

UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GRADUATE ADMISSIONS CRITERIA IN PSYCHOLOGY¹

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Summary.—36 undergraduate psychology majors from the University of Wisconsin—Platteville completed a questionnaire by listing what they believed to be relevant criteria in the admissions process for graduate school. Students subsequently rank-ordered by importance each of the criteria they generated. Their list of criteria was similar to those of previous studies; however, the relative importance of the criteria differed substantially between the present study and previous ones. Faculty advising students about graduate school may want to use this information to help students better understand the graduate school admissions process.

What do undergraduate psychology majors know about the graduate school admissions process? This study was designed to compare graduate school admissions criteria and undergraduates' perceptions of those criteria. Previous researchers have used graduate admissions committee members [hereafter called faculty studies] to assess the importance of various factors in the process (Mehrabian, 1969; Wallace & Schwab, 1976; Oltman & Hartnett, 1985; Eddy, Lloyd, & Lubin, 1987; Purdy, Reinehr, & Swartz, 1989). Other researchers have assessed students' perceptions of factors in graduate admissions [hereafter called student studies], typically by supplying students with a list of potential criteria and then having them rank the items in their perceived order of importance (Baird, Clark, & Hartnett, 1973; Kelsey & Dobson, 1977; Powers & Lehman, 1983).

From the above-mentioned studies, only three criteria appeared in all studies: the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), over-all undergraduate grade point average (GPA), and letters of recommendation. In the present study, students were asked to generate their own list of graduate admissions criteria and then rank-order the items. This approach offers an alternative technique for capturing students' knowledge about the process.

METHOD

Subjects

The subject pool for this study consisted of all 117 psychology majors at the University of Wisconsin—Platteville during the Spring 1991 semester. Ninety women and 27 men received the questionnaire.

¹This study was conducted by the first author under the direction of the second author. Address any correspondence to R. Eric Landrum, Department of Psychology, 1 University Plaza, University of Wisconsin—Platteville, Platteville, WI 53818-3099.

Materials and Procedure

A one-page questionnaire was developed and sent to all members of the subject pool. Subjects were asked to list all the factors they thought graduate admissions committees considered when screening applicants. Subjects then rank ordered the self-generated criteria from most important to least important in the admissions process.

RESULTS

Of the 117 questionnaires distributed, 39 were returned (33.3%); however, three subjects did not list graduate admissions criteria as requested. The ages of respondents ranged from 18 to 35 years ($M = 22.3$), and the average year in school was junior standing ($M = 3.18$). Twenty-nine women and 8 men responded; two individuals did not disclose their gender.

Students listed 42 separate variables as criteria for graduate school admission. Table 1 presents the criteria reported by at least 10% of all respondents. Over-all GPA was mentioned most often by these students (97.2%), concurring with the previous findings from faculty and student studies of graduate admissions. While both letters of recommendation and GRE scores were unanimous choices in those prior studies, these two factors were reported by students in this study only 58.3% and 55.6% of the time, respectively.

TABLE 1
CRITERIA: FREQUENCY OF RESPONSE ($N = 36$) AND STUDENTS REPORTING (%)

Criteria	<i>f</i>	%
Over-all GPA	35	97.2
Letters of Recommendation	21	58.3
Extracurricular Activities	21	58.3
GRE Score	20	55.6
Field Experience/Internship	19	52.8
Quality of UG* Institution	14	38.9
Research Experience	11	30.6
Psychology GPA	10	27.8
Interview	8	22.2
Courses Taken	6	16.7
Ethnicity/Race	6	16.7
Mental Health Field Aspirations	5	13.9
Gender	5	13.9
Autobiographical Statement	4	11.1
Work Experiences	4	11.1
Good Fit With Graduate School	4	11.1

*Undergraduate.

Students also rank-ordered their admissions criteria and these results are presented in Table 2. Surprisingly, GRE scores ranked higher than over-all GPA even though they were mentioned far less often (55.6% vs 97.2%).

TABLE 2
TOP STUDENT-RANKED CRITERIA FOR GRADUATE ADMISSIONS

Criteria	M Rank Order
GRE Score	1.9
Over-all GPA	2.1
Psychology GPA	2.5
Courses Taken	2.7
Research Experience	3.5
Letters of Recommendation	3.6
Field Experience/Internship	3.8
Extracurricular Activities	5.3
Quality of Undergraduate Institution	5.9
Interview	6.1

Note.—The lower the rank, the more important the item. Students averaged 6.2 responses over-all; this number served as the cut-off score for inclusion in this table.

Also noteworthy is that psychology GPA was ranked in a relatively high position (2.5) despite its infrequent appearance on the students' lists (27.8%).

DISCUSSION

While the scope of the present study was limited, an important finding did emerge: although students may be familiar with the criteria used in graduate admissions, they are typically unaware of the relative importance of those criteria. In comparing ratings of importance from the present students with ranks by faculty members serving on admissions committees, students do comprehend the importance of over-all GPA, but they underestimate the importance of GRE scores and letters of recommendation, and they overestimate the importance of extracurricular activities.

The present results and others suggest that there may not be enough clear and readily available information for prospective graduate students about admissions criteria (Baird, *et al.*, 1973; Hartnett, 1979; Millimet & Flume, 1982). Undergraduate faculty may wish to use the results of this study to provide students better information on the admission to graduate school.

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