



# **FITTING IN & STANDING OUT: THE PARADOX AT THE HEART OF ADMISSIONS**



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Accepted is THE premiere professional admissions consulting firm, helping applicants get accepted to colleges, graduate schools, business schools, law schools, and medical schools, as well as other healthcare programs, for the past 30 years. We have guided thousands of candidates through the entire application process to gain acceptance at the world's top programs.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR - KARIN ASH



With **30 years of career/admissions experience** at four universities, including Cornell's Johnson Graduate School of Business and College of Engineering, Dr. Karin Ash has met with thousands of recruiters seeking to hire the best students from leading schools. She has served as a member of the admissions committee, ensuring that the applicants who ultimately enroll are a good fit for the program and prime candidates for employers. As a consultant with Accepted Karin has facilitated students' entry into top engineering, data science, MBA, and other STEM graduate MEng, MS, and PhD programs.

[Click here to learn more about Karin Ash.](#)

# INTRODUCTION

The application process is a tricky balancing act: you must show the admissions committee that you *fit in* – that you're a perfect fit with their program and the exact type of candidate they're looking for – while simultaneously showing that you *stand out* in the pool of qualified candidates. In this admissions guide, we'll give you four key tips to help you *fit in* and *stand out* as an applicant.

# TIP #1: PROVE YOU CAN DO THE WORK

The first step to fitting in is showing the admissions committee that you can do the work required and excel in your target program.

## Can You Get the Job Done?

Graduate and professional school programs want to admit applicants who are prepared to manage the demands of the program. This means you need to demonstrate that you have the intellectual/academic ability to handle the work. As the assistant dean of MBA admissions at NYU Stern once said in [an Admissions Straight Talk podcast](#), “We look at ... academic potential – are they going to be able to handle the academic rigors of the program?”

## How Can You Prove Your Ability to Thrive?

You can demonstrate your ability most straightforwardly through your academic record, work accomplishments, and test scores. Ideally, you want to be at or above your target programs’ averages for both GPA and test scores – or at worst, only a little below those averages. These days, some programs are making admissions tests optional or issuing test waivers, so our test score advice here obviously holds only for those programs where such an exam is still required or optional, or where you didn’t receive a waiver. Some programs have additional considerations or academic requirements, such as certain courses (medical school prerequisites) or skills (foreign languages, computer skills, [work experience for MBA programs](#), clinical exposure for medical schools).

## What If Your Stats Aren’t High Enough?

If the issue is your test score (e.g., GRE, GMAT, MCAT, LSAT), and you have to submit one, consider retaking the exam. Most, but not all, graduate programs weigh your highest score most heavily or even exclusively. For these programs, retaking the exam and raising your score is the best response to a score that doesn’t represent your abilities fairly.

If your undergrad GPA is what’s concerning you, a high test score (and excellent research/work experience, brilliant recommendations, and so on) can mitigate it. Depending on your field, you can also consider taking additional courses (and getting great grades in them) to prepare for grad school.

Demonstrating your academic ability is just the first step to fitting in. It is necessary, but not sufficient on its own.

# TIP #2: SHOW FIT WITH THE SCHOOL'S CULTURE AND MISSION

The next key to showing your fit as an applicant is demonstrating that you're an excellent match for the program's culture and mission.

This means you must research each program you're applying to. Look into the following:

- What are the core values and mission of the program?
- What type of community does the program promote (collaborative or competitive)?
- What unique opportunities would you experience at the target program that make it the right fit?
- Does the program have a distinct mission or teaching philosophy? For example, if you're applying to MBA programs, are you drawn to schools with a case-based methodology? An emphasis on experiential learning? If you're considering engineering programs, how much emphasis is placed on demonstrating your creativity or entrepreneurship? If you're applying to medical school, do you want a research or clinical focus?

The key here is your research. Your reasons for choosing a particular school need to go [further than rankings and deeper than platitudes](#).

## How to Research Schools Effectively

There are many ways you can do this research.

- Your first stop is the school's (or department's) website. Scour it for information related to your goals. Many programs offer the opportunity to contact or meet with students or alumni, or to attend admissions events. These are all great ways to learn more.
- Reading student blogs or student-run newspapers can also give you insight into what life is actually like on campus.
- If you're applying to a research-oriented program, read up on the current projects that people in the department are working on. Department websites normally provide profiles of professors, along with their CVs. You might also find profiles of grad students or recent alumni, with descriptions of their research topics. This information is all there for your benefit, so take advantage of it!
- You can use resources such as LinkedIn to find students or alumni of your target school and then ask them for an opportunity to speak with them about their academic experience.

