Development of a Guided Personal Statement for Use in Graduate Admissions

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Abstract

Through 9 group interviews with graduate faculty, we identified types of accomplishments and experiences that could be included in a guided personal statement for use in graduate admissions decisions. We interviewed 27 faculty members from 3 universities in small groups in 3 academic areas: STEM, social sciences, and humanities. Results of these interviews were then used to create a draft guided personal statement.

Key words: personal statement, accomplishment summary, graduate admissions, graduate faculty interviews

Accomplishments, conventionally defined as notable attainments that are publicly recognized, not only are an indication of a person's abilities, motives and interests, and personality traits, but also forecast what he or she will achieve in the future (Munday & Davis, 1974; Willingham, 1985). Accomplishments that might be relevant in personal statements have been extensively studied by the *GRE*® Board, Educational Testing Service (ETS), ACT, National Merit Scholarship Corporation, and the College Board since the 1960s, and an accomplishments inventory has been used operationally by ACT since shortly after this testing program's inception. This work has established that (a) accomplishments in the early stage of the school career (e.g., high school) predict accomplishments in later stages (e.g., college; Willingham, 1985) and even after leaving school (e.g., Munday & Davis, 1974); (b) accomplishments overlap minimally with grades and with scores on entrance examinations and on personality and interest inventories (e.g., Nichols & Holland, 1963); and (c) ethnic group, gender, and socioeconomic status differences, when and if they exist, tend to balance out—favoring one group or gender on some accomplishments and another group or gender on other accomplishments (e.g., American College Testing Program, 1973; see also reviews by American College Testing Program, 1973; Baird, 1976). A better understanding of valued accomplishments and experiences could be useful in creating guided personal statements for use in graduate admissions decisions and/or counseling of prospective graduate students. Although some universities provide guidance to undergraduates in preparing personal statements, this guidance is not informed by faculty surveys of the kinds of accomplishments and experiences that would be most important to include in the personal statements (e.g., Purdue Online Writing Lab, 2019; UCONN Writing Center, 2019). Updating the research from the 1970s and 1980s with a more contemporary view of the kinds of accomplishments that are most valued by graduate faculty and should be included in personal statements is clearly needed.

Recently, there has been increased interest in holistic file review as a way of getting a broader and more nuanced view of applicants for graduate study (e.g., Jaschik, 2016; Kent & McCarthy, 2016; Posselt, 2016). ETS (2018) has encouraged graduate institutions to supplement scores on the GRE general test and subject tests with a more comprehensive holistic file review. A guided personal statement could be a useful tool for any institution wishing to look beyond test scores and grades to reach a better understanding of applicants' strengths and capabilities.

An inventory for documenting accomplishments, as a means of minimizing distortion by test takers and amplifying users' interpretation of the attainments, was developed by Baird for the GRE Board and investigated by him in the 1970s and 1980s (Baird, 1979, 1985; Baird & Knapp, 1981). The initial measure consisted of a checklist of attainments (e.g., "Make your own works of art") accompanied by a series of questions that sought details and documentation for the claimed attainments. The attainments were grouped into four scales: Literary–Expressive, Artistic, Scientific–Technical, and Social Service–Organizational. The scales correlated moderately with corresponding first-year attainments in graduate school (e.g., the Scientific–Technical scale was associated with scientific attainments). Differences favored White students on some scales and Black students on others as well as men on some scales and women on others. This instrument was problematic because the coverage was not comprehensive, it was cumbersome for applicants to complete, and it was complicated to score.

Stricker, Rock, and Bennett (2001), building on Baird's (Baird, 1979, 1985; Baird & Knapp, 1981) work, subsequently devised a prototype measure in unpublished research for the Law School Admissions Council that minimized these problems. It used a combined multiple-choice/open-ended item (e.g., "Authored or coauthored a paper presented at a scientific meeting? Yes/No. If Yes, subject and meeting") and grouped items into a set of 12 scales that reflected a variety of accomplishments. The items had these characteristics:

1. The items concern notable accomplishments in school and work settings as well as wholly self-initiated attainments in extracurricular and extravocational settings.

   - The accomplishments are limited to public, factual matters that are potentially verifiable.
   - The accomplishments are available to virtually everyone to minimize race, gender, and similar biases.

