

Connecting Admissions and Student Success: Using Holistic Admissions to Promote Diversity and Inclusion

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Today's Discussion

- Provide a more comprehensive definition of holistic admissions
- Describe ETS research efforts to understand graduate admissions practices and curate “Promising Practices” for holistic file review
- Share experiences from recent UNC Chapel Hill efforts to diversify graduate programs
- Address misconceptions regarding GRE test
- Introduce the Office for Graduate Education Engagement

ETS Research into Graduate Admissions Practices



Campus visits

71 interviews with deans and faculty in the following disciplines:

- ✓ Life sciences
- ✓ Physical sciences
- ✓ Engineering
- ✓ Social sciences
- ✓ Arts & humanities
- ✓ Education
- ✓ Business



Literature review

Examined published works related to graduate admissions from early 1950s to present

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<https://bit.ly/3cha7e0>

<https://www.holisticadmissions.org/>

What is “holistic admissions”?

At its core, holistic admissions is about considering **all information** to get the fullest picture of everything that an applicant can bring to a program.

But it’s not just about **what** information is considered, but **how**. Programs that are **advanced** in their holistic admissions practice typically:

- Avoid using threshold (or cutoff) scores that are determined using only undergraduate GPA and *GRE*[®] scores, as that may prevent candidates with other desirable qualities from being considered.
- Give thought to the weighting of various components of the application — and the order in which those components are reviewed — to consider all information about an applicant in a fair and equitable way.

Information typically considered in holistic review

- **Undergraduate record**, including grades, transcript and reputation of undergraduate program
- **Standardized test scores** that provide evidence of graduate readiness, such as GRE scores, and English-language proficiency (as needed), such as TOEFL[®] scores
- **Recommendations**
- **Personal statement or statement of purpose**
- **Internship and work experience**
- **Research experience**
- **Demographics**, such as gender and ethnicity



Overtaxed
faculty & staff



Lack of time



Application
volume



Communications
challenges



Careful
spending

Another goal of ETS's research was to provide "Promising Practices" that respect common challenges and constraints

Promising Practices for Holistic Admissions

Promising Practice

Work together to set goals and strategies to achieve them

- Agree upon goals early and structure admissions process (recruitment to enrollment) to achieve them
- Be explicit about plans to identify and recruit desired populations and how to assess desired attributes
- Determine the role and importance of each component of an applicant's file

Ensure agreement on:

- Enrollment goals, strategy and process
- How to evaluate each component of the application
 - Role and importance
 - Order of review
 - What inferences can be made
- How to mitigate unconscious bias
- How disagreements will be resolved

Promising Practice

Determine and communicate the application review and selection process so all decision makers understand

Promising Practice

Review multiple components — even when narrowing the pool — and don't over rely on any one component

- If using score guidelines, add another component
- Quantify traditionally qualitative components
- Align rubric weighting to goals
- Review components in order of priority based upon enrollment goals
- Consider an alternative review process

“Navigating Holistic Admissions” digital guide

This robust resource provides research-based guidance, examples from programs, and **downloadable content** that can be emailed, printed and shared.

Resource: [Navigating Holistic Admissions Digital Guide](#)

At-a-Glance Infographic



The infographic is titled "Navigating Holistic Admissions At-A-Glance" and features the ETS GRE logo and the tagline "Partnering in Potential". It includes a photo of a smiling man. The main text states: "At its core, holistic admissions is a method in which reviewers consider all available information to get the fullest picture of everything that an applicant can bring to a program. Implemented appropriately, it can support a fair and inclusive process that helps to identify applicants that effectively meet program needs and support institutional goals." Below this, it lists "Programs conducting holistic admissions typically:" with three bullet points: "Use information from multiple sources to gauge applicants' knowledge, skills and attributes", "Avoid using 'cut scores' that use only undergraduate GPA and GRE® scores", and "Give thought to the weighting and order in which components are reviewed". A circular flow diagram shows five steps: 1. Preparing for the Admissions Process (Download: Discussion Guide), 2. Collecting Applicant Information (Download: Benefits and Drawbacks of Application Components), 3. Evaluating the Admissions Process (Download: Understanding and Improving Retention Rates), 4. Selecting Applicants (Download: Sample Holistic Admissions Scorecard/Rubric), and 5. Reviewing Applicant Files (Download: Getting the Greatest Value Out of Test Scores). At the bottom, it says "Visit Holisticadmissions.org/Navigate for the full Navigating Holistic Admissions digital guide." and "ETS — Measuring the Power of Learning®".

