**Graduate School White Paper on the Graduate Admissions Process
Portfolio Review at Wayne State University**

November 30, 2017

Summary

The Wayne State University (WSU) Graduate School strongly encourages graduate programs at WSU to develop and implement portfolio review processes for graduate admissions. Portfolio review is a process by which each applicant is evaluated as a unique individual based on a broad range of metrics, characteristics, and experiences. In portfolio review, standardized test scores, often a prime determinant of admissions decisions, are contextualized by other information that indicates potential success in graduate studies. The movement to this method of review is based on data collected at WSU as well as national research. The goal of this initiative is to invite a diverse and inclusive graduate student body to excel at WSU, contribute to the mission of the university, and become leaders and innovators in Detroit and the world based on their achievements, work ethic, and values. To support this initiative, the WSU Graduate School will base funding and awards, in part, on programs' development and implementation of portfolio review processes, especially those that recognize the limitations of standardized tests and collect information on applicants' other qualities and experiences that predict graduate student success.

Background

National Data

During the application process, applicants for graduate study submit a variety of materials including standardized test scores, transcripts, statements of purpose, and letters of recommendation. In practice, standardized test scores weigh heavily in admissions decisions as many admissions committee members consider these scores as an important indicator of merit or deservingness to pursue graduate education (Posselt, 2014). Some programs even use these tests including the GRE General Test to make a "first cut" to select top applicants. The College Board has noted that the GRE "does not and cannot measure all the qualities that are important in predicting success" (ETS, 2017), and argues that multiple criteria be used when evaluating applications. In addition, initial cuts of applications based solely on standardized test scores contribute directly to a lack of diversity in graduate admissions by eliminating a number of capable students, including women and people of color, from further consideration very early in the process (Miller & Stassun, 2014). First-generation college students and socioeconomically disadvantaged students are also likely to obtain lower scores on the GRE (ETS, 2016). Because of findings such as these, the National Institutes of Health (http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-15-120.html) and the National Science Foundation (https://www.nsfgrfp.org/applicants/faqs) have eliminated the collection of standardized test score data in fellowship and training grant applications. Likewise, prominent programs at Harvard University (Astronomy and Astrophysics) and the University of Michigan (Program in Biomedical Sciences) no longer require and/or accept GRE scores in their graduate applications. Other programs are following suit, according to data gathered by representatives in the AAMC's GREAT Group. As shown by Posselt (2014) and other research cited above, the mere presence of standardized test scores in an applicant's portfolio likely biases admissions committee members to overlook other important qualities and experiences

that applicants can bring to their programs. It is therefore important to use GRE scores in the context of other predictors of student performance in graduate school.

WSU Data
The WSU Graduate School also tested whether the GRE General Test scores were correlated with student performance in graduate school. Figure 1 and 2 demonstrate that GRE Verbal and Quantitative subtest scores do not appear to be correlated with time to the Ph.D. degree. That is, lower scores do not necessarily indicate that a Ph.D. student will need more time to complete their degree. Tables 1a and 1b also demonstrate that GRE scores do not predict the career sectors pursued by Ph.D. graduates.

