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ABSTRACT

This article presents an in-depth examination of the validity of the admission factors employed by a NASPAA-accredited MPA program. Admission factors are examined to determine if particular factors, or a set of factors, are most indicative of an applicant's potential achievement in the MPA program as measured by a student's final grade point average (GPA) in the program. The study uses truncated regression techniques to analyze student records in order to determine the relative significance of a set of commonly collected admissions information. We find that the best predictor of success in the MPA program, as measured by final GPA in the program, is the applicant's undergraduate GPA. This finding brings into question the utility of much of the information collected in a typical MPA program application.

The decision to admit a prospective student is perhaps one of the most important decisions made in a Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. Those charged with admissions decisions typically have a limited amount of data available to them, and from these limited data points they must decide whether an applicant has the ability and desire to complete a graduate degree. Errors of either type can be costly: A capable student denied admission represents a missed opportunity; an incapable student admitted brings difficulties for the applicant, his or her fellow students, and the program faculty.

This article involves an examination of the admission factors or criteria employed by one NASPAA-accredited MPA program in making admission decisions. Faculty members were keenly interested in understanding, if possible, which factors commonly used by MPA admission committees, if any, could best predict student performance in an MPA program. In other words, were there particular pieces of information typically available to admission committees that were most indicative of potential achievement in the MPA program as measured by a student's final grade point average (GPA)? Clearly, it is important to know

which admission factors make sense for committees to evaluate in admission decisions. The NASPAA accreditation standards call for the development and use of admission factors that will bring forth only those applicants who show good potential for success in professional graduate study (NASPAA, 2006) and, as noted earlier, it is in everyone's best interests to make the best admissions possible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the apparent importance of the admissions decision for graduate education, surprisingly little empirical work has been done, particularly for MPA programs. Two of the three most relevant articles were both published in the 1980s. The first article (Thompson & Kobrak, 1983) was an analysis of a single MPA program, which is similar to the current study and involved a few measures common to this study. However, the article is of limited use since the admission factors it covered did not include the commonly used GRE test scores, nor did it discuss the use of reference letters or the use of standardized examination waivers.

The authors did find that those students with the highest English-language skills as indicated by scores on the verbal portion of the GRE general test appeared likely to do well in their MPA program. The authors also determined that how well students did in the first three courses of their program had approximately double the predictive power of all the other variables combined when predicting students' final GPA in their program.

The second article (Bowman, 1988) involved a 1987 nationwide survey of admission practices in MPA programs. There were 157 responding programs and, not surprisingly, considerable variation in the admission factors used by the responding programs. The survey asked MPA program administrators for their impressions as to which factors were most useful in making admission decisions. The opinions of the administrators were not based on careful or rigorous analysis, but rather on their experience and judgment with their own programs. Most of the administrators responding to the survey felt that undergraduate grades (GPA) were the best single gauge of student success. Over two-thirds of the responding program administrators agreed that "despite attempts to clearly specify admissions criteria, faculty responsible for admissions decisions are often forced to rely on their own personal and /or professional values and judgment" (Bowman, 1988, p. 871). This current study attempts to overcome the weaknesses of previous research and provide MPA faculty with at least some validated criteria that could prove useful in considering applicants for admission to MPA programs.

The third article (Gibson, Leavitt, Lombard, & Morris, 2007) examined a total of 291 student records consisting of all students admitted to the MPA program from 1998 through 2003 who took at least three courses in the program. The study examined the program's standardized test waiver for applicants who possessed what was defined as significant experience in professional-level positions in public or nonprofit sector organizations. The MPA program examined in this

study required that applicants submit GRE scores as part of the admission packet unless they applied for and were granted a GRE test waiver. Applicants who received the GRE test waiver were in-service professionals and typically older, and they obviously had more experience than the non-waiver applicants. The study found that students receiving GRE test waivers tended to perform at a higher level in the MPA program, as measured by grade point average.

