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УДК 378

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### **Facilitating the best fit: Masters Students and masters programs**

*With the decline of the U.S. economy and the recent decline in the enrollment of new graduate students (Council of Graduate Schools 2011b), many universities are searching for methods to retain the graduate students in their programs. After experiencing a 34% drop in new enrollment in a year, one online graduate program at a midsize research*

*university in the south decided to make an adjustment in its application requirements to see if this improved their retention rate. Instead of embracing the "open door" policy, which seemed to lead to a "revolving door" result, the faculty decided to focus on attracting and retaining candidates with the prerequisite knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions necessary to be successful in the rigorous, online program. The procedures and process implemented by this faculty included an online interview requirement with a well-established interview protocol, real-time problem solving activities, and an assignment, completed before the interview, to determine candidate readiness for success.*

**Keywords:** *graduate student retention, appropriate prerequisite skills.*

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Содействие наилучшему соответствию: студенты магистратуры и магистерские программы

*В связи с падением роста экономики США и недавним сокращением приема новых магистрантов (Совет высших учебных заведений 2011 г) многие университеты ищут способы сохранить магистрантов на своих программах. Пережив падение количества абитуриентов на 34% в год, руководители одной из дистанционных магистерских программ исследовательского университета среднего размера на юге США решили сделать корректировку требований в документах для поступления, чтобы увидеть, улучшит ли это коэффициент удержания. Вместо того чтобы проводить политику «открытых дверей», которая в итоге приводит к результату «вращающейся двери», факультет решил сосредоточиться на привлечении и удержании кандидатов с предварительными знаниями, навыками, и/или характером, необходимыми для достижения успеха в четко спланированной дистанционной программе. Процедуры и процесс, внедренные факультетом, включают требования к онлайн-интервью с хорошо налаженным протоколом интервьюирования, мероприятия по решению задач в режиме реального времени, а также задание, выполняемое до интервью, для определения готовности кандидата к достижению успеха.*

**Ключевые слова:** *Удержание магистрантов, соответствующие предварительные навыки*

### ***The problem***

According to the Council of Graduate Schools, enrollment of new graduate students declined, for the first time in seven years, nationwide by 1.1 percent between the fall of 2009 and the fall of 2010 (June, 2011b). In particular, graduate students were especially wary of programs in fields that traditionally offer little financial support, such as education. President of the council, Debra Stewart, attributes the decline to the faltering U.S. economy (June, 2011a).

Disconcerting national statistics, such as these, combined with budget cuts and diminishing federal and state funding, has prompted universities across the country to reexamine graduate recruitment and admission strategies in an effort to meet challenging enrollment objectives (Hainline, Gaines, Feather, Padilla, & Terry, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Worley, 2008). Graduate program coordinators and directors are frequently being compelled to boost enrollment without additional financial expenditure. For many, the opportunity for growth lies in diversifying program delivery into online venues [11; 1; 6; 9].

But what about programs already delivering coursework fully online? The resolution is often a conversion to quasi-open door admission policies to increase student access, offering eligible candidates program admittance without restriction in the range of quantitative admission criteria such as Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and/or undergraduate grade point average (GPA) [4].

After experiencing a 34% drop in new enrollment in a year, one online graduate program at a midsize research university in the south decided to make just such a change in its application requirements. However, without these traditional quantitative methods of data analysis to guide program admission decisions, the challenge became sustaining a program without forfeiting quality or integrity. Faculty members were concerned that a more open door admissions policy would trigger a revolving door effect, attracting candidates that might not possess the prerequisite knowledge, skills, or dispositions necessary to be successful in such a research-intensive online graduate program and ultimately weakening program reten-

tion. Consequently, the program's admissions committee executed a thorough review of research regarding alternative admission methods. The review indicated admission criteria that employ individualized admission procedures, such as personal interviews and real-time problem solving activities, are effective predictors of student success and improve the overall selection process [7; 8].

