What do graduate admissions committees look for in graduate applicants? Understanding what graduate schools want in applicants is the first step in tailoring your experiences and application to make yourself irresistible to the graduate programs of your dreams.

So just what do admissions committees look for? Their goal is to identify applicants who will become important researchers and leaders in their field. In other words, admissions committees try to select the most promising students. What's a promising student? One who has the ability to become an excellent graduate student and professional.

The Ideal Grad Student

The ideal graduate student is gifted, eager to learn, and highly motivated. He or she can work independently and take direction, supervision, and constructive criticism without becoming upset or overly sensitive. Faculty look for students who are hard workers, want to work closely with faculty, are responsible and easy to work with, and who are a good fit to the program. The best graduate students complete the program on time, with distinction - and excel in the professional world to make graduate faculty proud. Of course, these are ideals. Most graduate students have some of these characteristics, but nearly no one will have all, so don't fear.

Criteria Weighed by Admissions Committees

Now that you know the ideal to which graduate faculty strive in selecting new graduate students, let's look at how faculty weigh the various criteria for admission. Unfortunately there is no simple answer; each graduate admissions committee is a bit different, but generally speaking, the following criteria are important to most admissions committees:

- Undergraduate GPA (especially the last two years of college)
- Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores
- Recommendation letters
- Personal statement

Sure, you knew these things were important, but let's talk more about why and the part they play in admissions decisions.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Grades are important not as a sign of intelligence, but instead grades are a long term indicator of how well you perform your job as student. They reflect your motivation and your ability to do consistently good or bad work. Not all grades are the same, though. Admissions committees understand that applicants' grade point averages often cannot be compared meaningfully. Grades can differ among universities - an A at one university may be a B+
at another. Also grades differ among professors in the same university. Admissions committees try to take these things into account when examining applicants’ GPAs. They also look at the courses taken: a B in Advanced Statistics may be worth more than an A in Introduction to Social Problems. In other words, they consider the context of the GPA: where was it obtained and of what courses is it comprised? In many cases, it's better to have a lower GPA composed of solid challenging courses than a high GPA based on easy courses like "Basket Weaving for Beginners" and the like.

**GRE Scores**

Clearly, applicants' grade point averages are difficult to compare. This is where Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores come in. Whereas grade point averages are not standardized (there are enormous differences in how professors within a department, university, or country grade student work), the GRE is. Your GRE scores provide information about how you rank among your peers (that's why it's important to do your best!). Although GRE scores are standardized, departments don't weigh them in a standardized way. How a department or admissions committee evaluates GRE scores varies - some use them as cutoffs to eliminate applicants, some use them as criteria for research assistantships and other forms of funding, some look to GRE scores to offset weak GPAs, and some admissions committees will overlook poor GRE scores if applicants demonstrate significant strengths in other areas.

**Letters of Recommendation**

Usually admissions committees begin the evaluation process by considering GPA and GRE score (or those of other standardized tests). These quantitative measures only tell a small part of an applicant's story. Letters of recommendation provide context within which to consider an applicant's numerical scores. Therefore it's important that the faculty who write your letters of recommendation know you well so that they can discuss the person behind the GPA and GRE scores. Generally speaking, letters written by professors known to committee members tend to carry more weight than those written by "unknowns." Letters written by well-known people in the field, if they signify that they know you well and think highly of you, can be very helpful in moving your application towards the top of the list.

**Personal Statement**

The personal statement, also known as the admissions essay, statement of purpose, and personal goal statement, is your chance to introduce yourself, speak directly to the admissions committee, and provide information that doesn't appear elsewhere in your application. Faculty read personal statements very closely because they reveal lots of information about applicants. Your essay is an indicator of your writing ability, motivation, ability to express yourself, maturity, passion for the field, and judgment. Admissions committees read essays with the intent to learn more about applicants, to determine if they have the qualities and attitudes needed for success, and to weed out applicants who don't fit the program.