In sum, this prototype had the advantages of a standardized measure but also allowed the user to verify and interpret attainments. It offered a systematic means of identifying applicants' strengths in place of the more informal scrutiny of admissions material.

A short version of the prototype with six scales (Academic; Leadership; Practical Language, e.g., public speaking, journalism; Aesthetic Expression, e.g., creative writing, art, music, dramatics; Science; and Mechanical) was included in several GRE Board studies investigating an experimental cognitive test. The scales were moderately intercorrelated (Bennett

& Rock, 1995, 1997), their internal-consistency reliability was substantial (Bennett & Rock, 1995, 1997), and they correlated minimally with the GRE General Test and undergraduate grade point average, except the Academic scale, which correlated substantially with the latter (Bennett & Rock, 1995, 1997; Enright, Rock, & Bennett, 1999). Another study (Stricker, Rock, & Bennett, 2001) found that, with the exception of the Mechanical scale, men and women did not differ in their level of performance on the scales, and ethnic groups (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, other ethnicity) did not differ on any scale.

Although clearly inspired by the earlier work, the current project did not seek merely to update the scales from the previous studies. Most critically, the idea of creating numerical scales based on counting accomplishments in different areas was abandoned. The numerical scales had worked reasonably well but relied on a questionable assumption that more is always better—being in three activities gets a higher score than being in one. But a student could commit more hours and be more involved in a single activity than another student who was minimally involved in any of his or her three or four listed activities. Willingham (1985) indicated that when colleges identified their "most successful" students, their focus was on "significant accomplishments" (p. xiv), not number of accomplishments. Activities as represented in a personal statement should be considered as part of a holistic file review but may not lend themselves to a numerical score. One principle that was retained from the earlier work is that many, though not necessarily all, of the accomplishments included in the guided personal statement should be verifiable. On a résumé, a student may claim to have given three papers at national conferences, but without specifics, this claim cannot be verified. On the other hand, if the student is required to provide the name and location of the conference, it would be possible to find the program for that conference and verify the student's contribution. We are not suggesting that most accomplishments would actually be checked by anyone in the admissions office, but knowing that a check is possible should discourage students from making fraudulent or exaggerated claims.

Why Create a Standardized Personal Statement?

Any accomplishments that could be included in the guided personal statement also could be listed on a résumé. However, résumés can be problematic for cataloging accomplishments in several ways. First, as noted earlier, the résumé may not contain enough detail (e.g., specific information about the time and place of a conference presentation) to reach an understanding of

the value of the accomplishment. Second, the résumé may not provide a way to verify the accomplishment. Third, applicants may not appreciate the kinds of activities and accomplishments that faculty value and so fail to mention relevant activities. For example, working at a fast-food restaurant may not be something an applicant would think to include in a résumé, but such experiences are valued by many faculty members. Fourth, by soliciting exactly the same information from each applicant, it should be easier to make comparisons across individuals to facilitate admissions decisions. Fifth, over time, data summaries could be created that provide a form of normative information. For example, a data summary might show that 70% of applicants to STEM programs had at least one presentation at a national meeting or had spent at least 200 hours working in a lab.

One use of the proposed guided personal statement could be as part of an applicant's admissions file that would be reviewed by graduate faculty. But another use could be simply to inform applicants of activities that are valued by faculty so that they can include more relevant activities in their own personal statements.

This project had two goals: to (a) identify accomplishments that graduate faculty value in their applicants and (b) produce a draft guided personal statement.

Method

Sample

We contacted the graduate deans at several institutions within 200 miles of the ETS Princeton, New Jersey, office via an e-mailed invitation and asked them to nominate faculty members who would be willing to meet with us and share their perceptions of valued accomplishments (Appendix A). Data were collected through mini focus groups, three (one each for STEM, social science, and humanities faculty) at each institution, with a minimum of three faculty members at each focus group.

Because these mini focus groups required a full day at each institution, we visited only three universities, but these three were reasonably diverse on a number of dimensions. One was a private historically Black college or university, one was a public suburban university, and one was a large urban private university. All were classified as R2 (higher research activity) universities by the Carnegie classification system, and all offered both master's and PhD degrees. The valued accomplishments were quite consistent across these varied institutions, giving us some confidence in the generalizability of findings from even this small sample. All

participants in the mini focus groups were tenured faculty members who were familiar with both master's and PhD admissions at their respective universities and had participated in admissions reviews but were not necessarily currently on an admissions committee. We did not collect detailed information on the extent to which each participant was currently involved in the admissions process or the exact number of years that participants had been in their current positions, but such information might be solicited in any future research. The 27 participants were diverse with respect to both gender and ethnicity: seven African American males, for African American females, one Asian American male, two Hispanic females, six White males, and seven White females participated.

