



GRE[®] General Test Case Study — An MBA Program Director's Perspective



Cal Poly's Orfalea College of Business

GRE® General Test scores help the director of a small California MBA program craft a diverse cohort of students who are “bright, willing to sweat and know how to learn.”

When Beena Khurana considers the roughly 160–250 applicants to the MBA program at Cal Poly’s Orfalea College of Business in San Luis Obispo each year, she assesses their individual strengths, as well as what they might contribute to the diverse cohort of 35 students that is beginning to take shape in her mind. “It’s as if I’m planting a garden,” she said. “I have the whole garden in mind when I’m deciding on the individuals. I’m very transparent about this. I will say to applicants, ‘Your task is to tell me what makes you unique, because that’s critical to the likelihood of us investing in you.’”

“In our cohorts, we rarely have more than 15% business majors. I’m sampling from engineering, biology, chemistry, kinesiology, architecture, the social and behavioral sciences, arts, agriculture, wine and viticulture. We’ve even trained a philosopher. These are the people knocking on our door and they do brilliantly. I think of it this way: it’s as if they’ve acquired a first language, and now they’re acquiring the language of business.”

The desire to handcraft an incoming class from students who speak a diverse array of undergraduate “first languages” is one of the reasons Orfalea has been accepting GRE® General Test scores for admission to its MBA program since 2010, Khurana said. The GRE test helps her cast a wide net for the variety of applicants she seeks. And now, “because I’ve diversified where we get our candidates from, we actually get more GRE applicants than GMAT® applicants. Over the past three years, anywhere from 50% to 70% of our applicants have come in with GRE scores.”

Here is a closer look at how the MBA program director uses GRE scores and tools to refine candidate comparisons and craft a diverse, able cohort, year after year.

GRE scores help identify qualified applicants with balanced skill sets

Of all the materials Orfalea’s applicants submit, their GRE scores provide a standard and fair basis for comparing them, Khurana noted. And the value of this common standard is amplified with international applicants, at least 90% of whom apply with GRE scores. Since U.S. admissions officers rarely have in-depth knowledge of the myriad of international institutions, “in those instances, without GRE scores, our selection process would be significantly biased.”

“Whoever has taken the GMAT®, in general, tends to be a business student. In my program, I’m looking for people who come from all different backgrounds — who have learned things other than business. GRE goes across disciplines in a way that the GMAT doesn’t.”

— **Beena Khurana, Ph.D., MBA**
Program Director, Orfalea
College of Business

Khurana includes the average total GRE score of Orfalea’s prior MBA class in the profile the business school includes in its marketing materials. For initial communications, “that seems to work best,” she said. In the ensuing conversation with a potential applicant, “ranges come into play.” And as her exchanges with individual candidates deepen, she shares more about the GRE evidence she uses to determine if an applicant is “an Orfalea student.”

“Most of my candidates will hear that I do know, on average, engineers and STEMers post better quant scores than verbal scores, and students of the social and behavioral sciences post better verbal scores than quant scores,” she said. “But I then quietly say, ‘You do know that what I want to see is the exact opposite, right?’ For the engineers and STEMers, I look more carefully at their writing and verbal scores. And for the people in the social and behavioral sciences, I zero in on that quant score.” Khurana explained that, “while there is merit in the assurance GRE provides about one’s undergraduate degree developing the skills it purported to, there is greater value in what the GRE informs about skills that are not the bread-and-butter of one’s undergraduate degree.”

Also, in addition to business know-how, the corporations that recruit Orfalea graduates “seek candidates with oral and written communication skills,” Khurana said. “Both components are important for the MBA.” She wants each incoming cohort to be “intellectually ambidextrous” in its abilities. Even if a “combined GRE score is very healthy, if it’s mainly made up of a very healthy quant score with a very low verbal score and poor writing, or vice versa, it’s a no-go for us.”

In this way, the GRE Analytical Writing score “has become part of the DNA of selection,” she said. She trusts it as a measure of applicants’ analytical writing ability. She also likes knowing she can see the actual essay responses each student produced during the test. Since GRE scores and students’ essay responses are available to score users electronically through *ETS® Data Manager*, “it means that I’m looking at them more and more.”

