

Graduate Admissions Values and Criteria Recommendations

Overview

This document serves as a resource to assist graduate programs in evaluating and potentially revising admissions criteria to ensure alignment with university and program missions, visions, and values.

The first part of this document is an overview of research-based considerations of commonly used measures that are utilized in the admissions process, including grade point averages, standardized test scores, and letters of recommendation. The second part of this document is an overview of variables and corresponding measures that may lead to more inclusive graduate admissions, including realistic self-appraisal, nontraditional learning, and leadership experience.

Part 1: Considerations of Commonly Used Measures

Evaluation criteria that are thought to be correlated with graduate success are biased in a variety of ways. At a minimum, many evaluation criteria are biased because of the *hidden curriculum*, which consists of the unwritten and unofficial lessons, values, and perspectives with which programs expect applicants to be familiar or to be able to navigate. Removing problematic criteria or, at the very least, incorporating additional criteria (Part 2 of this document), may reduce the bias of these traditional measures and result in a more equitable evaluation of applicants.

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Benefits	Limitations
Both students and faculty believe that GPA is one of the top three indicators of graduate student success	Inconsistent when comparing GPAs across programs or universities
Can be connected to personality, motivation, and team learning, and can also predict cheating ability	Applicants may not honestly report GPA scores, or omit it from their applications
Is more valid and reliable if using the overall, cumulative GPA	Does not favor non-traditional students, especially older adult learners
A better quantitative predictor of student success than standardized test scores	Is a better predictor of success for STEM fields than for other non-STEM academic programs
When using cumulative, can show growth and determination in specific subject areas	May be a better indicator of motivation rather than success

Recommended Readings for GPA

Attiyeh, G., & Attiyeh, R. (1997). Testing for bias in graduate school admissions. *Journal of Human Resources*, 524-548.

Bacon, D. R., & Bean, B. (2006). GPA in research studies: An invaluable but neglected opportunity. *Journal of Marketing Education*, 28(1), 35-42.

Chari, D., & Potvin, G. (2019). Understanding the importance of graduate admissions criteria according to prospective graduate students. *Physical Review Physics Education Research*, 15(2), 023101.

Hagedorn, L. S., & Nora, A. (1996). Rethinking admissions criteria in graduate and professional programs. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 1996(92), 31-44.

Wao, J. O., Ries, R., Flood, I., Lavy, S., & Ozbek, M. E. (2016). Relationship between admission GRE scores and graduation GPA scores of construction management graduate students. *International Journal of Construction Education and Research*, 12(1), 37-53.

Standardized Test Scores (GRE, GMAT, LSAT, MCAT)

Benefits	Limitations
Assesses verbal, quantitative, writing, and analytical reasoning skills or discipline-specific knowledge	Applicants who come from high-income backgrounds are more likely to have higher test scores due to the ability to pay for and access test preparation books, courses, and tutors
The GRE was initially created to promote equal access to graduate programs	Does not measure student motivation and interest
Research-based and required to meet professional standards before being administered	Can be biased against minority groups, including racial, ethnic, and gender identities
Some tests provide funding waivers and free/reduced price tutoring to eliminate socioeconomic barriers	Penalizes students for, and does not measure, deep/critical thinking or creativity
Is more valid when utilized in holistic review practices	Many standardized tests are based in English, which can be barriers for non-English speakers or ELL applicants

Recommended Readings for Standardized Test Scores

Cahn, P. S. (2015). Do health professions graduate programs increase diversity by not requiring the graduate record examination for admission? *Journal of Allied Health*, 44(1), 51-56.

Hedlund, J., Wilt, J. M., Nebel, K. L., Ashford, S. J., & Sternberg, R. J. (2006). Assessing practical intelligence in business school admissions: A supplement to the graduate management admissions test. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 16(2), 101-127.

Kuncel, N. R., & Hezlett, S. A. (2007). Standardized tests predict graduate students' success. *Science*, 315(5815), 1080–1081.

Powers, D. E., & Kaufman, J. C. (2004). Do standardized tests penalize deep-thinking, creative, or conscientious students? Some personality correlates of Graduate Record Examinations test scores. *Intelligence*, 32(2), 145-153.

