

TOWARD MORE ADEQUATE SELECTION CRITERIA: A CASE STUDY OF GRADUATE COUNSELLING ADMISSIONS*

LARRY E. PASS and SHAWN E. SCHERER
University of Toronto

Abstract

An initial attempt was made to consider the process employed in selecting applicants for doctoral training in counselling through systematically investigating the admission criteria used by the faculty of one counselling department. While a number of the categories considered were commonly acknowledged as having considerable weight in the decision to accept or reject an applicant, of the total number available approximately 45% were regarded as unimportant in making an assessment. There was also substantial diversity of opinion among faculty as to the significance given to a number of other categories. To the extent that the counselling faculty investigated are representative of others, the findings may have general applicability to many counselling departments.

Résumé

Cette étude représente un premier essai dans l'examen du processus utilisé dans le choix de candidats au programme de doctorat en consultation. Pour ce faire, on a étudié de façon systématique les critères d'admission employés par le corps enseignant d'un département de consultation. On a jugé qu'un certain nombre de critères jouaient un rôle important dans l'acceptation ou le refus d'un candidat. Cependant on relève que 45% des critères utilisés ne s'avèrent vraiment pas pertinents dans le choix des candidats. On soulève également la diversité d'opinions parmi les professeurs au sujet de l'importance qu'on devrait accorder à différents critères. Dans la mesure que ce département est représentatif de ses pairs, ces conclusions pourraient servir à plusieurs autres départements de consultation.

The assessment of admissibility to graduate study programs has traditionally relied upon evidence of undergraduate academic excellence, standardized nationally-normed general aptitude examinations, and to a lesser degree, letters of recommendation (e.g., Goldberg, 1977). Criteria for admission have long been, and remain, a significant issue to educators (Dawes, 1971; Morgan, 1974; Gough, 1976). Among faculty in the applied field of counselling, the matter has been an issue of discussion (Anthony, Gormally, & Miller, 1974; McGreevy, 1967) and occasionally, of heated debate.

The task of examining applicant files is not only tedious and time-consuming, but one that must be performed with great care in order to ensure a fair and uniform appraisal for all, besides guaranteeing that the best possible students are admitted. As yet, however, the criteria for admission or rejection are largely ill-defined. It has even been suggested that selection by lottery might be as appropriate, less expensive, and possibly more

equitable than current practices (Sheldrake, 1975; Simpson, 1975).

In terms of the formal process presently being employed, admissions to doctoral programs in counselling are largely determined through two procedures. Initially, the Office of Graduate Studies determines if applicants meet the University's minimum standards for admission. Typically, this involves a relatively straightforward appraisal of the applicant's grades, and general content of previous academic training. The counselling faculty are then required to make a further selection from among those applicants passing this preliminary screening. Although various indices (e.g., undergraduate grades, Graduate Record Examination (GRE), Miller's Analogies Test (MAT), recommendations, and counselling experience) are regularly employed by counselling faculties in the decision-making process, no clear statement can yet be made regarding the relative importance that faculties place on such criteria.

The present study therefore is an initial attempt at systematically investigating the admission criteria used in selection of applicants to one department's doctoral training program in

* Requests for reprints should be sent to Larry E. Pass, The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 1V6.

counselling. The study was designed to provide a forum for discussion among counselling staff. It was felt that discussion of these issues would assist staff in further clarifying the criteria, thereby improving the screening process. Furthermore, it was hoped that this report would facilitate other counselling faculties in their analyses of the criteria employed in assessing applicants to their own graduate programs.

METHOD

Faculty members in a university department, charged with the responsibility of applicants for a doctoral training program in counselling, were canvassed as to the importance of criteria they used in assessing suitability for admission. The Admissions Assessment Index consisted of 26 categories; each category was responded to by using a twenty-one point bipolar rating scale. The scale provided information as to the degree of importance the assessor placed on a particular category in terms of his or her decision to reject or to accept the applicant. The categories were organized into three major general groupings: demographic factors; objective indices; and subjective indices. Each individual category was divided into two or more subcategories in order to particularize the assessor's responses. For example, the category of "nature of undergraduate studies" was divided into the subcategories of "social sciences emphasis", "natural sciences emphasis", and "humanities emphasis".