Procedures

At each university, we conducted three focus group sessions, one each for STEM, social science, and humanities. Each session consisted of three to five faculty members and met for approximately 90 min. Specifically, across the three universities, the following programs were represented by least one participant:

- STEM: chemistry, computer science, mechanical engineering, mathematics, physics

- Social sciences: public affairs, international service, economics, history, geography and environmental systems, public policy, Afro-American studies, school psychology, clinical psychology

- Humanities: arts management, art history, language literacy and culture, digital arts, theater arts, English

Participants volunteered to meet with us for approximately 90 min and were not paid. The last 30 min of each session were devoted to getting input concerning a proposed forced-choice personality assessment (which will be described in a separate report). The full procedure for our focus groups is provided in Appendix B. The interview protocol was developed to address and extend many of the issues identified in our review of the literature. An excerpt of the focus group protocol highlights the main research questions that were of interest in the study:

1. When you look at a reference letter, what specific academic accomplishments do you look for? What details about these accomplishments might be useful to you?

   a. If undergraduate research experience is mentioned:

      i. How is a student's research experience and role documented (e.g., sharpened pencils for the team or contributed to the design or analysis)?

      ii. Would it be useful to know how many hours were spent on the research?

      iii. Should the faculty sponsor be named?

   b. If presenting at a research conference or contributing to a publication is mentioned:

      i. How is a student's contribution to the presentation or publication documented?

      ii. Is the conference name (and/or sponsoring organization) relevant?

      iii. Is it clear if the student presented from a citation or that work they contributed to was presented by others?

2. Same questions with respect to personal statements—what do you look for and what additional details would have been helpful?

   a. Have you ever found out about an activity or accomplishment that would have been helpful to know about before a student was admitted (or rejected)?

   b. Do prospective students ever provide evidence of activities/accomplishments that reduce their chances for admissions?

3. Do you care about accomplishments or activities that are not directly related to your academic discipline such as:

   a. Worked while in school to support themselves or their family?

   b. Was in a leadership position, such as an officer in a campus organization?

   c. Involvement in volunteer, charity, or political work?

   d. Involvement in sports or the arts?

4. What other accomplishments or activities that we have not yet discussed might be helpful to you in making admissions decisions?

   a. Is evidence of creativity important to you, and if yes, what is good evidence for creativity?

   b. Is evidence of grit important to you, and if yes, how do you assess the ability of students to persevere in the face of challenges?

With the permission of the participants, all discussions were audio recorded, and written transcripts of the sessions were created. We used a grounded theory approach, and thus we did not begin with any preconceived hypotheses; rather, we let the relevant themes emerge from the data. After listening to the audio and/or reading the transcripts, we organized the responses into five themes that seemed to capture the kinds of accomplishments that were most valued by faculty.

Results

Although we had no fixed hypotheses, we initially anticipated that we might need to have a separate set of themes for each broad disciplinary area. However, there was substantial agreement across areas on the kinds of accomplishments that were valued, so one set of themes was appropriate for STEM, social science, and humanities programs.

Theme 1: Accomplishments Specific to the Academic Discipline

This category includes presenting papers at a scientific meeting (especially for the sciences and social sciences), publishing research findings (or in the humanities, this could include such activities as publishing a poem or short story), working in a research lab, or working closely with a faculty member on research. To be valuable for admissions decisions, some details in these areas would need to be captured. With respect to the idea of documenting undergraduate research experiences, one participant said, "I love the idea of undergraduate research; that's an easy one." For STEM faculty, experience with using computer packages was highlighted with near-universal agreement, one respondent saying "yes, yes, yes, yes, yes," another saying "that's a great one," and another adding, "yeah, yeah." It would not be sufficient to know that a candidate presented two conference papers; the nature of the conference (e.g., local interest group or national conference) and the nature of the contribution (e.g., first author or third author) also would be relevant. Providing these details on the nature of conference participation would make the contribution potentially verifiable. Mere attendance at a conference was not valued, with one participant saying, "Yeah, attendance doesn't really give you much information about the students."

