

2019

# Admission Members' Perceptions of Predictive Validity of the Graduate Record Examinations

Janet Thompson  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Janet Altagracia Thompson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
and that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

## Review Committee

Dr. Martha Norris, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Elizabeth Bruch, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Dr. Peter Kiriakidis, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University

2019

Abstract

Admission Members' Perceptions of Predictive Validity of the Graduate Record

Examinations

by

Janet A. Thompson

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2019

## Abstract

Disparate student academic outcomes and program access is a problem at Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs in the Northeast United States. The current admission committee members at the case university did not know institution leaders' rationale for eliminating the Graduate Records Examination (GRE) criterion. The decision to exclude the GRE as an MPA admission requirement was enacted prior to their respective tenures. The program leadership expressed interest in exploring research-based admission criteria to enhance student access and predictive outcomes. Supported by critical pedagogy and humanist theories, the purpose of this case study was to investigate admission committee members' viewpoints about the GRE's predictive efficacy for MPA applicants. Two MPA admission committee members were purposefully selected to be study participants. Data were collected via semi structured individual and focus group interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis for emergent themes. The study findings were: (a) GRE scores reduce applicant access to MPA programs; (b) student access to MPA programs may improve should universities use a broader array of non-cognitive admission assessments; (c) students with low GRE scores may still attain the MPA; and (d) the GRE Quantitative section is not relevant to assess the soft skills MPA graduates will need in the public sector. These findings can be used by the case university MPA stakeholders to implement a model of varied non-cognitive admission methods. This study may promote social change by providing MPA admission stakeholders with a broader selection of non-cognitive assessments to support increased rates of applicant access and program completion outcomes.

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## Dedication

I dedicate my doctorate to my parents, Esperanza and George Fleury. Through countless examples, you taught me the importance of persistence and hard work to fulfill any goal. Your love and work ethic provided enduring bedrocks from which I dared to undertake this endeavor. During those times when I felt discouraged or lost my focus, I drew strength from my memories of you and kept going. Throughout this journey, you have been my anchors and I was committed to fulfilling this achievement in your honor. This doctorate reflects the kind of person you made me, so it is your accomplishment as well. Thank you and I love you.

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## Section 1: The Problem

### **The Local Problem**

Higher education institutions in the United States have used the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) admission test to assess graduate applicants for over 8 decades (Briel & Michel, 2014; Kane & Bridgeman, 2017; Posselt, 2016). Initially, the exam was administered to student candidates at Yale, Princeton, Harvard, and Columbia in the late 1930s after being developed from an automated grading system and cooperative graduate testing program (Briel & Michel, 2014; Posselt, 2016). The Educational Testing Service (ETS) is the present source for the GRE. The exam is used as an evaluative instrument to assess applicant readiness for graduate study (Briel & Michel, 2014). GRE scores may be included in program applications as a required criterion to determine whether student candidates are qualified to be admitted to the university.

Researchers have suggested that the predictive validity of the GRE is a variable rather than a determinative gauge of student persistence and program completion. For instance, a meta-analytic study of 22 schools indicated that the verbal and quantitative GRE segments are minimally prognostic (Morrison & Morrision, 1995). But a key prognostic of student success in a graduate program is academic ability, for which universities have relied on GRE scores as determining factors of the scholastic potential of future students (Anderson, Hayes, Massey, & Brownell, 2017; Schwager, Hulsheger, Bridgeman, & Lang, 2015; Zimmermann, Davier, Buhmann, & Heinemann, 2018).

The criteria for admission in Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs in the Northeastern United States are distinct. They alternately require the GRE as a

component to determine applicant acceptance. The admission policies of 11 MPA programs in New York State are almost split in whether they use the GRE as an admission criterion. The GRE is a contingent requirement for one MPA program and required at six (National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration [NASPAA], 2017). The accreditation standards of the NASPAA (2017) indicate that an MPA program should align its admissions practices and policies with its mission of assessing candidates and accepting them into the program.

Peer-reviewed literature on MPA programs suggest how the GRE is valid in its predictive aspect to assess whether student applicants will be viable (Bridgeman, 2016; Bridgeman, Cho, & DiPietro, 2016; Klieger, Belur, & Kotloff, 2017). For example, Bridgeman et al. (2016) suggested that GRE scores can help predict student persistence and placement, as represented by the measurable data of low, middle, and high scores correlating with quartile grades. However, researchers have indicated concerns about the predictive validity of the GRE based on exam results, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), personal statements, and letters of recommendation (Eaglin-Richard, 2017; Evans, 2017, Kjelgaard & Guarino, 2012); Littleford, Buxton, Bucher, Simon-Dack, & Yang, 2018).

Several studies have indicated the potential issue with the predictive validity of GRE scores. For example, Moneta-Koehler, Brown, Petrie, Evans, and Chalkley (2017) as well as Littleford et al. (2018) have evaluated whether the GRE exam can validly predict student performance to ensure that it is an efficient admission criterion for MPA programs in New York State. Littleford et al. suggested that the validity of the GRE to

predict master and doctoral student performance is affected when other predictive metrics include first-year graduate GPA, graduation graduate GPA, and faculty ratings.

Researchers have also suggested that the exam's predictive validity cannot evaluate the admissibility of graduate student candidates with adequate determination (Hall, O'Connell, & Cook, 2017; Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014; Potvin, Chari, & Hodapp, 2017; Wao, Ries, Flood, Lavy, & Ozbek, 2015). The weight of the GRE's subject matter is limited because there is no focus on individual reasoning attributes that are tied to how students perform in graduate programs (Moneta-Koehler et al., 2017), which leads to admission selections based on inadequate determining factors (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016). MPA faculty and administrators review criteria to evaluate whether an applicant can complete a degree successfully, but the assessment results are not assured (Darolia, Potochnick, & Menifield, 2014).

Several peer-reviewed studies have also indicated that MPA admission policies and practices are not consistent in identifying and aligning measures of student candidacy, skills and abilities, and curriculum (Darolia et al., 2014). MPA admission decisions about what candidates are capable of may be subjective and exclude viable candidates while admitting students who are not able to complete their programs (Darolia et al., 2014). Though MPA administrators and faculty comprise the members of admission review committees, there are no current studies focused on how MPA administrators and faculty perceive the predictive validity of the GRE or the degree to which these views form admission policies at institutions with NASPAA accreditation.

## **Rationale**

Researchers have suggested distinct admission criteria and mixed predictive validity of the GRE for master's programs in nursing, psychology, counseling, and engineering (Buckless & Krawczyk, 2016; Grice, 2013; Husbands & Dowell, 2013; Jones-Schenk & Harper, 2014; Knorr & Hissbach, 2014; MacCann, Newman, Joseph, & Roberts, 2014; Sebok, Luu, & Klinger, 2014; Singer, McLaughlin, & Cox, 2016; Yen, Hovey, Hodwitz, & Zhang, 2014). Bright and Graham (2015) indicated that NASPAA-accredited program representatives focus on institutions' admission frameworks to examine their processes and guidelines. Rich (2013) further noted that undergraduates' final GPAs may be assessed as one criterion of a larger criteria set. In addition, researchers have suggested that the work or career experiences of student candidates can be an evaluative criterion for MPA program admission; they question whether one component or set of components can be applicable measures of potential student success (Darolia et al., 2014). Additional literature presents a deeper understanding of discrete sets of elements that guide admission practices in MPA programs.

Despite previous research on how to evaluate admissions criteria, studies have not been centered on understanding the perspectives of admissions committee members about the GRE as an admission criterion. Therefore, I addressed a gap in the current literature by applying an instrumental case study approach to explore the viewpoints of university administrators and faculty. The foci of this study are administrator and faculty understandings of the GRE's predictive efficacy as an admission criterion, the contributions of these perspectives to institutional admissions policies, concepts about the

efficacy of alternate admission criteria, and insights into how these admission practices address student access. As the researcher of this instrumental case study, I addressed social change in higher education by examining the underpinnings of MPA graduate admission policies toward an evaluation of institutional practice for equitable student candidate program access.

Authors of education studies have either affirmed or disaffirmed the GRE's predictive validity and suggested that including the GRE as a requisite criterion for MPA programs is an admission policy based on inconsistency. University graduate admission processes for the MPA in New York State programs include reviews, usually by committees consisting of administrators and faculty, of required documents that prospective students submit as part of their applications (Darolia et al., 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how administrators and faculty, who typically comprise the admissions committees for MPA programs, perceive the value of the exam for assessing prospective students, alternative forms of assessment, and preservice as well as in-service student access. Faculty and administrator perspectives of applying the GRE to the admission process at one New York State institution were explored contextually with peer-reviewed studies that have suggested approaches in higher education admissions testing as well as the extent and limitations of the predictive validity of the GRE. I reviewed group decision-making theories to consider how the suggested operant-construct dynamics may inform the way graduate committee members evaluate and decide on student selection. As a result, I used critical pedagogy and humanist education theories as the framework of this study.



## Definitions

Definitions for terminology that is specific to this research are listed as follows:

*Educational testing service (ETS)*: The organization that developed and administers the GRE (Burns, 1972).

*Graduate Records Examination (GRE) Revised General Test*: The test administered by the ETS to assess cognitive and writing competencies for graduate-level academic study (Swiggett, Kotloff, Ezzo, Adler, & Oliveri, 2014). Subject tests assess knowledge in specific academic disciplines for graduate academic study (Stocking, Smith, & Swanson, 2000).

*Graduate grade point average (GPA)*: The cumulative totals of graduate student course grades as calculated by each completed semester and total completed semesters (Darolia et al., 2014).

*National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA)*: The accreditation organization for Master of Public Administration programs and specializations (Marshall & Hewitt, 2006).

*Predictive validity*: The prognostic verification and accuracy of exam scores (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Bray, & Spaulding, 2014).

*Undergraduate grade point average (GPA)*: The cumulative course grades of undergraduate college students that represent completed semesters and total completed semesters (Darolia et al., 2004).

## Significance

The significance of the problem was investigated in two distinct studies. Kuncel, Wee, and Serafin (2010) suggested that the GRE provides valid prognostic indications of applicants' preparedness for graduate study in master's programs. The GRE results of public administration candidates suggested predictive outcomes for graduate GPA in students' first and final years of enrollment (Kuncel et al., 2009). In a contrasting 18-year study, Blesek-Reчек and Browne (2014) found that from 1982 to 1996 and 2003 to 2007, men scored an average of over 500 points on the GRE-Verbal and GRE-Quantitative exam sections, whereas women scored an average of below 500 points; African American, Hispanic, and Asian test-takers also scored consistently lower than Whites on these same sections. Further, graduate program enrollment and completion outcomes were skewed among MPA programs, with women, African American, and Hispanics having lower enrollments than White males and Asians (Blesek-Reчек & Browne, 2014). Because of these contrasting views on the predictive validity of the GRE, investigating perspectives of admission committee members can provide further insight into whether the GRE is considered a valid admission criterion as well as alternatives to the GRE.

Distinct practices in local and regional educational contexts parallel contrasting research about the GRE's predictive validity. The institution MPA admission stakeholders of this study have supported a policy that the GRE is not required as a criterion for admission. The program committee members review candidates' personal statement essays and official undergraduate transcripts. Prospective students must

complete an application form to provide scholastic background information that includes undergraduate study and GPA attainment. Institution stakeholders' distinct administration practices further suggested that they are not conclusively informed about whether the GRE instrument presents prognostic indication of such future success. Consequently, the synthesized literature in the white paper that was produced from this study can provide the MPA stakeholders with current, exemplars of admission practices.

The 11 MPA programs in one Northeast state are similarly divided in their approach to considering the GRE an efficacious admission criterion. Faculty and program administrators in both contexts will either rely on or disregard the GRE as a criterion for admission, which is dependent on institutional discernment. University stakeholder discernments about the inclusion and exclusion of the GRE as an MPA admission criterion are predicated on factors that include annual enrollment figures and program rankings representing program selectiveness (Cassuto, 2016). Researchers have also suggested the need for empirically-based MPA admission policies and practices toward improved predictive and access outcomes (Boske & Chinasa, 2017).

### **Research Question**

This case study's overarching research question was devised to investigate the individual standpoints of MPA graduate committee members regarding the GRE's predictive value. The viewpoints of MPA administrators and faculty about the prognostic strength of the GRE are relevant to their applicant admission decision-making stances. Validity is an elemental attribute that establishes assessment import by diminishing prognostic ambiguity (Markus, 2016; Newton & Shaw, 2016). The research question for

this study was: In what ways do MPA faculty and program administrators perceive the GRE's efficacy as a predictive indicator for student candidate access, persistence, and program completion? The research question underpins the inquiry aim of this study to investigate the problem of distinct institutional policies and practices; stakeholders alternately include or exclude the GRE as a required MPA admission criterion.

### **Review of the Literature**

The GRE is applied as a requisite element of admission applications and is used as a preliminary assessment of whether applicants are prepared for graduate-level study. Currently, MPA program administrators and faculty are mixed on the use of GRE scores for prospective student admission evaluations. University program application policies and procedures may require GRE test scores, indicate that scores are not needed, or request their submission under specific circumstances. Moreover, institutions have implemented alternate criteria for evaluating prospective students—a decision suggesting a shift in the paradigm for MPA graduate student application criteria. This study was conducted to examine how MPA administrators and faculty perceive the GRE and its role in entrance evaluations within the context of a graduate admissions setting that no longer consistently applies the exam as an assessment for prospective students.

