

# Making the “Grade” in College

## Is College Worth It? Of Course It Is!

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*“Education is the best provision for life’s journey.”*

Aristotle

So much is made of the question “Is college worth it?” It is a silly question with a simple answer: *Yes*, absolutely it is. What you need to realize is that college is more than just an investment; it is an experience—and experiences are what you make of them. For the purposes of being transparent here, consider the following:

- Is college expensive? Yes, it can be very expensive.
- Will you go into debt after you graduate college? Likely; about two-thirds of students graduate with student loan debt.
- Are textbooks included in tuition costs? No, they typically are not.
- Are textbooks expensive? Yes, they are.
- Do college graduates earn more money on average than those who do not attend college? Yes, they do—they earn about two to three times more on average than a high school graduate.
- Will graduating college lead to a high-paying job? It can.
- Will graduating college lead to the job you want? It can.

The idea here is that yes, college is expensive, and yes, there is a risk that you will still find few job opportunities after earning your college degree. But the rule is that your degree can and will pay off. It is not a matter of whether college is worth it; it is a matter of whether you are prepared for such a big investment. After all, why spend so much time and money on an education if you do not have a plan? The reality is a college degree has the potential for a huge payoff. The ability to realize the potential

of your education will depend largely on how prepared you are for college in the first place.

For most degrees across all majors, the biggest payoffs can be realized if you pursue graduate school. While being in college is a great accomplishment, preparing for your next steps upon graduation may be even more important. Finding a path to graduate school requires a plan and the preparation needed to be competitive for applying to and being accepted into graduate programs for the field of study you choose. This book is largely your *plan* aimed at showing you how to create and realize opportunities available to you as an undergraduate—opportunities that can in turn help you stand out among your peers and be highly competitive for graduate programs. To begin, let's think about what it means to plan and prepare.

## Getting on the Path to Graduate School: Planning and Preparing

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*“By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail.”*

Benjamin Franklin

Going to college is a great idea—if you have a plan. Being prepared substantially increases the likelihood that you will find great success after college. Certainly, college is an investment; a college education is a *big* investment. Having a plan for college can be difficult because, in truth, the preparer (that would be you) has likely never experienced college and therefore is not entirely sure what to prepare for. You are not alone—many students struggle with how to prepare for college.

While you can have elaborate plans to prepare for college, we can start simply. There are three core questions you should answer right now. The first big question that you need to answer is:

- What do you want to be when you grow up?

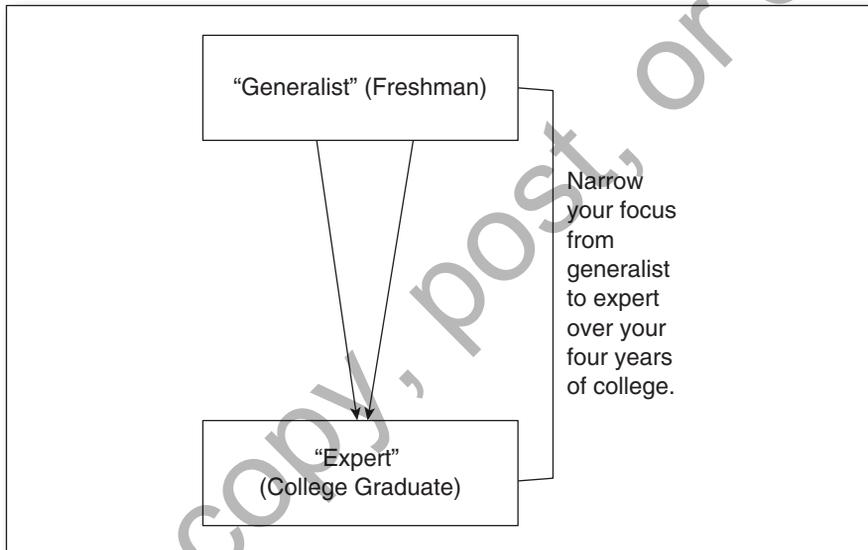
If you have already answered this question, then you are honestly ahead of the game—many college students have difficulty answering this question. However, you do not necessarily need to have the answer to this question before you go to college. If you do not know “what you want to be when you grow up,” then you will want to make it a priority in your first year of college to find the answer. The reason it is important to narrow your interests to specifically what you want to do after you graduate pertains, in part, to how the graduate school selection process works.

