



# Using the GRE in Psych Graduate Admissions

Adapted from Sarah Hird (MCB), Barbara Malone (MCB) & John Redden (PNB)



## What is the GRE?

- Test administered by a for profit company that many graduate admissions committees have used to score applicants
- UConn Graduate School does not require GRE
  - Historically, UConn's Dept of Psych Sciences has used the GRE as one of many components in graduate applications (minimum GRE cutoff was eliminated several years ago)
  - Perception that this is an objective, standardized measure that allows comparison of a heterogeneous applicant pool
- However, there are growing concerns about the validity of the GRE as an objective measure



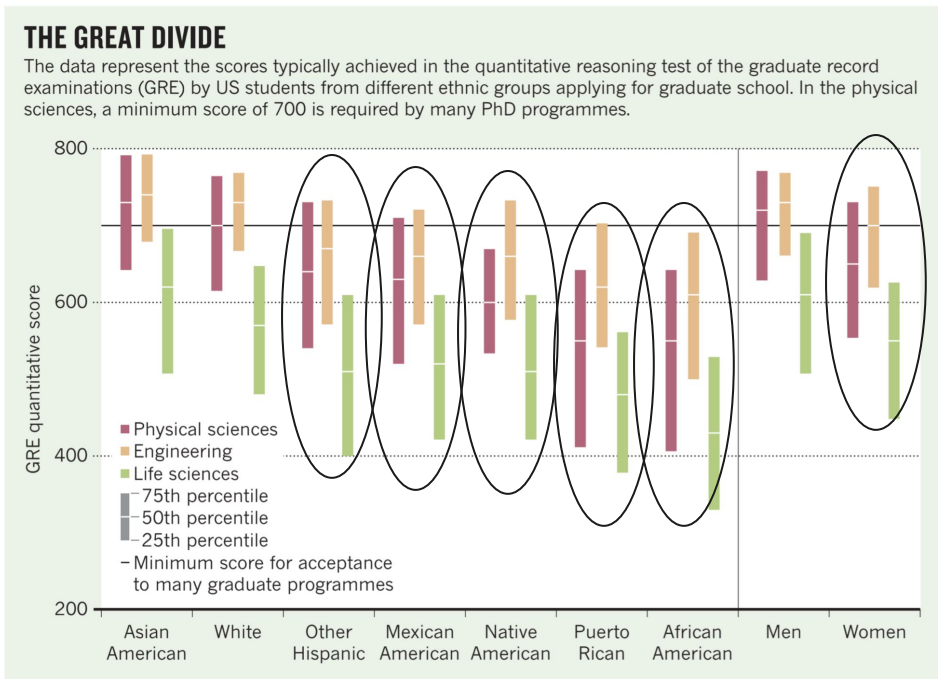
## Dropping the GRE is not a panacea...

“The lack of a GRE requirement does not automatically increase the representation of under-represented minority students in the matriculated class. The programs most successful in meeting their diversity goals **also engage in deliberate recruitment activities.**”

[Cahn \(2015\), Journal of Allied Health](#)

... **but it is an important step**

# The GRE penalizes underrepresented minorities



Notably, the ethnicity / gender gap has not diminished over time

[Bleske-Rechek & Brown \(2014\), \*Intelligence\*](#)

[Miller & Stassun \(2014\), \*Nature\*](#)

# The GRE is biased against women

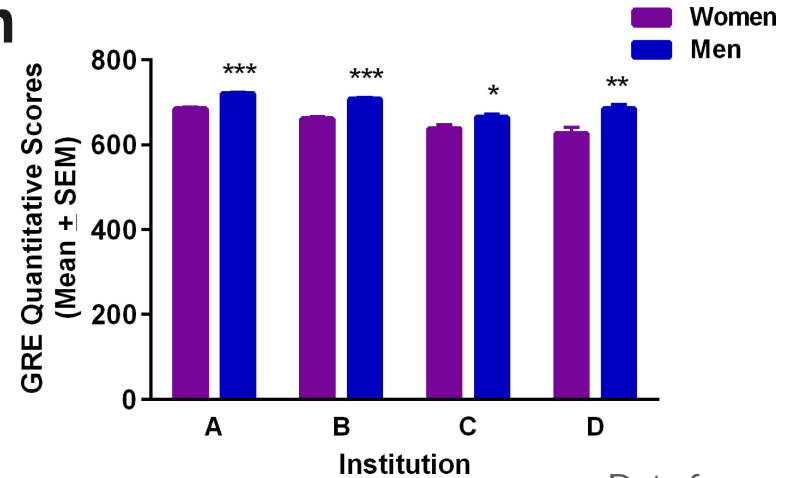
A multi-institutional study found that GRE quantitative scores for women were significantly lower than the scores of men

In fact, GRE quantitative scores were higher for men who left their programs than for men who completed PhDs. The same is not true for women.

