

Episode 17: Dear Esteemed Professor – The Cold Email

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.

Today's episode is different in two important ways. Though we will continue with this season's emphasis on preparing your graduate school application, today's topic is most relevant to prospective international students. Second, I'm casting today's comments from the "don't do this" standpoint. I try to be positive in my podcasts and would prefer to tell you what **to do** rather than what **not** to do, but there's no way to spin this topic in a positive light. I'm talking about the practice of sending email inquiries to faculty about getting into their graduate program. We call this the untargeted cold email blast.

Here's an example of an actual email I've received. It's been edited for brevity with identifying information removed to protect the sender's privacy. It goes like this:

Respected Sir!

I'm from Pakistan. My bachelor's degree in chemistry was completed with research, and my cumulative GPA was 3.55/4. I looked through your profile and it made me extremely pleased to know that your research interests are closely similar to mine. If you would accept me into your research group, it would be a wonderful chance for me to learn more and improve my abilities. I promise to keep your research group's decorum and put in a lot of effort. My resume and transcript are included in attachments. I would be very grateful to you if you will examine it. In case of any query or further processing, feel free to contact me.

It's a lovely email and for an assistant professor receiving one of these for the first time, it's downright flattering. But after decades of receiving dozens of such emails each day, they lose their novelty.

Prospective students are clearly getting advice from someone that this is an effective and acceptable practice. It's even being propagated online with advice on how to best cold email with [posts on LinkedIn](#) and Reddit. It's being promoted to international students in particular by their friends, faculty, and third-party placement services.

Their purpose is well-intentioned and understandable. These prospective students really do want advice on how to get into the program. Their messages are generally well-written and honest, but they can also be overly effusive, with typical statements like this one:

I cannot help but express my deep fascination with your exceptional work.

or they inquire about openings in the research group:

I was hoping you might tell me whether you are planning to take new students this coming year. I would also be interested in any other information or advice you have. For your consideration, I have attached my CV.

Some of these emails are targeted, meaning the salutation is to me personally rather than a generic "Dear Esteemed Professor," and there is some reference to the area I work in with comments citing specific scholarly products. At least the sender looked at my web page. But regardless of whether the inquiry is targeted or untargeted, sincere or flattering, these types of inquiries present a problem. How do I respond, if at all? Here are my options as a faculty member:

- Respond to it individually.
- Respond to it generically.
- Forward it to the admissions officer.
- Ignore it.

Let's say I get ten of these cold emails each day (including weekends). Even if it takes me five minutes to read and respond to each one – which isn't nearly enough time to provide a meaningful response and recommendation on whether or not to apply – that's one hour each day that I simply don't have. Have I responded to really interesting cold inquiries before? Sure. But they constitute about 1% of all the cold emails. Besides, I can't even tell you if I will be taking students next year or not because I don't know. I'll know more about whether my latest grant application was funded well after your grad school application is due. And I certainly have no control over whether you get admitted or not. That's a committee decision (at least) and a graduate school decision at most. So, an individualized response is not happening, no matter how much I feel a responsibility to do so.

I could forward it to the admissions officer. Maybe this is a faculty colleague who is chair of the admissions committee for that year. But the chances are that every faculty member in the program has received the exact same email, and if they all forward it to the admissions officer then there are now twenty times as many cold emails clogging their inbox. The chances of a personalized response go down, not up. I always assumed that if I got a cold inquiry – even if it was targeted and personalized to me – that all my colleagues and probably every other faculty member in the country got a similar email. I wasn't going to forward these messages to somebody else.

I could ignore it. Unfortunately, that's what happens to the vast majority of these emails. Faculty simply don't have the time to respond to cold inquiries. This is the crux of the problem. You may think that you are sending a detailed message with a resume and accomplishments that set you apart from all other cold inquiries, but the reality is that the volume is simply too high for that to happen. Faculty get dozens – even hundreds of such inquiries a day. And that's if the message even makes it through the university spam filter. **The sad truth is that your message will probably never be read.**

What I ended up doing out of a sense of professional responsibility and the recognition that this person really was sincere in their desire to come to our university was to send a generic response confirming receipt of their message and encouraging them to apply with a link to the online application. I had a draft email already set up that I would cut and paste into the reply. Am I cold and uncaring? Maybe. But I also have a responsibility to my current students to make myself available to them. They come first.

This isn't just a personal rant. When I polled some faculty colleagues on topics I should cover in my podcast, this was the most common response. It's not that it's an increased workload for them – that shouldn't be anyone's concern but their own. It's that faculty feel helpless to provide meaningful responses where there is clearly interest and need.

In fairness, I should say that in some disciplines, the email inquiry is acceptable and in a few limited cases, necessary. In some of the humanities and social sciences one way to get into a graduate program is to have a faculty member endorsement. In other words, the faculty member does indeed screen potential applicants and may recommend someone for admission based on their background and interests – an invitation to apply, if you will. Without a faculty endorsement, a cold application may not even be read. But these instances are exceptions rather than the rule. The fact is that many programs simply admit the “best” students irrespective of who they might want to work with, then make advisor assignment after starting the program. Listen to [Episode 2 on Selecting a Mentor](#) for more information on that process. Regardless of whether a cold email helps you get a foot in the graduate school door or not, you may feel compelled to send these messages, if for no other reason than they help motivate you to pursue your advanced degree or you simply feel like they can't hurt.

With that in mind, let's shift from “what not to do” to a more constructive “here's what you should do.” Here are some suggestions for what to do with your inquiries.

- Seek an introduction. This is most likely one of your undergraduate instructors and someone who may know the person you're writing to. It might be your undergraduate research advisor – see [Episode 16](#) for more on that topic! An email that starts with “On the recommendation of so-and-so...” carries a lot more

weight if I happen to know and respect so-and-so. Maybe you had an opportunity to meet this person at a conference or an invited talk. Lead with that. It's much more personal.

- Limit the number of email inquiries you send, especially to a specific department or program. Faculty compare notes, and if they are all part of the same email blast your inquiry is more likely to get put in the general admissions inquiry bin.

- Keep your message short. Four sentences at most.

- Don't attach resumes, CVs, your undergraduate thesis, a video of yourself, or anything else for that matter. It simply increases the chances of your message getting caught in a spam filter. If this information is needed, it will be requested.

- Don't be overly-effusive in your praise. It comes across as insincere, especially to American faculty.

- Send your message from university email if at all possible. Gmail, Yahoo and other third-party emails get sent to spam.

- If you have legitimate questions about the admission process, required documents, status of your application, timing, or whatever, there should be an individual to direct your inquiry to. This is probably a staff person, not a faculty member, and it may even be a generic email. That's OK. Make your inquiry and if the program is worth applying to then it will have someone monitoring this email who will respond to your questions.

- Don't send a follow-up message if you don't get a reply. If there is no response to your inquiry, then you've learned everything you need to about this program or person.

I hope this gives you some perspective on the untargeted cold email. We'll continue to focus on preparing your grad school application in the coming episodes with additional topics of particular relevance to international students. Look for those to drop in the coming weeks!

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://www.linkedin.com/posts/baak_phdapplications-graduateschool-academicjourney-activity-7206899055199748096-jwJa?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

<https://spotifyanchor-web.app.link/e/PPwOFVlydMb>