Demystifying the American Graduate Admissions Process

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Abstract

This paper attempts to discuss at length the various factors (along with their respective weightage) that the admissions committee at a top graduate school in the US takes into account while reviewing a Master of Science (MS) application.

Disclaimer

This paper is a mixture of facts, inferences and extrapolations, based on my personal experience as an admissions committee member at Stanford. All views expressed here are solely mine and do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of Stanford University.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I outline the various parameters involved in the complex decision making process of a Masters admissions committee in a top graduate school in the US. To clarify this further, (i) This report is mainly targeted at MS applicants, but a lot of it can be extended to PhD applications as well. In most cases, the requirements for a PhD admit will just be a stricter version of those mentioned here. (ii) I do not have a specific list of universities in mind when I say "a top graduate school". Stanford, MIT, UC Berkeley and CMU are certainly up there, but I am not particularly referring to any specific list of graduate school rankings. In a more general sense, I am talking about schools where the default attitude of the admissions committee is "rejected, unless strongly proved otherwise" rather than "let's give him/her the benefit of the doubt". These schools tend to follow a risk minimization policy, and if in doubt, they would reject the candidate rather than risk diluting the quality of the incoming batch. (iii) The content here is targeted only at the applicants to US universities. Though some of it might be the same, I have no personal experience regarding the admission criteria of graduate schools elsewhere. Also, since I belong to a computer science background and have served in the computer science admissions committee, some of my examples could be computer science (or in general, engineering) oriented, but they should still suffice to get the message across to a wider audience.

A strong disclaimer that I would like to mention, right at the beginning is that this entire compilation is based only on my personal experience of being a part of the MS admissions committee at the Computer Science Department at Stanford. These are by no means, rules set in stone or a sure shot way to getting accepted. The number of words like “usually”, “generally”, “mostly”, “may”, “might”, “could”, etc. strewn across the paper should reinforce this disclaimer. Different universities and different departments within the same university might approach the admissions process differently. Even the very same department might make minor amendments in its admissions criteria from year to year, depending on the people constituting the admission committee.

Finally, I have taken care to ensure that this paper only contains advisory guidelines and generic "do's" and "don'ts". I will not be disclosing any specifics of the admissions process at Stanford - be it the total number of applications, the total number of acceptances, exact algorithm followed in the decision making process, etc. Nor will there be any information that could help to identify anyone from the applicant pool or rest of the admissions committee.

2. The Admissions Committee

The admissions committee consists mainly of faculty members from the department and occasionally a few students already in the graduate programme. The decision making process is a multi-stage process. For utilizing the committee members' time most efficiently, there is usually a preliminary round where a lot of the applications are weeded out, based on some hard constraints (requirements) that the committee thinks of as minimum expectations for a student at their university. These could be cut offs on GRE, GPA, etc. (see sections 3.1, 3.3) or in some cases, criterion like not considering applicants who already have a graduate degree in the same or related field. The ones that go through this filter are the true potential candidates and get reviewed more rigorously by the committee. The applications are split up among the committee members in a way such that each application has at least more than one reviewer. The review process typically ends with a committee meeting where the final shortlisting is done to reach the admission target for the academic year, with a few more being chosen for the waitlist.

3. The Components of a Graduate School Application

In this section, I talk about the different components of a typical US graduate school application. I will describe in detail the various aspects that are evaluated by the committee along with the respective weightage of each.

3.1 Graduate Record Examination

The GRE General Test, conducted by ETS is a requirement for most of the top schools. However, the GRE Subject Test is usually optional for a Masters application. The GRE scores are mostly used as a negative filter for rejecting candidates. A poor GRE score can get the candidate rejected, but an exceptionally high GRE score will still not be enough (by itself) to guarantee him/her an admit. Candidates with full (or almost full) marks in the quantitative section are viewed favourably. It is recommended to have at least 750/800 when applying to graduate studies in engineering or any field involving math. At any rate, one should definitely ensure a score of 700/800 or above in the quantitative section. A low score (3.5/6.0 or less) in the analytical writing (AWA) section can also be looked at as a cause for concern. The committee can be a bit more forgiving with the verbal section, especially for international students, but it would still be highly advisable to be get at least 500/800.

