

Pedagogue Bonus: Applying to Graduate Programs (w/Mandy Olejnik)

Transcript

Welcome to *Pedagogue Bonus*, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

This bonus episode is dedicated to those interested in applying to graduate programs, who perhaps are trying to better understand the process or hoping to get some insight on what they should be looking for, what really matters when it comes to selecting, applying, and then choosing a graduate program.

In this episode, I talk with Mandy Olejnik. Mandy is a doctoral student in composition and rhetoric at Miami University of Ohio. She teaches professional writing courses in the English department and works as a graduate assistant director in the Writing Across the Curriculum Program at the Howe Center for Writing Excellence. Her research interests include graduate student pedagogy and support, learning transfer and threshold concept theory. Her work has appeared in *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, and she has forthcoming work in *Transformative Works and Cultures*.

Applying to graduate school can be a daunting task. I'm thinking about all the materials and costs involved. For some of us, there's also a lot of unknown. When I applied for my MA, I had no idea what I was doing. I applied to three schools, not based on programs, not based on my research, not based on anything other than moving away from my home state. I didn't even know what Rhetoric and Composition was. I applied to Rhet/Comp programs only because my undergrad mentor told me to and I trusted him. I did absolutely terrible on the GRE and I felt like I was only accepted to the one MA program because I would be paying out-of-state tuition. And by paying, what I really mean is taking out student loans. That's a small glimpse into my process in applying to MA programs.

SW: Mandy, I'm really interested in hearing about your experience. There's a lot of questions and it can be a really intimidating process. I was hoping maybe you could talk about how you and about the process, what informed your decisions and what advice did you receive? How would you also encourage students currently in the process of applying or making their decisions about grad school?

MO: Yeah, so I will definitely start by saying that my process for applying to PhD programs was a lot different than my process for applying to master's programs. The first time around for master's programs, I didn't really know what I was doing. I think a lot of people can relate to that. I looked up, I think I just Googled like Composition and Rhetoric master's programs and whatever first ones came up I researched them a little bit. I actually learned about Miami because someone from my undergraduate institution at Oakland University ended up going to Miami, so it was on my radar and that's why I applied. One of my professors sent me to apply to one of their alma maters, so just kind of more loose organizational. A few of them that I applied to probably weren't the best for me. I would've never gone there if I had known more about it, but I guess it ended up okay because I like Miami.

But for the PhD program, I really tried to narrow my search more. And I think there are two things that are good about that and some that are not so good about that. The one that I think was good was that I was really intentionally trying to envision who I was becoming as a scholar and what I think I might want to do. Because that's kind of the dirty secret about applying to PhD programs is that everybody writes a personal statement and you're saying, "I'm going to study blah blah, blah." But you're probably not going end up doing whatever you say you do.

So many people just completely change directions. And that's something that I was told repeatedly after I was admitted places and I was asking them about their program, but I didn't really internalize it during the process. I sort of set myself up to say, "Well, I'm going to apply to these programs because I am a WPA student. I'm interested in transfer, I'm interested in this." And that was good to an extent that I wasn't applying to random programs that I probably would never want to go to, but it also made it a little bit harder on me because I kept worrying about, "Well, can this program support exactly what I want to do?" I think that's a really fine balance. And again, it's hard to really tease through after you start that process. Do you get in places and you start thinking about them? But it's good to really go into these applications knowing that you're a learner, you're going to grow, you're going to keep trying new things, and you're probably going to end up somewhere that you didn't think that you were going to be.

And then it was really just after you apply places and get into places, just thinking about what place makes you happy. I don't think that there's any one right program for people. I think you could do well in numerous places. You can go in different directions. But the one piece of advice that really stuck out to me when I was making these decisions is which one would you be saddest to give up? So if you envision two versions of yourself, one at school A and one at school B, which one makes you sadder to give up? And that really kind of put it into perspective for me that I was really excited about the opportunities that I had at Miami. And even though I was excited about these other schools that I was considering, I didn't quite want to give up on what I was doing.

The first thing that I think is really important for people who are applying to Composition and Rhetoric programs is that prestige, in the sense that most people talk about in the academy, I don't think that prestige is really a thing in our field. Because there's so many different things that you can do as a student who studies writing, who studies rhetoric, who studies technology and digital making that it's really not a matter of, well, which school is the most highly rated. Because I feel like you could be at one school and do one thing and have a really great experience, but you could say something else and maybe not have as good of an experience if you were at a different school.

I think our field is divided into so many sub-fields and even within those sub-fields, different approaches, that it's really hard to base the decision based on, well, what school has the biggest name or which school has the most reputation. Because in a field as small as Rhetoric and Composition, they're going to know where you came from, what people studied there, why you studied there, and how your research relates to the trajectory of the program.

And I think a big source of anxiety for myself and other people is just worrying about not being good enough. Or what if I go to a lesser school? What if I go to this bigger name school and I

learned more stuff and I get a better chance of getting a job, but I think that's all very context dependent. And again, I think if I had gone into this process being aware of that, that might've made it a little bit easier for me because I felt such pressure to make the right decision. But there really is no right decision. You just have to realize that it's a decision.

And talking to people about all of this really helps. I wish I had talked to people more as I was applying to programs because I think that the people who know about the program and about what your experience can be like are people who are currently there. And I talked to people once I was admitted, of course, but if I had done a little bit more searching beforehand, there might've been a couple that I wouldn't have applied to in the first place and that would have saved.

Applying to programs is expensive for masters, for PhD, for law school, med school. That's so much money and you have to take tests. I know a lot of schools in Rhet/Comp are getting rid of the GRE requirement now, which is great. But when I was applying, it's \$27 to send your score every time. The test itself was like \$200, and then you have to usually spend a \$50 or \$60 application fee. And sometimes, one of the common advice that I'd heard was, "Apply to as many as you can so you have more chances to get in." But if you applied at 10, 12, 15 programs, that can run up into the thousands of dollars. And I think most people who are students and who are considering school, that's just a very privileged thing to say that, "Hey, you should spend all this money to try and get in."

And that's another one of those little hidden things about grad applications that no one really told me until I was into it and I said, "Okay, I think I'm going to apply to six or seven that I know are good fits and not waste my time or money or things." Because time is another asset that really goes into this because it takes so much time if you want to tailor it to each school and best represent yourself.

So my process to find a PhD program sort of refined through it. It was during the decision process that I felt most in a good headspace of knowing the different things that I should be considering. But at that point, I think it was almost a little bit too late. I should have had some of that just frame of mind of how to approach it beforehand. Everyone learns stuff in hindsight. But I think that's really important is just knowing that you have to just choose a version of yourself that you want to go with. There's never going to be a wrong choice. It's going to be a choice, and you really just can't hold yourself to these impossible standards.