

## **Eric Lehman: The Advanced Degree Trajectory Facilitator's Guide<sup>1</sup>**

### **Discussion**

The case, *Eric Lehman: The Advanced Degree Trajectory*, raises the issue of applying to multiple graduate school programs and how many a potential applicant should consider. It also raises questions about how a Masters degree might assist in moving on to a PhD program, about financial strategies for students starting in a community college and transferring to a four-year university, and some of the constraints an older student with children might face. The case begins with Eric Lehman considering his options after he has been denied admission to a PhD program at UC Davis. The case makes clear that even students like Eric may not be accepted to the program of their choice. Eric has an outstanding GPA, good GRE scores, and excellent recommendations. However, there are many other factors that go into an admissions committee decision for PhD programs, particularly because most programs admit only a limited number of students. Many university graduate programs prefer that their undergraduates study at another university to widen their scholarly influences and therefore, have a policy of not accepting students who have studied in their department. Faculty must also be interested in the topics a potential applicant wishes to study and often there is not a match. Funding and financial support can also play a part in how many students any given department is able to admit. The case can be used to prompt discussion of a number of issues; the relationship between academic engagement and scholarships, considerations of family life and moving to pursue an academic career, using financial resources wisely, and how many graduate school applications a student should be prepared to submit. It can also be used to help students consider if completing a Masters degree and then applying for a PhD program is a path they want to take.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

## **Abstract**

The case follows the academic career of Eric Lehman, who is in his senior year at UC Davis when the case opens and considering his options after graduation. An older student, Eric has discovered late in life that learning and knowledge are his true passion and he wants to continue his career in academia. Although Eric's track record to date is excellent, he has learned the hard way that acceptance to a PhD program is very different than being accepted for undergraduate work: a student can exceed all the minimum requirements and still not be admitted. This is particularly difficult if the student applies to only one program, a situation Eric finds himself in because he does not want to re-locate his pre-teen son. As the case opens, Eric has decided to employ a backup plan and apply to Masters degree programs at two CSU campuses that are within commuting distance of his home. This will allow him to continue on towards his ultimate goal of teaching at the community college level and also leave open an option to re-apply for a PhD program once his son has completed high school. The case illustrates excellent strategies for students starting at a community college and transferring to a four-year school as Eric's track record demonstrates the interdependence between doing well in classes and finding funding for one's education.

## **Pedagogy**

The class discussion should help students understand some of the strategies Eric employed to fund his education and allow students begin to think about questions they may want to research when applying to various graduate programs. There is no prescribed number of programs any given student should apply to but they should know how to assess the possibilities of their acceptance. The case can also help prompt students to seek out and start exploring programs in which they may have an interest. How would they go about finding out what are the requirements for teaching at a community college? Does one need a Masters degree before you apply for a PhD? What are the different career paths for those students that complete Masters and PhDs?

### ***Teaching points:***

1. The strategic benefits of applying for scholarships
  2. How to explore academic trajectory options and what kind of questions to ask of different programs
  3. How to assess acceptance rates and decide how many applications to submit
- 1. The strategic benefits of applying for scholarships:** As an older student, Eric was careful with the finances of returning to school and made sure he understood how his funding would work. Knowing he wanted to transfer to a four-year college and complete his BA helped him strategize about the state funding he would have available and when and how to use it. Eric also learned early on that good grades could equal financial aid and he made a point of doing two things; making sure his professors knew of his interests and plans and then leveraging this into scholarships. Professor recommendations are a vital component of any scholarship application and these are easier to write when the professor understands a student's goals and interests and can write with some familiarity. Eric also found an ancillary benefit to applying for scholarships. It helped him to define his goals and move him forward.

Each scholarship application required that he put his education in perspective and articulate his reason for being in school, his reasons for studying and where he thought he was headed. Articulating a clear direction can help a student persist, even in the face of obstacles, and even if that direction changes within months. Perhaps it was Eric's strong sense of purpose and the fact that he had written about it at length, that allowed him to pivot so easily when he wasn't admitted to UC Davis and continue on with the other options that presented themselves. It should also be pointed out to students that the reciprocal relationship between grades and funding also helped Eric focus on what was important.

2. **How to explore academic trajectory options and what kind of questions to ask of different programs:** Students who are considering advanced degrees need to do a lot of exploring to discover a good program fit. This can be done through searching websites, talking with graduate students, and attending information sessions at various programs and universities. They should talk with professors they have for current classes and also, if possible, visit professors at university programs they have an interest in attending. Informational interviews can also help a student decide what kind of program might fit best with their interests and career goals.
3. **How to assess acceptance rates and decide how many programs to apply to:** Some programs post their admissions statistics and include information about the number of applicants and how many are accepted annually, as well as GPA averages and GRE scores of accepted applicants. (Students applying to medical and law school programs will have a very different set of statistics. It is generally accepted that medical applicants apply to as many as twenty different programs.) Students should also understand the differences between applying for a Masters and PhD and what any given degree will allow them in terms of career opportunity, advancement and salary. Gathering some of this information will help them understand how many programs they will want to apply to and determine what kind of budget they need for the application fees.

**Additional notes:** Once the discussion is concluded, instructors can reveal that a few months into the program at CSU Sacramento, Eric was offered the position of Teaching Associate for a first year English composition class entitled Accelerated Academic Literacies. He accepted the paid position and began in January 2015 with the start of the new semester.