

GRADUATE EDUCATION

Getting into grad school

Who benefits from the Ph.D. admissions process and who falls through the cracks?

By Sian Beilock

During graduate school, a professor I worked with asked me an odd question: Was I a slow reader? She was in the midst of reviewing applications for a new crop of Ph.D. students and, in reasoning about their potential success, had remembered that, although I had gotten a fairly high quantitative score on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), my verbal score was not as impressive. Rather than use my case to conclude that the GRE was a poor predictor of success, she was looking for a reason to categorize me as an exception to the rule.

It turns out that my former professor is not alone. In *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping*, Julie Posselt shows how the process of offering admission at selective Ph.D. programs is chock-full of assumptions that are seldom made explicit or challenged. Over the course of 2 years, Posselt sat through admissions processes in 10 top Ph.D. programs, and her experience provides a firsthand look into admissions decisions in disciplines from astrophysics to classics to economics.

Many more highly qualified candidates apply to prominent Ph.D. programs than there are slots. Faculty are therefore constantly looking for reasons to reject applicants—whether it's an odd recommendation letter, uncertain research interests, or less-than-stellar standardized test scores. At first glance, these rejection criteria don't seem objectionable, but Posselt astutely points out that, when faculty follow a model of risk aversion, they tend to gravitate toward applicants similar to themselves. It's perceived as risky to take a chance on a student from a nonelite educational background or one with different training. The result is often a failure to realize the Ph.D. diversity that most faculty and universities strive to achieve.

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This risk aversion is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in how faculty treat GRE scores. Although ample evidence demonstrates that the GRE is not an especially good predictor of graduate school success, the appeal of this simple metric is real. Posselt points out that, because average GRE scores differ as a function of racial and other group factors, relying heavily on GREs in the initial judgment of candidates—as many



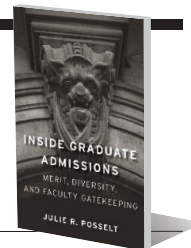
Admitting on "merit" can mean different things to different faculty.

departments do—fundamentally alters the makeup of applicants given most attention in later admissions rounds.

Even more striking is that faculty rely on GRE scores in an inconsistent manner. Although we are quick to use GRE scores as a potential indicator of success for domestic students, faculty often discount the typically high scores of applicants from China, in the belief that they carry little predictive power. Of course, high and low scores can be found among applicants of all backgrounds, but faculty may unconsciously follow their own biases in ways that can stymie the goals of both quality and diversity.

Posselt offers some concrete suggestions to improve the admissions process. She sug-

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gests that departments should revisit their admissions routines and make explicit the practices used to judge applicants. Who is being cut out of the pool if a department triages prospective students based solely on GRE scores and undergraduate grade point average? Do the indicators that faculty use to predict success pan out when looking at students 3, 4, or 10 years later? These questions seem like obvious ones to ask, yet they are rarely posed in a systematic way.

Posselt also argues that Ph.D. outreach and recruitment need to be rethought. Whether departments draw from already established undergraduate summer programs at their universities or build connections with institutions that could serve as pipelines for a diverse student body, universities can do more to ensure more equitable admissions outcomes.

Finally, from my own experiences leading UChicagoGRAD (the University of Chicago's new initiative to support graduate students and postdocs to be leaders in their chosen careers), it is clear that the labor market for individuals with doctorates is changing and that the admissions process needs to change, too. When an individual with a Ph.D. goes into the academy, she often advances her adviser's work. This is the outcome many faculty aim for when making admissions decisions. However, it is also important to recognize that when an individual with a Ph.D. goes into government, industry, or the nonprofit world, he

serves as a conduit for the transmission of knowledge from the academy into other sectors. We must therefore strive to admit students who are interested in diverse career paths, which will mean actively countering our inclination to admit only those students who will end up just like us.

Whether you make admissions decisions or are just curious about higher education, Posselt's book will push you to think about Ph.D. admissions in new ways. You may disagree with some of her arguments, but if you have ever sat around an admissions table, many of the episodes she recounts will likely resonate with you.

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