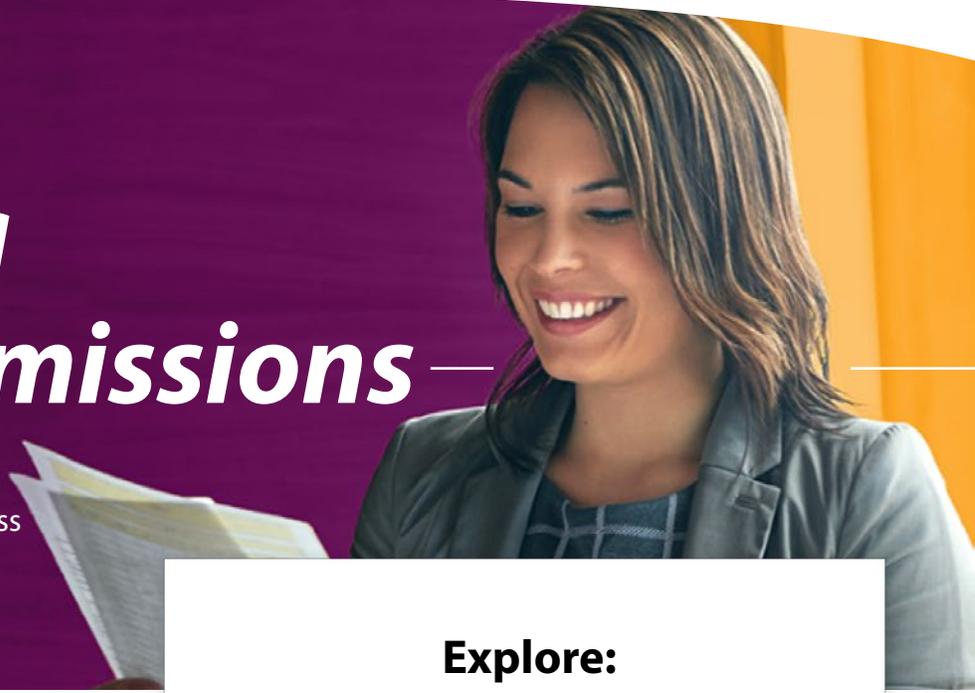


Navigating Holistic Admissions

Explore this step-by-step guide to implementing a holistic admissions process that is aligned with your program and institution goals.



Implementing more holistic admissions processes

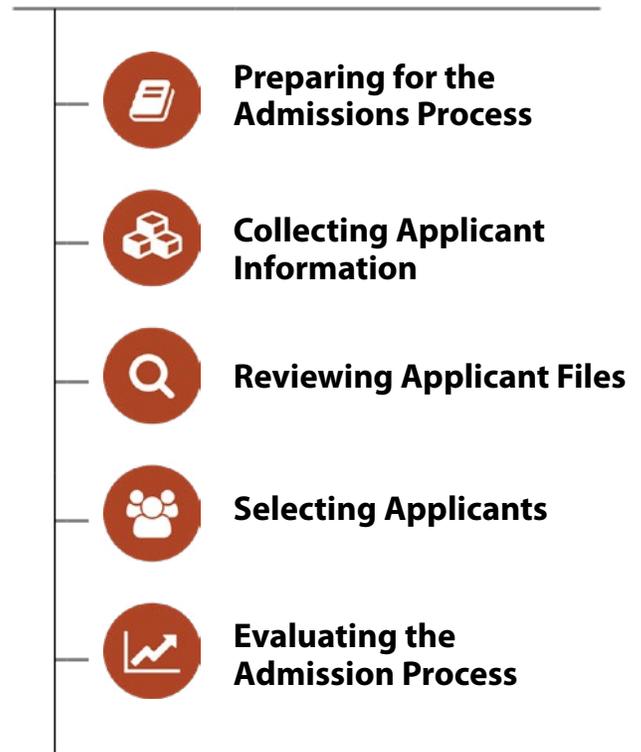
Many graduate programs and institutions are embracing holistic admissions as a way to:

- Select applicants likely to be successful
- Meet their goals
- Consider applicants fairly

To help, ETS and the GRE® Program have curated promising practices based on interviews with graduate deans and faculty involved in admissions at 58 programs across seven broad discipline areas and at the master's and doctoral levels at a variety of public and private institutions with differing goals and levels of selectivity.