## Using Your Research to Demonstrate Fit

Once you've done your homework, it's time for you to demonstrate cultural fit throughout your application. Your coursework reflects your interests. Your work experience, extracurricular activities, and community service reflect your values and impact. The way you describe what you've done can highlight those experiences in ways that show shared values.

Finally, there are the essays, which are prime opportunities for showing your fit.

Whether it's an MBA goals essay that also discusses how a particular program will help you achieve those goals, an MA/MS or PhD statement of purpose that highlights why the department is a perfect match for your research and career goals, or a med school secondary essay that discusses the school's mission statement head-on, your essays are the first place for you to show the admissions committee that you fit with the school's culture.

Demonstrate that you've done your homework by referring to specifics: which opportunities (such as research opportunities with specific professors, experiential learning, and clinical training, depending on your field) make their program compelling? It is never enough to say that a program is appealing because it has a great reputation and is in a location you like. Instead, you need to go deep.

## Pay Attention to the Details

As you identify the school's core values, think about how you exemplify them, and keep that in mind as you choose examples for your essays and your resume/activity history. For example, some med schools place an especially high premium on volunteering. Say your target school specifies a minimum of 300 hours of community service, and your further research has revealed that admitted applicants actually average about twice that. You will definitely want to highlight your service experience in your application, given that it is obviously a core value of that school.

Here's one thing to remember: don't just repeat the school's mission statement or phrases from the website. Do your research, and **show** how your experiences make you a great match for what the school is looking for, as well as how the school's offerings make it a perfect match for your interests and goals.

## TIP #3: DEMONSTRATE FIT VIA YOUR GOAL

A third key way of showing your fit is by demonstrating you have a clear, realistic career goal – one that the program will help you achieve.

Goals are an important part of the application process for many types of programs. That's why MBA programs normally ask applicants about their post-MBA goals, and why grad programs in a variety of fields ask for a statement of purpose. The admissions committees want to know that you have thought clearly not only about your plans for the future but also about what role their program will play in helping you realize them. (If you're applying to college, it's okay for your goals to be more nebulous, but you can still start thinking about your interests.)

Some programs might ask you to describe both your short- and long-term goals. Think about the industry you plan to work in, as well as the job function and how you hope your career will develop over time.

### Where Are You Headed? How Will You Get There?

If you're early in your career, your goals might still be evolving, and that's fine. The key here is that you have thought about the direction you want to go in and *how the skills and training you'll gain in the graduate program will help you go in that direction.*

For example, some med school secondaries ask you to consider the direction your future career might take. Even if you're not sure which specialty you might ultimately choose, this is an opportunity to think seriously about how you see your professional life unfolding – what type of practice you envision, whether you want to incorporate research into your career, and so on. The schools ask this type of question because they want to know that you've thought seriously about your goals and understand the path you're setting out on.

If you are applying to an MBA, engineering, or other graduate program, what job function/industry do you envision for the first five years? What is your aspiration in the long term? What kind of impact do you want to have on society?

### Using Your Goals to Stand Out

Having a clear, coherent goal is one way you can show you "fit" in a school's pool of target applicants, and your description of your goals/statement of purpose is a way to stand out. What do we mean by that?

Your goal is unique, because you are unique, and the experiences that have prepared and motivated you to pursue that goal are unique. [Your goals essay or statement of purpose](#) must illustrate a connection between your past experiences and your future plans, and show how the school's resources and strengths meet your educational needs and will help you transform your plans into a realized future. Think about your experiences and how they've shaped your interests and your goals. Even if you're going to grad school to change careers, there's normally something in your experience that has set the foundation for your current interests.

Connect the dots for your readers. Show them how your path – a journey that is distinctive to you – has led you to your goals for grad school and your career.

# TIP #4: REVEAL THAT YOU HAVE A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

Once you've shown that you have what your target school is looking for – that you fit in – your challenge is to stand out among a pool of applicants who could, at least on a superficial level, look just like you.

