

# Graduate School

Winning Strategies for Getting In  
With or Without Excellent Grades

## Chapter 3 What You Need To Know Before You Apply

Finding Out What Graduate or Professional School is All  
About

Understanding How the Selection Process Works

Basic Components of a Graduate or Professional School  
Application

Financing Graduate Study

Dave G. Mumby, Ph.D



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By Dave G. Mumby, Ph.D

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## ***Chapter 3***

# **What You Need to Know Before You Apply**

### ***Finding Out What Graduate or Professional School Is All About***

**B**efore you decide to apply to graduate school, or not to, you owe it to yourself to find out what graduate studies and an eventual career in your field of interest would be like. Many students apply to graduate school without really understanding how it differs from undergraduate school. Many successful applicants enter graduate school expecting that they will simply be taking more difficult courses. What they soon discover is that this is one of the *least* significant differences between undergraduate school and graduate school. Your first step, therefore, is to learn about the nature of graduate study in your field.

Some of the differences that exist between programs in various fields are obvious. For example, in most professional degree programs the graduate students admitted in any given year will generally work through a program in lock-step with each other, and individ-

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ual faculty members do little or no direct supervision of individual students. By contrast, graduate work at the doctoral level in most nonprofessional fields is conducted under the supervision of an individual faculty member. The same is true for master's programs in some fields, but not in others.

One of the main differences between undergraduate and graduate school is the nature of the relationships you will have with professors and other students. The social environments are completely different. You may be working closely with professors who will treat you like a junior colleague, and expect you to behave like one. You may get to know some of the professors more as friends than as teachers, and you will probably call them by their first names.

There may be very few other students in the same graduate program as you, compared to the hundreds or thousands of others that were in the same undergraduate program. Some of you might be together on an almost daily basis for a few years, and you may find yourself having to work on major projects for extended periods with one or more other students. Even the ways in which you deal with secretaries and administrators will be different than when you were an undergraduate.

You will be part of a community and your success within it will depend to some extent on how well you are accepted by others and how well you feel you fit in. You will be highly visible most of the time. Those around you will get to know you very well. They will develop opinions about your personality and character based on the cumulation of all the interactions they have with you.

In sum, the social environment of graduate school favors participants who are reasonable, likeable, and who communicate well. Admissions committees and other graduate program faculty members want to fill their programs with students who fit this bill. These are among the most important dimensions on which candidates are evaluated. It is not enough to be smart. Unfortunately, this fact is largely unappreciated by the majority of applicants, who pay little or no attention to how they come across as a *person* to those who will be making decisions about their application.

Like it or not, your interpersonal skills will be on display at several different points in the application process. The fate of your application will depend largely on how these skills are perceived.

### ***Graduate School: Winning Strategies for Getting In***

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This point will be repeated several times throughout the remainder of this book.

**Ask your professors** The easiest way to begin learning the truth about graduate school in your field is to make an appointment with one of your professors and ask questions. There are many general things that just about any professor will be able to tell you about graduate school. Some professors will sincerely try to answer your questions (either because they are individuals who genuinely like helping others, or because you have flattered them by seeking their advice).

For reasons that remain a mystery to me, most students seem reluctant to visit with their professors outside of class, and when they do, it's almost always to deal with coursework. Most professors can be a good source of educational and career counselling and many enjoy speaking with students about such things. A conversation about graduate school with a professor can be illuminating for many students, who will discover things about graduate school that they had never heard of or imagined. This should not be surprising. After all, your professors have all gone to graduate school, and they may be currently involved in their own department's graduate programs.

Perhaps you cringe at the idea of approaching one of your professors because you have already had an uncomfortable experience with one who is especially grouchy, aloof, or arrogant. Rest assured, there are others you can seek counsel from who will not behave that way. There are specific faculty members in most departments who have the responsibility of serving as undergraduate advisors, and they are the first people whom you should seek to talk with about graduate studies. But don't stop there if none of these individuals seem approachable. You may be better off seeking advice from a professor you know a little better and whom you like.

Ask lots of questions and do not worry about appearing naive. Most professors realize that there is an information gap that prevents many undergraduates from finding out what's really involved in graduate school. Eventually, you will want to know about financial support, about the courses that you will have to take and the options that you will have in choosing courses, research requirements,

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