This section includes several related topics presented in the literature. To find this information, I used the EBSCOHOST, ERIC, JSTOR, and ProQuest databases. I further used Walden University's library document delivery service to access research literature that was not readily available in the university databases. I applied the following search terms to find relevant material: *predictive validity*, *predictive validity of admissions*

*exams, master of public administration admissions, graduate admissions, graduate entrance exams, General Record Examination, GRE, graduate programs, group decisions, group decision making, decision-making methods, organization decision making, decision-making theories, and critical pedagogy.*

First, I begin with the conceptual framework that provided the base for this study, Then I present peer-reviewed literature on the development of U.S. MPA programs and admissions criteria over time. Third, I describe the admissions criteria and effects for other graduate programs. This segment includes programs for which the GRE has been required and those for which the GMAT is required for admission. Fourth, I present literature on the effectiveness of the GRE and GMAT for admissions. Fifth, I explore literature on alternate forms of graduate candidate entrance assessments. Finally, I review literature on group decision-making within organizational contexts. This section also consists of a recent literature analysis about group decision-making concepts and alignment with MPA graduate admission committee practice toward the evaluation of prospective student candidates.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Critical pedagogy and humanist education were the theoretical frameworks of this instrumental case study. Critical pedagogy is concerned with individuals' discernments and agency to understand what forms perspectives in higher education contexts (Darder, 2012; Freire, 2003; Giroux, 2003, 2004). Analyses of individual descriptive narratives in a public administration education setting shape theoretical premises and their professional applications through scholarly explorations of the varied aspects, administrations, and

policies of organizations (Ospina & Dodge, 2005). Humanist education concepts are based on individual agency in education and assessments (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). The generalized research focus addresses the idea of human tendencies to conceptualize and interpret based on context (Creswell, 2009). The generalized approach also helps to explicate distinct yet multifaceted human ideas (Creswell, 2009). Individual constructions are considered in this instrumental study to understand more deeply the phenomenon within its bounded system.

Critical pedagogy researchers have further suggested that adult learning is a means of advancing individual agency, which contrasts with the more commercial goals of higher education (Brosio, 2017; Darder, 2012; DelBanco, 2012; Giroux, 2003, 2004; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1998). Thus, testing as an institutionalized practice is situated in a framework suggesting implications for student stratification and higher education access. The commodification of higher education methods does not serve students' intellectual development (Freire, 2000). In this setting, power is considered as the enforcement of structure whereby institutions and their designees decide on education practices in ways that cancel or dilute learner autonomy (Darder, 2012; Delanco, 2012; Freire, 2003; Giroux, 2003, 2004; Lipman, 2017). Universities that require GRE exam scores for admission engage the administration of this policy as a persuasive necessity. The GRE prerequisite of the institutional admission framework suggests that learner agency in determining and presenting alternate representative artifacts of relevant competencies is not a policy consideration (Posselt, 2014, 2017).

Although selectivity may not rely on GRE entrance exam scores at schools that do and do not administer the exam, institution stakeholders who have practiced differentiated use of the GRE for admission have suggested a form of perceptual incongruence about program quality to prospective students (Archer, Hutchings, & Ross, 2002). Distinct selection practice may be a working feature of the rating schema universities use that informs students' self-perceptions of their background and preparedness, how they select institutions, and how they make higher education choices (Archer et al., 2002). How students discern agency is affected by external factors that equate school selectivity with educational quality (Bersola, Stolzenberg, Fosnacht, & Love, 2014). Students may view that GRE scores as a criterion for MPA admission at some schools and not others is a measure of selectivity denoting program quality. Students' belief in their potential success in a quality MPA program may equal their perceptions of whether they will pass or fail the GRE (Bright & Graham, 2015; Gerlach, 2016). Thus, the GRE may become a prohibitive criterion for graduate school applications (Bright and Graham, 2015).

### **MPA Programs in the United States**

Historically, public administration education in the United States has been a discipline centered on preparing professional practitioners for various roles in the government. Traditionally, graduate academic programs have been focused on fiscal and management content to develop related student competencies (Honey, 1967). The value of an MPA degree for both recipients and employer stakeholders has been guided by an awareness of organizational and governmental orientations that pinpoint public

administration as a multipart field of growing complexity (Grove & Holzer, 1975). The multidimensional evolution of public administration has been reflected in academic preparation. For instance, a requisite competency for MPA graduates has been organizational administration that addressed partisan, societal, and fiscal segments that formed the complex setting for public administration work (Cleary, 1990). The progression of graduate-level public administration study in the United States has also paralleled 19th century social and socioeconomic evolutions of mass-production industries, concentrated populations triggering urban development, and subsequent population growth (Raadschelders, 2011).

The complex societal impacts of evolving industries and development has supported the involvement the government, which has led to a need for qualified individuals in public administration (Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014; Husar Holmes, 2012). Public administration education is a way for systematized training to prepare individuals for resource oversight that serves the general populace (Nalbandian, O'Neill, Wilkes, & Kaufman, 2013). The literature has suggested that retiring professionals in the government and other public sectors as well as resulting generational workforce transitions are increasingly demanding MPA programs that emphasize professional development in social and governance competencies (Husar Holmes, 2012; Levine, Christian, & Lyons, 2013; Rubaii & Calarusse, 2014). The literature has further suggested the development and application of an MPA praxis assessment to evaluate the efficacy of programmatic content, as demonstrated by the applied knowledge and skill



attainment of graduated students (Jones et al., 2013). As a form of validation, MPA accreditation standards may support the field test (Jones et al., 2013).

Graduate-level public administration study in the United States has followed the development and growth of the country's civil entities: government, social services, and education. Regulatory, service, and public education institutions have grown into multifaceted and complex bodies for which university graduate programs need to produce individuals with professional competencies that align with the requirements of an ever-evolving public sector environment.

### **MPA Program Admission Criteria**

Graduate-level academic preparation has led to structured admission policies and practices to assess whether future students are viable for government and organizational administration. MPA programs in the United States have been divided in their inclusion or exclusion of the GRE as an applicant assessment criterion. For example, western Michigan's MPA admission requirements included undergraduate GPA and an English competency instrument as quantitative indicators of student viability (Thompson & Kobrak, 1983). Admission committee members have also reviewed the professional resumes of in-service students to assess whether their public administration work experience is substantial enough for graduate work (Thompson & Kobrak, 1983). The use of quantitative and nonquantitative indicators to assess candidate efficacy for MPA programs evolved concurrently with distinct methods of criteria identification and evaluation for different student types.

Exploratory studies have illustrated national MPA admissions selection practices at NASPAA-accredited U.S. programs. The perceptions of surveyed respondents have suggested that admission factors have been contingent on students' professional experience profiles (Haupt, Kapucu, & Hu, 2017). MPA representatives have categorized student candidates with no field experience and those with governance or other public service work backgrounds and determined distinct undergraduate GPA, GRE, professional experience, and recommendation standards according to two applicant classifications (Haupt et al., 2017). Distinct applications of admission standards by student type are also denoted by the inclusion of race and sex as criteria for applicant selection in light of affirmative action policies. Including these student candidate characteristics in MPA selection processes has been commodified by affirmative action legislation that has established the premise of expanding access for underrepresented groups in higher education.

Other studies have been conducted to evaluate race and gender in considering the evaluative weight of quantitative and nonquantitative admission requirements by NASPAA member institution representatives (Bautista, 2018; Frederickson & Stazyk, 2016). Admission decisions about applicants have suggested that reviewer decision making has been weighted toward the more quantitative undergraduate GPA and GRE scores (Bautista, 2018; Frederickson & Stazyk, 2016). Applicant recommendation letters, race, and gender were secondary considerations in decision-making outcomes (Bautista, 2018; Frederickson & Stazyk, 2016). The decision-making focus on grades and scores

suggested admissions practices that were not part of considerations based on recommendations, race, and gender.

Reviewer understandings about distinctions between preservice and in-service candidates' verbal and quantitative GRE scores are also presented in the literature on MPA admission criteria. Reviewers have perceived that lower verbal scores of preservice student candidates contrasted with those of their mid-career applicant cohort (Levine et al., 2013). The reverse was noted about quantitative exam results for mid-career candidates who were scoring lower than their preservice counterparts (Levine et al., 2013). The significance of separate considerations between preservice and in-service student applications and test scores suggests that reviewers have counterweighed evaluations of the GRE results and professional credentials as they reviewed applications (Levine et al., 2013). This identification of preservice and career student candidates further implies that this distinction may lead to a weighted evaluation of GRE and professional application criteria.

Researchers have studied the significance of application criteria in assessing student viability; the usefulness of each admission criterion in each candidate review; whether reliance on certain admissions factors leads to the formation of unofficial and informal subcommittees; and the ways these loosely formed subcommittee perspectives may inform student assessments (Husar Holmes, 2012; Kapucu, 2017). Research on the decision-making perspectives of admission committee members have indicated the importance of understanding how committee members, both individually and collectively, perceived quantitative and qualitative application criteria. Researchers have

further suggested the significance of determining how individual and collective committee perceptions influence reviews of GRE scores in deciding student admissions.

The prognostic weight of GRE exam results in MPA admissions has been examined concomitantly with students' first-term GPAs to assess program performance. Researchers have suggested the value of evaluating GRE scores with post-admission GPAs to predict student persistence in an MPA program (Sackett, Dahlke, Shewach, & Kuncel, 2017). The aligned review of GRE scores and graduate rating averages suggested a use for postadmission, probationary MPA student evaluations as part of the admission committees' decision-making process (Sackett et al., 2017).

Waiving the GRE requirement for student candidates, in conjunction with postadmission course grade reviews, suggests no statistical course performance distinctions between students who are granted GRE waivers and those who take the exam (Darolia et al., 2014; Mislavy et al., 2013). The development and application of a GRE waiver policy and student candidates' postadmission course GPA reviews further indicated a possible path to admission for in-service MPA student candidates when review committees examine professional experience criteria to grant GRE waiver approval (Darolia et al., 2014; Mislavy et al., 2013). Assessing professional experience in public administration as a factor in GRE waiver eligibility suggests that MPA committees categorize and designate admission criteria for distinct student candidate types: preservice and in-service public administration professionals. The significance of distinguishing candidates by pre- and in-service standards underscores public administration experience as a determinant criterion that equal to the GRE for evaluating

candidates (Manoharan & Mirbel, 2018). How admission committee members designate conditional MPA program admittance may be determined from undergraduate GPAs presented in the application materials and formal program admission on the GPA from the first three MPA courses (Darolia et al., 2014). Admission committees may also distinguish between the application materials of preservice and in-service candidates by non-degree-seeking status as a criterion to apply a conditional admissions model (Mislevy et al., 2013).

In addition to considerations of GRE scores as a criterion, assessment criteria for MPA admissions include professional and academic measurements. Evaluation of socioeconomic status as an admission criterion is also considered a relevant student candidate characteristic and a means of access. Reviews of MPA student candidates may also include their demonstrated abilities to bypass social challenges to meet entrance requirements. Consideration of candidates' socioeconomic background focuses on contextual hindrance factors and how they relate to students' efficacy for graduate-level study (Sabharwal & Geva-May, 2013).

### **Predictive Validity of the GRE**

The formative role of graduate education has been considered a preparative to qualify individuals for specified careers (Klieger et al., 2017). University graduate committees serve to evaluate student candidate applications for program admittance. Application data are comprised of diverse representative artifacts that an institution typically requires for the selection process. Student candidates' GRE scores may be a necessary application criterion for review (Klieger et al., 2017). But the prognostic

weight of the GRE to measure candidate efficacy and persistence for graduate study may not help determine admission and program completion (Kane, 2016). Thus, its use as a determinate admission criterion is affirmed and accepted by selective institutions, policymakers, and prospective program candidates (Garces, 2014). Researchers have further acknowledged variations in the prognostic validity of the GRE verbal and GRE quantitative scores based on their weight in relation to or distinct from undergraduate GPA, as measured by graduate GPA in the first and cumulative years of study (Klieger et al., 2017; Kuncel, Kochevar, & Ones, 2014; Liu, Klieger, Bochenek, Holtzman, & Xu, 2016). The GRE exam includes an analytic writing segment that peer-reviewed researchers noted serves as a predictive assessment for graduate applicants when results are concomitant with the GRE reading score (Bridgeman, 2016; Bridgeman et al., 2016).

When they are assessed singularly, GRE student candidate results provide numerically calculable data for graduate committees to make program admission decisions (Bejar, Deane, Flor, & Chen, 2017; Kleigher, Cline, Holtzman, Minsky, & Lorenz, 2014). Applicant GRE scores that are assessed as a primary criterion for admission and program persistence may be examined to designate low scores only as relative to the highest scores (Kleigher et al., 2014). The practice of assigning predominance to the GRE could result in the exclusion of student candidates with low scores, but it might also be used as the basis for rejecting applicants with average GRE outcomes (Garces, 2014; Posselt, 2016, 2017). When applications include evidence of prior academic competence, student candidates with mid-range scores may still be considered if other application criteria are weighted with GRE scores (Posselt, 2016,

2017). Researchers have suggested the concomitant review of student candidate GRE scores with undergraduate GPAs to assess viability for graduate study and completion (Dee & Morton, 2016; Garces, 2014; Hatchett, Lawrence, & Coaston, 2016; Kleiger et al., 2017; Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014).

