



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 37 - Applying to Graduate School

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

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Adam: And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn and how we teach and how they overlap.

Dinur: Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 37: Applying to Graduate School.

Now, Adam and I have a lot of students who are thinking about going to graduate school, who are going to law school, some who are thinking about medical school. And the first thing that Adam and I want to ask is, well, one: are you **sure** you actually want to go to graduate school? And if you say "yes, I absolutely want to, I want a Masters," or "I want a PhD or a JD," you want to be very clear about why you want to go. Do you want to go because you want to do interesting research? Do you want to go because you want to be able to teach at the university level? Do you want to practice law? Why do you want that degree? What does the degree offer you that your bachelor's degree won't?

Adam: So, to talk about our own experiences here, I'm going to start by saying I actually ended up with a PhD more or less by accident. And it was because when I was going for my original degree, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my bachelor's. I just knew that I needed to get a degree. And I was in my late twenties, early thirties. I had gone back to school after 10 years of working in the world without a degree. And there was some pressure from my family, 'cause both of my parents had Masters' degrees and they felt that it was kind of embarrassing that none of their kids had a college degree.

And then, in the middle of my undergrad, I had the chance to present to a class. It was my history class. And Lois Nettleship - and I hope that someday maybe she'll hear about this - she was my teacher. And she had basically set the class up very flipped for the time period, which was way early, you know, a lot of people had not yet flipped their classes, but she had definitely flipped it.

And so, every week someone had to stand up and do a 20 minute presentation on something, in every class. And it was a class of 30 students and we had a 17 week semester. So, it was perfect. You know, every day there was one student who had to give some kind of presentation. So, my presentation was on the Twenties, it was on - for the life of me, I can't really remember what it was on, because it was so long ago and it was just a

20 minute presentation - but I had thrown myself into it. I had charts, I had graphs, I had handouts, the whole bit. And so I finished, and I was the last thing to happen before the class was over.

So I finished, and I'm all, "Okay. So that's all I've got. I guess that's it," and I looked to Dr. Nettleship, and she grinned. And everybody started walking out, and I'm packing everything up, you know, tapping my nine handouts that I didn't hand out.

And she came over and put her hand on my arm. And she said, "If you do not become a professor, I will haunt you when I die."

And that was the first time it had ever occurred to me that teaching might be something I'd like to do. And I thought back on it and I thought, "you know, how many times have I been in a study group and I wound up teaching everybody what the book said? Or translating something in the lecture into English instead of jargon?" And it just, I twitched in the niche a little bit and I said, "You know, okay. Yeah, yeah."

But I also assumed - and I didn't check - that I had to have a PhD to teach college. I knew I didn't want to teach high school because for me, having to go to school kills a lot of the love of learning. So I figured, "okay, I want to teach college because that's where the people who want to learn will be." I have since learned that's not always the case, but I decided I was going to get a PhD. And I'm not sorry that I did. I'm, I'm actually really proud of myself for having gotten a PhD. It was a heck of a lot of work though. So that is one of the things you've got to remember: getting any kind of an advanced, graduate-level degree, whether it's a Master's or a JD or an EdD or PhD or an MD, it's a lot of work.

And so, remember, too, if you're in it for the degree, employers are paying at least as much for the skills you develop while getting that degree as for the degree itself. It's that intermediate step of going from "not knowing how to run a statistical analysis at all" to "being able to do it practically in your sleep." That's what's valued, all right? And it doesn't matter which discipline you get your degree in, you're going to learn a lot of research skills, you're going to learn a lot of writing skills, you're going to learn a lot of communication skills. And so think about the job that you want to do. Think about the career that you want to have, and think about how will this degree translate to that job?

Dinur: Now, what we've just said is kind of "things to think about before you start applying," but you also - on a practical level, once you've decided, "yeah, I want this degree and here's why," you've got to do your homework.

Don't just apply to one school, because it's a crapshoot. You don't know whether you will or you won't get in, even if your scores are competitive. What you want to do is you want to look up a lot of different schools. You want to see what these schools and these departments specialize in. Because, for example, in sociology, you have a bunch of different disciplines. I know that my specializations were criminology and socio-legal studies, which means I study a lot about crime and the law and how to help prevent crime. And I also specialized in institutions and organizations and trying to see how they behave. But there are people who specialize in race, or who specialize in different forms of inequality. So you've got to find areas that interest you, and you want to also be able to piece your program together.