In the broader education literature, several other studies have examined a similar question, in a variety of settings. Truell and Woosley (2008) examined undergraduate admissions factors to business schools, and found that neither math nor verbal aptitude test scores (either SAT or ACT) were significant predictors of successful graduation in business schools. On the other hand, Zwick and Sklar (2005) reported that SAT scores were significant predictors of first-year under-graduate GPA for all race/language groups tested, but that the variance explained by high school GPA varied from 7 to 70% between the groups.

In terms of graduate admissions, several studies have attempted to determine the ability of admissions materials to predict the success of Master of Business Administration (MBA) students. Wright and Palmer (1997) divided their sample into three groups according to graduate GPA and found that both verbal Graduate Management Aptitude Test (GMAT) and overall GMAT scores differed significantly between the groups, and that the verbal score was positively and significantly related to GPA. They also reported that quantitative GMAT scores were not significantly correlated with GPA. Likewise, Adams and Hancock (2000) report that work experience was a more accurate predictor of graduate GPA than GMAT scores, undergraduate GPA, gender, country of origin, and several other variables. Sireci and Talento-Miller (2006) report that the GMAT verbal and quantitative scores accounted for about 16% of the variance in graduate GPA; undergraduate GPA added another 9% to the explained variance. In a related study of graduate speech pathology students, Halberstam and Redstone (2005) reported the graduate GPA was significantly correlated with undergraduate GPA in speech courses, quality of the student's reference letters, and the quality of the required personal statement.

While all of these studies are relevant, they all contain a common limitation: None of the studies has undertaken a comprehensive examination of all of the data commonly available to admissions officials to determine either the relative predictive value of each or the total predictive value of all pieces of admissions packet information. This study therefore attempts to fill this gap in the literature by examining the predictive value of the material commonly found in a graduate admissions packet.

The Model

The program under study requires a common list of materials to be submitted by applicants in order to be considered for admission. From a nonscientific

assessment[1] of NASPAA-accredited MPA program websites, the admission factors outlined here appear to be commonly used by many different programs. First, the prospective student submits a standardized admission application form. This form captures personal information about the applicant as well as standard demographic information (gender, race, age, country of origin, etc.). Students are also required to submit official transcripts of previous work at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Two letters of recommendation are also required, along with an admissions essay in which applicants are asked to present their reasons for seeking admission to the MPA program.

The last item, valid GRE scores, is not required of all students. Our program serves a significant proportion of nontraditional, in-service students, and the faculty decided several years ago to waive the requirement for the GRE for this group. To receive a waiver, the applicant must demonstrate having at least 3 years of significant supervisory/professional-level experience in a public or nonprofit organization. Applicants without this level of work experience, including both traditional pre-service students and in-service students with less than 3 years of appropriate experience, are required to submit valid GRE scores. So, some of our students have GRE scores, while others have received a waiver. The effects of this waiver are discussed more fully in Gibson et al., 2007.

As a measure of program success, we adopt the standard found in the literature and use overall GPA as our indicator. While many studies also use GPA in the first three courses in the program (see House, 1994; Oldfield & Hutchinson, 1996; Sampson & Boyer, 2001; among others), it is not appropriate in our case for two reasons. First, in many of the studies employing this measure, all students take the same set of three courses. In our program, students are not so constrained and can choose from a wide variety of offerings for their first three courses. Second, as a practical matter, we find that a student's GPA in the first three courses and his or her overall GPA are highly correlated ($r = .746$), a finding again consistent with the extant literature.

Our predictive variables include the elements of the application packet available to the admissions committee: undergraduate GPA, letters of reference, the admissions essay, and GRE scores (or GRE waiver). Several other pieces of information are available for analysis, such as gender, race, and age. However, since these latter factors cannot legally be used to determine an admissions decision (and, in practice, they are not considered), they are omitted from this analysis.

