



## EducationUSA Weekly Update

Special edition - "Students First", January 14th, 2009

### Students First...

A special edition of the EducationUSA Weekly Update with Dr. Martin, author of *Road Map for Graduate Study: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*

## I. Seven Pointers for Completing your Graduate School Application(s)

As you start working on your graduate school application(s), here are a few pointers:

### 1. RELAX!!

Do your best to relax as you work on your applications. Worrying and obsessing, while tempting, will not help. In fact, worrying and obsessing could hinder your ability to think clearly and focus on preparing the best applications you can.

In truth, going through a graduate school application process can result in a major learning experience for you. As you complete each application you will engage in personal reflection and self-discovery. This can prove to be very rewarding, whatever the decisions you receive from the admissions committee. As they have moved through this process, some applicants decide not to pursue graduate study or to wait awhile. Others decide to pursue an entirely different area of study than they originally had in mind.

So use this application process to your benefit; consider it a positive learning experience in and of itself. Be calm. Be reflective. Be thoughtful. Relax.

### 2. Allow time.

If you have been following some or most of the suggestions provided in Chapter One's monthly checklist you should be feeling fairly comfortable about the application deadlines you are working to meet. In fact, allowing plenty of time during the search process, which then allows you plenty of time to complete your applications, automatically helps you to relax.

Knowing you have adequate time is very comforting and, as I mentioned earlier, allows you to focus on the task at hand - doing your best on your applications.

### 3. Follow directions.

This seems like such a "no-brainer" that you may wonder why I even mention it. I do so because over the years I have truly been amazed at the number of applicants who do not follow directions. If you are one of those applicants, it raises some questions about how well you might follow policies and procedures once admitted and enrolled. Some directives may not make sense to you, but they have been provided for a reason, and you need to comply. If you are unable or unwilling to do so, you send a clear signal about yourself to the admissions committee. It is a red flag, not a green light.

Let me give you a few examples:

- a. If there is a word limit for essay questions, follow it. Remember, application evaluators are reading hundreds, maybe thousands of essays. You will not get a positive response if yours is longer than it is supposed to be.
- b. If you are asked for two letters of recommendation, do not send ten. Some institutions will permit an extra recommendation, but usually no more. Honor that.
- c. If an interview is conducted by invitation only, do not request one. You might mention that you hope you will have the opportunity to interview, but leave it there.

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- d. If an interview is highly recommended, by all means request one, and make every possible effort to follow through. More about this in the next section of this chapter.
- e. If you are an international student applying to a U.S. graduate school and are required to take a test to measure your English language skills, do so. Do not argue even if you are fluent in English. If that is the case you will obviously do very well on the test, which will serve to enhance your application.
- f. Do not knowingly leave a question unanswered. Make sure you have responded to everything you've been asked and that you have really addressed the questions asked of you.
- g. Be careful about sending extra materials. Some applications allow for this, or will allow you to write an extra essay question. But if they do not, first check to see if it is okay for you to send extra information rather than assuming that it is okay to do so.

#### **4. Be professional at all times/in all interactions.**

Remember, as an applicant you are at the part of the process where you are not in the driver's seat. You are one of many applicants being compared with each other. Always present yourself in a calm, assertive and sincere manner. It is appropriate to be inquisitive about your application, but it is never to your advantage to be argumentative. Be confident but not arrogant; be kind and patient, not abrasive and demanding.

Many admissions professionals keep written records of their interactions with applicants. At one university where I was employed we used something called the "orange sheet." If we had an extremely positive or extremely negative encounter with an applicant we wrote a summary of that interaction on an orange sheet of paper and placed the sheet just inside the person's application. When it came time to make a decision on that application, the orange sheet(s) was/were very persuasive, for better or worse.

Actions speak louder than words. Some of the best applications on paper have been completely devalued due to the behavior of the person who prepared them.

#### **5. Content and presentation are both important.**

While what you say in your application is obviously very important, so is the "look and feel" of your application. This is especially true when the institution/program to which you are applying is extremely selective and has the luxury of choosing their admitted students from a very large applicant pool. Some applications are sloppy, wrinkled and disorganized. Others are hand-written (there is absolutely NO excuse for this in the age of word processing). Some have coffee or tea stains on them. Occasionally essay questions are not sent to the right institution, and often it is clear that they were not proof read for correct grammar or spelling. Pages are out of order. Some information is not provided, or contradicts similar information provided elsewhere in the application. Applications with these kinds of presentation errors quickly become less competitive. The admissions committee tends to assume that the applicant was not really serious about this application, and they tend to respond in a similar manner.