So let's say you want to study things about the media, but you don't have "media and culture studies" in your department. Try and find a different department that can give you some of that background. Look at what each school and what each department demands in terms of a grade point average, and your test scores, and see

what previous incoming classes did, because those are often going to be a bit higher than what the department tells you is needed to get in.

Adam: And when we say “test scores,” we are not talking about your SATs. We are not talking about the standardized tests that you took in high school, or the standardized tests that got you into your bachelor's program. We'll talk about those in a little bit, but just be aware when we say “test scores,” we're not talking about the tests you've already taken. We're talking about the tests that you still have to take.

Now, I want to expand for a minute on this thing about “look for the department.” One of the other things you need to look for is who's publishing stuff that's interesting to you? Because a lot of times the school you want to go to, it's not even about the school, it's about **this** researcher, **this** professor is doing work in an area that is fascinating to you, that you really want to know more about.

So for example, a friend of mine, Allison, we were in grad school with her together. She came to our graduate school specifically to work with two people who were working on a very specific area of sociology, and that was what she was interested in, and she wasn't interested in any other school, but what she did was she searched out not just those two people, but also places where their students were now teaching and doing research as tenure track professors, to make sure that when she did get into the school or schools that she applied to, that she would have people she could work with.

When you go to graduate school, one of the things that you may not be aware of is that it is **not** like undergrad, all right? A lot of people come in and they think, okay, it's still go more classes, do more tests, get more good grades. Classes, tests and grades, right? Well.... kind of.

The way that the program that Dinur and I were in, for example, the first two years, at least in that particular sociology program, you get the groundwork and so you're with the same people who came in with you, you work with them, you're all in the same classes together for the first two years, and that's when you get your Master's, basically. You finish those first two years and those are all classes you take together.

But after that, it stops being about grades. And even then, it isn't about grades, because a lot of times it's a class where you have to produce a paper that you could try to publish, not just “Here, teacher, here's my essay, grade it.” No, it's no longer that simple.

So when you are picking out a school, it's really important to look at: Who is there? What are they working on? What are they publishing? What are they writing about? What are they doing research on? Because this gives you a sense of what the focus might be in that department, or at least with that professor, and that might give you ideas for your own research, which - you will need to do a lot of research in grad school. You don't have to read every single thing that they wrote word for word, but find the literature reviews of their articles. Read the abstracts of their articles; that helps, Find book reviews of their books.

Most professors who are tenure track are hired and retained not because of their teaching, but because of their research. So a lot of their time, yeah, they're on campus a lot, but most of that time is not spent in the classroom. It's spent writing. It's spent doing research. It's spent gathering data. It's spent analyzing data. It's spent trying to figure out why the data that's analyzed on this computer with this program didn't come out the same as the data analyzed on that computer with supposedly the same program, which is something that my dissertation chair and I ran into the second year I was working with him. I was his research assistant.

You need to be aware of what they are publishing, because if you aren't aware of what they are publishing, you don't really know what you want to do when you get into grad school. And this is not like undergrad. This is not like when you pick your major and you've got the chance to take a few classes. No, you really have to know, going in, "These are the two areas I'm going to focus on. These are the two professors that I **really** want to work with." And then you have to make sure that you get to know those professors, not just as mentors but as people, because you're going to be working with them for a long, long time on the stuff that they are interested in.

Dinur: And again, keep in mind that these professors are rewarded for research more than their teaching. And so, they're going to put a lot of their energy and their efforts into this research. So their research kind of shows you who they are in an academic sense.

But there's another good reason you want to look at what faculty are publishing, and that's because admissions committees for schools change every year. And that means that there's a chance that the professors you say you'd like to work with are the people looking at the committee that year. And if you can say something like, "I want to work with Dr. Jones on their study of looking at how news coverage of natural disasters has changed since Hurricane Katrina," well, that shows the committee you're willing to do your due diligence on them. You're willing to see what their faculty are researching. And if Dr. Jones happens to be on that committee, they might be flattered! Because let's face it, if you see your name or you hear it on an application, it feels really, really good knowing that people are interested in your work, that you're not the only one out there, that maybe you were able to spark some interest in an idea.

And if you're applying and you said, "Wow, I really like this piece by Dr. Jones", you might want to explain **why** that work is interesting or how you would plan on extending it. Just saying, "Hey, this study stopped in 2010. I want to see what's happened since then." You don't have to explain it step by step on the application, but if you show that you have an idea, then you're showing that you're serious about doing research and you're serious about that school.

