

It's not (all) about you

Smiling through the interrogation of an online Ph.D. admission interview, a woman of color confidently answered questions posed by three men huddled around a laptop. I sat behind them, observing as a researcher studying the admissions process. In my view, she handled their questions brilliantly—stressing her qualifications and articulating creative research ideas. But the next week, when her application came up in committee deliberations, the decision to reject her was swift and unanimous. I was shocked. One faculty member commented, “Ugh, I wondered if she’d ever stop smiling.” Another replied, “No kidding. Too much sunshine, not enough gravitas.”

I’ve worked in and studied graduate admissions for almost 20 years, and perhaps the most fundamental misconception is that the best applicants win. The truth is that what counts as an “ideal” applicant is a moving target. The process can be unfair—even unjust. Practical considerations also play a role, starting with the reality that programs have limited funding and advising capacity. Either way, the reasons for rejection are often as much about the professors and programs as they are about the applicants. Here are some scenarios I’ve witnessed.

FACULTY HOLD BIASES. Outcomes of graduate admissions can be especially unpredictable for students from marginalized groups. For example, gender bias no doubt contributed to the rejection of the woman whose interview I observed more than 10 years ago; her friendly persona didn’t comport with the panel’s idea of “gravitas.” Bias is a major, multifaceted problem—which is why faculty should reflect on and discuss their admissions priorities, learn what current research says about selection and bias, and develop shared standards.

THE FIT WAS OFF. I have been on committees put in the uncomfortable position of rejecting applicants with stellar grades, mountains of research experience, and powerful personal statements—simply because their research interests didn’t align with the specific, immediate needs of a faculty member. Applicants can help their chances by clearly articulating how their interests and experiences match those of prospective advisers.

IT WAS ABOUT THE COHORT. Great applicants are often rejected because faculty are thinking not only about individual students, but also the cohort they want to enroll.



“In admissions, like any game, you will win some and lose some.”

It’s common to want “balance”—groups of admitted students that are diverse on many dimensions, including their social identities and research interests. Applicants don’t know and can’t control who else has applied, but they unwittingly affect one another’s odds.

COMMITTEES CAN BE RISK AVERSE. I once observed an admissions committee decline an applicant from a top-ranked university who had seven first-authored publications under his belt. The faculty were so convinced he’d be admitted to a higher ranked program that they didn’t want to take a chance by giving him an offer. Instead they accepted applicants they thought were more likely to attend. It underscores

why applicants should only apply to programs where they can make a compelling case for their interest.

THEY DON’T WANT TO FIGHT. If two professors are keen to advise the same applicant and there are no structures for coadvising, then professors may protect their relationship with each other by simply rejecting the applicant rather than fighting about it. Collegiality is a virtue in academia, but it doesn’t always benefit students.

Admissions decisions involve more than a judgment of an applicant’s worth and potential. If you’re among the thousands of prospective graduate students who receive rejection letters each year, perhaps these insights into the process can help you reframe rejection. It’s natural to be frustrated, but keep in mind that in admissions, like any game, you will win some and lose some. Keep playing! ■

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