### ***The solution***

Based on these findings, the admissions committee elected to establish an admissions interview requirement, held via the free video and voice call utility Skype ([www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com)). To begin, the admissions committee gathered faculty input to determine which knowledge, skills, and dispositions candidates must possess to be effective in their field upon completion of the program. Those requirements that could not be learned during the program's preparation thus became the minimum requirements for admission to the program [5]. Attributes branded as essential to retain prior to program entrance were:

- analytical adeptness – a problem solver
- oral communication competence, including listening
- ability and inclination to contribute to a team – as a co-worker and as a leader
- commitment and enthusiasm for learning
- basic knowledge of current technologies

To provide candidates ample occasions to clearly articulate their potential for graduate study, the admissions committee developed an interview protocol grounded in the identified minimum criteria. The selected prompts were organized by fundamental attributes as follows:

#### Analytical adeptness

- Tell us about a goal you have set for yourself and how you have achieved it.
- Describe a recent significant problem you faced and how you handled it.

- What problem in the world troubles you most? What can you do about it?
- Communication competence
- Do you feel your academic record accurately reflects your abilities and potential?
- What challenges do you think you might face in this graduate program?
- Teamwork
- Tell us about a group in which you were involved. How did you contribute to help the group achieve a specific goal?
- Explain a situation in which you had a conflict with another person and how you resolved it. What would you do differently?
- Commitment and enthusiasm for learning
- Are you motivated? Explain and provide examples.
- If you are not accepted into this graduate program, what are your plans?
- What activities do you enjoy most outside of school?
- Basic knowledge of current technologies
- What previous experiences do you feel have prepared you for graduate study in this program?
- What skills will you bring into this program?
- What is the last technology specific webinar or professional development you attended?

Beyond confirming that candidates hold the prerequisite skills, qualifications, and dispositions necessary to flourish academically, faculty sought to ensure that candidate needs and expectations correspond to what the graduate program was designed to and capable of providing. In order to clearly evaluate this fit, the admissions committee established an additional set of inquiries, including:

- Why did you choose to apply to this graduate program?
- What characteristics do you feel distinguish this program from others in the same academic field?

- What skills or abilities do you hope to strengthen through this program?
- What are your career goals? How will this program help you achieve your goals?

To further convey an accurate representation of the program, the admissions committee isolated program details meaningful to procuring related academic and career objectives. Pertinent information identified encompassed:

- Typical program completion rate
- Average class size
- Learning environment traits – requires a lot of self-discipline
- Time requirements
- Research expectations
- Intended program outcomes
- Employment opportunities after graduation

The admissions committee also wanted candidates to be aware of the support available to them, such as:

- Financial aid – grants, scholarships, internships, student loans, and loan forgiveness programs
- University writing center – virtual and face-to-face support available
- Virtual office hours – program faculty offer convenient times for candidates including nights and weekends
- Virtual tutoring – one-to-one and small group sessions provided by program faculty

In order to ensure reliable appraisal of each candidate, the admissions committee developed a detailed scoring rubric based on the interview protocol [4]. Indicators included the following categories: analytical ability, communication, teamwork, learning commitment, technical fundamentals, and program expectations. Each category incorporated a three-point scale, with 1 corresponding to the indicator not being met and 3 signifying the indicator being fully met. Table 1 illustrates the indicator, description, and score for each of the categories of the candidate assessment rubric.

Table 1

**Candidate Assessment Rubric**

| <b>Indicator</b>           | <b>Not Met<br/>1</b>   | <b>Partially Met<br/>2</b>   | <b>Met<br/>3</b>   |
|----------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Analytical Ability</b>  | Candidate demonstrates limited or no ability to problem solve.   | Candidate demonstrates some ability to problem solve.  | Candidate demonstrates excellent ability to problem solve.   |
| <b>Communication</b>       | Candidate demonstrates little or no potential for graduate level writing. Candidate is not articulate and/or attentive.                  | Candidate demonstrates potential for graduate level writing. Candidate is articulate and attentive most of the time.                 | Candidate demonstrates graduate level writing. Candidate is articulate and attentive.  |
| <b>Teamwork</b>            | Candidate has no experience working in teams. Candidate demonstrates little or no potential for successful teamwork                      | Candidate has some experience working in teams. Candidate exhibits potential to work cooperatively and collaboratively with a group. | Candidate has extensive experience working in teams. Candidate shows success contributing as a leader and strong group member. |
| <b>Learning Commitment</b> | Candidate is not currently seeking professional development beyond graduate school and/or shows little potential for future development. | Candidate occasionally seeks professional development and shows potential for future development.                                    | Candidate is committed to life-long learning and regularly seeks professional development.                                     |