A great GRE score will help the candidate a lot, especially if he/she comes from a lesser known university that the committee has not heard of. In spite of a good academic track record in such a college, it might be tough to convince the committee if the GRE score is low, since it casts suspicions on the overall quality of the candidate's undergraduate college. A good GRE score, on the other hand, provides further evidence in support of the candidate and assures the committee that the high GPA is not merely a fluke due to studying in a rather uncompetitive college.

A consistently bad percentile in each of the three GRE sections definitely stacks the odds against the candidate. However, a slip up in one of the sections (especially if it is the Verbal or the AWA section) can be overlooked, provided the rest of his/her profile is genuinely good.

3.2 TOEFL

TOEFL, an English proficiency test which is also conducted by ETS is usually a requirement for all international students applying for graduate studies in the United States. However, the TOEFL score hardly carries any weightage (in fact, might even be neglected altogether) as far as the admission decision is concerned. If the university has clearly spelled out a cut off (sectional or aggregate) for the TOEFL score on its website, it is then necessary to just clear that cut off, but the actual score (be it 120/120 or 100/120) does not matter. It would almost never be the case that a candidate is rejected only on the grounds of having a poor TOEFL score. In some cases, when the TOEFL score is low and rest of the application is strong, the candidate might be given admission, but asked to take an English proficiency class and/or pass an additional English test after joining the university.

3.3 Academics

The candidate’s academic record forms a crucial part of the graduate school application. In a way, the undergraduate GPA could be thought of as being similar to the GRE since it acts as another negative filter. A poor GPA is a compelling reason for a reject, but a stellar GPA by itself might still not be a good enough reason to

guarantee someone an acceptance. However, it is also different from the GRE because getting a GRE score of 1550/1600 will not put that candidate significantly ahead of someone who has got 1350/1600. But getting a 3.9/4.0 will definitely be looked upon much more favourably than getting 3.6/4.0.

It is quite tough to provide guidelines on what qualifies as a good enough GPA, for a number of reasons. Different universities across the world use different scales to grade their students. Some of the common ones are 0-4, 0-4.3, 0-10 and 0-100. These scores cannot be simply scaled and compared with each other. For instance, getting a 9.0/10.0 in most of the top Indian colleges is significantly tougher than managing a 3.6/4.0 at a US university. Even if the scale is same, the universities might still differ in the way they compute the grades. Therefore a 3.6/4.0 at a university X might not necessarily be equivalent to 3.6/4.0 at university Y. The committee members appreciate it a lot if the university's official transcripts have an appendix that clearly spells out the mechanism behind the assignment of grades and the final GPA calculation.

Things get even trickier while dealing with candidates whose transcripts contain absolute marks and grades reported in terms of percentages. Unless the committee has prior experience of dealing with candidates from that university or at least has more than one candidate from the same university for comparison purposes, it is tough to gauge whether getting 80% marks on an absolute scale is commendable or not. The candidate might have got 75% marks and been the topper of his department, but "75%" nevertheless looks unimpressive on paper, especially when compared with the 3.9* and 9* candidates. It may seem like a tougher battle for candidates from such universities, but strong recommendation letters from professors who can comment on the candidate's academics can help in levelling the playing field. In particular, it helps a lot if the professor clearly states that the candidate did indeed top the department (or a particular course) and also provides some background regarding the usual range of grades for courses taken at that university.

Another cause of concern while comparing candidates across different universities is the variation in the curriculum and in the weightage associated with non-technical courses. Engineering programs at some universities have a rigid structure, with the entire curriculum consisting of only science, math or engineering courses. Others allow the students to take additional courses from arts, humanities, communication skills, physical education, etc., but do not include them in the final GPA calculation. And finally, there are universities which not only allow students to take such additional courses, but also take into account the grades from these non-technical courses while calculating the overall GPA. This can bloat the GPA and make an otherwise ordinary candidate look better than he/she truly is. Suppose that a candidate is seeking admission to a computer science graduate program. He/She can end up having a high GPA in spite of performing inconsistently in core computer science courses, on account of getting A+'s in "Ballet", "The Origin of Capitalism" or "Introductory Mandarin". In the exact opposite scenario, a candidate who has done consistently well in the core relevant courses might have a slightly lower overall GPA due to bad performances in a couple of completely irrelevant courses.

