Resolution #69-04
The Graduate and Professional Student Association (GPSA)
The Pennsylvania State University

of the 69th Assembly
October 30, 2019

Be it decided by the Assembly of Elected Delegates,

Statement on Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions and the GRE Requirement
In support of the use of holistic review practices in graduate admissions and abolishing the GRE as a requirement for admittance to the Graduate School, selecting University Graduate Fellows (UGFs), and Administering Financial Aid
(Decided: [ Y / N / A ])

Nature of the Situation:

Summary statement

The Graduate and Professional Student Association supports the removal of GRE (Graduate Record Examination) scores in the admissions process, selection of university graduate fellows, and the administering of financial aid across all colleges and departments. The GRE has been shown to be prohibitively expensive and inherently discriminatory towards underrepresented groups. Additionally, departments at Penn State and other top-ranked universities are moving towards the elimination of the GRE as an admissions requirement. At Penn State, GRE requirements are not uniform across the university, and colleges and departments are given discretion in determining whether to require GRE scores in the admissions, fellowships, and financial aid processes. This patchwork system is particularly unfair because the decision making processes for university fellowships and financial aid depend on GRE scores as a determinant for funding, a requirement dropped by the National Science Foundation’s Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) in 2010 and by the National Institute of Health’s individual
fellows and institutional training grants in 2015. Given this precedent and the move being made by other universities away from the GRE, we urge the Graduate School to forgo the use of this test and find more appropriate, alternative methods of assessment.

**GRE as a prohibitive expense lacking in equal accessibility to students**

The GRE is prohibitively expensive for some students and thus discourages applicants from applying to certain schools that require GRE scores for admittance or financial aid. As of July 2019, the GRE General Test costs $205 to take in the United States. This cost does not include additional expenses that can be accrued while preparing for the GRE, such as a rescheduling fee ($50), a fee for changing the testing center ($50), costs for study materials, or costs for travel to the exam location. Additional costs can be incurred with sending GRE scores to the universities that a student is applying to, which costs $27 per school after the first four free recipients. The average student, according to Career Services at the University of California - Santa Barbara, applies to three to eight programs, making the cost of taking the GRE and sending out scores prohibitive for many potential students (“About US,” N.D.). The costs associated with the GRE may be especially burdensome to students who are already disadvantaged and underrepresented in higher education, such as first-generation college students and students of color.

The problems with the cost of the GRE become even greater when we consider students who live outside the United States. For individuals outside of the United States, it can cost up to $255 to take the GRE (“GRE General Test Fees,” N.D.). In addition to being costly, oftentimes the GRE is offered in limited locations, meaning that some people must travel long distances, sometimes to another country, to take the exam. This creates an additional burden to potential students, as these individuals must pay for travel and lodging in addition to the cost of the exam. This obstacle with the GRE should be of particular concern to Penn State because, according to its own statistics, international graduate students make up 22 percent of the graduate student population on campus as of Fall 2018 (“Statistics on Graduate Study at Penn State,” Fall 2018) and the rate of enrollment by international graduate students is decreasing. Many international students incur additional costs related to graduate school, such as taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam, which can cost over $200 (“TOEFL IBT Test Fees,” N.D.), as well as expenses associated with their arrival at Penn State. Given that taking this exam places unnecessary financial burdens on both domestic and international students, eliminating the GRE requirement at Penn State would have a positive effect by increasing the number of underrepresented groups who apply to and accept offers from the university.