Theme 2: Accomplishments Outside of a Candidate's Academic Discipline That Show Broader Intellectual Curiosity and Interests

An example of this theme could be a computer science candidate who has a passion for nature photography or performs in musical theater. The candidate might fail to mention such seemingly irrelevant activities on a résumé or vita, but faculty indicated that they value such activities. Specifically, one participant observed,

> A student who chose to start a club on campus when they were an undergrad, or who, you know, initiated the some sort of a drive or, you know, got really interested in a particular issue of conflict in the world or um stand out and I think that they're the kind of things that students, applicants, don't necessarily realize how valuable they are.

Theme 3: Accomplishments That Show Resilience and an Ability to Rebound From Initial Failures

Examples could be directly related to the candidate's academic discipline, such as a lab experiment that was initially unsuccessful, or the challenge could have come in an area totally unrelated to the academic discipline, such as a psychology student's persistence after failed attempts to master a particularly difficult piano piece. Several faculty members, from different disciplines, made the point that failure is frequently part of the graduate school experience so that the ability to cope with failure and learn from it is essential. Prospective students should have demonstrated an ability to rebound from failure. As one participant remarked, "[B]eing able to meet some tough challenges and figure out how to move past them, I think that's highly valued."

Theme 4: Accomplishments That Show the Ability to Balance Academic Demands With Other Responsibilities

An example would be a student who had to work at a fast-food restaurant to meet personal or family economic challenges. This kind of activity was frequently spontaneously mentioned as important by faculty, and when it did not initially come up, upon prompting, there was near-universal agreement that they would want to know about these experiences. Faculty thought that including reference to this type of activity on a standardized inventory could be especially valuable because it is the kind of activity that a prospective student might not think to include on a résumé, or might even be inclined to think they should hide. Another example in this general category was participation in an athletic team at either the varsity or club sport level.

This was valued, as it would show the ability to balance academic and nonacademic demands and interests. One participant summed up this common view as follows:

> The other thing I would say is, um, as far as the limitations of the transcript, you know
> . . . somebody who is working full time and . . . doing their undergrad work and taking
> care of a sick family member, whatever it might be, I want to know that stuff too. And if I
> see average grades and this applicant told me that story, but that's what was going on,
> there's a big piece of the story that's missing. So, if there is a tool that's going to help
> people understand that this is an important piece of their story—that they should be
> telling. If they could figure out how to go to grad school or do undergrad, support
> themselves, work 40 hours a week, and take a full load, that's a pretty impressive
> person. . . . That's some resilience, that's some really great resourcefulness and I want to
> know those things. And if I only look at the transcript, I don't know that.

Theme 5: Accomplishments That Show a Willingness to Challenge Norms or the Conventional Way of Approaching a Problem

Successful undergraduates can often succeed just by following the rules, but graduate students may need to occasionally challenge the rules. Evidence of a creative, or unorthodox, approach to a problem would be appropriate here. A participant pointed out that there are different paths to desired outcomes and that the linear path is not always the best one:

> I want to know some instances where you made it happen, you made it work, you figured
> out a way that you're able to problem solve, look at things a bit differently, not
> necessarily take this linear path, but you have to kind of take some detours, but you are
> still focused on that same outcome point.

Considerations in Creating a Guided Personal Statement From These Themes

Several considerations were important in creating the guided personal statement from these themes. First, it should be possible for any candidate to complete the statement in 20 min or less. Although there was a temptation to make the guided statement very comprehensive and include many different accomplishments, we felt that a shorter statement that was completed was better than a longer statement that students might see as too burdensome and ignore. Second, many, though not necessarily all, of the accomplishments in the statement should be verifiable.[1]

Asking graduate school candidates to include references to public sources, such as names and dates for conference presentations, should discourage bogus or inflated claims. For other accomplishments, the name of a person familiar with what the candidate accomplished could be provided; for example, if the candidate claimed to have worked at a fast-food restaurant, the name of the restaurant manager could be provided. Third, we assumed that the inventory would be delivered on a computer, which would allow branching to allow candidates to skip over sections that were irrelevant for them. Computer delivery also allows candidates to embed links to particular accomplishments. For example, instead of just indicating the time and place of a conference, the candidate could insert a link to the conference program. Fourth, we thought it was important to capture the time commitment for certain activities, as a significant number of hours on one activity may signify a greater accomplishment than three or four activities with a minimal time investment.