Guide PDF



The PDF cover is titled "Navigating Holistic Admissions" and features the ETS GRE logo and the tagline "Partnering in Potential". It includes a photo of a smiling woman. The main text says: "Explore this step-by-step guide to implementing a holistic admissions process that is aligned with your program and institutional goals." Below this, it lists "Implementing more holistic admissions processes" with a sub-section: "Many graduate programs and institutions are embracing holistic admissions as a way to:" followed by three bullet points: "Select applicants likely to be successful", "Meet their goals", and "Consider applicants fairly". Below this, it says: "To help, ETS and the GRE® Program have curated promising practices based on interviews with graduate deans and faculty involved in admissions at 58 programs across seven broad discipline areas and at the master's and doctoral levels at a variety of public and private institutions with differing goals and levels of selectivity." At the bottom, it says: "This guide shares those promising practices and other practical resources to help you develop and put into practice a holistic approach that works for you." A central box titled "Explore:" lists five items: "Preparing for the Admissions Process", "Collecting Applicant Information", "Reviewing Applicant Files", "Selecting Applicants", and "Evaluating the Admission Process".

PowerPoint® with Talking Points



The PowerPoint slide is titled "Navigating Holistic Admissions" and features the ETS GRE logo and the tagline "Partnering in Potential". It includes a photo of a smiling woman looking at a document.

Holisticadmissions.org/beinformed

- Answers questions about validity, bias, how to mitigate group score differences, and diversity that members of the graduate community are asking themselves, or hearing on campus or within their other academic networks.
- Contains an FAQ section, a presentation deck and a narrative document that provide information to help inform campus conversations.

Are the GRE tests valid and reliable?



Why do some people say the tests are biased?



How can an admissions committee mitigate GRE score variances between demographic groups?



Will dropping use of the tests help remove barriers for people from underrepresented groups?



Can dropping the tests help increase student diversity?



Practical Experiences from UNC Chapel Hill

UNC: Program Completion Is the Goal



- Changing the admissions process
 - Nursing programs waive the GRE requirement
 - Biological and Biomedical Sciences program moves to holistic review
- Retention initiatives
 - Training Initiatives in Biomedical & Biological Sciences (TIBBS)
 - Diversity and Student Success (DSS)

UNC Admissions: Two Case Studies

Nursing programs – DNP, PhD, MSN

- Requested GRE requirement waiver
- Intended goal: increase diversity
- Realized impacts
 - Initial increase in applications
 - Slightly higher UGPA for matriculated students
 - No significant increase in diversity in applicant pool

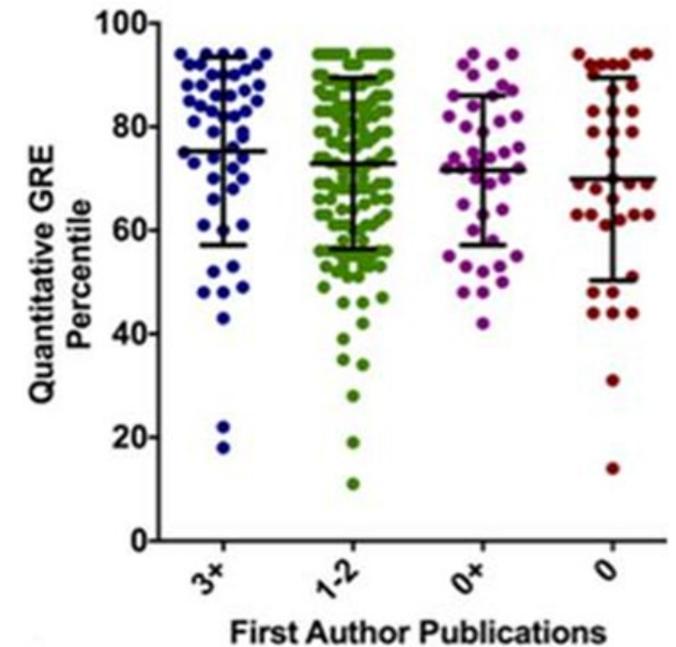
Biological and Biomedical Sciences

- Extensive data set used to look for correlation with 'success'
 - 1200-1500 applicants per year
- No single component predicts success, completion or productivity
- Admission process is imperfect – how can it be improved?
- Need to spend as much time discussing how to support students

