GRIT Application Guide
2018

This guide is aimed at advising Admissions Committees on equitable practices when reviewing student applications from marginalized backgrounds. Generally, the Graduate Recruitment Initiative Team (GRIT) recommends a holistic review process, in which quantitative and qualitative (non-cognitive) traits of a particular applicant are all considered in the application process. Non-cognitive variables, such as perseverance and grit, have been shown to be better predictors of success for underrepresented minority (URM) students than the GRE alone (Sedlacek, 2010; Sedlacek, 2004).

While the reading and reviewing of applications can be a very personal, case-by-case process, GRIT wishes to provide a resource to orient faculty for reading applications from students marginalized, underrepresented, or nontraditional backgrounds. We recognize that this guide will not be applicable in all scenarios due to the diverse personal experiences reflected in each application; however we hope this guide will provide insight on such applications.

<u>Application Criteria:</u>
- **Research**

  Research experience is a critical component of any graduate school application, however disparities in research opportunities may disadvantage some students. While it certainly can be striking on an application if a student has had an extensive research experience at a top name university, this does not mean that a student who hasn't had that opportunity would be any less suited for graduate education. GRIT suggests looking for the following:
  - **Logic, Clarity, and Enthusiasm:**
    - Can this applicant clearly and concisely explain their research?
    - Do they present their work in a logical flow?
    - Do they seem excited to discuss their research and/or others' research?
    - Do they seem enthusiastic about research in general? (e.g. awed or inspired by their interactions with science)

- **Perseverance**

  Studies have shown that the best predictor of success is not GPA, GRE scores, or explicit scientific knowledge, but perseverance and grit (Moneta-Koehler, 2017; Miller and Stassun, 2014). These factors, while hard to define, are critical to success in graduate school where students are faced with many hurdles and stressors. GRIT suggests looking for the following:
  - **Job experience:**
    - Non-scientific jobs can highlight important qualities about a candidate that have a large impact on their potential success in graduate education. These qualities include, but are not limited to:
      - Time management skills (such as in the service industries)
      - Interpersonal skills
      - Leadership skills and professionalism
      - Collaborative and Team Building skills

Note: students from low socioeconomic backgrounds often help their families by working jobs in addition to their classes/research. This often impacts GPA and quality of research experience.

- ○ **Background**
  - ■ Many URM and other marginalized students (e.g., LGBTQ+) face challenges throughout their life, including stereotype threat (see below), inequality in educational/economic resources, challenges related to identity, etc., that all impact academic success.
  - ■ Persistence in and commitment to academic success, even in the face of insurmountable odds is a strong indicator of a motivated and dedicated student. For instance, if a student feels underqualified or undeserving of higher education or science, or are the first in their family to seek such a career (e.g., First Generation), the fact that they are even submitting an application can show a desire to succeed that rises above the odds against them.
- ○ **The "rising" quality**:
  - ■ Look for ways that the applicant has risen to challenges; personal, academic, or professional.
  - ■ A way one can contextualize this is by asking "look how far they have come" and detailing the accumulation of disadvantage marginalized students experience.
  - ■ Is this student on a rising trajectory? Are they committed to success no matter the odds?

- ● **Community**
  While this may not seem like an important consideration when reading graduate school applications, understanding an applicant's relationship with their community may bring insight on the type of community builder they will be here at UChicago. Community based and non-academic endeavors may highlight many non-cognitive traits that result in a student's success.
  - ○ **Leadership Opportunities and Community Building**
    - ■ Does this student actively engage in their community?
    - ■ Has this student shown leadership in academic, non-academic, or personal situations?
    - ■ How well does this student interact as a team?
  - ○ **Teaching and Mentorship**
    - ■ Has this applicant shown an interest in teaching and/or mentoring others? How have they demonstrated this?
  - ○ **Programs/Group affiliations**
    - ■ Involvement in non-academic groups and programs may indicate a desire to serve one's community, which is exactly the type of student we wish to have at UChicago as we strive to create a collaborative and supportive working environment. This may include:
      - ● Involvement in service or volunteer type organizations

- Spearheading new clubs or groups
- Specifically working in groups that aim to lift up others, such as diversity focused groups, mentorship programs, or volunteer-type organizations.

- ○ **Awareness and Conscientiousness**
    - In order to create a diverse, inclusive, and supportive campus community, we need to recruit students who take self-aware, thoughtful, reliable, and responsible.
    - Did this student "make an impact" at their undergraduate university, in their professional community, or in their personal life?
        - Examples of this could include: taking their obligations to others seriously through spearheading community building programs, Diversity & Inclusion initiatives, volunteer work, or mentorship programs
- ○ **Awards and Scholarships**
    - Non-science related awards and scholarships highlight the service a student has made to their communities at large.

Important Considerations:

- **GPA**
    - ○ Grade point averages, although they may be useful to committees in determining the academic strength of an applicant, may not be entirely unbiased in their representation of the academic success of the applicant. These things can vary based on:
        - The type of undergraduate institution
        - Barriers that are particular to URM groups, such as: English as a second language, inequality in educational materials, etc.
        - Financial or economic security (i.e., needing to work another job)
        - Mental health or medical situations
        - Physical or learning disabilities
        - First generation college or First generation American status

    Note: While we understand it is important to select applicants that will succeed in the demanding academic structure of UChicago, we hope that every application will be examined in the context of the student's background.

- **GRE**
    - ○ GRIT commends the BSD in dropping the GRE as a requirement for graduate applications. This is a huge step forward in equitable admissions practices.
    - ○ Regarding the now optional GRE:
        - We urge admissions committees to view optional submitted GRE scores as a helpful addition to an application, but not as a metric of comparing students. (i.e. when comparing two similar applications where one includes a GRE score, this does not automatically mean the GRE-included applicant is better suited for graduate school).
        - The GRE has been shown to be biased against URM students and women (ETS, 2014; Louderback, 2008; Hood, 1992); and studies have shown that the GRE holds no

predictive power for time until graduation or numbers of publications (Micceri, 2002; Sternberg and Williams, 1997; Willingham, 1976).

- **Stereotype threat**
  - Stereotype threat is a situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group. For example, students of color feel pressured to succeed in the light of higher dropout rates of minority students. This pressure and/or risk can cause high levels of anxiety and lead to underperformance.
    - This has been shown in many academic papers and psychological studies (e.g., Taylor, 2011) . For concrete examples of the effects and various types of stereotype threat, please read this resource.
    - Understanding the potential impact of stereotype threat is critical when considering measures of academic success such as GPA and GRE.
    - Pressures from racial, gender, or identity-based anxiety may also result in underperformance in interviews. We hope to mitigate these effects, admissions committees will take into account personal student-connections with prospective students, which may be more indicative of aptitude for graduate school.

Final Thoughts

We hope that this guide proves useful when reading and reviewing applications, particularly applications from students of marginalized and diverse backgrounds. While we understand that it is important to select candidates that will be successful in graduate school, we hope that all applications will be considered within the context of the applicants' background.

Other Resources:

- A guide on "holistic review": https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS_HolisticReview_final_web.pdf
- Another guide on holistic review from UMichigan: https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/resources-for-directors/holistic-review-of-applications/
- Stereotype threat resource guide (contains many definitions, examples, and citations): https://diversity.arizona.edu/sites/default/files/stereotype_threat_overview.pdf