The MPA admissions committee used, and continues to use, impressionistic information in admission decisions rather than a formula-based admissions process. The GRE scores and undergraduate GPA were obtained through documents submitted by the Educational Testing Service and university/college transcripts sent directly to the admissions committee. The reference letters consisted of a standard rating form used for all graduate admissions at the university; a separate written letter often accompanies these forms. The essay was a written

statement describing career goals and how life experience in work and education, and the choice of graduate study in public administration, could lead to the applicant's achievement of career goals. Maximum essay length was 1,000 words.

If all of these pieces of information are truly indicators of future performance in an MPA program, we would expect all of them to be significant in an interactive regression model. Likewise, a closer examination of these items should indicate the relative predictive power of each variable. Knowing which pieces of information are more (or less) important as predictors of future success should help admissions committees make the best admissions choices possible.

Data and Methods

This study involves the examination of the student records of all applicants who were admitted to and completed the MPA program from Fall 1998 through Fall 2003 and who completed at least three courses during that period. The dependent variable that we focus on in this article is the overall grade point average in the MPA program. To graduate from the program, students must achieve a minimum GPA of 3.00 in all graduate coursework, so the dependent variable ranges from 3.00 to 4.00, calculated to two decimal places.

The predictor variables examined in relation to the dependent variable are GRE score (verbal and quantitative), undergraduate GPA, reference letters, and essay score (interest and quality). Most of the independent variables were straightforward measurements. However, two independent variables, reference letters and essay scores, needed to be categorized. Almost all reference writers used the standard reference form provided by the university, and this form allowed reference writers to score the subject applicant in at least four categories: academic performance, communication skills, originality/creativity, and motivation for proposed field of study. Each category ranked the subject applicant as follows: upper 1 or 2%; upper 10% but not 1 or 2%; upper 25% but not upper 10%; upper 50% but not upper 25%; and lower half. We assigned a score from 5 (upper 1 or 2%) to 1 (lower half) for each of the items. We then summed the scores across all reference forms for that student and divided by the number of items for which a score was present. This gave us an average score across all categories and references for each student. Each of the applicant essays were read by a faculty reviewer and scored on two dimensions: quality of the essay and interest in the program. Reviewers used a 5-point scale from 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). Essay quality involved an assessment of grammar, sentence structure, flow, topic sentence, and critical thinking as well as how specifically the applicant's goals related to public administration. Essay interest used the same 5-point scale and involved faculty judgment of the level of applicant interest in obtaining an MPA degree. The techniques described here were patterned after the techniques described by Breaux, Clynch, and Morris (2003) to measure syllabi and texts used in MPA core courses. Summary statistics for all variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Mini-mum	Maxi-mum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Graduate GPA	139	3.03	4.00	3.5076	.25602
GRE Verbal	41	310	600	443.41	69.664
GRE Quantitative	41	270	680	462.68	91.598
Reference Letter	126	2.90	5.00	4.3956	.45851
Essay Quality	135	1	5	3.62	.992
Essay Interest	135	2	5	3.95	.804

ANALYSIS

We employed a truncated regression procedure using STATA 10.1 to determine the relative ability of admissions indicators to predict student performance after completing the MPA program.[2] First, we examined the bivariate correlations as shown in Table 2. Our dependent variable coefficient for Graduate GPA is significantly correlated with undergraduate GPA, essay quality, and essay interest coefficients. Inter-item correlations are low to moderate and do not present concern for multicollinearity in our regression analysis.

The results of our truncated regression analysis are shown in Table 3. Our first analysis involves modeling those students who submitted valid GRE scores with their admissions packet. The truncated regression model predicting graduate GPA from undergraduate GPA, GRE scores, reference letter scores, and essay interest and quality is significant (chi-square = 12.75, df = 6, $p < .05$). The only predictor variable significant at the .05 level of confidence is undergraduate GPA, although the reference letter score is also significant at the .10 level. It appears that past performance in an academic setting as an undergraduate student really matters when it comes to graduate education. The higher the applicant's undergraduate GPA, the more likely the applicant is to succeed in a graduate degree program. More interesting is the finding that GRE scores and level of expressed interest in the MPA program are not significant. The extant literature suggests that the GRE is indeed a valid predictor of future performance, but our analysis suggests that the GRE score is not a particularly useful indicator.