UNC Admissions: Two Case Studies

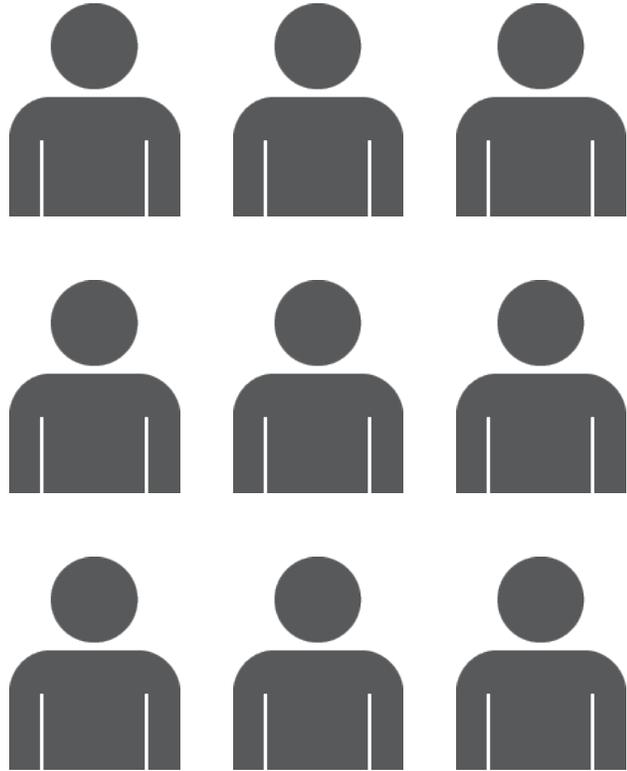
Biological and Biomedical Sciences

- Measure productivity in terms of papers published
 - 3+ 1st author; 1-2 1st author; 0 1st author with middle author; 0 papers
- GRE scores did not predict productivity
- UGPA did not predict productivity
- Duration of previous research experience did not predict productivity
- Recommendation ratings were most reliable



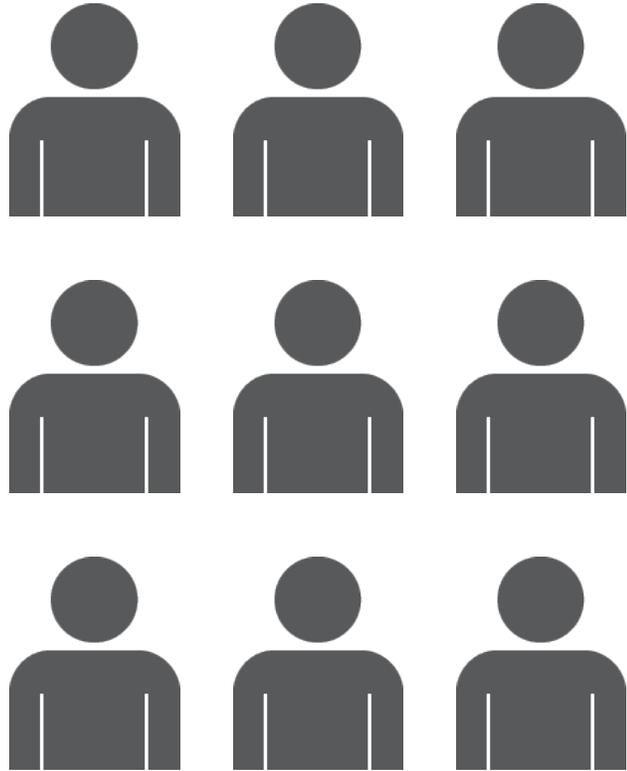
Hall et. al. PLoS ONE 12(1):e0169121

Adopt a Holistic Admissions Approach



- We all want good students
- Educate faculty about non-predictive measures of productivity
 - Use these factors in admission decisions appropriately
- Educate all admission committee members about implicit bias
- Remove GPA and GRE scores from student dossier provided to interviewers

Holistic Admissions Approach Impact



- Admission committee training adopted in 2014 (for fall 2015 admission season)
- Admission of URM students at 15% (2011-14)
- Admission immediately rose to 26%
 - Has increased to above 30% with 2019 cycle
- Retention/completion of URM students is identical with majority students