Next Steps

The small convenience sample in the current study provided a useful first step in defining valued accomplishments to be included in a personal statement, but feedback and suggestions from a larger sample are required. Through an Internet survey, the ETS marketing team will ask faculty members in STEM, social science, and humanities whether they believe a fully developed version of the guided personal statement would be useful for making admissions decisions. They also will be asked to indicate activities/accomplishments that should be added. If there appears to be faculty interest in the guided personal statement, a retrospective validity study could ask current second- or third-year graduate students to complete the statement as they would have at the beginning of their senior year in college. Responses on this statement would be matched with current accomplishments in graduate school, such as grades and faculty ratings of engagement, creativity, and potential for contribution to the field, to determine the extent to which accomplishments in college are predictive of accomplishments in graduate school. Differences in accomplishments by gender and race/ethnicity also would be noted.

The draft for a guided personal statement (included in Appendix C) is intended to illustrate the general approach to a personal statement that could be used in graduate admissions. It is a tool to get reactions and suggestions from graduate faculty but should not be seen as a finished document ready for operational deployment. Note that for this report, the questionnaire is presented on paper, but the actual delivery method would be on a computer. Students would be

advised that they should not expect to have a response in every category and that real commitment to a few areas is often preferable to a minimal commitment to many areas. With the computer delivery, follow-up details would be requested only for "yes" responses. Responses for choices that are shown in italics would be via radio buttons or drop-down lists. Appendix C is formatted as it will be used to obtain feedback from a broader and more representative sample of graduate faculty.

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Appendix A. Recruitment Letter to Graduate Deans

Dear Dr. X,

Educational Testing Service (ETS), the developers of the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE®), has consistently emphasized that test scores should be only one part of a holistic file review. We are in the beginning stages of considering how ETS might be able to help in providing additional useful information, beyond just test scores, to graduate admissions committees. One approach that we are exploring is the development of a standardized guided personal statement that could help uncover information that may be missed in the review of the applicant's file. The purpose of this letter is to invite you to be part of this effort.

Decades of research suggest that future accomplishments are best predicted by past accomplishments. Personal statements and undergraduate faculty recommendations are one way that admissions committees gain information on past accomplishments. We are not suggesting that these valuable information sources should be replaced, but that a standardized inventory might provide added value. Specifically, an inventory could highlight accomplishments that might have been overlooked by a reference letter writer. And, the inventory might provide useful additional details that were not mentioned in a personal statement. For example, an applicant might indicate that they presented a research paper at a conference, but the inventory could ask for additional details on the nature of the conference (e.g., a local on-campus conference or a national meeting of a professional society). The inventory also could help with diversity goals by allowing applicants to include information that might not be mentioned in reference letters, such as working full time to support the family, but that still demonstrates initiative and a work ethic. Furthermore, such information could provide context to explain why accomplishments in other areas might be more limited. To be clear, we do not have a draft inventory that we are trying out. Rather, we are at the initial stage of getting faculty input on what kinds of accomplishments might be included in such an inventory.

Additionally, we are interested in feedback from faculty related to the development of a personality and behavioral attribute type assessment. For this part, we will be showing faculty the capabilities of an existing assessment engine and will solicit feedback regarding possible uses (e.g., student selection or advising admitted students) in higher education.

We are asking for your help in getting that faculty input. Specifically, we would like to schedule one and a half hour meetings with three faculty groups—one each with STEM, social

science, and arts & humanities faculty. We are suggesting just three faculty members in each group.

        If you are interested in participating in this effort, and think you might be able to find nine faculty members who also would be interested, please respond to this e-mail with a preferred phone number (and/or e-mail address), and we will contact you (or your designee) to schedule the meetings.

        If you have any questions, please contact:

        Dr. Brent Bridgeman, Distinguished Presidential Appointee, bbridgeman@ets.org, 609-915-8609

Thank you.

(David's signature here)

Dr. David Payne

VP & COO ETS Global Education

Appendix B. Focus Group Procedures Guide

Introduction—allot 10 minutes

Explain what the group will be doing during the session.