**GRE is not a predictor of success in graduate school**

Beyond the issue of cost, there is no clear or consistent evidence that GRE scores predict graduate student success. For example, a study of graduate student success in a top-ranked psychology graduate program, found that other measures of success, including “professors’ ratings of students’ analytical, creative, practical, research, and teaching abilities,” were far more predictive of success than GRE scores (Sternberg & Williams, 1997). Another study investigating the effectiveness of typical admissions criteria in identifying students’ ability to complete a doctorate in physics found that GRE scores are a better predictor of the gender and race of students accepted into programs than of Ph.D. completion, grants secured, the number of conference presentations, or publications
(Miller et al., 2019). These studies are among a mounting body of research showing little correlation between GRE scores and success in graduate school. This growing evidence has resulted in the recent “GRExit” by a growing number of top-ranked U.S. research universities (Langin, 2019), a movement that we strongly urge Penn State to consider at the institutional level. Furthermore, we consider that GRE scores cannot predict a key part of graduate school success; completing a Master’s or Ph.D. program requires individual characteristics such as determination, perseverance, and creativity that are not captured well through GRE scores. For this reason, admissions requirements for graduate school programs and fellowships commonly require a holistic review of application materials, including undergraduate GPA, letter(s) of recommendation, a curriculum vitae, and statement(s) of purpose. Together, these measures of an applicant’s character, drive, and ability are not only more meaningful predictors of graduate success but are more financially accessible to individuals underrepresented across higher education (Posselt 2016; Kuncel & Hezlett, 2007).

The GRE disadvantages underrepresented communities

“Only by attending to structural issues present in the process of selecting who gets to do the science of the future can we make sustainable progress toward broadening the participation of groups historically underrepresented in STEM” (Miller et al., 2019). Though this quotation is referencing physics and other STEM students, the sentiment can be applied to other fields with respect to graduate school.

Kimberlé Crenshaw, Professor of Law at Columbia University, provides us with the concept of intersectionality, a useful legal theory that highlights the blind spots of policy and law that focus on single elements of individuals’ identities (1990). Thus, rather than compartmentalizing single identities, we must consider how combinations of different identities factor into students’ experiences of graduate school, including their socioeconomic status, gender, race, ethnicity, and national origin. However, we recognize that the affected groups of students extend further to include older or non-traditional students and students with disabilities, among others.

Low socioeconomic status, for instance, is correlated with GRE test performance, where low socioeconomic status correlates to lower GRE scores. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), the company that administers the GRE, states that there is a clear relationship where students whose parents completed college score higher than those whose parents did not. ETS goes on to state the possible reasons for this correlation: parents who completed college push their children more, have higher standards of living and can afford to send their children to better schools, have their children focus on school rather than the need to work, and can provide extra resources to the students (“Factors that can Influence Performance,” 2008). Additionally, research has shown that when students are made aware of their socioeconomic status, they perform more poorly on the GRE than students who are not made aware of their socioeconomic status. This is particularly troubling since ETS has requested and collected data at the time of students’ testing on parental income and education, therefore making them aware of their socioeconomic status (Spencer & Castano, 2007). Not all potential graduate students have access to the resources that ETS identifies as beneficial or the social capital that comes with those socioeconomic advantages, necessitating the removal of the GRE requirement in order to truly implement a more just admissions process.
The social and cultural capital that works for those with a higher socioeconomic status also creates barriers for underrepresented students when it comes to accessing graduate education. Social capital refers to the relationships, resources, and knowledge available to assist students and their families with applying for college or graduate admission. This includes entrance exams such as the GRE. Given these limitations, the lack of social capital tends to hinder underrepresented students from applying and gaining entrance to graduate school. This is illustrated by ETS’s own data correlating low socioeconomic status and test scores.

In addition to the test’s classism, the GRE functions as a barrier to women and underrepresented groups applying to graduate schools. As Miller and Stassun said, “If the correlation between GRE scores and gender and ethnicity is not accounted for... cut-offs adversely [affect] women and minority applicants. For example, in the physical sciences, only 26% of women, compared with 73% of men, score above 700 on the GRE Quantitative measure. For minorities, this falls to 5.2%, compared with 82% for white and Asian people” (Miller & Stassun, 2014). Cut-offs vary by department and university, and are often used in the admissions process as a first step in narrowing the applicant pool. Knowledge about these barriers is not new. In 1996, an article in the American Physical Society concluded “The gender gap [when it comes to standardized testing] that favors boys persists across all other demographic characteristics, including family income, parental education, grade point average, course work, and class rank” (“Fighting the Gender Gap, 1996). The GRE as a standardized test is no different; gender and racial identities and their intersections with other identity markers, such as class, should no longer be ignored. Research over the last 20 years has consistently shown that GRE scores underpredict the success of women and underrepresented groups (Clayton, 2016). As even ETS reports, African Americans and Hispanics score on average 200 points below their white counterparts (Miller, 2014).

