

Tackling the Graduate Admissions Process with a Graduate Education Action Plan (G.E.A.P)

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Are you considering applying to graduate school but you just don't know where to start? The pursuit of a graduate education is a financial and personal investment. It's important for students to make an informed decision before committing to an advanced degree of study like a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree. It's almost like purchasing a new car. The average car buyer will visit several dealerships before making a final purchase. The same strategy should apply to selecting the MSW program that will fit your needs.

Any major decision in your life that will affect your financial, academic, and professional career should be approached with a plan of action that will help you make practical decisions. One way to demystify the journey to obtaining an MSW is to create what I have coined as a Graduate Education Action Plan (G.E.A.P). The plan consists of three key components that will make your pursuit of obtaining a graduate degree more attainable: Purpose, Research, and Apply. It's that simple. The G.E.A.P is similar to a business plan that an aspiring entrepreneur would create before embarking on a new business venture. The plan will provide you with a roadmap to sort out your reasons for wanting to earn an MSW or any graduate level degree. Purpose: Why do you want to obtain an MSW?

The first part of the G.E.A.P should focus on your purpose for applying to an MSW program. Remember that the decision to pursue an advanced degree, like an MSW, should be your decision and no one else's. Just because your best friend or relative is a social worker does not necessarily mean that social work is a good fit for you. To be truly successful and fulfilled in an MSW program, you have to possess the passion and motivation to want to earn the degree in order to make a meaningful contribution to the field of social work. You should not expect to find your passion once you get to graduate school--you should come into the program motivated and driven to contribute and gain new knowledge in the social work field.

Also assess why you want to apply to a particular type of MSW program at a particular university. For example, will the universities that you are applying to provide you with the skills to reach your goal to better serve your community, individuals, and families? Will the MSW degree provide you with the conceptual and practical knowledge you need to achieve your lifelong dream of addressing international issues? Is the university conducive to learning? If the answers are yes, then you should start applying to those graduate schools of social work that you feel are conducive to learning and that will best prepare you to practice international and family-centered social work. If the answers are no, or if you have different goals, I recommend that you continue your research until you find the university that provides the MSW program that will meet your academic and career goals. Whatever the outcome, you should feel proud in knowing that your diligence in following a plan of action will yield a more rewarding and beneficial outcome.

During the initial stages of the admissions process to a particular institution, students begin to form their first impressions of the social and intellectual character of the institution (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, it's critical for prospective students to take the time now to thoroughly investigate various universities and their graduate programs to make sure that it's the right fit. The G.E.A.P will help you make informed decisions that will ultimately turn your purpose into reality. Research: Which universities will provide the knowledge base to help you become a proficient social worker?

Typically, students start their research of graduate programs by visiting the university's Web site and requesting a program brochure and admissions application. To get the information you need to make a well-informed decision, you must incorporate other research components in your G.E.A.P.

Information Sessions. Most graduate schools hold monthly information sessions that are designed to give the prospective student an opportunity to visit the campus and learn more about the program and university from the director of admissions, faculty, and dean. This is a great opportunity for applicants to take a tour of the campus and to inquire about program prerequisites, testing, the program structure and curriculum, admissions criteria, and financial aid.

Class Visits. Scheduling a time to sit in on several different course sessions is a good way for a prospective student to assess the professors' teaching style, depth and quality of content, and student-teacher interaction. Depending on the class discussion, this is also an opportunity for you to showcase your interest and knowledge in the course topic by participating in class discussions. If you don't voluntarily participate, it's likely that the professor will engage you in class discussion.

Graduate Fairs. Generally between the months of September and November, universities across the country host graduate fairs for their current undergraduate students and alum to come and meet with graduate program representatives from different academic disciplines. The fair is an opportunity for prospective graduate students to inquire about such things as the admissions process, financial aid, student-to-faculty ratio, and student services. It's important to not get overwhelmed by the vast number of programs represented at the graduate fair. Stay focused. If you know for sure that your passion is to pursue an MSW, do not waste your time talking to a representative who is promoting the biochemistry program. However, if you are weighing your option between two graduate programs, by all means talk with each representative to gather more information.