Contrastingly, the literature illustrates that academic background and the graduate exam are not consistent predictors of graduate students' persistence in psychology programs (Morgan, 2018). For specific psychology courses, the GRE Advanced Psychology Test correlated with academic performance (Morgan, 2018). Morgan's study suggested the predictive capacity of a GRE specialty track at the course level of a psychology program. Researchers have indicated alignments between GRE verbal results, GRE quantitative results, and graduate GPA, but predictive outcomes differed between older and younger students (Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014; Shevchenko, 2016). The GRE predictive outcomes designated older students as lower-performing and younger students as exceeding academic performance (Shevchenko, 2016). Graduate GPAs indicated that the GRE's predictive capacity underrated older student performance and overrated younger student performance (Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014; Shevchenko, 2016).

The researchers have also suggested the exam's indeterminate predictive outcomes for international student applicants. The verbal GRE formed a barrier to international students' admissions to graduate programs (Shevchenko, 2016). The American cultural substance of the exam's questions was considered biased and limited in predicting international students' capacities. Student perceptions about the exam's

limited capacity and biased content suggested the need to review and revise the verbal GRE section to eliminate issues of bias and access (Bersola, Stolzenberg, Fosnacht, & Love, 2014; Garces, 2014).

### **Alternate Admissions Assessment Methods**

Critical pedagogy and humanist researchers of the seminal literature have suggested that using higher education admissions testing instruments to assess student capacity is an effect of the commodification of the academy (Darder, 2012; Giroux, 2003, 2004, 2011; Roberts, 2003). Business management models are particularly favored by segments of American society that perceive corporate entities operate more effectively than higher education institutions (Ahmad, 2015; King & Sen, 2013; Lucas, 2014). From this contextual view, the attention corporate enterprises give to processes for standardizing product and service outputs is comparable to the practice of verifying student knowledge for predictive test instruments that identify prototypical graduate candidates. The identification process is intended to discern students who will complete graduate programs successfully as the desired student prototype. Applying test scores as the differential admission criterion may label student candidates who do not meet numerical thresholds—by marginal amounts—as altogether unqualified for program admission (Cortes, 2013).

Alternate approaches to graduate application reviews for diverse programs have been discussed in the literature. They offer the varied efficaciousness of distinct assessment criteria when considered with or separate from test scores. University graduate admissions policies alternately required or did not require candidates' GRE,



GMAT, MCAT, or LSAT scores for application and review. Committees alternately weighed the results of standardized test scores with non-test criteria or solely considered non-test criteria for program admissions. Committee members reviewed undergraduate GPAs, student essays, letters of recommendation, assessments of prior learning, and professional experience to assess student candidate persistence in graduate studies (Kuncel et al., 2014; Ortega, , Burns, Leslie, Schmidt, Austin, Burns, Hussey, Kjelgaard, & Guarino, 2013; Pratt, 2015; Schmidt & Austin, 2013; Stenlund, 2013).

Researchers of peer-reviewed studies have further suggested the differentiation of graduate admission tests and undergraduate GPAs from other evaluative methods as “cognitive,” “noncognitive,” and “soft-skill” measurements (Buckless & Krawczyk, 2016; Grapin, Lee, & Jaafar, 2015; Grice, 2013; Sebok et al., 2014; Yen et al., 2014). The predictive value of non-cognitive assessments for admission criteria—namely, emotional intelligence, multiple-mini interviews, and student engagement—was suggested as applicable singularly and in designated combinations (Buckless & Krawczyk, 2016; Grice, 2013; Husbands & Dowell, 2013; Jones-Schenk & Harper, 2014; Knorr & Hissbach, 2014; MacCann et al., 2014; Sebok et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2016; Yen et al., 2014).

### **Group Decision Making**

MPA admission practices center on the methods committee members use to review application data. Organization leaders typically designate groups to perform multilayered decision-making tasks; they assign significance to the knowledge individuals contribute in a group context to evaluate information and complete the

decision process (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2015). Group decision making is further underpinned by paradigms for “ranking” and “selection” individual and collective considerations (Qin & Liu, 2015; Wang, Wang, & Li, 2016). Researchers of group decision making have suggested individual cognitions, representations within the group context, and group decision-making efficacy when individual understandings inhibit or constrain group evaluations and outcomes (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2015; Liua, Liu, & Qin, 2018; Schafer & Crichlow, 2013). Individual perspectives influence the dissemination and assimilation of decision-information data toward quality of group decision output. Effective data integration and analysis are inhibited when members of a decision-making group do not agree about the primacy of information analysis (Cheng, Chen, & Chiang, 2016; Meyer et al., 2016). Data integration and analysis are compromised when committee members’ emphasis is on unanimity rather than evaluative decisions (Cheng et al., 2016; Meyer et al., 2016).

An alternate form of group-decision consensus may be attained by adapting individual members’ distinct ideals in the outcome (Cabrerizo et al., 2015). Models of argumentation are operationalized in decision-making contexts as a means toward group consensus through the accommodation of diverse conceptions (Cheng et al., 2016). In this context, a judicial perception of proof versus judgment-guided jury decisions is comparable to forming a decision based on data analysis versus personal determination (Meyer et al., 2016). Individual perspectives may selectively guide data review to achieve group consensus and impede optimal use of information (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2015; Kelman, Sanders, & Pandit, 2017). The way group members understand tasks is

predisposed toward unanimity rather than the exploration of information to substantiate decision-making outcomes (Henningesen & Henningesen, 2015).

Information allocation within a group affects decision making. When group members know that individuals have discreet knowledge expertise, they share more data to improve their outcomes (Henningesen & Henningesen, 2016). Individuals in the group setting consider how critical their discreet knowledge and expertise is for the group process (Yue, 2017). Individuals in the group context prioritize the cumulative value of their respective areas of expertise toward decision-data analysis rather than decision-data distribution (Halvorsen, K , 2018). Individual and group orientation toward evaluating rather than exchanging information provides the foundational groundwork for superior decision making. Individual capacity for “micro-level” leadership qualities of questioning and emotional intelligence are determinative for meaningful group decision making (Meyer et al., 2016).

Committees for MPA graduate programs consist of individuals assigned different roles in the applicant review process: faculty, department chairs, department deans, and program directors. Members apply their unique experiential knowledge of the MPA program to assess application data and advance the decision process. These divergent institutional roles also suggest the potential for subgroup formations and divisions based on what might motivate the various stakeholders. The convergence of distinct interests may affect the group’s decision-making capacity when segmented alliances form within the primary group. Such segmentation may develop according to how individual group members perceive affiliations with select members within the larger entity. Member-

identified relationships then form the basis for subgroup alignments stemming from ideals of shared characteristics, subject-matter expertise, and access to or knowledge of resources (Nikolova & Lamberton, 2016; Sui, Yaping, Mo, Le, & Junqi, 2016).

The decision-making process of graduate admission committee members may be specifically contextualized as existing within the revenue and operational objectives of administrative leadership (Posselt, 2016; Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). Fiscal prioritization of programs, based on student enrollment and retention, is one dimension of the commercialization of higher education that increasingly informs academia (Schoorman & Acker-Hocevar, 2013). Corporate frameworks for university academic programs engender a tension in graduate admission decision-making when program financial viability is an imperative.

As higher education organizational groups, MPA graduate admissions committees are officially designated by their institutions with application reviews, analyses, and entrance decisions. Committees review student criteria to determine an applicant's potential to persist in the program. Institutional policy dictates the inclusion, exclusion, or conditional application of the GRE as a criterion for committee decision making. As committee members engage in applicant information, they may be informed and guided by individual perspectives, group and subgroup dynamics, rationality, and organization business imperatives (Cabrerizo et al., 2015; Cheng et al., 2016; Henningsen & Henningsen, 2015; Kämmer, Gaissmaier, Reimer, & Schermuly, 2014).

## **Implications**

After analysis of the collected data, it seemed appropriate, given the study site setting, to prepare a white paper for a policy review of current admission criteria at the focal institution of this study. The bases for policy reviews of current MPA admission methods are as follows: changing conceptions of graduate admission criteria, enhancing student access, and evolving professional contexts in the public sector that necessitate academic preparation to assess and develop students' cognitive and non-cognitive efficacies (Benavides & Keyes, 2014; Dee & Morton, 2016; Fried, Begg, Bayer, & Galea, 2014; Hanson, 2014; Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014; McDonnell & Curtis, 2014). University provosts, MPA chairs, program directors, and faculty stakeholders who evaluate student candidate applications may consider the interrelatedness of admissions criteria with student efficacy and professional outcomes.

Reevaluation of admission criteria to extend the means of assessing student candidate qualifications is a higher education administration function that should evolve to align program curriculum requirements with measurements that attend to varied student capacities in order to demonstrate academic acumen (Dee & Morton, 2016). The institution stakeholders of this study may identify and apply distinct measurements that attend to established academic standards through diverse student candidate assessments. The extension of criteria that align with program requirements and address distinct student candidate capacities is an inclusive approach toward equitable student applicant admissions policies and processes (Dee & Morton, 2016). The inclusion of diverse entrance metrics makes admissions democratic by recognizing students varied,

efficacious dispositions toward graduate education persistence and attainment (McDonnell & Curtis, 2014).

As graduate admission committees recognize and evaluate student candidates' distinct knowledge characteristics, they support the evolving nature of career settings that require professionals with distributed learning and application capacities (Benavides & Keyes, 2014; Hanson, 2014; Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014). MPA student candidates are comprised of individuals who vary in their public-sector experience and are preparing to enter or advance in a field where ever-changing environmental factors determine requisite proficiencies (Benavides & Keyes, 2014). MPA graduate admission committees may consider diverse measurements of student candidates' capacity for program study and persistence as aligned with the public service sector's professional knowledge requirements (Benavides & Keyes, 2014).

University stakeholders who review institutional admission policies include provosts, MPA program deans, directors, faculty, and admission representatives. MPA student applicant stakeholders include early and mid-career individuals. Public-sector stakeholders are government, NGO, not-for-profit, and charity organizations that employ MPA graduates. This study potentially further impacts stakeholders beyond its case site by recommending MPA admission criteria policy reviews toward inclusion of a broader range of determinant metrics.

### **Summary**

The GRE is a distinctly criterion for assessing student candidate applications and admissions at MPA programs in New York State. The researchers of the peer-reviewed

literature suggested varied perspectives of the exam's effectiveness and function as a measure to evaluate candidates' preparedness for study and successful completion of a graduate program. Studies have also suggested alternative means to determine this viability. The researchers of another body of literature presented group decision-making concepts that suggest environmental effects on both individual and collective reviews of qualitative and quantitative information. MPA admissions committees ultimately decide on student candidate program entry. The purpose of this study, then, was to explore these committee members' perspectives of the GRE's role as one element of preservice and in-service applicant evaluations.

In the subsequent sections, the research methodology, project genre, and scholarly reflections are presented. Section 2 includes the research question that guided the case study design for data collection and analysis. The researcher's role is described contextually to delineate the requisite scholarly stance of self-reflection for objectivity throughout data collection. Data collection and analysis are explicated relative to the ways they are aligned with the study inquiry and methodological literature. Section 2 concludes with a summary of the study problem and social change implication.

Section 3 of the finalized study is comprised of segments that present evidence of quality in the data collection and analysis steps, procedures for assessing discrepant data, analysis procedure, explanation of the study findings, the study goals, rationale, review of the literature, implementation timetable, project evaluation, and implications for social change. In Section 3, the researcher's quality measure of identifying and addressing disconfirming data is also described. The steps for maintaining integrity throughout the

data analysis phase are explained and the findings are detailed in relation to participant demographics and thematic narratives. The literature review is synthesized as a body of scholarly research toward alignment with the study problem, findings, and project genre. Section 3 concludes with an explanation of the study's local and far-reaching implications for social change.

Section 4 of the study contains reflections on the researcher's role, the project 'study and genre, learned leadership and change concepts, self-analysis practitioner and project developer concepts, as well as evaluation of the project genre in relation to the study problem, findings, and implications for future research. Reflections on the researcher's role, the study, and project genre are described from the experiential stance of discerning the project's strengths and limitations. Scholarship, leadership, and change concepts include detailed reflections on lessons derived from the project development experience as well as engaging with participants in the research milieu. The self-analyses segments present detailed outlooks of the transitions from student to scholar, practitioner, and project developer in undertaking the project study. Section 4 concludes with information about the study's suggested social change impact and pathways for further research.



## Section 2: The Methodology

### **Research Design and Approach**

Section 1 presented the problem definition, rationale, the problem at the local level, and peer-reviewed literature. Section 2 includes the rationale for selecting the case methodology over other approaches and a comprehensive review of how the inquiry technique was developed to address the investigative queries of this study. The following topics are described: research design, research questions, sampling strategy, participant selection, participant safeguards, investigator's role, data collection, and data examination and elucidation. The section concludes with a summary of the method and transition discussion about Section 3.

