



# Master's Admissions: How Are Application Materials Used?

CGS Research in Brief, December 2018

By Hironao Okahana, Robert M. Augustine, & Enyu Zhou

CGS member and affiliated institutions received approximately 1.5 million applications for admission to master's and certificate programs during the Fall 2017 admission cycle. Between Fall 2012 and Fall 2017, the number of master's applications grew at an average annual rate of 2.1% (Okahana & Zhou, 2018). A recent project by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) found that master's admission is primarily a process that seeks to identify applicants who are most likely to complete degree requirements (Okahana, Augustine, & Zhou, 2018). A question remained, however: how do master's programs use various application materials to determine applicants' potential for earning degrees? With support from Educational Testing Service (ETS), this brief offers some of the highlights from the project report.

## References

Okahana, H., Augustine, R.M., & Zhou, E. (2018). *Master's admissions: Transparency, guidance, and training*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

Okahana, H., & Zhou, E. (2018). *Graduate enrollment and degrees: 2007-2017*. Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools.

## Key Findings:

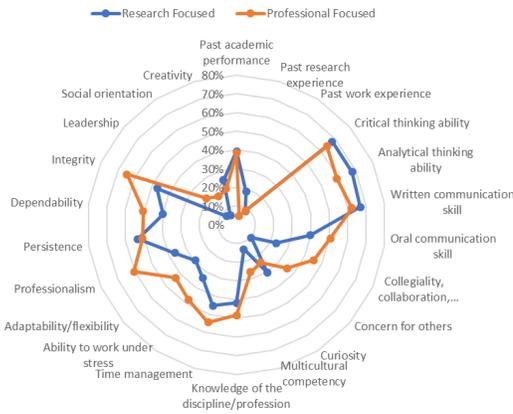
- Conventional academic attributes, such as critical thinking, analytical thinking, and written communication skills are weighed heavily in determining applicants' potential to complete degree requirements. However, other attributes such as integrity and professionalism, are also essential, particularly in master's programs with a professional focus. (Figure 1)
- Graduate deans cited limited staff and faculty time (71%) and inadequate university data correlating admissions criteria to student success (44%) as the top two barriers their institutions encounter when evaluating master's applications. (Figure 2)
- While academic transcripts and standardized test scores have specific uses, letters of recommendation, as well as personal statements are used in weighing a variety of applicant attributes and qualities. More program directors indicated that they use letters and statements to weigh applicants' critical and analytical thinking abilities than used transcripts or test scores. (Figure 3)

## About the Data Source:

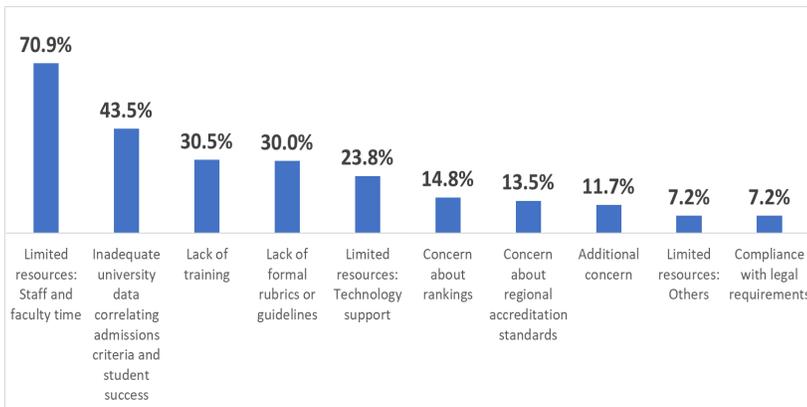
Conducted in 2017-18, the CGS Master's Admissions Attribute project collected data and insights from three sources: (1) four regional focus group discussions with graduate deans and program directors; (2) two surveys completed by graduate deans and program directors; and (3) a colloquium with graduate deans, program directors, employers, and disciplinary societies. This brief is based upon the survey completed by master's program directors, which included 1,176 participants across multiple degree types from 256 institutions, and presents statistics based on Fall 2017 application volumes.

This publication is based upon work supported by Educational Testing Service. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in the publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Educational Testing Service.

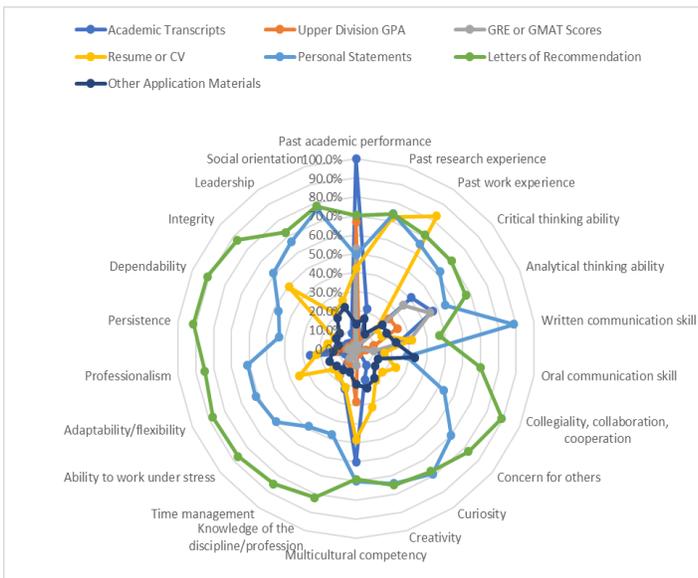
**Figure 1: Percentage Shares of Master's Programs Indicating Applicants' Attributes as "Very Important" in Determining their Potential for Degree Completion by Program Focus (from Okahana, Augustine, & Zhou, 2018, p. 11)**



**Figure 2: Graduate Deans' Perspectives on Barriers and Limitations for Evaluating Applicants**



**Figure 3: Percentage Shares of Master's Programs Indicated the Use of Selected Application Materials to Weigh Applicants' Attributes (from Okahana, Augustine, & Zhou, 2018, p. 14)**



### Takeaway Points:

- While master's program directors look to academic transcripts, test scores, and resumes for a specific set of attributes, letters of recommendation and personal statements are used more broadly. However, the process and criteria by which these letters and statements are evaluated is unclear.
- The absence of clear evidence that links these noncognitive attributes to metrics of success (e.g., degree completion) makes it difficult for master's programs to establish guidelines or processes for reviewing them.
- Lack of staff and faculty time also hinders the ability of master's programs to review and evaluate large volumes of non-standardized, open-ended application materials, such as letters of recommendation and personal statements.

### Conversation Starters:

- What kind of prompts are letter writers and applicants given for preparing letters of recommendation and personal statements for master's programs at your institution?
- What criteria are used by your master's programs to evaluate letters of recommendation and personal statements?
- What guidelines and resources does your institution provide to prospective applicants and letter writers to help them prepare effective personal statements and letters of recommendation?