

Why We Should Use Noncognitive Variables  
With Graduate and Professional Students

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The simplest response to the title of this paper is that the measures that are commonly employed in evaluating prospective graduate and professional students *don't work*. That is, scores from the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) and prior grades (GPA) appear to have little validity in assessing postbaccalaureate student potential (Sternberg & Williams, 1997; Sedlacek, 1998, 2004; Bair & Haworth, 1999). I believe there are several reasons for this conclusion that I will address below.

### Restriction of Range

The GRE attempts to measure what nearly all measures of academic aptitude attempt to measure: verbal and mathematical ability. However, because the GRE is used with the population for which it is intended (e.g. the most capable individuals in our society) there is a great restriction of range of scores on the measure; we do not get scores on people who did not attend baccalaureate programs and performed reasonably well in them (Darlington, 1998). Restricting the range of scores we can study depresses our measures of association. While estimates of the effects of restriction of range are possible, they may be artifacts if the valid variance is not there to begin with.

Additionally, we do not know how to distinguish among potential graduate students on measured verbal and math abilities. Throughout most of the last century test developers have been refining available measures, with some success, but I feel we have come to the limits of our ability to develop such measures. Even if the population of potential postbaccalaureate students might be distinguishable on the constructs of verbal and math ability, I do not feel that our current methods of test development are likely to do the job. Thus, I feel there is no more practical useful variance to capture in the verbal and math areas.

As a predictor of success GPA causes us even more problems in restriction of range than the GRE. Studies from the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) documented the problem of grade inflation, which appears to exist at all levels of education (Rigol & Kimmel, 1997; Rojstraczer, 2003). Students are receiving higher and higher grades, which restricts the range of possible GPAs we have to study. That applicants to graduate and professional school tend to be on the higher end of the GPA distribution restricts our range even further.

As if a lack of variability in predictor scores weren't bad enough, the criteria that we wish to predict are also highly restricted. We know that graduate students tend to get even higher grades than undergraduates, and are more likely to be bunched at the top of the grade distribution. The criteria of retention or completion of degree offer some alternative indices of success, but again may offer fewer individuals in the noncompleter category than among undergraduates. So, on restriction of range alone, we severely limit our ability to effectively study the utility of GRE or GPA, but there are other problems in studying predictors of postgraduate student success.

### Increasing Diversity

That our baccalaureate level students have been increasing in diversity on dimensions of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, disability and many other attributes has been well documented (McTighe Musil, Garcia, Hudgins, Nettles, Sedlacek, & Smith, 1999). These changes have a potentially profound impact on the kinds of attributes we should be measuring in predicting success in graduate and professional school. As we begin the 21st century, do we need to examine alternatives to admissions concepts developed in the early 20th century? The answer is yes! Potential measures are already developed and have been studied on many student groups, but they have not been as widely utilized as they might be, particularly with graduate and

professional students (Sedlacek, 2004, in press). I have discussed several reasons for this including what I call the "Three Musketeers" problem (Sedlacek, 1994, 2004).

### The Three Musketeers Problem

The rallying cry of "all for one and one for all" is one that we use often in developing what we think of as fair and equitable admissions measures. Commonly, our interpretation of how to handle diversity is to hone and fine-tune our measures so that scores from them are equally valid for everyone (Berk, 1982; Sackett, Schmidt, Ellingson & Kabin, 2001; Helms, 1992; Sedlacek, 1985, 2004, in press). However, if different groups have different experiences and different ways of presenting their attributes and abilities, it is unlikely that we could develop a single measure, test item etc. that could be equally valid for all. If we concentrate on results rather than intentions, we could conclude that it is important to do an equally good job of selection for each group, not that we need to use the same measures for all to accomplish that goal. We want equality of results, not process. *Therefore, we should seek to retain the useful variance that exists across diverse groups in our measures, rather than attempt to eliminate it.*

Sternberg's (1985, 1986) work on intelligence might prove instructive here. He suggested that there are three kinds of intelligence. Componential intelligence is the ability to interpret information in a hierarchical and taxonomic fashion in a well-defined and unchanging context. People who do well on standardized tests such as the SAT or the GRE tend to have this type of intelligence. Experiential intelligence involves the ability to interpret information in changing contexts; to be creative. Standardized tests do not appear to measure this type of intelligence. Sternberg called his third type of intelligence contextual; it has to do with the ability to adapt to a changing environment; the ability to handle and negotiate the system.

