Apply Yourself

Setting a Course for Grad School Admission

BY LORA SHINN

HEATHER FLANAGAN OF PORT TOWNSEND, Washington, is 45, but she's headed back to school this fall. She's enrolled in the Executive MBA program at Seattle University, after spending hours on research and conceiving a distinctive approach to her application. Yellow legal pad in hand, she pored over MBA websites, detailing locations, costs and hours involved. After narrowing down options, Flanagan met with Seattle University's program director—and brought along a PowerPoint demo detailing the reasons she and Seattle U's Executive MBA program were the perfect fit.

Slide No. 8 listed the top reason she chose Seattle U: "Strong ethics around service and legacy."

"You need to know what value you have to offer, and how you'll be of service to your peers," Flanagan.

Heather Flanagan prepared a PowerPoint presentation for her interview for Seattle University's MBA program; she was accepted.
explains. "Be your amazing self, and make it easy for them to want you, so they don’t have to work hard at that acceptance decision."
That kind of vision, confidence and determination is exactly what graduate schools desire today. Students with ambitious goals seek graduate schools to make those dreams happen.
Applying to graduate school is the first step on the path of professional success, but it’s not an easy process. Here’s how to put your best foot forward.

**RESEARCH AND RELATE**
Create a short list of program options, advises Katy D. DeRosier, director of program development at the University of Washington Graduate School. DeRosier has conducted dozens of seminars on preparing for graduate school admissions. She suggests Internet research to start, closely reading department sites, and listing two or three reasons why each program might work for you.

Be sure to go beyond the basics, the essay word count and required test, to ascertain whether the program’s right for you. "Can you see doing this program on a daily basis, or will you want to run away? What do you envision?" DeRosier says.
To get deeper into the program, ask to speak with a faculty member who teaches something that excites you, and with a grad student in the program. Bring questions and a curious, open attitude, much like a savvy grad school comparison shopper.

Discussions like these can also save time—if you arrive and discover that your favorite professor is about to leave, or the program doesn’t offer what you seek, staff and faculty will point out programs more suitable. Yes, even at other schools, DeRosier says.

Don’t discount far-flung destinations—after all, a research visit is just a flight away. At San Diego State University, one out of five graduate students relocates from outside California, says Joanna Brooks, SDSU’s associate dean of graduate and research affairs.

On your fact-finding trip, graduate student associations can offer observations and advice about a possible move.

This, in turn, helps when your application lands on the desk before the school’s admissions committee. "You’re more likely to

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**FIVE ESSAY DON’TS**
from Donald Asher, author of Graduate Admissions Essays

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DON’T \overshare
"They don’t want to know your family drama, they want your intellectual biography," Asher says.

DON’T \cut & \paste in haste
Don’t accidentally insert the wrong school’s name or use a generic application; either will cost you.

DON’T \forget to customize
Your essay should focus on the match between yourself, the curriculum, the location, the strengths of the school, and the unique vision of the school.

DON’T \skip the “statement of diversity”
Even if you don’t think of yourself as diverse in any way, or are afraid to draw attention to yourself, explain how you can contribute to the diversity of thought on campus.

DON’T \forget to proofread
Whether you capitalized the discipline, made small grammatical errors or forgot to spell-check, you’ve probably made a few mistakes in your essay. Ask expert outside eyes to review.
"Candidates need to be very careful in how they ask for a letter of recommendation."

be successful at getting in. You're a known entity," DeRosier says.

At Portland State University in Oregon, students from around the world are drawn to master’s degrees in international management and financial analysis, among others. "We offer Skype calls and phone advising appointments," says admission specialist Laura Allen for the graduate business programs at Portland State.

APPLICATION PACKAGE
Graduate program applications generally require a personal statement or letter of intent, postsecondary transcripts, and letters of recommendation. "Sometimes, additional materials are required, such as standardized test scores, a writing sample, or a resume or curriculum vitae," says Nick Sewell, academic coordinator in the Office of Graduate Education at Washington State University. Students apparently don’t always read application guidelines thoroughly, particularly regarding the supplemental materials required by the department, Sewell notes.

For example, at WSU, the Master's in Teaching program asks applicants to write an essay in response to five questions, sharing leadership examples and experience in working with different cultures and special needs. And at SDSU, supplemental materials for the Master of Fine Arts can include performance samples, whether a theatrical display or a creative writing piece.

With many programs, it's helpful to add extra information. "In some cases, students send additional documents or letters of recommendation," Sewell says. If those distinguish the candidate, it can help their chances of acceptance.

Prerequisites are often outlined on departmental admissions websites. If you don’t already possess those in your academic resume, a prerequisite course may be in your future. However, depending upon the program, work experience may substitute for class credits, Sewell says.

Applicants to Portland State University's business school graduate programs submit resumes. "Certain programs do require work experience," Allen says; two years of experience is a prerequisite for PSU's real estate, MBA and supply chain degrees.

ESSAY / STATEMENT OF PURPOSE
Committees are "looking for reasons to cut down the applicant

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MOST POPULAR fields, by master's degrees conferred, according to the federal National Center for Education Statistics.

1. BUSINESS
2. EDUCATION
3. HEALTH PROFESSIONS
4. PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND SOCIAL SERVICES
5. ENGINEERING

MONEY MASTERS
Top early-career salaries:

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<th>Master's Degree</th>
<th>Early-Career Median Pay</th>
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pool," Sewell says, and certain elements decrease your chances. "For example, providing a very short or general statement of purpose lacking a research focus is undesirable," he says. So is applying to multiple programs, which suggests the applicant just wants to get in to any graduate school, but no program in particular.