To tackle these problems, the committee usually goes through the transcript of the candidate, focusing mostly on courses related to the program he/she is applying to. For instance, for an MSCS candidate, the committee would look closely at the core computer science courses and possibly a few relevant math courses. This serves the dual purpose of (i) getting familiar with the candidate's background in terms of how many relevant courses he/she has taken and (ii) decoupling the overall GPA from performance in the core courses that actually matter.

The transcript also gives insights into how the candidate has fared over time. As would be obvious, an increasing or a consistent trend in the grades looks more favourable than a declining one. In fact, being consistently good is the safest option. A candidate might have had one or two poor semesters (or quarters) and made a very good comeback, but all else being equal, he would still lose out to another candidate who always maintained good grades. The only exception is the case where there was a genuine reason for the dip in the grades, something that is explained via the statement of purpose, letter of recommendation or elsewhere in the application.

To summarize, academics form a very important part of the application. Since the committee members do not get an opportunity to interview or test the candidate in any way, they have to use the grades as proxy for determining the candidate’s competency in his/her field of study. Having an impeccable academic record (e.g. topping the department or always being in the top three, etc.) is definitely a sure-shot way to get noticed by the committee. But if not that, it is highly recommended to at least maintain a fairly good cumulative GPA (subjective to clearly define, but around the ~3.6/4.0 or ~8.5/10.0 mark) so as to not get directly rejected on grounds of poor academic performance. Academics however have to be supported by the rest of the application and can at times also be forgiven to an extent if there is something else that stands out in the application (see the following sections).

3.4 Statement of Purpose

As far as the committee is concerned, the statement of purpose (SOP) is one of trickiest components of the overall application since it cannot be easily and objectively evaluated. It also requires considerable perseverance and patience on the committee member's part, especially when one needs to read dozens of such two page (or even longer) essays. The difference that the SOP can make in the outcome of one's admission decision differs on a case by case basis. The SOP is a great place to point out things which could not be covered in other parts of the application – past projects, internships, work experience and other academic and non-academic achievements. The SOP can also be crucial in cases where there is a genuine reason for poor academic performance over a quarter or two, since those reasons can be clearly stated in the SOP. However, the applicant must take care to not go overboard and write a very detailed biography, because a very long statement is more likely to irk the reviewer than to impress him/her.

In reality, a lot of the SOPs end up being artefacts that neither help nor hurt the cause of the application. Most SOPs tend to be similar to each other in flow and format and even though the individual facts differ, only rarely do they stand out. An important point missed out by most applicants is that even though the SOP is a means to convince the admissions committee of his/her calibre, it should not merely be a boastful compilation of the applicant's previous achievements. In that case, the SOP ends up being nothing more than a verbose curriculum vitae, when it actually is supposed to be a statement of *purpose*. Majority of the SOPs fail to address the *purpose* part completely or only talk about it in a few sentences in the concluding paragraph. The statement should instead prove the candidate's worthiness not just through his/her prior work, but with a detailed discussion of why the candidate chose the particular program, what he/she intends to do while pursuing the program and what he/she will do after having gained the education. Talking about a bright idea that one might have or an impactful long term project that the applicant wants to work on is more likely to catch the reviewer's attention (and convince him that higher education will serve a good purpose) than the applicant's memoirs.

In most cases, if the overall application (GRE, grades, recommendations, etc.) is very strong, then the applicant has a good chance of getting admitted even with a lacklustre SOP. In other words, a badly written statement will almost never be the sole reason for a rejection. However, skilfully written statements will always help the applicant's cause. In the entire application, the statement of purpose is perhaps the only opportunity that the applicant has to *excite* the admissions committee. Getting straight A's and a GRE score in the 90th percentile will impress the committee, but there is a good chance that many of the other applicants could have emulated the same feat, since the application pool for a top tier university is typically quite competitive. However, a new research idea or problem that the applicant has been working on (or would like to pursue), or a novel and useful application that he/she intends to develop, etc. are things that will get the committee excited and make them want to admit the candidate to their university.

