Implementing Best Practices in Master’s Admission

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SIUE Profile

• PUI; Doctoral/Professional Institution
  • 50 Master’s programs, EdD, DNP, 4 cooperative PhD programs with SIUC
    • Undergraduate Enrollment: 10,800
    • Graduate/Professional Enrollment: 2200
  • Fourth highest for research expenditures per NSF HERD in our Carnegie Class.
• Mission
  • Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is a student-centered educational community dedicated to communicating, expanding and integrating knowledge. In a spirit of collaboration enriched by diverse ideas, our comprehensive and unique array of undergraduate and graduate programs develops professionals, scholars and leaders who shape a changing world.
CGS/ETS Study on Master’s Admissions Attributes

● Improve master’s education through evidence-based guidance on connecting successful admissions practices to characteristics of student success

● Without evidence to support of admissions practices
  ○ Some segments of the population may lose out on access
  ○ Employers may miss out on diverse leadership ready employees
  ○ Our master’s programs could fail to attract talent needed to meet the rigors of degree completion and post-degree success
CGS/ETS Study on Master’s Admissions Attributes

Main Guiding Questions

● What admissions processes are currently used in master’s education?
  ○ What attributes are currently used in admissions decisions to predict success?
  ○ What evidence is currently used to evaluate those attributes?
  ○ How do programs define success?

● What are the “missing pieces” in the current admissions evaluation practices?
  ● What attributes do we not evaluate for and what evidence is missing that would be useful to the evaluation process?
CGS/ETS Study on Master’s Admissions Attributes

- Four regional focus groups of master’s program directors and graduate deans
  - October 2017, results used to inform national survey
- Two national survey: master’s program directors and graduate deans
- Post colloquium discussion: with various stakeholders

Based on focus group results, for this study:

- Primary program(s) focus identified: professional or research
- Categories of potential for graduate student success
  - Degree completion
  - Program fit
  - Potential for post-graduate success
CGS/ETS Study on Master’s Admissions Attributes

What do master’s programs look for in applicants?

- Potential to complete coursework rated as Very Important
  - 79% of research focused programs
  - 84% of professional focused programs
  - From post discussion, Completion of coursework rated higher than completion of degree

- Other items were more area or discipline specific, for example:
  - Research focused programs rated completion of capstone requirements as Very Important (75%)
  - Health sciences rated the potential of fulfilling an internship/practicum as Very Important (72%)
What attributes are used to predict student success?

- **Degree completion**
  - critical thinking and analytical thinking were weighted as Very Important

- **Program fit**
  - Past academic performance, critical thinking, and analytical thinking were weighted as the most important
  - Other items more discipline specific, for example:
    - Health sciences and public administration rated professionalism as Very Important

- **Potential for post-graduate success**
  - Professional focused programs rated professionalism as Very Important (78.8%)
  - Research focused programs rated research related skills more heavily; analytical and critical thinking (71%)
What evidence is used to evaluate these admissions attributes?

Academic transcripts were required by 99% of the graduate schools.

- Ranked highly to evaluate past academic performance
- Transcripts used to evaluate cognitive and non-cognitive attributes
  - The depth and breadth of content knowledge in the discipline as evidence for critical and analytical thinking
  - Course repeats, withdrawals, number of majors, number of institutions seen as non-cognitive weaknesses; lacking persistence (grit)
  - Return to successful performance following a poor performance seen as evidence of persistence (grit),
What evidence is used to evaluate admissions attributes?

- Undergraduate GPA
  - All Graduate schools required a minimum GPA for admission
  - GPA as evidence of cognitive attributes similar to academic transcripts
    - Upper division GPA’s were used in some areas to better define competencies within discipline specific areas
What evidence is used to evaluate admissions attributes?

- Standardized test scores were used to evaluate cognitive attributes
  - Test scores were seen as evidence of multiple forms of rigor
    - Rigor of basic cognitive skills in screening large applicant pools.
    - Interestingly, also rigor required to maintain a graduate program’s national ranking or disciplinary accreditation standards,
CGS/ETS Study on Master’s Admissions Attributes

What evidence is used to evaluate admissions attributes?

