So you want to go to Graduate School: Tips and Tricks from Perspectives in the Admissions Journey

The process of applying and being accepted to graduate school can be quite daunting to the first-time applicant. It is important to utilize all available resources to make this process as manageable and as stress free as possible. For this month’s feature article, as application deadlines are quickly approaching, we will provide advice from three individuals at very different points in the graduate school application process, in the hope of easing your concerns and answering your questions.

Dr. Christine Neufeld Ph.D., EMU Professor of English and Director of the Literature Grad Program.

There is no better place to get advice about applying to graduate school than from a person in charge of a graduate school themselves. Dr. Christine Neufeld Ph.D., an EMU professor of English and Literature Graduate Program Coordinator, discusses the finer points of the admissions process in order to help students gain knowledge on what graduate programs are looking for in an applicant.

“We want people who seem like they have their stuff together” is one of the first points that Dr. Neufeld made sure to get across. If your application reflects logical, intentional thought and an ample dedication, then it will shine through in the review. Dr. Neufeld reiterated that it’s not important to appear to be an expert in the field of study. Graduate schools are looking for the best raw material — the people who they are going to be able to mold and shape into experts. A strong personal statement is incredibly important; you must give the schools to which you are applying a thorough understanding of who you are as a person. “Make them fall in love with your mind”, Dr. Neufeld said. People who want to make a difference and have a plan for how they are going to do so are the ones that stand out in the application process.

When it comes to recommendation letters, it is imperative that you ask someone who will be able to write a strong letter that speaks to your strengths, and your potential to thrive as a graduate student. Review boards are looking for letters that come from tenure-track professors, as they value their expertise in their academic field. Just as with your personal statement, Dr. Neufeld stressed that these letters also need to be well thought out, and should give a comprehensive view of your potential as a student and future professor. Always give your professors an ample amount of time before letters are due, and give them as much information as you can about the schools you are applying to, and about yourself. Start early in the application process to look for people to write strong recommendations for you, for their words could be essential in an admissions decision.

Dr. Neufeld also offered tips for making your application stand out, an incredibly important aspect of the admissions process. First and foremost, you must follow all the directions given to you by each university in regard to the creation and submission of your application. Dr. Neufeld mentioned that as applicant, you always want to pay careful attention to each document in your application. You want a clean and professional looking set of documents to turn in to each school. Prove to them that you have done the research and you are genuinely interested in becoming a part of their academic environment.

All in all, some of the most important elements of what graduate schools are looking for, according to Dr. Neufeld include extensive effort, strong recommendation letters and a carefully crafted and thoughtful personal statement. There’s no secret formula to ensure that your acceptance is obtained, and each school is different, but by taking into account tips and tricks from the top of this process, you can improve your chance of receiving letters beginning with “Congratulations”...
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Tips and Tricks from all Points in the Grad School Journey

The Undergraduate’s Perspective

Mayra Rivas, a senior Psychology major, Human Biology minor, Honors College member and EMU McNair Scholar, agreed to share her experiences as a student actively filling out graduate school applications. A key factor, according to Mayra, is “balance.” Having to focus on academics, applications and a social life can at times be quite challenging. “I don’t always have time for a social life, but it is 100% necessary. Finding time to dedicate to so many important aspects of life can at times be very overwhelming, but will all pay off in the end.”

When asked how she determined the number of schools to apply to, Mayra responded, “I am just looking for a fresh start.” She has decided to apply to thirteen graduate programs; Mayra stated that has selected some highly competitive schools, but she also has backup programs, as well. She feels that applying to a variety of schools will allow her to have more options. “Graduate school is like an adventure. You want to be sure that you are comfortable with wherever you selected when you begin your new life!”

Each application has different deadlines and documents, so organization is a must. Mayra keeps a binder and an Excel spreadsheet with all of her graduate school information. “I highlight tasks once they are completed, so I can focus on what I need to work on next.” Mayra prefers to work on the applications as long as possible; when she gets tired, she sets them aside and turns to something different. “This way,” she said, “you won’t get too burned out, and your applications will be focused and thoughtful every step of the way. In addition to the McNair Scholars Program being an avenue for support during the application process, Mayra credits her family, friends, mentors and fellow students — who are also applying to grad school — with assisting her when she feels overwhelmed. “It’s important to have that support network around you throughout the process,” Mayra stated. She also stressed the importance of starting early and making the process of applying “fun.” Your enthusiasm will come across to the review boards, so making this an enjoyable experience as possible is especially important.

Knowing that you are not alone in the process of applying to graduate school, and understanding many others have survived the process, can be a comforting thought. Mayra pointed out that applying to graduate school is a full time job, and nothing will feel better than submitting that final application, weeks before the deadline. Applying is only the beginning of the journey. The feeling of being admitted to, and attending a graduate program, is different from any other academic experience in an undergraduate’s life.

Courtney Williams, former EMU McNair Scholar, now a Master’s student at Pepperdine University in Los Angeles.

