

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR GRADES AREN'T SO HOT

You may be among those many students who didn't take their grades seriously until it was too late to turn their academic records around. You may lament that you did not, or could not, commit more strongly to your studies. *Don't despair yet!* If your course grades do not reflect your true ability, you may still be able to get back on *the* path, or at least a similar one, that will lead you to your goals. College underachievers can even excel in graduate programs (Schwartz & DeSimone, 1985), especially when their goals and objectives become clearly delineated.

My friend is a first semester junior and really wants to be a psychologist, but his transcript qualifies for disaster relief. He's already struck out, right?

Not necessarily. Take a look at Figure 14-1. This is a selection from an *actual* transcript of one of my students who is currently enrolled in a psychology doctoral program at one of the top universities in the country! As you can see, she got a *C* in the introductory psychology course, and flunked a chemistry class *twice*. An "incomplete" and a "withdrawal" provide additional blemishes. Hardly a record that inspires optimism!

It wasn't easy for this student to turn things around, but with tremendous resolve and a commitment to follow through with the necessary actions, she was able to demonstrate to a selection committee that she was intelligent and motivated, a "good risk" despite her earlier, checkered record. She cultivated professors who would help her reveal her true abilities. She volunteered to help them with their research, and spent many a weekend "running" both rats and data. Her GPA for the last four semesters was close to a 4.00.

Thus, for some students who catch themselves early on, it's a matter of ameliorating their records during the latter part of their undergraduate careers. It is impossible to markedly raise the numerical component itself to a figure that rivals those of students who have earned high grades all along. The student just described, despite her heroic effort during the last half of her undergraduate studies, graduated with a modest overall **GPA** of **3.22**. However, evaluators will usually pause long enough to take notice of a stark upward trend, especially if the applicant has additional compensating factors. Many programs weigh the **GPA** earned during the latter half of the applicant's undergraduate career far more heavily than that earned during the first half.

FALL 1984					
BIOL 150	PRIN OF BIOLOGY I	3.0	3.0	B	9.0
BIOL 150L	BIOLOGY I LAB	1.0	1.0	A	4.0
CHEM101	GEN CHEMISTRY	-5.0	-5.0	D	-5.0
PSY 150	PRIN HUM BEHAVIOR	3.0	3.0	C	6.0
SOC 201	CONT FAM IN SOCTY	3.0	3.0	B	9.0
SPRING 1985					
BIOL 322	POPULATION BIOL	-3.0	-3.0	C	-6.0

BIOL 360	GENETICS	-3.0	-3.0	C	-6.0
CHEM102	GEN CHEMISTRY	-5.0		F	
PHYS 100A	GENERAL PHYSICS I			W	
PHYS100AL	GEN PHYS LAB	1.0	1.0	B	3.0
FALL 1985					
CLAS115	ENGL VOC- GRK+LAT		3.0	CR*	
BIOL 151	PRIN OF BIOL II	3.0	3.0	B	9.0
BIOL 151L	BIOLOGY II LAB	1.0	1.0	A	4.0
CHEM 101	GEN CHEMISTRY	5.0	5.0	B	15.0
POLS 155	AMER POL INST	3.0	3.0	C	6.0
		12.0	15.0	2.83	34.0
SPRING 1986					
HSCI 170	EMRG PROCEDURES	1.0	1.0	B	3.0
HSCI 170L	EMRG PROCDRS LAB	1.0	1.0	B	3.0
P E 127A	BODY COND. I	1.0		I	
BIOL 322	POPULATION BIOL	3.0	3.0	B	9.0
BIOL 360	GENETICS	3.0	3.0	B	9.0
CHEM 102	GEN CHEMISTRY	5.0		F	

Figure 14-1

What Ever Happened To This Student?

What about students who can't catch up because they will be graduating within the next semester or two?

The Undergraduate Psychology Major Survey revealed that most of the respondents wanted to go onto graduate school, including 81% of those with GPAs of 2.2 to 2.9 and of 71% of those with GPAs of 1.9 to 2.1. These data suggest that very large numbers of students whose final academic records are quite unassuming will be attempting to find their way into graduate training programs. Some of them will take it.

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to the population of students whose academic performance throughout their undergraduate career was not near the top range, *yet who also*

believe they have far more ability and motivation to succeed in a graduate program than their records reveal.