It is interesting that for most undergraduate schools, the selection process looks specifically at how diverse your skills are. For example, suppose a student applies to a college for a major in psychology. If the student has high grades in psychology but rather low grades in an unrelated subject like language, you may think that his or her high grades in psychology will carry a lot of weight. However, undergraduate selection committees will often prefer a student who can demonstrate high grades in all academic areas beyond just the major for which he or she is applying. To get into

competitive undergraduate schools, then, an applicant needs to be a “generalist”—he or she needs to show competency across multiple (often unrelated) academic subjects.

In contrast, to get into competitive graduate schools you need to be *focused*. If you want to pursue psychology, for example, then your strengths, activities, research, internships, academics, and more should be largely focused on that subject: psychology. Hence, you arrive to college as a “generalist”—you have general competencies across various academic subjects. However, as you progress through undergraduate school you will need to narrow or focus your competencies. In other words, the other end of college is to have an “expertise,” as it will be called once you have a degree to back it up! I will share a full plan in this book for accomplishing this. Figure 1.1 summarizes the basic aims of narrowing one’s focus.

**Figure 1.1** Develop expertise to demonstrate interest in a particular topic or academic subject.



In my view, the first question is the most important. If you do not know and/or have no plan to find the answer to this question in your first year of college, then college may not be worth the investment. Graduate schools, even employers, want to know that you have answered this basic question. Obvious evidence that you answered this question is to show a narrowed focus to demonstrate that you are interested in the particular area or discipline to which you are applying (for a job or for graduate school). Seeking an answer to the first question is essential if you want to be prepared to realize the potential of your education. However, there are two more basic questions you need to answer. The second question you need to answer now is:

- What are your priorities?

While teaching an introductory psychology course on the topic of motivation, I asked my students, “Why did you decide to go to college?” I was expecting answers

like “To get a degree” or “To learn.” However, the first response I received was not at all what I expected. Instead, one student in the front row was eager to give her response, and when I called upon her, she exclaimed, “To make friends!”

I understand that college should be fun. Certainly, have fun! That being said, you need to prioritize your time. “Making friends” is great, but paying tuition for the purpose of “making friends” is nonsense. Of course you know this, but it is also important to put this into practice. Have fun—responsible fun—after you take care of your work. In other words, get your work done first. If you have to sacrifice time out with friends, then that is what you will do. Make your schoolwork your priority. Don’t lose sight of the fact that you are attending college for the opportunities you gain by earning an education and eventually a degree. Honestly, it is in your best interest to keep your priorities straight; *you* gain the most by putting your work first.

Part of having a plan is realizing that how you perform in college will bear heavily on the opportunities available to you upon graduation. As you are fully aware, putting in the necessary time to learn and study is essential if you want to realize the potential of your education—it will be worth reminding yourself of this from time to time. There is no reason why you cannot have fun in college; just make sure that you keep your priorities straight along the way. The third question logically follows from the second question. The third question you need to answer now is:

- What grades will you aim to achieve?

Every once in a while I hear the phrase “Cs get the degrees.” While this phrase is generally true—a C average will earn you a degree—it is also true that a C average will almost certainly eliminate you from being accepted to a respected graduate school, or possibly to any graduate school. As a general rule: In a worst-case scenario, you should obtain at least a 2.8 grade point average (GPA) to even think about applying to (low-ranked) graduate schools. Such a GPA is a little higher than a B– average. Hence, Cs may “get the degrees,” but Cs do not get you into graduate school.

Using the GPA scale, your GPA ranges from 0.0 (F) to 4.0 (A). Some universities extend the GPA scale to 4.33 (A+), but most colleges conform to the standard 4.0 scale. This GPA scale is important because it is one key criterion used by all graduate schools to select candidates for a graduate program. For this reason, you should keep track of your GPA, which is fairly simple to do nowadays. Most colleges have a GPA calculator on their website. You can use the calculator to plan for ways to improve your GPA. As a general rule for getting into graduate schools, you should strive for A and B grades only, if possible. Also keep in mind that once you complete your degree, your GPA for that degree is basically set in stone—it cannot be changed once you accept your degree. So yes, grades must be important to you.

