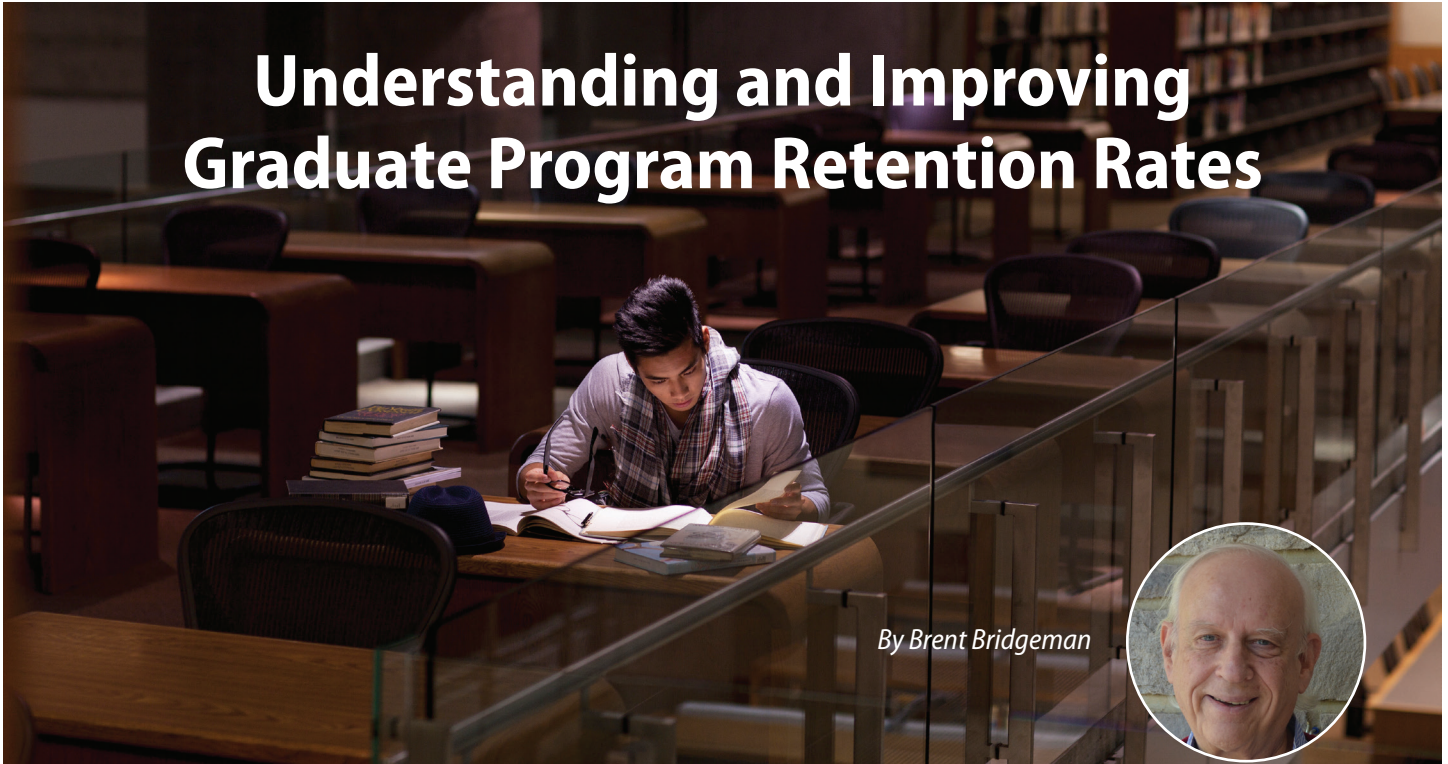


Understanding and Improving Graduate Program Retention Rates



By Brent Bridgeman

Graduate school is hard — and it is supposed to be. The ultimate purpose of graduate school is to provide students with the chance to dive deeper into a field they are interested in and give them the skills necessary to excel professionally. It is meant to greatly challenge students with a passion for learning in order to produce top-notch practitioners, researchers, and critical thinkers in all fields of study. Graduate school is one of the biggest, most consequential decisions a nascent intellectual can make, and it demands numerous sacrifices and costs along the way.

Countless factors go into why someone chooses to go down this path and myriad more go into why they might choose to leave it, but the issue of retention in graduate programs is generally misunderstood and understudied. Nearly everyone involved in graduate admissions in one way or another agrees that attrition has negative consequences; however, there is very little agreement about what causes it. Sticking with a graduate school program all the way through is a multifaceted issue that touches on nearly every aspect of a student's academic career, as well as his or her personal life.

A [study](#) from the National Center for Education Statistics found that the most common reasons for leaving graduate school were: changes in family status (30%), job/military conflict (17%), dissatisfaction with the program (16%), the need to work (14%), personal problems (13%), and other financial reasons (12%). However, in that same study, only 1% of interviewees said they dropped out due to academic problems. One of the reasons this number is so low is in part due to the role that standardized testing plays in graduate admissions, particularly its ability to predict outcomes related to academic performance, such as first-year graduate grade point average (GPA), overall graduate GPA, and faculty ratings of student performance.

The *GRE*® General Test measures skills that are necessary for success in rigorous graduate programs: verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing. Soft skills, such as a student's motivation and personal disposition to stick with a program to the end, the conscientiousness needed to produce quality research, and the grit to overcome obstacles — all of which are also essential to degree completion — cannot be measured by the



GRE test. These personal characteristics are better evaluated using other indicators such as letters of recommendation, personal statements, and interviews. Graduate programs should consider applicants holistically, and include a standardized assessment of academic skills, like the GRE test, in addition to indicators that provide information about soft skills.

If you look at the students who do struggle academically during their first year of graduate school, you will find that their GRE scores were lower 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% of the students in the lowest quartile of GRE Quantitative Reasoning scores were in peril, compared to only 8% in the top quartile. In English programs, 11% of students from the bottom quartile of GRE Analytical Writing scores were in peril, compared to only 4% from the top quartile. Even in engineering programs, where writing skills might not seem to be as important as quantitative skills, 40% of the students in the bottom quartile of the GRE Analytical Writing scores in those departments were at risk. This study, like any study of students who were already admitted to graduate programs, could only suggest the true value of an admissions test because students with low scores were not admitted. Thus, it could not show how such students likely would have struggled even more than students who were simply at the lower end of the admitted group. The

strange but true fact is that the reason it is difficult to show how well an admissions test is working is simply because it is working well.

The GRE General Test provides some assurance to graduate programs that the students they admit are likely to have the verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, and analytical writing skills needed to succeed in graduate education, and thus will not be counseled to leave the program for academic reasons during the first year. When focusing on the broader issue of retention in graduate programs, there are numerous other aspects to consider, such as level of financial support, quality of mentoring and advising, familial non-financial support, and social environment or peer group support. Additionally, there is a wide-ranging conversation about the prevalence of mental health issues among graduate students, with some [research](#) suggesting that systemic issues at schools such as the “culture of critique” and the pervasive isolation of independent research may lead to high attrition due to mental distress.

Given these facts, it is clear that the issue of retention in graduate programs is complex and multifaceted. Nonetheless, the GRE test's role in this problem is overestimated and not well understood. Any possible solution needs to look beyond a single admissions requirement and instead address more fully the other aspects of why students choose to leave a program. It will be hard — but it's exactly that kind of creative and holistic thinking for which graduate schools are known.

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