Recommendations for File Review

- Do not assign undue predictive power to UGPA or GRE scores
- Consider relevant experience particularly when coupled with enthusiastic support letters
- Define criteria for admission in advance
- Train committees on implicit bias
- Consider ways to assess non-cognitive qualifications
 - Motivation
 - Perseverance
 - Adaptability
- Read every application and the entire application — this can be done at scale



Recommendations for Retention

- Spend as much time and effort training and supporting students
 - BBSP and Training Initiatives in Biomedical and Biological Sciences (TIBBS)
- Effort is supported by SoM, IMSD grant, BEST Award
- Office includes seven full time staff
- Focused on
 - Admissions
 - Professional Development
 - Internships
 - Career advising
- **Impact:** Retention of under-represented students same as majority students (85-92%)

Common Misconceptions Regarding the GRE Test



- **Predicting Success**
- **Cost**
- **Fairness**

The *GRE* General Test Is a Valid Predictor of Many Graduate Outcomes

Some reports claiming the test is not predictive of completion have made headlines in the past year, however, use caution when considering that research for three main reasons:

- Some of the research has used small sample sizes, which can lead to incorrect conclusions.
- Some of the research has based conclusions on a restricted range of GRE test takers – those who have already been admitted.
- Graduate students generally drop out due to changes in life circumstances or other personal reasons, which a measure of academic skills cannot predict.
- Many studies lack a true control. Multiple variables are being changed at the same time.

Resources That Can Help

- A National Center for Education Statistics [report](#) that shows why graduate students drop out (see p42)
- A large body of research conducted by external and internal researchers is posted on the GRE Research [webpage](#)

The *GRE* General Test Is a Valid Predictor of Many Graduate Outcomes

Independent research (a meta-analysis of 1753 samples and a pool of 82,659 students by Nathan Kuncel at University of Minnesota) has shown that:

- The test *is* a valid predictor of first-year graduate GPA, overall graduate GPA, comprehensive exam scores, publication citation counts and faculty ratings.
- The test correlates positively with degree attainment and research productivity.
- The test has better predictive validity than undergraduate grades or letters of recommendation.
- All of the above results apply across a range of intended academic majors, across native speakers of English and nonnative speakers of English, and across master's and doctoral programs.

Resources That Can Help

- [*The Validity of the Graduate Record Examination for Master's and Doctoral Programs: A Meta-analytic Investigation*](#)
- In addition to the seminal report described at left, a large body of research conducted by external and internal researchers is posted on the GRE validity resources [webpage](#) and GRE research [webpage](#).

ETS Offers Resources So Cost Is Not a Barrier

- The fee is required to offer the exam in test centers around the world on a continuous basis, for human raters to read and score all essay responses, for test security, and to offer accommodations for test takers with disabilities.
- To defray the cost, ETS:
 - makes available excellent, free test prep to all
 - offers a Fee Reduction Program, which reduces the cost by half for those with financial need and to national programs that serve students from underrepresented groups, first-generation college students, and students with financial need. Individuals who qualify for a fee reduction also get free access to additional test prep valued at \$100.
- As a nonprofit organization, ETS reinvests any revenue earned over expenses in research that addresses big educational challenges.

Resources That Can Help

- GRE Fee Reduction Program [webpage](#)
- GRE Test Prep [webpage](#)
- [Advisor Toolkit](#), which includes information about test preparation workshops for campus educators and the prepaid voucher service

There are three ways for applicants to pay less — or nothing — to take the *GRE*[®] General Test and/or a *GRE*[®] Subject Test

- 1) Apply for a **50% fee reduction voucher**, which is available for individuals who can demonstrate financial need
- 2) Receive a **50% fee reduction voucher** from one of a dozen programs that serve students from underrepresented groups, first-generation college students, and students with financial need
- 3) Receive a **full or partial pre-paid voucher** from any sponsoring program, organization or individual.