In college, it is also important to recognize that often “you take the professor, not the class.” In other words, one professor may teach a course at a very difficult level, whereas another professor may teach that same course at a much easier level. The result for two students in the same course who have the same level of mastery: The student in the more difficult course may have a lower grade. Therefore, sometimes

your GPA can reflect how much you learned, and other times it can reflect how “difficult” a professor was. In this way, realize that your GPA is an *estimate* of how well you have preformed in your classes. Many faculty members, particularly those at graduate schools, recognize that a 3.8 GPA, for example, may not mean the same thing at all colleges. Some students may have worked much harder to obtain their 3.8 GPA than others. For this reason, your GPA does not need to be perfect; but it should be high if you want to be competitive—how high it needs to be will depend on your goals for graduate school.

Throughout this book I will describe ways to help you improve your grades and create opportunities to help you achieve your goals. I will outline a plan for making your work and studying easier and also give you ideas to help you figure out what you want to pursue upon graduation. This book will help you find certainty in an otherwise uncertain endeavor. You will know how to answer these questions, and in the process devise a plan that can make you competitive for graduate schools, even at the doctorate level—right out of an undergraduate degree.

## Graduate School: A Career Path

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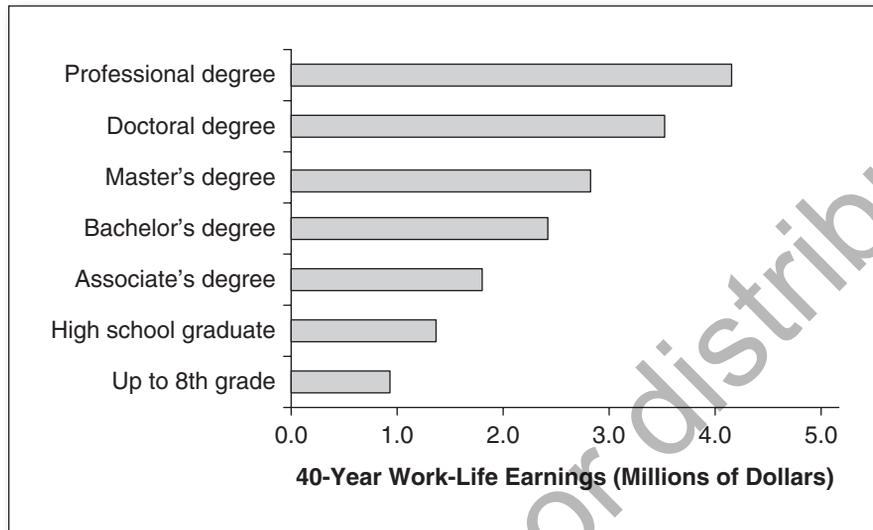
*“Nothing is really work unless you would rather be doing something else.”*

J. M. Barrie

Now, of course, with all of this talk of graduate school, a fair question is “Why go to graduate school in the first place?” There are two ways to answer this question. The traditional answer is to throw out some statistics. Why not?

Based on reports from the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), Figure 1.2 shows the expected earnings by degree across academic disciplines. Using data in the table, if you earn a bachelor’s degree, then you can expect to earn over a 40-year work life about \$1.1 million more than a person with a high school diploma—that is almost doubling your expected work-life salary. Earning a doctoral degree will pay out about \$2.2 million more than a high school diploma and about \$700,000 more than a bachelor’s degree. The highest total is for a professional degree (e.g., MD, JD), which will pay out over a 40-year work life about \$2.8 million more than a high school diploma, about \$1.7 million more than a bachelor’s degree, and about \$600,000 more than a doctoral degree. The full 2012 U.S. Census Bureau report for data on educational attainment and commensurate salaries can be found at [www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education](http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education).

The take-home message here is that a college degree has value in terms of money earned. The reason for higher earnings over your work life is that having a college degree creates job opportunities that would not otherwise be attainable. While being hired for one of these higher-paying jobs is likely competitive, you nonetheless can compete for these jobs because of your college degree. Keep in mind also that the earnings reported in the figure are *average* work-life earnings; so your college degree could potentially have even larger payoffs. Being prepared and having a clear plan can go a long way in helping you to achieve that larger payoff.

**Figure 1.2** Lifetime earnings increase with education level.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys, 2012.