3.5 Letters of Recommendation

Letters of recommendation play a very vital role in the admission process. In fact, even a single letter might at times change the committee's overall outlook towards the applicant and thus potentially change the application's outcome. The committee attaches a lot of importance to these letters since they provide evaluations of the applicant by professors and/or supervisors who have closely monitored the applicant's work over a period of time. However, the committee is also smart enough to detect anomalies in the letters most of the times. Every admission committee has professors who have reviewed applications year after year and have read a variety of recommendation letters, besides composing them for their own students. They can thus use some helpful cues to find out whether the recommendation has indeed been composed in confidentiality by the person it claims to be. Even easier to figure out are cases where the recommendation writer clearly does not know the applicant well and has written the letter off a standard template. Such letters usually just praise the applicant without citing any personal experiences or facts to support their claims. They therefore sound too generic and could have been written by the recommender for any applicant.

It gets a lot more serious if two different applicants with the same recommender have the exact same (or almost same) letter since that proves beyond doubt that the recommender is simply using a template. Though this could at times be the letter writer's fault, it is highly unlikely that a professor (or manager) would write a one-letter-fits-all recommendation if he/she indeed did know the applicant very closely. A good recommendation letter is one where the recommender talks in some detail about the actual work done under their supervision by the applicant, how he/she fared at the task and other specific instances from their interactions with the applicant. Such a letter not only

gives the committee an idea of the applicant's impression on the recommender, but also highlights projects, achievements and other salient information which might not have evident from rest of the application.

Reading and evaluating applicants based on recommendation letters is not a very easy task. Recommendations from different applicants across the globe are subject to variations (regional, cultural, etc.). For instance, a recommendation letter from an Asian university might be quite different from a letter from a European or an American university. There are also variations on a recommender to recommender basis. Some might only choose to highlight the positive points (and in general, fill the letter with praises) and say nothing negative about the applicant at all, whereas others might do a more honest evaluation – highlighting both the positive as well as the negative points. The committee thus takes the overly glorifying letters with a grain of salt. It also has to factor in other influencing information like the undergraduate university that the applicant comes from, the general level of competition there, etc. For instance, the committee might decide against a highly enthusiastic recommendation from a university that's been unheard of, in favour of a good but not so enthusiastic recommendation from a top tier university.

While nominating recommenders, the applicant has to clarify on his/her application form whether he/she waives the right to read the letter. The committee looks more favourably at letters for which the right has been waived, since this ensures confidentiality of the letters and reduces the chance that the letter writer was influenced by the applicant. Also, to help the committee take more informed decisions, universities might also ask the letter writer some additional information apart from the actual recommendation itself. These are fields that the recommender has to fill in the recommendation form and may include (i) The recommender's position/title (ii) The recommender's relation to the applicant (iii) The duration for which the recommender has known the applicant (iv) The duration for which the recommender has been writing such recommendations for his/her students/employees (v) The number of such recommendations he/she has written earlier (vi) The pool of students/employees he/she is comparing the applicant with, and its size (vii) The rank of the applicant when compared to that pool (viii) The strength of the recommendation. Each of these can play a role in determining the overall efficacy of the recommendation:

(i) Usually, the higher the title, the stronger the recommendation. Thus, the recommendation from a professor who has a doctoral degree will carry more weightage than that of a lecturer without a doctoral degree. Similarly, recommendations from the Head of the Department, the Dean, a senior researcher or a senior manager can be more influential. However, it is important to note that any recommendation will work only if it has a personal touch to it and if the recommender has indeed had a close association with the applicant. Despite being penned by a very senior person (for instance, the director or the president of a university), if the letter turns out to be a very generic certificate of appreciation, or if it can't convince the committee that the recommender did in fact personally interact with the applicant, it does not serve the purpose.

(ii) The relation should be such that it involves direct supervision and frequent interaction over a period of time. For instance, a professor who has taught a class or two to the applicant or has supervised him/her for a project, a manager who the applicant directly reports to, etc.

(iii) The committee values the recommendation more if the recommender has known and worked with the applicant for a significant period of time. It is understandable that one (or at times two) of the recommendations might come from persons who have known the applicant for a relatively short period. For instance, a professor who just taught one class but the applicant excelled in that class or a manager/researcher with whom the applicant worked for just one project (like a summer internship). However, it is highly preferable to have at least one recommender who has known the applicant for a year or more.