The institutional disenfranchisement of racialized underrepresented groups spans across academic spaces and has gone on since the beginning of the United States’ educational establishment. Standardized test scores, including but not limited to the GRE, provide direct evidence of the institutionalized racism found in our higher education system, with underrepresented students performing poorly due to access and quality of education which are dictated by resource allocation and controlled by the elite (Noguera, 2017). Eliminating the GRE requirement entirely will help foster diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Penn State has the opportunity to set an example and become an institution that truly fosters and serves its diverse community; one that will afford all prospective graduate students the same equal opportunity for admission regardless of past systematic educational inequities.

**Precedent for removing the GRE as a Graduate School admissions requirement**

Penn State would not be alone in instituting a “GRExit.” A number of comparable and aspirant institutions have already recognized that the GRE is a flawed predictor of graduate student success and have removed the exam as an admissions requirement from numerous graduate departments across the country, including at elite institutions and for almost 50 percent of life sciences departments (Langin, 2019). Earlier this year, Cornell and Harvard stopped requiring the test for admission into their English Ph.D. programs (Jaschik, 2019) and within the past month, Princeton University (Aronson, 2019) and Brown University (“Brown Eliminates GRE,” 2019) have ceased requiring the exam for 14 and 24 doctoral programs, respectively.
Some schools have decided to make the GRE and other standardized tests optional for admission (ex. NYU and Ohio State University, see Benchmarking Appendix). However, this does not make the admissions process accessible for underrepresented students in terms of recruitment. Students may see the “option” of sending GRE scores as not an option at all and may feel their application will be incomplete without the test scores, regardless of whether they are used in the admissions process by entrance committees. Those that do submit scores are likely to have higher ones, creating a misleading hierarchy using a metric that is a weak predictor of success (Clayton, 2016).

Even at our own institution, a number of departments have moved away from requiring the GRE for admissions entirely, including Philosophy and Anthropology. While others, such as the Physics Department, have made the GRE optional. However, even if a department does not require the GRE for admittance, departments like Agricultural and Biological Engineering use the GRE as a factor to determine financial assistance (“Admission Requirements,” N.D.). Additionally, university fellowships like the Bunton Waller (“Bunton-Waller-Nomination Form,” N.D.) and the College of Education (“University Graduate Fellowship Program Nomination Form,” N.D.) require the GRE to be submitted as part of an application. This further disenfranchises underrepresented groups, even after being admitted to Penn State.

Penn State is already beginning to distance itself from the GRE. Removing the GRE test as an admission and/or fellowship requirement for all graduate programs at the university is the logical next step. Not only would such a move demonstrate the university’s commitment to genuinely fostering a diverse, equitable, and inclusive graduate population (part of the Strategic Plan 2016-2020), but it would also provide consistency across departments. While individual departments removing the GRE requirement is a step in the right direction, there will not be genuine change until the requirement is eliminated from all departments for both admission and fellowship consideration. By taking this step, Penn State can move toward fulfilling its mission and join other prestigious institutions that are working to make graduate school more equitable and accessible to all.

**Recommended Course of Action:**

We consider that including the GRE as a requirement for admissions goes against the diversity statement of the Graduate School. The Graduate School defines diversity as “a climate which encourages representation of faculty, staff, and students from typically underrepresented entities, including those from racial/ethnic minority groups, various countries and cultures, genders, persons with disabilities, and those from a mixture of religions and sexual orientations” (“Diversity in the Graduate School”, N.D.). By including the GRE as a requirement in some departments and for university fellowships and financial aid, the Graduate School is inherently selecting out quality applicants and is, therefore, undercutting its own diversity statement and efforts to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion across the university.

By adopting this resolution, GPSA formally recommends that the Graduate School adopt the following or comparable policy changes:

1. Standardize department admissions criteria by abolishing the GRE as a required or optional factor for admittance across all colleges and departments.
2. Abolish the use of GRE scores and utilize other criteria, including, but not limited to, curriculum vitae, personal essays, and extracurricular activities, as factors in selecting university fellowships, including the Distinguished Graduate Fellowship. These noncognitive variables, as defined by the Council of Graduate Schools’ report on Holistic Review (Kent, 2016), have “been shown to be better predictors of success for underrepresented minority students” even when used independently of the GRE (Sedlacek, 2004; Sedlacek, 2010).

