

Homeschool to Grad School

How to Use Your Non-Traditional Education
to Get Into the Grad School of Your Choice

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About Unbound

I'm a homeschooled high school graduate. My mom was always a little worried about homeschooling us all the way through to college, but after graduating from Thomas Edison State College (now University) over a decade ago, I can't say I've starved yet. In fact, I'm doing a lot better than many a college grad these days.

Many worried moms question whether homeschooling will really prepare a student for college and life after. In my opinion, the autonomy which comes through homeschooling was the very catalyst that's made my success a reality.

After I graduated high school, I turned down the opportunity to attend a local university. Instead, I decided to get work experience before attending college. I did college online a few years later, graduated with my BA in English, then I started looking at grad school options.

Even though I'm a non-traditional student in every respect (or maybe because I'm a non-traditional student in every respect), I was easily accepted into the MBA program at the University of Texas at San Antonio. After all, I didn't just meet their requirements; I exceeded them.

I wrote this book to help your student take their own path from homeschool to graduate school. My hope is that by following this advice, gathered through months and years of hard work, you'll experience the same success I did. But with fewer headaches.

So You Want to Go to Grad School?

Preparing for graduate studies starts long before a student fills out an application for admission; especially for homeschoolers. The first step to getting into grad school is getting into college. Here's what you can do as a parent to help your student have a successful transition from homeschool to university.

GED = Dropout

As a homeschool parent, you may be concerned colleges will see your student's academic ability as invalid unless you find some sort of outside validation. This uncalled for anxiety has motivated some students to take the GED to prove high school prowess instead of using a homeschool transcript.

Bad idea.

While the GED does validate your student's academic record, it also makes them look like a high school dropout. Yes, stellar students can take the GED to finish with their studies early, but academia generally perceives the GED as a last resort for students who can't handle traditional high school studies.

The reality is that you're absolutely qualified to validate your student's academic record. You do this by creating a transcript.

Now you might be thinking, "Wait a second—I'm not an accredited institution. I can't do that!" But high schools do it all the time. Most high schools aren't evaluated by an independent accrediting body. In fact, during state evaluations many high schools fail dismally, yet their students are still accepted into top universities.

This happens because admissions officials are more interested in a student's individual performance than in a school's overall performance.

Make a transcript.

How to Make a High School Transcript

Want a fool-proof transcript model that has put countless homeschoolers into college? Here it is: a simple, one-page document that lists a student's courses, amount of credit, and grade for each course. Put the overall GPA at the bottom and list some extracurricular activities. That's it.

Oh, and don't forget to sign and date it at the bottom. It's not a valid document unless you sign and date it. Sign each transcript you or your student sends to colleges—no copied signatures will be accepted.

If you're still a little nervous about assembling this ever-important, but ever-simple document, here are a few more practical tips:

High School Credits and How Many Your Student Needs

A single high school credit is equivalent to one two-semester, high school-level course. To look good to college admissions, your student should have at least 24 high school credits. If you can, list up to 36. That looks even better and will increase the likelihood your student will be admitted to the undergraduate program of their choice.

As far as knowing what *kinds* of credits to take in high school, each state has different recommendations for that. Do your research to ensure your student is meeting your state's individual standards.

Course Titles Have to Make Sense

When you list courses on a transcript, use language that makes sense to academia, not necessarily the name of the specific homeschool curriculum you used.

For example, instead of listing *Biology: A Search for Order in Complexity* (the exact title of one homeschool curriculum), consider simplifying to simply *Biology*.

If you need help naming the courses your student has completed, check out a college catalog for their wording. Don't copy a course title verbatim, but use the titles in the catalog to generate ideas on how to word your student's high school course titles.

Stand Out with Dual Credit

Colleges like students who pursue college-level work in high school. This is an especially good idea for homeschool students, as it provides some measure of outside validation that students can handle college-level coursework. While this validation isn't necessary, it will help your student stand out above their peers because they've proven themselves to be on a college level. If your student takes an AP course (even if they don't take the test), an online college course, or a standardized college exam, like the College Level Examination Program (CLEP), you can simply list the exact name of the exam or course as the course title. List that course as "advanced" or put an asterisk next to the title. Just be sure to note at the bottom of the transcript that courses marked with an asterisk are college level.