To learn about fee reduction: www.ets.org/gre/grefeereduction

To learn about pre-paid vouchers: www.ets.org/gre/institutions/advising/prepaid_voucher

- NEW!** ■ Business Leaders of Tomorrow
- Gates Millennium Scholars Program
- NEW!** ■ Institute for Recruitment of Teachers (IRT)
- NEW!** ■ Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation (LSAMP)
- Maximizing Access to Research Careers (MARC) Undergraduate Student Training in Academic Research (U-STAR) Program
- National Consortium for Graduate Degrees for Minorities in Engineering and Science Program (GEM)
- Postbaccalaureate Research Education Program (PREP)
- Research Initiative for Scientific Enhancement (RISE) Program
- NEW!** ■ Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS)
- NEW!** ■ TheDream.US
- TRIO Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program
- TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) Program

New this year:

- ✓ Five additional programs will receive 50% fee reduction vouchers, bringing the total to 12
- ✓ Vouchers available for the first time to international students through the EducationUSA Opportunity Fund Program

Learn more at www.ets.org/gre/grefeereduction



POWERPREP PLUS[®] Online Practice Tests

This set of practice tests is the closest simulation to what a test taker will actually encounter on test day. Test takers can:

- ✓ understand what's being tested
- ✓ gain familiarity with question types and the functionality of the test
- ✓ practice taking the test under timed conditions
- ✓ Try out the following accommodations for test takers with disabilities or health-related needs: extended time, extra breaks, screen magnification, selectable colors, and screen reader and refreshable braille compatibility.



ScoreItNow![™] Online Writing Practice

This online tool enables test takers to sharpen their writing skills as they prepare for the Analytical Writing measure of the GRE General Test. Students can write and submit responses to two essay topics and get immediate scores and feedback.

Also new this year:

- ✓ Individuals who qualify for a fee reduction also get free access to additional test prep valued at \$100.

Learn more at www.ets.org/gre/grefeereduction

The Test Undergoes a Rigorous Process to Eliminate Bias to the Extent Possible

- Group performance differences are related to disparities in educational opportunities over a long period of time. If people are exposed to different opportunities and educational experiences, how can we expect them to perform the same on a test?
- No other piece of the application endures the same rigorous fairness process as the GRE General Test, which include:
 - Training staff on the ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness, which are aligned with AERA/NCME/APA professional standards
 - Forming diverse teams to review test questions
 - Removing questions from tests that seem to disadvantage any one group
- The “Diversity, Equity & Inclusion” committee of the GRE Board advises the GRE Program on fairness related to research and services

Resources That Can Help

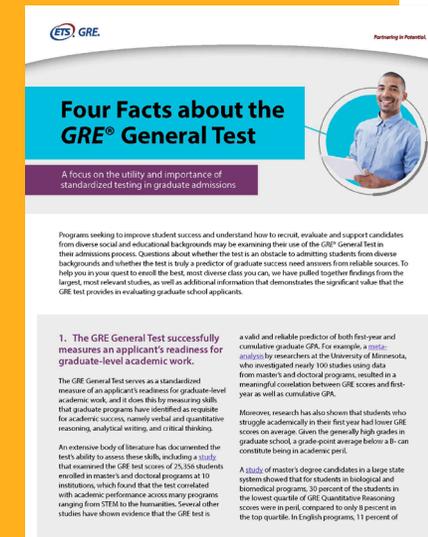
- [ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness](#)
- ETS's [Life of An Item](#) video
- The [GRE Guide to the Use of Scores](#) (p14)

The GRE Test is the Single Common Objective Measure Across All Applications

- All components of the application are subject to bias; only the GRE test has checks and balances to ensure it is as fair and unbiased as possible
- Remember:
 - Educational opportunities and life circumstances may have a substantial influence on all components of an application.
 - Letters of recommendation may reflect bias.
 - Graduating from an elite institution may reflect an applicant's socioeconomic background rather than the applicant's intellectual, scholarly, or creative potential.
 - Graduates from elite institutions are likely to have had more opportunities for research and creative experience than graduates from other institutions.
 - Without GRE scores, students who attended lesser-known institutions are less able to demonstrate their academic capabilities.

Resources That Can Help

- [Four Facts About the GRE® General Test](#)
- [Reviewer Diligence and Responsibility in the Graduate Application Process](#)



New research provides a blueprint for holistic review using *GRE*[®] scores

A 2019 report by Marena Wilson and other researchers at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHHealth Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences concluded that:

- It is the practice of using cut scores, not the GRE test itself, that disproportionately affects doctoral applicants from underrepresented groups

- An admissions committee can mitigate GRE score variances between demographic groups

- A multitiered holistic applicant review process can increase the diversity of the applicant pool without increasing the workload of the admissions committee

The report also provides a blueprint for institutions that want to implement a data-driven approach to assess applicants in a manner that uses GRE scores as part of the process.

Resource: [A Model for Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions That Decouples the GRE from Race, Ethnicity, and Gender](#)

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