This session is focused on gaining your insight on the type of information that might benefit you in making admission decisions. Educational Testing Service (ETS), the developers of the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE®), has consistently emphasized that test scores should be only one part of a holistic file review. We are in the beginning stages of considering how ETS might be able to help in providing useful information, beyond just test scores, to graduate admissions committees. The purpose of our meeting today is to get your ideas and suggestions on two possible types of information that are being considered. One approach that we are exploring is the development of a standardized guided personal statement. A second approach that we are exploring is a personality inventory.

Ground rules for discussion

- First and foremost, your ideas and feedback are important, and your input will help shape the development of these inventories.

- There is a lot of ground to cover, so please try to remain focused on the core questions I will be asking. I may give you gentle reminders to bring the discussion back to the core questions. I may also ask you to elaborate or clarify a comment you make.

- Everyone has different experiences and viewpoints about what is most valued in admissions decisions. We know that people sometimes have strong opinions about the impact of the issues we will discuss today. Remember that all ideas and opinions are welcome, appreciated, and respected.

- Try to avoid broad discussions of, for example, the pros and cons of various types of admissions materials, such as tests or transcripts, or the relative weight that should be placed on each. Rather, please focus your comments more specifically on the issues related to the inventories being discussed.

- The session will be recorded (both in the form of notes as well as audio recording).

- Your comments will be combined with those from other schools and will eventually form a report for the GRE program.

- Your names or other identifiable information will not be used in any report.

- While we hope that some agreement among group members can be reached regarding your feedback, the group does not have to reach consensus, and the goal of the discussion is not to convince your fellow participants of a particular position.

- At the end of each part, you will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire where you can record comments you may not have been comfortable expressing.

- Note that you are not required to respond to any question and can decline to participate at any time.

Ask the group if they have any questions about the session.

Topic 1—allot 55 minutes

Introduction

Decades of research suggest that future accomplishments are best predicted by past accomplishments. Personal statements and undergraduate faculty recommendations are one way that admissions committees gain information on past accomplishments. We are not suggesting that these valuable information sources be replaced but that a standardized inventory might provide added value. Specifically, an inventory could highlight accomplishments that might have been overlooked by a reference letter writer. And, the inventory might provide useful additional details that were not mentioned in a personal statement. For example, an applicant might indicate that they presented a research paper at a conference, but the inventory could ask for additional details on the nature of the conference (e.g., a local on-campus conference or a national meeting of a professional society). The inventory also could help with diversity goals by allowing applicants to include information that might not be mentioned in reference letters, such as working full time to support the family, but that still demonstrates initiative and a work ethic. Furthermore, such information could provide context to explain why accomplishments in other areas might be more limited. To be clear, we do not have a draft inventory that we are trying out. Rather, we are at the initial stage of getting your input on what kinds of accomplishments might be included in such an inventory.

Before moving ahead, do you have any questions about what I have described?

Questions

1. When you look at a reference letter, what specific academic accomplishments do you look for? What details about these accomplishments might be useful to you?

   a. If undergraduate research experience is mentioned:

      i. How is a student's research experience and role documented (e.g., sharpened pencils for the team or contributed to the design or analysis)?

      ii. Would it be useful to know how many hours were spent on the research?

      iii. Should the faculty sponsor be named?

   b. If presenting at a research conference or contributing to a publication is mentioned:

      i. How is a student's contribution to the presentation or publication documented?

      ii. Is the conference name (and/or sponsoring organization) relevant?

      iii. Is it clear if the student presented from a citation or that work they contributed to was presented by others?

2. Same questions with respect to personal statements—what do you look for and what additional details would have been helpful?

   a. Have you ever found out about an activity or accomplishment that would have been helpful to know about before a student was admitted (or rejected)?

   b. Do prospective students ever provide evidence of activities/accomplishments that reduce their chances for admissions?

3. Do you care about accomplishments or activities that are not directly related to your academic discipline, such as:

   a. Worked while in school to support themselves or their family?

   b. Was in a leadership position such as an officer in a campus organization?

   c. Involvement in volunteer, charity or political work?

   d. Involvement in sports or the arts?

4. What other accomplishments or activities that we have not yet discussed might be helpful to you in making admissions decisions?

a. Is evidence of creativity important to you, and if yes, what is good evidence for creativity?

b. Is evidenced of grit important to you, and if yes, how do you assess the ability of students to persevere in the face of challenges?

Wrap-up

Thank you for your comments.