- CV or resume were used to determine past work experience or past research experience
  - Used as measure of cognitive attributes
  - Used to evaluate non-cognitive attributes of integrity, multicultural competency, and adaptability.

- Work history provides insights into desire to further advance expertise or acquire a new area of specialization; used as evidence of program fit.
What evidence is used to evaluate admissions attributes?

- Letters of recommendation are heavily relied on to assess both cognitive and non-cognitive attributes
  - Cognitive: knowledge and skills
  - Non-cognitive: a slew of attributes including persistence, dependability, collegiality, adaptability, ability to work under stress, integrity, time management, professionalism, concern for others, curiosity, creativity, leadership.
CGS/ETS Study on Master’s Admissions Attributes

Implications

- Across all disciplines there was a heavy emphasis on traditional measures of critical and analytical thinking
  - Interestingly, these were also used for assessing potential for program fit (prerequisite knowledge)
  - Rigor of the applicant’s prior institution was used as a heavy weighting factor but the definition of rigor is ill defined, which reduces the transparency of the admissions process

- A major barrier is predictive limitations between admissions criteria and student success
  - Particularly, evidence linking non-cognitive attributes with student success is lacking

- Absent clear guidelines the application materials, particularly academic transcript, personal statements, and letters of recommendation are very subjective
  - Weight of evidence is influenced by the perceived reputation of the undergraduate institution, program, or the author of the recommendation letter
Biases that impact admissions Decisions

• Biases are human, they are not something we can simply eliminate.
• By recognizing biases exist, we can build our processes to help reduce the impact.

kiratalent.com/bias/
Cognitive Biases

Examples

- **Ingroup Bias**: Giving preference to a person or organization that aligns with one's own group.

- **Groupthink Bias**: When members of a group set aside their own opinions, beliefs, or ideas to achieve harmony.

- **Halo Effect**: When one remarkable quality influences other factors in a decision.

- **Stereotype Bias**: An oversimplified understanding of a particular type of group, person, or thing.
“Biased” Processes

- **Lack of Consistent Training**: New graduate program directors following different processes than their predecessor.

- **Unclear Reviewer Criteria**: Rating a student on a scale of 1-5 on “leadership” without a clear definition of “leadership.”

- **Lack of Consistent Reviewing Practices**: Students getting screened in with different practices, i.e., pre-interview or phone call in the application process.

- **Decision Fatigue**: Admissions reviewers may be overworked and exhausting, affecting decisions on applicants.
A Few Strategies to Reduce Bias

• Have reviewers report their feedback individually so they do not influence each other's opinions.

• Use consistent rubrics to evaluate an applicant's file across reviewers to ensure each applicant is evaluated on the same criteria.

• Have annual training available for faculty and staff who evaluate applicants.
Master’s in Speech-Language Pathology

- **Goal:** Improve assessment of soft skills and non-cognitive attributes. Improve consistency of reviews across applicant pool. Mitigate groupthink bias. Reduce the dependence on GPA.

- **Approach:**
  - 2 minute video responding to specific prompts uploaded to YouTube
    - “You’re working on a session plan for your client and you have a tight deadline. You find that you’re unable to complete your plan because your supervisor is unavailable to answer a few key questions. How do you deal with the situation?”
  - A rubric developed for video assessment
  - Admissions team members review individually, scores combined
  - And it allows for to add new important pieces of evidence such as oral communication, adaptability, working under stress
Implementing Best Practices in Master’s Admissions

Lisa Armistead, Ph.D.
Graduate Dean and Professor of Psychology
Georgia State University
Georgia State University Context

- **R1 university with over 53,000 students**
  - ~7100 are graduate students
  - 10th most ethnically diverse university

- **Offer 250+ degrees across Associate, Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral level**

- **Graduate School established September 2019**
  - Decentralized
  - Central Graduate Admissions office implemented with Spring 2018 admissions cycle
  - Central admissions criteria=Baccalaureate degree
Arts & Sciences
22 Master’s    13 Ph.D.

Policy Studies
7 Master’s
3 Ph.D.

Nursing & Health Professions
6 Master’s
3 Doctoral

Public Health
1 Master’s
1 Ph.D.