When applying college-level courses to a high school transcript, keep in mind that a three-credit college course (equivalent to one semester of study) is worth half of a high school credit. So for example, if you want your student to take a full year of advanced history, have them take two courses: *Western Civilization I* in their first semester and *Western Civilization II* in their second.

Build a Transcript Before High School, but Stay Flexible

It's always a good idea to begin with the end in mind. If you can, envision what you want your student's transcript to look like even before they start high school. This will get your student off to a strong start.

But the beauty of homeschooling is the freedom students have to pursue what they're truly passionate about without worrying about pre-set expectations. As your student works through their high school studies, pay attention. Help them discover their passions and interests, and lean into those.

For instance, if your student is interested in computer programming, help them pursue that course of study. Look at college catalogs to see what material is covered in the course and help your student find a way to build those skills. Update their transcript as you go by translating their interests into academic credit.

Or, if your student has an idea of where they would like to attend college, adjust their transcript to include courses that meet the requirements for admittance. The earlier you can do this, the better. This way, you can help your student use their high school years to discover their passions *while* preparing for the future.

What You Need (Besides a Bachelor's)

Prepping for graduate school doesn't start at the end of a student's career; it starts at the beginning. In this section, we'll cover how your student can prepare for their grad school application from their first day on their new college campus.

Relationships = Recommendations

Graduate schools look at more than your GPA when considering you for a program; recommendations are a key part of their decision. Each graduate program usually asks for two or three letters from professors the student had during their undergraduate studies.

From day one of my English degree, I knew I might attend grad school in the future. Because I had these plans in the back of my head, I went out of my way to stay in contact with my professors. That way, I could ask them for recommendation letters later on.

When the time came to apply to grad school, all the professors I asked wrote very positive recommendations. They knew my work and my passion, and they didn't hesitate to help me out.

I also made friends with co-workers and managers during my college years. Two of them attested to my real-world business knowledge when recommending me to the MBA program I applied to. Having their backing was a huge boost towards getting accepted as well.

As your student makes their way through their bachelor's degree, encourage them to focus on building relationships with mentors. Not only will they learn more deeply, but this will also give them a tremendous boost when it comes time to apply for a graduate program.

Graduate Schools Want Leaders

Just about every graduate program asks students to write a personal statement spelling out their reasons for applying and how attending the program will help them achieve their goals. They want to know how a student's non-academic activities have contributed to achieving their life goals as well.

Graduate schools want to ensure they're admitting well-rounded students who are looking to grow, rather than checkbox students who just want a degree.

Fortunately, homeschoolers are especially suited for standing out from the crowd, since we tend to be very service-minded. But even we are guilty of boxing ourselves in sometimes.

Don't let your student forget the bigger purposes which drew them to their grad school program in the first place. Encourage them to get involved with businesses, intern with lawyers, or participate in community service organizations which will give them a chance to lead, learn, and grow *outside* of the classroom.

Yes, this will require a significant amount of your student's time on top of their college studies. Don't worry too much about that—they need to learn to balance the work. After all, grad school is no walk in the park. If your student wants a graduate degree, they might as well get used to balancing a rigorous schedule now.

My focus on service and external projects helped me greatly when I applied to grad school. Being able to truthfully say that I spent thousands of hours in community service indicated my drive to positively influence the world around me with the skills I was learning.

That's an appealing grad school applicant.

Getting In

At this point, your student should have the wheel firmly in hand, steering toward graduate school without much parental help. While they should be the one in charge of researching options, setting study hours, and tracking application deadlines, few students say “no” to a little extra support.

Here’s a glimpse at what your student can expect when Grad School Application season rolls around, and what you can do to support their efforts through the process.

Finding the Perfect Fit

Nobody wants to get turned down by a prospective graduate program. But it happens.

I myself got rejected by *two* programs before finding one that accepted me. It stung at first, but then I learned the chosen applicants had spent significant time in the Middle East and were fluent in languages like Arabic, Farsi, and Urdu.

I'm bilingual, but not in any of those languages. And the furthest east I've gotten is France. What did that equal? Two rejection letters.

Turns out, I just wasn't a good fit for those programs.

When choosing a program to apply for, your student should look for one that fits their profile. Many programs post the characteristics of past students online. They list GPA, standardized test scores, and sometimes average age of the candidates. Your student should find one that fits them.

