

Navigating The Complex Graduate School Admission Process. (Transcript)

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Abstract— *The graduate school application process is a multi-faceted and intricate procedure that encompasses various factors in determining the fate of an applicant's admission. This paper explores the different components and steps involved in the selection process, shedding light on the comprehensive evaluation approach adopted by admissions committees. (in layman's language).*

Keywords— *graduate school applications, selection process, admissions committees.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Applying for a Masters program in a top graduate school in the US/Canada is no small feat. It requires careful preparation, strong credentials, and the ability to impress the admissions committee. Have you ever wondered what happens behind the closed doors of the admissions committee? What are the factors they consider when evaluating applications? In this video, we'll take you inside the complex decision-making process of a Masters admissions committee and provide you with valuable tips on how to make your application stand out from the competition.

The admissions committee's default attitude is usually "rejected, unless strongly proved otherwise." They follow a risk minimization policy, meaning they tend to reject candidates if they're unsure of their potential. So, how can you showcase your strengths and convince them of your potential for success in the program?

Let's start with the first factor that the admissions committee considers: your academic performance. They carefully review your undergraduate transcripts, GPA, and the courses you've taken. They want to see evidence of your ability to handle rigorous coursework and excel in your field. If you've taken relevant courses outside of your major, it can also help demonstrate your interest and commitment to the field. Another important factor is your test scores. Tests like the GRE, TOEFL, or IELTS are used to evaluate your aptitude for a graduate program. However, keep in mind that test scores are not the sole determinant. Even if your scores aren't outstanding, you can still compensate with other aspects of your application.

Research experience holds particular importance for PhD applicants, but it can also be a plus for Masters applicants. If you've conducted research in your field, it shows your potential to contribute to the program and the field as a

whole. Make sure to highlight your research experience in your application.

Letters of recommendation provide valuable insight into your character, work ethic, and potential. Choose recommenders who know you well and can speak to your strengths and potential. Ensure your recommenders have sufficient time and information to write strong letters on your behalf.

Your statement of purpose is your chance to showcase your motivation, passion, and potential for success in the program. Tailor your statement to the specific program and institution you're applying to. Highlight your relevant experiences, achievements, and goals. This is your opportunity to stand out and demonstrate your uniqueness.

There are also other factors that the admissions committee may consider, such as relevant work experience, extracurricular activities, and community involvement. These factors help demonstrate your potential and dedication to your field. It's important to understand that the decision-making process of the admissions committee is not a perfect science. They consider a variety of factors, and their decisions are not solely based on one particular aspect of your application. Therefore, it's crucial to present a well-rounded application that highlights your strengths and potential for success.

Remember, the admissions committee is looking for candidates who can contribute to the program and the field. So, make sure to highlight what makes you unique and qualified for the program.

2. ADMISSION COMMITTEE

It's crucial to understand the decision-making process of the admissions committee. The admissions committee is typically composed of faculty members from the department, and sometimes even graduate students. Their goal is to identify the most promising candidates who will contribute to the academic community.

The process begins with a preliminary round where applications are filtered based on minimum requirements. This may include criteria such as GRE scores, GPA, or other benchmarks set by the committee. Applicants who don't meet these minimum requirements are typically rejected at

this stage.

The remaining applications move on to the next stage, where they are reviewed more thoroughly by multiple committee members. Each application is typically assessed by two or more reviewers who carefully evaluate the candidate's qualifications.

During this stage, the committee considers various factors, including research experience, academic achievements, letters of recommendation, and personal statements. These elements provide insights into the candidate's potential for success in the program.

Once the review process is complete, the committee convenes to discuss and finalize the shortlisting of candidates who meet the admission target for the academic year. It's a critical moment where the committee members deliberate on the strengths and weaknesses of each candidate.

It's important to understand that the admissions process is highly competitive. Top graduate schools follow a risk minimization policy, meaning they aim to maintain the highest standards and admit candidates who are a strong fit for the program. Consequently, if a candidate doesn't meet the criteria or isn't a strong fit, they are likely to be rejected rather than risk compromising the quality of the incoming class.

3. IMPORTANCE OF GRE

It's important to understand that GRE scores are typically used as a negative filter by admissions committees. While a poor score can result in rejection, an exceptionally high score won't guarantee admission. So, what do committees consider when reviewing your GRE scores?

First and foremost, strong quantitative skills are highly valued, particularly in fields such as engineering or mathematics. Aim for a score of at least 165 out of 170 in the quantitative section. Scores of 160 or higher are also considered solid.

