GRIT Application Guide 2020

This guide aims to advise admissions committees on some equitable practices for reviewing graduate applications, particularly the applications of students from marginalized backgrounds. The Biological Sciences Division and the Graduate Recruitment Initiative Team (GRIT) recommend a holistic admissions review process in which both data-based and other personal traits of a particular applicant are considered. Holistic review involves a whole-file examination to acknowledge how each student’s context, environment, experiences, and access to opportunities inflect how they might react to the challenges and opportunities of graduate study.

While the reading and reviewing of applications is a very personal, case-by-case process, GRIT wishes to provide a resource to orient faculty members reading applications of students from marginalized, underrepresented, or nontraditional communities. We recognize that this guide may not be applicable to the many diverse personal experiences reflected in student applications. However, we hope that this guide will provide some insight into the general method of reading applications holistically.

Application Criteria

Research Experience

Research experience is a critical component of any graduate application. However, disparities in research opportunities may disadvantage some students. While it can be striking on an application if a student has had an extensive research experience at a well-regarded university, a student lacking the same opportunity might not be any less suited for graduate education. When reviewing an applicant’s research experience, GRIT suggests looking for logic, clarity, and enthusiasm:

- Does this applicant clearly and concisely explain their research experiences?
- Do they present their work in a logical flow?
- Do they detail how their experiences have led them to apply to graduate school?
- Are they motivated to discuss their research and/or others’ research? Are they enthusiastic about research in general (e.g. awed or inspired by their interactions with science)?

Academic Rigor

| GRE   | GRIT commends the Biological Sciences Division’s removal of the general GRE as a requirement for graduate applications. GRIT also commends many programs’ efforts to make submission of GRE scores optional during the ongoing pandemic. We particularly commend programs’ efforts to prohibit submission of GRE scores when they will not likely be considered, as offering to take GRE scores into account creates a pressure on students to submit them. We urge programs to use this year to test what an admissions cycle without GRE scores might look like and to consider eliminating GRE scores as a metric of comparing students in the long term. An internal study by the GRE board itself found that non-cognitive variables can significantly impact graduate student performance (Kyllonen et al., 2011). The |
work of William Sedlacek outlines how such non-cognitive variables can be taken into account for holistic review (Sedlacek, 2017).

Studies have shown gaps between the average general GRE scores of underrepresented minority (URM) students and women and the higher average scores of other students (see, e.g., Miller and Stassun, 2014; Petersen et al., 2018). Within graduate populations, these discrepancies do not map onto many useful measures of ultimate graduate student success, as other studies have shown that general GRE results are not predictive of degree completion, time until graduation, or numbers of publications (Miller et al., 2019; Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017) and in fact some studies have reported that those who earn low scores perform better on all accounts (Micceri, 2002).

GRIT recommends that departments consider whether the available literature convincingly indicates that general GRE results are predictive of any measures of graduate student success that their department ultimately values.

Beyond complaints about GRE scores’ predictive validity and limited usefulness in helping students stand out, the cost of taking the test(s) and sending scores to multiple programs presents a financial barrier to embarking upon graduate work.

### GPA

While grade point averages may be useful to committees in determining the academic strength of an applicant, these averages can be biased in their representations of applicants’ academic success. Students’ GPAs can vary based on:

- Type of undergraduate institution attended
- Students’ financial or economic security (e.g. needing to work a job)
- Mental health or medical difficulties
- Physical or learning disabilities
- Parental citizenship and education levels

*Note: It is also important to look at grade trajectories across academic terms, as aberrations in transcripts can indicate that a student has experienced external pressures or unavoidable circumstances.*

### Perseverance

Perseverance and grit can be centrally important predictors of success in graduate work and may sometimes be more important for success in doctoral study than GPA, GRE scores, or the explicit scientific knowledge with which students enter graduate programs. These factors, while hard to quantify, are critical to helping students face the hurdles and stressors of graduate school. To assess perseverance GRIT suggests looking for the following:

Job experience. Non-scientific jobs can highlight important qualities of a candidate which might impact their success in graduate education. These qualities include some like:

- Time management skills (such as necessary in the service industries)
- Interpersonal skills
- Leadership skills and professionalism
Collaborative and team-building skills

Note: Students from less socioeconomically privileged backgrounds often must self-fund their own education and help their families by working jobs in addition to participating in classes or research. This often impacts GPA and quality of research experience.

