Strengthening Your Application for Graduate Admission to UC Berkeley

The following is a list of suggestions that if followed closely, will strengthen your application in the competitive process of graduate admissions to UC Berkeley and other programs.

1. Plan ahead
Research the colleges and universities where you would like to apply, focusing on the best programs that are the right match pertinent to your academic interests and personal needs. Find out if any of the faculty are doing research in an area that interests you. Go on-line or call the University for application and information materials. Double-check the deadlines (most programs will not accept late applications). Some schools have two deadlines: a fellowship deadline, which is earlier, and a later general application deadline. Make sure you apply before the first deadline if you wish to be considered for university fellowships. In general, you should consider applying to a minimum of five schools. Ideally, you want to obtain the right match of the university, and the faculty you wish to work with.

2. Letter of Recommendation
For graduate study, letters of recommendation are extremely important. Admission committees usually prefer letters from faculty since they believe only faculty can truly ascertain your scholarly potential. You need three letters of recommendation. Try to get all three from faculty with whom you’ve had an upper-division class, or have done research with. Some graduate programs require related work/internship experience, and you may need one or two letters from these entities in addition to one or two from faculty.

Professors will invariably state your class grade in the letter, so use caution when choosing your evaluators. Approach the faculty member and ask her/him if they are able to write a positive letter of recommendation for you. If they hesitate, or say they can only write a neutral letter, approach someone else.

Provide the evaluators with additional material such as copies of your transcript, resume, your statement of purpose, and personal statement (which should provide information about any pertinent personal history). This can strengthen the letter they write for you. Make sure to give them all the proper forms and deadlines. Follow up with a note of thanks.

3. GRE
The most common test required for entrance into graduate school is the general aptitude (Quantitative, Analytical, and Verbal) component of the GRE. The general GRE exam is offered throughout the year online.

- You can buy GRE study guides and exams at bookstores or online.
- Your GRE score will improve if you take the practice examinations in a timed format mimicking real testing conditions.
- Order the software/practice tests from ETS to better prepare for the computer administered test. Go to http://www.ets.org/gre.
- Many students suggest taking the practice exam on the computer, as it improves preparation for the actual test.
- Consider taking a test preparation class to help with test-taking strategies.
- Don’t randomly guess answers. Make calculated guesses that will narrow your choices.

The Analytical portion of the GRE is in essay format. You will be asked to write two essays on certain topics. Focus on an analytical response, backing up what you’re “arguing” with logic and analysis. The Quantitative section of the GRE is considered of greatest importance to admission committees in sciences and engineering. It is expected that scientists and engineers should do well on this section. There is no calculus on this test.

The GRE subject test is not required for the majority of those applying to Berkeley, however some departments, such as Math, English, Biology and Physics. Make sure you check with the department you’re applying to as to whether it’s required. The subject test is paper based and only offered three times per year. Most graduate programs take the exam results very seriously. Those departments requiring subject tests will weigh them more heavily than the general exam. Don’t let the GRE intimidate you. Studying ahead of time will prepare you well and reduce anxiety.
4. Your College GPA
The college GPA is a critical component of the admissions process. A satisfactory scholastic average, usually a minimum GPA of 3.0 is required by UC Berkeley for admission, though typically, the cut-off for most departments is higher. (Exceptions can possibly occur depending on circumstances.) Many admissions committees will consider upward trends in grades. However, the better your GPA, the better your chances of getting admitted. Careful attention should be paid to any courses taken at the undergraduate level that are pertinent to the area you are considering for graduate study. If you are admitted to a non-terminal Master’s program you may be able to continue toward the Ph.D. pending passage of the preliminary examination and have at least a 3.5 graduate GPA.

5. Research/Work Experience
During summer, or the academic year, try to gain research experience in an independent study with a professor or research program. This will give you an edge in the admission process, provide you with insight about your own future research interests, and augment your knowledge and skills. Professors in all disciplines often regard students as highly motivated when they partake in research as undergraduates.

6. Statement of Purpose
The statement of purpose is one of the most important parts of the application process. It is from this essay that the admissions committee will discern the seriousness of your intentions, your experience, and your motivation for graduate school. Think of the statement of purpose as a composition with three different parts. The first part is a brief paragraph stating the program you want to study and your research focus. The second part should be a summary of your college experiences. Briefly describe what brought about your interest in graduate study. Describe any research experience, clarifying your responsibilities, experimental results, and if you presented the findings at a conference or published them in a journal. You may be as specific as possible, as professors in your discipline will read this statement. The third and most important part of the essay discuss why you want to go to graduate school, what you wish to study (research), and ideally, whom you would like to work with. Perhaps you wish to address an issue or topic that hasn’t been addressed before, or expand an undergraduate research project. Professors are looking for students with scholarly potential, intellectual passion, and serious intentions about graduate study.

7. Personal Statement
Indicate any challenges, hardships or obstacles you may have overcome. (We look at this as a sign of perseverance.) Let us know if you’ve supported yourself through school, if you’re a first generation college student, took on a leadership position, tutored or mentored underrepresented students, or took advantage of unique opportunities.

8. Financial Support
Make sure you apply for graduate admission by the university’s fellowship deadline. This insures that you will be considered for various university fellowships. Apply for any other private, national, or corporate based fellowships. You should also fill out the FAFSA to receive consideration for loans and other aid. For more information regarding other fellowships, go to http://grad.berkeley.edu/financial/.

9. Suggestions
If you need to submit a writing sample in your application, use a great paper you’ve written, checked for grammar and content.

Once you are admitted, visit the campus if possible, and speak to current graduate students. Ask them why they chose that particular university.

Be on time; be organized, prepared, and thorough. No application to any university will be processed unless all materials are in by the deadline. All application materials are usually available in September.

Following these guidelines will strengthen your application to Berkeley and any other graduate school you wish to attend.

Good Luck!