(iv,v) As would be obvious, the committee would be more comfortable in trusting a recommendation if the recommender is someone who has been evaluating and writing recommendations for students (or employees) for a while, than someone who is writing his/her first recommendation letter.

(vi,vii) The recommendation form typically asks the recommender to rate the applicant as being in the "top 1-2%", "top 10%", "first quarter", "second quarter", etc. of an evaluation pool. Depending on the recommender, the pool might be "all undergraduate students of a particular class", "all undergraduates ever taught/supervised by him/her", "all interns recruited this year", etc. This rating is a helpful indicator of the recommender's overall opinion about the applicant. The committee however does take into account various influencing factors such as the size and competence of the comparison pool. For instance, someone rated as being within 10% of all students in a top school like Stanford or MIT might still be considered to be a better candidate than someone who is in the top 1% at an unknown university.

(viii) Finally, the recommender has to choose on the form whether he/she "strongly recommends", "recommends", "recommends with reservations" or "does not recommend" the applicant. This, along with

the rating (vii) gives the committee a summary of the recommender's opinion, even before reading the actual recommendation letter.

All of the above information can (and in most cases will) also be a part of the actual letter. Though I have given a lot of importance to the identity of the recommender (i-v above), it is the content of the letter itself that matters the most. Not realizing this basic fact is a common pitfall for a lot of the applicants. It is of no use if the recommender is a very popular person in the field or is affiliated to a prestigious institution if the letter that he writes does not sound enthusiastic enough. Many recommenders are frank and will clearly mention that they can only recommend the applicant with reservations since they haven't worked with him/her for a long enough duration. It is therefore always safer to choose recommendation writers (even if they do not hold a high title or are not popular) who have had a chance to monitor the applicant closely for a considerable span of time. Thus, the recommendation from a lecturer who supervised the candidate's final year project for an entire year would be more valuable than that from a visiting professor from a highly reputed university who only interacted with the candidate for a couple of weeks. On the other hand, there could be applicants who have known a professor or a senior manager for a long period of time, but on a personal level, i.e. as family or friend. In such cases, even though the recommender might have known the applicant since he/she was born and can strongly vouch for him/her, the recommendation would not support the applicant's cause since it does not provide a unbiased evaluation of the applicant's skills in an academic or professional setting.

Finally, when given an option of submitting more than the required number of recommendation letters (which is usually three), it is in the applicant's interests to not submit the extra letter unless he is entirely sure that all the four recommendations would be strong. Not everyone in the committee might read all the four letters. So it might turn out that the ones being read by them are not the three strongest letters. Even if a committee member does read all the four, it may turn out that one of the four is a very weak letter and can give him/her a reason to reject the candidate (despite the other three letters being strong). It is thus safer for the applicant to just stick to three strong letters that he/she is confident about.

3.6 Résumé

The résumé is usually an optional component of the graduate application. It is a good place to fit in all the details that can't be covered in rest of the application. The applicant can mention details about his/her courses, projects, work experience, publications, extra-curricular activities and other achievements here. However, the applicant should not rely on the committee members reading all the details in the résumé or even going through the résumé at all. Important information that the applicant definitely wants the committee to know should already get mentioned in one of the application components mentioned so far. A good rule of thumb is that if a particular item is not necessary for successfully submitting the university's online application form, it does not carry a lot of weightage. Résumé is one such item. There might be a few universities that demand a résumé as a required component, but even in such cases, I would strongly advice applicants to not entirely depend on it for the committee to discover important and potentially decision-changing information.

Information regarding an important academic project or research publication should get mentioned in the statement of purpose. Additionally, the professor who the applicant worked with on the project can talk about it in his/her letter of recommendation. If the applicant had a good stint as an intern at a premier institute/company, he/she can get a recommendation from the supervisor to make it more noticeable to the committee. If the applicant received a gold medal or certificate for academic excellence, that should find mention either in the statement of purpose or a recommendation letter. In summary, the résumé can contain a lot of information about the applicant which is absent elsewhere. However, some of the achievements certainly deserve to get highlighted in a better way than being mere bullets on a résumé that might often go unnoticed.