Wilson, M. A., Odem, M. A., Walters, T., DePass, A. L., & Bean, A. J. (2019). A model for holistic review in graduate admissions that decouples the GRE from race, ethnicity, and gender. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 18(1), ar7.

Interviews (In-person, phone, online formats, etc.)

Benefits	Limitations
Standardizing the process (outlining questions, using rubrics for scoring) increases reliability and validity of interviews	Difficult to obtain reliable scores
Multiple mini-interviews can increase validity in measurements of preparedness	Requires extensive training of interviewers
Multiple different types of interviews, can be molded to fit the needs of different to academic programs	Issues of inter-rater reliability and bias against visible differences (race, weight, etc.)
Mostly used within medical and health-related programs	Applicants believe that doing multiple, smaller interviews feels more impersonal
Online formats (Zoom, Skype, etc.) increase accessibility for out-of-state and international applicants	Can increase applicant anxiety

Recommended Readings for Interviews

Clark, J. R., Miller, C. A., & Garwood, E. L. (2020). Rethinking the admissions interview: Piloting multiple mini-interviews in a graduate psychology program. *Psychological Reports, 123*(5), 1869-1886.

Goho, J., & Blackman, A. (2006). The effectiveness of academic admission interviews: an exploratory meta-analysis. *Medical Teacher, 28*(4), 335-340.

Woo, S. E., LeBreton, J., Keith, M., & Tay, L. (2020). Bias, fairness, and validity in graduate admissions: A psychometric perspective. *PsyArXiv. August, 18*.

Letters of Recommendation

Benefits	Limitations
Easy qualitative measure to implement into the process	Often biased against women and BIPOC; shorter letters and less assurance
Can show motivation and persistence	Different authors for one individual is not as reliable as one author for different individuals
More than 3 recommendation letters can increase validity	More positively biased
Using multiple types of recommendation letters can better predict student success	Can be difficult to differentiate between applicants
When ranked on Likert-scale, can predict productivity of students	

Recommended Readings for Letters of Recommendation

- Baxter, J. C., Brock, B., Hill, P. C., & Rozelle, R. M. (1981). Letters of recommendation: A question of value. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 66(3), 296.
- Kuncel, N. R., Kochevar, R. J., & Ones, D. S. (2014). A meta-analysis of letters of recommendation in college and graduate admissions: Reasons for hope. *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 22(1), 101-10.
- Nicklin, J. M., & Roch, S. G. (2008). Biases Influencing Recommendation Letter Contents: Physical Attractiveness and Gender 1. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 38(12), 3053-3074.

Personal Statements/Statements of Purpose

Benefits	Limitations
Can help identify applicants who may benefit from mentorships and other campus support programs	Does not affect retention
Can be empowering and a way to assess determination and personality	Can cause applicant extra stress
Can increase accessibility if included in portfolios	Can be a barrier to poor writers and non-English speakers/English-language learners
Improves applicant's sense of identity, aligning with student development theory	Limited amounts of data for benefits, especially for minoritized groups
May increase access for racial-minority applicants	Quality dependent on whether applicant has writing/editing help from mentors

Recommended Readings for Personal Statements

- Alvarez, S. (2012). Arguing academic merit: Meritocracy and the rhetoric of the personal statement. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 32-56.
- Davis, K. M., Doll, J. F., & Sterner, W. R. (2018). The importance of personal statements in counselor education and psychology doctoral program applications. *Teaching of Psychology*, 45(3), 256-263.
- Hinkle, L., Carlos, W. G., Burkart, K. M., McCallister, J., & Bosslet, G. (2020). What do program directors value in personal statements? A qualitative analysis. *ATS Scholar*, 1(1), 44-54.
- Murphy, S. C., Klieger, D. M., Borneman, M. J., & Kuncel, N. R. (2009). The predictive power of personal statements in admissions: A meta-analysis and cautionary tale. *College and University*, 84(4), 83.

