

THE DREW LAB AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

ECOLOGY, EVOLUTION AND CONSERVATION OF CORAL REEFS

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Ph.D. application hints

Well this is my first blog post of my own, and it seems fitting that I should use this opportunity to talk about new beginnings.

Today we are going to meet to discuss this year's Ph.D. applicants*. While the particulars are confidential I would like to take this opportunity to talk about what I thought made a strong application. This will be the first time being on the other side of that closed door, and I know that while I was going through the Ph.D. application process the internal decisions seemed at best byzantine and at worst as if they were unknowable. I'm hoping that anyone going through, or better about to go through, this process may find some useful advice. Keep in mind however that this is a N=1 situation and your mileage may vary.

The Application:

The application can be broken down into five parts, your C.V. your transcript, your GRE, your letters and your research statement. Different people will weight these differently, and honestly **there are no set formulae as to what makes a good candidate**. Having said that I want to let you know what I was looking for.

C.V. This should be a brief outline of all your academic preparations. Do not put in your work experience scooping ice cream unless that (somehow) relates to your ability to do research. Put in your school, your GPA, your past research experiences along with a brief (seriously, one sentence tops) description of what you did and who you did it with. If you have any publications or grants put them on the first page because those are the coin of the realm in academia and if you have them as an undergrad or a MA student you're really going to stand out. I personally like to see conference presentations but do not place much weight on them. **In short, set the stage. You're going to tell a story about yourself and your aspirations, the CV serves as the playbill for this story.**

Transcripts: These are records of your grades. I was looking for a 3.0 (out of 4) as sort of a minimum, although if you had a rough start during your first two years and showed a steady improvement I took that into account. I definitely looked at what classes you may have gotten D's and C's in. If they were in biology classes that raised serious doubts, if they were in ballroom dancing I let it slide. Basically however there's nothing you can do about your transcript by the time you're applying, except, possibly, do well in your last semester. **Like many things in life, if there's nothing you can do about it, don't sweat it and focus your energy on things you can make a change in.**

GRE Scores: I look at these as sort of an equalizer. If you did really well at a school I know nothing about, I don't feel like I can place those grades in the proper context. **However everyone takes the GRE and it is a good way to approach some sort of level playing field.** The GRE scores I saw had three parts, Listening, Written Expression and Reading, along with their associated percentiles. I used this as a way to scan for red flags, particularly in reading. There is A LOT of reading in grad school and if you had a low score on this, I was concerned. Overall I was really looking to see GRE scores higher than 50 percentile on all three as my cut off. If they were wildly unbalanced (90th percentile on listening and 25th percentile on reading for example), I was willing to take a look. Most of the candidates I found competitive had upper 70's to 90th percentiles.

Letters: Choosing who to write your letter is critically important and something that, sadly, many people do wrong. Almost all of the letters I had were positive, so at least the applicants were able to pick people who would write them good letters. However with everyone having letters saying that they are wonderful students, the value of such statements are rather deflated.

I was looking for specifics. Having a letter saying "this student took X course of mine and got an A" is not really helpful, because I can get that information from the transcript. **You should use your letters as an opportunity to provide information that is not readily available elsewhere.** I was looking for letters that tell a narrative, about who you are, what it is like to work with you, and why I think you would be a good addition to our program.

Statement: This is your opportunity to shine. This should be a relatively short (under 2000 word give or take) statement that does the following. 1) Outline why you are interested in Ecology, Evolution and Environmental Biology (it's our department name, hit on at least one of those topics as your main interest). 2) Give us some insight into how your undergrad experience has prepared you for grad school, but for the love of god do not go into a

long litany of your research experience, that information is on your CV. 3) Where you think your given subfield is going and 4) How you think your research will help address these developments.

Essays that addressed these last two points strongly were most successful. **Good essays showed that you knew what was going on in the field, and that you had identified some areas within that field that you think you would like to answer.** I do not expect that you know exactly what you plan on doing (in fact I'd be suspicious of you if you said that you did), but I did want to see that you had been reading the literature and had been thinking about how your particular project might increase our knowledge and/or address a serious problem.

What worked for me:

I was looking for students who had good experience and above all who were **articulate about their passion**. I will be working with these students for five to seven years in the department and I wanted people who would be excited about being there and who would do the best with the opportunities provided them. I liked students who asked big interesting questions and who had clearly done their homework. In the end most students did not tell a convincing narrative about where they wanted to go, and why coming here was the next logical step in a clearly defined path. That isn't to say that those who didn't make the cut were not great scholars, good people, or folks worthy of getting into this program. Quite often they were but there was either a problem of fit (wanting to do something that we don't offer) or it was clear that their plans were still unformed. There is nothing wrong with taking a couple of years off and figuring out if a Ph.D. is really what you need to do to get where you want to go.

To those who we are about to accept, I hope you consider us. We're a good group of people and I look forward to working with you.

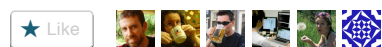
(* the first of very very many it now seems – JAD)

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BY LABROIDES IN UNCATEGORIZED ON DECEMBER 17, 2012.

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7 Comments

Craig S

DECEMBER 17, 2012 AT 4:33 PM

Currently in the midst of planning for PhD applications; I found this information very helpful. Thanks for sharing.

duffymeg

DECEMBER 17, 2012 AT 4:35 PM

Regarding GRE scores: UMich has a training session that members of grad admissions committees are required to attend. At that, I learned that GRE scores correlate with: parent socioeconomic status, average income, being male, being white. They also are somewhat *positively* associated with time to degree. They have an inconsistent and/or modest relationship with degree attainment, dissertation quality, and research productivity. So, the Rackham graduate school at UMich doesn't use GRE scores. I had no idea about all that prior to the session, so thought I'd pass that on.

Megan M.

DECEMBER 17, 2012 AT 5:21 PM

As one who had a terrible verbal GRE score, I'm still annoyed about that test. I can read the literature in my field just fine, but the type of vocabulary they had on that test was not comparable. Now that they have the parts you mention, I wonder if it's changed? What does the 'reading' exam entail?

Chris Anderson

DECEMBER 17, 2012 AT 6:45 PM

Very good, except the description of the GRE is a description of the TOEFL. As a description of how advisors use the TOEFL in admissions, it's good. Adding a description of the GRE, especially how you balance verbal and quant, would be additionally interesting

dr24hours

DECEMBER 17, 2012 AT 7:44 PM

This is excellent and revealing. I think a good companion piece would be examples of what not to do, based on what you received, assuming you can do that without revealing any personal information.

Friday Coffee Break « Nothing in biology makes sense!

DECEMBER 21, 2012 AT 2:33 PM

[...] is some advice on what makes a good PhD application from the point of view of a PI at Columbia University. (From [...])

Stuff we linked to on Twitter last week | Highly Allochthonous

DECEMBER 24, 2012 AT 2:22 AM

[...] advice here: Ph.D. application hints from @Drew_Labu201d <http://labroides.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/ph-d-application-hints/> (via @JacquelynGill, [...])

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