Alongside quantitative skills, the admissions committee pays attention to the analytical writing section (AWA) of the GRE. A low score of 3.0 or less out of 6.0 in the AWA section could be a cause for concern.

Verbal skills are also important, although the committee can be more forgiving in this area, especially for international students. Nonetheless, it's advisable to aim for a score of at least 150 out of 170.

A strong GRE score can be particularly advantageous if you come from a lesser-known undergraduate college. Even with a strong academic track record, a low GRE score may raise doubts about the overall quality of your institution. Conversely, a strong GRE score can provide further evidence supporting your application and reassure the committee that your high GPA is not merely a fluke.

However, consistently low percentiles in each of the three GRE sections can work against a candidate. While a slip-up

in one section, particularly the Verbal or AWA section, can be overlooked if the rest of your profile is strong.

A strong GRE score can enhance your application, especially when applying to top schools. Aim for a score of at least 165 out of 170 in the quantitative section and 150 out of 170 in the verbal section. Don't overlook the importance of the AWA section, as a low score could raise concerns. Remember, while a great GRE score won't guarantee admission, a poor score can hurt your chances, particularly if you come from a lesser-known undergraduate institution.

Keep in mind that GRE scores are just one aspect of your overall application. Admissions committees consider multiple factors when evaluating candidates. Focus on presenting a well-rounded application that showcases your strengths and potential.

4. IMPORTANCE OF TOEFL/IELTS

Unlike the GRE score, the TOEFL score carries minimal weightage in the admission decision. While universities may have a cut-off score requirement, the actual score doesn't hold much significance beyond meeting that threshold. In fact, it is extremely rare for a candidate to be rejected solely based on a poor TOEFL score.

The purpose of the TOEFL test is to assess an applicant's proficiency in English, as it is the language of instruction in most graduate programs. However, the admission committee places greater emphasis on other aspects of the application when evaluating candidates.

Factors such as academic records, research experience, statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation play a more significant role in the admission decision. These aspects provide insights into the candidate's academic abilities, research potential, and suitability for the program.

In some cases, if a candidate has a low TOEFL score but demonstrates strength in other areas of their application, they may still be offered admission. However, they might be required to take an English proficiency class or pass an additional English test upon joining the university to ensure they can handle the coursework and research in English.

It's important to note that while the TOEFL score may not carry significant weight in the admission decision, a good score can still benefit the candidate. A high TOEFL score showcases the applicant's proficiency in English and assures the admission committee of their ability to succeed in an English-based academic environment. Additionally, a strong TOEFL score can also enhance the candidate's chances of securing financial aid or scholarships.

While the TOEFL score is typically a requirement for international students applying for graduate studies in the United States/Canada, it does not play a major role in the admission decision. Candidates should aim to meet the cut-off score and focus their efforts on strengthening other aspects of their application to make a compelling case for admission.

Remember, academic records, research experience, statement of purpose, and letters of recommendation are key areas to highlight your abilities and potential. Pay attention to these aspects to present a strong application that showcases your qualifications and fit for the program.

5. PAST ACADEMIC RECORDS

The undergraduate GPA often acts as a negative filter for applicants, meaning that a poor GPA can lead to rejection. However, even a stellar GPA does not guarantee acceptance. Unlike the GPA, the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) score does not significantly differentiate candidates. Instead, a higher GPA is consistently viewed favorably by admissions committees.

Defining what constitutes a "good enough" GPA is challenging since grading scales vary across universities and countries. A 9.0/10.0 in top Indian colleges may be more challenging than a 3.6/4.0 at a US/Canadian university. Transcripts with clear explanations of the grading system and GPA calculation methods can help admissions committees evaluate candidates more accurately.

Comparing candidates from different universities can be difficult due to variations in curriculum and the inclusion of non-technical courses. Some programs focus solely on technical courses, while others consider grades from a broader range of subjects. Admissions committees often prioritize performance in courses relevant to the program the candidate is applying to.

Beyond the numerical GPA, the transcript also reveals the candidate's performance over time. A consistent or upward trend in grades is generally viewed more favorably than a decline. Candidates who consistently maintained good grades have an advantage over those who had temporary setbacks. However, if there were valid reasons for a dip in grades, applicants can address these in their statement of purpose or letters of recommendation.

Your academic record is a crucial component of your graduate school application. Admissions committees use your grades as an indicator of your competency in the field of study. While an exceptional academic record can attract attention, even maintaining a solid cumulative GPA, around 3.6/4.0, can significantly improve your chances of acceptance.