While going to graduate school can substantially augment your income, there is yet another important reason why graduate school is a great option: to pursue a *career*. A career can be distinguished from a *job*. A job is a position of regular employment—that controls you. You go to work; you “clock in” and “clock out”; you are told what hours to work, what shifts to fill, what pay to receive. There is limited freedom in a job. The less education you have, the more likely it is that you will find a job. Jobs can certainly come with high-end salaries, but also often with frustration. Time off can be hard to get when you need it, schedules are often not flexible, and job security is often perceived as job insecurity. A job tends to provide little freedom to the worker.

A career, however, is a position of regular employment—that *you* control. That is not to say that a career cannot in some ways still “control you.” Yet, unlike a job, a career enables you to “build your résumé” and sell yourself to others. When you apply for career opportunities, it can be more exciting. You can have some control over the careers you pursue and opportunities you seek. You often have greater negotiating power in terms of salary. You often have greater flexibility in your work schedule, and have greater opportunity for growth and professional development. If they had to choose between a job and a career, I believe most people would choose to pursue a career. Going to college with a plan is the most viable way to take advantage of that opportunity.

There are certainly those who have found great success without a college degree. Some notable names include Bill Gates (Microsoft), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook, Inc.), Michael Dell (Dell, Inc.), Larry Ellison (Oracle Corporation), and Ralph Lauren (fashion designer). All of these accomplished men established careers that allowed them to amass billion-dollar fortunes without obtaining a college degree. However,

these men are the exception to the rule—I’m confident that even they would agree. Some billionaires who do not have a college education inherited their billions. And the majority of billionaires in the world—about 4 in every 5—have a college education. This statistic also holds true for millionaires: About 4 in every 5 millionaires are college graduates. Moreover, about 40% of college-educated millionaires have graduate-level degrees. Therefore, the undeniable truth is that if you want to find a path to success, then an education should be one of your stops along that path.

A career can be more rewarding because it is something you want to do, something you can master, something you can market, something that can give you more flexibility to work around other aspects of your life, such as family. As J. M. Barrie stated, “Nothing is really work unless you would rather be doing something else.” If a career is that “something” that you wish to pursue, then obtaining an education will likely be a necessary step in your pursuits.

## The Path to Graduate School

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*“You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself in any direction you choose. . . . You are the guy who’ll decide where to go.”*

Dr. Seuss

The “path” you choose in life should include a college education when you are ready to plan and prepare for it. And if you really want to bolster your opportunities for success, then that path will likely include graduate school. What is important to recognize up front is that you choose your path. As Dr. Seuss put it: “You are the guy [or girl] who’ll decide where to go.” You need to take responsibility for your own choices, which begins with the choices you make to pursue an education, and ultimately a career. Again, this is something you already know, but it can be worth reminding yourself from time to time. In many ways, it is knowing that your path is your responsibility that makes your time in college exciting—inasmuch as you play a substantial role in treading the ultimate path toward your own success.

As you tread your path, keep in mind that your path is set only after you have lived it. It can be easy to get discouraged from time to time as you continue your journey through college. You may earn bad grades in a class, be turned down for an internship or other opportunity, lose friends or family, or get nervous about whether the major you are in is “right for you.” These experiences may teach you something about yourself or lead to an epiphany that causes you to change your goals, switch direction—reroute your path. You need to realize that plans can change . . . and changing your plans can mean changing the direction of the path you take to reach your goals.

This book will provide a guide for how to reach the goal of being competitive for graduate schools by providing a full plan that is laid out to allow you to “map out” your own path to success. The lesson here is to map out your path in pencil, but be prepared to use your eraser. You must be willing to “adapt to and overcome” the challenges ahead, be prepared to make changes as needed, and be able to

recognize that many paths can lead to your success. For example, note that in Chapter 9 I describe opportunities that can arise from acceptance and from rejection from graduate schools. Rejection is not the end of the road; it is where you can create alternative routes to the same success. In this spirit, keep your head up and look forward. No matter how often you “use the eraser,” there is almost always a route you can tread to find your path to success.

## Clearing the “Fog of War”

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*“It is best to learn wisdom by the experience of others.”*

Latin Proverb

In truth, by preparing for graduate school, you are preparing for something you have never experienced. To help you prepare for graduate school, it would be useful to know what graduate schools are looking for and to identify how you can be competitive for admittance into these graduate schools. What may be most insightful is to sit in on a graduate school selection committee meeting, to listen to the questions being asked, to take note of the criteria for selection, and to identify with the interests of the members of the committee. There is always some uncertainty stemming from not knowing exactly what is being considered among those selecting candidates for graduate programs. Conditions of uncertainty are referred to as the “fog of war.”