This guide shares those promising practices and other practical resources to help you develop and put into practice a holistic approach that works for you.

Explore:



View the Navigating Holistic Admissions digital guide and other companion materials.





Preparing for the Admissions Process

Aligning admissions practices with goals

Are your admissions practices designed to help your program and institution meet their enrollment goals? Adequate preparation can ensure that institutional goals are reflected in admissions practices at the program level.

Prepare: At a glance

- ✓ Set goals and guiding principles.
- ✓ Structure the recruitment and admissions processes to achieve your goals.
- ✓ Consider committee composition and training to mitigate bias in the review process.

Set Goals and Principles

The goal-setting period is an opportunity for all stakeholders to align on what a successful admissions process looks like for your program. The goals should align with the mission and values of the program and institution and should include details, i.e., demographics, skills and experiences about the desired composition of the admitted student pool.

Establishing guiding principles that align to the core values of the program and institution can help all parties involved understand how the goals will be achieved. For example, a guiding principle might be that all applicants will be evaluated as fairly as possible. Being more specific can help

clarify expectations. For example, “All applicants will be evaluated holistically by a team trained in mitigating bias so applicants are selected as fairly as possible.” Once established, the goals and guiding principles can inform every step of the admissions process from recruitment through enrollment.

Structure Processes to Achieve Your Goals

Consider what process your program can implement to identify and recruit the desired population. If the program wants to increase enrollment of applicants who meet a certain criteria, ensure that there are processes in place to grow that pipeline, such as building relationships with feeder schools and pipeline programs like the [Robert E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program](#) and networking with organizations that serve your target audience.

This is also the time to determine how the desired attributes will be assessed, whether the application form is designed to elicit that information, and how each piece of information about the applicant will be weighted given the goal. For example, if the goal is to admit more students with solid research experience, develop specific prompts in the application to elicit that information, perhaps in the personal statement and the letter of recommendation (see how [Cornell University Department of Physics](#) and [The University of Pennsylvania Wharton School](#)* address this topic). Then determine whether you will give that information greater consideration than other measures, such as undergraduate GPA or test scores. Some institutions use a scorecard or rubric to ensure consistency across reviewers.



Compose and Train the Committee

Given the faculty committee's powerful role in the admissions process, it makes good sense to evaluate the composition of the committee itself to ensure that all members understand the goals, principles and processes before the start of the admissions season.

When evaluating the composition of the committee itself, consider whether there is a balance of power among team members to prevent one person from having undue influence over which students are admitted. We are all human, and therefore susceptible to biases. This can be mitigated by ensuring that a variety of perspectives and experiences are reflected in the makeup of the committee membership. Some programs ensure that a representative from the institution's diversity office participates in the admissions process.

A [recent report](#) by the Council of Graduate Schools with support from ETS identified training as a key practice that could improve admissions processes. Only 26% of the master's programs participating in the survey reported that their institutions provide training to those who review applicant files; yet, effective training was identified as essential to admissions success. Researchers noted that a comprehensive faculty development program exploring the most effective admissions review practices could further strengthen the connection between admissions and program success.

In addition to training the committee members about the goals, principles and process, discussing or offering training about the role of implicit (or unconscious) bias and how to avoid it can result in a fairer process overall. Cornell University Graduate School provides an [Implicit Bias Resources](#) webpage as a faculty resource, which shares a series of videos produced by the UCLA Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. The resource page also directs visitors to other resources freely available through the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, VMware Women's Leadership Innovation Lab at

Stanford University and Association of American Medical Colleges.

A few promising practices to consider include:

- Promote faculty discussion in advance of each admissions cycle to ensure common understanding of the goals and guiding principles, the admissions process, application review and selection criteria.
- Determine the best approaches to benefit the process and the participants, e.g., optional workshops, mandatory trainings, facilitated conversation about avoiding implicit bias.

Connecting Graduate Admissions Practices with Goals: Questions to Consider



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**ETS has not empirically validated the examples and tips from graduate programs and institutions provided above.*



Collecting Applicant Information

Gathering evidence to form a holistic view of the applicant

Are you collecting sufficient information — and the right information — to determine which applicants are best suited for your program? Designing an admissions process that requests and considers multiple pieces of evidence about knowledge, skills and attributes can be effective in helping you select a qualified and diverse class. It also helps ensure your process is fair to applicants.

