice, inform them you’ve decided to apply to grad school, ask faculty if he/she can write you a STRONG letter of recommendation
- Only get letters from relevant faculty (those in same or similar field to grad program)
- Ask writer that knows you best to address any relevant blemish, provide explanation & evidence
- Give faculty additional information:
  - Strong, well-developed draft of Statement of Purpose
  - Academic Resume/Curriculum Vita
    - Academic honors/accomplishments; overall GPA/Major GPA/post frosh GPA (include specific and relevant GPAs that cast you in a good light and/or put a low overall GPA in better context
    - All relevant research/work experience
    - Relevant courses taken and grades (if they are strong, if not, leave grades out)
    - Specific information about classes you took from them (i.e. grade, paper topic for their class & their comments (if positive!))
- Any attributes/strengths/skills that you have and feel recommender is in position to attest to...don't be afraid to list them and directly ask recommender to address them in letter

**How does the admissions process work in grad admissions?**
- Faculty are looking for long-term scholarly colleagues (it’s all about the work)
- First admissions committee selects group of applicants who are admissible, all who would thrive if admitted
- From that pool committee then selects applicants who will make significant contributions to the department: lots of factors, including academic skills, research experiences, school attended, diversity, special experiences and background can play role (also specific department needs)
- Obstacles you have overcome may be important to admissions committee because those who have traveled far and achieved beyond expectations in the past are likely to do so in the future. Writing about such experiences in personal statement is appropriate, but tie these experiences DIRECTLY to your promise & productivity as scholar.

**How is applying to a Master’s program different?**
- Research experience not critical, relevant jobs/internships, volunteer experiences, leadership positions/experiences with organizations all helpful and more relevant to Master's than PhD
- Admissions committee understands applicants want extra knowledge/training to use out in real world
- Each element of application used to judge a) likelihood applicant will succeed in the program and b) likelihood applicant will make good/interesting/significant use of graduate training
- **Caution:** Much less financial support available for MS only programs (but ask about support and search high and low anyway!)

**Success in Grad School**

**Build your network of support**
- Who are the faculty who share your research interests?
- Who are the more senior grad students who can share with you how to succeed on this new terrain?
- Who are the scholars across the country (grad students and faculty) you can work with or just talk about your research and career?
- Who are the friends who will sustain you and remind you of the world outside the grad program?

**These folks will get you through!**

Questions? Contact Us!