

GRADUATE ADMISSIONS CRITERIA IN PSYCHOLOGY: AN UPDATE¹

R. ERIC LANDRUM AND JEREMY CLARK

Boise State University

Summary.—Ratings of importance were reviewed for nine graduate admissions criteria for the 573 graduate degree programs listed in American Psychological Association's Graduate Study in Psychology (2003). Overall, the three criteria receiving the highest percentages of importance ratings were letters of recommendation, statement of goals and objectives, and grade point average. Importance ratings varied depending on the degree programs offered. Results are discussed in terms of the advice offered students interested in admission to graduate school and the importance of students tailoring their graduate admissions process to their specific degree program.

Psychology's popularity is growing at a phenomenal pace. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002) reported that in 1999–2000, U.S. colleges and universities awarded over 74,000 bachelor's degrees in psychology, an increase of over 40% compared to 20 years ago. In that same 20-yr. period, the number of master's and doctoral degrees awarded increased just over 30% and 20%, respectively. Interest in psychology at the undergraduate level and the increased competition for admission to graduate study make understanding the importance of admissions criteria essential for students with aspirations for admittance.

When demand outstrips supply, the admissions process becomes more competitive and students need heightened awareness of the graduate admissions climate. Earlier research focused on these issues, for instance, work published on the odds of getting into various graduate programs (Korn, 1984) and that of Purdy, Reinehr, and Swartz (1989) who studied the graduate admissions criteria of departments from the perspective of relevant importance of items such as Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, letters of recommendation, research and clinical experience, grade point average (GPA), and coursework. A trio of factors emerged as important criteria for graduate school admissions: GRE, GPA, and letters of recommendation (Keith-Spiegel, 1991; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000). Landrum, Jeglum, and Cashin (1994) surveyed graduate admissions committees and replicated this finding but noted that the personal statement and research experience had gained importance.

There is interest in factors which affect admissions for a variety of rea-

¹Please address correspondence to Eric Landrum, Department of Psychology, Boise State University, 1910 University Drive, Boise, ID 83725 or e-mail (elandru@boisestate.edu).

sons. First, Landrum, *et al.* (1994) noted subtle changes over time. Second, Cashin and Landrum (1991) found that students have misperceptions about what is important in the graduate admission process. For instance, Cashin and Landrum found that students overestimated the importance of extracurricular activities while underestimating the importance of GPA and GRE scores.

The focus of the present study was somewhat similar to those of Smith (1985) and Lawson (1995) in use of the Graduate Study in Psychology (American Psychological Association, 2003) as a source of archival data. Smith looked at the distinction between kinds of programs, like clinical/counseling, experimental, educational, mixed, on how graduate programs valued the criteria. He thought coursework requirements were important. Lawson also examined program type and nonobjective criteria such as research experience, work experience, extracurricular activity, clinically related service, and letters of recommendation, as well as GRE scores and GPA. In the present study, however, we examined the different types of degree programs—master's-only, doctoral-only, master's+doctoral—rather than the departmental specializations. Students contemplating graduate education consider not only their area of specialization but also their terminal degree objective. The goal of this study was to update the general understanding of variables critical in the graduate admissions process, as well as to examine differences between graduate programs offering different types of degrees.

METHOD

Using the Graduate Study in Psychology (American Psychological Association, 2003), data were obtained for all graduate programs ($N=573$). The publication contains information about graduate school programs such as admissions criteria, information about financial aid, and competitiveness of the graduate program. Our focus was to examine differences in the importance of particular admissions variables depending upon the type of degree program of the department. Here, master's+doctoral programs are labeled combination programs. Degree programs were assessed on a 3-point scale of ratings of importance for the criteria. Anchors were 1: low, 2: medium, and 3: high.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

All data were available, thus inferential statistics were unnecessary. The chosen approach emphasized what the graduate degree programs valued as most important with respect to the admissions criteria. In Table 1 are the percentages of high importance ratings for each criterion, both overall and by type of degree program.

In terms of the traditional trio of primary admissions criteria, these data suggest a weighting of factors. Instead of GPA, GRE, and letters of recom-

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF HIGH IMPORTANCE RATINGS BY DEGREE PROGRAM
ON GRADUATE ADMISSIONS CRITERIA

Admissions Criteria	All Degree Programs	Type of Degree Awarded		
		Doctoral*	Master's	Combination
GRE/MAT scores	48.2	53.1	39.3	48.8
Research experience	52.2	69.2	30.6	50.0
Work experience	18.9	15.1	19.9	22.8
Extracurricular activity	3.6	3.8	3.0	3.7
Clinically related public service	20.2	16.4	20.4	24.3
Grade point average (GPA)	71.0	70.9	68.7	74.1
Letters of recommendation	79.3	86.7	72.8	77.0
Interview	61.7	63.1	47.0	72.5
Statement of goals and objectives	75.0	83.3	63.7	74.5

Note.—Degree programs rated each criterion with anchors of 1: low importance, 2: medium importance, and 3: high importance. *Ph.D. and Psy.D.

mentation, the overall pattern of highest importance ratings was letters of recommendation (79.3%), statement of goals and objectives (75.0%), GPA (71.0%), and the interview (61.7%). These criteria were followed by research experience (52.2%) and GRE scores (48.2%). The GRE was given the highest rating by 48.2% of all degree programs, so students must remember to find the best match or fit between their own skills and what a particular program emphasizes.

The nature of the advice offered to students by faculty members may depend on the type of degree program. An arbitrary value of 60% of highest importance ratings was identified as an indicator of a consistently important criterion for graduate admission so patterns by degree program could be considered. Doctoral-only programs highly valued letters of recommendation (86.7%), statement of goals and objectives (83.3%), GPA (70.9%), research experience (69.2%), and the interview (63.1%). Students with the goal of attending a doctoral-only degree program should keep these criteria in mind, but 16.4% of these programs gave clinically related public service the highest rating. Master's-only degree programs highly valued letters of recommendation (72.8%), GPA (68.7%), and statement of goals and objectives (63.7%). Programs with both master's and doctoral degrees highly valued letters of recommendation (77.0%), statement of goals and objectives (74.5%), GPA (74.1%), and the interview (72.5%). In this analysis, the critical admissions factors depend on the type of degree program. The common focus on GPA, GRE, and letters of recommendation may not be appropriate.

Although this analysis used the same source as Smith (1985) and Lawson (1995) in use of the Graduate Study in Psychology, the outcomes are not directly comparable. Both Smith and Lawson looked at how programs

valued criteria, distinguishing among clinical/counseling, experimental, educational, and mixed. Here, the different types of degree programs were examined rather than area specializations. Previous studies also focused on differential coursework requirements and GRE and GPA requirements. If looking at specializations within programs, e.g., developmental, industrial/organizational, or social, in conjunction with the importance of graduate admission criteria were possible with existing resources, such information would be extremely valuable for students considering graduate school.

There are several limitations to archivally based research. The precise nature of how graduate admissions committees used the information from the criteria could not be ascertained. Perhaps once minimum standards of GPA and GRE were satisfied, other criteria may have become more important. The ratings provided in the Graduate Study in Psychology (American Psychological Association, 2003) were static and cannot possibly reflect the underlying dynamic of the selection process.

As psychology increases in popularity, so does the competitiveness for graduate school admission. Students need to think carefully about their own career goals and interests and have some sense of surety that graduate education is the path to help them achieve their goals. To offer students their best chance for admission, educators need to continue providing students with the most accurate, up-to-date information possible. The time and energy invested in the graduate application process by students, faculty members, and graduate admissions committees is substantial. Educators have the responsibility to provide accurate information so students may optimize their chance for success.

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