Collect: At a glance

- ✓ Determine the evidence needed from applicants to evaluate their knowledge, skills and attributes.
- ✓ Ensure that the application explicitly requests the desired information and that the information can be easily found on the program website.
- ✓ Collect comparable information from all applicants.

Determine desired evidence

While the evidence submitted in an application package may never give a full picture, being explicit about what evidence is expected in each component of the application and being aware of the benefits and limitations of each can help keep the process as equitable as possible.

The evidence needed should be broad in scope, drawing from:

- Standardized assessments, such as the *GRE*[®] General Test, which assesses reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills.
- Undergraduate overall GPA, major GPA and coursework. Together, these pieces of information can offer insights about the rigor of previous coursework, knowledge acquired in a field, and the applicant's performance in coursework relevant to the intended program of study.
- Statement of Purpose, which applicants can use to communicate their research, academic and professional interests, as well as a résumé or CV, through which they can demonstrate experience in those areas.
- Personal attributes documentation, such as the personal statement, letters of recommendation, interviews, leadership experience and community involvement. These components of the application can indicate an applicant's interests, the conscientiousness needed to produce quality research, and the grit to overcome obstacles — all of which may be indicators of program completion.

When all of the information provided is considered and weighted appropriately, faculty committees can identify applicants that effectively meet program and institution goals. This process is inherently fairer to the applicant.



Explicitly request desired information

It's important to identify where the desired evidence is explicitly requested in the application and revise prompts that are less explicit to be as clear about expectations as possible. For example, in seeking insight about an applicant's grit, you may expect to find signs in the personal statement that this person has the motivation to keep moving forward despite the hurdles encountered in life. It's essential, then, to ensure that in the application, the personal statement prompt clearly requests that applicants provide evidence of that attribute. It's also essential for the instructions to be found easily on the program website, and for the language used to be absolutely clear and explicit, especially for international and first-generation college applicants. Some programs ask current students to review and provide feedback about the clarity of the application, and then refine the application based on that feedback.

It's equally important to identify which components are unrelated to evaluating the desired attribute. For example, the faculty committee should not use the personal statement to conclude that an applicant does not have grit, if the instructions for writing the personal statement did not explicitly request that applicants show evidence of that characteristic.

Collect comparable information

Faculty committees can only have comparable information about applicants if all components of the application are required of everyone (versus optional). All of the documents used as evidence for personal attributes should explicitly request the same information:

- **Résumés** – Provide the categories of information sought, e.g., education, work experience, internships, publications, research

experience, leadership experience, community service. Specify whether the candidate should include all work experience or only experience relevant to the intended field of study. Note that requesting all work experience might be the better option, as understanding the full breadth of a person's work experience can give you more information about personal attributes and circumstances.

- **Letters of Recommendation** – Request the attributes that letter writers should address, as well as specific examples where the attribute was evidenced. Consider using a form to establish some consistency in responses. See examples and tips from [American University School of International Service](#), New Jersey Institute of Technology, [Valdosta State University Graduate School](#) and [Memorial University School of Graduate Studies](#). These, and examples and tips provided in the following bullets, can possibly serve as templates to customize to a program's specific needs.
- **Statement of Purpose** – Help applicants understand why the statement is important and what information should be included. [Cornell University Graduate School](#), [Northeastern University Graduate Programs](#), [Carnegie Mellon University Global Communication Center](#) and [Drexel University LeBow College of Business](#) provide examples and tips.
- **Personal Statements** – Provide specific prompts to be addressed. See examples and tips from the [University of California at Berkeley Graduate Division](#), [Wayne State University Graduate School](#), [Purdue Online Writing Lab](#) and [MIT's Broad Institute*](#).