Table 2.
Correlations

		1	2	3	4	5	6
Graduate GPA	1						
GPA Undergraduate	2	.349**					
GRE Verbal	3	.285	.136				
GRE Quantitative	4	.262	.256	.475**			
Reference Letter	5	.148	.022	.039	.013		
Essay Quality	6	.343**	−.014	−.004	−.154	.110	
Essay Interest	7	.190*	−.126	.016	−.066	.008	.687**

Note. $^*p < .05$ (two-tailed); $^{**}p < .01$

Although the other variables were not statistically significant in the model, the signs of all of the coefficients were in the expected direction (positive).

One important caveat about the results of this table is our relatively low number of cases. As detailed earlier, our program enrolls mostly mid-career, in-service students, most of whom have significant work experience. Under our waiver program, these students are not required to take the GRE, which means that only a small number of our students ($n = 38$) submitted valid GRE scores. In short, we are hesitant to place too much emphasis on this specific analysis; a similar analysis with a larger number of cases may yield a different result.

To address our cases/variables problem in the first model, our second model drops the GRE variables and adds a dummy variable for the GRE waiver (see Table 3). This change provides an analysis with 120 valid cases, which represents all of the MPA graduates of this program during the study period. Overall, the model is significant (chi-square = 30.97, df = 5, $p < .001$), As in our first model, undergraduate GPA is a significant predictor of overall GPA. The other significant variable in this model is essay quality, suggesting that writing skills also play a role in predicting success. Most MPA programs, including the one under study here, require a great deal of written work in course assignments. Therefore, it is not surprising that the ability to write well, as measured by essay quality, is positively

Table 3.
Truncated Regression Models

Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	b	*Z*	*b*	*Z*
Undergraduate GPA	.32	2.52*	.24	4.35**
Reference Letter Score	.20	1.79	.07	1.25
Essay Quality	.11	1.56	.10	2.67**
Essay Interest	.06	0.76	.01	.25
GRE Verbal	.00	1.15		
GRE Quantitative	.00	0.56		
GRE Waiver (dummy)			.08	1.51
Constant	.35	0.39	2.02	5.80**
Model Chi Square	12.75*		33.39**	
Sample Size	38		120	

Note. $*p < .05$; $** p < .01$

correlated with student success in an MPA program. The essay score for interest in public administration education did not provide explanatory power in terms of predicting which applicants would do well in the program as measured by final GPA. The GRE waiver dummy variable was not significant.[3]

Those applicants with a high interest score were no more likely to do well in the program than those applicants who had a somewhat lower score, controlling for other admission factors. This finding might be explained as a problem of accurately measuring applicant interest as revealed in the essay. Also, very few applicants expressed low interest in public administration education; thus there was not a large degree of variation in the interest scores, which may further explain the lack of predictive power for the essay interest score. Interestingly, the GRE waiver itself was not significant in our model. While this is somewhat

at odds with a previous study, which found that students receiving a waiver had significantly higher GPAs (see Gibson et al., 2007), the previous study employed a difference-of-means test process in their methodology, and that model did not account for the interactive effects of the other pieces of information available at the time of admission. Furthermore, while the difference in mean GPA in the previous study was significant, the numerical difference in GPA between the groups was very small.

Discussion

The best predictor of success in the MPA program across both models is the applicant's undergraduate GPA. Although the dependent variable in this study, as discussed earlier, is the final student GPA in the program, we did run statistical tests using the first three courses taken in the MPA program as a predictor of final GPA. The grade point average of the first three courses taken in the MPA program is highly correlated (r = .746) with overall GPA; therefore, student performance at the beginning of graduate study is highly indicative of a student's final GPA in the program. This is significant for the program under study, and perhaps for other MPA programs as well, in that nondegree-seeking students who possess an undergraduate degree may take up to three courses in the program before applying for formal admission to the program. Nondegree-seeking students who do well in their first three courses are likely to do well in the program, and this factor should receive some significant weight in admission decisions.