If Sternberg's types of intelligence are applied to what is typically done in admissions in higher education, there is a heavy concentration on componential intelligence. Applicants who do not have traditional White middle or upper-middle class, mostly male-oriented experiences in the society may be less likely to show their abilities through componential intelligence than traditional applicants. These students will be called nontraditional here and include various racial-cultural groups, rural students, international students, women, gay, lesbian and bisexual students, athletes, students with learning disabilities or physical disabilities and older students. The list is intended to be illustrative not exhaustive.

### Noncognitive Variables

Noncognitive variables have been defined in a number of ways in the literature. Some have seen them as extracurricular or nonacademic activities while others have used the term to describe motivational and personality variables (Sackett et al, 2001; Willingham, 1985) In this paper I am defining noncognitive variables as those that appear to reflect Sternberg's experiential or contextual intelligence, and may pick up on the abilities and potentials of nontraditional students as defined above (Sedlacek, 1996, 2004). The Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) was developed to assess attributes that are more predictive of success in higher education for nontraditional students than are standardized tests (Sedlacek, 2004-see Table 1) Work in assessing nontraditional variables with the NCQ supports the idea that nontraditional people often tend to show their abilities through experiential and contextual intelligence. (Ancis & Sedlacek, 2004; Boyer and Sedlacek, 1982; Fuertes & Sedlacek, 1995; Fuertes, Sedlacek & Liu, 1994; O' Callaghan & Bryant, 1990; Sedlacek, 1989, 1991, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b, 1999, 2004, in press; Sedlacek and Adams-Gaston, 1992; Ting, 1992; Tracey and Sedlacek, 1984, 1985, 1987, 1988, 1989; White and Sedlacek, 1986). Much of this is out of necessity because

nontraditional people must learn to be "multicultural" and examine issues from different perspectives. They must be able to negotiate a system that was not designed for them. Having long- range goals, a self-concept that includes how the system views you and an ability to handle racism are some of the scales on the NCQ.

Institutional racism is defined as the negative consequences that accrue to a member of a given group because of the way a system or subsystem operates in the society (e.g., college admissions) regardless of any other attributes of the individual (Sedlacek, 2004; Sedlacek & Brooks, 1976). All "isms" (e.g., sexism, ageism) are included under the generic term "racism". The various "isms" take different forms but share a common basis. Thus, if there is a concentration on componential intelligence in admissions, less valid assessments will be done for nontraditional persons than for those with more traditional experiences in the system. This would be an example of institutional racism; unintended perhaps, but no less a serious problem.

It is not that componential intelligence is not important to nontraditional people; it may be that experiential and contextual abilities may be prerequisite (Westbrook and Sedlacek, 1988). If someone is struggling with racism in the system, time and energy may not be available to show componential talents. The point illustrates that there is a need to think of measures differentially in order to achieve equitable assessments for all. There is probably a classic oxymoron here in thinking that one can assess diversity of experience with a single measure. The arguments presented here are positive and proactive. Lowering standards of admission is not being advocated. The suggestion is to develop and use the most valid measures one can for all groups that can be operationally defined. Reliability of scores from the NCQ have been estimated, and generally run in the .80s employing several different methods (Tracey & Sedlacek, 1984; Sedlacek, 1996, 2004).

The noncognitive measures are also valid for traditional students, particularly against a retention or graduation criterion. Nearly all the references noted above show some validity of scores for traditional applicants. For example, the handling racism dimension becomes “handling the system” for those not experiencing systematic discrimination. While the noncognitive dimensions discussed here are useful for traditional applicants, they are critical for nontraditional applicants.

Scores on noncognitive variables have shown validity for a wide range of students in many fields and there have been enough studies on medical and other health profession students (Bandalos & Sedlacek, 1989; Helm, Prieto, & Sedlacek, 1997; Noonan, Sedlacek & Suthakaran, 2001; Sedlacek & Prieto, 1990; Webb, Sedlacek, Cohen, Shields, Gracely, Hawkins, & Nieman, 1997) to suggest their value to include in veterinary medical admissions. A number of veterinary colleges have reported success in including noncognitive variables in their system (eg California-Davis, Michigan State, among others).