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics were computed from the assessor's responses to the items comprising the 26 assessment categories. Appraisals were summarized as to their degree of importance in acceptance or rejection, based upon average ratings and measures of variability. Table 1 displays the data in terms of those subcategories to which faculty attributed high or moderate importance in accepting or rejecting the applicant. Table 2 summarizes those subcategories for which there was a high degree of diversity of opinion among faculty.

Demographic Factors

In general, over one-half of the categories were considered unimportant by faculty. Interestingly, in those few cases that were considered relevant, demographic criteria were employed largely for purposes of rejection. This was most notably observed in the case of the age over 40 subcategory, and to a moderate degree, where a significant physical handicap existed. A good grasp of the English language was viewed by almost all faculty as an important criteria in acceptance.

TABLE 1

Subcategories generally considered of high or moderate importance in accepting or rejecting applicant.

Accept	Reject
a English as first language	a non-Canadian citizenship
b superior grades (overall or social sciences)	a 40 or over
c favorable impression through personal interview or more extensive experience	a significant physical handicap
c perceived high status of university or department	b only fair grades (overall or social sciences)
c outstanding letters of reference with high perceived credibility of referee(s)	c unfavorable impression through personal interview or more extensive experience
c counselling/clinical work experience	c mixed letters of reference
c inferred superior intellectual characteristics from supporting letter	
c undergraduate training in social sciences or Master's degree in applied psychology	

a demographic factor
b objective indice
c subjective indice

TABLE 2

Subcategories with a high degree of diversity opinion among faculty.

Categories	Accept			Unimportant	Reject		
	Hi	Mod	Lo		Lo	Mod	Hi
a English as a second language							
b good grades (overall or social sciences)							
b scholarships							
b published research							
c inferred social maturity from supporting letter							
c perceived congruence between applicant's stated goals and program aims							
c variety of work experience							
b completion of research thesis or Master's degree							
b undergraduate studies in natural sciences							
b undergraduate studies in humanities							
b Master's degree in experimental psychology							
b Master's degree in natural sciences							

a demographic factor
b objective indice
c subjective indice

Objective Indices

The same pattern was found for both the overall quality of grades and the social science grades. In terms of decision-making, grades that were "outstanding" or "very good" carried a substantial weight in the decision to accept, having high agreement among faculty. In contrast, a good deal of diversity was found among faculty when candidates' grades were only "good". The diversity ranged from some inclination to accept to some inclination to reject. There was moderate agreement that "fair" grades were to be used as a basis for rejection.

Considerably more diversity of opinion occurred when considering academic honours as a criterion in acceptance, especially in the case of scholarships and published research. Specifically, scholarships were given a slightly greater weight in acceptance, while there was substantial disagreement regarding the value of published research. There seemed to be somewhat more agreement regarding the value of teaching and research assistantships as a criterion for admissibility.

MATs assumed some minor importance in acceptance only when scores fell above the 75th percentile.

GREs (total scores, verbal, quantitative and psychology subscores) were generally viewed as having minor significance when these scores fell above the 75th percentile or below the 50th percentile.

Subjective Indices

Nonacademic work history was given a moderate degree of importance in the acceptance of a candidate. There was moderate agreement as to the value of previous exposure to counselling-clinical experience, with somewhat lesser significance attributed to experience in education. Minor importance for acceptance was placed upon length and variety of the student's past work experience.

There was general agreement that the nature of the individual's nonacademic interests or hobbies were unimportant.

Moderate significance in the decision to accept or reject was given to the quality and breadth of the individual's academic background, although considerable diversity of opinion existed among faculty. However, there was little disagreement that both the quality of the candidate's previous university, and the quality of the university department, were moderately important in acceptance. In contrast, a good deal of disagreement existed as to the significance given to a research thesis (and to a lesser extent, to more than one degree), in appraising acceptability.

Regarding prior academic training, all faculty viewed a social sciences background as moderate-

ly important, while considerable diversity of opinion existed regarding the value of backgrounds in the natural sciences and humanities.

