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Featured Article

What Makes a Good Statement of Purpose for Graduate School? Part I

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The statement of purpose is a critical part of the application process for graduate school. Three experienced admissions officials from Harvard, NYU, and Yale offer their thoughts and wisdom on writing a great statement of purpose.

Career Center (CC): How important is the statement of purpose in the overall application process?

David P. Giovannella (DG), New York University, Graduate School of Arts & Science, Graduate Enrollment Services - The statement of purpose is one of the most important parts, if not the most important part, of the application.

Gregg Glover (GG), Associate Director of Admissions, Harvard Graduate School of Education - For our process at HGSE, it is very important. We often announce that it's the most important single item in an applicant's application. The essay can make or break a person's chances for admission, which is probably true at most schools. We are not test score driven in our process, so the statement takes on much more weight. Remember, the statement is the only part of the process that you have complete control over: you cannot change your GPA, or create the content of your letters of reference, but you can determine the finished product of your statement.

Dr. Liza Cariaga-Lo (LCL), Assistant Dean, Yale Graduate School of Arts and Sciences - The personal statement is very important, as it is often (in cases where there is no interview requirement) the only opportunity for the student to share information about themselves that they think is relevant to their pursuit of graduate study.

CC: What are you looking for in the statement of purpose?

DG - NYU: It should be typed. The applicant should outline their goals and aspirations. Present information chronologically, and show your writing skills and style.

GG - Harvard: The statement of purpose should demonstrate excellence in writing and clarity of thinking. It functions as a writing sample, often the only one you submit. Make it as solid a piece of writing as possible. It can also function as your interview if none is required. It is a chance to introduce yourself and describe who you are, what your background is, and what is important to you.

Perhaps more importantly, the statement is an opportunity for an applicant to describe his or her purpose in pursuing graduate study. Why this school, and/or this specific program? What are your reasons for graduate study? What is your plan in pursuing this degree? In the statement we look to see how well the candidate knows the school and justifies their reasons for studying there.

Another way to think about it is to consider "focus and fit": are your interests in graduate study focused, and is there a good fit with your interests and the particular program or school? This requires carefully researching the school or program to which you are applying. Read about the program's emphasis, the nature of the required courses, the work or research of its faculty. The more you know about the program to which you are applying, the better. You will sound more knowledgeable and more convincing in your essay.

Admissions committees at our school are trying to determine what the school or specific program can offer to the applicant, and what the applicant can potentially offer in return. It's a two way street: do we have what the applicant wants and needs? If admitted, how will this person contribute to our community? The essay allows you to express this. We also look for an applicant's commitment to the field of education, and the statement of purpose is an excellent place for an applicant to describe what fuels that commitment and where the source of his or her passions lie.

For essays to research-based doctoral programs, it's important to remember the following issues: Have you clearly articulated your potential research interests? Have you determined if the particular department, or specific faculty members in it, can support your research? We prefer that our doctoral applicants identify potential faculty with whom they might work to produce the dissertation. This requires you to carefully research the scholarly interests of the faculty and to clearly think through your own research ideas. You do not have to identify your specific dissertation questions, but it is important to focus your interests and argue that you will be

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well supported.

LCL - Yale: The goal of the statement of purpose is to provide (concisely, thoughtfully and in a well-organized, easy to read format) information about the student's path to pursuing graduate study in this particular field. The statement should cover the following areas: (1) his/her motivation for applying to graduate school, (2) relevant experiences and academic coursework that have prepared him/her for graduate study in the field, (3) characteristics and strengths that make him/her particularly well-suited to graduate study in the discipline and within the graduate program he/she is applying to, (4) academic plan for graduate study, (5) future career objectives, and (6) extenuating circumstances that may have resulted in less than ideal academic credentials for graduate school.

CC: What would you consider red flags?

DG - NYU: It's a red flag when the statement is not typed, not well thought out, or an edited statement designed for another school.

GG - Harvard: Poor grammar and usage in an essay certainly signal a red flag to admissions committees, as does an inappropriate fit with program. It's not a good sign if the applicant demonstrates little knowledge of program or school, or worse, names another school in the essay by mistake! Presentation matters: have others read the essay for grammar and ideas.

Similarly, if an applicant demonstrates a lack of relevant experience, sounds naïve, inexperienced, or unfocused and unprepared for graduate study in an essay, it can hinder his or her application. For doctoral essays, poor articulation of research interests can also hurt an applicant's chances.

LCL - Yale: Too much personal information that is not directly relevant to why you want to pursue graduate study in a discipline area (e.g., lengthy stories about your childhood), unexplained gaps in a student's educational pathway, and demonstrated lack of understanding about a particular field or the program/institution you are applying to (e.g., making naïve or erroneous remarks regarding research) are all red flags.

Look for Part II next week when our experts will answer the following questions:

What should you not include in the statement?

How personal should you get?

How should you deal with discrepancies in your record (grades, test scores, etc.)?



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