Northeast regional universities that offer the MPA are distinct in their consideration of the GRE for admissions. One northeast regional university was the study case for this single case study. The institution does not require the GRE as a criterion for admission. The university's approach to the GRE as a criterion for admission presents the phenomenal and bounded contexts for this case study (Merriam, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Stake, 2006). The institution's MPA faculty and administrators assess applications from student candidates to determine their academic capacities. The MPA faculty and administrator applicant reviewer roles situate these individuals as focus samples for rigorous study within the phenomenal and bounded contexts of the institution (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 2006).

### **Research Question**

Experiential questions are posed to explore individual perspectives and rationales for the distinct condition of GRE application in university admissions decision-making (Stake, 2006). The research question for this study was: In what ways do MPA faculty and program administrators perceive the GRE's efficacy as a predictive indicator for student candidate access, persistence, and program completion?

### **Research Design**

The research question for this study was centered on discerning individual perspectives and the ways they are shaped and applied in one university MPA graduate admission process, which aligned with the design of the study (see Yin, 2014). The problem that formed the basis for this research was participants' need to review the university's current admission policy with GRE exclusion contextually with scholarly literature to consider admission criteria based on empirical research. Thus, I applied a case study methodology to analyze occurrences of individual stances about a practice in an institution framework. The case study approach is a way to of conduct empirical inquiry about a phenomenon in its setting (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). The single-case study design allowed for an in-depth inquiry of the institution's admission policy and practice. A case study is distinct from other qualitative means of inquiry because its focus is the analysis of a problem within a "bounded system" (Merriam, 2009). Cases are empirical units of societal events and experiences that are present in a particular time and place (Patton, 2015).

Alternate qualitative inquiry methods—ethnography and autoethnography—were not suitable choices for undertaking this research. The primary inquiry focus of ethnography research is to explore cultural phenomena (Patton, 2015). An ethnographer mainly assumes the role of an observer to conduct this form of immersive field research (Patton, 2015). An ethnographic study was not practical for this study because the central aim to investigate individual perspectives relative to institutional and local area policy constructs needed to be accomplished within a limited timeframe. The autoethnography method evolved from researchers' postcolonial considerations as inherently biased by predispositions to his or her individual ideals (Patton, 2015). The autoethnographic approach of the researcher examining his or her own culture was not suitable for this study purpose of investigating stakeholder viewpoints about institutional policy and practice. Quantitative methods were also not appropriate for this study because of (a) the nature of the investigation inquiries; (b) the lack of control over setting and participants; (c) the study's focus on current practices; and (d) the need to collect data that cannot be assessed with statistical measures (Yin, 2014).

I focused on the application of the GRE exam at a MPA program to explore individual perspectives in one type of setting (Merriam, 2009). The case study approach is appropriate when it centers on a specific context (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). One case was studied: an institution where the GRE is not a criterion for admission. The university's admission practice supports the logic for conceptual inquiry to analyze a particular "construct" rather than representation (Miles et al., 2014). A requisite condition for the study of a single case is the capacity to attain insight into a subject that, within its

broader context, has a common program, phenomenon, or issue as the study's focus (Patton, 2015; Stake, 2006).

### **Sampling Strategy and Participation Selection**

I employed a purposeful selection method to review the case in this study (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Purposeful selection in a single case study is appropriate for focused exploration of individual perspectives that inform the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The small sample size of this case aligned with qualitative inquiry that seeks significance toward informing a field of practice (Patton, 2015). The sampling strategy and participant selection were further informed by within-case sampling methodology that necessitated attention to the nested, theoretical, and iterative attributes of studying participants within a context (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

It was important to include sample participants who would support an exploration of individual and collective perspectives that inform the use and exclusion of the GRE as a predictive criterion for MPA admissions. Sample participant selection is pertinent to address the study purpose and investigate the basis of its inquiry (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). The rationale for sample participant selection was further guided by a focus on individual perspective as a "unit of analysis" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 138). Case study site selection was supported by the need to explore the research question by including an MPA degree-granting institution that has defined the GRE as an admission criterion. A typical case site was determined by the following common criteria recognized by the

Institute of Education Sciences National Center for Education Statistics as distinguishing features of higher education institutions:

- Institutions with the same sector type: private not-for-profit, 4-year, or above;
- Universities with the doctoral/research Carnegie classification;
- Universities located in similar, large city campus settings; and
- Universities with no religious affiliations.

The following additional selection criteria were applied as particularly relevant to this study:

- Universities with similar, large city campus settings in one northeast U.S. state;
- Universities that offer MPA programs and maintain current accreditation status with the NASPAA;
- Universities with Master of Public Administration programs in existence for 10 or more years;
- MPA Programs with at least three-degree tracks: government, health care, and not-for-profit management;
- A university that requires the GRE as a criterion for admission to its MPA program; or
- A university that does not require the GRE as a criterion for admission to its MPA program.

Case study researchers apply selection methodology of a sample within a sample (Merriam, 2009; Miles et al., 2014). For this study, the university case provided one

sample tier. MPA program administrators and faculty who review student applicant credentials to enact admission comprised a second sample tier. MPA admission committees consist of faculty and administrators who evaluate and decide the acceptance status of applicants (Darolia et al., 2014). MPA program administrators and faculty who review student candidate applications for admission are key knowledge holders about the admission policies and practices of their institutions (Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). As individuals charged with applying the admission practices of each institution, MPA program administrators and faculty were suitable participants for this study. The specific criteria for faculty and administrator participant selection were as follows:

- MPA faculty and administrators who are employed as full-time members at the institution of this study;
- MPA faculty and administrators who have served to assess student candidate applications at the institution of this study; and
- MPA faculty and administrators who have served in an admission decision-making capacity at the institution of this study.

My research involving a single-case study sampling led me to determine that there was no fixed, ideal participant number; my sampling was aligned with the purpose of this inquiry and its selection strategy. The importance of the study sample size was its yield of rich and in-depth information (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Stake, 2006). The sufficiency of sample size may be determined by saturation of collected data when no new data are collected, and the point of redundancy is reached (Patton, 2015). The two participants of this study provided in-depth responses to inform

the research question. The collected data from individual and focus group interviews yielded the participants' experiential, individual perspectives to derive multilevel thematic analyses and explication.

The rationale for undertaking this case study was exploring distinct individual perspectives about practice; the collected data are not representative data (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Multiple case samples beyond the single case were not practical for my resources and required completion timeframe. The initial methodology for this study involved two cases: one university that requires the GRE as an admission criterion and another that does not, but the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of one institution that requires the GRE did not respond with a determination for my request. I also received approval for two subsequent changes of procedure from Walden's IRB (approval no.10-13-16-0180679). I sent invitational letters to two alternate universities who require the GRE but did not garner study participants.

Participant sample composition was determined by the higher education institution, faculty, and administrator selection criteria. The university requires its own IRB approval for external individuals who are conducting studies with participant members of the institution. A study application—with relevant information such as the study's purpose and participant confidentiality—was posted on the institution's IRB web page and sent to its designated administrators. Introduction and informed consent letters were mailed to the chairs, faculty members, and program administrators of the school's MPA program following their IRB's approval to conduct the study. The e-mailed introduction letters included a request for one individual interview and one focus group

interview, as well as the prospective participants' preferred method for further communications (telephone or e-mail); e-mails also included my contact information. In total, I sent 12 invitational letters and contacted the two individuals who confirmed their willingness to participate using their preferred method of communication. The other MPA faculty and administrators alternately responded to decline my study invitation or did not respond.

To form the researcher–participant working relationship, I started with my self-assessment to ensure that I attended to the necessary attributes for case study research before meeting the participants. Research establishing the researcher–participant relationship means developing mindful inquiry that attends to both questions and their interpretations, listening to participants actively and objectively, and avoiding biases (Yin, 2014, p. 73). I began my communications with participants as an impartial individual who was interested in their perspectives but not assigning personal assessments to their information (see Patton, 2015). Respecting the study participants' sensibilities, time schedules, and confidentiality was an important means of creating and sustaining the working relationships to advance this study (Josselson, 2013).

I protected the study participants' rights through the following procedural steps. I conducted this study as the sole researcher. My initial correspondence with participants included an informed consent letter that clearly detailed the purpose, scope, voluntary, confidential, and anonymous nature of this study. I requested that participants sign the informed consent to indicate that they understood the specified conditions of their participation. I used only my address for the receipt of mailed, returned letters of



informed consent. I hand-delivered and retrieved letters of informed consent that were not mailed before conducting participant interviews. All informed consent letters and subsequent communications with the participants were maintained in a secured document case that is in my personal home office. Field notes that included participant responses to interview questions were reviewed only by me and maintained in my locked file cabinet. Only I as the sole researcher saw all participant identifying information and maintained its confidentiality. The file cabinet containing study materials remained locked at all times when I did not use it to retrieve or include collected data from my field notes, audio recordings, transcribed audio recordings, worksheets, and capstone study printed iterations. Identifying information of the institutions and participants are not included in the study. I used the pseudonym MPA Program when referring to the institution and Participant A and Participant B in place of participant names.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am currently employed as an education program administrator at a state government office in the Northeast United States. I am a former employee and graduate of the case site for this study. It has been 7 years since my employment at the university and 12 years since my student status. I was employed in a distinct administrative department in a support staff capacity that did not directly oversee the MPA program, faculty, or administrators. Since graduating from the university, I have not sustained interactions with former professors or administrators. In the process of establishing the initial rapport of each interview, I shared my prior affiliations with the university in the interview context for full participant disclosure. Sharing my prior university associations

presented the dual considerations of my internal stance as researcher and the potentially affective dynamics on my study participants and our interview discourse. My perspective about the GRE as a criterion for MPA admissions was informed by my experience of selecting a program that did not require the examination. I acknowledged both my personal feelings of bias derived from experience and my qualitative researcher's stance of interpretive inquiry that required attention to how I distinguished my inferences of the data content (Josselson, 2013). I assimilated and applied an ethical stance of ongoing self-assessment to (a) acknowledge and deconstruct my assumptions about the participants, (b) acknowledge and deconstruct my assumptions about the study's problem, and (c) challenge my data findings through analysis (Josselson, 2013).

As a researcher who interviewed case study participants, I was engaged in sustained communications to explore the perceptual dispositions of the interviewees to investigate the study topic (Josselson, 2013; Yin, 2014). The study participants' perceptions of me as a researcher and responses in the interview context may have been altered by their knowledge of my past associations with the university. It was important for me to navigate the interpersonal undercurrents of familiarity and presumption about my knowledge of the institution by affirming my role as a researcher whose past university association did not inform my understandings of their perspectives in the institution's current milieu (Josselson, 2013). My past contextual familiarity formed the basis for initiating rapport with participants. Our interview discourse was underpinned by my inquiry disposition and the exploratory and structural rigor of interview questions to address the study problem (Josselson, 2013). The researcher's systematic application of

data collection methodology to address the research inquiry determines the depth of interview outcomes (Patton, 2015). Thus, to practice an exploratory perspective and apply structural rigor, I aligned my interviews with the following guiding criteria for narrative inquiries: (a) open-ended questions, (b) clarification, (c) active listening, (d) neutrality, and (e) observation (Patton, 2015).

### **Data Collection**

Yin (2014) described the interview as “one of the most important sources of case evidence” (p. 110). Participant initial and focus group interviews informed the project study data collection. An extended case study discussion may be conducted in one in-depth session or multiple sessions to understand and clarify participants’ responses (Yin, 2014). For this project study, I conducted interviews in individual and focus group formats. Initial interviews were conducted with individual participants and took place in person at two university campus sites. The second interview was conducted as an online focus group with the two participants who were individually interviewed. Selective application of technological tools enables inclusive and systemic qualitative data collection and analyses (Patton, 2015). The focus group interview was conducted in an online chat format using FocusGroupIt as the software platform (FocusGroupIt, n.d.). The ubiquitous nature of technological resources for meeting interactions provides the means for synchronous, remote site interview data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Participants engaged in the focus group meeting from their respective locations via computer. As the sole researcher and meeting facilitator, I accessed the web focus group software to schedule and facilitate the focus group meeting. I emailed each

participant in advance of the meeting to confirm receipt of the meeting invitation, passwords, pass names, and instructions. Participants accessed the focus group meeting on their computers via web link (FocusGroupIt, n.d.). To further protect participant confidentiality, the online focus group was closed and available only by assigned, distinct password and pass name (FocusGroupIt, n.d.). Pass names did not reflect the participants' real names (FocusGroupIt, n.d.). I scheduled both the individual and focus group interviews for 1 hour. The timeframe and scheduling of interviews may not be entirely predetermined because the researcher must adhere to how available the participants are for two meetings (Yin, 2014). Allotting 1 hour for individual interviews provides participants with opportunities to respond reflectively; it also allows the interviewer to probe responses for greater depth (Josselson, 2013; Patton, 2015).

I conducted member checking from individual interviews prior to the focus group interview. Each individual interview was audio recorded, transcribed, typed, and saved on my password-protected computer. Interview summaries of the individual interviews were sent to the respective corresponding participants as email attachments, with stated requests that participants read their respective interview transcripts and note comments and questions prior to the focus group meeting. Participant reviews of interview responses provide explanatory cogency to distinguish the connotative and denotative meanings of collected data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 190). The 1-hour focus group interview timeframe allows both participants and the interviewer time to review transcribed information and make sure it coheres with participants' expressed perspectives and allows for further probing and clarifying past responses from the

individual sessions (Josselson, 2013; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). The focus group session began with a brief synopsis of the case research. I stated the study research question and shared the group interview questions. Participants responded to the interview questions and I asked clarifying questions about their comments. Multiple interviews provide opportunities for substantive inquiry, corroboration of data, and additional queries (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). As the primary and sole meeting facilitator, I exported the FocusGroupIt meeting transcript as a document file to my password-protected computer.

