



Date: November 19, 2020

To: Deans, Department and Group Chairs, Graduate Advisors, Chairs of Graduate Admission Committees, Equity Advisors, Graduate Student Affairs Officers

From: Lisa García Bedolla, Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division
Oscar Dubón, Vice Chancellor of Equity and Inclusion

Re: **Holistic Review of Applicants for Graduate Admission and Fellowship Nominations**

As a new admissions cycle begins in this challenging time of remote work, we thank all who have worked so hard to adopt and follow practices that help ensure a fair, inclusive review of all applicants for graduate programs. These best practices help us recruit new cohorts of graduate students whose excellence and diversity invigorate our research and enliven our professional programs. Below, we remind you of these best practices as well as relevant campus policies. **We ask that you share this memo with all faculty and staff involved in your graduate admissions and fellowships nominations processes.**

I. Comprehensive Admissions Review Recommendations

We commend those departments that use comprehensive review in their graduate admissions procedures. Such an approach avoids over-reliance on GRE scores, especially in the preliminary stages of assessment, in determining a candidate's potential for successful graduate studies. We would note that consideration of the GRE is optional at the campus level and almost all UC Berkeley departments elected to not require the GRE this admissions cycle.

A. **Comprehensive, holistic admissions review.** This process examines an applicant's potential for success from more reliable indicators such as the applicant's general academic record, statement of purpose and writing samples, research experience, the context of achievement, and letters of recommendation. We would ask admissions readers to keep in mind the [biases](#) that can exist in letters of recommendation and keep those in mind as they review admissions files.

B. **Context of Achievement.** In addition to potential for success, holistic review considers the broader characteristics, attributes and assets that a student can bring to the university. Specifically, to assess potential for success in our rigorous programs, one should evaluate an applicant's record of prior achievement in the context in which these achievements were made, considering what it took for the applicant to attain their current level of academic achievement. While GPA is an indicator of academic accomplishment, one may consider academic success in spite of economic, social, or educational disadvantages, or while making significant contributions to society. Such factors include but are not limited to:

- First in their family to go to college
- Low income
- Previous educational experiences in an under-resourced environment
- Language other than English primarily spoken at home

- Member of a community that is historically underrepresented in higher education
- Research, professional, or volunteer experience working with low-income and/or marginalized populations
- Public service experience, such as the Peace Corps and AmeriCorps
- Participation in special undergraduate scholar programs such as Gates Millennium Scholars, McNair Scholars, Biology Scholars, Minority Access to Research Careers (MARC), California Pre-Doctoral Program, NSF Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation in the Sciences (LSAMP), and others. [View a list of programs](#) for which **UC Berkeley grants fee waivers.**
- Self-supporting; worked a significant number of hours and/or had responsibility for caring for others as an undergraduate

Also, keep in mind that undocumented applicants bring an entire host of valuable perspectives and experiences that enhance scholarly and professional pursuits. **Please give strong review and consideration to this unique applicant pool during the admissions cycle.**

II. Less Reliance on GRE Scores Given They are a Weak Predictor of Scholarly Success

Almost all departments have opted out of requiring the GRE this admissions cycle due to COVID disruptions, [GRE testing issues](#), and **to the weak empirical evidence that it effectively predicts graduate school success.** Departments still using GRE scores as a prominent criterion in graduate admissions are encouraged to instead use comprehensive, holistic approaches to evaluation.

The GRE Board of the Educational Testing Service states, “Many factors play a role in an applicant’s admissibility and expectation of success as a graduate student. GRE scores are only one element in this total picture and should be considered along with other data. The GRE Board believes that **GRE scores should never be the sole basis for an admissions decision** and that it is inadvisable to reject an applicant solely on the basis of GRE scores. A cutoff score below which every applicant is categorically rejected without consideration of any other information should not be used.”

More than a decade ago, the Graduate Council of the Academic Senate discontinued requiring the use of GRE scores in assessing applications for graduate admission in favor of allowing departments to determine the appropriate weight in using GRE scores. This accords with a [number of studies](#), including assessments conducted by several UC Berkeley departments, that note the limitations of using GRE scores as predictors, either positive or negative, of student success in graduate degree programs.

III. Universitywide Fellowships

GRE scores are not considered in universitywide fellowships competitions.

Because so many departments do not ask for GRE scores as part of their application materials and we want to ensure an equitable playing field for all nominated applications, GRE scores on nominated applications will not be displayed to University Fellowship Committee reviewers. We therefore strongly discourage references to GRE scores in nomination letters.

IV. Resources

We recommend attending our upcoming graduate admissions workshop or consulting the following resources in preparation for your department’s admissions review:

- [Holistic Graduate Admissions Workshop with Julie Posselt](#)
December 1, 2020, 2-4 p.m.
Learn about best practices for holistic applicant reviews with Julie Posselt, associate professor of higher education at USC and author of "Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping" and "Equity in Science: Representation, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change in Graduate Education."
- [Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions](#) (2016)
This report released by the Council of Graduate Schools offers a legal rationale for holistic admissions, as well as a summary of existing resources and the experiences of individual institutions.
- [Holistic Review of Applications for Admission to Graduate Degree Programs](#)
This webpage from the University of Michigan's Rackham Graduate School offers guidance for faculty who sit on graduate admissions committees.

V. Summary

Conscientious and deliberate holistic review efforts by all programs will increase the excellence of our graduate student body and will strengthen the university by fostering a more meaningful, intercultural learning environment.

Please let us know if we can assist you in any way as you discuss and implement admissions criteria for the coming cycle. The [Office for Graduate Diversity](#) is another valuable resource for departments as well.

Thank you again for your efforts and commitment to access and excellence.

Lisa García Bedolla
Vice Provost for Graduate Studies and Dean of the Graduate Division

Oscar Dubón
Vice Chancellor of Equity and Inclusion