For example, you might not think average age is an important factor to consider, but if a grad school program is looking for mid-career applicants, they probably won't be interested in a student who has just completed their bachelor's degree with little-to-no work experience, regardless of what score they got on their GMAT.

If your student fits the bill both socially and academically, they're probably a good fit. If not, it might be worth looking elsewhere.

Scoring Well on Standardized Tests

Yes, sorry, your student will need to pass a test to get into grad school. They'll likely take one of the Big Four grad school entrance exams:

1. The LSAT for those considering law school
2. The GMAT for business school applicants
3. The GRE for those considering liberal arts programs
4. The MCAT for medical school

There are some other standardized exams out there for more specialized programs, but these four are the most common.

Obviously, how your student prepares for their entrance exam depends on the exam they're taking. As each is focused on a different academic future, each requires a student to demonstrate excellence in slightly different competencies. However, from what I can tell, two things are true about preparation for all of these exams: onsite test prep classes are just not worth it when there are less expensive online options, and whatever you do, *start early*.

Find Good Online Resources

Unless your student is really driven by the classroom environment or tends to thrive with one-on-one tutoring, don't waste your money on in-person classes. There are a number of great online prep courses out there for these exams, and they're not hard to find. Help your student do the research required to find the best resources for the exam they're taking. In fact, I suggest using a couple of them. Having a variety of resources can add definition, preparing your student for any scenario which may come up when taking any of these exams.

Warning: you'll likely be tempted by the need to ensure your student's studies are sufficient, thus falling into the trap of thinking big bucks means a big payout. But let me assure you, for most students, whatever test prep solution they choose will likely be good enough to help them get into the program of their choice. (I personally used the Princeton Review's *Cracking the GRE* and found it to be more than enough to prepare me for that exam.)

If your student feels stuck or overwhelmed, encourage them to find a professor, mentor, or friend who's taken the exam. Ask them for help, what to expect, and the best ways to go about preparing.

Start Early

Once your student knows which test their prospective graduate program expects, encourage them to begin studying well in advance. There's no doubt that a high score on one of these tests will prove to grad schools that your student has done their duty in preparing to be a part of their program. So, many sources recommend getting at least six months of solid study before testing.

What exactly should your student be studying in this six-month period, you ask? Most of that will depend on the test they've decided to take, so I'll leave the specific advice to whichever test-prep method they choose. However, one aspect of test prep is shared by almost all grad school tests, and deserves special attention: the essay.

Beware of the Essay

Three of the Big Four grad school exams require at least one written essay. I want to briefly touch on this point, because this is the area most likely to trip up an ill-prepared student.

Each essay is timed, so getting in lots of practice beforehand is essential. Writing on command is stressful, and if your student isn't careful, they could run out of time before finishing, which could result in a bad score and lower their chances of getting accepted into the grad school of their choice.

The best way to stay calm and ace an essay is to take time to understand what is being asked and how one can make an effective response. It's okay to take some extra time to be sure one's writing exactly what the test is asking for.

Writing an outline is the best way to do this. It takes a little extra work in the beginning, but in the end it's a huge time saver because your student will know exactly what they want to say. In timed essay writing, it's not creating the content that's difficult, but organizing one's thoughts into cohesive points.

The first timed essay I ever wrote was almost a disaster. I didn't write an outline beforehand and submitted my essay with just nine seconds left. I wasn't happy with it either; I knew I was hurrying at the end.

Encourage your student to learn how to work in the five-paragraph format (introduction, first point, second point, third point, conclusion), and then practice, practice, practice. They should write several sample essays before taking the test, ensuring they're able to finish within the target time and that they're happy with what they wrote. If they can do it at home, they can do it on testing day.

Don't Be Surprised

Bottom line with standardized exams: the best thing your student can do is get familiar with the exam's format so they're not surprised by anything. This means studying the expected material, taking many practice exams, and working through as many sample questions as possible.

Crushing the Program Interview

While it's true, fewer and fewer programs are relying on interviews these days, your student should still prepare just in case their desired program includes one.

Prepare Answers Beforehand

Especially when pursuing multiple grad school programs, your student is going to get asked some of the same questions over and over again. *What are you interested in? Why are you applying?* Etc.

It's important for your student to take time before the interview to sharpen their answers so they can present themselves in the best light. No one wants to be searching for an answer each time they're asked the same important questions.