Appendix C. Guided Personal Statement

Educational Testing Service (ETS) is considering development of a Guided Personal Statement that could be used as part of the graduate admissions process. We strongly believe that just undergraduate grades and GRE test scores, while relevant, are insufficient to make sound graduate admissions decisions. A more complete picture of what the candidate can do is needed, and one of the best indicators of what they are likely to accomplish in the future is what they have accomplished in the past as reflected in their personal statement. We are asking for your help in identifying accomplishments that you value.

Why is a standardized statement needed? Without guidance, personal statements and résumés can be problematic for cataloging accomplishments in several ways. First, the résumé may not contain enough detail about a specific accomplishment. For example, if the student indicated that they presented a scientific paper, the value of this accomplishment cannot be adequately evaluated without knowing specific information about the time and place of the presentation (e.g., at a local department meeting or at a national conference of a professional society). Second, applicants may not appreciate the kinds of activities and accomplishments that faculty may value and so fail to mention relevant activities. For example, working at a fast-food restaurant while still dealing with the stresses of being a full-time student may not be something an applicant would think to include in a résumé, but such experiences are valued by many faculty members. Third, by soliciting exactly the same information from each applicant, it should be easier to make comparisons across individuals.

We conducted a series of focus groups with faculty in STEM, social science, and humanities departments to identify valued accomplishments and created a draft Guided Personal Statement. Now we are seeking input from a larger sample (this means you!) to identify the most valued accomplishments and to solicit any additional suggestions for accomplishments that should be included in the guided statement. Note that different graduate programs might weight particular activities or accomplishments quite differently. We want to know how valuable the information would be to you in your program; *we are not asking you to guess how valuable it would be in graduate programs generally*.

Guided Personal Statement

For each of the listed accomplishments/activities, please indicate how valuable this information would be to you in making an admissions decision. We ask that if you select "Very valuable" or "Not valuable," you provide a short comment explaining why (e.g., not applicable for degree, these are experiences we provide or skills we build and are not needed prior to program, many students don't have an opportunity to experience this activity or obtain this accomplishment). Note that the column on the right indicates follow-up for "yes" responses. If you would like to make any suggestions for rewording, you may put them in the comments section. Students will be advised to include only activities and accomplishments since graduating from high school.

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you participated in clubs or organizations (e.g., outdoor club, ski club, debate team, religious organization, DJ on campus radio)				Name(s) of club(s) or organization(s)_____ If you were an officer or leader in the organization, state your role

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you participated in a club, fraternity/sorority, or dorm sport, whether in school or with a community organization				What sport_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you worked for pay (include any job in the last three years, not just jobs on campus).				Where did you work and what did you do (you may list more than one)_____ Name of one work supervisor_____ e-mail of supervisor_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Did you have responsibility to care for another person (e.g., child care, sick or elderly relative)				Describe the care provided_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you done any volunteer work				Name of organization(s)_____ Describe what you did as a volunteer_____ Name a supervisor familiar with your volunteer work_____ e-mail of supervisor_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Were you an author or coauthor on any paper or poster that was presented at a regional or national conference?			Now considering papers and posters separately, for how many papers at regional or national conferences were you the first author: _____ For how many such papers were you a coauthor:___ For how many posters at regional or national conferences were you the first author: _____ For how many such posters were you a coauthor:___ For your best paper or poster, please provide: Title of paper/poster_____ Name of conference_____ Month and year of conference_____ Insert abstract or link to abstract here_____ If available, insert link to conference program____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Were you an author or coauthor on any paper or poster presented at a local or campus meeting?			Now considering papers and posters separately, for how many papers presented at a local or campus meeting were you the first author: _____ For how many such papers were you a coauthor:___ For how many posters at a local or campus meeting were you the first author: _____ For how many such posters were you a coauthor:___ Title of your best locally presented paper/poster_____ Insert abstract or link to abstract here_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Were you an author or coauthor on any paper published in a national journal? (Note that "paper" may refer to a scientific paper or a literary contribution such as a poem or short story)			For how many papers in national journals were you the first author: _____ For how many such papers were you a coauthor:___ For the paper on which you made the most significant contribution, please provide: Title of paper_____ Name of journal_____ Month and year publication_____ Insert abstract or link to abstract here_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Were you an author or coauthor on any paper published in local or campus publication?			For how many papers were you the first author: _____ For how many papers were you a coauthor:___ For the paper on which you made the most significant contribution, please provide: Title of paper_____ Name of publication_____ Month and year publication_____ Insert paper, abstract, or link to paper or abstract here_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you ever been named on a patent or patent application?			What was patented_____ Name the first inventor listed on the patent_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Were you a coauthor on a grant proposal?			For how many proposals were you a coauthor___ What was the title of the proposal for which you contributed the most_____ What was the sponsoring agency for this proposal_____ Name the principal investigator_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you written a research paper of at least 10 pages as a sole author			How many research papers of at least 10 pages have you written:_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you ever used a computer to analyze data or create an application			What languages or programs have you used with reasonable proficiency (e.g., Java, Python, Excel, Ruby, PHP, SPSS, SAS, R); list all that apply_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity Note—Remember to include only activities and accomplishments since graduating from high school	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Were you an editor or on the editorial board for any publication (including departmental or campus publications)?				Was the publication: *local, regional, or national* Name of publication_____ If available, insert link to publication Web page here_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity Note—Remember to include only activities and accomplishments since graduating from high school	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Did you have any experience in a science lab?				Where was your lab experience (check all that apply): *part of a class*; *on campus, but not in a class*; *off campus* If off campus, computer will ask: In what lab did you work_____ Check whether this experience was while you were enrolled as an undergraduate, or after graduation *As undergraduate___* *After graduation___* What did you do in the lab (check all that apply): *replicate known procedures, work with a team that was conducting original scientific experiments, assemble scientific apparatus, design new apparatus* Name lab supervisor who could describe your contributions in the lab, and who we might contact: Name_____ e-mail address_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity Note—Remember to include only activities and accomplishments since graduating from high school	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Did you have any experience assisting a faculty member or graduate student?				Specify the nature of this experience (e.g., assisting with fieldwork, data collection, literature reviews, grading assignments, editing or fact-checking manuscripts)

