

The Problem in Graduate Admissions Is Culture, Not Testing

By Jonathan Malesic

Graduate admissions is an inexact science. Faculty committees, sitting around conference tables for hours on end, have plenty of data to decide about applicants, including their transcripts, personal statements, letters of recommendation and *GRE*[®] scores. Problem is, it's not always clear just what the data mean. That makes it easy for biases to slip in undetected. And now there are growing concerns that the admissions process, including the role standardized testing plays in it, is standing in the way of greater gender, racial and socioeconomic equity in Ph.D. programs and the professoriate.

Concerns about diversity in graduate programs are well-founded. But standardized tests like the GRE test are not what's holding the academy back from attaining greater diversity. The problem arises instead in those long meetings in conference rooms. Faculty have limited time to make important decisions, all while navigating departmental politics and seeking to raise their program's prestige. So as Julie Posselt, an education professor at the University of Southern California, shows in her recent book *Inside Graduate Admissions*, faculty often end up trying to simplify a tricky process by choosing applicants who remind them of themselves. In short, the problem is rooted in human psychology and faculty culture; it demands a human-centered solution.

The American Astronomical Society (AAS) in 2016 recommended that graduate programs in astronomy stop requiring GRE scores for applicants. The AAS argues, in part, that when admissions committees establish cutoff GRE scores for applicants, they end up reducing the demographic diversity of their candidates for admission. Because of well-known disparities in scores between test takers of different races and genders, the AAS and some others believe that setting an arbitrary minimum score will disproportionately eliminate female, African American and Hispanic candidates from the pool.

The AAS is right to push for greater diversity in the field. And it's true that an astronomer — or sociologist or historian — is more than his or her GRE score. But ignoring the test will not solve the academy's inequities. That's because the GRE test is not the problem. In fact, when GRE scores are viewed in their proper context — including the known gender and racial score differences — they enable direct comparisons between candidates that no other criterion does. Evidence from undergraduate admissions suggests that making standardized tests optional does not produce more diverse student populations.

To understand the culture of graduate admissions, Posselt interviewed faculty and sat in on admissions committee meetings at 10 top-ranked graduate programs across the arts and sciences. What she found was faculty using a wide, inconsistent range of standards to arrive at their decisions. She saw some faculty misuse the GRE test by establishing high cutoff scores in the first stage of review in an effort to trim a large stack of applications down to a manageable size. She also found that faculty apply arbitrary criteria inconsistently across the applicant pool. In one extreme case, a professor of classics speculated that growing up in a "pastoral" region of the United States might be conducive to one applicant's ability to master ancient languages.

Faculty in elite departments struggle to distinguish among all the high-GRE score, high-GPA applications they see, Posselt found. Emotion, therefore, ends up heavily influencing decisions. In the conference room, one professor's enthusiasm for an applicant can sway everyone else's judgment. This commonly happens when an applicant comes from a faculty member's alma mater, according to Posselt's findings. Faculty also have a strong incentive to keep the peace in their departments, which can mean deferring to each other to avoid conflict.

The shifting definition of merit that results, and that Posselt observed, is not inherently bad. That is precisely how unconventional applicants she saw committees consider — like a student with low test scores who grew up on a remote Himalayan mountainside — get admitted and eventually thrive. Still, faculty need to be careful that their subjective judgments don't reproduce longstanding inequities in their fields.

Posselt argues that in the final stages of the admissions process, many faculty lean on the shaky criterion of "fit." Other gatekeepers to elite professions do the same. Recruiters for top finance, legal and consulting firms look for a certain kind of "fit" among prospective entry-level employees. Lauren Rivera, a professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, shows in her book *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* that "fit" means being someone the recruiter wouldn't mind being crammed into a rental car or stuck in an airport with.

In practice, this translates into recruiters looking for people like themselves: graduates of elite universities who are "well-rounded" in exactly the same way, right down to their hobbies. Diversity in hiring, therefore, often remains elusive.

Graduate admissions can produce similar results. That's not surprising, because, like private-sector recruitment, it is a human process. Humans are rational, emotional and social all at once. They're also often overworked, and so they can use help in making decisions that align with the higher-order goals of their institutions, such as expanding diversity.

Faculty understandably want autonomy in graduate admissions since they are choosing their apprentices and, in many programs, their employees. But human biases inevitably influence faculty members' choices in admissions. Universities therefore need to acknowledge those biases and work around them in order to diversify academia. This will mean changing faculty culture in order to align the admissions process with the university's diversity goals.

There are plenty of ways deans and provosts can help faculty accomplish this. They can offer incentives, like increased faculty research budgets, to programs that graduate a higher number of female, Black or Hispanic Ph.D.'s. They can also encourage more active student recruitment, reaching out to promising undergraduate students from underrepresented groups. Institutions that want to increase the population of Black and Hispanic Ph.D. students might build cooperative programs like the [Fisk-Vanderbilt Bridge](#), which prepares students at a historically Black university for graduate programs at a neighboring research institution. [Columbia University](#) has a bridge program open to students from underrepresented



groups who want to pursue a Ph.D. in natural sciences. The [American Physical Society](#) sponsors a bridge program, too.

Admissions committees might also benefit from changing the sequence and information context of their admissions decisions. (Management scholars call this [choice architecture](#).) Some tech firms have attempted to [diversify their workforces](#) by masking applicants' biographical information in the first round of review. Universities might consider something analogous. To keep faculty from immediately eliminating all candidates below a certain GRE score threshold, a department might withhold GRE scores from admissions committees until faculty have first reviewed other elements of the applications and identified the strongest minority candidates.

Because admissions committees typically look at GRE scores early in the process and consider diversity late, as Posselt found, such a change would completely reverse a familiar sequence. It would take some getting used to. But it would also address one of the American Astronomical Society's (and ETS's) chief concerns: the overreliance on GRE scores, without their full context, to vet applicants right away.

Decisions are hard. But information — including everything that goes into a graduate school application — is not the reason they're hard. They're hard because information, on its own, doesn't tell you how to use it. Culture does. By focusing on the culture of graduate admissions, universities can help faculty make decisions that improve the academy's diversity.

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