The last of the admission factors used by the MPA program under study was reference letters. As noted in an earlier section, two reference letters were required as part of an applicant's admission packet. Commonly, reference writers completed the university-supplied reference form, and many attached personal letters to the form. We carefully analyzed and scored the standardized reference forms; we did not score the personal letters. Based on reference form scores, we found no significant correlation between the scores and final GPA in the program. In other words, the reference forms as calculated in our analysis provided little predictive power in determining which applicants were likely to do well in the program as measured by final GPA. As noted earlier, the admissions committee for the program under study uses impressionistic information in making admission decisions. This finding related to reference letters seems to indicate that very little weight should be placed on the numerical ratings of the reference writers.

Since a grant of a GRE waiver is effectively a substitution of relevant work experience for standardized test scores, it is reasonable to assume that work experience might indicate a capability to complete graduate-level work in an MPA program. In other words, the more work experience a student has, the more knowledge he or she has to draw on in MPA classes. Additional research may suggest that the real effect of the GRE waiver is to increase enrollment in an MPA program rather than serve as a tool to identify and attract top students.

Other predictor variables (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, prior military service, and recentness of undergraduate degree) may in some instances be positively correlated with success in the program. However, these factors are not considered in our admission decisions. Future research on predicting student performance in the MPA program should consider these factors as well.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that because the study data presented in this article were drawn from a single MPA program, the authors make no claim as to the generalizability of the findings. It would seem, however, that since many MPA programs utilize admission factors similar to those described here, these findings and conclusions might prove useful in deciding which admission factors deserve the most weight in making admission decisions.

The most important finding from this study is, in effect, a non-finding: Of all the information available to admissions officials at the time of admission, only undergraduate GPA seems to be a significant (and consistent) predictor of a student's overall GPA in an MPA program. While many MPA programs require and review other data, none of those other data points appear to be particularly relevant. This brings into question the utility of much of the information collected in the typical MPA program application. While we also found that essay quality is a significant predictor, this may not be a factor important to all MPA programs. Our curriculum is not heavily quantitative,[4] but all students engage in intensive writing exercises during their course of study. On the other hand, a program that stresses quantitative skills may find that other predictors, even perhaps the GRE quantitative score, are valid predictors of performance (as measured by overall GPA).

Many programs rely on impressionistic data that are, by definition, impossible to quantify. For example, while we can score numerical reference ratings, it is virtually impossible to score the qualitative descriptions in the letters that often accompany those numerical reference scores. Likewise, while we make what we believe to be a valid attempt to capture an applicant's passion for MPA work as evidenced in his or her essay, such measures cannot account for the change in interest that occurs in some students in their early MPA courses.

There are clearly other factors that might be useful to admission committees charged with ascertaining which applicants have the greatest potential to perform well in an MPA degree program. Three such factors come immediately to mind. The first is the quality of the undergraduate institution/degree program attended by a particular applicant. Although this could be important information, it is not easy to measure reliably. It may be a factor taken into account by admission committees that employ an impressionistic approach to applicant evaluation; but it is difficult to determine if they are actually taking this approach, and whether it is being done accurately.

The second factor is the undergraduate major of a particular applicant. Public administration is clearly a multidisciplinary field; applicants to MPA programs possess a variety of undergraduate, and graduate, degrees and major fields of study. Applicants to the MPA program in this study possess undergraduate majors that range from art history to civil engineering, although most applicants majored in the liberal arts or social sciences. Information concerning undergraduate major is available to consider as an admissions factor, but the MPA program under study does not tabulate or use this data, although it could be of some use in some cases.

The third factor is the applicant's actual motivation to succeed in an MPA program. Clearly, motivation to pursue graduate education must be an important factor in an applicant's likelihood of success. The problem with this factor is one of measurement. Although interest in the field of public administration and graduate education may be revealed in the applicant essay, this is at best a proxy measure of actual motivation to succeed in an MPA program. Some programs employ in-person interviews that include questions to the applicant about motivation to pursue MPA study, but the responses to these questions are not easily quantified. We have no doubt that such data are both relevant and important, but they are just as clearly not conducive to the form of analysis employed in this paper.