There was general agreement that Master's level training in applied psychology, and to a lesser degree, in social psychology, was of moderate importance as a criterion in the candidate's acceptance. In contrast, little importance was placed upon specific training in education at this level.

Contact with the prospective candidate in the form of previous application for admission, personal interview, or some more extensive experience was considered important in decision-making. Where the nature of the experience was unfavorable, there was high agreement in placing moderate significance on this factor in rejection.

Outstanding references were viewed by all staff as moderately important in acceptance. To a lesser degree, positive references played a similar role. However, mixed references were generally viewed as providing some basis for rejection.

In most counsellor training programs, candidates are required to submit in support of their application, a letter stating their reasons for seeking admission to the program. For the faculty, in focus for this paper, the supporting letter was viewed as being of considerable importance in the decision-making process. Where the candidate was perceived as having goals that were inappropriate with those of the program, minor significance was given to deciding in favor of rejection. In marked contrast, perception in the supporting letter of superior intellectual characteristics in the candidate were generally regarded as being of considerable importance in acceptance.

DISCUSSION

In general, demographic factors were viewed by faculty as having little importance in the assessment of the applicant. While objective factors clearly played a significant role in decision making, interestingly enough, considerable weight was also given to subjective indices, particularly in determining degree of acceptability.

Overall, approximately 40% of the categories were given some significance in the decision to accept, whereas approximately 15% were considered significant for rejection. If this is not an artifact of the scaling technique employed, the staff found it easier to identify positive and nondiscriminating factors than negative ones.

Certain categories were especially salient in the decision to reject. These included: prior rejection of the applicant by the department; unfavorable personal contact, either in the form of an interview, or more extensive personal experience;

and noncitizenship. With respect to citizenship, there was considerable agreement among staff that priority should be given to Canadian applicants, although non-Canadian citizenship by itself was not necessarily viewed as a basis for rejection. Other categories considered relevant in the decision to reject included only "fair" overall or social science grades, and mixed letters of reference.

Very few faculty members considered any category as being critically important in acceptance or rejection. Rather, most assessors seemed to utilize a composite of subjective and objective categories in decision-making.

In terms of level of agreement across categories in the three groupings, a moderate to high degree of agreement was found to exist in approximately 85% of the cases, with particularly low diversity of opinion on items dealing with standardized test scores.

Approximately 45% of all subcategories were considered unimportant by all faculty in assessing suitability of a candidate. This was significant in that it suggests that these variables can be excluded from the assessment process without the loss of any relevant data. Of special importance was the finding that little weight was given to applicants' performance on the MATs or GREs. Exclusion of this category alone represents a substantial savings in terms of both time and effort in the preparation of an application. This finding is also noteworthy in that it represents a significant departure from the importance usually placed on such standardized tests in the selection process (Dawes, 1971; Goldberg, 1977).

A number of categories were commonly acknowledged as having considerable weight in determining the decision to accept an applicant. One group of factors reflected the nature of academic training and applied experience in the field of human relations. A second group consisted of the applicant's demonstrated or perceived level of academic competence and scholarship (e.g., superior grades, outstanding letters of reference). These groupings are in contrast with those subcategories over which there was substantial diversity of opinion among faculty. The isolation of this latter group (see Table 2) provides an important focus for staff discussion. It may be that the attention of assessors is focused on a relatively small number

of factors and that much of the information typically included in the application has in fact little or no relevance to the assessment process. If the relative importance of these factors could be clearly established, then it might be possible to develop a regression formula as a preliminary screening device. This would substantially reduce the energies expended by faculty in assessment as well as provide a more objective index to ensure greater uniformity and fairness to all applicants. Prior work has already demonstrated that this approach can be successfully applied to graduate psychology admissions (Goldberg, 1977).

Assuming that those canvassed in this study were representative of counselling faculties in general, then it is reasonable to expect that at least moderate agreement would exist among other counselling faculties as to categories they regard as critical in acceptance or rejection. Further study might now be directed at determining the generalizability of the present findings to other counselling doctoral training programs. It is interesting to speculate that there may be a formula that would have general applicability to many counselling departments.

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