Identify Life Goals

One of the best ways for a student to nail an interview isn't just to rehearse answers, but to know them in the first place. Understanding one's calling in life, beyond attending the grad program they're applying to, is the best way to do that. As I said before, program officials want to see motivation and drive to accomplish something great, not just a desire to achieve a degree.

Encourage your student to take time now, as a high school student, to identify their passions and goals in life. Your student should keep those ideas in the back of their mind and let them evolve as they continue to walk through high school and college.

Knowing what direction they're headed will not only help your student get *into* grad school, but it will also help them define which program they want to attend in the first place. And who knows? It might even help them discover that grad school isn't the best fit for their goals and dreams after all. That's a good thing to know early.

Setting Realistic Expectations

As I mentioned before, I got rejected by multiple graduate school programs before finding one which fit my needs and goals. This doesn't feel good, but it happens. After all, if getting into grad school were easy, everyone would do it.

One of the best ways you can support your student in their quest for grad school acceptance is to encourage them to *keep going*. Help them understand they're just going to hear a few "no's." That usually doesn't mean they're not good enough for graduate school. More often than not, it means that particular graduate school just isn't a good fit for them.

Homeschool to Grad School Success Stories

Working with Unbound, I've seen a lot of homeschooled high school graduates really shine. Not only do they often graduate with their bachelor's degree years ahead of their peers, those with graduate ambitions have regularly gotten into their preferred graduate schools and are now pursuing their dreams.

If you have any final reservations, wondering whether or not your student really will have a shot at excelling in college and beyond, here are just a few real stories of homeschoolers who "made it."



Lauren Whitney

Lauren took the GRE twice to make sure she got the best possible score. She took vocal lessons on the Butler campus to start building relationships with the faculty, and she networked with professors so that she would have solid references when she applied for Butler University's music program. All of this took hard work, but it all paid off. In the end, she became the youngest grad student at Butler, has since graduated, and is pursuing her dream of being a music teacher.



Josh Wurdemann

The son of a chiropractor, Josh grew up hearing about bones and backs his entire life. Josh earned his BA in History through Unbound, but his end goal was graduate school. Before starting his undergraduate classes, Josh thought ahead and chose the graduate chiropractic program he wanted to apply to. He worked with his Unbound coach to map out a comprehensive plan that would get him into the program of his choice and dedicated himself to long hours of study to ensure his acceptance. At age 20, Josh became the youngest student in Life University's Chiropractic school.



Brittany Salder

After graduating homeschooled high school and pursuing her bachelor's online through Unbound, Brittany was accepted to William and Mary law school, University of Virginia for their Masters in Government program, *and* Georgetown law school. Georgetown is

notorious for being hostile to homeschoolers and students with distance education undergrad degrees. So, Brittany definitely had her work cut out for her when she decided to apply. Brittany focused on getting an excellent LSAT score and giving a compelling personal account during her face-to-face interview, showcasing her innovative educational choices and her vision for the future. With that kind of preparation, she nailed it. In the end, Brittany decided to attend William & Mary's law school on a partial scholarship.



Sarah Dempsey

Sarah never planned to go to grad school. She wanted to be a professional ballet dancer. But after fracturing her back, she had to find a new path in life. She decided to pursue Psychology with a focus on Criminal Justice. Her new dream was federal law enforcement. After extensive research, Sarah decided to earn a graduate degree in Forensic and Legal Psychology, and applied to six schools across the country. She learned everything she could about their admission requirements and programs offered, and visited as many as possible—all while studying for and taking the GRE (twice), volunteering as a victim advocate, and finishing her degree. Sarah applied early to her top choice, Marymount University, and was accepted without any issues.

Each of these students was not just homeschooled. They even pursued their *bachelor's* in a non-traditional way. And each is far from starving. Their stories prove that the future for your homeschool student is indeed bright. By leveraging the flexibility and customization of homeschooling, your student can open any door and pursue any dream, including grad school.

Sponsored By Unbound

At Unbound, we're dedicated to helping 21st century students achieve success. To do that, we believe education should be tailored to the student, not the other way around.

Every year, we help students of every age and background set themselves up for success: earning a flexible bachelor's degree with zero debt.

Whether your goal is to pursue graduate school, enter the workforce, or simply complete an education without giving up your life and family, we can help.

[Click here to learn more about how Unbound can help you achieve success *your way*.](#)