The scheduling considerations of engaging individual and focus-group interviews necessitated the development of formalized means to collect and analyze data in a uniform way (Miles et al., 2014,). I developed a list of uniform, open-ended questions to guide my individual and focus group interviews (Patton, 2015). In conducting this study, I sought to explore individual perspectives to address the research question. I conducted a field test to determine the alignment of interview questions with the guiding research questions of this study. The selection of field-test participants may be based on subject-matter knowledge, willingness to participate, and location accessibility (Yin, 2014). Due to the timeframe of this study, I sent introduction emails to two faculty and two administrators of a local MPA program at a distinct institution from the two cases of this study. One MPA administrator responded to my introduction and expressed perspectives about the possible content of questions for my study in advance of my further response. My subsequent response email included a description of the general topic of my project, its research questions, and interview questions. I requested that the field-test participant

respond with comments about the alignment of my study interview and research questions via email. Field-test participants typically expect the researcher to give them feedback about their participation (Yin, 2014). The administrator did not respond to comments about my specific research and interview questions. Other individuals from the university did not respond to my initial invitation to participate in the field-test. I then sent invitations to MPA faculty and administrators from another local institution that was distinct from the one of this study, but I did not receive further responses from individuals at this second institution.

I audio recorded and took field notes of the individual interview sessions for the formal study. Recording the interviews and taking field notes depict the distinctive participant viewpoints in the single and focus group formats to support data collection and analysis (Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) specified four reasons to support interview recordings with field notes: (a) “to formulate new questions”; (b) “to ensure the intended direction of inquiries and stimulate early insights”; (c) “to facilitate later analysis”; and (d) as “a backup” for equipment failure (p. 473). I used a hand-held digital voice recorder to record participant individual interviews. The focus group interview responses were recorded from the online session. I adapted a template as a collected data worksheet and organized emergent understandings from interview data (Stake, 2006). I transcribed each audio recording and reviewed my field notes to organize the collected data in the template with the following sections: interview questions, response issues, response major topics, response minor topics, response quotes, and my impressions (Stake, 2006).

I used interview transcripts, field notes, collected data worksheets, summary reports, and participant follow-up responses to organize collected interview data. Case study information should be organized so that it presents the scholar's narrative as substantively supported by evidence (Yin, 2014). Collected data documentation from individual and focus group data were filed by institution, group, and participant names. Field notes, audio tapes, transcription documents, collected data worksheets, and summary reports were kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office to which I have sole access as the researcher.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the interview data revealed four emergent themes: Theme 1—GRE as a means for student applicant exclusion; Theme 2—approaches to enable student admission and inclusion; Theme 3—GRE's limited validity for applicant assessment; and Theme 4—GRE not predictive for MPA professional practice. The collected data for this study originated from participant interviews at one university MPA program. I prepared the collected data for detailed analysis by developing summary reports from my interview field notes and audio transcriptions following each interview session. To test the collected data for quality, member checking took place within 2 weeks of each concluded interview with summary reports of the individual and focus group interviews. Summary reports were developed and comprised of my typed interview field notes and transcribed interviews. I provided each individual interviewee with a copy of his or her corresponding summary report, with a note requesting review and response questions or comments. I noted date and time options for follow-up meetings to discussion participant

questions or comments about the summary reports. The focus group participants were able to review their typed responses during the synchronous session and apply edits before submitting responses to the online forum.

The member-checking procedure clarified data interpretations and participant perspectives for accurate representation, coding, and analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2006). Triangulation of the collected data was enacted through the distinct, applied methodologies of individual interviews with open questions, focus group interviews with structured questions, and member checking (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Stake, 2006). I analyzed the collected data from individual interview audio recordings, summary reports of my field notes, and focus group transcripts. The collected data from these sources informed my development of critical notes that I applied to identifying topical themes and patterns (Saldana, 2013, 2016). I assessed the emergent themes and patterns from the interview data to identify relevant topics in the peer-reviewed literature and analyze the related concepts. Assessing relevant peer-reviewed literature is important to inform both study design and data analysis (Patton, 2015). My analysis from the three distinct data sources and data types informed this case study by testing for consistency of findings (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). I collected and analyzed interview data after each individual interview was completed and after the focus group interview was concluded. Simultaneous collection and analysis provided opportunities to identify data as they emerged, pinpoint concepts for further investigation, and assess the cogency of the collected data with the study's research questions (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Saldana, 2013).



Saldana (2013) allocated the coding process into two segments: “First Cycle and Second Cycle”; codes are initially assigned and then further elaborated for refined analysis (pp. 58-59). I applied an “inductive” coding method to identify emergent, individual participant viewpoints (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2013, 2016). In the first coding phase, I categorized participant dispositions. Miles et al. (2014) summarized “emotion coding, values coding, and evaluation coding” as distinct “affective methods” to identify individual perspectives (pp. 75-76). In the second coding phase, I particularized the codes to integrate data relationships (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2013, 2016). Miles et al. (2014) synopsis the utility of “elaborating coding patterns with narrative description” (p. 91). I applied this story approach to further define the expressed perspectives of study participants and identify discrepant cases. I identified discrepant cases from individual and focus group interview data in the first coding phase of analysis. In the first phase of analysis, I expanded the coding scheme so that it further delineated and explained emergent outlier perspectives according to the three coding labels (Miles et al., 2014).

My initial data analysis approach considered university participants as the case and applied subsequent thematic analysis methodology. Ravitch and Carl (2016) posited that the “thematic analysis approach is appropriate to note relationships, similarities, and differences in the data” (p. 222). I followed the thematic analysis procedure to determine primary emergent themes that are particular to the case (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Through thematic analysis, I further compared and contrasted participants’ discrepant data findings.

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore individual faculty and administrator perspectives of the prognostic weight of the GRE as an MPA candidate admission criterion. MPA programs in the local setting practice distinct inclusion of the GRE as a criterion for admission. Analysis of the collected data and articulation of the findings are aligned with the study's purpose and research question: In what ways do MPA faculty and program administrators perceive the GRE's efficacy as a predictive indicator for student candidate access, persistence, and program completion? The case institution does not use the GRE. The study participants do not have an empirical basis for excluding the exam from the admission criteria. Analysis of the collected data distilled participant perspectives as thematic premises aligned with the materialized problem of not having evidence-based data to support the current admission practice of excluding the GRE. Thus, the data analysis method was appropriate for looking for emergent themes that reflected participants' perceptions about the efficacy of the exam and its effect on student access.

The data analysis was well aligned to distill the participants' expressed points-of-view where they elucidated the following thematic premises: (a) the GRE's potential for exclusion; (b) enabling MPA admission and inclusion; (c) the GRE's limited predictive efficacy for student persistence; and (d) the GRE's lack of predictive validity toward MPA professional practice. The research question was further informed by the participants' shared perspectives of the GRE as an instrument that is narrowly prescribed in its predictive scope and applicability within the MPA program context.

The thematic premises of the analyzed data revealed a pattern of conceptions about the GRE that is parallel to the university's policy and practice of excluding the exam from the MPA admission review process. Concomitantly, the study problem of distinct regional practices was distilled through the participants' responses that revealed their questioning of the bases for the current admission practice and interest in scholarly research standpoints to inform institution policy and practice systemically. This study's data analysis and findings of GRE predictive validity for MPA students were based on participants' comparative impressions of admission assessments and program "fit" (Bright, 2018; Bright & Graham, 2018). The critical pedagogy and humanist conceptual frameworks of this study elucidated the utility of admission assessments to form graduate applicant profiles that are items for review to qualify and quantify predictive values alternately (DelBanco, 2012; Espelande & Sauder, 2016; Giroux, 2012). The extant literature and theoretical premises informed the study's purpose of explicating stakeholder perspectives relevant to the research query and discern approaches to the study's problem of needed empirically-based admission policy and practice at the case institution.

### **Summary**

The research purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to examine individual understandings about the predictive weight of the GRE for MPA admissions. A single case study was used to ascertain the admission committee members' points-of-view about the prognostic merit of the exam and its access effects. The university of this case does not require the GRE as part of its application and candidate assessment policy.

This inquiry was undertaken as a single key informants' case to investigate the perceptions of participants relative to the case problem. The data were collected using recorded and transcribed single interviews, an online synchronous focus group, researcher notes, and interview reports. Data collected from audio recordings were transcribed and developed into summary reports. The reports were then provided to the case participants for member checking to evaluate the accuracy of the response interpretations. Focus group summary reports were shared with participants to triangulate them with data collected from individual interviews. The data reports were coded in a two-level sequence subsequent to the interviews. The first coding level included nascent, broad themes.

During the second-level coding process, themes were refined to discern and elaborate similar outlines through narrative description. The interview data were analyzed for comparative themes that informed the research questions. One of the themes emerging from data analysis was the participants' shared views that the exam has limited application for discerning individuals' potential for public administration practice. I further applied reflective questioning to identify and present discrepant data. Reflective questions are framed by the researcher to differentiate perspectives, define viewpoints, and clarify ambiguities to discern thematic premises toward objective analysis of collected data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

As the project study researcher, I explored the perspectives of a faculty member and an administrator at one university, both of whom review student academic background information for MPA program admittance, about the agency of the GRE as

an application benchmark. The GRE is not required as a criterion for applicant admission at the case institution. The project genre for this study is a white paper that presents synthesized, current research to further inform admission practice at the case institution. A possible social change result of this study is an institutional admission policy review to include cognitive and further non-cognitive assessments as criteria for MPA graduate admissions. The following section presents this inquiry as a finalized study.

### Section 3: The Project

#### **Introduction**

The white paper project genre for this study was derived from the study problem of the case university's MPA admission policy and practice that were not informed by current empirical data. The white paper presents a synthesis of the peer-reviewed literature. The current literature describes holistic approaches to graduate admissions toward empirical and learner-centered approaches. The objective of this qualitative case study was to explore and evaluate the individual perspectives of MPA administrators and faculty about the use of the GRE as an application criterion for student candidates. Participant perspectives were obtained through individual and focus group interviews. One MPA program chair (Participant A) and one full-time faculty member (Participant B) were the participants. Both Participant A and Participant B confirmed their direct involvement in the review and assessment of MPA student candidates for the university program. The participants further expressed an interest in describing their viewpoints about the GRE's effectiveness as a predictive measure for MPA student applicant admittance and program persistence. Finally, the participants indicated that they wished to learn more about the predictive efficacy of the GRE and identify other approaches for student applicant assessment.

I initially designed this inquiry as a multiple case study. I completed and submitted IRB applications with universities who met the criteria of this study, as described in Section 2. I sought IRB approval at one institution to conduct the study with their MPA faculty and administrators, but the institution's IRB did not respond. I was

granted IRB approvals to conduct this study with two alternate universities. I sent invitational letters to 14 MPA faculty and 10 MPA administrators at their respective institutions. They either did not respond to my study invitation or replied to indicate their inability to participate. I also sent study invitation letters to eight faculty and six administrators of the case university's MPA program. Of the 14 letters transmitted, one faculty member and one administrator responded to affirm their interest in participating in my study. The other faculty and administrators either noted their lack of availability or did not respond to my invitation. It was not practical for the study's timeframe to revise the participant criteria and reapply for Walden IRB approval.

Consequently, I conducted individual interviews with Participant A and Participant B of the participant institution using a self-developed instrument comprised of six open-ended questions. The participants also took part in an online focus group, which was comprised of four structured interview questions completed synchronously to allow for probing and clarifying follow-up questions and responses. Participant A and Participant B accessed the online focus group session and questions with individual passcodes. They typed their own responses and I followed the session with an e-mail inquiry to ascertain if they wished to append further clarifications to their initial responses. The participants did not amplify or revise their initial focus group responses.

### **Evidence of Quality**

The researcher's use of combined data collection approaches or distinct data sources supports the soundness of a study (Patton, 2015). To lessen possible threats to information validity, I triangulated the data by collecting them in two distinct ways: (a)

individual interviews comprised of open questions, and (b) a focus group interview comprised of structured questions. I also attained the collected data from two discrete perspectives: a member of the faculty and a program administrator. I developed and shared interview summary reports with the faculty member and chair that were comprised of individual interview transcripts and my field notes. Member checking was significant to ensure that I accurately described participant responses and diminished possible misconceptions during the analysis phase of the collected data (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Each individual interview summary was shared privately with the respective participant to ensure confidentiality.

The participants reviewed their respective summaries. Participant B provided further clarification for one response from the individual interview. Participant A did not respond with formative comments from the individual interview. The participants typed their responses to the focus group questions. The nature of the online focus group enabled synchronous member checking through the participants' self-documented responses to the interview questions. The process of member checking further provided assurance of collected information accuracy as an essential protocol for subsequent analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015).