*Fog of war* is a term used in the military to describe the experience of soldiers and Marines in war. A battle or firefight is unpredictable, and it is often thought that it is the unpredictability that is most stressful to those who fight these battles. In a similar but much safer way, it is the “not knowing” that can be most stressful for college students: not knowing what graduate schools want, not knowing how to prepare for graduate school, not knowing what you need to be competitive. This book will help to reduce the uncertainty or “clear the fog” by providing a detailed step-by-step guide for following a path to make you competitive for graduate schools. In this way, this book will reveal the process so that you can focus on reaching your goals and not worry so much about *how* to reach your goals.

## A Look Inside a Graduate School Selection Committee Meeting: Imparting a New Perspective

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*“No two persons ever read the same book.”*

Edmund Wilson

One way to “clear the fog” is to take a look inside a graduate school selection committee meeting to get a perspective from the selection point of view. In this section, I will describe a graduate school selection committee meeting, based on

my own experiences in such meetings. The meeting described here is meant to give you insights into what is actually being discussed in these meetings—however, of course, know that many factors can and will be different from one school to another and from one meeting to another.

Very early in my career I got my first glimpse into how decisions are made by graduate schools. What I saw in that process was not entirely expected. It forced me to reconsider the kind of advice I give to students. It was a truly revealing experience that imparted to me one important lesson among many: Getting into graduate school is not about your interests; it’s about how *your* interests (the applicant) match *their* interests (the graduate school). Not every point made in the meeting I describe will come up with all graduate school selection committees, but these points can, do, and are likely to come up. Being able to anticipate what topics may be discussed in a selection committee meeting and how you can preemptively address possible concerns can give you a competitive advantage over those who do not realize they should even address certain issues. The following is my experience on one such committee for the selection of candidates to a PhD program in psychology.

### The “Cutoff” Criteria

As the submission deadline passed to apply to our graduate program, I anticipated reviewing many applications. What I soon realized was that a lot of my work would be done for me. When the secretary received all the applications, her first job was to eliminate all applicants whose GPA and standardized exam scores did not meet the minimum requirements. Thus, applicants who did not meet our minimum requirements were not even considered.

The more interesting part is that for the rest of the selection process, “grades” were rarely brought up. In other words, students’ “grades” were an all-or-nothing criterion—either the applicants had the grades required by the school, or they did not. The selection committee did not spend much time quibbling over the difference between a 3.7 and a 3.8 GPA, for example. Once the school agreed that an applicant’s grades were good enough, that was the end of the discussion. The main focus shifted to everything else in the application. I couldn’t help but think about all those students who worked so hard to get high GPAs—if only they knew how little time we spent talking about their grades. Their grades got them considered, but it was largely the rest of their application upon which decisions to select or reject them were ultimately made.

### The Letters of Intent

As we gathered to review the applications, I was interested to see how the other committee members prioritized the application materials. I recalled thinking as a student that nobody actually reads the full graduate school application, but I quickly learned that I was wrong. In truth, one part of the application—a part that I thought nobody read—quickly arose as being among the most important application materials: the letter of intent. The letter of intent is sometimes called a cover letter

or a statement of interest, or can be given other names as well. Ultimately, these are letters in which you describe who you are and your intentions for graduate school. Some have word limits of 300 to 500 words; others can be up to five pages or more. These letters can be critically important in the final decisions made by graduate schools. For this reason, I devote an entire chapter to showing you how to write these letters in Chapter 6.

Of course, we reviewed the quality of the applicants' writing. However, our review of the letters was much more detailed than that, as will be addressed in greater depth in Chapter 6. Among the additional criteria evaluated in the letters of intent were the two criteria listed next: scholarly matching and geographic matching.

### *Scholarly Matching*

Our selection committee considered the extent to which the applicants' interests fit with (1) the goals or aims of the graduate program and (2) the interests of the faculty members, particularly their research interests. Faculty members who oversee graduate programs usually have a program of research or an applied program of study, and thus prefer to accept graduate students who share their interests. In the selection committee meeting, many strong candidates expressed interest in an area of research that did not specifically fit with the interests of our faculty or the graduate program; these applicants were eliminated. On the other side, many less qualified applicants expressed an interest in research that was specifically being done at our school; these applicants rose to the top. Hence, students who expressed their interests, without concern for the interests of those at the school, were largely eliminated. However, applicants who expressed interests that matched the interests of the faculty or school rose to the top—even if their grades were good, but “middle-of-the-pack.”

