Why Did the Environmental and Ocean Sciences Graduate Program Drop the GRE?

There are a number of good reasons to drop the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) score as part of our holistic evaluation of graduate students applying to our program. Broadly, they fall into three interrelated categories: They do a poor job of predicting success in graduate school; they are biased against underrepresented groups; and they can form a barrier to entry for low income students. Let's look at those factors.

Poor predictive ability. There is mounting evidence that the GRE performs quite poorly at predicting a student's success, in grad school and beyond, by any number of metrics. They are a poor predictor of Ph.D. completion, likelihood to pass the qualifying exam, time to defense, number of conference presentations, number of first author papers, or the probability of obtaining an individual grant or fellowship (Miller et al, 2019, Moneta-Koehler et al., 2019, Peterson et al., 2018).

Bias. To make matters worse, this tool that does not predict success is also biased against women and underrepresented minority candidates (e.g., see Miller et al., 2019 and references therein). Put simply, "…the GRE is a better indicator of sex and skin colour than of ability and ultimate success." (Miller and Stassun, 2014).

Cost. The cost of the GRE, both in money and time, is not inconsequential, particularly for low-income applicants. The test costs $205, and transmitting scores is an additional $27 for each university to which a student applies (ETS.org). Further, those who can afford the time (in one study, 5.5-7.5 weeks) and the money (often several hundred dollars) for GRE Prep courses, can improve their test scores by as much as hundreds of points (Miller et al., 1996). These factors will greatly increase the disparity in scores between high and low income applicants.

While it is not a motivation for our decision, we note that many programs, including graduate schools across the United States (e.g., see extensive, but by no means exhaustive, lists **here** and **here**), as well as funding agencies (e.g., the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program) have also recognized these issues, and joined the movement to drop the GRE requirement (aka "GRExit"). We are pleased to be in such good company, and look forward to better serving our applicants, our communities, and the sciences.

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