### **Procedures for Dealing with Discrepant Data**

Participant A and Participant B had differing perspectives about the efficacy of the GRE in the MPA admission context. Participant B described the GRE's use to provide supplementary evidence of a candidate's potential efficacy in the MPA program. But Participant A's perspective was that the GRE is not a reliable indicator of student



ability in the MPA program but rather a singular means for institutions to discern which students to accept.

My further analysis of the collected data revealed a second point of differing participants' viewpoints concerning the potential efficacy of the GRE for distinct education programs and levels. Participant A described that the GRE's quantitative exam section was predictive in the context of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) master's program admissions. The participant stated a correlation between those disciplines and the need for program stakeholders to assess applicants' quantitative reasoning capacities. Participant B posited that the GRE's quantitative reasoning segment is aligned with the requirements of doctoral-level programs where students are required to develop research products that necessitate connected data analyses. The participant described the GRE as an optimal assessment tool for gauging whether prospective students have the capacity for doctoral-level study. I accounted for the participants' distinct viewpoints by modifying two of the themes derived from probing the data (see Miles et al., 2014). The researcher may be predisposed to identifying patterns in the analysis segment rather than purposefully discerning disconfirming data; however, identifying inconsistencies is an essential aspect of performing a rigorous study (Miles et al., 2014).

### **Analysis of the Data**

Case data analysis is underpinned by methodology that is aligned with the research purpose and study questions (Patton, 2015). To sustain the accuracy of this inquiry and lessen potential researcher bias, I refrained from imposing personal

conceptions of the GRE on the interview, analysis, and interpretation segments of this work. Analysis of the individual and focus group data informed my research questions and study purpose to explore the MPA faculty's and administrator's perspectives of the determinative cogency of the GRE for MPA program candidates. The data were analyzed in two distinct phases: (a) assessment of the interview information, and (b) evaluation of concurrent notes from the interview meetings. In the initial data analysis phase of interview data, value codes are used to label the values, attitudes, and beliefs of participants (Saldana, 2016, pp. 131-132). Value codes may be assigned for discourse analysis without disaggregation to differentiate values, attitudes, and beliefs; the designation "value" may incorporate all three (Saldana, 2016).

I read the typed individual and focus group interview transcripts as well as my interview notes and inserted brackets around participants' phrases that suggested value stances about the GRE. I did not distinguish participant values, attitudes, and beliefs during the first coding phase. The research purpose and questions of this study are not aligned with identifying participants' incentives, ways of life, or suggesting correlations (see Saldana, 2016). Abbreviated value codes were assigned to the bracketed participant responses. After reviewing Participant B's responses, the following value codes were defined: applicant background important, student commitment important, GRE intimidates, GRE excludes, reviewer discretion important, conditional acceptance important, limited test relevancy, test primacy not fair, tests quantitative skills, tests for research skills, MPA for professional practice, and MPA not for quantitative research. I annotated Participant B's responses with these code phrases as well as listed them on a

separate sheet of paper. The code phrases were then attached to Participant B's individual and focus group responses. I proceeded similarly to review and annotate Participant A's responses with short-phrase codes derived from the collected data. Participant A's interview responses were annotated with the following code phrases: GRE to weed out, testing as a business, literature does not support, losing quality candidates, applicant background important, limited test relevancy, student commitment important, MPA for professional practice, and MPA not for quantitative research. Participant A's annotated responses were replicated to form a list on a separate sheet of paper which was attached to the individual and focus group interview transcripts.

To further refine the coded phrases, I employed code mapping to organize the data for the second coding phase (see Saldana, 2016). Twenty-four value code phrases derived from the faculty and chair responses were listed. I compared, contrasted, and sorted the value codes to delineate typologies for the participant perspectives (Saldana, 2016). I developed six categories and grouped the value codes according to the corresponding categories: (a) student agency; (b) student access; (c) GRE purpose; (d) GRE relevance; (e) public administration profession; and (f) MPA admissions stakeholder actions. Value codes and typologies were determined based on the significance of individual and focus group responses to inform the research questions (Seidman, 2013). A third iteration of the code-mapping process helped combine the six categories and value codes as a final step before the second coding phase (Saldana, 2016). Three participant response categories were derived, and the value codes were regrouped to align with the typologies: (a) student agency and access, (b) GRE purpose

and relevance for public administrators, and (c) MPA admission stakeholder actions. I studied the three categories and realigned value codes to discern patterns from participant perspectives to further determine emergent, significant themes (see Saldana, 2016).

### **Study Findings**

Four major themes were derived from the collected data from two individual interviews and one focus group interview. The themes were identified by categorizing related codes that resulted from the interviews. The first theme related to the use of the GRE exam to exclude student applicants based on the premise of selectivity. The participants posited that the inclusion of the GRE as an application criterion is a practice designed to align conceptions of program quality with student selectivity.

The second theme was aligned with the participants' values perspectives that distinct means of assessing applicant capacities for graduate study is a necessary feature of MPA admissions policies and procedures. They indicated that multiple, distinct modes of evaluating candidate readiness for MPA study is important for an inclusive program and student body, as they stated that diversity in public administration professions should start with university admission policies and practices that are centered on ideals of access.

The third theme was the GRE's limited validity for MPA applicant assessment. The participants emphasized the diminished relevance of GRE results when compared to student determination, as represented by undergraduate persistence. Participant A related that students who overcome financial, family, and work responsibilities to complete an undergraduate degree reflect tenaciousness, which demonstrates ability to persist in an MPA program. Participant B further indicated that students who complete bachelor

programs may amplify academic skills through their willingness to take additional, developmental courses. The participant emphasized that admission policies and procedures may stipulate academic skills courses, rather than the GRE, as an alternate entry path to MPA programs.

The fourth theme was that GRE results do not measure knowledge and skills that are essential in the professional setting. Participant A described that the GRE's test content is not relevant for the qualitative nature of public administration work. The participant described the need for MPA student candidates to demonstrate their potential for adapting analysis skills in ambiguous, nebulous contexts rather than trying to ascertain meaning through numerical data. Participant B highlighted this point by relating the misalignment of GRE's academic subject content with the professional practice of public administration.

I undertook this study to investigate the participants' perspectives about the efficacy of the GRE for MPA admissions to address the research problem. Local universities offering the MPA have distinct application requirements for the GRE. A researcher may apply "analytic induction" as an approach to synthesize theories from a study's peer-reviewed literature and its participant viewpoints (Patton, 2015). The research question that informed this inquiry was: In what ways do MPA faculty and program administrators perceive the GRE's efficacy as a predictive indicator for student candidate access, persistence, and program completion? The study findings present the distinct outlooks of its faculty and administrator participants about the predictive validity of the GRE as well as their viewpoints about the distinct outcome effects of the exam for

student admittance and graduate study performance in the MPA program. Concepts from the critical pedagogy and humanist theoretical frameworks of this study informed the themes from the participants' responses. The participant responses, thematic syntheses, and the peer-reviewed literature informed the outcomes of this study. I presented the results of this inquiry to the participants and other MPA admission stakeholders as a white paper, in which I synthesized the current literature on two areas of graduate admission practice.

### **Setting and Participant Demographics**

A local urban university MPA program was the setting for this project study. The university's student body is comprised of diverse regional, national, and international individuals. Applicants for the MPA program include preservice individuals who have not worked in public administration capacities as well as in-service sector practitioners with varying levels of professional experience. The program includes degree specializations for government, not-for-profit, and healthcare administration. The participants are full-time employees of the university that was the case for this study. One participant was an MPA faculty member, and the other participant was the program chair. The faculty member's described background included work in financial management roles in the government sector. The faculty member related research interests that led to a career transition and teaching in the university program. The program chair's shared background included administration of not-for-profit organizations in international settings. Both participants related the relevancy of their experiential knowledge to the university program setting. Each participant serves as a member of the MPA admission

committee that evaluates prospective students' applications and decides whether they qualify for admission to the program. The university does not require or evaluate GRE scores as a criterion for admission to its NASPAA-accredited MPA program. Student candidates who apply for admittance must hold baccalaureate degrees from accredited institutions and provide the following undergraduate transcripts, three reference letters, a personal statement, and the completed university application form. The faculty member and program chair described and exemplified their perspectives of the efficacy of the GRE for assessing program applicants within this context.

### **Themes**

Four major themes were identified from grouping similar codes in a two-phase process. During the first phase of coding, I used a labeling system to identify and group participants' attitudes, emotions, values, and belief stances in response to individual and focus group questions (see Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2013, 2016). I further segmented participants' responses during the second coding phase to identify comparisons and contrasts. I applied a narrative approach to derive thematic titles that represented the overarching meanings and contents of the participants' shared perspectives (see Miles et al., 2014). I analyzed participants' contrasting responses to explicate them as discrepant cases (see Miles et al., 2014). The four principal themes that emerged during the data analysis were:

1. GRE as a means for student applicant exclusion (by programs/universities);
2. Approaches to enable student admission and inclusion;
3. GRE's limited validity for applicant assessment; and

4. GRE not predictive for MPA professional practice.

**Theme 1: GRE as a Means for Student Applicant Exclusion (by Programs/Universities)**

The university of this study does not require GRE exam scores as an application criterion to consider student applicants' merit for MPA admission. Based on interviews with the faculty member and program chair, I concluded that they believed universities use GRE scores to limit the number of admitted applicants. Participant A noted several points that illustrates this concept:

I get that we're using the GRE more as a weeding out tool rather than an assessment of someone's ability to succeed in graduate school. I understand it's a very large business and I guess other programs have the ability to weed people out if it gets to the point where you're having far too many people apply than you have seats, then maybe you start to implement something like that. I can understand using the GRE if you're a highly selective program and you're just looking to reduce numbers. We're not training students to be academics. . . . I would say most MPA programs aren't. Yeah, there are some MPA programs out there, but they're offered by elite universities.

Participant B stated, "You have students that may not do real [sic] well on a standardized test and/or afford the GRE; you've got these barriers to students that otherwise could really use an education."



The interview data analysis suggested that the participants equated the requirement of GRE scores for admission as a means by which institutions exclude applicants and convey MPA program selectness.

### **Theme 2: Approaches to Enable Student Admission and Inclusion**

The participants noted their perspectives about approaches to enable student applicants' admission to the MPA and suggested these as means to support program inclusivity. One institutional method is the addition of noncredit graduate preparatory courses that students may take to develop proficiencies in specific subject areas. The faculty member explained how this method is applied in the MPA program:

We have our core program to the MPA, but we also have two pre-core courses.

We have an accounting course and a statistics course. If you can't demonstrate that you've done well on an accounting and statistics course at the undergraduate level, we will require you to take these two courses in addition to your MPA curriculum. (Participant B)

Student applicants are accepted into the program in the interim of demonstrating particular graduate subject-matter proficiencies. "We have not infrequently allowed students in conditionally" (Participant A). Students who are identified as deficient in specific subject areas are admitted and enroll in preparatory 500-level courses as prerequisites to credit-bearing subject courses. The determination of whether a student will require a preparatory course is assessed from the undergraduate GPA, as presented in the students' transcript. This measure is viewed as a viable alternative to the GRE for gauging student preparedness and program admission. "All of our courses are 600-level

courses, but these two courses are 500-level courses, which are pre-core courses. That's how we deal with that outside of the GRE" (Participant B). The participants further suggested demonstrated student persistence, evidenced by undergraduate transcripts and application essays, as a viable factor to evaluate MPA program readiness. "Maybe the student has a 2.9, but the student started with a lower score" (Participant B); "I like personal essays, they tell much deeper stories than a GRE will. A personal essay documenting challenges and how they've been overcome. A willingness to ask for help. These are indicators of persistence" (Participant A). Both participants shared further points-of-view about the evaluative merit of student efficacy as a contrast to the GRE, based on their personal experiences. As Participant B explained, "I had a lot of criticism of my writing to begin with, but all that was corrected in part by faculty just telling me, 'Here are the things you need to do,' not by me taking the GRE." As Participant A noted, "I'm excited when I find somebody who may not have had the greatest undergraduate experience, but who knows what they want and they're willing to work hard for it." Higher education practitioners may form the bases for their decisions (Scott, 2014).

### **Theme 3: GRE's Limited Validity for Applicant Assessment**

The faculty and chair suggested the GRE's finite cogency for providing predictive indication of students' performance at the graduate level. The study participants noted student efficacy, rather than GRE outcomes, as the determinative factor of academic performance. The faculty member (Participant B) emphasized the significance of recognizing and enabling student agency in this way: "If you've got a student that, for example, shows that they have a very low analytic writing score on the GRE, then maybe

you say, ‘You know [sic] what, you need to take a writing course in order to get into a program.’” The program chair (Participant A) contrasted successful test-taking with student persistence, “so they could be the most brilliant people on the planet according to test scores, but they don’t have whatever that is that it takes to get the job done.” Student efficacy in public administration education and effectiveness in professional practice are underpinned by adroit self-management (Bruce & Blankenberger, 2015).