Individual Meetings. If after attending an information session or graduate fair you find that you would like to get more information, you should schedule a time to visit one-on-one with the director of admissions, a faculty member, or other program representatives to get your questions answered. Come prepared with a set of questions in hand. Some graduate programs have a larger student population and may not be able to grant as many individual meetings as a smaller program.

E-mail and Telephone. These are two of the most popular methods for students to communicate with admissions representatives. However, if you choose to use these modes of communication, proceed with professionalism and brevity. For example, you should not use e-mail as an opportunity to get all of your questions answered. Your e-mail should not exceed two short paragraphs. Remember that admissions representatives receive an overwhelming number of e-mails from applicants daily. Therefore, in order for them to respond to each e-mail in a timely manner, they would prefer not to be given ten questions to address in each e-mail they receive. Also, if you speak with the admissions director or other representative via telephone, you should maximize your conversation by having your questions prepared before placing the phone call. Also, some of your questions may be addressed in the program's brochure or Web site, and you should therefore use the time with the admissions representative to discuss other pertinent issues.

Sometimes communicating with an admissions or other university representative can turn into an awkward situation if done improperly. Instead of using Hey, Hi, and Hello to start your e-mail message, use such introductions as Dear, Greetings, or Good Morning. This will change the tone from an informal to a more professional one. Also, avoid using the person's first name unless instructed to do so. Instead, these representatives should be addressed with appropriate titles or prefixes, such as Dean, Professor, Dr., Mr., Ms., or Mrs. If you are unsure of the title, err on the side of caution and address the person by his or her full name. Applying: Once you find the university that fits your goals, start the application process.

Applying to graduate school can be a very stressful and tedious process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 1976 and 2004 enrollment in graduate programs increased 62 percent from 1.3 million to 2.3 million, and by 2015, graduate enrollment is expected to reach 2.6 million. Unfortunately, everyone who applies to graduate school does not get accepted. Therefore, you must take the time to put together a comprehensive, well-presented application package that will set you apart from other applicants and provide the admissions committee with a good sense of your potential to succeed in an advanced degree program. Follow the directions outlined on the application and, if in doubt, contact the university for clarification.

Although each component of the application is evaluated thoroughly by the admissions committee, the personal statement and letters of recommendation are two of the most important areas that are needed to help the committee make its decision. Considering that you will not be present when the admissions committee reviews your application, it's important for you to "tell your story" in a well-written personal statement. The personal statement enables the admissions committee to rate your writing and reasoning skills. It also provides the committee an opportunity to assess your ability to follow instructions. For example, if the application requires a minimum of five to seven double-spaced typed pages, do not submit three hand-written pages. The committee will probably assume that if you were given a class assignment that requires a minimum of fifteen to twenty pages, you may only turn in seven.

Most importantly, check your personal statement for typographical and grammatical errors. For example, admissions committee members are aware that you are applying to several universities. However, they would prefer that you remove the name of the other university from the personal statement that you've submitted for review. This is a clear sign that the applicant is not taking the admissions process seriously and is probably using the same personal statement for each university to which he or she is applying.

Next, you should secure letters of recommendation from people who have firsthand knowledge of your academic and work experience. Take the time to identify people who can make a good assessment of your writing skills, problem-solving ability, and work ethic. Once someone has agreed to submit a letter of recommendation on your behalf, you should send a thank you note to show your appreciation. Also, if you are in the early stages of your undergraduate studies, I recommend that you build a working relationship with at least two of your academic professors. You should talk with them now about your interest in pursuing a graduate degree and let them know that you will contact them in the near future to write a letter of recommendation on your behalf.

Waiting for the Admissions Decision

One of the most stressful periods of the admissions process for the applicant is waiting for the admissions committee's decision. Some universities will provide a decision within a couple of weeks, and some within a few months. If you have not received your decision or an update within one month from the time you submitted your completed package, you should follow up with the admissions representative by sending a friendly e-mail or phone message requesting an update. Once you receive your update from the admissions representative, you should feel confident in knowing that the process is still underway. Remember that whatever the outcome may be, it's important for you to continue to make plans to move to the next level of your academic and professional career.

References

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