The need for comparable information applies to collecting standardized test scores, as well. A standardized test serves a unique role in the admissions process because it is the only measure that is objective and standard across all applicants,



allowing for fair and direct comparisons among applicants. Most standardized tests, like the GRE General Test and GRE® Subject Tests, are validated through research, follow rigorous fairness processes and adhere to professional standards established by the American Educational Research Association, National Council on Measurement in Education and the American Psychological Association. GRE General Test scores provide not only solid information about an applicant's reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills, but can serve as a "gut check," or balance, for more subjective components of the application package, helping to mitigate biases in the review process. This is especially helpful in cases in which:

- Two applicants seem equally qualified. Standardized test scores can serve as a check for undergraduate GPA.
- Applicants' undergraduate performance, for a variety of reasons, doesn't reflect their current potential for graduate study.
- Applicants' undergraduate institutions are unknown.
- Applicants are from countries with different education and grading systems.

GRE validity research, test taker performance and other information related to the GRE General Test and GRE Subject Tests can be found on the ETS website, www.ets.org/gre/institutions.

**ETS has not empirically validated the examples and tips from graduate programs and institutions provided above*

Reviewer Diligence and Responsibility in the Graduate Application Process



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Reviewing Applicant Files

Creating a balanced process

Are your processes enabling reviewers to clearly see which applicants are best suited for your program? Considering smart process changes and ensuring that all reviewers are on board might have a big influence on your success.

Review: At a glance

- ✓ Adopt a holistic review process to help reviewers clearly see which applicants are best suited for your program.
- ✓ Consider multiple criteria to make admissions decisions. Explore alternate processes to identify the one that's right for your program and that best mitigates cognitive biases, such as the framing effect.
- ✓ Work with the admissions committee to ensure application packages are reviewed and evaluated consistently.

Reviewing applicants holistically

Various definitions agree that, at its core, holistic admissions is a method in which reviewers consider all available information to get the fullest picture of everything that an applicant can bring to a program. Implemented appropriately, it can support a fair and inclusive process that helps to identify applicants that effectively meet program needs and support institutional goals.

Programs conducting holistic admissions typically:

- use evidence and information from multiple sources to gauge applicants' knowledge, skills, experiences and personal attributes
- avoid using threshold (or cut) scores that are determined using only undergraduate GPA and GRE® General Test scores, as that may prevent candidates with other desirable qualities from being considered
- give thought to the weighting of various components of the application, and the order in which those components are reviewed, to consider all information about an applicant in a fair and equitable way

Consider multiple criteria

One of the foundational elements of holistic admissions is the consideration of multiple sources of information in making admissions decisions. This is one of the score use guidelines published in the [GRE® Guide to the Use of Scores](#) and depicted in the "Using GRE® scores successfully: Guidelines for identifying the best applicants" [infographic](#). The premise of holistic admissions is that each piece of evidence requested in the application should add another layer of understanding about the applicant's knowledge, skills, experiences and personal attributes.



If your program receives an overwhelming number of applications and has resource constraints so severe as to make holistic review of every application impossible, ensuring your process uses more than just two sources of information (traditionally GRE scores and undergraduate GPA) to make the initial cut can make the process fairer for applicants and can prevent great applicants from being dropped. It can also help you better achieve your goals. If the description of your desired admitted pool includes not only academic experiences and cognitive skills, but also personal attributes and non-academic experiences, it makes sense that the initial whittling of your large applicant pool takes these other goals into consideration. Evidence of personal attributes and non-academic experiences can be found in the statement of purpose, personal statement, letters of recommendation and other sources.

Adding another source of information to your initial evaluation will probably be easier if traditionally qualitative components of the application file are quantified. For example, many institutions are attempting to quantify the letter of recommendation — in full, or in part — by asking reviewers to rate applicants on a variety of skills and attributes, such as analytical ability, breadth of knowledge, verbal and written expression skills, perseverance, maturity, imagination and creativity, and potential as a scholar or researcher.

Explore alternate processes

How applications are reviewed, by whom, and in what order can result in the framing effect and significantly influence the outcomes. The framing effect is a cognitive bias in which people react to a particular choice in different ways based upon how it was presented. For example, if a reviewer is first exposed to information about an applicant's low GPA and average GRE scores, the reviewer may review subsequent information with less interest or greater skepticism. If the reviewer is first exposed to evidence of the applicant's significant contributions to their field or impressive research work, the

information about the applicant's undergraduate GPA and GRE scores may seem less important.

