SWIMMING WITH THE SHARKS: HOW TO GET INTO GRADUATE SCHOOL

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TYPES OF GRADUATE PROGRAMS IN FAMILY SCIENCE
• Research Scientist Model (also called Bench Science) – A graduate program using this model prepares students to be researchers/scientists. Hence, the focus is on basic scientific concepts and theories. Although the research may be basic or applied, the focus is the research process itself.
• Scientist-Practitioner Model – A graduate program using this model prepares students to be both scientists and practitioners. Hence, the focus is on clinical and applied research as well as clinical experience.
• Professional Model (also called the Scholar-Practitioner Model) – A graduate program using this model prepares students to be a clinician/practitioner. Hence, the focus is developing clinical skills. An understanding of current research and scholarship is important so as to improve practice.

WHAT ARE GRADUATE PROGRAMS LOOKING FOR? (Adapted from Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000)
• Very Important Criteria
  o Degree of fit between the graduate program and applicant’s goals, interest area, and skills/attributes
  o GRE scores (http://www.gre.org)
    ▪ Take a preparation course and practice exams. Study, study, study!
    ▪ Check the graduate program to see what scores are required and if they require an individual subjects test
  o Grades
    ▪ If your overall GPA is not high, but your major GPA or last two year GPA is high, point that out in your personal statement.
      Many students, especially returning students, will not have a high GPA at the beginning of their academic career.
  o Research experience resulting in a publication or professional conference presentation(s).
    ▪ There are many undergraduate research journals that are peer-reviewed.
    ▪ List of undergraduate journals – http://www.eur.org/ugjournal.html
  o Clarity and focus of the applicant’s statement of purpose
    ▪ Start composing your statement of purpose early and have others read it to give you feedback.
    ▪ Make sure your statement of purpose fits with the graduate program.
• Generally Important Criteria
  o Course work
    ▪ For Ph.D. programs, statistics and research courses will be especially relevant
  o Potential for success in the graduate program.
    ▪ This is generally determined from GRE, GPA, and letters of recommendation
  o Letters of recommendation
  o Honors and scholarships
• Somewhat Important Criteria
  o Undergraduate major(s) and minor(s)
  o Paid and/or volunteer experience related to the graduate program
    ▪ This is more important to graduate programs that prepare students to be practitioners/clinicians.

CHOOSING A GRADUATE SCHOOL
• Decide what type of program you want and what your primary focus will be.
• Research graduate programs
  o Begin at least one semester before the application deadline. For example, if the application deadline is in December, you should be researching graduate programs in the prior Spring or Summer.
  o http://www.petersons.com and http://www.gradschools.com
• Find a graduate program that has a strong program in your area of interest.
  o Faculty research interests
    ▪ For those pursuing a Ph.D. and a faculty career, determine if the faculty member presents and publishes with student.
  o Areas studied in the department
  o Admission requirements
• Determine if there are funding opportunities (e.g., fellowships, research/teaching assistantships, and/or tuition fee wavers
• If you can, visit schools you are interested in before applying to the program.
  o Many schools provide funding for prospective graduate students to come visit.
  o Many schools provide summer research fellowships.
A summer research fellowship can help students determine if they are a good fit with the program.

- Talk to both faculty members and current graduate students at the school you are interested in.
  - Email the faculty members
  - Network with them at professional conferences
  - Attend informational meetings on campus or at professional conferences