**What Do Graduate Schools Look For?**

**Perspectives From a Graduate Student/Research Assistant**

On what graduate schools look for while admitting students: They look precisely for the qualities that make for a good researcher. These are the twins of focus and flexibility. Focus means the ability to zoom in on a specific topic and give one’s whole heart to it. Flexibility translates to the ability to change gears, change one’s area of focus, allow oneself to get interested in a new topic based on attending a seminar.

Recently, I was reading a book by M.R.Kopmeyer. He gives a very important piece of advice that makes a lot of sense for graduate school applications. Here’s the advice: “Figure out what they want, and give them more of it. Figure out what they don’t want, and give them less of it.”
To figure out what a Graduate School wants, it is enough to look at what they ask for. Below, I review the typical components of a graduate school application, and give my own opinions on what the School wants in each component.

Components that involve scores/grades/marks, where the direction of improvement is clear:

GRE general scores: These are important to the Graduate School as they indicate basic verbal and quantitative abilities. The Graduate School wants students with a reasonable vocabulary (Verbal), reasonable passage comprehension skills (Reading Comprehension part of the Verbal), good quantitative skills (Quantitative), and the ability to analyze and express thoughts (Analytical Writing). It is also obvious why they want these skills — they are necessary for practically all academic work and social living. I believe that a score of 700+ (out of 800) in verbal, 800 (out of 800) in quantitative, and 4.5-5.5 (out of 6) in the essay/argument is good enough to give them what they want.

GRE subject test scores: I haven’t investigated the Subject Test much, but its basic utility, so far as I can figure out, lies in its being the only objective way of evaluating the student’s aptitude in the subject. Its again not a big puzzle what the Graduate Schools want: people who are better at the subject. From what I’ve heard, I believe a percentile of 90+ is good enough to give the graduate school what it wants.

TOEFL scores: Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the four ways we send and receive information, and these are precisely what the new Internet-based TOEFL tests. While TOEFL scores in general are not so important, a good TOEFL score could be a plus point while applying for teaching assistantships. Basically, the Graduate Schools are looking for people who can handle the medium of instruction — English, with ease. Because the TOEFL pattern has changed, I’m pretty unclear of how much the Graduate School really wants.

Grade point average: Performance in the undergraduate academic institution counts for a lot, particularly in the subjects that I intend to pursue for further study (in my case, Mathematics) and in secondary subjects related to it (in my case, Computer Science). Apart from using these to judge the student’s academic ability, the Graduate School also wants to learn, from the grades received by the student, his/her ability to survive in and cope with an academic evaluation system. Universities in the United States give GPA out of 4.0, and they expect the GPA to be around 3.7 or more, so that translates to above 9 on the 10 GPA scale used in CMI. You can check out my own academic record here.

In the coming points, we start moving away from what the Graduate School wants in terms of ability to what the Graduate School wants in terms of personality. Here are components that depend on past academic choices and skills demonstrated:

Courses taken: The choice of courses that the student takes reflects the student’s interest and willingness to take up challenges. A senior told me that taking up a worthy course and getting a somewhat poorer grade counts for more than taking an easy course and sailing through with a good grade. Another senior told me that the entire pattern of courses a student takes determines the picture the student conveys to the Graduate School.

Prima facie, it is unclear what kind of picture the Graduate School wants, or does not want. Whereas in the earlier four requirements (GRE general, GRE subject, TOEFL, grade point average), the direction of improvement was clear, here it is not. In fact, I don’t think there is any ideal pattern of courses for each student to take. Rather, the pattern of courses should fit in with other components of the student’s application, such as summer projects, extra achievements, and Statements of Purpose.

Summer projects and summer schools: How the student spends his summer indicates not just the student’s talents but also his/her choices, priorities, and goals. A research life is a lot about choosing one’s topic and devoting time to it.
Also, a student can, in the summer, hope to put in a much more focused effort towards learning a topic, mastering a paper, or attempting an unsolved problem, that would not have been possible during term time. My seniors have told me that a person whose summer programs are synchronized towards a clear and focused goal stands a better chance of admission to any graduate school. The reason: graduate schools seek students with the ability to focus, and the best indicator of such ability is a past record of such focus.