### *Geographic Matching*

A surprising criterion was to identify if the committee “thought” an applicant wanted to actually live in the area. We asked, “Do we think an applicant will like it here?” Keep in mind that graduate schools want to select candidates who will not only be a good fit, but also want to stay. Often, schools are located in unique parts of the country or are surrounded with unique culture. If an applicant did not express his or her interest in or intent for living in the area, then that applicant was likely to be eliminated, particularly if the applicant was not already a top candidate.

## **The “Will They Come Here?” Criteria**

As the selections were narrowed, we placed the top names on a board. The impression in the room was that any of the top picks were good to choose. Now the question was whether or not the applicant, if accepted, would actually come to our

school, even if another school accepted him or her. This was a particular concern for the best-qualified applicants—those likely to receive multiple acceptance letters. If applicants did not directly identify our school as one of their top choices, then they left themselves open to allow the selection committee to “figure out” where they stood on this. Many applicants did not receive acceptance letters, in part, because the committee felt that they would not come, if accepted.

### The “Did They Show Excitement?” Criteria

The selection committee then followed up in phone interviews with top applicants whom they liked. Such impromptu phone calls, or quasi-interviews, are difficult to prepare for because the reason for the call is really almost impossible to know for sure. The protocol for making phone calls was to call a candidate to see if he or she expressed excitement about being called. The key feedback from our meetings was that the more excited the applicant was or the more interest he or she expressed during the phone call, the more excited the committee member was to select the applicant. Yes, the biggest criterion of the phone interviews was less the content of the call, and more the impression the applicant left regarding his or her excitement or interest in our school.

### The “Did They Get Along?” Criteria

As a final phase, many graduate schools will bring students in for group or individual interviews—we brought students in as a group. Of course, only the top candidates were invited for an interview, and the interviews were set up so that much of the applicants’ time was spent with the graduate students in the program. Part of the criteria in these interviews was how well the applicants got along with the graduate students and faculty. After all, the applicants selected to the program will work for the faculty and be fellow graduate students, so they need to be able to work together. Hence, these interviews were, in part, an elaborate social-personality test. In our final discussions, we specifically addressed if we felt that any of the applicants *may* be difficult to work with. Feedback from graduate students was a key criterion for determining this answer.

The committee met on a few occasions during that spring semester, and decision letters were sent out around March. What struck me, and should strike you, is how so much of the selection process is qualitative. It is based, in part, on how your interests match those of researchers or programs at the graduate school, how willing you are to live in the area, how excited you are to join the graduate program, and how well you get along with others in an interview. Getting accepted to graduate schools can take a lot more than just grades. As a general rule, the key to gaining acceptance into graduate schools is to tell the story you want graduate schools to read—and this book will share the detailed steps you can take to tell that story to be competitive at any graduate level.

Please revisit this section after you finish each subsequent section in this book to try to connect what you have learned to what is described here. Test your new

knowledge to see how you can apply the lessons and steps in this book to address the concerns of a graduate school selection committee. Of course, the criteria shared here will not be the same for all schools, but it is a safe bet that addressing these criteria can go a long way in ensuring that you are most competitive when it comes time to apply. In the final chapter of this book, I will revisit this graduate school selection committee meeting to identify how this book addressed the criteria described here.

## Making the Graduate School Plan Work for Traditional and Nontraditional Students

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*“The greatest accomplishment began as a decision once made and often a difficult one.”*

Michael Rawls

To help guide your journey in college and to help you prepare to compete for graduate schools, the freshman- to senior-year plan given in Section II is organized into 16 comprehensive goals, collectively referred to here as the “Sweet Sixteen.” Each goal that is listed is spread across your four academic years: freshman (5), sophomore and junior (7), and senior (4) years. For reference, each goal that is described in Section II is listed here in Table 1.1. Keep a copy of these goals on you and use it as a checklist to track your progress and success in college.