**APPLYING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL**

- Start working on your applications EARLY
- Follow instructions and deadlines exactly!
- Prepare writing samples (some schools require them)
- Prepare resume/vita
- Be prepared for application fees.
  - If you are an underrepresented minority, go to the CIC website and register for a free application from several Big 10 schools
- Transcripts (order them early)
- Letters of recommendation (usually need 3)
  - Ask potential references if they can write a strong letter of recommendation.
  - Ask for the letters at least three weeks before the application is due.
  - Prepare a packet to help your references write your letters of recommendation. Include the following:
    - A one-page letter to your reference. Your letter should include:
      - A reminder of your relationship with the reference (e.g., what classes you had with the reference, and when you had them, and what grades you received, the number of hours/semesters you worked with them, what duties you performed)
      - What type of program you are applying to and why you selected that type of program.
      - A description of your strengths and why you think you will be successful in a graduate program
      - A description of your weaknesses and how you have or plan to address those limitations (e.g., taking statistics class).
    - A resume or vita
    - A statement of purpose / personal statement
    - A list of all programs, the title of the university, program, and, if appropriate the professor and description of the program and lab for each school. Make deadlines very clear – put the earliest one at the topic. Also note if the letter is to be given to you or to the school.
    - A copy of your GRE scores (if applicable)
    - Your GPA (overall, major, minor)
    - List of courses taken in major and grades earned, or a copy of transcripts.
    - Reference forms and/or guidelines. The forms should be filled out completely (including the reference’s name, address, affiliation, etc.) except for the reference’s signature.
    - Peel off labels with the school address for each program (attach corresponding peel off label together with a paper clip).
    - Also, some programs require that you send all application materials, including letters of recommendation, at the same time, so make sure to include this information on the cover sheet
  - Once references have completed the letters, drop by in person to express your appreciation or send a “thank you” card.
- Statement of purpose (SOP)
  - Follow guidelines exactly. Each school has different guidelines, so you will have tailor each SOP accordingly
  - Address EACH aspect of their questions
  - Demonstrate the quality of your writing
    - Be clear and concise
    - Avoid repetition or over elaboration, and avoid colloquialisms (e.g., “I’m a people person”, “I hung out”)
  - Draft an initial statement and revise the draft
  - Ask others to read it and give you feedback

**References**


Getting Into Graduate School

Undergraduate and master’s students have a lot of intent when it comes to graduate programs, but frequently they do not know what is involved. Many feel lost and do not know what to do or when to do it. Also, many do not have a clear sense of what is important to admissions committees (Collins, 2001). And finally, the majority of undergraduate applicants are not adequately prepared for the graduate experience.

Preparation for graduate school starts even before students fill out their application. The vast majority of students understand the importance of grades in getting into graduate school. According to Collins (2001), students often overestimate the importance of practicum and volunteer experiences as key criteria for getting into research-oriented graduate programs (e.g., Ph.D. programs). Many contend that research experience may be the most important qualification to graduate admission committees (Collins, 2001; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Hence, students should develop research skills during their undergraduate study. For a good article on how to get involved in research as a student, refer to Purdy (2001).

According to Munoz-Dunbar and Stanton (1999), besides grades and research experience, letters of recommendation are an important factor in graduate school admissions. These letters provide very useful information (e.g., academic, social, and personality capability) as well as provide instant credibility about the students (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Hence, students should be developing relationships with faculty members throughout their undergraduate studies (Olatunji, 2000). Developing relationships with faculty members can enhance the students’ self-concept and undergraduate experience, and ultimately promote strong letters of recommendation.

Many graduate admission committees put a very strong emphasis on the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores. GRE scores are often more important than grades (Norcross, 1997). Hence, it is in the best interest of the student to prepare for the GRE. There are many resources available to the student that can enhance their success on the GRE.

Outstanding grades, strong references, excellent research skills, and good GRE scores do not guarantee that an applicant will be admitted into a graduate program. The applicant and the program must be a good fit with each other. Most graduate programs attract a large number of applicants, anywhere from 2 to 50 times more than they can accept (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Hence, potential graduate students need to consider what graduate schools are looking for, how to find more information about graduate programs, and how to apply to these programs. Many online resources exist which can facilitate researching graduate programs. Having clear goals and a clear sense of timing is very effective in planning for graduate school (Buskist, 2001; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). In addition, knowing what criteria is important to selection committees can help gear individuals in the right direction and aid them when devising a schedule for themselves.

When students articulate their goals (e.g., in the personal statement and/or statement of purpose), they must keep in mind the mission of the graduate programs to which they are applying (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). They must also make sure their goals are a good fit with specific faculty member(s) interests in the department.

Other considerations for the student include interviewing, networking, accepting and turning down programs once accepted, and negotiating funding. Clearly, lots of issue play into getting into graduate school. Because of all of these considerations, students need guidance. This round table will include helpful information about preparing for graduate school, what graduate programs are looking for, how to apply to graduate school, preparing personal statements and/or statements of purpose, preparing for the GRE, and securing funding. Starting this process early can help students take full advantage of the many opportunities available to them (Arnold & Horrigan, 2002).

References