		GRE V	GRE Q
Men Who Completed PhD Degrees	Mean	535.7	698.9
	SEM	4.1	3.4
	N	652	652
Men Who Did Not Complete	Mean	551.6*	722.8***
	SEM	5.5	3.6
	N	386	386

\*Significantly higher than scores of men who completed degrees;  $p < 0.05$ ;

\*\*\*  $p < 0.0001$ .



Data from:  
UMass Amherst, Rutgers, UNH, UVT

[Petersen et al. \(2018\), PLoS One](#)



## The GRE is expensive and cost-prohibitive for many

- The test itself costs \$205
- Text books and preparatory classes can total up to **thousands of dollars**
- GRE exams are held only in major cities so travel costs and days off from work must be accounted for (\$50 rescheduling fee, \$50 change location fee)
- Scores are sent to 4 schools for free, each additional school costs \$27

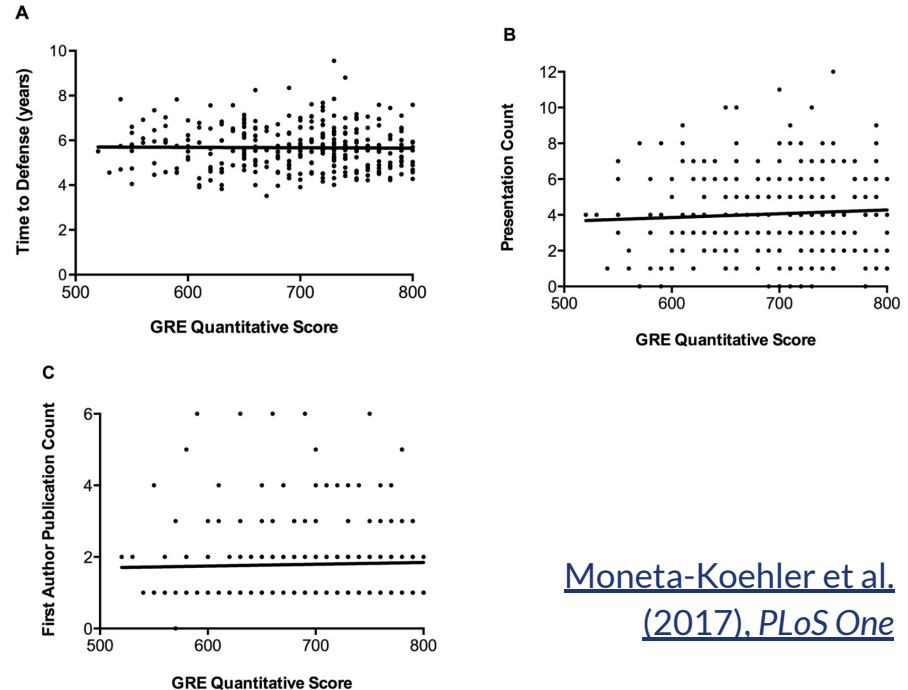
# The GRE does not predict graduate school outcomes

A recent study found that GRE scores were not predictive of several graduate school outcomes:

- graduation rate
- passing qualifying exams
- time to defense
- conference presentations
- first-author papers
- ability to obtain fellowships

And were only weakly predictive of outcomes such as first-semester grades

GRE does **not** test skills used in graduate school



[Moneta-Koehler et al. \(2017\), PLoS One](#)



*The Atlantic*

# The Problem With the GRE

The exam “is a proxy for asking ‘Are you rich?’ ‘Are you white?’ ‘Are you male?’”

“More than half of the faculty members who sat on the admissions panels she studied **erroneously equated GRE scores with a student’s native or raw intelligence**. Google ‘how to raise GRE test scores,’ however, and you’ll find the most common recommendation is to hire a private tutor or attend one of the many pricey GRE-prep classes offered by companies such as Princeton Review or Kaplan.”





As a result, over 100 of our peer and aspirant grad programs have dropped the GRE ([#GREXIT](#)) as a requirement for admission

Check out this [continually updated list](#) of the the many psychology programs (clinical, neuroscience, developmental, I/O) that have dropped the GRE.



