Tips for Applying to the Graduate Program in Sociology at UW-Madison
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November 2012

Every year the sociology graduate program at the University of Wisconsin-Madison receives hundreds of applications, but we are only able to admit a small fraction (fewer than 10 percent) of those applicants, making the selection process extremely rigorous.

In the three years that I have served as director of graduate studies for sociology, I have received numerous email messages from applicants asking for advice about how best to prepare their respective applications and improve their chances of admission. I always tell applicants the same thing: The graduate admission committee considers a wide range of factors when selecting applicants, including academic record, GPA, GRE scores, TOEFL scores (in the case of international students), transcripts, statement of purpose and applicant's goals, letters of reference, writing sample, previous research experience, and fit with our program. No one of these factors outweighs the others; rather they are examined in combination. For answers to frequently asked questions about our use of these criteria, please see here: http://ssc.wisc.edu/soc/grad/admissions_faq.php.

Although many of these factors are already set by the time a student applies to the graduate program, I believe that careful preparation of one’s statement of purpose and writing sample can help to improve one’s chances of admission. With that in mind, I am happy to share the following tips with applicants. This advice reflects my own personal experience and opinion and does not necessarily reflect the views of any of my colleagues.

To begin with, make sure your file is complete and the application materials are submitted on time. That’s your responsibility, not ours. In addition:

1. Make your statement of reasons for graduate study concise (no more than two pages) and readable (double-spaced, or at least skip lines between paragraphs, and 12-point font).

2. Things to avoid in your statement: There is no need for a lengthy recounting of past coursework (it's redundant: we have your transcript) or a detailed research proposal. We do want to see that you have some clear research interests, but a personal statement is not a research proposal. Also avoid extraneous information. The admission committee doesn’t need to know, for instance, about your experience as captain of the Quidditch team. These things have no bearing on your admission. Finally, I think it’s best to avoid stories about how you have been destined to become a sociologist since birth or how you were always already a sociologist. Even if it’s true, it will sound like a cliché.

3. Your statement should indicate that you know what graduate school is and what it is for: that it is essentially professional training and not simply a continuation of your undergraduate education. Thus, it’s helpful to say a few words about your future career plans. Why do you want a Ph.D? What will you do with the degree? Do you plan to pursue an academic career, like most applicants we admit, or some other kind of career? If some other kind of career, why do you need a Ph.D. for it? Why do you want a Ph.D. in sociology and not another discipline, especially if your background or previous degrees are in another field? If you are in another graduate program already, why do you want to transfer? This information will show that you’re serious about studying sociology at the graduate level and that you know why you’re doing it.
4. What draws you to this particular graduate program? You may want to mention, for instance, specific faculty members you’d like to work with here and why. This will keep the statement from appearing generic (an impression you want to avoid) and demonstrate your familiarity with our graduate program. It will look more convincing if you’ve actually exchanged emails or spoken on the phone with those faculty. (If you have, note it in your statement!) Remember that the admission process is like a courtship: we’re courting you (maybe), but you’re courting us as well, so tailor your statement to our program.

5. If you have any weak spots in your application such as a low GRE score (below the 50th percentile), the statement of purpose is a good place to call attention to mitigating or extenuating circumstances the committee may not be aware of, explain how you areremedying this weakness, and/or make a case why the weak score is not the best or most accurate indicator of your abilities in this area.

6. It’s helpful to highlight in your statement any previous research experience you have (senior thesis, master’s thesis, research assistantship, etc.). Research experience is by no means required for admission, but it may help to distinguish your application from others.

7. You may have acquired considerable knowledge in a particular subfield of sociology, especially if you have already completed some graduate study, but don’t assume that everyone on the admission committee will be a specialist in that field.

8. “Whoever wants a sermon,” Max Weber once wrote, “should go to a conventicle”—not to graduate school. Having a passion for social justice is not a bad thing, and it often serves as a powerful motivation for good sociological work, but sociology should not be confused with muckraking. Simply exposing injustice and oppression is not the same thing as illuminating the workings of society. It’s not news to social scientists that some groups are dominated or exploited by others.

9. Before you submit an extremely long writing sample, remember that the admission committee must review hundreds of applications. This usually compels me to skim through lengthy writing samples. Better to excerpt the best part of a long paper or thesis and preface it with a brief introduction that summarizes the paper as a whole and explains how the excerpt fits into it.

10. What do I look for in a writing sample? Clear and well-organized writing, careful reasoning, research experience, but above all a capacity for creative and imaginative thinking. I look for applicants who try to do more than describe what they have studied. I look for applicants who, as my colleague Erik Wright likes to put it, strive to learn from a case and not simply about it.

I hope these suggestions will be helpful. Good luck with your application!

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November 2012