Lessons I Learned When Applying to Grad School

Be organized.
As someone who can rarely be described as organized, I cannot express enough how important being organized is when applying to grad school. My experience with applying only included five PhD programs, but there was so much information to remember, that I could not have kept it straight in my head alone. All the programs I applied to required a statement of purpose, a CV, letters of recommendation, and a submission fee (amount varied by program), but only some required a personal statement and had different supplemental questions. I kept a detailed google sheet with a tab for each program to which I was applying (see template here). Important information to keep track of include links to the application (one application portal was so difficult to find that I almost did not apply to the program), my log in details, fee amounts, and deadlines for both the actual application and deadlines to order supplemental materials such as my transcripts.

Keep backups.
This is a short reminder, but things happen. I strongly recommend having a backup of your latest document at the very least just in case your computer crashes on a due date (I have seen it happen. It is awful).

Start early.
Applying to grad school is typically not the only thing happening in our lives during the application season. Most of us are still in school and/or working, too. That deadline will sneak up on us if we are not careful. Start prepping materials early to make things less stressful for yourself. And if not for yourself, then for your letter writers. Your letter writers are also extremely busy with other tasks. They need time to write you a good letter. In order to do that, some may ask for your application materials to know how you are presenting yourself and your academic interests. Make it easy on your letter writers and yourself by starting early.

Why grad school?
It is important to know why you want to pursue grad school. This information is not just necessary for the applications, but it is also good for your intrinsic motivation. Grad school is stressful. While I genuinely would not want to do anything else, this is also the most difficult thing I have done in my life. When things get tough, it is encouraging to me to remind myself why I am pursuing this degree. My passion for my research and my career goals remind me why I am putting myself through this when I am overwhelmed by deadlines and responsibilities. (To be clear, there are many great times in grad school, too!) In addition to being a good reminder for myself, my passion also was obvious in my application statements and face-to-face interviews. You may not have a perfect idea of what you want to do, but you should have an answer to the question “why grad school?” Do your career goals require a PhD? Are you pursuing a master’s degree because you will learn the skills necessary for your ideal career? Engage in some “academic soul searching” to find your real reason for pursuing grad school, and please be honest with yourself before committing years of your life to these degrees.

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