

Valerie Acevedo: Creating a Holistic Application Facilitator's Guide¹

Discussion

The case, *Valerie Acevedo: Creating a Holistic Application* profiles a cross-country athlete and graduate of California State University Fullerton, who aspires to a Masters degree in public policy. Valerie worked a number of jobs to finance her education and also took on leadership roles in student organizations, most importantly the job of president of the Latin American Studies Student Association. After she graduated, she moved to Spain for a year to work as an English Language Assistant for the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Sport, and also to improve her Spanish speaking and writing skills. Returning to the US, Valerie began work for AmeriCorps VISTA taking on the responsibility of creating a mentoring program for at-risk youth at New Vision Academy in San Bernardino, California. These experiences provided excellent training for her professional goal of working in public policy and demonstrated her interest and dedication to improving educational opportunity for all students. Yet Valerie remained concerned that the academic metrics that would be used by an admissions committee, her GPA and GRE scores, were not competitive enough to get her into an advanced degree program in public policy.

A GPA of 3.0 is usually the acceptable minimum for graduate programs at most universities, including those that are a part of the University of California system. Many CSU programs state that a lower GPA will be accepted, however, regardless of the stated minimum, applicants will always be competing with those who have higher GPAs. Some programs also post a minimum GRE score or provide the average score of students who have been admitted in previous years. However, there is a growing trend to use the GRE scores more prudently. Particularly within California, there is an understanding that using quantitative parameters inhibits the development of a diverse graduate school cohort. The Educational Testing Service (ETS) itself has developed guidelines, and states the following about the GRE. "It (GRE score) does not and cannot measure all the qualities

¹ This facilitator's guide accompanies the case of the same title and is to be used for class instruction and discussion. It was prepared by Sylvia Sensiper, PhD, Director of the Guardian Professions Program, Office of Graduate Studies, UC Davis. The following have provided funding for the GPP: The Stuart Foundation, the May and Stanley Smith Charitable Trust, The California Wellness Foundation and the University of California Office of the President.

that are important in predicting success in graduate study or in confirming undergraduate achievement. It is an inexact measure.”²

The reasons for adopting different admissions criteria stem primarily from two issues. It is clear by the attrition rate of graduate school programs (nearly 50% according to the Council on Graduate School)³ that GPA and GRE are not necessarily good predictors of degree completion. There is also a decided interest in diversifying the demographics of graduate school cohorts and it is a known fact that women and underrepresented minorities, as a whole, often do not perform as well on standardized tests. As a result, there has been a great deal of discussion nationwide about what kinds of criteria *would* provide a better assessment of potential graduate students. Much of the ‘context’ which Valerie provides in her essay narratives – leadership capability, international travel, pre-professional experience – demonstrate she has the maturity, intelligence and perseverance to complete a graduate program and admissions committees are currently more likely to take these kinds of criteria into consideration. Making use of these kinds of criteria when assessing applicants is usually called ‘holistic review.’

Abstract

Valerie Acevedo is interested in educational policy and helping students from disadvantaged backgrounds access a college education. She faced adversity during her own formative years and feels she can be a good role model. Her work experiences to date show a dedication to this mission and her various activities have created an excellent foundation for further study. Her BA is in anthropology, she took on leadership roles as an undergraduate, worked and travelled internationally and developed a college access program for the New Vision Academy in San Bernardino, California. Yet Valerie knows that when she applies for a Masters degree in public policy, her GRE scores and GPA will be under scrutiny and she isn’t sure they will be competitive. Learning more about the programs by making campus visits and attending information sessions helps her gain more information and also allows her to introduce herself to possible mentors. Valerie also makes the choice to apply to wide variety of programs to ensure she is accepted for the coming fall and to give herself some options.

Pedagogy

This case illustrates the idea that the graduate application is a ‘full package,’ more akin to a dossier that provides comprehensive information, than an application form that a student just fills out. Having an excellent GPA and a high GRE score is preferable, of course, but students who want to go to graduate school and have reasonable grades should not be deterred from applying, particularly if they can demonstrate significant work experience and commitment to the discipline or profession they want to pursue. Getting significant pre-professional experience is important and demonstrating initiative, leadership and commitment are key. During the first two years of their undergraduate career, many former foster youth are often catching up educationally. Living on their own can also bring its own set of difficulties and challenges. Admissions committees are often

² <https://www.ets.org/gre/institutions/scores/guidelines/>

³ <http://cgsnet.org/attrition-and-completion>

willing to admit students who have an upward trend in grades and who are making a contribution through activities they care about.

