INSIDE THE MIND
OF A GRADUATE ADMISSION COUNSELOR

What are graduate admission officers really looking for when they review your application? HINT: IT’S NOT ALL ABOUT THE GRADES.

BY TRACEY SHEETZ • CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Recently I received a letter from the disappointed father of a denied graduate applicant. After exhaustively listing his son’s strong academic qualifications (GPA and test scores), he questioned how it was possible his son hadn’t been admitted. While the parent of a graduate applicant speaking on behalf of their “child” is an issue to be addressed in another article, I realized this scenario is a prime example of the misconceptions of what makes for an ideal graduate student and strong application. Though websites outline the admission requirements, including GPA, test scores, and other objective criteria, those are only the rudimentary foundations for admittance. In truth, graduate admission evaluation is much more subjective and holistic and involves a deeper look beyond academic performance.

The characteristics of a favorable graduate application are often unwritten and vague. Beyond the few mandated university requirements, students are often asked for various supplemental materials like a portfolio, résumé, test scores, recommendations, essay, and interview.

Though high grades and test scores are commendable, reviewers find the true picture of an individual revealed in the supplemental materials. I have seen many outstanding academic performers denied admission due to their overall attitude, lack of preparation, and poor presentation of themselves in supplemental materials. A previous colleague who serves as the director of a physician assistant program placed more emphasis on the interview than GPA for his admission decisions. He told applicants, “If I wouldn’t want you taking care of my grandmother, I don’t want you in my program.”

That might sound harsh, but, in a highly selective program such as his, he wanted only those students with drive, compassion, listening skills, and good bedside manners. While his standards for admission were difficult to discern from GPA and test scores, they could be recognized through the various supplemental steps of the application.

So, what are graduate admission professionals looking for in a successful applicant?

Academic background
When committees review applications, they look for a student who is academically sound and prepared for graduate-level courses. Many probe into the transcript looking for grades in key courses pertinent to the graduate program. Reviewers examine the range of course work and whether a student has gone beyond what was minimally required or has successfully completed difficult courses. Philosophies of standardized test scores as success indicators vary. Depending on the program, emphasis may be placed on just one variable of a test score.

Writing skills
Personal statements and essays are crucial instruments in determining the writing aptitude of an applicant. For many evaluators, writing samples outweigh GPA, GREs, and even letters of recommendation. With any written requirements, emphasis is placed not only on what is written but also how well it is written. These samples help to ascertain if the applicant is ready for graduate-level work and has a command of the English language. Importance is placed on organized, clear, and thoughtful writing using correct grammar, spelling, and structure.

Inquisitive and original thinking
A graduate student needs to have the ability to ask questions appropriate for their discipline. This scholarly inquisitiveness emerges in written
materials, interviews, and communications with the program. Faculty are looking for students who have clear, specific, and even novel research directions that intrigue their interest and curiosity.

Clearly defined goals
A strong personal statement that tells a story and articulates your individuality will intrigue an admission committee. They already assume a student is pursuing a degree to advance their career; what they want to see is someone with a clear vision, who can identify how the specific program is going to help them reach their long-term goals.

Good “fit”
Though ambiguous, one of the biggest considerations in an admission evaluation is “fit.” Faculty reviewers look for applicants whose interests and goals best complement the strengths of the department. For example, if applying to a research-intensive program, communicate an intended line of research that aligns with faculty expertise.

How do you improve your “fit”? Do your homework! Investigate the research and teaching interests of the faculty and become familiar with the dissertations currently in progress. The essay and interview become venues for you to explain why that particular program, at that particular university, working on that particular research, with that particular faculty is paramount to reaching your professional goals.

Timely and organized
Time management and organization are musts as a graduate student. How an applicant displays these skills throughout the application process impacts the admission decision. Submitting all materials in a timely fashion is imperative. Double-check that reference letters and transcripts were sent and received. If ever you are uncertain about deadlines, requirements, or other steps, contact the program for clarity.

Falls directions
Admission into graduate school is competitive—don’t miss out on a technicality due to an oversight. Make sure to answer all questions in an application and include all required documents. Follow the instructions as written. Be concise and thorough!

Intrinsically motivated
Grad programs are looking for self-motivated applicants who can initiate their own opportunities. Describe your experiences that prove dedication to a particular discipline.

Invested in the process
Faculty value the attainment of education and the pursuit of the degree in itself. Students who demonstrate a shared value and aren’t just focused on the end result bode well. Likewise, students should make admission the priority and not focus on securing a graduate assistantship position. It is disconcerting when applicants ask for information on available positions before they have applied or inquired about the program.

Relevant professional experiences
Admission committees are looking for post-school experiences that prove dedication to the field, such as internships, volunteer work, international travel, research, conference presentations, or a job in a related industry, if not the industry itself.

Unique and Individual character
I’ve often heard deans say, “We want interesting people, not just smart people, in our program.” Again, writing samples and interviews are your opportunities to reveal who you are and your distinctive qualities not apparent in test scores or grades. Universities look for exceptional students who express creativity, determination, diversity, and thoughtfulness. Describe what makes you different, determined, and an asset to the program. Committees want to hear about invigorating experiences, perspectives, or skill sets that you can contribute to the enterprise.

Articulate
If an admission interview is required, don’t take it lightly! You are being evaluated by everything that comes out of your mouth. Be prepared. It is extremely important to know about the school and program, including faculty and their research focus. You may not know what questions will be asked of you ahead of time, but you will be strongly evaluated on what questions you ask. Don’t ask about surface-level info that can be answered from the school’s website; ask thoughtful and engaging questions.

Credibility
Letters of recommendation are meant to validate qualifications. So choose your recommendation writers carefully, among individuals who have worked with you in a professional or academic setting. Having a “prestigious” reference is great in theory, but it does not carry much weight if they cannot speak directly to your ability to do graduate-level work or your critical-thinking skills. Also keep in mind some admission evaluators briefly scan letters for specific words. Negativity in recommendation letters raises major red flags.

The landscape of 21st-century graduate education has evolved, increasing in intensity, rigor, and competitiveness. There is no foolproof recipe to the application evaluation process, and a good GPA is no guarantee of admission. Applicants must demonstrate that they can go beyond what is required, because when it comes down to it, “going beyond” is an intrinsic part of graduate study. It is far more powerful and relevant to show that significant challenges can be faced with self-direction, a commitment to the goals of the scholarly enterprise, and the desire to succeed.

Dr. Tracey Sheetz is the Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at California University of Pennsylvania. Previously, she was Director of Graduate Admissions and Recruitment at West Virginia University.