The last factor concerns the relatively high correlation between GPA in the first three courses and overall GPA. Given this strong correlation, students who do not perform well in their first three courses will likely continue to struggle throughout their MPA study. We recommend that students with lower GPAs from their first three courses should be reviewed, and those students should be counseled and their progress closely monitored.

A separate question, unaddressed in this research, asks about the relative importance of personal and demographic factors in determining success in the program. We suspect that factors such as gender, race, and age might prove to have an impact on a student's GPA in the program. While the effects of these factors might be of interest to MPA faculty in scholarly terms, we caution against any impulses to include these factors in the admissions process. The use of these factors in such a manner is very likely discriminatory and is inconsistent with the ethical standards of both NASPAA and ASPA. Moreover, such information is more appropriate for internal use within a specific MPA program; it can indicate the degree to which different groups are represented in the program as well as indicate the relative level of program success (as measured by final GPA) of different groups. Such an analysis can be useful in identifying program strengths and weaknesses, but personal and demographic factors should not be used in an admissions decision.

We can speculate, based on the extant literature in the field, that if a program were to eliminate the use of standardized tests for admission, program diversity should increase. For example, older applicants are reluctant to sit for standardized tests because of the amount of time that has passed since their previous educational experience (Gibson et al., 2007; see also House & Keeley, 1995; House, 1998; Ji,

1998). Likewise, if the literature is correct that standardized exams also discriminate based on gender (House 1994; 1998; Sampson & Boyer, 2001) and ethnicity (Sampson & Boyer, 2001), then not using standardized exams in admissions decisions is likely to result in a more diverse student body since applicants would not be eliminated from consideration on the basis of test scores. In sum, we believe this research raises important questions about the kinds of information typically used by MPA programs to determine admission. All MPA programs presumably want to make accurate predictions of future success in their admissions decisions, and our discussions with colleagues from other MPA programs suggests strongly to us that most programs actually enjoy a high degree of success with their choices for admission. In the end, however, such predictions may be more art than science; it remains the subject of future research to determine whether other MPA programs report findings similar to ours.

FOOTNOTES

1   We gathered information on required admissions materials from 15 NASPAA-accredited programs. The programs chosen represented a wide geographic dispersion and included both large and small programs.

2   We used truncated regression to address our sample of graduates because we consider only students who graduated from the MPA program. Our sample outcome measure of GPA is truncated at the lower level of 3.00. We have no data on students who did not graduate.

3   As suggested by a reviewer, we tested for interaction effects of the GRE waiver on all of the predictor variables by creating cross-product terms and including those terms in the truncated regression analysis. The cross-product terms as shown in the following table were not significant and therefore were not included in our final model. We thank the reviewer for this suggestion.

Variables	Model 2 With Interaction Terms	
	b	*Z*
Undergraduate GPA	.33	3.56**
Reference Letter Score	.14	1.51
Essay Quality	.10	1.67
Essay Interest	.04	0.66
GRE Waiver (dummy)	1.5	2.08*
GRE Waiver × Undergraduate GPA	−1.6	−1.47
GRE Waiver × Reference Letter Score	−0.15	−1.28
GRE Waiver × Essay Quality	.04	0.51
GRE Waiver × Essay Interest	−.09	−0.98
Constant	1.38	2.67**
Model Chi-Square	36.99	
Sample Size	120	

Note. $^*p < .05$; $^{**} p < .01$

4   Two of our required seven courses have a strong quantitative component: Public Budgeting and Financial Management, and Research Methods. The remaining core courses in the program are Administrative Theory I: The Context of Public Administration, Administrative Theory II: The Process of Public Administration, Public Policy Analysis and Evaluation, Legal and Ethical Foundations of Public Administration, and Capstone.

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