Teaching points:

1. Get involved in campus organizations and take on leadership roles
2. Find work that provides a gateway to the future and helps you build skills
3. International experience is an asset to a graduate school application particularly if you have worked overseas or completed a research project
4. Create essays that demonstrate your skill set, maturity and ability to handle responsibilities outside of classroom work
5. Use an addendum when possible to explain educational irregularities in your application

- 1. Get involved in campus organizations and take on leadership roles:** Valerie managed a busy academic schedule and worked during her undergraduate years, but also demonstrated her commitment to larger issues through her involvement in the Latin American Studies Student Association. Participation in student organizations provides informal learning opportunities and experience in collaborative work situations, negotiation and day-to-day diplomacy. Student organizations also provide an opportunity for taking on leadership roles, developing agendas and policies and understanding group dynamics. Students should be careful not to take on too many extracurricular activities and it is best if they get involved in activities that pertain to future career goals. However, any involvement that shows a serious commitment and proves initiative will help a student demonstrate maturity on a graduate school application.
- 2. Find work that provides a gateway to the future and helps you build skills:** Many graduate programs specifically state that applicants need to have a certain number of pre-professional hours of work in their intended profession. Teacher credential programs often ask for observation hours or work in the classroom, physician assistant programs ask for 1000 clinical hours and applicants to social work programs will usually be asked about their work experience in social services. PhD programs simply assume that an applicant has worked as a research assistant or conducted research of their own. The statement of purpose for a PhD applicant should detail this research as well as propose a future project. For students who haven't been able to find significant work experience during their undergraduate years, taking some time to develop this experience is crucial. In Valerie's case, she gained some experience through her travel abroad experience because she worked in an education setting. Returning to the US, she leveraged her experience in teaching into a educational resource position which related more directly to her future goals of working in educational policy. Many students find that AmeriCorps provides them an opportunity to engage in a professional setting and gain excellent experience.
- 3. International experience is an asset to a graduate school application particularly if you have worked overseas or completed a research project:** Demonstrating maturity and initiative, as well as the ability to take risks, are excellent additions to the

graduate school application. In Valerie's case, her international experience is doubly important because she had a job in Spain that was related to her chosen profession. Through this work she gained valuable insights into another educational system, and a general understanding of student needs. Traveling throughout Europe on her own also indicates a fundamental self-reliance that is essential when dealing with the demands of graduate school.

- 4. Create essays that demonstrate your skill set, maturity and ability to handle responsibilities outside of classroom work. Include the names of professors that are conducting research that pertains to the work you wish to pursue and why a rationale as to why they might be a good mentor for you:** Providing a narrative that explains a student's professional interests to date helps an admissions committee understand their potential and where their career might lead them in the future. Valerie's essays demonstrate her growth in educational issues as she gains experience overseas and then returns to the states to create a program for at-risk youth. Students are often in an exploratory mode during their undergraduate years, and it is important to take the time and effort to create an understandable narrative about this varied experience. This is an important part of the graduate school application process and should not be taken lightly. Some programs do have interviews, but essays are often the only way in which an applicant can present a holistic picture of themselves. Applicants should also acquaint themselves with the faculty in each program to which they are applying, and pick out two to three professors whose research is close to their own interests. These faculty should be mentioned in their essays as potential mentors with a description of how the applicant's research interests are similar to the faculty's interests.
- 5. Use an addendum when possible to explain educational irregularities in your application:** Some applications provide a space to include extra information or upload additional documents. Valerie found that a number of her applications allowed this and created an addendum to explain substandard grades and her GRE scores. When there wasn't an additional space, she included a truncated version of her addendum within one of her essays.

Additional notes: Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can tell students that Valerie Acevedo was admitted to Cal Poly SLO, Mills College, Claremont Graduate School, and UC Irvine. She decided to complete a Masters in Public Policy at UC Irvine.