

Mac Strelloff: GRE Strategies Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Mac Strelloff: GRE Strategies*, provides an example of an undergraduate career that will be of interest to students wishing to obtain a PhD. The case begins by raising the issue of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and whether Mac has achieved a score that will help or hinder his application to various graduate schools. Many, but not all, graduate school programs in the sciences, social sciences and humanities require that students take the GRE and applicants must be familiar with the exam. The case discussion can certainly start with the issue raised in the opening paragraph, yet student's attention must also be drawn to the ways in which Mac has approached many other facets of his academic work. He exhibits a profound understanding of the many informal educational opportunities at the university, and his ability to network with professors and other students, search out learning and research opportunities, and make use of mentors and mentoring relationships is exemplary. The case can be used to help students understand the culture of the research university and the kinds of academic work they should be doing outside the classroom to further their understanding of their discipline and prepare for work in an advanced degree program.

Abstract

The case illustrates the academic career of Mac Strelloff, who is a senior at UC Davis when the reader first encounters him in the opening paragraph of the case. Due to family issues, Mac did not attend high school but this has not impaired his academic success and he was able to transfer from College of the Canyons to UC Davis with a Regents Scholarship. At the case opening, Mac is preparing to submit an application to graduate school and the problem posed is whether he should re-take the GRE: he is not certain that his scores are competitive. Understanding the GRE is an important factor in applying to graduate school and students should know how the program(s) they are applying to view the test scores. Some programs value it highly, others, while they

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require students to take it, look more broadly at a student's overall application. Yet the case does not focus solely on this issue. Mac's trajectory through his undergraduate years indicates a passion for research and he has many academic accomplishments and a set of skills that graduate schools value.

Pedagogy

The class discussion should help students understand the many ways in which Mac developed his academic record, all of which will help him create a competitive application with a statement of purpose that details these accomplishments. The GRE is important, as are many of the exams required for other programs such as the LSAT (law school) and MCAT (medical school). But other academic activities such as mentored research experiences, presenting at conferences, and publications are also valued. The following teaching points should be covered with the order depending on the student population the instructor is teaching and the particular points the instructor wishes to emphasize.

Teaching points:

1. Finding academic support
 2. Thinking about career options
 3. Analysing risks and rewards
 4. Knowing the pre-requisite tests
 5. Leveraging local knowledge
 6. Turning adversity into strength
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1. **Finding a mentor(s):** Mac's interest in psychology motivated him to stay after class and talk with Dr. Rebecca Shephard, a relationship that developed into guidance and mentoring as Mac became more interested in the field. He made his interest in the discipline evident by attending a conference (and paying his own way) and applying for a teaching assistantship. The mentoring relationship grew organically out of Mac's work in the field and his contributions to the community of students involved in the psychology department at College of the Canyons. At UC Davis, Mac's mentoring relationship came through a more formal channel when Valeri Garcia of the Guardian Scholars Program introduced him to Professor Keith Widamen. This mentoring relationship, however, was just as fruitful: Professor Widamen met with Mac on a regular basis and helped familiarize him with the graduate school seminar format by having him attend classes. Mentors are helpful guides to many of the implicit rules of academia that are not always apparent in the classroom or through academic advising and can be a source of advice and counseling when decisions about internships, applications and jobs need to be made. Mentors are also a good source of the letters of recommendation (usually three) that are a part of a graduate or professional school application and this is particularly true of long-term mentors who are there to witness the growth in academic maturity. The discussion around this point could allow students to describe people they consider mentors and how they found them, and also ask them to think through how they might seek out an informal or formalized mentor relationship in a new environment.