Extra achievements: While graduate schools do look for focus, they also look for a personality with wide-ranging interests. This means that extra achievements, extra activities will be viewed favorably by graduate schools if they indicate commitment to a cause, the ability to work hard, and the skills needed to succeed at arduous tasks. What graduate schools do not want is a string of impressive-sounding achievements in what they consider to be inconsequential settings. Interestingly, the same achievement can be cast in terms that provoke very different reactions from the graduate school. The student needs to highlight what he/she put in and what he/she learned or gained. The graduate school seeks a person with certain qualities, and achievements are important only insofar as they highlight the necessary qualities.

Personal statements of the student and of others who know the student:
Statement of purpose: Summer camps, extra prizes and honors, extracurricular activities, courses, course grades, are all just facts. The real personality comes through in the Statement of Purpose. This is not some test that the Graduate School subjects the student to in order to test his/her essay writing skills. Rather, it forces the student to clarify what he/she wants from the Graduate School and is willing to give the Graduate School. As I read recently in a book, the Statement of Purpose should show the student's life as a painting in the making, with the next stroke on the canvas being the student's admission to and entry into the Graduate School.

Letters of recommendation: This is an aspect of the application over which the student, apparently, has least control. Some recommenders prefer not to let the student see their recommendations, leaving the student in the dark as to how he/she is placed with respect to the possibility of admission. Like the Statement of Purpose, this component could make or break an application. I think what the Graduate School seeks from recommenders is confirmation of the student's ability to fit in the bill for research life.

Here’s my overall feel: graduate schools are looking for people who are willing and capable to do research. Tests go only so far as to show ability, while personal choices show both willingness and ability. And the statements of the student and recommenders go further into showing both the willingness and the ability.

**Graduate School Interviews**

**Tips From Salisbury University**

**General Information**

While success in graduate-school interviews can be greatly helped by experience, educating one's self and preparing mentally are very important. As in many areas of life, being admitted can also be a matter of luck; that is, you may be interviewed by someone who clicks with your style, interests, background or experience.

The more informed you are about the various nuances of the process, the less anxiety-producing it will be. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to describe an array of areas that touch upon this process. Former students who have been through the interview process often circulate well-meaning interview stories, but these stories may frighten those who are about to enter the process. Just remember that these are anecdotal experiences, and, in all likelihood, you will not encounter the same set of circumstances or have the same kind of experience. So the point is, take the "grapevine" information with a grain of salt. Some colleges keep reference materials on each graduate school's interviewing process, including lists of standard questions that have been asked of students. This may be useful, so check with your advisor's office to see whether any such materials exist. The opinions of others regarding the school may be very helpful as you develop your own list of what to look for at that institution on the day you visit.
Most students are quite surprised to find that interviews tend to be highly conversational, and the interviewer's purpose seems to be to get to know the student. However, you should be prepared for anything; group interviews and two interviewers to one student are not unheard of, but you'll usually encounter the one-on-one situation. Interviews typically last anywhere from 20 minutes to 90 minutes. Most schools will have from one to four interviews. Many schools will have as one of their interviews a meeting with the admissions dean or someone else who will be asked to assess the student's academic record as well as his/her personal attributes.

It is advisable to know the basic facts about the school prior to arriving there for the day of interviews. Helpful information might include such things as size, relationship to the college campus, etc. Use the following checklist to gather your data.

- Size of graduate-school class
- Percentage of minority students
- Percentage of women
- Age range of entering students
- Academic mission
- Problem-based or non-problem-based curriculum
- Quarter or semester program
- Research opportunities
- Community-outreach programs
- Grading system
- Policy regarding promotion
- Academic support services
- Pre-matriculation program
- Administration's advocacy of student needs

Make an index card on each school, and as you go from interview to interview, write appropriate details on the reverse side of the card for future reference. If you do a lot of interviews, things tend to blur after a few months. Always seek out students at the school, and check their answers with those of faculty interviewers. Develop your own rating system and give the school points on the various areas.

