

Five Things You Need to Know before Applying to Business School

Getting into business school is no easy task; in fact, it may well be one of the toughest things you do in your entire life. However, if you want to make it there are five things you need to know before applying; keep these simple instructions in mind and your trek to the bright future you deserve becomes a whole lot smoother.

To start with, you need to understand how business schools decide who gets in – and who gets left out in the cold. As a rule, business schools look at three things when assessing applicants: their GPA as undergraduates; their GMAT scores; and their previous work experience. What sort of GPA will get you considered for biz school? That answer really depends upon the institution, but it is widely understood that business schools prefer students who have GPAs of at least 3.5. As for desirable GMAT scores, the big thing is that schools invariably look for applicants who score between 500 and 600 (700 is usually the cut-off) for each and every section; if you are not well-rounded, you can forget about getting in. Finally, when it comes to work experience, it clearly never hurts to have previously held job positions that demand leadership skills, interpersonal skills and problem-solving skills (Kuther, para.7). As a rule when deciding upon the jobs you will take on during the summer, try to access positions that place you in administrative roles (leadership); in roles where you work collaboratively with other people on projects (interpersonal skill development); and jobs that entail event planning or logistics planning (problem-solving). Aim for these sorts of occupations and your stock will rise in ways you can scarcely imagine.

The second thing you need to know is what kind of school you want to be a part of. We will discuss the “three tiers” of school selection in a short while, but the big thing right now is to discuss the little things (which aren’t so little, in truth) that should determine which institutions interest you and which ones do not. Firstly, when choosing a school, bear in mind the reputation of the school; the instructional methods utilized (does it involve case-based learning or does it rely upon theory-based lectures?); the nature of the curriculum (is it wide-ranging and holistic or does it emphasize some aspects of business to the exclusion of others?); and the options the school offers its students upon graduation (Kuther, para.4). If you want a school that will give you a well-rounded and practical education, then attending an institution that embraces theory but not case-study work and co-operative experiences is precisely the wrong place for you.

The third thing you absolutely must know before applying to any MBA program is which branch of the business field do you want to be a part of: financial services; marketing; operations management; information technology; sales; or something else entirely? Attending an Ivy-League institution is a wonderful thing, but if that school doesn’t have a strong program or specialization in the field that most piques your interest (and for which your own skill-set is best-suited) than you are hurting your chances of placement after graduation. In the end, if a state university has a well-earned reputation in churning out, say, operations managers while your dream Ivy-league school doesn’t, you may want to go the state school route.

The fourth thing any applicant has to know before taking those fateful first steps towards business school involves knowing the interviewing process - that means enduring one mock interview after another in the lead-up to the actual interview process. If you have a couple friends in academia – a professor with whom you are friendly, for instance – who have conducted admission interviews in the past, then ask them if they can grill you on what to expect; another good idea is to have mock interviews with more than one person so that the predictable rhythms of one interviewer do not lull you into a false sense of security as the big day approaches. Another thing to keep in mind when it comes to knowing the admission process forward and backward is that it never hurts to approach successful business applicants: ask them what questions were asked and if there are any common themes that interviewers like to emphasize. Lastly, always try mock interviews in which odd or unexpected questions – weird questions like “what’s your favourite colour?” – are thrown your way; expect the unexpected and you will be far more supple and responsive when the time comes.

Last of all, there is a fifth thing you need to know from the outset: your own capabilities; this is where the aforementioned “three tiers” of schools comes into play. As a rule, it is a good idea to apply to three different types of schools: a school you feel comfortable you will get into; a school just above your level (or your comfort level); and a school that is your dream school – the Ivy-League school you’ve always wanted a degree from. Doing things this way will ensure a couple of things: firstly, you will be less likely to suffer disappointment because the odds are in your favour that at least one of your applications will be successful; secondly, the confidence of knowing that you have “one in hand” will make you more relaxed when you go in for your interview at any other institution. Another nice thing about applying to schools just above your (comfort) level is that it forces you to get better in the areas you lack – but it keeps things realistic so that a sense of hopelessness does not set in. Giving yourself a back-up plan when you apply - at the same time as you apply to institutions which may appear out of your grasp - will allow you to maintain your confidence while still pursuing your ultimate dreams.

In the final analysis, know what business schools look for in candidates; know what each school offers; and know yourself. Do these three simple things in conjunction with plenty of studying and prep work, and you’ll be amazed how high you can climb.

References

Kuther, Tara. “Applying to Business School.” About.com: Graduate School. 2008. New York Times Company. 26 Jun. 2008 <http://gradschool.about.com/od/businessschool/a/businessoverview.htm>