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## It's important to think carefully about one's personal statement when applying to Ph.D. programs (opinion)

Submitted by Stephen J. Aguilar on February 14, 2020 - 3:00am

As admissions wraps up this year, I have begun to reflect on the process of applying to Ph.D. programs. It is a big step and a daunting process that should not be taken lightly. You should approach it much like applying to a job, since obtaining your doctoral degree is the start of a long career devoted to a specific field of knowledge.

Doctorates mimic traditional degrees, but they are decidedly *not* the same. After all, many institutions pay you, the applicant, to be there if you are admitted. That is why is it important to examine one often-misunderstood requirement of Ph.D. applications: the personal statement.

### Defining the Statement

Personal statements for Ph.D. programs are named terribly. They are not personal in the ways that a personal statement for undergraduate programs are. At its core, a personal statement is a written argument that makes the case for being admitted into a program, often to work with a particular person or set of people. As such, a personal statement must set forth a few claims and warrant those claims with evidence that makes the argument convincing.

A personal statement must answer the questions “Why are you applying here, to this program?” and “How do your interests and/or experiences align with those of the program and/or faculty you have identified?”

While the above questions are straightforward, the manner in which you

should answer them is not. This is where many applicants often trip themselves up. In answering the above questions, they presume that the readers of their statement require a long exposition focused on personal stories of struggle, persistence and accomplishment. Such stories can indeed help contextualize certain aspects of an applicant, but too many stories -- or stories that are, in fact, too personal -- can distract from the core argument: what you will contribute to the intellectual community that you are hoping to join.

### **Hallmarks of a Weak Statement**

Weak personal statements have one to two focal points that signal persistence, for example, but they do not make such persistence *relevant* to the program or the work of potential advisers. Including stories that are divorced from the program or advisers in that way makes it difficult to imagine how an applicant can contribute.

Another hallmark of a weak statement is generic language. Readers of personal statements know when statements are generic versus tailored to the program or adviser. When in doubt, *always* tailor. This does not mean that you need to write five totally unique statements for five programs. But it does mean that portions of the statement should reflect where you are applying.

Weak statements are also unfocused. If I, as a potential adviser, do not know what applicants want to study after reading a personal statement, it signals to me that they may simply want another degree rather than to contribute to our understanding of a set of phenomena. I would come to a similar conclusion if it becomes clear that an applicant has too many unrelated interests -- or interests that do not align with my area of expertise or the program's strengths.

### **Writing a Strong Statement**

Strong personal statements do not overflow with personal stories that are unconnected to one's proposed field of study. Strong statements instead use limited personal details as a prologue of sorts that helps frame the rest of the statement. Such framing helps a reader understand *why* an applicant is interested in a particular topic.

The notion of personal stories as prologues is key: strong personal statements use stories as entry points to discuss relevant experiences that will be valuable to an applicant as they navigate the Ph.D. program. Often, such stories are not truly personal; they are instead anecdotes that signal additional *professional* experience. Admissions committees are generally less interested in that one time you overcame a difficult class and more interested in the series of experiments you helped run for Professor Y.

For example, an applicant to a school of education may have developed an interest in studying students' study habits after teaching in the classroom. They would be well served by using a story from their classroom days to highlight that interest. That story could instead be personal -- an applicant can discuss their own academic journey and how it has motivated them to better understand studying and self-regulated learning. Such stories may include hardships that were overcome, but it would be a mistake to focus too much on those hardships.

If the first part of the statement is effective, then the reader should, in most cases, be able to predict which faculty members would be appropriate advisers. A strong personal statement also makes it clear who could be a good fit. In fact, after laying out your interest in and rationale for applying to the program, you should be able to write something akin to "For those reasons, Dr. X is the person I am most interested in working with ..." followed by sentences that signal that you have actually taken the time to understand Dr. X's research agenda.

Don't feel like you have to name only one potential adviser -- name a few. But don't fall into the trap of listing every faculty member who is marginally related to your interests, either. Admissions committees look for coherence, and nothing says, "I don't really know what I want to study," more than selecting potential advisers with very different research interests and agendas.

Finally, make sure that your personal statement is as perfect as it can be when it comes to grammar. Personal statements function as writing samples, as well. So if yours reads poorly from a technical standpoint, then the admissions committee will (rightly) question your ability to cope with the writing

requirements of the program.

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