|                                |  |  |  |
|--------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>Technology Fundamentals</b> | Candidate cannot perform basic operations without assistance.  | Candidate can perform routine tasks independently.                 | Candidate can perform complex tasks and troubleshoot operational difficulties. |
| <b>Program Expectations</b>    | Candidate needs and expectations cannot be met by the program. | Candidate needs and expectations can mostly be met by the program. | Candidate needs and expectations can be fully met by the program.              |

Upon faculty approval of the interview protocol and candidate assessment rubric, the admission committee set out to establish explicit interview procedures. The process agreed upon is as follows:

1. All program faculty members are invited to participate in each candidate interview. Doodle ([www.doodle.com](http://www.doodle.com)), a free online scheduling application, is employed to invite and confirm faculty member availability for specific dates and times. Dates and times that serve the preponderance of faculty are then reserved for candidate interviews.

2. Candidates are invited through email to participate in a virtual interview via Skype. Doodle is again used to allow candidates to choose slots that best suit their individual schedules. A confirmation email, including the program's Skype contact information, is then sent to candidates. Since this specific graduate program is 100% online and requires students to occupy a rudimentary grasp of technology tools, no additional instructions are provided.

3. Just prior to each scheduled interview, the admissions committee and confirmed faculty members meet in the program's conference room for a review of the candidate's admissions materials, including official transcripts and a technology pre-assessment. Any points of concern are identified and added for discussion during the interview protocol. The candidate is then instant messaged through Skype to confirm his/her readiness to begin.

4. With all attendees seated around a large conference table, the candidate is video called using Skype. The camera and screen



are positioned as to simulate the candidate being “seated” with the group. Rapport is built by first requesting that all attendees individually introducing themselves and then allowing the candidate to reciprocate. From this point, the interview protocol is followed and ends with soliciting questions from the candidate.

5. Immediately following the interview, the admissions committee requests feedback from faculty in attendance regarding the candidate’s overall quality and potential for graduate study. Responses are noted and the faculty is dismissed.

6. Subsequently, the admissions committee discusses the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses, giving specific attention to the minimum knowledge, skills, and dispositions identified previously as essential for success. Following the discussion, each admissions committee member scores the candidate using the Candidate Assessment Rubric (Table 1). As suggested by Dodge and Derwin [4], the admissions committee’s discussion and candidate assessment rubric scores are used to make the final admission decision.

7. Finally, the admissions committee advises the candidate of the action taken via email.

While striving to increase graduate enrollment, the admissions committee felt this admission process would help to preserve program quality and ultimately increase candidate retention. This does appear to be the case.

### ***The results***

In a nation where many graduate programs are reconsidering current graduate admissions measures, this particular graduate program seems to have found a standard that is working. Since the new admissions process was implemented the graduate program has seen on average a 37% growth in enrollment while increasing average retention rates from 66% to 81%. Though it is obvious there is still work to be done, these numbers are encouraging.

### ***The final word***

As more university graduate programs struggle to attract and retain qualified graduate students, many get frustrated with the num-

bers game. Although an open-door policy seems attractive in the beginning, many faculty soon discover the issues and concerns of allowing anyone and everyone into their program. Perhaps facilitating the best fit for candidates as well as programs, through a more rigorous admissions process, can help alleviate this frustration.

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**Л.В. Гурленова**

### **Вопросы теории искусства в трудах П. Сорокина**

*В статье рассматриваются суждения Питирима Сорокина в контексте его теории социокультурной динамики о формах искусства, их стадийности и эволюционных изменениях. Терминологи-*