Remember to strive for excellence in your academic pursuits and focus on consistently performing well in relevant courses. Your academic achievements will play a vital role in demonstrating your readiness for graduate studies.

6. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

As a prospective graduate student, you may be wondering why the statement of purpose (SOP) is so crucial to your chances of admission. Your impressive grades, recommendations, and GRE score provide objective measures of your academic ability. However, the SOP offers you a unique opportunity to showcase who you are and why

you're passionate about your field of study. It's a chance to demonstrate your writing skills, critical thinking abilities, and potential for success in a graduate program.

Crafting an effective SOP, though, is no easy task. Admissions committees read countless essays each year, all vying for attention. To stand out, you need to dedicate time and effort to create a compelling narrative that sets you apart from other applicants.

One common mistake is using the SOP to boast about past achievements. While it's important to highlight your accomplishments, it's equally crucial to explain your motivations for pursuing a graduate degree and how it aligns with your research interests and long-term career goals. Showcasing your purpose and the potential impact of the program you're applying to is essential.

It's also important to strike a balance. Avoid turning your SOP into a lengthy autobiography or oversharing personal details. Focus on your academic and professional aspirations, demonstrating a clear vision for your future and the dedication needed to achieve it.

Remember, the SOP is just one component of your application. If your other materials are strong, a mediocre SOP may not significantly impact your chances. However, a well-crafted and thoughtful essay can make your application stand out in a competitive admissions process. The SOP is a critical part of your graduate school application. Take the time to carefully consider your research interests, career goals, and how the program aligns with them. Craft an essay that showcases your best qualities and achievements, demonstrating your potential for success in graduate school.

Remember, the SOP is your opportunity to shine and show the admissions committee who you are beyond the numbers. Put your best foot forward and seize this chance to make a lasting impression.

7. RESUME

When applying for graduate school, you may wonder about the role of your résumé. Is it a critical component or just an optional addition? One common misconception is assuming that every detail in your résumé will be thoroughly reviewed by the admissions committee. However, the reality is that committee members may not have the time to go through it in great detail. Therefore, it's crucial to ensure that any important information is already mentioned in other parts of your application, such as the statement of purpose or letters of recommendation.

For example, if you worked on a significant academic project or have a research publication, it's important to highlight these achievements in your statement of purpose. Additionally, a professor who can vouch for your contribution to the project can discuss it in their letter of recommendation. By integrating these accomplishments into other application components, you ensure they receive the attention they deserve.

While your résumé can provide a comprehensive overview of your achievements, it's essential to remember that not all details may be noticed by the committee. Therefore, prioritize and emphasize the most noteworthy accomplishments in other parts of your application. By doing so, you ensure that the most important information doesn't go unnoticed.

Ultimately, the résumé should be viewed as a valuable addition to your application rather than the sole vehicle for conveying critical information. It can provide a comprehensive snapshot of your experiences and skills, but it should not be relied upon as the primary means of showcasing your accomplishments.

While the résumé can play a useful role in your graduate school application, it's important to understand its limitations. Ensure that any significant achievements are highlighted in other parts of your application, such as the statement of purpose or letters of recommendation. By doing so, you maximize the chances of your most important accomplishments being noticed and appreciated by the admissions committee.

Remember, your application should present a cohesive and compelling narrative of your academic journey and future goals. Use the résumé strategically to supplement the information provided in other components.

8. OTHER FACTORS

When applying for graduate school, many factors can influence your chances of admission. While grades, test scores, and recommendation letters are essential, the reputation of your undergraduate university can also play a role.

Different graduate schools assign varying levels of importance to the reputation of your undergraduate university. Generally, the admissions committee is more familiar and at ease with universities they have heard of. This is because the reputation of the institution can reflect the quality of education and the rigor of the curriculum.

However, it's important to note that the committee's familiarity might be limited to American universities. For international applicants, the committee might not be well-acquainted with institutions outside their region.

In such cases, graduate schools often maintain lists of recognized universities from different parts of the world. This helps the committee assess the reputation of unfamiliar institutions. However, these lists might not always be up to date.

Additionally, the committee members themselves can be a valuable source of information, as they often come from diverse backgrounds. They may share their knowledge and insights about different universities during the evaluation process. Moreover, the committee might also conduct web searches or review the university's website to gather more information.

While the reputation of the undergraduate university can be influential in some cases, it is rarely the sole reason for rejection. However, it may introduce some bias in the reviewer's mind when evaluating the application.

For example, if an applicant from a reputable university is on the cusp of meeting the admission criteria, they may receive the benefit of the doubt due to the institution's reputation. This may not have been the case if the applicant were from a lesser-known university.

