The Inside Scoop on Grad School Applications

A veteran application reviewer offers exclusive insights on strengthening your case.

BY BRENDA C. SEAL

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EMAIL: Dear FIRST NAME, I'm a senior majoring in CSD at COLLEGE, and my dream since freshman year is to get into your SLP grad program. I'd love to set up a meeting one Friday evening or Saturday in October to talk about my application and how I can improve my chances of getting in. Signed, FIRST NAME

EMAIL RESPONSE: Thank you for your interest in our graduate program, FIRST NAME. I look forward to seeing your application and hope it offers all the variables we look for in those students who are accepted. I’ll also invite you to attend our Graduate Fair/Open House on DATE (see information below). I look forward to talking with you then. Signed, FIRST INITIAL LAST NAME

In 35-plus years of reviewing thousands of speech-language pathology graduate school applications, we’re still searching for the best possible students to make up the best possible class of future speech-language pathologists. So what are graduate-degree
programs looking for? What variables do I—and many of my colleagues—use as we determine who to accept, waitlist or reject?

Variable 1—Grades
The best predictor of grades in grad school is undergraduate grades. We reviewers give grade-point averages (GPAs) an important look when we sort applicants by cumulative and major GPAs on a spreadsheet. GPAs calculated from only the CSD classes can be really difficult to rank, though, when looking at three candidates with similar qualifications and only a hundredth of a point difference in their grades (3.71, 3.69 and 3.70, for example).

Cumulative GPAs (3.25, 3.50 and 3.69 for these same three candidates) may help the sorting, but it’s often the transcript that offers more detailed information: What was the candidate’s grade in anatomy? Phonetics? Acoustics? Was there a thesis? A minor?

And why so many changes in undergraduate majors? The National Center for Educational Statistics reported in 2017 that 35 percent of science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) majors, and 26 percent of students in health care fields change majors within three years of graduating. Low freshman grades often account for the discrepancy between major and cumulative GPA, and signal a change in the candidate’s area of study.

We are receiving increasingly more applications from non-CSD students, whose applications require additional scrutiny of prerequisite course grades, undergrad major GPA and graduation year (for example, an applicant graduated with a 3.1, majored in biology, and has been working in a
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five semesters later with promise of a clinical fellowship, graduate program reviewers are looking more intently for evidence of essential functions in their applicants’ profiles. Communication is prominent in the list of basic skills.

We often look for clues to good communication skills in letters of reference: If I see any positive mention of communication (“She was always the first to raise her hand in my class, answering and asking questions that benefitted other students”), it leaves a favorable impression as I’m reading the hundreds of letters that help sort applicants.

In returning to the opening email, what was your impression of the applicant’s communication?

Variable 4—Diversity

The CSD professions are constantly changing, and we are hungry for graduate students who speak more than one language and understand cultural backgrounds of clients from growing minorities. Diversity means more than including students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, however. We also look for students who can “adapt” to cultural and linguistic differences (see the discussion of “adaptability” in an ASHA Special Interest Groups Perspectives article by Soren Lowell and colleagues, on.asha.org/pathways-to-cc).

Applicants who impress reviewers—either in their written communication or in their phone calls and visits (and at Gallaudet, we value sign communication as an important measure of cultural-linguistic diversity)—with a genuine excitement about this rapidly changing profession and their adaptability during change, tend to rise to the top of the accepted list.

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Best wishes to all students applying this winter, and to the many reviewers who search for the best combination of all possible variables.

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