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
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
Published 8/28/19:
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
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
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
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.
Practical Experiences from UNC Chapel Hill
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)
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
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
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 person 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
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](http://www.ets.org/gre/grefeereduction)

To learn about pre-paid vouchers: [www.ets.org/gre/institutions/advising/prepaid_voucher](http://www.ets.org/gre/institutions/advising/prepaid_voucher)
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

NEW!
- Business Leaders of Tomorrow
- Gates Millennium Scholars Program
- Institute for Recruitment of Teachers (IRT)
- 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
- Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS)
- TheDream.US
- TRIO Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program
- TRIO Student Support Services (SSS) 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.

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 Marenda Wilson and other researchers at The University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center UTHealth 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
Office for Graduate Education Engagement

Terry Ackerman
Distinguished Professor of Educational Measurement at University of Iowa

John Augusto
Associate Dean of Strategic Initiatives at Georgia State University

Maureen Grasso
Professor of Textile Sciences and Former Graduate Dean at North Carolina State University and Former Graduate Dean at University of Georgia

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