#### Other Methodological Problems

Graduate and professional students tend to matriculate in isolated, decentralized pockets of experience. Issues relating to success or failure of students may vary within institutions across fields, and across institutions within fields (Bair & Haworth, 1999). Thus, a student in human medicine may have a much different experience than one in veterinary medicine at the same institution, and students in vet school may have varying environments at different institutions.

Also, numbers of students in a given program, at a given institution, may be quite small, thus complicating a study of predictors of success.

#### Legal Cases

In *Hopwood v. Texas*, (1994) the Fifth Circuit Court struck down a University of Texas Law School plan to target a student body with certain percentages of Latino and Black students. Also in 1996, the voters of California passed Proposition 209, amending the state Constitution and making it illegal to consider race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin for preferential treatment in state organizations, including colleges and universities. At this writing *Hopwood* applies only to the Fifth Circuit (Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana) and Proposition 209 is limited to California. However, the reasoning in Proposition 209 has been challenged in *Castañeda et al. v. The University of California Regents et al* (1999), and *Farmer v. Ramsay et al.* (1998), both of which raise the question of noncognitive variables as an alternative approach. The *Farmer* court has ruled in favor of allowing the University of Maryland to employ noncognitive variables in admitting students to its medical school; the plaintiff has appealed this judgment.

Two cases decided by the Supreme Court of the United States further challenged the use of race in admissions. The cases involved the University of Michigan's policies to consider race in admissions to add diversity to its general undergraduate program and law school (*Gratz and Hamacher v. Bollinger et al.*, 2002; *Grutter v. Bollinger et al.*, 2002).

In the former case, the Court ruled that the university could not assign a specific weight to an applicant solely because of race. For example, Michigan awarded twenty points to each "underrepresented minority," which was one-fifth of the points necessary to guarantee admission.

However, in *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court ruled that the law school could consider race as one of many factors in admitting students. This logic is similar to that used by Justice Powell in his dissenting opinion in the *Bakke* case.



Whereas I supported the efforts of the University of Michigan to consider race directly in its admissions policies, I believe there is a better way to proceed. If the university were to use the noncognitive variables proposed here in its admissions systems, it would achieve diversity in its classes by virtue of considering variables that reflect race, culture, gender, and the other aspects of nontraditionality discussed earlier. Thus, by not directly selecting according to aspects of diversity, a school can achieve increased diversity in a more sophisticated way, on the basis of the research evidence available. The noncognitive variable method yields important attributes correlating with student success that appear to be legal and fair to all applicants.

### Multiple Methods

Noncognitive variables can be assessed and researched using several techniques.

#### Questionnaires

The Noncognitive Questionnaire (NCQ) has been shown to have validity and reliability in assessing the eight noncognitive variables noted above. Several forms of the NCQ have been developed and employed in different admissions contexts and are available in Sedlacek (2004) at no cost. The questionnaire can be administered on-line. The Gates Millennium Scholars program assesses the eight noncognitive variables shown in Table 1 using short answer questions in awarding scholarships to students of color. The use of a noncognitive questionnaire has been presented by the plaintiffs in *Castañeda v. The University of California Board of Regents et al.* , as the preferred method of increasing minority student enrollment at The University of California-Berkeley. Scores from a version of the NCQ has been shown to have validity in selecting traditional and nontraditional students to health programs at a western state community college (Noonan, Sedlacek & Suthakaran, 2001). Students are evaluated in project ACCESS at Prarie View A& M University using the NCQ, and they report greater validities for scores from

the measure than for grades or test scores.

### Interviews

It is feasible to interview applicants using noncognitive variables. The key is to train interviewers to identify how applicants may show high or low scores. The Louisiana State University Medical School in New Orleans has employed noncognitive variables in their admissions program through interviews starting in the late 1980s. In the 10 years since the use of noncognitive variables was introduced, enrollment of students of color doubled to 21 percent with an 87 percent retention rate. During this period, admissions committee members were trained to interview concerning the eight noncognitive variables shown in Table 1 using simulated cases. More than 80% of the admissions committee members felt the noncognitive variables were useful in admissions and 92% thought the training helped them identify the noncognitive variables in applicant interviews (Helm, Prieto & Sedlacek, 1997). The admissions committee thought self-concept (97%), realistic self-appraisal (95%), leadership (84%), support person (83%), and handling racism (81%) were the most useful indicators of “minority” student success. Sixty one percent felt grade point average and 57% felt Medical College Admission Test scores were useful for minority admissions.