#### **6. Be yourself/human/honest.**

Resist the temptation to lie, embellish or make excuses. Don't be someone you're not. At times, applicants try to make themselves look perfect. As we all know, no one is perfect. Trying to look that way can often cause application evaluators to be more suspicious than impressed. I'm not suggesting you discuss all of your weaknesses and past mistakes (which are there for all of us), but rather, that you simply be yourself. The best applications I have read are from those who were saying the following in between the lines: "This is me. I hope you will appreciate who I am, and also appreciate the level of interest I've demonstrated in your institution by completing this application. If you choose to admit me, I'll be thrilled. If you don't, I'll be okay."

Above all, do not lie or embellish the truth. This can have disastrous effects. In my years as an application evaluator and decision maker, I have seen individuals with great talent and potential be denied admission, have their admission revoked, or be expelled after enrolling because they lied and/or embellished. If you earned a 3.2 overall GPA, don't say it was a 3.5. If you did not serve as a class officer or student leader, don't say you did. If you were not in an organization, the military, and/or the Peace Corps, don't put it on your resume. Don't write your own letters of recommendation and/or falsify the names of their authors. Don't pretend you are someone else when an admissions representative calls to speak with you. That one probably sounds a bit strange. Let me explain. When working as Director of Admissions at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business, I would personally phone each admitted student before she/he received notification in the mail or online. Obviously, it was a win-win phone call all the way around. I often made admitted student calls on the weekends to help spread out the number of contacts I made each day. I tended not to identify myself immediately, but did so as soon as the person on the phone indicated that they were indeed the applicant. One Saturday morning I called a newly admitted male student. The gentleman who answered the phone claimed he was not the applicant. I was sure I had dialed the correct phone number, so I tried the number again a few minutes later. This time a woman answered the phone. I identified myself and asked if the applicant was there. The same gentleman, who had just answered my call a few minutes earlier, took the phone. When I asked why he lied to me about his identity, he

said he thought I was making a “sales call.” Upon hearing this, I informed the applicant that while the original purpose of my call was to congratulate him on his admission, I was now informing him that he was denied. That story could be repeated more times than I care to remember. Dishonesty is such a waste - there is absolutely no need for it. Many admissions evaluators randomly screen applicants and verify information they have provided. While it is human to be tempted, don't allow yourself to yield. There is nothing to be gained, whether you are found out or not.

Finally, don't make excuses on your application. You may decide that you need to explain a lower overall GPA, a less than stellar academic record during one of the years you were in college, a break in your employment record, holding several jobs in a short period of time, etc. If there are legitimate reasons for what might seem like a blemish in your application, by all means let the admissions committee know. Perhaps you had a serious illness, lost a loved one, had a sudden financial crisis, etc. That should definitely be mentioned. Bottom line, make explanations, not excuses. The admissions committee will know the difference and your application will either be helped or hindered.

#### **7. Make contingency plans in case you are not admitted.**

Things happen for a reason. In my years as an admissions director I met applicants who were so convinced that a particular institution was for them, or that this was the year they were going to attend graduate school that they did not make plans for what to do if things did not go as they hoped. Some would go so far as to inform employers and loved ones of their plans before it was advisable to do so. In some very extreme cases they moved to where their number one graduate option was located before they received a decision on their application! Being confident and positive is one thing. Throwing caution to the wind is another. Be prepared to be denied admission, perhaps to every one of your options, or to be placed on the waiting list by several of your options (I'll have some suggestions on how to respond if/when this happens at the end of this chapter). Also, be prepared for what you will do if you end up not attending graduate school in the year you thought, planned, prepared and hoped to.

Being prepared for all outcomes is not a sign of lack of belief in yourself or your abilities to do graduate work. It IS a sign that you realize life does not always go the way we plan and making alternative plans is often required.

For the 10 Dos/Don't' of applying, the 7 deadly sins for applicants, tips for essays interviews and recommendation letters, the 7 ways to get positively noticed as an applicant, and much more, go to Dr. Martin's website and order his book *Road Map for Graduate Study: A Guide for Prospective Graduate Students*. The website address is [www.gradschoolroadmap.com](http://www.gradschoolroadmap.com)

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