

# It's Time for an Honest Conversation about Graduate Admissions

By David G. Payne

It's time to have a critically important conversation about graduate school admissions. This conversation will require honest introspection and candid dialogue in the higher education community. Let's start here: We are all united in the goal of improving diversity in and increasing access to graduate programs, and we should collectively seek to employ research-driven and thoughtful solutions to get there. The current debate over higher education institutions moving to test-optional admissions is necessary and healthy. But we caution faculty members and admissions committees against moving forward with any solution before addressing the hard work of analysis and self-reflection.

Many advocates for holistic file review would encourage admissions committees to consider a broad set of academic and nonacademic information, inclusive of *GRE*<sup>®</sup> test scores and the critical information they provide about a student's readiness for graduate-level work. Programs that have dropped the GRE test as a requirement are opting to make admissions decisions based on less information and practices that are susceptible to greater bias. The challenge of improving diversity and adopting a holistic admissions process is more complex than one simple solution, such as changing a test requirement. Diversifying student bodies and objectively identifying academically prepared students who can succeed in graduate education requires careful consideration of all sources of information. Many programs consider GRE scores an important part of their holistic admissions practices, and use scores successfully to achieve their diversity goals. Eliminating bias in the graduate admissions process is challenging. Because the GRE test is standardized and is the only application component that is research based and adheres to

fairness standards and reviews, it stands as the one objective measure to directly compare students from different backgrounds. Be wary of shortcuts and silver bullets.

ETS and the GRE program have always supported holistic admissions practices, advocating that a GRE score be only one piece of evidence used in admissions decisions. By dropping a GRE score requirement, committees are left to consider only measures that are subjective. This heightens the role that implicit bias plays in the review and selection process. Faculty members on admissions committees, being human, see the undergraduate institution on a transcript and their biases can come into play. They see a last name of an applicant and their biases can come into play. They see the author of a recommendation letter and their biases can come into play.

Further, if faculty members are left to evaluate applicants based on nonstandardized measures, they are left with GPAs that are not comparable across all candidates, and letters of recommendation or writing samples written at different levels or eloquence of vocabulary. If GRE scores are removed from the admissions process, what's left is not objective or comparable. In addition, dropping a GRE score requirement risks admitting students who are not academically prepared, which could lead to retention issues that have serious implications for the student and the program.

If we as a graduate community want to champion holistic file review as the equitable path forward, it must truly be holistic, no shortcuts. Dropping the GRE score requirement would be a mistake. Carefully considering how the GRE score requirement is used is essential. In fact, this careful analysis should apply to all components of the admissions process and not simply the quantitative measures.

The notion that meeting diversity and completion goals can be done with less information is flawed. It is misguided to think that equipping faculty for holistic, equity-minded graduate admissions can come about by simply removing the one objective measure that has served students and the graduate community well for nearly 70 years.

It's time for admissions committees to have these discussions, but we argue that GRE scores are only one part of that talk. Admissions officers will have to come to terms with their own human biases, which is a more difficult discussion and will take more introspection, time and work. It is the talk we hope to lead and champion with our colleagues in the graduate community.

We've been having this talk with the GRE Board, an independent board affiliated with the Association of Graduate Schools (AGS) and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), which oversees GRE tests, services and research. "We too believe that the talk that should be happening on campuses nationwide must address how our own biases impact admissions decisions and how we can improve diversity with greater awareness of how we view admissions materials. The graduate community is ripe for this deep and challenging conversation and together, with you and ETS, we hope to move it forward," said Janet Rutledge, GRE Board Chair, speaking on behalf of the executive committee.

We know, from the thousands of institutions the GRE program serves, that in many ways this conversation has already begun, and we'd like to add some considerations.

- The GRE test can provide tremendous value in helping institutions and programs achieve their enrollment goals, but to do so, programs need to require GRE scores from all applicants. The objective, comparative data that scores yield is especially helpful when comparisons are difficult to make, such as when evaluating applicants from unfamiliar undergraduate institutions or from countries with different educational and grading systems. ETS encourages programs to weight GRE scores more or less highly, versus other components of applicants' files, based upon their institutional and program enrollment goals, rather than making the test optional and disposing of the valuable data it provides.
- The GRE Program has consistently discouraged graduate programs from using GRE scores as the sole factor for making any decision. Doing so lessens the importance of other components of a candidate's application such as desirable attributes like grit and conscientiousness, resulting in a less diverse student body.



- What other measure does an institution plan to use that is common and objective, that undergoes a rigorous fairness review process and that yields comparative data? Why throw out another piece of information about your applicants? Isn't it better to evaluate how scores are currently being used and consider weighting them differently than to rely solely upon measures that can introduce a greater level of bias to the application review and selection process? For applicants who may be adversely affected by programs that drop the GRE test, the answer is yes.

In its early years, the GRE test served as a common, objective measure to fairly evaluate a large number of diverse applicants — from often-unknown undergraduate programs — who were interested in pursuing graduate education after World War II. The need for a fair way to evaluate candidates is just as important today, and we will continue to advocate for research-proven solutions that support our collective efforts to improve diversity, equity and access.

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