GUIDING STUDENTS THROUGH THE GRADUATE APPLICATION PROCESS

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Topics

■ Differences between Masters and PhD programs
■ Gaining research experience as an undergraduate
■ How to secure GOOD letters of recommendation
■ How to choose the RIGHT graduate program
■ GRE
■ Tackling admissions essays
Masters vs PhD programs

■ Advantages of a Masters program
  - Shorter time to finish
  - Sometimes lower admissions standards
  - Sufficient to practice as a professional in certain fields (e.g., Business, Engineering, Architecture, Counseling, Speech Language Pathology)

■ Advantages of a PhD program
  - Funding!!!
  - Potential for more career options
  - More autonomy to pursue your particular research interest
  - Sometimes less competition to gain admission
  - Can leave program with a Masters
Gaining research experience

- Introduction to what they will be doing in graduate school
- Ideally done with a tenure-track professor
- Impressive on a grad application for most majors, necessary for other majors (e.g., Psychology, Biology, Physics)
- Encourage to look beyond your campus to...
REUs (Research Experience for Undergraduates) and SROPs (Summer Research Opportunity Programs)

- Approximately 8-10 weeks during a summer
  - Paid travel
  - Room & board included
  - Stipend
- Often underrepresented groups are prioritized
- Applications due early Spring semester and typically require
  - Transcripts
  - Letters of recommendation
  - Essays
  - At least one semester left in undergrad
REUs (Research Experience for Undergraduates) and SROPs (Summer Research Opportunity Programs)

- Many opportunities nationwide for high-achieving, motivated students
- Big Ten Academic Alliance: [https://www.btaa.org/students/srop/introduction](https://www.btaa.org/students/srop/introduction)
- Summer Research Academy at UCF: [https://our.ucf.edu/prospective/sra/](https://our.ucf.edu/prospective/sra/)
Securing letters of recommendation

- Preferably from tenure-track faculty, but default to people who will write strong letters

- Start forming the relationships early with faculty

- Guides for requesting letters

- No groveling
Choosing the School

- US News and World Report provides rankings
  - *Useful as an organizational tool, but rankings are inaccurate and biased*
- Research and career match are most critical
- Consulting professors
- Backtrack the articles and books they enjoyed
- DON’T choose school for the wrong reasons (prestige, location, etc.)
- Create a “Grad Application Matrix"
Graduate Record Examination (GRE)

- Scores are important, but not life or death; applications are reviewed holistically in most programs
- Important to practice taking the test in computer format
- Inexpensive study prep
  - Magoosh (fully online course modules)
  - Kaplan, Princeton Review (books/online, not programs)
- Some REUs and SROPs have GRE prep
Financial Aid

- FAFSA not required for all programs but should be filled out
- No Pell or other federal assistance in grad school
- Fellowships and Assistantships pay most costs
- Should NOT take out loans if at all possible
Admissions Essays

- Many names, common purpose: Personal Statement, Statement of Purpose, Letter of Intent, Research Statement, Diversity Statement

- Expect to write many drafts, up to 20!

- Less is more (1pg. single spaced)

- Should be reviewed by no more than 3-4 people.
  - *Consider using the following order*
    - First reviewer to check for grammar and writing mechanics
    - Second reviewer to edit for content and clarity
    - Third reviewer (professor or grad student) to help with finishing touches
Admissions Essays (cont.)

- FOLLOW PROMPTS AND WORD LIMITS!

- But if there are no prompts or word limits, use the following guide

- 3 main components of admissions essays:
  - Background
  - Qualifications
  - Fit to program
Background

- Describe what specific events and experiences in your life have motivated you to pursue graduate study in your chosen field

  - Avoid clichés

  - Avoid sob stories unless relevant to your future studies

  - Can discuss your personal background, if relevant

  - Who inspired you? (teachers, professors, family)

  - Clearly state the program to which you are applying
Qualifications

■ Why are you qualified for advanced scholarship?

  - Research experience
    ■ Research publications and presentations

  - Advanced coursework

  - Relevant job or volunteer experience

  - Certifications, languages, special skills or competencies

  - Omit irrelevant info
Fit to Program

- Don’t underestimate the importance of fit to program!
  - *No matter how smart and prepared the applicant, one must be a good fit for that particular program or no admission*

- Match applicant’s interests to faculty research topics

- Demonstrate knowledge of the program, university, resources, etc.

- Make clear why applicant fits in that program
McNair Scholars Program & Research Opportunity Program

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