The University of Maryland Medical School employs interviews to assess applicants on the noncognitive variables shown in Table 1. Their have been supported in a lawsuit that has challenged their fairness (Farmer v. Ramsay).

### Portfolios

The use of portfolios provides yet another way to assess noncognitive variables (LaMahieu, Gitomer & Eresch, 1995). Portfolios have been commonly used in the arts to demonstrate the work of applicants for admission.

The School of Design at North Carolina State University in Raleigh has required an additional admissions procedure beyond the general one employed for all undergraduates. They have traditionally required a portfolio containing design-related materials produced by the applicant. Administrators and faculty at the school wished to broaden the content of the portfolio to contain information on noncognitive variables, such as how they had overcome obstacles, how they saw themselves and what were their goals. They felt this would give them better information on which to judge their applicants, particularly those of color. Faculty evaluators were trained in identifying examples of high and low scores on noncognitive variables. Such training is important in order to avoid one of the potential problems in portfolio assessment; that middle-class students may benefit most from such assessments (Koretz, 1993).

The University of California, Irvine included a Personal Achievement Profile along with SAT or ACT scores, grades and specific courses completed as part of its admission profile. It included, among other things, the noncognitive variables of leadership, community service and creative achievement. After applicants were screened on their academic credentials about 60% of the admissions were determined. The additional 40% of the admissions were selected based on the Personal Achievement Profile. Using a double-blind procedure admissions staff trained in reviewing the profiles made the judgments. No interviews or letters of recommendations were employed and the entering class cut across a number of dimensions.

#### Essays

With appropriate training, it is possible to have raters score essay material on noncognitive variables. For example, in the Gates Millennium Scholar program, readers were able to score applications with high reliability on scores from the noncognitive variables shown in Table 1. A normal distribution of scores for over 16,000 applications of students of color was

achieved. This sample includes graduate and professional students, and will include more as the recipients move on to advanced academic work. Validity studies are underway relating those scores to academic and nonacademic outcomes (Sedlacek and Sheu, in press,a,b).

### Conclusions

Based on the logic, research and suggestions above there appear to be a number of reasons to proceed with some plans to employ noncognitive variables in admitting veterinary students. As argued above, our previous efforts in designing the more traditional verbal and math ability tests may have run their course. It appears that if noncognitive variables were to be employed in admitting veterinary students, more diversity along many dimensions could be achieved, without directly selecting on race, gender or other attributes and those students would be successful. Noncognitive variables may provide a solution to many of the legal, moral, ethical and practical problems presented in balancing the validity of scores from assessment measures with achieving diversity and fairness in selection.

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Table 1

NONCOGNITIVE ADMISSIONS VARIABLES

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- I. POSITIVE SELF-CONCEPT OR CONFIDENCE. Strong self-feeling, strength of character. Determination, independence.
- II. REALISTIC SELF-APPRAISAL, especially academic. Recognizes and accepts any deficiencies and works hard at self-development. Recognizes need to broaden his/her individuality.
- III. UNDERSTAND AND DEALS WITH SYSTEM/RACISM. Realist based upon personal experience of racism. Is committed to fighting to improve existing system. Not submissive to existing wrongs, nor hostile to society, nor a "cop-out." Able to handle system. Asserts school or organization role to fight racism and change system.
- IV. PREFERS LONG-RANGE GOALS TO SHORT-TERM OR IMMEDIATE NEEDS. Able to respond to deferred gratification.
- V. AVAILABILITY OF STRONG SUPPORT PERSON to whom to turn in crises.
- VI. SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE in any area pertinent to his/her background (gang leader, church, sports, noneducational groups, etc.)
- VII. DEMONSTRATED COMMUNITY SERVICE. Has involvement in his/her cultural community.
- VIII. KNOWLEDGE ACQUIRED IN A FIELD. Unusual and/or culturally-related ways of obtaining information and demonstrating knowledge. Field itself may be non-traditional.