

Episode 18 – Bolstering Your Grad School Application GPA

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you. I'll draw upon my experiences as a graduate dean and research mentor, as well as my network of students, colleagues, and experts to bring you the most complete information on graduate education that I can.

As with all personal metrics, your college grade point average doesn't define you. It's just a number like your age, weight, or number of followers. But just like your age makes you eligible to do certain things and unable to do others, and your weight is something you're either proud of or like me, an ongoing challenge, your college GPA is a fact that is relevant in some circumstances and totally unimportant in others. When it comes to admission to graduate school, it's important. It's not everything, but it's important. Even in the most transparent, balanced, progressive, holistic admissions review process, it is used to evaluate your preparedness for graduate school. After all, despite what those investment fund disclaimers tell you, one of the best predictors of future success is past performance. Are there people who do well in graduate school despite a lower GPA? Sure. Can people change? Absolutely. But don't expect application reviewers to just overlook shortcomings or not give you credit for a job well done. Especially in highly competitive programs where there are a lot of qualified applicants, your GPA is an important consideration.

Today, we're going to discuss ways you can influence your GPA that you may not have fully considered. The most influential thing you can do is, well, get good grades. But there are ways to bump up your GPA that can be difference makers to grad school admissions officers. Every tenth of a point counts. The rules and regulations regarding coursework vary by university, by units within the university – sometimes called colleges or schools – and by program within the units. They can even vary by class within the same major if changes have been made and students have been grandfathered into the policy they matriculated with. So, despite what I say here, you must check the academic policies and procedures at your institution. Some of these things may not be possible and certain restrictions may even have the opposite effect of what I'll describe here. But you should be aware that these options exist at some institutions and look into them if you think they will be of benefit to you.

Let's consider the following topics that provide you some flexibility in your GPA: Advanced Placement (AP) credits; transfer credits; grade replacement (taking a course over); grade/no grade options for courses; and major/cumulative GPA considerations. To illustrate the points, we'll use a simple example of a typical 120 credit hour bachelor's degree, using all 3-credit courses with a balanced course load of 15 credits per semester – 5 courses. If you get 3 As and 2 Bs each semester, by the end of your junior year - the GPA you will probably use for your grad school application in the fall of your senior year - your cumulative GPA is 3.6. Pretty nice! That's our base-case. Now let's look at the impact of some common scenarios on this GPA. A [spreadsheet is available on the grad-post.com website](#) with these various GPA scenarios.

Let's start by looking at advanced placement credit. This may be a done deal for those of you well into your bachelor's degree, but maybe you can pass along this wisdom to your younger siblings or family friends as they prepare to enroll in college. Advanced placement credits – known as AP credits – are all the rage. These are courses you take before entering college to help prepare you for your undergraduate studies and give you a head start on getting those college credits. Your high school probably offers a ton of them. The college course you get credit for depends on your AP score and there are limits on the application of AP scores to courses in your major, etc., etc. But why wouldn't you take them and use them? They're college level courses, right? If I can come in with twelve credit hours of the 120 credits

you need for your bachelor's degree, I'm a tenth of the way there before I even get started. Sweet! But here's two things to consider. First, if you used AP credit instead of taking three courses you got an A in over the first three semesters, your 3.6 cumulative GPA would drop to 3.55 by the end of junior year. Your credit hours would drop to twelve for the first three semesters which could help you concentrate more on those courses you may have gotten a B in, so there could be an upside. Here's the irony of AP credit: if you scored a 5 in an AP course, you are better off taking the course again in college. Chances are you will do really well in it and it will help your GPA. If you scored a 4 or lower (and still can get credit), take the credit. Chances are you won't do as well in the college-level course and it may negatively impact your GPA. This is all from the GPA standpoint, of course, which isn't everything. I often advised students in my major to take major-adjacent courses like chemistry and physics at the university, even if they had AP credit. Which leads to my second point on AP credits. There is benefit in taking the course in college aside from GPA considerations. You meet people: classmates, professors, TAs. There's also a danger in taking **too few credits** your freshman year. You're less engaged. You focus less on your studies because there's less to do. You don't develop those good study habits you will need as courses get tougher and the workload increases. The university I worked at surveyed students who left after their first year, and you know what the number one reason was? It wasn't financial. It wasn't homesickness. It was lack of rigor. They didn't feel challenged. And we're not talking about some third-rate school here; it's a top 50 institution. But they accepted a ton of AP credit. I haven't established a cause-and-effect relationship between the two, but my working hypothesis is that too much AP credit in the first year has a negative impact on performance and satisfaction. What I am able to say definitively is that your GPA will go down by replacing good grades with AP credits, all other things being equal. That's just math.

