Four Facts about the GRE® General Test

A focus on the utility and importance of standardized testing in graduate admissions

Programs seeking to improve student success and understand how to recruit, evaluate and support candidates from diverse social and educational backgrounds may be examining their use of the GRE® General Test in their admissions process. Questions about whether the test is an obstacle to admitting students from diverse backgrounds and whether the test is truly a predictor of graduate success need answers from reliable sources. To help you in your quest to enroll the best, most diverse class you can, we have pulled together findings from the largest, most relevant studies, as well as additional information that demonstrates the significant value that the GRE test provides in evaluating graduate school applicants.

1. The GRE General Test successfully measures an applicant’s readiness for graduate-level academic work.

The GRE General Test serves as a standardized measure of an applicant’s readiness for graduate-level academic work, and it does this by measuring skills that graduate programs have identified as requisite for academic success, namely verbal and quantitative reasoning, analytical writing, and critical thinking.

An extensive body of literature has documented the test’s ability to assess these skills, including a study that examined the GRE test scores of 25,356 students enrolled in master’s and doctoral programs at 10 institutions, which found that the test correlated with academic performance across many programs ranging from STEM to the humanities. Several other studies have shown evidence that the GRE test is a valid and reliable predictor of both first-year and cumulative graduate GPA. For example, a meta-analysis by researchers at the University of Minnesota, who investigated nearly 100 studies using data from master’s and doctoral programs, resulted in a meaningful correlation between GRE scores and first-year as well as cumulative GPA.

Moreover, research has also shown that students who struggle academically in their first year had lower GRE scores on average. Given the generally high grades in graduate school, a grade-point average below a B- can constitute being in academic peril.

A study of master’s degree candidates in a large state system showed that for students in biological and biomedical programs, 30 percent of the students in the lowest quartile of GRE Quantitative Reasoning scores were in peril, compared to only 8 percent in the top quartile. In English programs, 11 percent of
students from the bottom quartile of GRE Analytical Writing scores were in peril, compared to only 4 percent from the top quartile.

Because this study only includes admitted students, it cannot show how students who were not admitted might have struggled even more than those who were simply at the low end of the GRE score range. Thus, though it may seem counterintuitive, the reason why it is difficult to show how well an admissions test is working is simply because it is working well.

2. Holistic admissions processes that consider multiple components of a candidate’s application package, including GRE scores, are fairer to the applicant.

The GRE General Test should be considered thoughtfully alongside other measures like undergraduate GPA, personal statements, and letters of recommendation to evaluate the whole student.

These measures combined are more likely to provide an accurate indicator of academic preparedness, plus other desirable attributes such as motivation and conscientiousness, which may indicate other outcomes, such as program completion and research productivity. Using GRE scores in combination with qualitative measures is a proven method of identifying students with the experiences, skills and abilities needed for graduate school success.

3. The GRE General Test can be used to help programs achieve their diversity goals.

The issue of diversity in higher education is difficult and multifaceted, and it requires a frank and open conversation. Myriad factors of an application determine the composition of an applicant pool and the number of students from underrepresented groups in that pool. Factors include everything from undergraduate performance and class size to geographic location and personal disposition. However, there are also innumerable nationwide socio-economic and historical forces at work that lead individuals to apply to a certain program. Societal inequalities are not something that one test can cause or fix, so the idea that meeting diversity goals can be achieved with less information is misguided.

The GRE test is the only application component that is research-based and adheres to fairness standards and reviews, and it stands as the one objective measure to directly compare students from different backgrounds.

In this way, the GRE test can help institutions understand performance differences among various groups and how to take them into consideration during the admissions process. Improving student diversity will likely require significant and comprehensive changes to an institution’s recruitment and admissions processes as well as the environment on campus and within programs, which is not as simple as dropping one testing requirement that has served students and the graduate community well for more than 70 years.
4. The GRE General Test was created to provide equal opportunity to everyone.

The original purpose for creating the GRE test decades ago was to have an objective lens through which all applicants can be examined and compared, regardless of other parts of their application. At its core, the GRE test is meant to highlight students with the skills to succeed academically, and may in some cases serve as a supportive detail in an application packet for individuals with those skills who didn’t have the privilege of attending selective schools or taking unpaid internships.

Today, as institutions look to enroll more students from underrepresented and minority groups and other nations, the need for a common, objective measure has never been more pressing. Because of this, nonprofit ETS goes to great lengths to make its assessments as fair and unbiased as possible. This includes training staff on the ETS Standards for Quality and Fairness, forming diverse teams to review test questions, and removing questions from tests that seem to disadvantage any one group in accordance with standards set by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) and the American Psychological Association (APA®).

As a result, the GRE test yields objective, comparative data that is especially helpful when making tough admissions decisions and comparing applicants, all of whom come from different backgrounds and academic experiences.

Learn more about using GRE scores in holistic admissions at www.holisticadmissions.org and www.ets.org/gre/institutions.

References