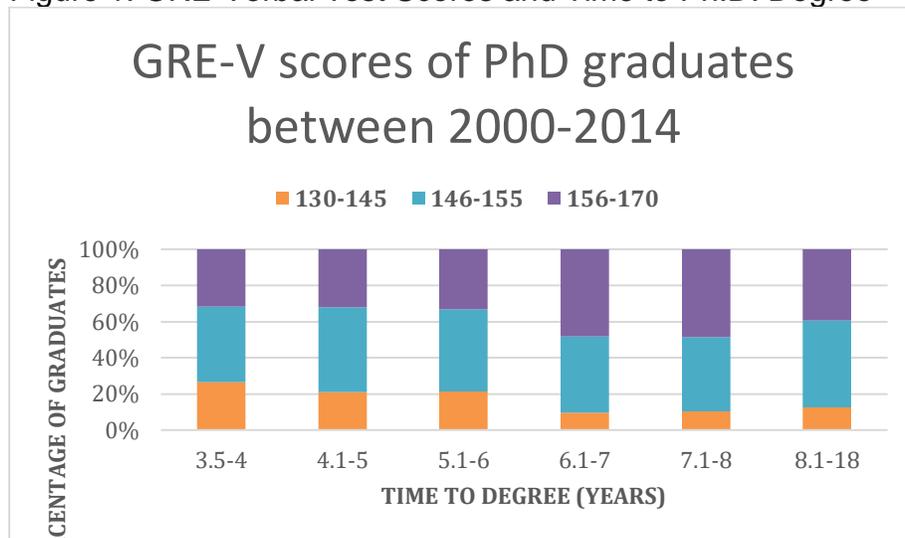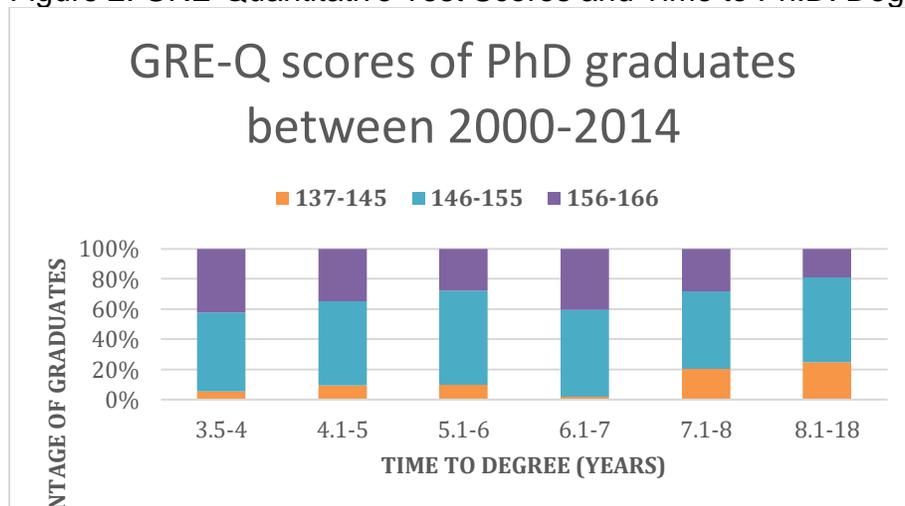Figure 1. GRE-Verbal Test Scores and Time to Ph.D. Degree

Figure 2. GRE-Quantitative Test Scores and Time to Ph.D. Degree

Tables 1a and 1b. GRE Scores and Career Outcomes at WSU

Career Outcomes by GRE scores

A. GRE Quantitative

	Academia (n= 181)	For-Profit (n=133)
Mean	150.7	149
Standard deviation (SD)	10.7	9.43
Standard error of the mean (SEM)	0.8	0.82

'p' value 0.86

B. GRE Verbal

	Academia (n=222)	For-Profit N=97
Mean	151.2	148.8
Standard deviation (SD)	9.20	6.97
Standard error of the mean (SEM)	0.62	0.71

'p' value 0.72

Finally, the WSU Graduate School conducted an experiment to determine how WSU faculty used application information to make admissions decisions (Cano, Wurm, Nava, McIntee, & Mathur, forthcoming in *SEMQ*). The results showed that GRE scores weighed heavily in decision-making, especially when considering the first-generation college student status of the applicant. When GRE information is present, faculty pay inordinate amount of attention to it even when other information may also be available.

In sum, these findings suggest that graduate programs intentionally or unintentionally place an inordinate amount of emphasis on the GRE despite evidence suggesting that it is a weak predictor of graduate student success. WSU is missing out on outstanding students who are successful in every other way but their standardized test taking skills. The Graduate School considered eliminating completely GRE score collection and its subsequent use in admissions decisions altogether. However, we realized that for disciplinary reasons, some graduate programs required quantitative and/or verbal scores to best evaluate their applicants. For this reason, we decided to consider alternative approaches to the admissions process that take various factors into account in the application review, with the standardized score being just one of those, rather than being the sole predictor of student success in graduate school.