Adam: Now, one caution about this. Do not say, "I want to come specifically to work with Dr. Jones because I love everything Dr. Jones did!" That's just kissing up. We can tell when you're doing that and we'll probably say, "Yeah, no, I don't want to babysit."

Another thing, and this is something - this is a mistake that I've seen a lot of undergrads make, or think about making, and fortunately they've checked with me or another professor - they've said, "Well, who should I call at UCLA to make sure that I can get in, into the biology department? You know, I need to make sure that I've set up somebody that I want to work with before I apply, right?" No. No, no, no. Do not call professors and ask them to shoot the breeze with you about their program and whether they'll accept you in their lab. That's not a good idea because for one thing, they may not actually get to choose who goes in their lab.

Some folks that I've known, they were getting their Master's degree in biology, and it was basically a lottery program. You know, they just assigned you randomly and said "That's going to be your mentor. That's going to be the person who's your Master's thesis chair, so you have to work in his lab." And, so, don't do that. Don't reach out to the professors individually, hoping that that will somehow give you an edge in admissions. It will actually backfire more often than it will help you.

Now, I mentioned standardized tests earlier. What we're talking about here is the GRE, the Graduate Record Exam.

Now the GRE is basically the SAT on steroids. There is a vocabulary part, there's a reading comprehension part, a writing part and a mathematics part. It's all on a computer. I think you get one piece of scratch paper - at least I did when I was taking it, but I also got disability accommodations and I don't know if you will - and the first five or so questions in each section are crucial. For each one you get, right, your score pops up and it jumps up, but the questions get a lot tougher.

If you screw it up early on, then the subsequent questions are easier, but because you only got the easy questions, your score goes down.

And you can only get one question at a time. You can't skip ahead. You can't go back. So, you can't use a lot of the strategies for taking tests that you might've used - you know, look at the whole exam, figure out which ones are easier to do those first. You can't do that with this kind of test.

And for writing, you're given a prompt and you have to take a side. You get to pick which side and then you have to back up your argument. It is not an easy test, all right? I scored fairly low. I remember when I got to finally read the letters of recommendation that were written for me for grad school, the person who ended up being my dissertation chair said, "Yes, this is Adam's score on the GRE, but it's a lower-bound estimate of his abilities." And that was important because a lot of times you will get accepted or rejected based on the strength of your test scores.

Dinur: And one thing I can safely tell you is, the vocabulary you study for the GRE will not be used after the test. I remember having to go through a bunch of flashcards, and in my entire PhD career, used maybe three of those words, either in a paper or in an article. So you're going to study words that are going to make you sound really fancy, but you're probably not going to use them in most of your writing. And that's for the GRE.

But for students thinking about law school, you have to take the LSAT, and that test has a vocabulary section, reading comprehension, and what throws a lot of people, including myself, off, the logic games. So you have five sections. One of the sections won't count, but you don't know which. Each section is 35 minutes, and you have to score around 150 to 160.

Now, the LSAT is scored between 120 on the low end and 180, and the biggest 10 points are between 150 and 160, because if you score 150 you're average. You're in the 50th percentile of all test takers. If you score 160, you're up in the 85th percentile. And so those 10 points make a huge difference in terms of what schools you're going to be competitive for, because law schools tend to emphasize the LSAT score over grades and even over the personal statements that we'll talk about later. But that is the nature of their beast,

Adam: Right? And then if you're going to medical school, you have to take the MCAT. Now the MCAT has four sections, the Chemical and Physical Foundations of Biological Systems or a CPFBS; the Critical Analysis and Reasoning Skills or CARS, the Biological and Biochemical Foundations of Living Systems, which is BBFLS, and then the Psychological, Social and Biological Foundations of Behavior or PSBFB sections. All of these are multiple choice.

The four parts that make up your total score are a numeric score, a percentile rank, a confidence band, and a score profile. So, the score profile is given for each section, so you can see where you were strong or weak. It won't tell you which specific questions you actually missed, but if you do have to retake the MCAT, it will tell you, you know, "you didn't do so well on CPF BS and you really bombed it on PSB FB. You need to bulk up on those." Okay.

Now when you retake the MCAT, that's what you got to take. The average score is 501.8, but the average score for students who get accepted is 508.7. Now, medical schools also consider your GPA, and that varies from school to school. That's similar to law school and grad school. Different law schools and different grad schools and different med schools. They all have different standards for what's good enough to get in.

Now when it comes to the MCAT, scoring's a little bit more in depth. So Dinur, do you want to take this part?