#### **Theme 4: GRE Not Predictive for MPA Professional Practice**

The study participants described the GRE’s assessment content as discordant with the MPA program and professional outcomes for novice and experienced students. The participants further suggested that the nature of public administration practice and the GRE’s assessment content are misaligned. As Participant A described, “With an MPA degree, your analyses have got to be informed by qualitative measures and it’s not simply a math thing. It’s more analyzing data richly and looking at communities and trying to make the best decisions possible.” Participant B recalled the personal experience of taking the exam to illustrate a divergence between the exam and its relevance for professional practice:

I remember taking the GRE myself and studying geometry. Okay, well geometry’s great, but we don’t use geometry here in public administration. This is a terminal professional degree. We are preparing students to become city managers. We are preparing students to become nonprofit leaders. None of these people are going to do some geometry on the side.

The experiential perspective expressed by Participant B suggests that the MPA is a preparatory program centered on developing students' career and role-based competencies and that its professional applications are distinct from the GRE's academic subject-matter foci and attendant measurements. Gee (2015) related the concept of situational relevancy considered from individual perspectives as personal "discourses" that shape views of "social geography" through the aggregation of specified, human contextual roles (p. 246).

The study participants' related ideals of public administration practice and GRE subject-matter content indicated these may be positioned oppositional rather than symbiotically. The four themes suggested Participant A's and Participant B's individual perspectives that the GRE does not provide an overarching means by which to assess student candidate efficacy and persistence in an MPA program. Their responses to the interview questions further implied that the GRE is limited in evaluative and predictive validity for MPA candidates and that its inclusion as a required application criterion may serve as a barrier to prospective student access. The interview data analysis additionally presented Participant A's and Participant B's concepts of student agency in admissions when the GRE is not a required admission criterion. Patton (2015) elucidated that "analyst-created concepts" may derive from the researcher's analysis of interview data (p. 545). Further consideration of the inclusion of the GRE and multiple mini-interviews as application criteria could provide additional cognitive and non-cognitive evaluation materials to enhance predictive validity and student agency in the application process.

### **Description and Goals**

I conducted a single case inquiry to explore the individual perspectives of an MPA faculty member and program chair about the GRE's prognostic soundness at one New York State university. The university does not require prospective students to provide GRE scores as a criterion for application. The focal problem of this study was the distinct practice of universities in the state that either require or do not require the exam as a condition of admission. The authors of the peer-reviewed literature suggested that distinct admission practices engender student access issues when assessments do not support differentiated means of representing capacity for graduate-level study (Buckless & Krawczyk, 2016; Darolia et al., 2014). MPA institutional decisions about admission criteria that do not attend to identifying and applying alignments between cognitive and non-cognitive assessments may be weighted in ways that contravene the desired end of identifying viable student enrollees (Darolia et al., 2014).

I conducted this study to examine the problem of distinct practice in MPA admissions toward addressing the following research question:

Research Question: In what ways do MPA faculty and program administrators perceive the GRE's efficacy as a predictive indicator for student candidate access, persistence, and program completion? Karyotaki, Drigas, and Skianis (2017) noted a concomitant, affecting relationship between "emotional processes" and "perception and reasoning" that is evident when individuals are in decision-making capacities (p. 220). The participants' standpoints about the predictive validity of the GRE based on their experiences were presented in the findings of this study. Based on my

analysis of the collected interview data, the participants' views of the GRE were informed by the ways they applied concepts of values, attitudes, and beliefs to form evaluative stances in response to the case interview questions. Contrasting individual understandings through purposeful consideration of distinct data that may contradict personal outlooks significantly underpins objective decision making (Pohling, Bzdok, Eigenstetter, Stumpf, & Strobel, 2016). The participants were not informed of current peer-reviewed researchers' suggested predictive validity of the GRE, multiple mini-interviews, and emotional intelligence measures for assessing graduate student applicants (Bridgeman, 2016; Gale, Ooms, Grant, Paget, & Marks-Maran, 2016; Makransky, Havmose, Vang, Andersen, & Nielsen, 2017; Omoregbee, Morrison, & Morrison, 2016). A white paper synthesis of current peer-reviewed literature, in which researchers suggested the predictive validity of the GRE and non-cognitive admission assessments, could be provided to the case study participants to inform them further about the inclusion of these application criteria both to enhance student access and to provide further indicators of program persistence.

A primary goal of this project was to explore individual conceptions about the efficacy of the GRE as a measure of MPA student candidates' efficacy. A secondary goal was to provide MPA program stakeholders with a white paper that synthesized the peer-reviewed literature on cognitive and non-cognitive admission assessment. The authors of the peer-reviewed literature related the inclusion of cognitive and non-cognitive assessments towards alignment with student candidates' differentiated modes of representing preparedness for graduate study (Bridgeman, 2016; Heldenbrand et al.,

2016; Knorr & Hissbach, 2014; Oliveri & Ezzo, 2014; Schwager et al., 2015; Zimmerman, von Davier, & Heinemann, 2017). The purpose of the white paper, then, was to further inform university stakeholders of the need to review and reconsider current institution policies and processes. A professional development curriculum would not have been a suitable project genre for the perspective inquiry and findings of this study. Professional development may be undertaken toward acquiring and applying a skill or set of skills that may be used as a new or enhanced practice (Mazzotti, Rowe, Simonsen, Boaz, & VanAvery, 2018).

### **Rationale**

I selected the single case study framework and applied interview data collection methodology to discern MPA administrator and faculty perspectives of the GRE to investigate the local problem of disparate admission policies and practices. Individual perspectives inform decision making in higher education settings when the examination of multiple forms of data is an integral part of the review processes for consensus-based determinations (Henningsen & Henningsen, 2015; Orhun & Urminsky, 2013; Posselt, 2014, 2016). The analysis of the collected data suggested thematic premises engendered by the participants' individual points-of-view of the predictive efficacy of the GRE. The data analysis further suggested that the participants' viewpoints were underpinned by alignments between their personally significant experiences with the GRE and the university's policy that does not require the exam to assess applicants for MPA admission. Individuals convey perceptual observations as evidence when contextual relevancy exists (Gee, 2015).

The analysis of current peer-reviewed research on admission criteria suggesting alignments between differentiated student representations of graduate study readiness with distinct assessment instruments will further inform the university participants and stakeholders of this case to reflect on, compare, and contrast individual understandings and institutional practices (Naylor, Wooldridge, & Lyles, 2014). Empirically-based data about diverse forms of entrance assessments, predictive outcomes, and student access effects may be synthesized to elucidate foundational information toward the appraisal of admission policies and systems. The participants of this study and institutional stakeholders may specifically consider adaptive and holistic frameworks as well as their suggested predictive outcomes toward inclusion in their current admission policies and procedures. The researcher may relate qualitative study findings to case participants with information genres to present standpoints that align with a study's purpose and local problem (Saldana et al., 2014). Saldana et al. (2014) specified the "activist stance" as one perspective the researcher may take to develop a case with the following intentions: "to align findings and local problems; to facilitate enhanced decision making; to enable the reader with direction for enacting initiatives; to support the reader's use of research-based outcomes" (p. 326).

When interviewed, the faculty and department chair related that they had not reviewed literature on current admission approaches and efficacies for assessing students' persistence toward completing graduate study. Participant B related that department-level meetings have been held to discuss ways the university MPA curricula may be more closely aligned with contemporary public administration paradigms across varied sectors



of the discipline (Personal communication, February 20, 2017). Participant B also elucidated that dually enhancing the means of measuring student applicant capacities and program access would be a part of the university's program planning (Personal communication, February 20, 2017). Both participants expressed interest in exploring empirical research on admission practices to consider how these information sources may inform the university's current MPA admission policy and procedures (Participant A, personal communication, February 16, 2017; Participant B, personal communication, February 20, 2017).

The attentiveness of MPA program administrators and academicians to developments that affect public sector professions is significant, so they may assess, develop, modify, or sustain admission practices that evaluate student candidate competencies relative to the practitioner milieu (Levine et al., 2013; Shevchenko, 2016; Ysa, Hammerschmid, & Albareda, 2017). Public policy and administration practices are shaped by evolving societal frameworks; the eventual nature of this context engenders the need for practitioners who are critically informed through academia (Ysa et al., 2017). To this end, the white paper project includes a synthesis of the peer-reviewed literature. Scholars have suggested the predictive value of cognitive and non-cognitive admission assessments within the contexts of adaptive and holistic admissions as well as relevancies for professional practice. The application of diverse methods for assessing student candidates' readiness and persistence is aligned with the progressive milieu of public administration practice (Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014; Hiedemann, 2017; Oldfield, 2017; Shevchenko, 2016).

## Review of the Literature

The analyzed findings of this study included the participants' expressed need to understand current research about graduate admission approaches. The study participants want to develop empirically-informed policies and practices toward predictive student outcomes and access. The literature review aligned with the study findings through its synthesis of current research on holistic admissions frameworks. The holistic admissions practice is suggested as an overarching method for related approaches toward prognostic efficacy and equanimity that may be adapted for MPA candidates at the case university. The stances taken by the authors of the peer-reviewed literature may be considered by the case participants, institution faculty, and administrators as the stakeholders of the MPA program that is responsible for forming and enacting program admission policies and procedures. The holistic admission models presented in the literature indicated the participants' views of the need to enhance MPA applicant efficacy and access with entry assessments aligned with program content and students' future professional practice.

The peer-reviewed authors also suggested admission methods that underpin policy and procedure changes to attain social equities. Researchers in the university milieu have recommended policy and procedure adaptations of distinct assessment instruments toward heuristic, practice-based discernment of predictive outcomes. I accessed education and multidisciplinary databases through the Walden Library and conducted Boolean searches of the following terms: *adaptive admissions, adaptive tests, adaptive assessments, holistic admissions, holistic tests, holistic assessments, cognitive styles, cognitive admission assessments, non-cognitive styles, non-cognitive admission*

*assessments, contextualized admissions, prior learning, prior learning portfolios, prior learning assessments, stakeholder theory, stakeholder management, stakeholder leadership, and stakeholder theory.* I also explored the MPA national and international accreditation organization's website, Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), to review current literature on graduate admission practices in public management programs and professional placement outcomes. I found articles about MPA education and admission concepts as well as related administrator, faculty, practitioner, and student perspectives in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*. Finally, I reviewed the Council of Graduate Schools' website for national research data on holistic admissions.

Graduate admission policy discourse is oriented to enactment through decision-making constructs that have varied societal effects (Lester, Lochmiller, & Gabriel, 2017). In the MPA context that forms the basis of the local problem for this study, determination frameworks are comprised of university stakeholders who establish policies about the inclusion and use of distinct assessment criteria and admission committee members who enact those policies through procedural conventions. The social outcomes may be related distinctly, selectively, or collectively as consequential MPA student candidate program entrance, persistence, completion, and professional sector outcomes. Researchers have suggested that the interconnected significance of graduate admission policies, processes, student candidate effects, and practitioner competencies engenders the need to consider empirical data that inform praxes (Benavides & Keyes, 2016; Bruce-Cantrell & Blankengerger, 2015; Melguizo, Zamarro, Velasco, & Sanchez, 2017). The peer-

reviewed authors suggested research-based, social responsibility practice foci that may further inform MPA admission policies, procedures, and predictive measurements through the contextual cogitation of two principal suppositions: stakeholder approaches and holistic admissions.

### **Stakeholder Approaches**

Stakeholder theoretical conceptions provide empirical perspectives of ethical approaches to organizational policy discernments and implementation (Harrison, Freeman, & Sa de Abreu, 2015). From an institutional standpoint, as individuals who are hierarchically situated to determine organizational policies, stakeholders attend to the multidimensional priorities of internal and external constituencies (Mitchell, Weaver, Agle, Bailey, & Carlson, 2016). A significant element of the positional stance of organizational stakeholders centers on considerations of the correlative effects of their decision-making agency on contextual societal outcomes (Mitchell et al., 2016). The affecting connection between institutional stakeholder policy agency and societal bearings engenders deliberations toward decision-making approaches that reflect social responsibility as a principal stance (Jan De Graaf, 2016; Lopez-de-Pedro & Rimbau-Gilabert, 2012; Mitchell et al., 2016). An organization's social responsibility approach may be underpinned by both the proactive and reactive roles of its internal stakeholders to the expressed and anticipated needs of its external stakeholders (Zaman, Mahtab, & Samaduzzaman, 2014). The concept of embedded tension as a characteristic of institutional agency when social responsibility concerns are preeminent may be addressed by stakeholders' application of shared value as a guiding standard for policymaking (De

Graaf, 2016; Harrison & Wicks, 2013; Harrison et al., 2015). Discernments of value may necessarily require information gathering to identify, understand, and apply internal and external value attributions toward decision making (Lankoski, Smith, & Wassenhove, 2016). Value judgments for decision making may be guided by engraining heterogeneity in the decision framework and process toward achieving mission-based social welfare aims (Mitchell et al., 2016). Stakeholders may develop and apply comprehensive situational analyses to assess multiple narrative-based depictions of potential outcomes and determine distinct approaches (Cairns, Goodwin, & Wright, 2016, p. 1050). Stakeholders' rationales may be mapped as a methodological approach to identify individual perspective biases as part of a decision-making framework that also includes empirical and practitioner data (Ferretti, 2016). The adaptation of decision-outcome modelling strategies further enhances stakeholders' determination capacities through: validation of decision-making stimuli, exemplification of multiple perspectives, identification of complexities, aggregation and distillation of conflicting objectives, and strategic outcome mapping (Cairns et al., 2016; Ferretti, 2016).