3. Abolish the use of GRE scores and utilize other criteria, including, but not limited to, curriculum vitae, personal essays, and extracurricular activities, as factors in determining financial assistance.

4. Require program admissions committees to receive formal training in holistic review through their college Associate Dean for Graduate Education and/or Multicultural Leader. This training could be largely based on the Council of Graduate Schools’ document titled “Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions” which outlines first principles as well as best practices (Kent, 2016).

By following these recommendations, the Graduate School can ensure a more equitable and accessible admissions process aimed at enhancing the diversity of the Penn State Graduate School.

Respectfully submitted,

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Delegate, College of Agricultural Sciences

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Delegate, Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications

**Adilson E. González Morales**  
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Delegate, College of Liberal Arts

**Chloe McGuire**  
Delegate, College of Liberal Arts

**Catherine Okafor**  
Graduate Council Student Caucus Member

**Katie Warczak**  
Graduate Council Student Caucus Member
The Graduate and Professional Student Association

### Benchmarking Appendix of Selected Schools/Programs

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Department or Program</th>
<th>Reason for not using GRE (if given)</th>
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</thead>
</table>
| Brown University | American Studies  
Biotechnology  
Biomedical Engineering  
Chemistry  
Comparative Literature  
Computational Biology  
Computer Science  
Earth, Environmental and Planetary Sciences  
Ecology and Evolutionary Biology  
English  
French Studies  
German Studies  
Hispanic Studies  
Italian Studies  
Mathematics  
Modern Culture and Media  
Molecular Biology, Cell Biology, and Biochemistry  
Molecular Pharmacology and Physiology  
Neuroscience  
Pathobiology  
Portuguese and Brazilian Studies  
Religious Studies  
Slavic Studies  
Theatre and Performance Studies | “In enabling Ph.D. program leaders to drop the requirement to submit test scores, the Graduate School looks to attract talented, high-achieving students from an increasingly diverse pool of candidates.” |
| Columbia University | Architecture<br><br>Graduate School of Arts & Sciences<br>• Biochemistry, Molecular Biophysics & Structural • Biology<br>• Cell Biology & Stem Cell Sciences<br>• Cellular and Molecular Physiology & Biophysics<br>• Genetics & Development<br>• Microbiology & Immunology<br>• Neurobiology & Behavior<br>• Nutritional & Metabolic Biology<br>• Pathobiology & Mechanisms of Disease<br>• Systems Biology<br>Ecology, Evolution, and Environmental Biology<br>History<br>Latin American & Iberian Cultures<br>School of Journalism | “GRE scores are not good predictors of success or failure in a Ph.D. program in English, and the uncertain predictive value of the GRE exam is far outweighed by the toll it takes on student diversity.”

| Cornell University | English | “Renita Miller, associate dean for access, diversity, and inclusion for the Graduate School, said Princeton wants to make it easier for students from all backgrounds to apply for graduate study.”

“We believe that demographic and intellectual diversity drives innovative research and discovery, it expands our capacity for teaching and learning, and it equips us for lives of leadership in an increasingly pluralistic society,” Miller said. “To achieve our academic mission requires Princeton to identify, attract...”

| Dartmouth College | Psychological and Brain Sciences |  |

| Harvard University | English |  |

| Princeton University | Art and Archaeology<br>Classics<br>Comparative Literature<br>Ecology and Evolutionary Biology<br>English<br>French and Italian<br>Geosciences<br>Molecular Biology<br>Music Composition<br>Neuroscience<br>Psychology<br>Religion<br>Slavic Languages and Literatures<br>Spanish and Portuguese |  |
and develop the most promising individuals from as many segments of society as possible.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University of Pennsylvania</th>
<th>Immunology 12</th>
<th>Philosophy 13</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>GRE scores are not required and will not be considered even if they are sent.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yale University</td>
<td>History 14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cost: “Disadvantage low-income applicants, women, and people of color” Restrict access to graduate study Distorts the admissions process</td>
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**Other Academic Institutions**