Dinur: Yeah. So, each section has a total score of 118 to 132, so it's a really small range, and all four of your sections are added together. The midpoint score for each section is 125, and the lowest overall score is 472, the highest overall score 528, the midpoint score is 500. A good MCAT score is one that puts you around 510 to 511, according to Princeton Review. The American Association of Medical Colleges suggests for schools to look at scores that are towards the middle of the range as their ideals. But if you're taking those tests, you want to hit that 81st percentile. You want to aim for 509 or higher, because that gives you the strongest shot of being accepted.

The MCAT is a long test. It's a total test time of six hours and 15 minutes, and you've got to answer 230 questions in that time span. You get a percentile rank compared to everyone who's taken the test in the past three years. Every extra point you earn on the test means that you jump up in percentiles.

Oh, Adam mentioned something called the "confidence band" as part of your score. And the confidence band is the range of accuracy of your scores when you take into account any inherent flaws that standardized tests have. So, for example, if the confidence band for a section is somewhere between 126 and 128, then that means medical schools should consider scores of 126, 127 and 128 as effectively being the same, because they're all within that tight, narrow window.

Adam: Now, we've gone over the three main standardized tests that you need to take. We should also mention that the GRE sometimes has subject-specific GREs. Like I know there's one for physics. Um, I'm pretty sure there's one for math. So certain disciplines also require not just the Graduate Record Exam, but also the Graduate Record Exam for Math. So be aware that you are going to have to pay for these tests, and you're going to have to study like heck for them.

Adam: Now, once you've gotten through the tests, and you've picked out the school you want and you know you want to go to, you need to get letters of recommendation that are strong, really strong. So get to know your instructors. Keep in mind, letters from graduate students, and from lecturers or adjunct professors, might not be valued as much as letters from tenure-track professors. I have, on several occasions when a student who has, say, a B in my class comes to me and asks for a letter of rec to grad school, I say "Try to find a tenure-track professor that you got a similar grade with, because the fact that I'm not tenured and that I'm not on the tenure track makes it less likely that they're going to take me seriously because I don't have that institutional cred."

Now, it is better to get a glowing letter from a lecturer than a tepid, milquetoast, boring letter from someone who's tenured. So part of what you've got to do is start this work early. You need to get to know your instructors. You need to get on good terms with your instructors. You need them to be able to pick you out of a sea of faces and say, "Yeah, that's Angie. I know her. She's in my office every week asking about this and this and this. And she's planning on applying to USC, and to UCLA, because she wants to go to medical school. I know her."

You want your professors to know you and you want them to be on good terms with you. So when you go to office hours, talk with them about class stuff, talk with them about related material, develop a good working relationship with them, and you'll get much better letters of recommendation than if you just emailed them, you know, a month before you need your letters of rec, and they taught you three years ago, and you got a B in their class. They're probably not going to remember you. You want them to remember you so that your letters of rec are glowing.

Dinur: Now, when you ask for these letters, please give your writers time. Because it takes time to write a letter that showcases your talents and growth. Anyone can say, "I had such and such in my class. They got a B. They're a good student." Is that going to tell a committee anything? Would that tell you anything? No. You want to see what makes them glow. Were they really fantastic because they kept participating in class? Did they come up with some really creative ideas? Did they throw together really interesting presentations when the time came, were they constantly thinking about new ideas in terms of either class stuff or in terms of research? What about them made them stand out and for that to come out, your letter writers need time, because again, just as it takes time for you to write a quality paper for your classes, it takes time for your letter writers to write good letters that truly showcase your talents and your growth.

I've had students ask me less than a week before applications were due for a letter, and I've had to say no, because that's not enough time for me to write a strong letter. I recommend you give your letter writers around six to eight weeks, so, a month and a half to two months for the letters, and give them periodic reminders if the instructor hasn't let you know that they've finished writing the letter. I would say, if they say, "Hey, I've written it, I've sent it off", then their work is done.

Make sure to let your letter writers know what class or classes you had them and what grade you earned, because we're one instructor, but we're dealing with, in some cases, 40; in some cases, a hundred; in some cases, several hundred students. We're not going to remember out of all faces and all those names, 'cause we often teach more than one class. So multiply those between 40 and, say, 300 people, times four or five classes. We're not going to remember everyone, and we're not going to remember what grade they earned. So if you let your professors know, "I took these three classes with you and these were the grades I got."