To avoid the framing bias, some institutions ensure that faculty members who read letters or personal statements or conduct applicant interviews aren't exposed to information about GPA and GRE scores ahead of time. Each committee member reviews all of the application materials 1) in the same order, and 2) completely independently. This can help to increase the quality and diversity of the incoming class.

Below are additional options for reviewing applications that you may want to consider to help achieve your goals and prevent overreliance on any one measure:

Separate and convene – In this process, different committee members review different components of the application, then convene to discuss. For example, one committee member might review components of the application that contain cognitive evidence (e.g., undergraduate GPA and coursework, GRE scores), while two other committee members review components of the application that contain information about experiences and personal attributes, such as work or research experience, letters of recommendation and the personal statement. When the two groups convene, applicants that received high marks from both groups should sit high in the consideration set. If the application process includes an interview component, consider having yet another group of reviewers conducting the interviews, so a single set of people are not judging all components. Some programs find that the interviewer is more objective when not exposed to applicants' test scores or undergraduate GPA. See other suggestions for mitigating bias during the interview process from [Georgetown University School of Medicine](#) and [University of Florida's Training & Organizational Development](#) group.

Two-pool – This process enables decision makers to act quickly in an environment in which multiple institutions will likely target the same populations



you are considering. In the two-pool process, programs first review the applications of candidates in the target populations to accelerate the holistic review process. Then the program focuses on reviewing remaining applications.

Multi-stage – This process uses an initial set of criteria to narrow a large applicant pool. From the group that didn't make the initial cut, reviewers identify additional applicants that exhibit other desired skills or attributes. Both groups are reviewed holistically. This process might be especially helpful to institutions that want to target members of underrepresented groups, who might be disadvantaged if limited criteria are considered.

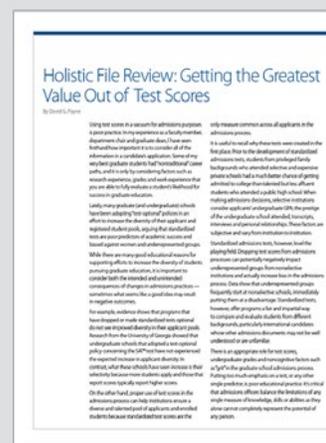
Work with the committee regarding the review process

Working with the committee at the start of the review process helps ensure application packages are reviewed and evaluated consistently. All decision makers should understand:

- Enrollment goals, guiding principles and processes.
- How to evaluate each component of the application, including its role and importance, the order in which components should be reviewed, and which inferences are, or are not, appropriate to make based on the information provided.
- How to mitigate unconscious bias.
- How disagreements between reviewers will be resolved.

**ETS has not empirically validated the examples and tips from graduate programs and institutions provided above*

Holistic File Review: Getting the Greatest Value Out of Test Scores



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Selecting Applicants

Bringing it all together

Are you and your colleagues ready to admit the class best suited for your program? If you've set goals and guiding principles, worked with the admissions committee, collected evidence based on a carefully crafted application and established a fair and thoughtful process, it's time to put your hard work to the test.

Select: At a glance

- ✓ Balance quantitative and qualitative measures to get the most complete picture of what an applicant can offer.
- ✓ Take the composition of the class as a whole into account in order to meet program goals and targets.
- ✓ Consider using a scorecard or rubric to evaluate applicants consistently.
- ✓ Consult published research to determine which of the three GRE General Test scores are most predictive in your discipline, and weight those scores accordingly.

Balance the art and the science

Making admissions decisions is an art and a science. Objective, standardized measures, such as *GRE*[®] General Test scores, provide the science. More subjective sources of information about an applicant's attributes and experiences, such as the

personal statement and letters of recommendation, provide the art. Both are important.

ETS recommends ensuring your admissions process is as holistic as possible — balancing the art and science so that all applicants have the opportunity to be considered for everything that they can bring to a program, and so that programs can enroll applicants that best fit their program needs and support institutional goals. ETS also recommends requiring GRE scores of all applicants, as standardized tests have a unique role as an objective measure in the admissions process and can balance more subjective components of the application.

Consider Class Composition

Admitting a body of applicants to meet program enrollment goals requires a bit of creativity. When selecting students, consider the composition of the class as a whole to ensure goals are met. For example, if a goal is to increase program diversity by enrolling more individuals from underrepresented groups, factor that in during the selection process, if defensible and appropriate. Consulting with university counsel periodically can help ensure the selection process remains defensible.