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<th>Michigan State University</th>
<th>Education 15</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MIT</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering and Computer Science 16 Linguistic 17 Media Arts &amp; Science 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYU</td>
<td>Business 19 Social Work 20 Clinical Nutrition 21 Food and Nutrition 22 Engineering 23 Integrated Digital Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Optional or not-required</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio State University</td>
<td>The Graduate School 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Section 2.1 of the Graduate School Handbook: “GRE and GMAT are optional and are not required for admission to the Graduate School.” Individual departments may still require such tests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purdue</td>
<td>Computer Science 25 Educational Studies (not Ph.D.) 26 Chemistry 27 Biological Sciences 28</td>
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<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Programs</td>
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| Rutgers                            | Molecular Biosciences\(^{29}\)                                          | - Biochemistry\(^{29}\)  
- Cell and Developmental Biology\(^{29}\)  
- Cellular and Molecular Pharmacology\(^{29}\)  
- Microbiology and Molecular Genetics\(^{29}\)  
- Physiology and Integrative Biology Neurosciences\(^{30}\) |
| Stanford University\(^{31}\)      | Anthropology\(^{32}\)  
Education\(^{33}\)                                                   | April 2018 – Faculty senate at Stanford revised admission policy to decentralize the decision on whether to require GRE scores. “Deans will be able to either establish a blanket policy for their respective schools or allow individual departments and programs within their schools to decide whether to require the GRE General Test” |
| University of Chicago              | Biological Sciences\(^{34}\)                                            | Encourage female and minority applicants                                                                                                                                                       |
| University of Illinois             | Computer Science\(^{35}\)                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| University of Indiana              | Biology\(^{36}\)  
Kelley School of Business\(^{37}\)                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| University of Michigan             | History\(^{38}\)  
Programs in Biomedical Sciences\(^{39}\)                                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                    | - Bioinformatics  
- Biological Chemistry  
- Biophysics  
- Cancer Biology  
- Cell & Developmental Biology  
- Cellular & Molecular Biology  
- Human Genetics  
- Immunology  
- Microbiology & Immunology  
- Molecular, Cellular & Developmental Biology  
- Molecular & Cellular Pathology  
- Molecular & Integrative Physiology  
- Neuroscience  
- Pharmacology  
School of Social Work\(^{40}\) |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |


University Graduate Fellowship Program Nomination Form (n.d.). College of Education. Retrieved from Penn State University Website: https://ed.psu.edu/internal/grad-recruit/ugf-nomination-form

Notes - Benchmarking

2. https://gsas.columbia.edu/degree-programs/phd-programs/architecture
5. https://gsas.columbia.edu/degree-programs/phd-programs/history
8. https://english.cornell.edu/english-department-faculty-resolve-remove-gre-test-requirement-graduate-admissions
9. https://pbs.dartmouth.edu/graduate/graduate-admissions
10. https://english.fas.harvard.edu/guidelines-admissions
12. https://www.med.upenn.edu/immun/admission.html
13. https://philosophy.sas.upenn.edu/graduate/prospective-students
15. http://education.msu.edu/maed/apply/
17. http://linguistics.mit.edu/graduate/admissions/application/
18. https://www.media.mit.edu/graduate-program/apply/
23. https://engineering.nyu.edu/admissions/graduate/apply/requirements/gre-gmat
24. https://gradsch.osu.edu/handbook/2-1-admission-application
28. https://www.bio.purdue.edu/Academic/graduate/graduate_faq.html
29. https://molbiosci.rutgers.edu/
32. https://anthropology.stanford.edu/graduate-program/admission/graduate-degree-programs-ma-and-phd
33. https://ed.stanford.edu/step/admission/requirements
35. http://cs.illinois.edu/admissions/graduate/applications-process-requirements
38. https://lsa.umich.edu/history/news-events/all-news/graduateneuws/u-m-history-eliminates-gre-requirement-for-phd-program.html
40. https://ssw.umich.edu/faq/question/7327-is-the-gre-required-for-application-to-the-msw-program