Biomedical Sciences
1 Master’s
1 Ph.D.

Nursing & Health Professions
6 Master’s
3 Doctoral

Business
27 Master’s
8 Doctoral

Education & Human Development
33 Master’s
3 Specialist
12 Doctoral

Biomedical Sciences
1 Master’s
1 Ph.D.

Arts
6 Master’s
1 Ph.D.

Public Health
1 Master’s
1 Ph.D.

Business
27 Master’s
8 Doctoral

Education & Human Development
33 Master’s
3 Specialist
12 Doctoral

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1 Ph.D.

Arts
6 Master’s
1 Ph.D.

Law
2 Master’s
JD

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Are GRE scores used in determining program rankings?

Do peer and aspirational programs continue to rely on the requirement for admissions decisions? If so, how will moving away from disciplinary norms impact the graduate program?

Will removal of the GRE impact placement success rates for those programs populated by students intending to pursue a more advanced graduate degree (e.g., Ph.D.)?

What impact is removal of the requirement anticipated to have on application quality and quantity?
School of Public Health interested in streamlining the MPH admissions process, while retaining a holistic approach

- 2018-19 Academic Year
- 450 applications
- 258 admissions
- 106 Enrolled
Building an Algorithm for Application Review

**Concerns of MPH Faculty**
- Inefficiency
- Missed opportunity to bring in the strongest students with greatest likelihood of attending GSU

**Commitment of MPH Faculty**
- All applicants will still be reviewed by at least two faculty
- Decrease time to review for most desirable applicants
- Increase yield
Building an Algorithm for Application Review

- Considerations
  - Risk of bias
  - Program leadership
  - Direct/Influence the process

- Variables to include in initial model
  - GPA
  - Experience
  - Engagement with CRM
  - Program outcomes
  - GRE?
Building an Algorithm for Application Review

- **Strategy**
  - Lead by me and Institutional Research Assoc. in the Graduate School
  - Partnering with Data Science Program
  - Reiterate risks
  - Iterate process with ongoing examination of data
Helping Your Programs Adopt Holistic Admissions Practices

- Admission Practices Workshop conducted at James Madison University
  - With Graduate Program Directors across all the graduate programs

- Co-Presenters
  - Molly McCraken, Kira Talent
  - Cathlin Sullivan, Kira Talent

- Activity to help connect sought after incoming student characteristics to admissions practices
  - Including, a review of biases and strategies for minimizing them.
What does your current process look like?

- A detailed picture of what process and evidence is being used in app review
  - reveal how sought after characteristics are currently being assessed or NOT assessed (what is missing in the process)
What is your ideal student cohort?

• Connect characteristics of successful students to the learning objectives of the program.

Create Your Ideal Cohort

A cohort vision helps tie together your admissions process with the overall mission of your program.

When creating a cohort vision, consider the following:

1. What does success look like for this cohort?
2. What’s your program mission and why?
3. What do you want your students to accomplish - both while studying and after graduating?
4. What makes your students stand out?
5. What do you admire most about them?

Craft Your Cohort Vision Here.
What are core competencies for incoming students?

• From ideal cohort to core competencies
  • What competencies should your review process be assessing?

Define Your Core Competencies

Think about your top students. Do they have any characteristics, life experiences, or competencies in common?

- WHEN CREATING A COHORT, CONSIDER THIS FOLLOWING:
  1. What does success look like for this cohort?
  2. What is your program mission and why?
  3. What do you want your students to accomplish - before, during, and after graduation?
  4. What makes your students stand out?
  5. What do you admire most about them?

- LIST COMMON CHARACTERISTICS, LIFE EXPERIENCES, AND COMPETENCIES:
  1. 
  2. 
  3. 
  4. 
  5. 
  6. 
  7. 
  8. 
  9. 
  10. 

- LIST THE 3-4 COMPETENCIES OR CHARACTERISTICS THAT YOU SEE AS BEING IMPORTANT TO YOUR STUDENTS’ SUCCESS:
Redesign your review: process and evidence

• What does your current review process do well?
• What does the current process miss?
• What pieces of evidence would best assess sought after competencies?
• What changes can be made to mitigate potential biases.
References
Questions?