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October 12, 2009

GMAT vs. GRE: a New Question for Business Schools

By James M. Danko

As a business-school dean, I have followed with interest the current debate about the Graduate Record Examinations' becoming an acceptable alternative to the GMAT, or Graduate Management Admission Test, as a key quality indicator of applicants to graduate business programs. In the spirit of full disclosure, I am a member of the Board of Directors of the Graduate Management Admission Council, which administers the GMAT. Irrespective of my connection to the council, as a business-school dean I hope to see a broader dialogue about factors that might motivate a business school to move away from a model in which the GMAT is the sole test used in the admissions process.

Some business-school deans are concerned that a primary motivation for wanting to accept the GRE is the likelihood that doing so would increase the overall applicant pool, since the GRE may be more accessible or palatable to younger or international applicants. For example, a college senior might decide to take the GRE while still in an academic frame of mind, which would leave open the option to apply to a graduate business program in the future—with one less hurdle at the time of application.

In conversations with some business-school deans, however, I have discovered that they are motivated to make the change not because it expands the applicant pool, but because of the potential impact on a school's rankings performance. Applicants opting to take the GRE because they view the GMAT as too difficult and not playing to their academic strengths would probably score in the lower ranges of GMAT takers. Thus, with lower GMAT scores removed from the incoming-class pool, the average GMAT scores of a school's accepted students would be pushed higher. Not wanting to risk losing any advantage to the competition, even top business schools would feel compelled to imitate the early adopters and accept alternate exams in a sort of rankings arms race. Since *U.S. News & World Report's* top-10 business schools all boast GMAT averages above 700, with very small differences in score ranges, they would be understandably concerned about losing ground in the rankings.

We must not only be sensitive to the factors that motivate business schools to change their use of tests; we must also consider the issue of integrity on the part of business-school applicants. In recent years, M.B.A. programs have been called to task for their alleged failure to ensure the development of ethical business leaders. In my view, that responsibility starts at the time we assess applicants for admission. We must do our best to ensure that those who enter our business schools demonstrate a high degree of ethical behavior. In turn, we also want assurance that those same high standards are inherent in our testing process.

While I cannot comment on the practices of the Educational Testing Service (which administers the GRE) and am not implying that ETS does not hold to the same rigorous standards as does the GMAC, it is a fact that many business-school administrators know that the council is committed to integrity in the testing process and has a zero-tolerance policy toward cheating. For example, when GMAC discovered Scoretop, a Web site that posted live test questions from a number of key admissions tests, GMAC aggressively pursued Scoretop until the site was shut down, and then went directly after those people who were stealing and posting live questions. GMAC took steps to cancel their scores and to directly notify business schools in cases where there was a clear violation of ethical standards.

As another example, last month the French National Commission for Information Technology and Liberty granted GMAC approval to collect biometric data through its palm-vein-pattern reading technology, as part of the effort to guarantee the highest level of security for the GMAT exams. The GMAT is the only private examination ever to be awarded this right. As business schools consider alternative tests, we should confirm that any other providers demonstrate and maintain comparable security standards.

Debate is healthy, as is innovation. An industry conversation about admission testing, including exploration of the GRE as an additional option, is most welcome. However, a much more thorough analysis is needed in this case—along with an open, thoughtful debate that takes both rankings implications and testing integrity into account—before such a shift in our overall testing model should occur.

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The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037