What does “modest academic record” mean in numerical terms?

It is difficult to place a precise GPA range that defines “modest,” because other factors – such as the selection of undergraduate courses taken, performance in specific major courses, and the rigor or reputation of the undergraduate college or university – will influence its interpretation. But, in general terms, we are talking about students with B- through the low end B+ averages (or GPAs of about 2.7 to 3.2 on a 4-point scale). Students with GPAs below 2.7 may be able to find graduate study options that will lead them to a career in their general interest area; however, direct entry into a psychology doctoral program in a traditional university setting is far less likely for them.

Eight Strategies for Students with Modest Grades to Consider

Delay Graduation. Remember the kid they “held back” a grade in junior high school? The stigma associated with that label of “dumb” or “inadequate” is hard to shake. However, with increasing numbers of students going to school part-time or adding a semester or more because they changed majors late, it is not uncommon for students to get out of sync with their starting freshman class.

If you think that you can *significantly* improve your **GPA** by delaying your graduation a semester or two, it could be the smart thing to do. Perhaps by reducing the number of units you take (while taking solid courses!) you can focus more time and labor on your studies. Please note that this is a plausible strategy *only if you are extremely confident in your ability to do better work*. If your grades remain bare-boned, and it takes you longer to graduate, the whole plan will miscarry!

Take Selected Courses Over Again. Another tactic to consider (which may also have the effect of delaying your graduation date) is to repeat one or more of the courses that are pulling down your GPA – courses in which you received Ds and Fs – or key courses in your major in which you performed in the very average range. Most colleges and universities allow courses to be retaken. This plan makes sense only if a *few* courses are involved, the rest of your record is adequate, and you are convinced that you could perform significantly better the second time around. You should also know that the original attempts and the lousy marks associated with them will not remain on your transcript. You would repeat the courses not to hide a problem, but to prove that you can do better.

Become a “Post-Baccalaureate” Student for a Semester or Two. It is usually possible to remain at your undergraduate institution (or go to another) as a post-baccalaureate (PBA) student for the purpose of taking additional courses. This would be done to round out your record and/or to improve it by earning better grades and gaining other valuable experiences. The only difference between this ploy and delaying graduation is that you go ahead and graduate before taking more courses.

Please note that the courses you take as PBA student may be at the *undergraduate* level because graduate courses are often only open to students enrolled in graduate programs. You will not receive graduate level credit for undergraduate courses taken as a PBA unless you happen to take one of the very advanced undergraduate classes that allows you to be excused from taking some basic course in the graduate program you eventually enter.

These suggestions all take time, but don't count toward an advanced degree. It's rather like standing still, isn't it?

No, you aren't marking time. You are busy digging out and mopping up. The strategies suggested above offer a possible *second chance* to become a competitive applicant to graduate programs you could not qualify for now. We haven't finished with the list of strategies, however, and the rest of them involve moving ahead from where you are now.

High Test Performance. Well-read and bright students who did not pay enough attention to their college course work might be able to shine in a different light. If applicants with very modest GPAs put in exceptionally strong showings on the GRE exams, they will earn a closer look. Data indicate that selection committees frequently use GRE scores to offset otherwise less-than-satisfactory credentials: That is, selection committees may try to avoid "false negatives" by allowing strong GRE scores to compensate for a weaker GPA (Oltman & Harnett, 1985).

This is not to suggest that one can ignore course work and make up for it with stellar test scores! Selection committees are looking for more than just how well one can perform on objective tests. A student with high GRE scores and lower grades would also have to provide some indication of how she plans to better apply herself to her course work as a graduate student.

Take Classes at the "Target" Institution. Those who have identified the program to which they aspire, but do not quite meet the qualifications for acceptance, may find it possible to go there anyway – sort of. Many universities, including the most prestigious and competitive ones, have "non-degree status" categories that enable students to take a few classes, sometimes even at the graduate level. These categories go by such designations as "unclassified graduate student," "special student status," "course work only status," "associate graduate student," "graduate study only," "special standing," "visiting student," and "limited student status." Sometimes the limitations of this status are so restrictive that this strategy would not be attractive to you and would not get you where you want to go. It is necessary to check out the specific university of interest for details, and then assess the feasibility according to your goals.

