

INVITED EDITORIAL: The GRE Psychology Subject Test: Advising Implications of a Faded Criterion for Graduate Admissions

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ABSTRACT. Less than 1% of psychology graduate programs listed in the American Psychological Association's (2013) *Graduate Studies in Psychology* require the Graduate Record Exam Psychology Subject Test (GRE-PSY). In this editorial, I encourage students to take the GRE-PSY only if required by the graduate program(s) to which they are applying. International students and/or students for whom psychology or a closely related field was not their undergraduate major may wish to consider taking the exam as a general indicator of psychological knowledge. However, I would recommend taking the exam as a general indicator of psychological knowledge only if encouraged by a specific graduate program. Furthermore, I hope this editorial and the strikingly low number of programs that require the test decreases the misguided generic advice for graduate-school bound students to take the GRE-PSY as a matter of course. I report on a qualitative analysis of the type and geographic placement of programs that require the GRE-PSY. In the analysis of the more than 1,700 U.S. programs listed in the *Graduate Studies in Psychology* book, only 17 universities in the United States required the GRE-PSY (representing 24 psychology-related graduate programs). Most of the programs were doctoral, in counseling, clinical, or school psychology and located in the northeastern United States. In addition, none of the 25 Master's in Social Work programs analyzed required the GRE-PSY.

Psychology as a discipline enjoys a high level of popularity as an undergraduate major and as a foundation for both basic and applied graduate programs. Psychology is one of the top five most common undergraduate degrees in the United States and doubled in popularity during the 2000–10 decade (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Although estimates vary, research indicates that as many as 45% of psychology undergraduates get graduate degrees in any field including psychology (Carnevale, Cheah, & Hanson, 2015), and of doctoral students in psychology, approximately 64% held psychology undergraduate degrees (National Science Foundation, 2014). Psychology students, advisors, and faculty encounter a large number of

career and graduate school options, and resources when delving into the information available about psychology-related futures. In this editorial, I focus on the decision point associated with whether or not students should take the Graduate Record Exam Psychology Subject Test (GRE-PSY). Due to the small number of programs that require the test, I recommend that students only take the exam if it is required by the graduate program(s) to which they are applying. However, international students and/or students for whom psychology or a closely related field was not their undergraduate major may wish to consider taking the exam as a general indicator of psychological knowledge. However, I would recommend taking the exam

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as a general indicator of psychological knowledge only if encouraged by a specific graduate program. Furthermore, I hope to decrease the misguided generic advice for graduate-school bound students to take the GRE-PSY as a matter of course.

Resources for students preparing for graduate school in psychology often parse the admissions criteria into objective and nonobjective sources (American Psychological Association, 2007; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Norcross & Sayette, 2014). Objective criteria refer to grade point averages and scores on objective tests such as the GRE. Generally speaking, both the GRE General Test and subject-specific GREs have some level of predictive validity for student success in graduate school (meta-analysis across disciplines; Kuncel, Hezlett, & Ones, 2001). Karazsia and Smith (2016) found that current graduate-level training programs in psychology use GRE scores as one form of broad spectrum indicators of potential success (along with grades and letters of recommendation) in addition to more program specific indicators of goodness-of-fit.

One of the reasons my students and I completed the analysis of the GRE-PSY was the contrast between the data regarding a paucity of graduate schools with the GRE-PSY as an admissions requirement with fairly pervasive advice to students to take the GRE-PSY “as a matter of course.” A decline in the requirement over the past decade is apparent in the numbers of individuals taking the test. Educational Testing Service (ETS, 2016) reports that 14,624 individuals took the GRE-PSY between 2012–15, down from 17,929 (between 2010–13), and 22,683 (between 2006–09). These numbers represent a sizable drop, especially set against the backdrop of the rising number of psychology undergraduate students.

The GRE-PSY is comprised of approximately 200 multiple-choice questions that reflect three content categories: experimental or natural science, social or social science, and general. Questions involve factual information, applications, and research design principles. The test costs \$150 and is offered three times a year at authorized test centers. The GRE website (Educational Testing Service, n.d.) provides the following response to the question “Why is it a good idea to take a GRE Subject Test?”

Taking a GRE Subject Test tests your knowledge of specific subjects and can help you stand out from other applicants.

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Despite the data that a relatively low number of programs require the test, reputable sources advise taking the exam as common practice. For instance, the first sentence under the heading “standardized test scores” in APA’s book *Getting In* reads “most graduate programs in psychology use scores on the general GRE and Psychology GRE as admission criteria” (2007, p. 64). More recently, Dunn and Halonen’s (2016) book *The Psychology Major’s Companion: Everything You Need to Know to Get Where You Want to Go* also suggests that students applying to psychology-related graduate schools will need to take both the general GRE and the GRE-PSY. Internet searches will yield uncited claims such as the following (Understanding the GRE, n.d.):

...you’ll want to think about taking the Graduate Records Examination (GRE) Psychology Subject Test in order to get into an accredited graduate psychology school program. About half of the available doctoral programs in psychology require you to take the Psychology GRE in order to pursue your degree... (para. 2)

The landscape regarding the requirement has changed, and students appear to be getting advice that is out-of-sync with current admissions’ requirements.