Programs can also benefit from having students that bring different skills — or a mix of them — to the classroom. For example, the program may benefit from a balance of students with strong research skills and those with work experience. In [Building Successful Graduate Programs with a Humanistic Approach](#), a graduate enrollment management director describes his efforts to balance class composition.



Achieving balance may be easier if some of the traditionally qualitative components of the application file are quantified. As mentioned previously, many institutions are attempting to quantify the letter of recommendation by asking reviewers to rate applicants on a number of skills and attributes. Quantifying more subjective measures can add a bit of consistency and rigor to the “art” of admissions.

Use scorecards and other tools

Some programs use scorecards (see example below) or rubrics to help ensure that reviewers evaluate applicants consistently and in alignment with program goals. In a scorecard or rubric, a range of points are assigned to each component of the application based on the program’s goals. Components that the program considers more important can receive more points, or be weighted more, than components the program considers less important. And for each component, reviewers can assign a range of scores depending on whether the evidence received demonstrates the skills, experiences and attributes desired.

For example, if a program is looking to enroll students who have leadership experience and have overcome significant challenges in their lives, and the personal statement instructions explicitly request evidence of those attributes and experiences, the personal statement might be valued at three points, with students earning one point if they have met the requirement, two points if they have surpassed the requirement in either area (meaning either that their leadership experience seemed especially significant or that the hardship they overcame seemed especially substantial), and three points if they have surpassed the requirement in both areas. If the program in this example also would like to see previous work or internship experience in the field, but places less value on that experience, perhaps the total possible point value for work/internship experience is two.

The scorecard or rubric could also recommend action for the committee to take based on the total score range. For example, if the total score range is 10-27 points, perhaps applicants with a total score range of 24-27 are considered “strong admits,” applicants in the 20-24 range are “probable admits,” and applicants below 20 are likely to receive waitlist or rejection letters. This would depend upon how many applicants fit into either of the aforementioned categories and the historical response rate to acceptance letters that the program sends out. While these are just examples, the idea is that by creating total score ranges, reviewers can more easily make recommendations for admittance that align to program goals. Of course, a scorecard is intended as the beginning of a discussion, not the source of a firm admit/deny decision. Faculty committees should reach final admissions decisions through discussion and consensus.

Weight GRE General Test Scores

Users of GRE® General Test scores receive three distinct scores, one for each measure on the test: Verbal Reasoning, Quantitative Reasoning and Analytical Writing. This allows for flexibility in determining which scores to weight more or less. It’s especially helpful to consult published research to determine which of the three measures is most likely to predict success in your field. For example, [research](#) shows that in Engineering programs, Quantitative Reasoning and Analytical Writing scores most strongly predict graduate GPA at both the master’s and doctoral levels. Therefore, it makes sense to weight Quantitative Reasoning and Analytical Writing scores higher than Verbal Reasoning scores in an Engineering program.

Analytical Writing scores can be undervalued, despite providing programs with two unique benefits. First, [research](#) shows that of the three scores that the GRE General Test provides, how



well students perform on the Analytical Writing section is the best or second best predictor of their graduate GPA across most disciplines at both the master's and doctoral levels. Second, institutions can view applicants' actual Analytical Writing responses through the [ETS® Data Manager](#) — this service is free to institutions that have a GRE score reporting code.

Additionally, Analytical Writing responses:

- Give faculty committees another piece of information about their applicants.
- Cannot be coached or edited by parents or other advisors, unlike personal statements, because the GRE General Test is administered in a secure testing environment.
- Give faculty committees a good indication for how the applicant would analyze an issue or an argument and present those analyses in a form that could be understood by others. These are skills they'll need at some point in any graduate program and certainly in their careers.

The [GRE® Guide to the Use of Scores](#) not only provides information about important score use guidelines, but also offers a compelling case for using GRE scores as part of a holistic admissions process.