To contextualize the scores of individual applicants, Khurana uses *A Snapshot of the Individuals Who Took the GRE® General Test* — an annual report that provides test-taker volumes and performance data, broken down by several variables including gender, age, work experience and undergraduate major field. “I now look carefully at the averages of test takers who have a background in X, Y or Z, as it allows me to make more nuanced admission decisions, and that is fairer.”

Attracting a diverse cohort

Currently, the two largest pools of applicants to Orfalea programs are to the MBA and the MS in Business Analytics (MSBA), Khurana said. “These two programs attract the most applicants.” Unlike the school’s other graduate programs, which strive to enroll about 30 students per year and tend to recruit from more homogeneous pools, the MBA and MSBA programs share the quest for well-rounded skill sets and cohort diversity.

Accepting GRE scores for admission helps both programs attract candidates who want to combine a business degree with content knowledge from other fields, Khurana said. “The GRE General Test is the only common exam” students can use to apply to different programs, so “it lowers the so-called barrier to switching fields.”

“The MBA and MSBA programs get people from the social sciences, engineering, statistics, applied math, STEM, and of course business. It’s great. You could be on a team and interact with someone who got an undergraduate degree in computer science, or applied math, or business, or sociology, and you’re all working together on a project,” Khurana said.

To enhance geographic diversity, Khurana uses location-based mailing lists provided through the GRE® Search Service to recruit applicants from areas that tend to be underrepresented in her cohorts. “I use the Search Service to go beyond California, to recruit outside the state and outside the country,” she said. “The Orfalea MBA does not get a large number of international students, but we want to change that.”

“By contrast, the MSBA attracts the largest proportion of international students, because business analytics is such a highly coveted skill set at the moment,” she noted. “The MSBA generally gets 20% to 30% international students. Almost every team formed for the MSBA program’s distinct analytics consulting projects has somebody who has exposure outside the United States. It’s wonderful and I’m intent on creating that same experience for my MBAs.”

*“The students who get admitted say,
‘This is the most diverse classroom I’ve
ever sat in.’”*

— **Beena Khurana, Ph.D., MBA**
Program Director, Orfalea
College of Business

Developing career-ready students

Khurana's unique MBA admissions system seems to be working. "I know our yield is among the best in the university. I make it a point to select carefully. So, for every four acceptances I send out, I know I can get three, giving us a yield between 75% and 80%," she said. That's why, as she approaches the completion of each cohort, "I have to become very cautious" about acceptances. Once admitted, very few students leave. "In five years of overseeing this program, two candidates have arrived and not gotten through the program."

Once enrolled, Orfalea MBA students learn as much from each other's unique perspectives as they do from their immersion in the school's signature, hands-on learning experiences. "We tend to be deeply collaborative," noted Khurana. And as part of a polytechnic institute, the program embraces "a teaching philosophy of *learn by doing*."

Students leave Orfalea with "not only a basic managerial skill set in their back pockets," Khurana stressed, but an attitude of being ready to work and willing to learn that adds value to their degrees and promotes their success.

Perhaps Orfalea's 97% school-to-employment rate says it best. When Khurana talks about students initially admitted to the MBA program with GRE scores, she can reel off story after story of notable successes, most of which go something like this: Student graduates from Orfalea with an MBA; takes position with well-known entity; demonstrates not only skills and knowledge, but also flexibility, willingness to learn and collaborative spirit; student is promoted to a high-level managerial role within a year to 18 months. "These are our people, and we ride on the coattails of their successes, or bask in reflected glory!"

To find out how the GRE General Test can serve your program or institution, email grebusiness@ets.org.



Orfalea College of Business Snapshot

- Website: gradbusiness.calpoly.edu
- Offers 10-month and two-year MBA options
- Offers five specialized graduate degree programs:
 - MS Accounting
 - MS Business Analytics
 - MS Packaging Value Chain
 - MS Quantitative Economics
 - MS Taxation
- 50% to 70% of MBA candidates apply with GRE scores each year
- Average accepted GRE score for MBA in 2019: 310+
- Average accepted GRE score for MSBA in 2019: 316+
- 50–66% of admitted MBA cohort are women
- Achieves a school-to-employment statistic of 97% across business programs
- Proximity to Silicon Valley provides strong recruiting options