3.7 Other deciding factors

Suppose a candidate has secured a very good score in GRE and TOEFL, always maintained a strong academic record and has a fluently written statement of purpose. Would these be enough to guarantee him admission at a school like Stanford or MIT? Not necessarily. As already mentioned, recommendation letters can often play a vital role in admission process. However, there a few other factors which play a decisive or at least an influential role in the outcome of the application.

3.7.1 Undergraduate University

Different graduate schools might attach different levels of importance to this factor, but in general, the identity of the undergraduate university definitely carries some weightage. The committee is more at ease when the applicant's undergraduate university is one that they have heard of. The committee would generally be knowledgeable about the reputation of most American universities, but might be acquainted with only a few international institutes. For instance, it is highly likely that the committee does not easily recognize any college in India apart from the IITs. Graduate schools usually compile and keep a list of good universities in different parts of the world. This helps the committee to an extent, especially when they are unfamiliar with institutions in international regions. The list however is by no means exhaustive and often might not get updated frequently enough to reflect the current state of affairs. At times, the committee itself can also a good source of information about different schools since it usually contains a good mix of members from different parts of globe. Lastly, the committee might resort to doing a web search about the applicant's university or looking at its website to gauge its reputation.

There might be a few graduate schools where the reputation of the undergraduate college is of utmost importance and can have a direct influence on the admission decision. However, for most schools, it is often not the sole reason for rejection, but can still end up inducing some bias in the reviewer's mind while evaluating the application. For instance, if the committee has a tough time making a call on a particular applicant since he/she seems to be just below the mark (or is a borderline case), the applicant might just end up getting the benefit of the doubt if he/she belongs to a top-rated university. This might not have been the case, had the applicant been from a more obscure university.

3.7.2 Research

This is probably the most important and decisive factor discussed in this section. Since the application pool for a top school is generally of very high quality, numerical scores (like GRE, GPA) will in most cases not be enough to set one candidate apart from the other. It is therefore the candidate's research background that might hold the key to him/her being chosen over someone else. An applicant's research background can be inferred from the internships and projects done by him/her (mentioned in the SOP and/or resume) and research papers published in journals and conferences. Though not as crucial as in the case of PhD applications, having research publications definitely helps in setting an applicant markedly apart from rest of the pool. Universities often ask for a list of publications to be attached while filling the application form. In addition, it is advisable for the applicants to talk about the publication (and the project behind it) in detail in the SOP as well. Similarly, in the case of internships and projects, rather than only mentioning it in the resume, it is better to highlight them in the SOP too and if possible, get a recommendation letter from the professor or researcher who supervised the work.

A paper published anywhere will carry some weightage, but the committee is more likely to be impressed if the journal or conference is a highly reputed one. The committee usually maintains a list of first tier, second tier (and other respected) conferences/journals in different fields of studies and refers it to evaluate the worthiness of a publication. Having relevant publication(s) is undoubtedly the best way to convince the committee members of potential research capability. However, internships and academic projects (especially the final year thesis or project) can help too, if they are significantly research-oriented instead of being purely implementational.

These publications and/or projects might catch the interest of someone in the admissions committee if they are relevant to his/her own research work. And if the applicant's prior research is truly admirable, that particular committee member can be instrumental in influencing the decision of others in the committee. The ideal candidate is thus not only academically brilliant (i.e. has excellent grades, admirable GPA and GRE score), but also has a proven research potential. Even in cases where the numerical scores are not very impressive, having a strong research background will help in offsetting the effects of the ordinary scores to an extent.

3.7.3 Work experience

Work experience here refers to full-time positions taken after graduation (rather than part-time jobs or internships). Unlike the requirement for MBA programs in some US schools, work experience is not at all necessary to apply for MS at a US university. In fact, work experience need not even necessarily improve an applicant's profile or increase his/her chances of getting accepted. Thus, someone fresh out of college is just as qualified to get admitted as an experienced professional.