Portfolios

Benefits	Limitations
Combines many different components of the application process into one easy format	Must have an explicit rubric for all components for the portfolio to be valid and reliable
Can be flexible and made to fit each program's specific needs	Time-consuming for both applicants and reviewers
Allows applicants the ability to choose their own application components and utilize creative artifacts	If using electronic portfolios, online programs and technology can be costly
Can show persistence if used correctly	Can be too broad for academic program needs
Is beneficial for accreditation and assessment tracking if utilizing electronic portfolios	Most portfolios focus on career development, not curricular development

Recommended Readings for Portfolios

Johnson, A. P., & Gentry, M. (2000). Admissions portfolio for a graduate program: Matching practice and paradigm. *Roeper Review*, 23(2), 83-84.

Mathur, A., Cano, A., Dickson, M. W., Matherly, L. H., Maun, C., & Neale, A. V. (2019). Portfolio review in graduate admissions: outcomes of a pilot program. *Strategic Enrollment Management Quarterly*, 7(1), 7-24.

Reardon, R. C., Lumsden, J. A., & Meyer, K. E. (2005). Developing an e-portfolio program: Providing a comprehensive tool for student development, reflection, and integration. *NASPA Journal*, 42(3), 368-380.

Reese, M., & Levy, R. (2009). Assessing the future: E-portfolio trends, uses, and options in higher education. *EDUCAUSE Research Bulletin*, 2009(4), 1-12.

Resumes/Curriculum Vitae (CV)

Benefits	Limitations
Provides an overall summary of academic, volunteer, and career experiences	Not used often as admissions criteria
Increases reliability and validity of other admissions components (like letters of recommendation) if used together	Application reviewers do not go in-depth on resume reviews since all components are touched on in other parts of the application
Follows Bandura's theory of self-efficacy	Can contain false or outdated information
Beneficial for highlighting research experiences for research-intensive programs	Can be biased against minority applicants
Utilizing verifiable, accurate, complete, updated, and public (VACUP) guidelines (da Silva et al., 2020) can create a more valid review process	Can be biased against students who do not have access to career preparedness programming

Recommended Readings for Resumes and CVs

da Silva, J. A. T., Dobránszki, J., Al-Khatib, A., & Tsigaris, P. (2020). Curriculum vitae: challenges and potential solutions. *KOME*.

Handy, F., Cnaan, R. A., Hustinx, L., Kang, C., Brudney, J. L., Haski-Leventhal, D., ... & Zrinscak, S. (2010). A cross-cultural examination of student volunteering: Is it all about résumé building?. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 39(3), 498-523.

Raghunathan, K. (2010). Demystifying the American graduate admissions process. *StudyMode. Com*.

Sanders, C. E., & Landrum, R. E. (2012). The graduate school application process: What our students report they know. *Teaching of Psychology*, 39(2), 128-132.

Part 2: Measures to Increase Diversity and Inclusion

To reduce systemic inequity in graduate admissions and facilitate diversity and inclusion, we encourage programs to utilize *holistic evaluation* or *review*, which entails evaluating an applicant's performance along multiple measures and domains and not relying solely on an applicant's performance in one area. In addition to other program-relevant values, we strongly recommend that all programs, regardless of specialty, incorporate measures related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, leadership, communication and collaboration, self-appraisal, and developing and working toward long-term goals.

When evaluating through written formats (e.g., essay questions), we recommend a character or word limit (e.g., 1000 characters per response) to decrease the burden on evaluators and to avoid overwhelming and/or dissuading applicants from applying (e.g., an applicant may choose to not apply to a program if the admission process entails a large amount of writing).

References

Fisk-Vanderbilt Master's-to-Ph.D Bridge Program. (n.d.). *Bridge program tool kit*. <https://www.fisk-vanderbilt-bridge.org/toolkit>.

