

Do I Prepare for Graduate School and a Job in the Same Way?

The two most common options available to college graduates are finding a job or gaining acceptance into graduate school. Therefore, a question they often ask their academic advisors is: "How do I get into graduate school?" or "How do I get a job?" These questions should be asked early in an undergraduate's career because their answers are often very unpleasant if the student has not engaged in appropriate career-planning activities during their freshman and sophomore years and then followed through on them as a junior and senior.

The first step in this process involves your decision to pursue either a career that requires a graduate degree or a job for which graduate education is unnecessary. The second step is to determine the factors that will increase the probability of success in your career plan. The third step is to maximize these factors. To assist academic advisors in their attempt to help students answer these questions and maximize their chances of post-graduate success, Milton, Pollio, and Eison (1986) performed a survey of 362 representatives of business and industry who were actively involved in interviewing and hiring college graduates and 500 college faculty from the sciences, the humanities, and pre-professional programs. The task of the members of these samples was to rate the importance of each of the factors in the following 15-item lists on a 1 to 7 scale depending upon the importance they placed on these items when reviewing materials submitted by college graduates for either employment or admission to graduate school. The following lists are arranged in descending order of these ratings.

Business Representatives

1. Personality of student
2. Grades in major classes
3. Nature of noncollege jobs
4. Overall grade point average
5. Breadth of classes taken
6. School/Recommender reputation
7. Breadth of life experiences
8. Extracurricular activities
9. Publications, awards, and honors
10. Number of difficult classes
11. Samples of student writing
12. Affirmative action needs
13. Contributions to the school
14. Letters of recommendation
15. Standardized test scores

College Faculty

1. Grades in major classes
2. Number of difficult classes
3. Samples of student writing
4. Letters of recommendation
5. Publications, awards, and honors
6. Breadth of classes taken
7. School/Recommender reputation
8. Standardized test scores
9. Overall grade point average
10. Breadth of life experiences
11. Personality of student
12. Contributions to the school
13. Extracurricular activities
14. Nature of noncollege jobs
15. Affirmative action needs

It appears from these lists that employers and graduate schools put emphasis on very different sets of factors when they weigh the qualifications of newly graduated college students. A quick check of the top five factors indicates that potential employers appear to be most impressed with job applicants who possess a good personality, earn high grades in both their majors and a wide variety of other classes, and have relevant employment experience outside the college environment. Graduate schools are most impressed with undergraduates who earn high grades in their majors; take difficult classes; are good writers; earn high recommendations; and have publications, honors, or awards to their credit. You should study these lists very carefully during the early stages of your college career when you are engaged in initial career-planning activities. Your willingness and ability to attain these factors could have a profound effect upon your chances of post-graduate success.