The two major areas in which schools seek information are personality and capability.

Interviews for graduate school serve four main purposes: as a public-relations mechanism; as an opportunity for the school's representative to answer questions for the candidate; to recruit the student; and for data-gathering.

Applicants should take note that three out of the four purposes stated here center on meeting the student's needs. So relax, do your best and have fun.

**What Graduate Schools Look For?**

The majority of schools use a structured interview; that is, they have identified important areas around which they will attempt to gather information about the student. While the following list is not intended to be exhaustive, it covers more than 80 percent of the information that is being sought. Use it as a reference guide to think about these areas in relation to yourself, and try to assess ways in which questions may be posed to you to cover these areas.

Support Persons:
Who does the student turn to in times of need to obtain help or advice? A student who is unable to seek help may be at risk for not completing the graduate-school program.

Work Exposure:
What does the candidate know about his/her chosen career? Is the student’s knowledge base coming from family, friends, personal experience or reading? How realistic is the understanding? What is the level of awareness of the changes in graduate work today? What other professions have been ruled out in coming to this choice?

Motivation:
How has the student tested out his/her interest in graduate work? What level of responsibility has the student assumed for others? Can a student describe the values that he or she possesses that will sustain motivation in difficult times? Who are the role models that have been most significant in influencing the choice of graduate work? Is there anything that, if it changed dramatically, would cause a student to lose interest in graduate work?

Personal Qualities:
Appearance, poise, confidence, ability to communicate, sense of humor and proper use of the English language will all be assessed by the interviewer. Interviewers will pay particular attention to emotional stability, including making an attempt to discern unresolved personal problems. They will seek to gain a better understanding of family dynamics for each student, and will try to discover the nature of relationships among students, parents and siblings. Interviewers will want to know if a student is emancipated from his/her family, and will explore students' level of maturity and degree of development of empathy skills. They will seek to understand the student's operating style, will want to know whether tolerance for diversity has been manifested through life experiences, and will explore whether students are sufficiently flexible to manage the substantial changes that lie ahead.

Social Awareness:
How informed is the candidate about local and national issues? Has the student taken a stance on any area of social concern? What is the student's level of awareness of some of the important ethical issues facing us today? Has the student ever acted upon his or her political or social conscience?

Caring, Compassion and Conscientiousness:
If you wanted to convince someone that you are conscientious, how would you go about it? Caring and compassion should be qualities that are exhibited daily toward others. Are you willing to take a risk that might benefit a colleague or friend? What are your feelings about your abilities to be compassionate, yet remain sufficiently objective, thus not incapacitating yourself by becoming overly involved?

Having the interviewer ask the question is one-half the equation; the other is your response. What is the interviewer looking for in what you provide? In all likelihood, your interviewer will be experienced, and it is important that you assume that this will be the case. When considering important aspects of what makes a good graduate student, interviewers are likely to be looking for insights that help affirm or deny a particular attribute. Some of the following areas are the guideposts from which they view a "good graduate student."

Value System:
How interested is the student in others? What does his/her track record indicate? Do the student's goals include expressions of wanting to serve others? Interviewers will attempt to determine your degree of courage to persevere during difficult times.

Interpersonal Relationships:
Good graduate students make friends easily and enjoy positive interactions with others. They are able to work independently as well as collaboratively. They are able to value the contributions of others. Good graduate students will always be sensitive to the needs of others and will take others into account in their actions.

Knowledge Based Skills:
Good graduate students enjoy solving problems and have good aptitude for it. Discipline and order are key prerequisites to success in graduate school. It is critical for a good graduate student to have high standards and the integrity to know when to seek help. Understanding whether the student exhibits integrity in his/her value system is key for graduate-school interviewers.
Questions will most often be presented in an open-ended, abstract manner; that is, few can be answered by a yes/no response. When the question is asked, if you don't understand it, seek clarification.

