

A Slacker's Guide to Getting Into Grad School (v 1.0)

Trevor Michael Tomesh
PhD Candidate / Sessional Lecturer
Department of Computer Science
University of Regina
Regina, Saskatchewan Canada

July 22, 2018

Abstract

I am a slacker – but I've managed to get into three different graduate institutions – two of which I attended and one of which I am in my last year of my PhD. I didn't have the best GPA or GRE scores – and honestly, I couldn't even tell you what those numbers are anymore (nor do I care). But I've managed to get this far. I'm often asked "how do you get into graduate school?" Here's my take.

1 Be sure it's what you want.

This may seem obvious – but it's worth asking yourself, "is this what I want?". Graduate School is not easy. Graduate school will challenge you and in ways that you may not have thought possible – intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Are there ways to achieve your dreams? Can you handle the commitment and sacrifice? If you're not sure it's what you want, how can you expect to convince a potential supervisor that you're the type of person that they want to mentor? Be sure it's what you want.

2 Don't let yourself be a number.

The absolute worst thing you can do to yourself is to let yourself be a number. Your GPA is not you. Your GRE score is not you. The number of papers you've published is not you. When you submit a graduate application, you are only providing the faceless machine of the admissions process an input with which to grind out a number to slot you into a queue. You will not be number one. In fact, you don't want to be number one – because you don't want to be a number. The only way to accomplish this is to show up to the department. Speak with potential supervisors. Stun them with your enthusiasm. Put a face and a spirit to your application. Transcend the machine. Don't let yourself be a number.

3 Don't wait for a mentor. Choose one.

The best way to avoid becoming a number is to choose the faculty member you want to work with. Most people will submit an application and just wait for the department to throw someone their way. This is how you become a number. And the absolute worst thing you can do to yourself is to let yourself be a number. Instead, go to the faculty web-page. Find a faculty member who is interested in the same things as you. Read their work and talk to them. Get them on your side. Make them want to work with you so that when your application slides in front of the admissions committee, they will stop the rubber stamp from coming down. Don't wait for a mentor. Choose one.

4 Read the faculty you want to work with.

Donald Asher, who literally wrote the book on graduate admission essays, gives us the following rule: “Thou shalt not write, nor call, nor visit any graduate faculty member without having read some of his or her works first.” This is known as “Asher's Law”. What you must realize is that professors are people. And just like every other person, they have an ego – appeal to it. If you want to work with a certain faculty, you absolutely must be familiar with their work – and be sure that they know it. Moreover, you must have read their work in order to have an articulate conversation. Once you've read

their work and have had the conversation, you'll have someone on the inside that wants you there. Read the faculty you want to work with.

5 Visit the department.

See section 2. The best way to do this is to visit the department.

6 Find money.

I am an international graduate student. As such my tuition is ridiculously high. However, I couldn't tell you what it is. That's because I have found a way to get it paid for. Whether it is through a scholarship, a charitable individual, or loaded parents – you need to have money. There's no way around it. And don't expect to work your way through graduate school. That's nearly impossible. If you want to go to graduate school you need to find money.

7 Be open to opportunity.

If you have an institution, degree, research subject or research group that you absolutely need to work with or else – stop it. Stop that thinking right now. Nip it in the bud. Getting anywhere in life – and especially graduate school – means hopping on the train that's heading in the general direction you want to be. If you aren't willing to open your eyes to other paths, you are closing yourself off to opportunity. Be open to opportunity.

8 Conclusions

So, there you have it. These are my very subjective and very incomplete bits of advice on how to get into graduate school – or at least, what's worked for me.