

**Bridging the Gap: Faculty Versus Graduate Student Perceptions of Graduate Admissions**

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

The graduate admissions process in social science agricultural programs remains underexplored concerning equity, diversity, and inclusivity in a post-Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) landscape ("Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.", 2023). Graduate admissions practices are decentralized and inconsistent, leading to confusion and potential bias in applicant evaluations (Orfield, 2014; Posselt, 2014). Previous research highlights disparities in perceptions of admissions criteria between faculty and students based on discipline, race, and gender (Chari & Potvin, 2019; Powers & Lehman, 1983), yet does not fully address these discrepancies in agricultural education, communication, and leadership (AECL). While diverse students often aspire to graduate education (English & Umbach, 2016), they face systemic barriers including implicit biases and a lack of mentorship, resulting in underrepresentation within academia (Tidwell & Logan, 2024). Considering these challenges, further research is needed to examine faculty and student perspectives on admissions criteria in social science agricultural programs, to align processes within the broader goals of access and clarity. This study was guided by the following research question: what academic, professional, and personal qualities do accepted graduate students possess in AECL (and similar) programs nationwide?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Chari and Potvin (2019) highlight the value of a multistakeholder perspective, the conceptual framework of this study, that builds on Freeman's (1984) stakeholder approach. This perspective views stakeholders as individuals or organizations that can impact or be impacted by an institution's success. It encourages institutions to consider stakeholders' contributions, concerns, and decision-making reasons (Freeman, 1984; Chari & Potvin, 2019). The study emphasizes the role of admissions perceptions in graduate application decisions and explores the perceptions of faculty, staff, and students regarding graduate admissions in AECL and related social science departments in U.S. colleges of agriculture.

### **Methodology**

This quantitative, comparative, pilot survey design examined the discrepancies that exist between the qualities faculty believe are important for prospective graduate students in the graduate admissions process and what current graduate students considered important in the process. This study utilized a 23-question, five-point unipolar scale question structure to analyze the importance of items related to graduate admissions, such as GPA, letters of recommendation, and culture fit. The survey was adapted from the post-graduation career intentions survey developed and validated by Chari and Potvin (2019). This study utilized a convenience sample of twelve faculty and eight students from an agricultural social science department at The Ohio State University. Data were collected via an online questionnaire and analyzed using descriptive statistics and a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test (Table 1) to compare the importance of graduate admission items between faculty and students. Given the convenience sampling and small sample size of this pilot study, the findings are not generalizable outside of the sample. Additionally, the goal of the pilot study was to estimate reliability, but due to the small sample size ( $n < 30$ ), a second pilot will be conducted. However, these initial results could provide initial insight into the differences between faculty and students for future explorations.

### **Results/Findings**

The Mann-Whitney U Test (Table 1) shows the two items found to be significant in this pilot study.

**Table 1**

*Mann-Whitney U Test on the Importance of Various Graduate Admissions Items*

Item	Status	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Rank	<i>U</i>	<i>Z</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
GRE	Faculty	12	12.58	151	23	-0.66	.04	-.15
	Student	8	7.38	59				
	Total	20						
Reputation of Recommenders	Faculty	12	8.38	100.50	22.50	-2.09	.04	-.47
	Student	8	13.69	109.50				
	Total	20						

### Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Based on the findings, the GRE score item showed a significant difference between faculty and students, with this being the only significant item faculty ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ) ranked higher than students ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ). However, the  $r$ -effect size of this item showed a low strength of association (Cohen, 1988; 1992). For the reputation of recommenders, faculty ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.07$ ) ranked significantly lower than students ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ). Additionally, the  $r$ -effect size of this item was  $-0.47$ , indicating a moderate strength of association (Cohen, 1988; 1992). While not significant, letters of recommendation, personal statement, prior research experience, publications, conference participation, and research alignment showed a moderate effect size ( $r$ -effect size was between  $.30$ – $.49$ ). Interestingly, many of the graduate admissions items with a moderate effect size focus on research-related attributes. However, the overall findings from the exploratory pilot study do not provide many answers due to the small sample size ( $n < 30$ ), yet the data presents distinctions between faculty and student perspectives on items associated with graduate admissions.

The implications of this research are particularly relevant due to the ongoing debates surrounding higher education, specifically regarding changes in the graduate admission processes influenced by government mandates (Orfield, 2014; "Students for Fair Admissions, Inc.", 2023). Additionally, the impact of this research on the AECL profession, and similar social science programs, may provide a foundation for balancing graduate admissions decisions when factoring in items that faculty and students view as important versus decisions outside of the department's control due to the political climate. This research can also facilitate transparency and serve as a guide for applicants in the graduate admissions process. Moreover, it could provide training opportunities for faculty involved in graduate admissions, helping to foster discussions about potential biases in their decision-making. Future research should expand on the sample size to better understand the differences in faculty and student perceptions. Moreover, specific research should focus on AECL departments across the country to determine if location also impacts different factors that go into graduate admissions. Further, since this pilot study was being conducted in an agricultural social science department closely related to AECL to validate the instrument, it is important to recognize that admissions practices can differ significantly between related departments, due to the decentralized nature of graduate admissions (Kent & McCarthy, 2016; Posselt, 2014; Wilson et al., 2019), which underscores the importance of continuing this research to determine items that are most valued.

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