The point of this tactic, of course, is to get to know the program by actually being there, to meet the faculty, and to try to attract their support. The strategy is not without risk, however, because there is no guarantee of acceptance into the graduate program. However, I have worked with a number of students for whom this route was successful.

Earn a Master's Degree Before Applying to a Doctoral Program. We have already discussed the possible advantages of completing a master's program focused more on students whose goals were not firmly set or who felt that they needed a little more time to mature. Certainly another group who could benefit from this route includes students whose grades and test scores qualify for entry into a master's program, but are not high enough for a doctoral program. If the master's degree period is used as a proving ground, a way of showing evaluators in doctoral-level programs that you have developed what it takes, then you may be accepted into a doctoral program and receive some credit for your master's-level work.

If your grades and scores are low, or your goals are not clear, then a master's degree may be helpful in gaining entry to a doctoral program – if you earn good grades as a master's level student and get good faculty recommendations.

Florence L. Denmark
Robert Scott Pace Professor
Pace University
President, American Psychological Association, 1980

It is important, however, to assure that the master's program you select is rigorous and well-regarded if your ultimate goal is to enter a traditional doctoral program. I've spoken to some very downcast students who thought that any "psychology-like" master's program would do, and were stunned to learn that their degrees from non-traditional schools or less-rigorous programs were dismissed as "irrelevant."

Earn a Master's Degree instead of a Doctoral-Level Degree. If your grades are very modest, you may never be able to qualify for a doctoral program. However, a number of master's level programs may be able to prepare you to do the kind of work you would find fulfilling. If you must abandon your hope of becoming a clinical psychologist, for example, you may find the master's level counseling programs which come in a wide variety of types, may be your ticket. You could specialize in counseling families, persons in the process of rehabilitating from a mental disorder or physical condition, persons returning to society (e.g., ex-prisoners), or substance abusers. Settings include community mental health centers, halfway houses, and find work in various agencies in the public and private sector.

Fill Out the Forms like a Pro. Many other graduate school applicants may have better grades than you do, but nothing precludes submitting a neat, professional set of application materials that appears as impressive as that of any student with a 4.0 GPA! Carefully read the upcoming chapters on how to prepare your application forms and essay statements, and put in that little extra effort. This may not put you over the top, but it will make you look sincere, motivated, organized, and competent, and maybe – just maybe – someone to take a chance on!

Seek Career Counseling. Students who must readjust their goals because of their low academic records would be wise to get some in-depth career counseling. If you are still an undergraduate, you probably have these services available to you right now at no or minimal cost. Try *SIGI Plus* if you can. This is the computerized career counselor developed by the Educational Testing Service (the same folks who bring you the SATs and the GREs). Many students report that the SIGI experience provided useful insights.

Strategies that Won't Work

If I explain that I had the misfortune of getting boring and unfair professors, will that help selection committees understand my low grades?

A number of strategies will give you no help, and shifting the blame for your academic record onto the institution and its teaching staff is one of them. The evaluators will more likely assume that you overuse rationalization and cannot take responsibility for your own actions.

Other useless strategies include: filling up at the end of your undergraduate career on lower division, fluffy, or "easy A" classes; begging a referee to fudge for you when it comes to describing your academic potential; hoping that no one takes much notice of your GPA if you never mention it to your referees or in your essay statement; and applying to scores of programs for which you clearly do not qualify in hopes that you will get lucky with one of them.

Other Pointers for Students with Modest Academic Records

Although you should read all of this book and apply whatever you can from it, there are a few modifications that students with modest grades may have to make.

When it comes to asking people for letters of recommendation, you may not have the luxury of choosing professors from you earned high marks. First consider any in whose classes

you performed the best (any A's or B's). Find time to see them in person and discuss your academic record openly. You don't have to apologize or put yourself down, but do enter into a discussion of your goals and how you plan to do better work in the future. The idea here is to give potential referees a flavor of your motivation and commitment which may, if they are convinced, carry over into the comments they make about you on the referee forms.

What about asking professors who gave me a C? There is one I think liked me.

