Crafting Your Graduate Application: A Few Strategies for Success

Evelyn S. Erenrich, PhD
Associate Dean and Chief Diversity Officer
School of Graduate Studies
Visiting Associate Professor, Chemistry & Chemical Biology
Components of the Application

- Application form
- Personal Statement/Statement of Purpose
  - Separate Research Statement may be required. If not, incorporate in your Personal Statement
- Recommendations – usually 3
- Transcripts
- Writing sample (depends on program)
- CV or resume (depends on program)
- Diversity Statement (depends on school/program)
- Application fee (≈$75 per school)
  - Rutgers has multiple fee waiver categories
- GREs – some programs no longer require or even consider
Personal Statement

• What have you accomplished in and what excites you about proposed field of study?
  – If you have done research, discuss your project(s)
    • What were your most important contributions?
    • What are the future directions of the work (even if someone else carries on)?
  – Discuss your scholarship. e.g. Junior seminar in specify the topic
    • Topic of your paper and what were your most important contributions?
  – Have you presented your work at a conference? Publications?

• What are your goals?
  – In graduate school? e.g. Study ____ in-depth - specify the topic(s) and the evolution of your interest
  – Future? e.g. Become a researcher or professor in this field, contribute to innovation in industry, or be a leader in science policy, etc., etc.

• Why this school and why this graduate program?
  – The strengths of the program in (specify) areas of study
  – Specific faculty doing research that fits with your interests

• If important to you: How will you contribute to Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion and/or outreach?

• In summary: Why are you an excellent fit for the school and for the program? How will you contribute to the graduate and University community?
Transcript: More than Grades
What you say in your Personal Statement can impact how the Admissions Committee reviews your transcript!

The Admissions Committee review involves more than just your GPA
- Positive trajectory by semester is a big plus. Highlight an upward trend.
- Underscore breadth and rigor of courses.
- Point out how courses reflect your developing research interests
- If you had one weak semester due to special circumstances (illness, family or financial situations, etc., explain.
- Avoid blaming a poor grade on the professor

Demonstrate your potential for academic success in graduate school!
Recommendations

• People who know you well from
  – Your research and scholarship
  – Advanced courses
  – Service or volunteer work or employment (only if appropriate and relevant to the field)

• Examples
  – Faculty mentor(s) for undergraduate research project(s).
    • If multiple mentors, request a letter from each (up to the limit)
  – Professor in a class where you participated actively and demonstrated leadership or high level critical thinking

Pointers
- Recommender should be highly ranked, i.e. faculty members rather than Graduate TAs.
- Recommender should be someone who can say much more than “Got an A in my course.”
- Help the recommender by providing your Statement, CV, and an outline of key points for the letter.
- If you have faced life challenges that the Graduate Admissions Committee should know, suggest that the recommender refer to those challenges.
Interview

• An interview invitation may follow if the Committee is enthusiastic about your application.
  – May be virtual or in-person
  – If you are invited to campus, you may receive a travel allowance or expense reimbursement
• An invitation often means you are on the “short list.”
• But…it is not a guarantee. Prepare, Prepare, Prepare.
  – Learn about the research interests of faculty who are members of the graduate program.
  – If possible, find out whom you will be speaking with. Check out some of their papers.
  – Practice “elevator talks” about your own research experiences. Prepare versions of various length and targeted at specialist and non-specialist audiences.
  – Learn about the curriculum, interdisciplinary opportunities, rotation options prior to choosing a mentor, requirements to advance to PhD candidacy.
  – What resources are there for academic support, wellness, professional development, career exploration?
  – Learn about campus climate and culture, programs to promote diversity, equity & inclusion, outreach & community engagement
  – Try to meet with current graduate students.
• Remember that you are interviewing the University and the graduate program, too. Prepare questions to help you make an informed decision.