# Is it better to get GRE scores and use them as part of a holistic evaluation?

In a perfect world, maybe. But in our current reality, no.

- If we believe the data suggesting that the GRE has **no predictive value**, then **no, it makes no sense to use GRE scores**.
- If, despite the data, we believe that the GRE does have predictive value, then in theory scores could be used as part of a truly holistic evaluation of applicants. Unfortunately, this is unrealistic:
  - Because applicant evaluation is so time-consuming, and faculty are often “risk averse” about accepting PhD students, even well-intentioned faculty are likely to rely on GRE scores to eliminate applicants rather than, e.g., contacting references
  - As psychologists, we know that an individual’s judgments are strongly affected by **anchor** numbers (e.g., [Tversky & Kahneman, 1974](#)). So even if we are well-intentioned about trying to discount these scores, we may not be able to.
- By including it, we **systemically place students who are not rich, white or male at a disadvantage**, and we make our applicant pool less diverse. These potential applicants may apply to one of the (many) peer schools that don’t require the GRE and **some potential applicants may not apply at all**.
- **Setting it as optional still suggests that it has value.**



## Does dropping the GRE exclude our students from university fellowships?

No.

“ GREs are not required, and I continuously push against committee members making decisions based on this metric. I push for them to look at the holistic side of the applicants. ”

Stuart Duncan  
Director of Fellowships, Outreach Programming,  
The Graduate School, University of Connecticut



## Qualitative metrics better predict graduate success

**“We found no correlations of test scores, grades, amount of previous research experience, or faculty interview ratings with high or low productivity among those applicants who were admitted and chose to matriculate at [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill]. In contrast, ratings from recommendation letter writers were significantly stronger for students who published multiple first-author papers in graduate school than for those who published no first-author papers during the same timeframe. We conclude that the most commonly used standardized test (the general GRE) is a particularly ineffective predictive tool, but that **qualitative assessments by previous mentors are more likely to identify students who will succeed** in biomedical graduate research. ”**

[Hall et al. \(2017\), PLoS One](#)

# Anecdotaly, programs that have dropped the GRE have noted an increase in the diversity of applicants

Jordan Ward Retweeted

 **Russell Vance** @russelleva... · 4d


An interesting stat: the @berkeleyMCB PhD program discontinued the GRE requirement and we saw a 28% increase in applications from under-represented minorities! Chance? I don't think so. Think of all the talent we have been missing all these years...

40 606 1,955

[Show this thread](#)

UC Berkeley (Bio)

Dan Starr and Dr. Valerie Horsley liked

 **Sean Elliott** @Prof\_SJE · 1d

Wondering about important it is to drop GRE requirements for grad school, in order to let EVERYONE who wants a shot at grad school to take it? The BU MCB program went along with #GRExit, and applications are up by 30%. BOOM.

7 23 130

BU (Bio)

Brian Beliveau and 4 others liked

 **Gavin Sherlock** @gsherloc · 1d

For the first time, we dropped the GRE requirement for grad student applications this year. We have received over 100 more applications than last year (558 total!), so hopefully this has increased access to allow new candidates to apply.

13 35 315

Stanford (Bio)

Scott Barolo and 2 others liked

 **Laura Lopez** @ohdear2 · 8h

Graduate applications are still coming in, but I wanted to share that since making the PGRE optional, the OSU astronomy applicant pool has increased overall by 22%, # of women applicants increased by 54%, and # of URM applicants increased by 300%!! And apps are still coming in!

3 63 212

Ohio State (Astro)

including our colleagues in MCB & PNB at UConn



The rest of the world is doing fine without the GRE.

We advocate **dropping the GRE** and moving toward a more [flexible, holistic application process](#) (*Nature Neuroscience*, March 2021). This **will not be easy**, but if we want change, is **crucial that we do the hard work**.

This must be **complemented by targeted efforts** to recruit and retain a diverse graduate student body



Dropping the GRE is consistent with our own stated commitment to diversity:

“ We will actively seek to recruit, mentor, support, and celebrate students, staff, and faculty from underrepresented social groups. ... We strive to understand the historical and current systems which have shaped the ways in which we think about equality and prejudice. ... It is each of our responsibilities to identify and challenge the explicit and implicit biases and barriers that members of marginalized social groups face in academia... ”

- Dept of Psych Sciences' Commitment to DEI