Four Facts about the GRE® General Test

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

Are you considering changes to your admissions processes? This document pulls together useful information — including findings from the largest, most relevant studies — that shows the GRE® General Test’s unique value in helping programs ensure that prospective students have the critical thinking skills needed to meet program requirements.

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

As a standardized measure of an applicant’s readiness for graduate-level academic work, graduate programs can use scores to fairly compare students from different backgrounds. The test assesses critical thinking, verbal and quantitative reasoning, and analytical writing skills. These are skills needed across many disciplines and are critical in helping graduate students navigate the rigors of the academy.

The test’s ability to assess these skills have been documented through an extensive body of research:

• A study that examined the GRE® scores of 25,356 students enrolled in master’s and doctoral programs at 10 institutions found that the test correlated with academic performance across programs ranging from STEM to the humanities. For students in biological and biomedical programs, for example, 30 percent of the students in the lowest quartile of GRE® Quantitative Reasoning scores were in academic peril. Only 8 percent in the top quartile of scores were in academic peril.

• A meta-analysis by researchers at the University of Minnesota using data from 82,659 graduate students across multiple disciplines, concluded that GRE® scores are “generalizably valid predictors” of:
  • first-year and cumulative GPA
  • comprehensive examination scores
  • publication citation counts
  • faculty ratings

Validity was established for both master’s and doctoral programs. The study also found “consistently positive” — though not always statistically significant — correlations with degree attainment and research productivity. These are outcomes that extend beyond what the GRE® test was designed to measure.
2. Holistic admissions processes that consider multiple components of a candidate’s application package, including GRE® scores, are fairer to the applicant.

GRE® General Test scores are an essential part of holistic admissions because of their unique role as the only research-based, fair and objective measure of cognitive skills in the application packet. The term “holistic admissions” refers to admissions processes that 1) consider a broad range of characteristics, including cognitive skills and personal attributes, when reviewing applications, and 2) align with institutional and program goals. Holistic admissions processes can enable programs to select a better qualified and more diverse class.

In holistic admissions, GRE® scores are considered alongside evidence gathered from transcripts, undergraduate GPA, personal statements, letters of recommendation and other relevant sources. These latter materials can provide information about desirable attributes such as motivation and conscientiousness, which may be useful predictors of program completion, research productivity and other outcomes. Using GRE® scores in combination with undergraduate GPA and qualitative measures is a proven method for identifying students with the skills, experiences and appetite needed for graduate school success.

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

The GRE® test can serve as a door opener for students who otherwise may not be considered for admission. Many graduate students and professionals, including those from underrepresented groups, credit their graduate admission to how well they performed on the GRE® General Test. For those who have undergraduate degrees from less-familiar or foreign undergraduate institutions, don’t have a letter of recommendation from an author with whom the faculty committee is familiar, or have had to forgo an unpaid internship to put food on the table, GRE® scores can elevate their application to be visible among applicants who had richer educational experiences. And the GRE® Program’s 50 percent fee reduction offering — now with free test prep valued at $100 — reduces barriers for those applicants as well.

Increasing diversity at the graduate level is challenging because programs are trying to adjust for social inequalities that began long before the applicant ever considered attending graduate school. Just as graduate programs alone can’t fix entrenched, systemic societal inequalities, neither can the GRE® General Test. However, the GRE® Program can help institutions understand performance differences among various groups and how to take them into consideration during the admissions process. And the GRE® Program provides GRE® score use guidelines and promising practices for ensuring that GRE® scores are used appropriately in admissions processes without overinflating their role so that all applicants are considered fairly. The promising practices have been curated from 71 interviews with faculty, deans and staff at programs across various disciplines at the master’s and doctoral levels.

It is unlikely that dropping the GRE® test requirement for admissions — a test that has served students and the graduate community for more than 70 years — will result in a more diverse class. And it may have several unintended consequences, such as overreliance on reputation of the undergraduate institution, letters of recommendation and personal statements, all of which can be influenced by socio-economic status and are susceptible to implicit bias.
4. The GRE® General Test was created to provide equal opportunity to everyone.

An original use of the GRE® General Test was to fairly evaluate soldiers returning home from World War II after the GI Bill was passed. Many of those soldiers attended rural undergraduate institutions, and at the time, graduate education was generally reserved for those from privileged families. While the diversity goals of institutions have evolved as society has evolved, the GRE® test’s original purpose remains. At its core, the GRE® test is meant to highlight students with the skills to succeed academically, and may serve as a supportive detail in an application packet for qualified individuals who didn’t have the same advantages as their peers.

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® General Test yields objective data that enables decision makers to directly compare applicants, all of whom come from different backgrounds and academic experiences.

Learn more at www.holisticadmissions.org and www.ets.org/gre/institutions. We welcome questions and comments at GREtests@ets.org.

Research References