Sample Scorecard for Holistic Admissions

Using a Holistic Admissions Scorecard for Fair and Consistent Application Review

Notice: While this scorecard, as its name implies, addresses a holistic review process, it is not intended to be used as a checklist or a formula. It is intended to be used as a guide to help institutions consider all available information to get a more complete picture of what an applicant can bring to campus. Institutions are encouraged to use this scorecard as a guide to help them make more informed decisions about their applicants and to help them make more informed decisions about their applicants.

Requirements for using this scorecard:

- Use this scorecard as a guide to help you make more informed decisions about your applicants.
- Use this scorecard as a guide to help you make more informed decisions about your applicants.
- Use this scorecard as a guide to help you make more informed decisions about your applicants.

Component	Weighted Points
Academic	3
Letters of Recommendation (LOR)	3
Work Experience (WE)	3
Extracurricular Activities	3
GRE	4
Personal Statement	3
GRE Scores	4
Total	26

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Evaluating the Admission Process

Gaining insights for future improvements

Did your admissions process help you achieve your desired goals? Periodic review and reflection can lead to insights regarding improvements you can plan to implement in the next cycle.

Evaluate: At a glance

- ✓ Evaluate and measure outcomes data against admissions information periodically to ensure desired outcomes for the program, institution and student body are being achieved.
- ✓ Reflect on past students who have been successful, and those who were not, to gain insight into the effectiveness of the information collected.
- ✓ Understand why students typically drop out of graduate programs to ensure inputs are being analyzed appropriately.

Measure outcomes

Periodically evaluating and measuring outcomes data against admissions information can help ensure that the admissions policies and practices are producing the desired outcomes regarding institutional and program goals, as well as the composition of the student body. Any observed patterns between admissions data and important student outcomes may be useful in refining the admissions practices in subsequent cycles.

If you find that one of your program's enrollment goals has not been met, such as to increase diversity, reviewing the strategies for recruiting and nurturing relationships can lead to active exploration of new ways to attract applicants.

Reflect on successful and unsuccessful students

Reflecting upon past students who have been successful in the program, as well as those who were not, can provide insight into the information collected. It can reveal how effective pieces of information were in helping determine which applicants have the potential to make it through the program. Doing this can also determine if there is any information not currently collected that would have been useful.

Analyze inputs

A regression analysis may help a program determine which inputs contribute toward the prediction of the outcomes it values. Generally, a sample size of 75 is a reasonable threshold for making any meaningful conclusions, and the more variables considered, the larger the sample size should be. Programs can combine data collected over several years to achieve a sufficient sample size for this type of analysis. It's important to use caution in relying upon study results with smaller sample sizes, as they can often lead to incorrect conclusions. Someone in the research or statistics department at your institution may be able to advise on parameters for such a study.



ETS researchers are also available to advise regarding factors to consider; email gretest@ets.org to connect with someone who has experience in this area.

It's important to exercise care when comparing outcomes with inputs as many factors contribute toward whether a student is successful in a particular program. In a [study](#) for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) exploring the reasons students did not complete graduate school programs, researchers identified "change in family status," "job/military conflict" and "dissatisfaction" as the top three of 15 reasons. While there may not be any way for programs to determine who will drop out due to competing life priorities, conducting exit surveys could help your institution make changes to avoid dissatisfaction. While it can be time intensive, some programs take the extra step to conduct exit interviews using a standard set of questions to solicit richer feedback.

IMPORTANT NOTE: Some programs have stopped requiring GRE® General Test scores because they don't believe the test predicts program completion. The NCES study can be used to understand why. The GRE test could never have predicted the impact that competing life priorities and other external influences could have on degree completion. Only 1% of interviewees indicated they were dropping out of their program due to academic problems. By using the GRE test in combination with other measures, however, the majority of graduate schools have been very successful in admitting only students with the reasoning, critical thinking and analytical writing skills needed for success. Therefore, very few students drop out because they lack these skills.

Contact a graduate education advisor

A number of graduate faculty and administrators serve as graduate education strategic advisors with ETS. These advisors are ready to help answer your questions and learn more about the needs of your graduate programs. Strategic advisors are also available to conduct webinars about holistic admissions, co-facilitate a presentation, or hold 1:1 meetings with individuals on your campus to learn about program needs. This is a service that ETS is providing at no cost to your institution as part of our mission to advance quality, equity and diversity in education. [Email us](#) to learn more.

Understanding and Improving Graduate Program Retention Rates



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