Programs That Require the GRE-PSY

To determine the type and geographic location of psychology-related graduate programs that require the Education Testing Service’s GRE-PSY, two research assistants coded each program listed for the United States in the American Psychological Association’s (2013) *Graduate Study in Psychology, 2013 Edition*. For universities with multiple programs listed in the book, each program was coded as a separate entry. Coders noted the level of the program (master’s or doctorate), the type of program (e.g., clinical or experimental), and whether the GRE-PSY was required or recommended. The guide listed 1,743 programs. I also corresponded with several program directors regarding their requirement of the GRE-PSY. Finally, given the interest in other clinically oriented programs by

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psychology undergraduates, the research team also reviewed the admissions criteria for the top 25 Master's in Social Work (programs in the United States, as indicated by U.S. News and World Report (2012)). Seventeen universities in the United States (representing 24 psychology graduate programs) required the GRE-PSY, representing less than one percent of the total number of programs listed in APA's *Graduate Study in Psychology*. Most programs that required the GRE-PSY were at the doctoral level; represent clinical, counseling, or school psychology fields; and were located in the northeastern region of the United States. There was a small number of programs that indicated in their materials that the GRE-PSY is strongly recommended and another small group whose materials recommend the GRE-PSY. None of the Master's in Social Work programs required the GRE-PSY.

Conclusion

The GRE-PSY is a relatively rare (~1%) requirement for graduate programs in psychology in the United States. Of the small number of universities requiring the GRE-PSY, the majority represented programs in clinical, counseling, or school (CCS) psychology; were doctoral programs; and were most likely to be located in the northeast of the United States. It is not surprising that CCS programs were the predominant field of study of those programs requiring the GRE-PSY given that over half of the doctorates awarded in psychology are currently in the CCS fields (Michalski, Kohout, Wicherski, & Hart, 2011). Although the current study was conducted to be of benefit to students and advisors, the decreasing requirement of the GRE-PSY may also have implications for undergraduate curriculum within departments. Courses such as *History & Systems* often are taught, in part, to help students prepare for the GRE-PSY. Consequently, departments may wish to reconsider the role and/or timing of specific courses in terms of graduate school preparation.

As indicated at the beginning of this editorial, I recommend that psychology majors take the GRE-PSY only when they are applying to one of a handful of programs for which it is required. Given the rarity of the requirement, the cost of the test, and the preparation involved to take it, students should not be advised casually to take the GRE-PSY. However, students who do not have a degree in psychology might be encouraged to take the test in order to show prowess with psychological content—a recommendation that came from

my correspondence with program directors. In contrast to the general notion that most psychology graduate schools require the test and that CCS-bound students should take the test as matter of good preparation, students are better advised to strengthen their dossiers through other methods. Graduate school preparation remains best aided by psychology coursework, strong GPAs, general GRE scores, research experience, and professionally related experiences (American Psychological Association, 2007; Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Norcross & Sayette, 2014).

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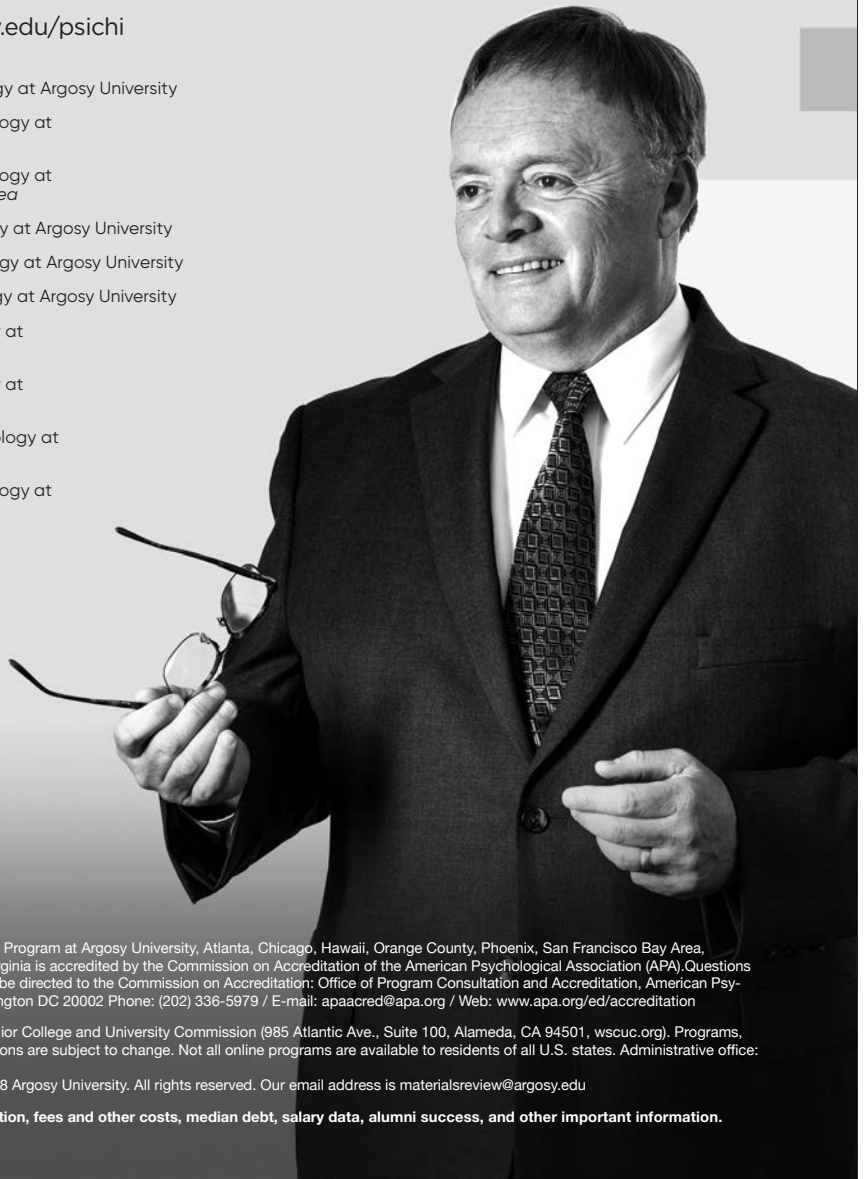
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