The ‘rising’ quality:
- Look for ways the applicant has risen to personal, academic, or professional challenges. Asking for adversity statements can highlight the importance of these experiences to applicants.
- One can contextualize this by detailing the accumulation of disadvantage marginalized students experience and observing how they have persevered.

Note: Many URM and other marginalized students, e.g. LGBTQ+ students and students with disabilities, face challenges throughout their lives, including inequality in educational/economic resources, stereotype threat (see below), and challenges related to identity that impact academic success. Persistence towards academic advancement in the context of adversity is a strong indicator of a motivated and dedicated student.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Special Circumstances and Disclosures</th>
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<td>Overcoming obstacles can often be a central theme in applications produced by marginalized people. A focus on obstacles can showcase the grit and determination that will allow a student to succeed in graduate school or might contain an explanation of a perceived problem that emerged from lack of funding or a family death. Applications from marginalized people may also include disclosure of personal information, such as sharing LGBTQ+ identities or discussing how the student navigates a disability. Note: It is important to remember information disclosed in the application, particularly details of disability or LGBTQ+ identity, is meant to be private and should not be shared beyond those absolutely necessary, even in good faith.</td>
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Community

Understanding an applicant’s relationship with their community may provide insight into how they might contribute to communities at UChicago. Demonstrated involvement in community-based and non-academic endeavors also highlight many non-cognitive traits that can support a student’s success.

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<th>Leadership Opportunities and Community Building</th>
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<td>- Does this student actively engage in their community?</td>
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<td>- Has this student made an impact at their undergraduate institution, in their professional community, or in their personal life?</td>
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<td>- Has this student shown leadership in academic, non-academic, or personal situations?</td>
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<td>- How well does this student interact in a team?</td>
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<td>Teaching and Mentorship</td>
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| Programs and Group Affiliations | Involvement in non-academic groups and programs can indicate a desire to serve one’s community, an important trait in a graduate student as we strive to create collaborative and supportive environments that support strong scientific inquiry. Such involvement may include:  
  - Participation in service or volunteer organizations  
  - Origination of new clubs or groups  
  - Contributing to groups that aim specifically to lift up others, like diversity-focused groups, mentorship programs, or the volunteer organizations |
| Awareness and Conscientiousness | Has this student shown awareness of others and conscientiousness through their engagement with their community?  
  - Such an orientation towards aiding others is valued by bodies which award NIH and NSF graduate fellowships.  
  - These traits might be demonstrated by involvement in the above programs and groups. |
| Awards and Scholarships | Non-science-related awards and scholarships highlight the service a student has made to their broader communities. |

**Important Considerations**

- **Stereotype threat**  
  - Stereotype threat is an observed effect in which people who feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to salient negative stereotypes about their social group can see reductions in their performance, especially academic performance.

- **Implicit Bias**  
  - Implicit bias is a model of bias under study by researchers in which people engage in subconscious attribution of particular qualities to members of certain social groups due to social conditioning. Because of this subconscious attribution, people can behave in biased ways without conscious awareness. For example, despite believing that women are as capable as men, someone might behave in a biased manner by distrusting feedback from women coworkers or by preferentially hiring equally qualified men.

**Other Resources**

- **UChicago Graduate Recruitment Initiative Team (GRIT):**  
  - [https://voices.uchicago.edu/grit/](https://voices.uchicago.edu/grit/)

- **Two guides on holistic review:**  
  - [https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/resources-for-directors/holistic-review-ofapplications/](https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/resources-for-directors/holistic-review-ofapplications/)  