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you participated in theater or film (including dance or ballet) as a performer				Name of best (or favorite) production_____ Your best role_____ Where was that performance (city and venue)_____ When was that performance (month/year)_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you participated in theater or film technical crew				Name of best (or favorite) production_____ Where was that production (city and venue)_____ When was that performance (month/year)

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you played a musical instrument or sung in public				What instrument(s) (including voice) do you play____ Performance type (e.g., *marching band, rock band, jazz band, orchestra, classical ensemble, choir, glee club, solo*)_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you produced or directed a play or film that was publicly performed or shown				Title of the production_____ Where was the production (city and venue)___ When was it first performed or shown (month/year)_____

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you arranged or composed music that was publicly performed?				Where was the performance (city and venue)_____ Date of the performance (month/year)

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you publicly displayed art (including painting, sculpture, and photography)?				What did you display___ Where was the display (city and venue)___ When was the display (month/year)___

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No	Average Hours *per year* on this activity over the last three years	If yes, computer will go to:
Have you participated in a varsity sport				What sport_____ Did you win any athletic award (e.g., MVP or team captain) Yes No; if yes, describe the award

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Activity	Yes	No		If yes, computer will go to:
Have you served in the military				Which service (and indicate if non–United States)_____ Specialty (MOS)_____ Final (or current) rank_____ Dates of service: From (year)___to (year)___ Are you currently on active duty or in the reserves

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Describe an incident in which you initially failed and how you responded to that failure. [200 word maximum]

___Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

Provide an example of a problem you had to solve that required an unconventional or creative solution. [200 word maximum]

____Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

If you already have an undergraduate degree, describe what you have been doing since graduating. If you do not yet have a degree, just put NA. [200 word maximum]

____Very valuable ___Somewhat valuable __Minimally valuable ___Not valuable

Comments_____

_____End of Inventory_____

If you have any suggestions for additional accomplishments or activities that might be added to the Guided Personal Statement, or any other general comments, please put them here:

Note

[1] Earlier research on this type of verifiable guided personal statement used the term *Documented Accomplishments* (e.g., Baird, 1979). When discussing our plans to update some of this research with a group of representatives from Hispanic-serving institutions, we were warned against any label that included the word *documented*, as, regardless of context, this could be a red-flag word to Hispanic students. The word *verifiable* would be more acceptable but still not a word that we wanted to include in the title, as it puts too much emphasis on verification instead of on the accomplishments in the personal statement.