

PLAN B: How to Get Into Graduate School with a “Low” G.P.A.

Although there are a variety of factors that inter-play in the graduate admissions process (see: www.grad.berkeley.edu/admissions/application_tips.shtml for a detailed guide.) Most top-ranked graduate programs typically prefer a GPA of 3.5 or better. Exceptions to this rule occur, of course, but many students give up their quest to attend graduate school due to a low (3.0 or less) GPA. While there is no guarantee that you can attend graduate school with a sub 3.0 GPA, following some of the suggestions below might improve your chances.

A. Before Graduating:

1. Try to achieve good grades in the remaining classes in your major, upper division classes or classes in your intended area of graduate study. Repeat poor grades if possible, even if it requires an extra semester of study. At Berkeley, students can directly substitute 12 units of coursework with the new grades which can greatly affect the resulting GPA. You may need to drop a few extra-curricular activities in order to devote more time to studying. Go to faculty/GSI office hours and ask more in-depth, dedicated questions of the material so that you understand it better, create a study group and get tutoring help if necessary.

Graduate Admissions committees will pay attention to an upswing in your grades, or a definitive turn-around. You can mention this in your statement of purpose, even note the specific higher GPA(s) for each subsequent years/semesters showing the turn-around. You could, if applicable, state: “Although my overall GPA is X, the GPA I obtained during my last two years of study, a 3.7, is a better indication of my potential for graduate school success.” Perhaps you became newly excited about the field and your improved grades reflect this. I have seen plenty of students go from average grades their first two years, to obtaining primarily A’s their latter years and subsequently get admitted to top graduate school programs. Make sure to let your faculty recommenders know about your turn-around.

2. Acquiring research experience can greatly enhance a student’s acceptance into graduate school. Having a “low” GPA does not exclude you from doing research. See if you can get involved in undergraduate research either on your own campus through a formal research program or at a formal research program at another campus. You can also pursue an independent study with a faculty member at your home institution. You more than likely will be volunteering to assist with a research project, but you may be able to receive academic credit for conducting research during the school year. I do, however, strongly recommend “doing your homework” before approaching a professor about conducting research. Below are tips on obtaining research experience in an independent study with a faculty member:
 - Consider what topics you are interested in and look up the research interests of faculty on campus. (Search the department web sites.)
 - Go to their CV’s or bios, and look up some of their recent publications.
 - Read two or three publications and see what topics are of most interest to you.
 - Make an appointment to speak to the faculty member.

- Tell him/her very briefly that you've investigated their work, read several of their articles/books (name them), indicating what you found especially interesting.
 - Ask the faculty member what they're currently working on. Keep in mind, that even the most recent publications are minimally one to two years old. Take notes.
 - Respond positively to what you're interested in.
 - Ask the faculty member if there is any possibility of assisting them on a current project.
 - You may be asked about your skills or previous research experience. If you haven't had previous research experience, indicate your interest in the subject and willingness to learn.
 - Tell the faculty member the number of hours you could commit to. Make sure to state only what you can realistically do. Work hard, stay in touch with professors, report your progress, results, new skills you've learned to conduct more in-depth analyses, etc.
3. Standardized Exams: Do well on the GRE (or GMAT, LSAT, MCAT, as appropriate). If possible, take a test preparation course as it will generally help you perform better. Or buy a book to help you prepare. They are relatively inexpensive. Make sure to take practice tests to help you prepare for the exam ahead of time. It is also a good idea to ask other people who have take the GRE (etc.) about their experience. Ask for tips and strategies. Prepare for these tests seriously, but don't let the test intimidate you. Proper preparation will boost your score and increase your confidence. You can take the GRE, etc. a second time, which may enable you to achieve a better score.
 4. Work on your writing skills. Take an extra class to increase your skills. A well written statement of purpose will better impress graduate admission reviewers. Later on down the road, possessing good writing skills will enable you to complete papers, thesis's, grant proposals, articles and books in stellar fashion. Writing is such an important skill, that no matter the discipline, you can never go wrong by improving your ability to communicate.
 5. If you are a re-entry student, or had a break in your education, think about the skills you acquired and what you learned while not in school. These may contribute to your knowledge base and given positive regard by future admissions committees.

B. After Graduating:

1. If you're interested in obtaining a Ph.D. you may need to complete a Master's degree first before being admitted to a Ph.D. program.
 - Try to get admitted into the best Master's program in the area you're interested in, preferably with a research/ thesis component. Obtain good grades, aim for straight A-s. You will need a 3.5 GPA or higher to get into more high-ranking Ph.D. programs. It's important, however to try not to enroll in Master's programs where you will incur excessive debt. This may limit what Ph.D. program you subsequently can attend. Consider applying across the state *and* out of state to maximize your options.
 - Complete a thesis you're proud of, as you'll be speaking about your thesis work later in your statement of purpose when you apply to Ph.D. programs.
 - You'll need letters of recommendation from professors at the Master's level, so get to know these professors well.

2. Take classes as non-matriculating student at a nearby university that offers course credit. (Go to the best university possible.) You will not receive financial aid for these courses, so plan wisely. My recommendations on how to proceed are as follows:
 - If possible, speak to the Chair of Graduate Admissions at the universities you're interested in attending. Typically, this is a faculty member in charge of graduate admissions for that particular department). Ask what classes you might take as a non-matriculating student through concurrent enrollment that would increase your potential for graduate admission. Concurrent enrollment is the ideal way to take these courses, as you will be in the same classes with matriculating students. Plan to take these courses over the next year or two. You may need to take only one or two classes, or it could be as many as three to five. The courses that may be suggested might be graduate level courses. Try to obtain "A" grades. Consider dropping the class if you're getting a B. Most graduate programs require students to obtain 3.5 GPA's, so faculty may discredit your graduate school potential if you obtain B grades. Stay in contact with the department (periodically contact the faculty member you spoke to and inform them of your progress).
 - If you can't speak to the Chair of Graduate Admissions prior to signing up for classes as a non-matriculating student, take foundational classes (upper division or graduate), in the area you're interested in studying.
 - If you need to work to support yourself while taking these additional classes, you will probably have to negotiate taking them with your supervisor, as you may be taking classes on campus with regularly enrolled students during day-time business hours.
 - Again, get to know the professors in these classes so they can hopefully write good letters of recommendation for you when you ultimately apply to grad school.
 - Perhaps, once you do well in a class, the professor may be open to having you conduct research with them. Again, you will more than likely be volunteering as a researcher, but it'll be worth it. Try to become an essential component to the research team. Acquiring research in this capacity is highly regarded by many faculty, as you're learning new skills, obtaining advanced knowledge, and showing commitment to future study.

3. Other ways to distinguish yourself academically.
 - Volunteer to conduct research with a faculty member from your alma mater. (Make sure to do the same "homework" stated in section A, 2.)
 - Participate in an internship where you work on an academically focused project such as data acquisition, grant proposals, research assistant, or artistic activities (if applicable to future goals). This work will more than likely be unpaid, but again, will be worth the effort. Consider looking into social service agencies, non-profit programs, publishing companies, etc. Speak to former advisors, the career center, or faculty for suggestions. Prepare a resume with a cover letter expressing your skills, interests, and plans.
 - Take classes to increase your skills in areas that need improvement, especially those in your field of interest.
 - Find an academic mentor who might guide you through the Plan B process of getting into graduate school.
 - Reach out to current graduate students in your area of study and their advice. Don't be afraid to ask questions.