- 2. Determining a career direction:** Mac took very specific actions as he began to search for a career direction, investigating different fields of study by taking classes that might lead to entry level professional jobs. Yet neither the paralegal class nor the mental health training seemed a good fit for him and he determined that neither law nor the mental health fields were in his future. Instead, Mac's tutoring job and growing interest in research psychology helped him determine that an academic professorial position might be more in line with his interests. He considered the basic thrust of his desire to help people and influence them and his decision to pursue an academic career grew out of his research activities. The discussion on this point should help students to understand that finding out what you don't like or enjoy is as important as finding out what seems to be a reasonable and do-able pursuit or even a passion. Students should always be encouraged to explore various interests and careers.
- 3. Looking for and leveraging non-classroom learning experiences:** Mac sought out and participated in many learning experiences outside of his classes, all of which increased his understanding of his field of study as well as the implicit norms of academia. Mac participated in formal and institutional activities such as applying to be a teaching assistant, tutoring and becoming the president of the psychology club. He also created his own opportunities when he developed the project involving the Heroic Imagination Project (HIP) and volunteering to help one of his TAs with his research. Mac attended conferences, both as a participant and as a presenter and worked with MURALS on a mentored research project. Many students do not understand that their activities outside the classroom are as important as their classwork, and this is especially true if a student is interested in moving on to a PhD program. Mac's outside activities mirror the work of a professor – attending and presenting at conferences, conducting research, teaching and initiating projects. His application statement of purpose will therefore indicate that he has already developed the skill set needed to advance to a doctoral program.
- 4. Transferring to a four-year university:** Many students in California attend community college and then transfer to a four year university. This transition often involves a big adjustment, particularly in changing from semesters to quarters, but it also means students have to develop an entire new set of relationships with administrators, advisors and mentors. Mac was accepted at his number one choice, UC San Diego, but the financial support of the Regents Scholarship swayed his choice towards UC Davis. Tuition and cost of living are often the reasons why a student might pick one university over another, particularly when they are admitted to comparable large public universities. However, Mac also did his research via a web review of both psychology departments' majors and course offerings, determining that UC Davis had a psychology degree with a math emphasis. He also prepared to enter his new academic environment by taking some extra classes through the Khan Academy, an online learning environment. The additional math classes helped him place into a higher calculus track.

5. **The GRE requirement:** Mac had a history of doing well on standardized tests, so studying for the GRE took a backseat to the courses he took the summer before his senior year. Since the question of whether Mac should take the GRE is the case problem posed at the beginning, the instructor will need to allow time for students to debate whether he should or shouldn't re-take the test and/or what should be his course of action in order to make the decision. Once Mac researched what were the average scores for those accepted to UC San Diego, he had a better idea of what he should do, but there also remained the time constraint that he had to complete the test while also taking a full quarter worth of classes. Certainly one of the lessons of this case is that students should always take some time and study for the GRE, regardless of their historical performance on standardized tests. They should understand as well, that there is always the opportunity to re-take the test and it is up to the student what scores are reported. Mac, in fact, did decide to re-take the test, putting a special emphasis on studying for the math section since he has a research interest in using math with psychology. Students should be encouraged to study for the GRE and do their best, but also to do their homework and discover how the GRE is viewed in the programs they are applying to. This information might be published in the department website, on an online forum like college confidential² or through talking with graduate students in the program.
6. **Researching advanced degree programs in a desired discipline:** Mac determined potential graduate school programs through online research, talking with mentors and corresponding with and visiting professor's labs. He took advantage of a trip to UCLA to visit an animal research lab and found that this was not a direction he wanted to pursue. When a professor did show an interest in his background, as was the case with the UC Irvine professor who requested his cv and asked if he had any programming experience, Mac conducted some research in order to understand what she might be looking for. In this way, he tailored his answer so that he could confidently say that he would be able to do the work required in her lab.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that Mac did decide to re-take the GRE and improved his quantitative score, although his verbal score decreased slightly. Taking it the second time Mac received a verbal score in the 66 % and a quantitative score in the 81%. Mac was admitted to psychology programs at UC Davis and UC Irvine and chose to attend UC Irvine.

² <http://www.collegeconfidential.com/>