An Alternative to the GRE: Portfolio Review
As a way to address this problem, graduate programs across the country are embracing review processes to consistently and intentionally review application materials to select the best students for their programs, including the use of a "Portfolio Review". Portfolio review refers to "the consideration of a broad range of candidate qualities including 'noncognitive' or personal attributes" (Kent & McCarthy, 2016). Other key pieces of information that can be evaluated include GPA; research, scholarly, creative, or applied experiences; writing or communication skills; and demonstrated evidence of persistence and motivation, community involvement, and entrepreneurship. Portfolio review is in accordance with the WSU Mission and Strategic Plan. Portfolio review is a method of improving the graduate applicant selection

process so that admissions decisions are made for each individual student consistently and with attention to programmatic and strategic needs.

Portfolio Review at WSU
At the Wayne State University Graduate School, we have listened to applicants, current students and alumni, and faculty, staff, and administrators voice their concerns about the graduate admissions process, including anecdotes about how the outsized influence of standardized test scores has prevented qualified applicants from obtaining admission to WSU despite abundant evidence about their drive, motivation, and resourcefulness. We have also listened as programs have lamented the fact that these same students have gone on to be successful in other competitive programs. In response to these conversations, the Graduate School has collected data to examine the role of standardized tests in graduate student outcomes, including career placements. In addition, Dean Ambika Mathur has opened discussions about the graduate admissions process including the need to consider a greater variety of metrics in meetings of the Graduate Council, the formal elected body of faculty and staff who advise the Dean, and the semi-annual Graduate Directors meeting, which includes graduate program directors from every master's and doctoral program at WSU. Dean Mathur also presented the case for portfolio review at WSU leadership meetings including the Provost's Office, Council of Deans, and the Board of Governors meetings.

With support from university leadership, the Graduate Council, and Graduate Directors, Dean Mathur convened a Graduate Admissions Committee in 2016 comprised of faculty and administrators from a diverse set of doctoral programs including Cancer Biology, Chemistry, Communication, Education, English, and Psychology. This group provided valuable input into portfolio review processes including the creation of a [Portfolio Review Toolkit](#) to educate and assist programs with their portfolio review efforts. Included in the toolkit are guidelines for instituting portfolio review in an intentional manner including thoughtful reflection on the qualities or experiences that programs value, rubric templates that can be customized to program needs for evaluating [personal statements](#) and entire [application packages](#), and an [FAQ page](#) to answer common questions about portfolio review and its implementation. The WSU Graduate School has also created an [Application Support](#) webpage to assist applicants with tools to put together competitive applications under portfolio review including tips for writing compelling personal statements and securing strong letters of recommendation.

In an iterative manner, the toolkit was shared with the Graduate Council, Graduate Directors, and WSU leadership for additional refinement. The final toolkit has been reviewed by WSU's Office of General Counsel to ensure that the tools are consistent with state and federal laws. It has now been posted online and made available to programs. The next step will be to incentivize the use of the toolkit, which will be done by linking funding (e.g., fellowships, scholarships, graduate research assistantships) and faculty and student awards (e.g., teaching, service, and mentoring awards) to departments' development and creation of tailored portfolio review practices for their own programs. Special consideration will be given to programs that create or use a variety of metrics, in addition or instead of standardized scores alone, to assess valued qualities and experiences that predict graduate student success.

To our knowledge, there have been no systematic efforts to rework the graduate admissions process for all graduate programs within a single institution. With the portfolio review, the WSU Graduate School hopes to implement a broader definition of merit in order to recruit and train the highest caliber of a diverse student body, respecting disciplinary needs, in a manner that

aligns with the mission of Wayne State University, with graduates that contribute to the intellectual and economic capital locally, nationally and globally.

Ambika Mathur, Ph.D.
Associate Provost of Scientific Training, Workforce Development, and Diversity
Dean, Graduate School
Professor of Pediatrics

Annmarie Cano, Ph.D.
Associate Dean of Student Services, Graduate School
Professor of Psychology