Interviewers will be assessing whether your thinking style is more abstract or concrete in nature. Other areas that interviewers will assess include:

Your ability to understand the question being posed.
Your depth of knowledge in providing the response.
Whether you can synthesize from one experience to the next.
What you've learned about yourself from various experiences/events.
What kind of reality testing you've done, and whether you exhibit maturity and good professional judgment.
What areas of your personality you are working on, i.e. what you consider to be your weaknesses.

Internal consistency is important in your responses. If you make negative comments about yourself, interviewers will likely follow up with questions about why you feel the way you do and attempts to determine whether any of your disparaging comments might interfere with your success.

What gets the student into trouble with an interviewer? First of all, how does the student see life? Does s/he take the "glass is half-full" approach, or the "glass is half-empty"? What is the degree of compulsiveness, which might lead the student to reveal too much about himself/herself? Interviewers will attempt to determine if there is pomposity, arrogance, anger or hatred toward institutions or individuals that would get in the student's way of succeeding. How strong are the student's religious beliefs? Might they override a willingness to accept responsibility for personal actions? On the positive side, can the student be described as someone who has initiative (a high level of intellectual curiosity), and what examples exist? Has the student participated in rigorous academic activities that speak of a willingness to take an academic risk? How can the interviewer know that a student can handle multiple, and often competing, demands, so that s/he can learn the importance of being able to set priorities? Can a student discuss a meaningful life problem?

The interviewer's main focus in assessing your academic characteristics is to determine whether you can handle a rigorous program at her/his school. Interviewers know that if a student is not assessed properly, s/he could wind up failing at that school. This is contrary to the desires of most schools; most want their students to succeed. When reviewing your own academic record prior to the interview, think about questions that are likely to arise, such as:

1. If there were quarters/semesters during your undergraduate career when your total hours were low, what were the reasons?
2. If you received low grades, were there extenuating circumstances?
3. How have you done overall in your school's required science courses?
4. If your transcript includes withdrawals, incompletes or course repeats, what were the circumstances?
5. When asked about a difficult course from your academic program, can you provide evidence of resourcefulness in the face of adversity?
6. Is there any discrepancy between your undergraduate grades and your GRE score? If so, what accounts for this?
7. If you posted a low verbal or writing-sample score, what does this mean from your perspective?

Graduate schools have a pretty good perception of what your academic record indicates about your potential to be a successful graduate student.

Keep the following list in mind as you answer questions about your academic record.
Do you enjoy reading and believe that you’re good at it?
Are you enthusiastic about learning?
Can you adapt easily to new situations?
Do you see yourself as a good test-taker?
Do you learn actively? Do you anticipate questions to be asked/tasks to be done?
Do you set priorities and deal with competing academic demands?
Do you organize your time and use it efficiently?
Are you able to integrate new information with your existing knowledge?
Can you develop a big picture, i.e. a conceptual framework of knowledge?

Interviewers will often ask questions that are of an ethical nature. Typically, these are posed in the form of a hypothetical situation. Some of the scenarios described may be considerably out of the realm of the student's experience, but remember that the interviewer is not so much interested in determining a right or wrong response, but will be looking for how you develop the framework of the response, what experiences you bring to bear in your answer, how your values and beliefs fit into what you say, and how deeply you hold your convictions. If interviewers challenge you, they will be looking to see if you quickly capitulate to their view or whether you can back up why you believe what you do. A word of advice: Don’t ever get into an argument with the interviewer. You will lose.

LINKS

About Grad School: What Do Graduate Schools Want?
http://gradschool.about.com/cs/miscellaneous/a/want.htm

Advice for Undergraduates Considering Graduate School:
http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/people/pagre/grad-school.pdf

Grad Schools: Articles: Get Informed:
http://www.gradschools.com/article-category/get-informed-1

Grad School Tips: Types of Grad School Essays:
http://www.gradschooltips.com/typesofessays.htm