The same can be said of transfer credits, but the impact is more varied, so it's difficult to make generalizations on GPA impact. For example, if you are a transfer student, meaning you completed one or more semesters at another university and then transfer to a new one, the courses and grades you received at the first institution may be used to calculate the cumulative GPA at your new institution, even if you re-take a course. You will be required to submit transcripts from all of your undergraduate institutions on your graduate school application, so there's no hiding institution hopping or poor performance at one of them, but you can certainly make the case that your last GPA is the most relevant. So, transferring credits can be beneficial from a GPA standpoint. However, if you re-take a course at another institution during the summer to make up for a poor grade at your home institution, that transfer credit falls under the category of grade replacement. Let's look at that scenario more closely.

To understand the GPA implications of re-taking courses, let's go back to our base-case scenario of a 3.6 by the end of junior year; three As and two Bs each semester. Let's say now two of those Bs your freshman year were actually Cs. Maybe you just don't like foreign languages or two of your general education electives were poor choices for you. Your GPA at the end of junior year is now 3.53. Still very respectable, but you're looking to get into a highly competitive master's program. If you re-take those two courses your junior year, your credit hours go up to 18 both semesters – still manageable. Heck, that's the typical course load for some majors. You get an A in both replacement courses and your initial grades are removed from your overall GPA – although they still remain on your transcript. Your end of junior year GPA is now 3.67 – an increase of almost a tenth and a half. Maybe that's important to you, maybe it's not. But unlike AP credit that you have to make an educated guess about ahead of time, course replacement is something you can do retroactively.

The policies on replacement grades vary tremendously. It depends on your institution, your major, and of course whether you can actually do the work to get a better grade. At the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, for example, the grade replacement policy varies by school. In the [School of Liberal Arts and](#)

Sciences, you have to have received a grade of C- or less to re-take a course and you can only re-take four courses for grade replacement, among other restrictions. There's also the scenario that you used AP credit for the two courses you got Cs in, in which case there's actually a GPA boost; plus, you don't have to retake any courses. But there's no way of knowing that ahead of time. You can see that the scenarios start to become endless. Read your undergraduate catalog carefully and work with an academic advisor to determine whether re-taking a course is in your best interests.

Another option is to take courses for credit without a formal grade assignment, what is variably called taking courses pass/fail, satisfactory/unsatisfactory, or auditing a course. It has components of both AP credit and replacement courses insofar as the GPA impact is just like an AP course – you get the credit but not the grade – but it is something you can do in junior year or later to help lessen the negative impacts on your GPA. Let's say you had to take some courses over again from freshman year, not because you got a C and you want to replace it with an A, but because you failed it. We saw the beneficial impact on GPA with replacement grades, but in this case it increases your workload in what might be a tough semester with coursework. If some of those courses are electives, consider taking them pass/fail so you can devote more time to taking a replacement course or doing well on your major GPA. This is less of a direct, mathematical impact on your GPA and more of a time management consideration that indirectly might affect your GPA. Taking elective courses on a pass/fail basis also allows you to take courses that either interest you or will give you some skill that might be important to you. The rules on which courses you are allowed to take pass/fail can be very strict – some institutions may not even have this option available. But it's worth looking into. Again, you should do the math, run the scenarios, and clear your plan with an academic advisor.

Finally, just a comment about two different types of GPA. There is your overall or cumulative GPA that we have been discussing to this point. It's important. But equally important is your major GPA, that is, those courses that are specified in your degree curriculum. In some disciplines that's easy to calculate. In others, not so much. But if you excluded all the elective and general education requirement courses from the GPA calculation, that's your major GPA. Some university-level degree audit software may do this for you, and it may even be stated on your transcript, but you can always calculate it yourself. For your grad school application, you want your major GPA to be higher than your overall GPA. After all, if you are generally a good student but can't cut it in your major courses, then why are you going to grad school? It's not a deal breaker. Some majors are just harder than others. But if there are large discrepancies between your cumulative and major GPAs and you still have time in your undergraduate experience, you should consider some of the ways we've discussed to boost your major GPA.

In the end, your GPA is about self-actualization. It's yours – flowers, warts, and all – and you have the ability to not only positively influence it with some forethought, but to do remediation where necessary. But remember that GPA is just one consideration in a wealth of personal information on your grad school application. There's a story there, and you will have an opportunity to explain it all in a personal statement. That's the topic of an upcoming episode, so stay tuned!

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links provided in this podcast are available at grad-post.com. There, you'll find additional resources and information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Links

<https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/8fd9ea13-ad54-4e4e-afc4-09b868231f3f/downloads/Sample%20GPA.xlsx?ver=1724757623796>

<https://las.illinois.edu/academics/courses/repeating>