The impact of work experience on the applicant's admission chances depend on factors like the particular role that he/she was in, and the relevancy of the industry to the program of study he/she is applying to. Suppose that a

candidate is applying for an MS in Computer Science and wants to specialize in the field of Artificial Intelligence. The best case (i.e. the one that adds most value to the application) would be one where the applicant has been working in a research lab or the R&D wing of a company that works on problems related to his field of interest (in this case, AI problems like Robotics, Image processing, Language processing, Speech processing, etc.). The next best option would be a job as software or hardware engineer in the computer industry where he/she works on software development (or hardware design) projects. Such a job, even if not research-oriented or focused towards a particular field, is still related to Computer Science and at least gives significant programming experience to the applicant (a skill that will always be necessary, even in academia). However, working as a sales professional in the pharmaceutical industry (or even the computer industry) will seldom have any effect on the application. Thus, the weightage given to work experience depends on how much the committee deems the work to be relevant and of use to the candidate for the graduate program.

Provided that the work is relevant, the other factor that matters is the identity of the company itself. Companies that are reputed and are more familiar to the committee will have more weightage than others. For instance, in the computer industry, these would be companies like Microsoft, Google, Apple, Oracle, etc. Applicants having work experience can choose to have one of their recommenders as their immediate manager from work instead of someone from their undergraduate college. This can help both applicants who hail from fairly unknown colleges, but work in a reputed company, and applicants who could not manage to perform very well in college (hence recommendations from college are likely to be weak), but subsequently excelled in his/her job.

3.8 Summing It Up

As can be deduced from the preceding sections, the admissions selection process relies upon a number of factors, which interact with each other in various ways. Every potential candidate (after the initial screening) is usually reviewed by more than one committee member and gets a numerical score from each reviewer. However, there are no fixed numerical weightages for each factor and the final score is not a linear combination of the different factors. The committee is usually given a scale (e.g. 0-5, 1-10, etc.) and a mapping from different scores on that scale to English descriptions of what an average applicant getting that score should be like. Using this legend as a reference, the score is awarded by the reviewer based on his/her overall perception of the candidate, taking all factors into account. The average reviewer score is then used for deciding the fate of the application.

Since it is tough to start assigning accurate scores to applications right from the beginning, committee members often go back to their already evaluated applications for recalibrating the scores after going through all their applicants once (i.e. after getting a sense of the average quality of the application pool). Despite such careful measures, there may be cases where the same application gets contrasting reviews since each committee member may differ in the way he/she evaluates candidates. These differences are sorted out by debate and discussion during the final admissions committee meeting. In these discussions, applications that might have otherwise got rejected (due to low average reviewer score) can get rescued by a committee member who has a strong case for admitting the candidate. The final selection process is thus a time consuming and complicated one. However, it receives due diligence from every committee member since maintaining an excellent quality of incoming students is a high priority for any top tier graduate school.

4 Conclusion

This paper gives a detailed tour of the American graduate admissions process from the perspective of an application reviewer. It explains in depth, the extent to which each aspect of the applicant's profile matters, how the different aspects influence each other, and how they are used in conjunction to arrive at a final decision. It also tries to correct some of the common fallacies about the admissions process and highlights pitfalls that should be avoided by applicants. In conclusion, this paper hopes to provide an adequate answer to the question "What does a top US university look for in an applicant to their graduate program?"

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My Brief Bio

I graduated from Stanford University in June 2010 with an MS in Computer Science (specializing in Artificial Intelligence) with Distinction in Research in Natural Language Processing. I received my B.Tech in Computer Science and Engineering from the National Institute of Technology Calicut (India) in April 2008 and then joined Stanford for my graduate studies in the fall of 2008. While at Stanford, I got the opportunity to serve as one of the members of the computer science department's MS admissions committee for the 2010 admissions process. This paper is based on my personal experience as an admissions committee member at Stanford and is licensed under a Creative Commons License.

Though I am always happy to help graduate school aspirants and/or discuss any of the things mentioned in this paper in further detail, I would highly encourage prospective applicants to study the information available at http://ktick.blogspot.com[1] before contacting me. The blog contains answers to a lot of frequently asked questions regarding graduate applications that I have compiled from my experience in advising and replying to the emails of dozens of students from India over the past few years. I can be reached at kr@cs.stanford.edu and more details about me are on my homepage at http://nlp.stanford.edu/~rkarthik.

[1] This blog is invitation-only for now. Kindly contact me for access.