Sometimes a letter from a professor in whose class you performed only average work will be effective. If you are pretty sure that the professor knows and likes you, then ask yourself what else this person could say about you that would help your cause. For example, I once had a student who earned a C in my class, but who did a terrific fieldwork project. He volunteered to work with high school students on the verge of dropping out. His own "street smarts" were perhaps the key to forming effective relationships with these kids. The school personnel thought he was superb (I told him to get that on paper!) and his long-term career goal was to work with "at risk" adolescents. I was pleased to support his application to counseling program in an educational psychology department, even though I could not portray him as a strong student. He earned his master's degree and is currently working with adolescents in a community agency.

Perhaps there was something you did well, or something about you that the professor admires, that can form the basis of the positive aspects of the letter. Your negotiations for a letter of support should address these issues directly.

If you have trouble getting three letters of recommendation (the number usually requested) from professors, consider any other credible options. In my experience, many students with more modest academic records receive enthusiastic reviews from supervisors in fieldwork settings.

What should I say on the application about my grades?

In your statement of purpose (or cover letter), you will want to address your average grade situation directly. The Graduate Staff Survey respondents often observed the applicants frequently make the mistake of failing to discuss the weakness in their records. Unless you do so, and try to convince the evaluators that you can do better and why, they may surmise that you are trying to hide, or are unaware of, your shortcomings.

If your grades improved markedly with time, it is obvious that you have changed, and you do not need to elaborate on the reason extensively. You may simply note that your performance accelerated as soon as you decided on your goals, or mentioning whatever event or circumstance explains the turning point. You may also calculate (even if not specifically requested) your GPA for the last two years to concretely illustrate your current level of performance. If extenuating circumstances existed, accounting for a muffed semester or two, you could describe them briefly. Be cautious about going into more detail than is necessary here. Include how the situation has since been remedied. Focus most of your comments, however, on your strengths-what you have done well and what about you warrants the selection committee's serious consideration

Those whose grades have remained on the low side and very stable across the semesters, and especially those whose grades started off better than they finished up or whose grades in the major are as low or lower than their overall GPAs, will have more difficulties convincing a selection committee that they are a good risk at this time. If you are in this group, you can either take one or more of the "mop up" suggestions presented earlier, or consider applying to one or more of the lesser-known state sponsored universities, or are in very expensive private schools. The APA Directory will be of *less* help to you in this instance than the larger but less-detailed directories put out by Peterson's Guides and the Educational Testing Service (see Chapter 11).

A friend told me that she knew where you can get a PhD in less than a year and students don't even have to go to any classes.

There are lots of post office boxes you can write to (with a check included, of course!) and get back an "advanced degree certificate" from some fancy-named but nonexistent institution. Stay away from such nonsense.

Other institutions are in a "grey zone." They may have a license to operate legally, but do not meet any minimum educational standards set by the professions for which they claim to prepare their "students." The old saw, "If it seems too good to be true it probably is," clearly applies here. You want training that has merit and that will not be a source of laughter when you ask for a job, so stay away from these, too. (See Chapter 5 for more detail about "incompetent institutions.")

However, there comes a point when we move into the *legitimate* realm of non-traditional training programs. These may not have a campus complex in the usual sense- with departments representing many disciplines, a library, undergraduate as well as graduate programs, a football field, founder statues, and a quad-but do provide training that is recognized as complying with at least minimal standards required by the consensus of the profession. Many of these programs cannot compete for students whose grades and experiences are modest. Many are designated as free-standing professional training programs-and some of these APA approved and also competitive-but the lesser known or very small schools of this type may give you what you need to reach your goals, and they have more lenient admissions requirements. Research them out carefully to assure that they are viewed as legitimate and offer competent training. Ask their staffs for information about what becomes of their students after they graduate.

You may find the *Directory of Colleges and Universities with Non-Traditional Programs/Systems/Practices* (published and revised periodically by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers) a helpful resource, although it consists mostly of non-traditional programs located on traditional university campuses.

Conclusion

If you have a modest academic record but are truly motivated to earn a graduate degree and think you have the ability to do it, stick by your convictions. You will have to work hard to prove yourself. You may well get some words of discouragement along the way, including being told that you don't rate a letter of recommendation.

The main thing to keep in mind is that your advanced training, whatever it may be, prepares you to do competent work, and that includes learning the boundaries of your competence so that referrals can be made when your capacity limit has been reached.