Sedlacek, W. E. (2017). *Measuring noncognitive variables for student success and retention: Improving admissions and student affairs services for diverse groups including women and students of color*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Variable	Definition	Interview or Essay Question Examples	Positive and Negative Evidence
Realistic Self-Appraisal	Applicant realistically is aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and works on self-development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What went well/poorly for you in your previous college experience and why? • What mistakes did you make in previous college experience, and what would you do differently? • Which course(s) in this program do you expect to have the most trouble with and why? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulates strengths and weaknesses • Faces problems with determination to do better • Explains poor performance in the past <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unaware of strengths or weaknesses • Does not learn from previous experiences
Preference for Long-Term Goals	Applicant can plan and sacrifice for the future	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are your long-term goals after you complete the program? • If you do not get accepted into the program, what alternative career would you pursue? • How would this program help you achieve your long-term goals? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sets realistic and tangible goals in and out of academia • Aware of required steps to reach goal <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vague or unarticulated goals • Requires explicit direction on goals from others • Too focused on present
Perseverance	Applicant has persisted in face of hardships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is an example of a situation when you've hit an obstacle/failure and how have you handled it? • What do you do when you are overwhelmed with tasks or responsibilities? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can describe a time they failed/encountered an obstacle and coped • Evidence of passion and follow-through <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has little experience with failure/obstacles • Cannot identify a response that allowed them to cope w/ obstacle

Variable	Definition	Interview or Essay Question Examples	Positive and Negative Evidence
Communication and Collaboration	Applicant has built successful relationships that have enabled success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who are faculty/mentors who have been most important to you? How did the relationship develop; how did you work together? • Describe a situation when you reached out to a mentor for help and the outcome. • If we talked to your mentor, what would they say you're really good at? What would they say you could improve on? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describes relationship and that demonstrates ability to work and communicate with others • Articulates strengths and weaknesses <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is unable to describe mentoring relationship or skills listed above • Does not reach out for help when needed
Nontraditional Learning	Applicant has learned about field of study outside of school and coursework	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe something you've learned about your field (or other fields) outside of school. • What kinds of activities do you engage in outside of school/coursework on your own to learn about your field? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses knowledge to teach others about the topic • Is working independently in their field (doing research, participating in competitions or compositions) <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only learns about field from coursework

Variable	Definition	Interview or Essay Question Examples	Positive and Negative Evidence
Research Experience	Applicant knows what research entails and takes advantage of opportunities to become involved in research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is your most successful or interesting research experience? What was the experimental question/problem, what was challenging, how did you troubleshoot, and what did you learn most? Who did you work with and what was the relationship like? • Describe the kind of research you would like to be involved with in this program. 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly and concisely describes research experience • Clearly and concisely describes research process (project development, execution, presentation, publication, etc.) • Describes taking initiative in developing project or getting involved in project that was not required in coursework <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unable to describe details of research project or process
Leadership, Service, and Community	Applicant has played a leadership/mentoring role, advanced participation of others, shared knowledge, and contributed to their community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What experiences have you had where you played a leadership or mentoring role for others? • Describe a situation when you've had to work with a team of people. What were your strengths and challenges? • Do you prefer to work alone or with a group and why? • What community-based activities are you involved in and why are they important to you? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant shows commitment to a service site or issue area • Applicant demonstrates specific or long-term commitment with a community <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant lacks involvement in a nonacademic community • Applicant engages in more solitary activities than group

Variable	Definition	Interview or Essay Question Examples	Positive and Negative Evidence
Teaching Experience	Applicant knows what teaching entails and has taken advantage of opportunities to become involved in teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe any formal or informal experiences you have had where you were a teacher or were responsible for conveying information to someone • Describe the value you think teaching has for your career • Describe a situation when you've learned how to improve your teaching. • Describe your teaching philosophy and methods. 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly and concisely describes teaching experience • Has formal teaching experience • Clearly and concisely explains value of teaching <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No teaching experience • Unable to describe why teaching is important • Unable to describe teaching methods
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice	Applicant contributes to and demonstrates a commitment and understanding of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in professional and personal life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How have you committed yourself to understanding and aiding in the pursuit of equity and inclusion in your professional and/or personal life? • What steps have you taken to reduce bias and promote inclusion and justice? • How has your background and experience prepared you to be effective in an environment that holds diversity as core to our mission and values? 	<p>Positive:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articulates specific actions or steps taken and their motivations. • Able to connect equity and inclusion with their personal and professional opportunities • Describes specific resources used to gain more understanding <p>Negative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applicant does not value or cannot articulate the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion • Applicant has taken no actions to advance equity and inclusion