

Thinking of Going to Graduate School?

A workshop presented by the Indiana Beta Chapter of Alpha Chi at Huntington University at the AX National Convention. St. Louis, MO. March 28, 2014.

Purpose:

This presentation shared ideas from an annual “So You Want to Go to Graduate School” Alpha Chi Forum held in the fall semester at Huntington University, including tips and pitfalls involved in the process, participation by faculty who recently finished graduate school, ideas related to preparing for graduate school, and walking through online resources. Also, to be discussed will be some of the things that worked and didn’t work in connection with this subject.

How to Create an AX Graduate School Forum:

1. What departments on your campus have a lot of students who go on to graduate school? See if they would like to work with you to put on a Going to Graduate School Forum.
2. What resource people do you have in your community who would be willing to come talk about going to graduate school in their discipline or occupation? These could be people who have recently graduated: doctors, lawyers, engineers, social workers, counselors.
3. Do you have younger faculty (recent PhDs) at your institution that might be willing to come talk about their graduate school experiences as well as the dos and don’ts.
4. Find out who at your school oversees the Career Planning or Testing and Placement. This person or persons might be great resource people for a discussion on getting ready for Grad School.
5. Find out which people on your campus might already have taken one of the graduate placement exams. Would they be willing to share their experiences? Are there faculty who are familiar with these exams that would be willing to serve on a panel? Is there someone on campus who can provide information on such matters as costs, testing locations, frequency of offerings, deadlines, and testing procedures for the following: MCAT for Med School, LSAT for law school, GMAT for business, and the GRE.
6. A Few Barriers or Problems to Overcome:
 - a. Publicity: How do you reach Freshmen, Sophomores, and Juniors who need to be thinking in this direction long before their Senior year?
 - b. How to communicate that these Forums are not only for AX members?

Discussion Points:

1. Things that have worked:

- a. We typically find professors who have recently obtained their doctorates or recently completed grad school. We ask them to speak on their challenges and achievements just to show people what it is like.
 - b. Bring in outside people from the community (lawyers, doctors, etc.) who have also been through the process. Not always sunshine and rainbows, but it was good to hear for those looking into going in that field.
 - c. Your career planning person/office is usually a good resource.
2. Things that didn't work or challenges:
 - a. Hard to get underclassmen in attendance, so they can begin to prepare for grad school in a timely fashion. Maybe you could get departments which have students that are going on to graduate school help publicize the event.
 - b. Tried a joint event with the Psychology Department, which limited the focus of the event too much, and ended up not applying to most students there who were interested in other departments. Don't limit yourself to one or two departments.
 - c. Getting people there not to make a pitch for a particular grad school. People can inform us how to get there, and so forth, but should be told not to try to sell a certain grad school.
3. When you do apply for grad school, what should you keep in mind?
 - a. Any offer you get from a grad school, get it in writing. If not in writing, then it isn't a real grad offer.
 - b. Follow up and make sure the school received your info early. Make sure that they have you and not a person with the same name. Make sure you keep screenshots or backup copies of your application to send in in case your info is lost.
 - c. Persistence!
 - d. Stress that when you start asking for references to ask for them early. You may need to request that they rewrite in case they lose them. When you ask for someone to write a reference, give them your vita and a list of your strengths and qualities because it will help them write a great letter.
 - e. Do some practice interviewing. The better you come off on the initial contact, the better you will be down the line. Make sure that someone who knows your field reads your essays for spell check, grammar, and content: nothing like making a bad impression by appearing to be illiterate. Proofread your application very thoroughly. Some schools will throw out applications because of minor grammar errors.
4. We distribute a "Thinking of Going to Graduate School" handout with helpful resources for steps on application, schools, and so forth. We usually try to update this every year.
5. When planning your own grad school event, bring in someone who knows about resources to help promote and create awareness on the schools and can answer questions.

6. Elements that are usually part of our panel.
 - a. We discuss the different tests that are required for the different practices. We talk about the difficulty and how far in advance one needs to start studying. One example, one professor began studying six months in advance as a full time job. These tests should be taken very seriously because they are very expensive (as much as \$200 each time you take it). If you take it again, find out if the grad school you are applying to will average your scores or not.
 - b. Make sure students are aware that they should find out specifically what exams their school of choice requires and point out that taking some area specific tests might not be required and could potentially hurt them in the long run if done poorly.
 - c. See if your library loans out practice tests. It is crucial that you practice taking these tests and take as many as you can. You must be aware of how much it costs to take these tests. Not only the actual test fee, but the travel costs if not administered locally.
 - d. See if you can ask the school if there are any grad students in your field who you would be able to talk with. Some schools may allow you to visit and talk, while others may not. How are the grad students treated? Are there any TA's? The more information you can glean, the better off you are.
 - e. Testing locations and frequency of how often the tests are offered is something you need to look up and make sure you are aware of. Sometimes it is beneficial to take the test early because it shows that you are prepared and didn't wait until the last minute.
 - f. Several tests take writing samples; practice your essay writing early. It is important that you get topics in your area and practice your essay writing. You can work with your faculty advisors for this.
 - g. When taking the practice test for the first time, don't time yourself, but focus on making sure you understand how you should formulate your answers rather than worrying about how much time you have used. Then, you will be better able to take the test later when you time yourself and not have to worry about formatting your answers as much.

Takeaways:

Here is the list of "takeaways" that attendees emphasized at the end of our St. Louis session:

1. Setting up an AX Graduate School Forum on a campus:
 - a. Decide when to have it
 - b. Look at the don'ts when organizing
 - c. Emphasize following up with information
 - d. Encourage underclassmen to come and think about the planning for grad school
 - e. Work with a variety of departments and disciplines

- f. Understand how much work graduate school can be
 - g. Have younger faculty share graduate school experiences
2. Things that attendees thought they needed to keep in mind:
- a. Prepare early for exams
 - b. Do study for the exams
 - c. Take many practice exams
 - d. Take tests early if possible
 - e. Visit the campus of potential graduate schools
 - f. Get all offers in written detail from the institutions, not just verbal
 - g. Contact prospective school to ascertain more about how they regard the GRE score before you take it
 - h. Make sure you follow up with the grad school to see if they received all your material
 - i. Be persistent in follow up
 - j. Make sure you are communicating with your own faculty about wanting to go to graduate school. Work with them to prepare letters of recommendation.
 - k. Know what your grad school really wants
 - l. Ask for references early, give them a copy of your vita and strengths
 - m. Know when the exams are offered and where they can be taken
 - n. Look for resources to help you study. What does your library have?
 - o. Brush up on essay writing skills
 - p. Take advantage of mock interviews offered by your school's career services
 - q. Start saving money for tests and campus visits
 - r. Know if retaking a test will hurt you or help you
 - s. Start taking practice tests 6 months before you take the real one

Thank you!

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