While the goals are listed by academic year, keep in mind that these same goals can be achieved much more quickly. For example, maybe you are a junior transfer student or a nontraditional student who is finishing up college or starting college for the first time. If you are picking up this book for the first time, then rest assured that the goals and how to achieve them have no absolute timeline. The goals for Year 1 mostly include tips and steps you can take to find a career path—to answer the all-important question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” You can research this in weeks, or take your entire freshman year if you are a traditional student. The goals for Years 2 and 3 provide many ways to find and gain opportunities that will impress most graduate schools. You can start taking advantage of these opportunities immediately, or you can follow the timeline organized in this book.

The truth is that many students are not certain of their career path. Therefore, this plan for getting into graduate school is written so that traditional students at four-year colleges can lay out this plan over four years to achieve their ultimate goal of getting into graduate school. The layout of the plan is meant to give a realistic timeline for any student—whether it is a student who confidently knows his or her career path or a student who needs some help finding his or her career path. But that is not to say that the plan must be spread across a four-year span. You can lay out this plan along any timeline you choose—you can take advantage of the tips and suggestions in this book at any time.

**Table 1.1** The “Sweet Sixteen”: 16 Key Goals for the Freshman-to-Senior-Year Plan Given in Section II of This Book

<b>Freshman Year: Find a Direction</b>	
1	Get acquainted (with the college and resources available).
2	Know your major requirements (so that you can <i>plan</i> to graduate).
3	Find good study habits (that you can use throughout college).
4	Meet friends; choose carefully (surround yourself with supporters).
5	Choose your career path (and stay committed to it).
<b>Sophomore and Junior Years: Pursue Opportunities</b>	
6	Get connected (to establish professional contacts).
7	Pursue scholarship (and apply for scholarships).
8	Find opportunities to present and publish (if possible).
9	Pursue activities and international studies (to show an interest in your field).
10	Write a résumé or curriculum vitae (and revise it as you go).
11	Keep track of your GPA.
12	Prepare to take the GRE or other standardized exams.
<b>Senior Year: Select Schools and Complete Applications</b>	
13	Search for graduate schools and be realistic.
14	Request letters of recommendation and follow up.
15	Complete all parts of each graduate school application.
16	Apply on time and communicate effectively with schools.

Moreover, the goals for Year 4 will be useful for any student in the process of applying to graduate school. These goals identify the steps for applying to graduate school. To support the goals for Year 4, Section III is entirely dedicated to showing you exactly how to complete key parts of the graduate school application, with templates and samples provided based on those written by students recently accepted to graduate- and doctorate-level programs across the country. The takeaway message is that no matter what year of undergraduate school you are in, this book will provide invaluable insights into how to be competitive for graduate school, and how to effectively apply to graduate schools. Whether you choose to lay out this plan over four years, as described in this book, or to move more quickly is your choice—either way you can take advantage of the insights in this book to achieve your goals.

## Making the Plan Work for You

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*“To change one’s life: Start immediately.”*

William James

Regardless of the timeline you follow to pursue the “Sweet Sixteen” goals in this plan, it should be apparent that competing to get into graduate school is less about being qualified and more about how much you stand out among the applicants who are just as qualified as you are. This plan was therefore written to show you how to stand out among all those qualified applicants, not simply fit in among them. Being more than qualified is more attainable than you may recognize. Realize that most students do not even know what they need to do to be competitive. Having this book, and following this plan, can therefore help you gain a competitive advantage. The plan in this book will do more than just tell you what you need to do—it will show you *how* to do it with templates and examples given throughout the book.

Of course, you need to be cautious in deciding whether college is right for you. Having fun is certainly part of college, but you need to be ready to work hard as well. You need to be prepared to put in the time to prepare, study, and pursue opportunities beyond just coursework. Certainly you will find many useful tips and resources to help you achieve your goals for becoming competitive for graduate school. However, it is you who need to take action; you need to realize your own success. Take responsibility for what you can control, and trust in those who can help you along the way.

The title of this chapter refers to making the “grade.” Making the grade refers to many aspects of college beyond your GPA or test scores. To make the grade you need to find a direction (Chapter 3), pursue opportunities (Chapter 4), apply to graduate schools (Chapter 5), know how to complete the application process (Section III), and know how to plan for next steps (Section IV). Thus, making the grade in college is about doing the right things to be competitive. Whether you plan to pursue a master’s or a doctoral degree program upon graduation, this book will help you be competitive in your pursuits. Be confident in yourself and know that with this book and these resources as a guide, you can find your own success; you can make the grade.