When so many applicants have pursued similar academic paths to prepare for grad school, have taken the same exams, and might even have parallel professional trajectories (at least at first glance), how can you make sure you don't blend into the crowd?

The key is to show the admissions committee what makes you unique, what makes you YOU.

## Revealing Your Individuality – Identity, Deeds, Ideas

There are several ways to constructively reveal your individuality and, most importantly, your ability to contribute to class discussions and your community, both on campus and after you graduate. In broad strokes, here is an overview:

### 1. Identity: Who are you?

Your background is part of your identity and can help you differentiate yourself from your competition. Are you the first in your family to attend college? Did you grow up in a rural area or a country or state that doesn't send many students to the programs you are applying to? Are you a member of an under-represented minority? Did you have to overcome challenging circumstances? How did you become motivated to consider your academic field? All these elements of your identity could contribute to your target program's diversity and the richness of the learning environment it provides.

You need to demonstrate throughout your application your ability to contribute to the diversity of your class, but a diversity statement or personal history, if requested, is prime territory for this endeavor. How has your background contributed to your interest in your target field or perhaps to a distinctive interest not related to your professional or educational goals? Let the programs know how your identity animates your interests, drives your ability to contribute distinctively, and makes you tick.

If this sounds like you need to do some serious thinking before you start writing, you're right. Self-reflection is a great foundation for a good application. Journaling and taking notes before you sit down to write an essay or diversity statement can also be helpful. Thinking and prewriting can help you show that you fit in and stand out.

### **Deeds: What have you accomplished?**

As we've already discussed with reference to goals, one key strategy when developing your application essay(s) is to draw connections between what you have done in the past and what you plan to do in the future; the admissions committee needs to see that their program makes sense for you. The same logic applies to standing out: by revealing your past contributions, you can show how you have had an impact in the past and draw a link to how you will have an impact during grad school.

[What are some areas where your unique experiences and contributions can make you stand out?](#) Here are a few to consider:

- Excelling in your academics or profession
- Success/leadership in your community service or volunteer work
- Succeeding in a sport or other extracurricular activity
- Unusual area of interest
- Uncommon travel
- Overcoming challenges or disability

This is another point where self-reflection and journaling/note-taking can help you. How have your unique experiences shaped your perspective? How have the contributions you've made in the past prepared you for the goals that lie ahead? How do the experiences that you are most proud of reveal the qualities and attributes that your target programs value?

### **2. Ideas: How do you think?**

Your unique perspective, which has been formed by your experiences, can help you stand out as an applicant AND show the admissions committees why you're great for their program. For example, someone with a background in analytics and big data can revolutionize retail and marketing or health-care or many different fields. Maybe you're someone who has a record of looking at complicated problems in a new way, reaching innovative solutions: that's a unique perspective and can help you stand out. Or perhaps your background combines seemingly disparate interests – such as music and law, or medicine and literature, or computer science and farming.

You can also use your application to show how your experiences have given you critical analysis, excellent listening, and/or other communication skills. Many graduate programs expect their alumni to become leaders in their field, and doing so requires the ability to communicate effectively with diverse constituents.

Where can you demonstrate these things in your application? The diversity statement and/or personal history is one place. But the theme of contribution – the impact you've had, what you've learned from

it, how you'll contribute in the future – is something that should run through your entire application, including your statement of purpose, community service descriptions, and CV. And it is something you should be prepared to discuss in an interview as well.

# CONCLUSION

As we discussed at the beginning of this guide, one of the central challenges and paradoxes of the application process is that you need to show that you would fit into a school's community while also standing out from other candidates in the applicant pool. In a competitive application process, merely "fitting in" is not enough – you must distinguish yourself and show that you have something distinctive to contribute. Likewise, if all you do is "stand out," the admissions committee might have qualms about your ability to do the work or participate constructively in its community and your chosen profession.

You **MUST** simultaneously fit in and stand out.

We've covered four aspects of this challenge:

1. Proving you can do the work
2. Showing you fit in with the school's culture
3. Highlighting your goals
4. Demonstrating that you will contribute distinctively to classes, your fellow students, and the school's broader community

If you fulfill these four objectives, you should be able to effectively demonstrate both your fit with the programs you're applying to and your distinctiveness.

Now it's time to move from general tips to personalized advice tailored just for you.

Sign up for a free consultation with one of Accepted's admissions experts!

**GET STARTED!**

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