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The Graduate Student’s Perspective

EMU McNair Alumna Courtney Williams (*12) is a student the Masters program for Clinical Psychology at Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, California. Her emphasis is in marriage and family therapy. As an EMU undergraduate Courtney served as a Supplemental Instructor, tutor and volunteered at Ozone House. She was active in campus organizations and was also a member of the Honors College.

When asked about her greatest struggles when applying to graduate school, she stated, “Time management! You want to put time into each piece of the application to highlight yourself in the best possible way.” Like Mayra, Courtney found support from family, friends, and the McNair Scholars Program.

Though Courtney was determined to go to grad school in California, she nonetheless applied to five different schools throughout the country. A key factor in Courtney’s school choices was location; she wanted to be in a place where she fit in academically as well as culturally. She put extensive research into her school choices, evaluating everything from their mission statements to their programs of study. She even made a point of incorporating key terms from the schools’ mission statements into her own personal statement, to demonstrate that she’d be a great “fit” for their programs. “Fit” sometimes seemed to determine which schools she got into. “Everything matched up really well for the schools I was admitted to.” After visiting several schools, Courtney knew that Pepperdine was, indeed, ideal for her.

Looking back on the process, what Courtney most remembers is the stress: not the stress of the applications, but the stress of having to wait for the decisions! However, receiving her acceptance letters made it all worthwhile. Courtney reminds McNair Scholars to always take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way. Make sure schools know who you are personally, for schools are interested in much more than your grades and test scores. Courtney also stated that confidence is key; no matter how apprehensive you are feeling, you’ve reached this point in your academic career, so trust that you’re well prepared.
Getting There: A First-Generation Professor’s Story

Guest Writer: Ms. Mikki Smith, ‘15

As first-generation college students, we face the pressure of working hard to reach the long-term successes we’ve envisioned all our lives. We set out on a path and often wonder if we’ll ever see the light at the end of the tunnel. I myself, a double major in Psychology and Social Work, have days when I’m not sure what steps to take to succeed. Luckily, during my first year at Eastern Michigan University I was introduced to Dr. Michelle Byrd Ph.D., who has helped me each step of the way.

Dr. Byrd has been a Psychology professor at EMU since 2002. She earned a B.A. in Psychology and Women’s Studies from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and an M.S. and Ph.D. from the University of Nevada, Reno, in Clinical Psychology. Although she has successfully completed her degrees and is now working in her field, she faced many challenges along the way.

First of all, she had to adapt to life at the University of Michigan. “I felt quite nervous during those early days, both in and outside of the classroom. However, I quickly learned that the same things that had proved effective up to that point would also work at the university. I tried to remember to use my intellectual gifts to be curious and thoughtful, rather than in an attempt to prove that I wasn’t an admissions error.”

Her words hit so close to home with me because although I was “high school smart,” there were many moments I wondered whether I was bright enough to pursue a university career, especially when there were so few people I knew who began the journey before me.

As my mentor, Dr. Byrd often reminds me that although the constant struggle often feels unbearable, the benefits reaped in the end will make the struggles worthwhile. As our interview came to an end she told me, “By no means was my journey to faculty life an easy one, and I certainly considered quitting many times. However, it’s a testament to the great equalizer of education that there is nowhere that I feel more at home than walking across campus to class on a fall morning, leaves crunching under my feet, only about six miles down the road from where my journey as a scholar began.”

I feel that stories like Dr. Byrd’s are the ones that often need to be told to scholars such as ourselves. Sometimes the notion that we are not alone in the long journey of higher education is needed just to give us one more burst of strength to reach our academic goals.

New Scholars Watch

Rosaly Maldonado is a sophomore from the Dominican Republic. She is majoring Psychology, with a minor in Social Work. Rosaly hopes to explore and uplift the mindset of the underprivileged Latino community as she conducts her research on the struggles of being a minority individual in America. Welcome to the McNair Scholars Program Rosaly!

Jasmyn Barringer is an Early College Alliance sophomore. She is studying to be an English Literature professor. Jasmyn has many interests, including drawing, reading, writing, theatre, and exploring life however she can. Jasmyn is originally from Detroit. She hopes to write for a German newspaper and travel extensively in Europe. Welcome, Jasmyn!

Brialle Ringer is from Marquette in the Upper Peninsula. She is a sophomore majoring in Psychology with a minor in Human Sexuality. Brialle is treasurer of the Psychology Club and enjoys doing volunteer work with children in her free time. The McNair scholars program is looking forward to working with Brialle in the years to come!

Tyronda Smith is a senior from Detroit, MI. She is currently studying in Biology and Psychology at Eastern. In her free time, TyRonda finds ways to be involved in the EMU community, or helps members of the Ypsilanti community save money on essential services. Tyronda is excited to be a part of the McNair program is looking forward to beginning research. Welcome Tyronda!

THANK YOU to EMU CAMPUS LIFE for the tickets to “Mama Mia!” We loved it!!