While the reputation of your undergraduate university can have an impact, it is just one aspect that graduate schools consider. It is essential for applicants to focus on other components of their application, such as research experience, essays, and recommendation letters, to showcase their potential for success in graduate school.

Remember, your application is a holistic representation of your capabilities and achievements. While the reputation of your undergraduate institution may influence the evaluation process, it's important to present a well-rounded application that highlights your strengths and demonstrates your readiness for graduate studies.

9. RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

In the competitive world of higher education, having a strong research background can be a game-changer for aspiring graduate students.

While numerical scores like the GRE and GPA are important, they don't necessarily set an applicant apart from the rest of the pool. This is where research experience becomes crucial. Graduate schools seek candidates with a proven research potential, as it demonstrates their ability to contribute to the academic community.

Research experience can take various forms, such as internships, projects, and publications. When including these components in your application, it's important to go beyond just listing them. Provide details about the research itself, such as the goals, methodologies, and outcomes.

Publications carry significant weight in demonstrating research capability. However, the reputation of the journal or conference where the work was published matters too. Admissions committees maintain lists of respected journals and conferences in different fields to evaluate the worthiness of publications. It's also beneficial to secure recommendation letters from the professors or researchers who supervised your work.

While publications hold great value, internships and academic projects can also make a positive impression, especially if they are research-oriented. These components might catch the interest of a committee member, particularly if the work aligns with their own research interests. This member can influence the decision-making process of the committee.

Overall, having a strong research background can help offset

the effects of ordinary scores and demonstrate your potential for success in graduate school. It showcases your ability to think critically, work independently, and contribute to your chosen field of study.

When applying, be sure to highlight your research experience in your application materials, such as your statement of purpose and resume. Clearly articulate how your research background aligns with your academic and professional goals, and how it can contribute to the graduate program you are applying to.

Remember, research experience is highly valued by admissions committees, as it demonstrates your readiness for the demands of graduate-level study. By showcasing your research potential, you can set yourself apart from other applicants and increase your chances of admission to your dream graduate program.

10. WORK EXPERIENCE

Many applicants wonder if work experience is necessary to increase their chances of admission. Firstly, it's important to note that work experience is not a requirement for MS programs. Fresh college graduates are just as qualified to apply as experienced professionals. However, work experience can have an impact on your chances of admission, depending on various factors.

The role and relevance of your work experience to the program of study are crucial. If your work experience aligns with the industry or specialization you're applying for, it can provide valuable insights and practical knowledge. For example, if you're applying for an MS in Computer Science specializing in Artificial Intelligence, work experience in a research lab or an R&D wing of a company working on AI problems can be highly beneficial.

On the other hand, work experience in an unrelated industry is unlikely to have a significant impact on your application. The weightage given to work experience depends on how relevant the committee deems it to be for your chosen graduate program.

The identity of the company you've worked for also matters. Reputed companies that are well-known to the admissions committee carry more weight. For example, companies like Microsoft, Google, Apple, or Oracle in the computer industry have strong recognition and can positively influence your application.

If you do have relevant work experience, you can choose to have one of your recommenders be your immediate manager from work. This can be advantageous for applicants who come from lesser-known colleges but have worked in prestigious companies, or for those who may not have performed well academically but excelled in their job.

Work experience is not necessary to apply for MS programs in the US, but relevant work experience can positively impact your chances of admission. It's important to showcase the relevance and quality of your work experience,

along with other components of your application, to highlight your potential for success in the graduate program.

Remember, whether you have work experience or not, focus on presenting a strong application that showcases your passion, skills, and potential for success in your chosen field.

11. CONCLUSION / FINALLY

The graduate school application process begins with an initial screening of each application by multiple committee members. However, the final decision is not a simple calculation of numerical weightages. Each committee member evaluates applicants based on their overall perception and uses a scale to assign scores.

To ensure accuracy in the scoring process, committee members often recalibrate their scores after reviewing all the applications. However, different committee members may have contrasting evaluations due to their individual perspectives.

The selection process is time-consuming and complicated, but every committee member puts in their due diligence to maintain the quality of incoming students. They strive to evaluate each applicant fairly and comprehensively to select the best candidates for their graduate programs.

In conclusion, the graduate school application process is a holistic evaluation of a candidate's skills, experience, personality, and potential. It involves multiple steps and careful consideration by committee members. So, if you're planning to apply for a graduate program, make sure you present your best self and highlight all your skills and achievements to stand out in the competitive pool of applicants.

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