Much rides on that statement of purpose or essay. "People freeze up when they have to write an essay," DeRosier says. They're afraid they're going to be judged by a crowd of smart people.

If you write the statement of purpose in incremental steps and "build it as you go," DeRosier says, it'll feel less overwhelming and more refined. Start off with a rough draft. If a grad student mentions an exciting overseas travel opportunity available to master's program participants, add that fact to your essay. "You're writing about what you actually do know about the program, about that match. It's more concrete." You may even rewrite a section after meeting with a professor.

That's the mindset of the mature graduate student, DeRosier says. "You're doing actual research, not guessing what you think an admissions committee might want to hear."

"Get personal but be relevant," suggests Scott Mann. At age 33, Mann successfully applied for a master's program in park and resource management from Slippery Rock University. Mann's essay touched on his years of informal education running a podcast and speaking on topics such as ecological design.

RECOMMENDATIONS
Typically, admissions committees want to see letters from relevant faculty members; strong writers who know you well and support your future endeavors. Of course, it also helps to ask individuals who can offer both a sterling recommendation and cachet in the field you're applying to join, says Todd Faubion, an independent education adviser focused

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“A generic letter [of recommendation] can be worse than no letter at all.”

on graduate school admissions.

If you’ve been out of school for a while, ask the graduate program adviser which letters of recommendation they’re willing to consider, DeRosier says—including letters from employers. But those permissions may vary from committee to committee; you may even have to employ a creative option such as auditing a course to obtain a recent professor’s recommendation.

But it’s crucial that letters support you as a candidate with unwavering confidence. “A generic letter can be worse than no letter at all,” Faubion says. “Candidates need to be very careful in how they ask for a letter of recommendation.”

He suggests “frontloading” difficult conversations with potential letter-writers. Does that English 401 professor have time? Is she willing? If the answers seem less than enthusiastic, keep looking.

Then, offer a bullet list of your strengths to help guide the recommender, even if it feels like it’s requiring you to be more aggressive than usual, Faubion says. Use specific examples, such as “Remember when I was a really strong leader on the group project, and you commented on my communication skills?” or “Remember when I was an active contributor to class discussions on a certain topic.”

You’re not putting words in your professor’s mouth, but jogging memories of your past academic performance. “If you can provide specific examples, I can conjure up a sense of you as a person in a class of 70 people,” Faubion says.

Ask for letters at least two months before the application deadline. Brooks
notes, as professors are typically juggling grade deadlines when letters are due.

**TESTING, TESTING**

GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT. These letter-jumbles are acronyms for different standardized tests that are required for most graduate school admission applications. The Medical College Admission Test is a demanding daylong exam meant for med school applicants; law school applicants take the Law School Admission Test; business school applicants sit for the Graduate Management Admission Test. Everyone else? They take the Graduate Record Exam.

The GRE and other graduate level standardized tests are far from easy, says graduate school admissions counselor Arvin Vohra of Vohra Method in Bethesda, Maryland. "You can't really outsmart the GRE or GMAT," he cautions. A decent amount of preparation is required—six or seven hours per week for three or so months before taking the test; the LSAT may demand twice or three times the effort. The MCAT requires years, not months, of thorough preparation, typically undertaken in undergraduate school.

"It's better to think through a small number of problems than skim through hundreds of problems," Vohra says of graduate admissions tests. "It's like playing chess. Chess isn't hard to learn, but it's hard to be good at it. You need to learn a few basic concepts, then use them cleverly."

Don't stress over getting help—tutors are available online or locally, and often work (and charge) by the hour, so if you need to brush up on algebra, chemistry or geometry, they can help. Make sure you're working with a professional specializing in the test you're taking, or a subject-matter expert.

If you don't score as high as you had hoped on your exam, follow up with the program. Sewell says that whereas some programs require a minimum score, other programs look at the application...
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“Take time to find the right program and the right people who fit your long-term goals.”

as a whole and may not place as much weight on standardized test scores.

TRANSCRIPTS
One of the top Google searches is the following phrase: “Applying to graduate school with a low GPA.”

If your grades—or your GRE scores—aren’t ideal, that doesn’t mean grad school is a lost cause. Mann describes his undergrad records as “less than stellar,” but he spoke with the grad school’s program director to discuss concerns and interest in the program’s goals, and to point out his professional expertise since college.

A 3.0 GPA is the minimum requirement for WSU Graduate School admission, but students with lower GPAs are still encouraged to apply. Departments can request the Graduate School calculate the GPA of the last 60 semester credits or 90 quarter credits and admit those whose GPA calculates at a 3.0 or higher. Still below a 3.0? The department can request that up to 10 percent of their admission be students with less than a 3.0 GPA.

“Take time to find the right program and the right people who fit your long term goals,” Mann suggests. Doing so allowed Mann to find a program that will open more career options, he says. Whether you’re 24, 34, 44 or older, it’s never too late to consider a graduate school program. “Better to take time off than to think graduate school is another check box. You get out of it what you put into it.”

Based in Los Angeles, Lora Shinn earned a master’s degree in library and information sciences from Seattle’s University of Washington at age 25.

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