



Alabama Connection

ALABAMA GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOL EXPO

Grad School Tips & Advice

APPLICATION PROCESS

UNDERSTANDING THE GRAD SCHOOL APPLICATION PROCESS

What do Graduate Schools Want?

What do graduate admissions committees look for in graduate applicants? Understanding what graduate schools want in applicants is the first step in tailoring your experiences and application to make yourself irresistible to the graduate programs of your dreams. Their goal is to identify applicants who will become important researchers and leaders in their field. In other words, admissions committees try to select the most promising students. What's a promising student? One who has the ability to become an excellent graduate student and professional.

The Ideal Grad School Candidate

The ideal graduate student is gifted, eager to learn, and highly motivated. He or she can work independently and take direction, supervision, and constructive criticism without becoming upset or overly sensitive. Faculty look for students who are hard workers, want to work closely with faculty, are responsible and easy to work with, and who are a good fit to the program. The best graduate students complete the program on time, with distinction, and excel in the professional world to make graduate faculty proud. Of course, these are ideals. Most graduate students have some of these characteristics, but nearly no one will have all, so don't fear.

Criteria Weighed by Admissions Committees

How do faculty weigh the various criteria for admission? Unfortunately there is no simple answer; each graduate admissions committee is a bit different, but generally speaking, the following criteria are important to most admissions committees:

- Undergraduate GPA (especially the last two years of college)
- Graduate entrance exam scores
- Recommendation letters
- Personal statement

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Grades are important not as a sign of intelligence, but instead grades are a long term indicator of how well you perform your job as student. They reflect your motivation and your ability to do consistently good or bad work. Not all grades are the same, though. Admissions committees understand that applicants' grade point averages often cannot be compared meaningfully. Grades can differ among universities. An A at one university may be a B+ at another. Also grades differ among professors in the same university. Admissions committees try to take these things into account when examining applicants' GPAs. They also look at the courses taken: a B in Advanced Statistics may be worth more than an A in Introduction to Social Problems. In other words, they consider the context of the GPA: where was it obtained and of what courses is it comprised? In many cases, it's better to have a lower GPA composed of solid challenging courses than a high GPA based on easy courses like "Basket Weaving for Beginners" and the like.

Graduate Entrance Exam Scores

Clearly, applicants' grade point averages are difficult to compare. This is where the graduate entrance exam (GRE, MCAT, LSAT, GMAT) scores come in. Whereas grade point averages are not standardized (there are enormous differences in how professors within a department, university, or country grade student work), the standard entrance exam is. Your exam scores provide information about how you rank among your peers (that's why it's important to do your best!). Although exam scores are standardized, departments don't weigh them in a standardized way. How a department or admissions committee evaluates exam scores varies. Some use them as cutoffs to eliminate applicants, some use them as criteria for research assistantships and other forms of funding, some look to exam scores to offset weak GPAs, and some admissions committees will overlook poor exam scores if applicants demonstrate significant strengths in other areas.

Letters of Recommendation

Usually admissions committees begin the evaluation process by considering GPA and your standard entrance exam score. These quantitative measures only tell a small part of an applicant's story. Letters of recommendation provide context within which to consider an applicant's numerical scores. Therefore it's important that the faculty who write your letters of recommendation know you well so that they can discuss the person behind the GPA and exam scores. Generally speaking, letters written by professors known to committee members tend to carry more weight than those written by "unknowns." Letters written by well-known people in the field, if they signify that they know you well and think highly of you, can be very helpful in moving your application towards the top of the list.

Personal Statement

The personal statement, also known as the admissions essay, statement of purpose, and personal goal statement, is your chance to introduce yourself, speak directly to the admissions committee, and provide information that doesn't appear elsewhere in your application. Faculty read personal statements very closely because they reveal lots of information about applicants. Your essay is an indicator of your writing ability, motivation, ability to express yourself, maturity, passion for the field, and judgment. Admissions committees read essays with the intent to learn more about applicants, to determine if they have the qualities and attitudes needed for success, and to weed out applicants who don't fit the program.

Interview Questions

What do you consider to be your major strengths?

What weakness or area for improvement have you identified?

Name one of your greatest accomplishments?

What relevant experience or activities have you been involved in?

What have you learned from your extracurricular activities and how have they prepared you for your career pursuits?

Which courses have you enjoyed most? Which courses have been the most challenging for you?

Why did you choose this profession as your career goal? What inspired you or attracted you to this field?

What do you think it takes to be successful in this field? What challenges do you anticipate?

What are your plans for the future? What are your goals and aspirations?

What contributions do you hope to make to your field?

Are you an active learner? Are you enthusiastic about learning?

Do you enjoy reading and researching and believe that you're good at it?

Do you see yourself as a good test-taker? Do you organize your time and use it efficiently?

Can you adapt easily to new situations? Do you set priorities and deal with competing academic demands?

Are you able to integrate new information with your existing knowledge?

If you received low grades, were there extenuating circumstances?

How have you done overall in your school's required courses in your subject area?

If your transcript includes withdrawals, incompletes or course repeats, what were the circumstances?

Can you provide evidence of resourcefulness in the face of adversity during a difficult course?

Websites

Princeton Review - www.princetonreview.com

Thomson Peterson's Guide - www.petersons.com

Council of Graduate Schools - www.gradschools.com

Graduate School Guide - www.graduateguide.com

All About Graduate School - www.allaboutgradschool.com

Alabama Connection - www.alabamaconnection.org

On-Line Articles

About Grad School: What Do Graduate Schools Want? - <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/miscellaneous/a/want.htm>

Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School: - <http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/grad-school.pdf>

Grad Schools: Articles: Get Informed: - <http://www.gradschools.com/article-category/get-informed-1>

Grad School Tips: Types of Grad School Essays: - <http://www.gradschooltips.com/typesofessays.htm>