Also, send them stuff that you've written, because when we want to write the letters, we want to showcase your academic talents. And if you say, "Well, here are papers I've written," we can say, "Wow, this person shows really strong analytical skills. Wow. They're an especially creative writer," if you're looking at an English program. That gives us something more concrete that we can use as evidence in supporting you.

Adam: When I went to graduate school, I had an advisor in the honors department, and they said "You need to prepare a packet for each person you're asking to write a letter. Give them your best exam, your best paper, your best homework assignment, and your best email to them and print those things out and put them in a folder. And when you ask them, "please write a letter for me," hand them the folder and say, "here's some stuff you can use to know who I am."

I got stellar letters of recommendation. Why? Because every professor that I asked for a letter, I gave them my best exam in their class, my best paper in their class, my best homework assignment in their class, and the best email exchange we had, so that they really got a sense of me as a student. Not just me as a dude who happened to take their classes, but what I did with my work, what I did with the things they told me to do, how well was I doing the stuff that they knew would translate well into graduate school, like research, for example.

And now I ask my students, at least not for a packet generally, but when they ask me for a letter of recommendation, I send them, basically, a form to fill out to tell me about themselves, so that I know what it is that they're doing, what it is that they've done, and why I should actually recommend them.

And then I actually email them back and say, "Okay, given what you told me, I don't think I can write a letter for you," or, "Given what you told me. I will write your letter, but I want you to get me a copy of this and this so I can look at them, and actually know what you did in the paper in my class."

So now, the other thing you need to worry about writing is your personal statement. And this can often be the deciding step in admissions.

It's assumed that letters of recommendation are going to be positive. Hopefully your writers have your back. If they don't, they're hopefully straightforward and honest enough with you to tell you "You don't want me writing your letter of recommendation, you need to go find someone else."

But you and all the other potential graduate students are applying to this school, and you have similar test grades, and you have similar test scores, and you have similar GPAs. Why should the school pick you over one of them?

So this is where doing your homework about the department's research areas will really pay off. This is where you want to use your personal statement to talk about you and your ideas, and show how they'll fit in with the department's ongoing research and researchers. You want to use this area to basically sell yourself as a student researcher, and the concept, more than anything, that you've got to hit is fit: How well does this department's culture, in terms of its research, and to a lesser extent, its teaching, fit your interests? And how well do your interests mesh with at least some of the professors in that department?

So when I wrote my personal statement, I said, "This professor is doing research in this area. I have done some research in that area. I would like to see where I can go with it, with them as a mentor. That is something I am hoping for."

And also, another thing to remember about your personal statement. They are not looking at you as someone who will earn grades. They are looking at you as someone who will add to the research product of this department. And that's a very different thing. A lot of students come in and they don't understand the main reason you're there is not to get grades, it's to publish new research.

Dinur: Your job is to create knowledge, and now you're creating knowledge within these frameworks.

Now, I will say that you can change your interests over time. That happens, where you say, "Oh, I am, I'm applying and I really want to work on this project" and maybe you take a class, and a new question pops up in your head and that's what you end up working on it. That's totally fine. That happens regularly.

But you want to go in showing that you have a plan. Adam mentioned fit, and the reason that matters is you're going to need these professors to be on your committees - for your master's thesis, for your prospectus for the dissertation, for your dissertation committee - and they're going to teach some of your courses. And you're probably going to either teach for them as a teaching assistant, or help them with research as a research assistant.

If you have a good professional relationship developed with your professors, and you can show that you and the department mesh well, it makes graduate school a much smoother process. Don't get me wrong and don't get Adam wrong. There's still going to be a lot of stress in grad school, and we're going to have an episode on that later on, but having a good working relationship goes a very long way towards making stresses manageable.

Adam: So that's what we have for you in Episode 37. If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends! We're always hoping to get new subscribers, so we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and Android. We're hosted on Blubrry.com. And we'd really, really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Now, Dinur was talking with me about how he had students complaining about an exam, and the class average was something like 81, and some of the students said, "this test is too hard!" and some of them said, "What are you talking about? It was easy!"

Dinur: Be sure to join us next week for Episode 38, when Adam and I have the first of our Testing Series: How to Create Effective Tests. In this series, Adam and I will talk to both professors and students.

Adam: You've been listening to Learning Made Easier, a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Dinur: We want to say thank you to all of our supporters on Patreon, who make this podcast possible.

Adam: If you want to support us, please go to www.patreon.com/learningmadeeasier.

Dinur: We look forward to seeing you next week!