Researchers have suggested that MPA administrators and faculty who have program oversight and comprise admission committees function as institutional stakeholders (Bainbridge et al., 2018; Bruce-Cantrell & Blankenberger, 2015). The policies and procedural decision stances of MPA admission committees have affective outcomes for student candidates and their efficacy to demonstrate graduate study competencies toward professional practitioner applications (Bainbridge et al., 2018; Bruce-Cantrell & Blankenberger, 2015). Stakeholders' attunement to public

administration practitioner competencies through research provides a further foundation to inform and design university admission and curriculum policies and practices from an empirical stance (Hiedemann et al., 2017; Oldfield, 2017). Stakeholders' expressed discourse outlooks provide a significant means with which to assess the ways an organization perceives itself and how member discernments affect policy development and implementation (Lester et al., 2017). MPA admission committee members and other university stakeholders may wish to analyze regional public administration professional competencies development data further to assess practice aptitudes that require measurement as part of the admission criteria and process (DeHoog, 2017; Janousek, 2017). My analysis of the study findings suggested that individual experience and observational practice primarily informed the admission assessment predictive validity discernments of the two university MPA committee participants. Researchers' stakeholder theoretical premises underscore the significance of empirical, methodological approaches to discern socially ethical approaches to forming organizational policies (Wu & Wokutch, 2015). Empirically-based admission guidelines may be a foundational element to further shape practices toward enhanced parity for the institution and student candidates in two areas: (a) institutional social responsibility and (b) candidates' enhanced means for demonstrating graduate study competencies toward program access. University stakeholders who determine graduate admissions policies may further assess the applicability of admission research empirical findings to their institutions' programs and establish a premise of relevancy toward methodologically-based policy change (Holloway, Reed, Imbrie, & Reid, 2014).

## **Holistic Admissions**

The concept and practice of holistic admissions is based on an integrative approach to provide distinct types of assessments in an application criteria framework so that decision makers may discern candidates' readiness for graduate study through varied, student-centered measurements (Artinian et al., 2017; Holden & Kitchen, 2016). Holistic admissions may also be "contextualized" so that applicants' education attainments may be reviewed with consideration to individual, personal circumstances that may present significant challenges to academic persistence (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016, p. 144). Kent and McCarthy (2016) noted three overarching principles for university admission stakeholders to consider in developing and supporting a holistic admissions framework: (a) "diversity" as an essential enrollment consideration; (b) "recruitment, admissions, and ongoing student support as mutually reinforcing"; and (c) alignment between "holistic review processes and the institutions' mission and program goals" (p. v). Researchers have further suggested that stakeholders may establish a holistic admissions process of assigned application reviewers and a rubric for admission committee members to determine value points for candidates' distinct application documents (Zeeman, McLaughlin, & Cox, 2017).

The distinct learning styles of student candidates may inform a research-based approach to develop and establish admission practice frameworks that attend to differentiated ways program candidates can present graduate study capacities (Labib, Canos, & Penades, 2017; Nighaoui, 2018). Distinct student learning styles may also provide a reference context to guide the formation of a test-optional criterion and further

underpin individuated modes of assessment toward a holistic admissions practice (Hiss & Franks, 2015; Kyllonen & Kell, 2018). University stakeholders may consider test-optional admission policies facilitating student candidates' agency to demonstrate graduate study capacity through elective test-taking and resultant performance (Furuta, 2017). From a holistic admissions standpoint, graduate applicant test scores may be alternately prioritized as representative of candidates' capacity for graduate study when students choose a test option or aggregated with non-cognitive criteria to form the basis of determining program admission (Kerrigan et al., 2016; Reche-Bleske, & Browne, 2014).

Students' undergraduate portfolios may be included in a holistic framework as an application criterion that provides admission reviewers with representations of student competencies that may be assessed to determine candidates' preparedness for graduate academic work (Cousins, 2016; Lam, 2017; Younger, 2015). "Summative" and "evaluative" approaches may be applied to assess applicant portfolios in the graduate admissions milieu to ascertain applicants' capacities for academic development over time as well as their level of scholarship upon undergraduate degree completion (Lam, 2017, p. 85). Students' candidate portfolios that reflect academic progress and defined career foci may additionally provide graduate admissions committees with data that align student competencies with the program mission as relevant for field work preparation or advancement (Kruger, Holtzman, & Dagavarian, 2013). Graduate committees' consideration of the career segments of applicants' portfolios to assess admission may be



particularly significant for applicants with experience that is aligned with program curricula toward professional advancement (Wilson, Hallam, Pecheone, & Moss, 2014).

The peer-reviewed researchers have suggested holistic graduate admissions practices that are based on the inclusion of cognitive and non-cognitive assessments toward enhanced student access and diversity outcomes for university programs (Artinian et al., 2017; Felix et al., 2012; Kent & McCarthy, 2016). Admission committee members may combine data from distinct assessment methods to derive a student candidate competencies profile to determine graduate program entry (Haberman & Yao, 2015; Kent & McCarthy 2016). Student graduate school access that is achieved through deliberative assimilation of holistic graduate admissions practices has correlated with and yielded predictive data of student performance and program completion (Kent & McCarthy, 2016). The MPA administration stakeholders of this case maintain an admission policy that does not require the GRE as an entrance criterion.

The project white paper is a synthesis of current research about holistic admissions to inform the university stakeholders' consideration of the concept and practice. The university participants of this case expressed interest in learning about empirically-based admission policies and practices to further inform their current framework and enhance assessments of distinct student candidate efficacies. The participants expressed consideration of policy and process changes to adapt admission requirements that provide applicants with cognitive and non-cognitive assessments, support admission diversity outcomes, and provide predictive validity data measurements.

## **Implementation**

### **Potential Resources and Existing Supports**

Empirically-based examination of admission policies toward the implementation of modifications is a significant element of higher education management that is necessitated by the current milieu of “validity” as a measure of vetting student candidates for MPA and other graduate program stakeholders (Niessen, Meijer, & Tendeiro, 2018). Upon completion of the project study, I will communicate with participants of this case via email to provide them with electronic copies of my project study white paper. The white paper will present empirically-based, current models of holistic admissions practices that MPA and other graduate programs have adapted. In my communication to the department chair study participant, I will propose meeting dates and times to discuss my findings and proposed adaptation of a holistic admissions model for the case university’s MPA program. Since the target audience for the proposed policy and process change should include all MPA decision-making stakeholders, I will ask the department chair to forward the electronic white paper to the program dean and admission committee faculty members with my meeting request, suggested schedule options, and contact information. I believe that when additional MPA administrators and faculty members receive the white paper, the meeting context and topic, and the proposed schedule from the department chair, their interest and participation will be enhanced. After participants receive the forwarded email communication and white paper from the department chair, I will be a liaison for further communications to confirm meeting invitation responses and coordinate scheduling.

I anticipate a 2- to 3-week timeframe from my initial communication to confirm a meeting. The interim timespan will be needed to provide meeting invitees with time to read and annotate my white paper with their related comments and questions. If it is not possible to coalesce one meeting date and time for all MPA stakeholder administrators and faculty, I will stagger the dates and times to align with their schedules and facilitate. To provide meeting invitees with further flexibility and convenience, I will propose video conference as the meeting format. I have access to video conference software on my personal computer that I may use to schedule, confirm, facilitate, and record remote group meetings. Meeting invitees may participate at their location of choice via internet-connected computers or mobile devices. I will email video conference access information to invitees. To access the video conference, participants will retrieve a meeting web link that will be embedded in the meeting email invitations. Meeting invitations will also include a conference access code and a call-in option for individuals who do not wish or may not be able to join via video. Since meeting attendees will likely participate from varied locations, I will be sure to relate computer browser and internet connection requirements in the email invitations. At least 1 week prior to meeting dates and times, I will send reminder emails that will also include the video conference access link, national and international call-in options, and conference access code.

### **Potential Barriers**

University graduate admission policies and procedures include requirements for student candidates to provide application artifacts that represent their qualifications for graduate study. Over the past 4 decades, MPA programs have changed and grown to

reflect the development of public and government sectors; contrastingly, admission policies and practices have undergone limited review and revisions in the same timeframe (Henderson & Chetkovich, 2014). The MPA application criteria of the case university do not include a requirement for GRE test scores. Prospective students submit an entrance form and additional related documents. The case university's MPA admission policies and practices have been in place for years. One potential barrier to implementing this project may be that MPA stakeholders do not share the study participants' interest in learning about and applying current, research-based methodologies for holistic graduate admissions. Stakeholders may question the need for altering the program's current admission policies and practices from the standpoint of relying on the existing student applicant data review process as enough to determine candidates' program acceptance (Shevchenko, 2016). Another possible barrier is that the MPA program administrators and faculty may have schedule constraints inhibiting their availability to dedicate the time needed to review the white paper, meet to discuss related comments and questions, and deliberate on procedural steps to adapt a revised admission framework. I plan to record, summarize, and send the video conference meeting minutes to invited participants who are not able to attend so they may review their colleagues' discussion points and respond via email with their related comments and questions. The quality and quantity of participant engagement with the study white paper and meeting discussions may determine the extent to which the MPA stakeholders consider a holistic admissions model to be a potential method for adaptation to their current admission framework.

### **Project Timetable and Implementation**

The tentative timeframe for execution is the Fall 2018 semester. Responses from the MPA administrators and faculty members of admission decision committees and their availabilities for video conference meetings will dictate the definitive project implementation timetable. I have completed the project white paper and proceeded with email communications to the study participants and additional MPA admission stakeholders to facilitate discussions.

### **Responsibilities of Participants and Student**

In the first project implementation segment, I initiated email communications with the department chair and faculty project study participants. The study participants indicated their interest in learning the study findings and informing their current admission practice with research-based data. Electronic copies of my white paper were attached to these email communications. Emails reestablished discourse with the study participants and conveyed the project genre for their review. I will further consult and collaborate with the MPA program chair to determine other program individuals who should be contacted, receive the white paper, and be invited to participate in consequent discussions.

In the second project phase, I will act as the primary meeting facilitator to present the project as well as respond to comments and questions about the white paper. Additionally, the program chair will be invited to share insights that may be contextually significant to support meeting participants' deliberations about the university's current MPA admission practices and the potential adaptation of a holistic model. Initial email

communication with the program chair will include a request for cooperative facilitation if schedule considerations are conducive to the chair's schedule. If the program chair is not able to facilitate collaboratively, I will inquire about contextual points that may further inform my meeting discourse with the MPA administrators and faculty.

### **Project Evaluation**

University graduate admission stakeholders are uniquely situated to determine assessment tools and shape policies so that they are aligned with program mission and articulated outcomes (Holden & Kitchen, 2016; Oldfield, 2017). After meeting with the MPA administrators and faculty of the institution, I will follow up with a meeting report. The report will coalesce and summarize key points, questions, and responses presented by meeting participants during discussion. Academic administrators and educators may collaborate to define approaches, policies, and processes for program development (Bodil, 2017). The report will also include a suggested outline for a defined holistic admissions model that the institution admission stakeholders may consider for adaptation in their policy and procedure structures. The holistic admissions outline will be dually derived from the research-based exemplars described in the white paper and meeting participants' viewpoints of the distinct admission assessment measures presented in the literature.

Institutional members may determine leadership stances within the context of project participation to shape its content, progress, and outcomes (Pretorius, Steyn, & Bond-Barnard, 2017). The meeting participants' attunement to the following elements will further inform the suggested holistic admission outline: (a) MPA program mission,

(b) current MPA program outcomes, (c) current MPA program student persistence data, (d) goals for MPA student candidate admissions, (e) goals for MPA student persistence, and (f) requisite procedural steps for program admission policy change(s). Meeting documents and discussions are key means of distributing information and exchanges that determine project implementation processes and outcomes (Prinsloo, van Waveren, & Chan, 2017). I will propose that the MPA administrators follow up with a progress summary update in the Fall 2018 semester to describe further considerations about the holistic admissions outline and potential adaptation format and timeline. As an alternate approach, the institution administrators and faculty may convene focus group meetings comprised of a cross-section of university admissions administrators and MPA students to obtain their viewpoints about the proposed holistic admissions outline. Focus group work may help further discern the viewpoints of varied individuals who have subject-matter knowledge to determine points of consensus about the proposed action (Traynor, 2015).

### **Implications Including Social Change**

#### **Local Community**

Access to university graduate education may be considered a form of “cultural capital” that alters the ways individuals interact within their communities as well as in broader settings (Espino, 2014, p. 546). Graduate school entry may alternately distinguish those individuals who believe they are enabled within the constructs of graduate admissions to enroll in their programs of choice from other individuals who may feel inhibited from enacting similar selectivity based on perceived diminished efficacy to

demonstrate qualification through institutionally determined, requisite application materials (Espino, 2014). University graduate admission policy and process stakeholders who relate distinct forms of competencies and align entrance assessment criteria accordingly may enhance student candidates' ability to demonstrate their qualifications for program entry through distinct "knowledge assets" (Chung & Yoon, 2015, p. 817). An applied research approach may be adapted by university admission administrators and faculty to develop admission models that include differentiated modes of applicant assessments, thereby further underpinning institutional efforts toward student access and predictive data for program persistence (Crisp, Horn, Dizinno, & Barlow, 2013; Gorard, Siddiqui, & Boliver, 2017).

The MPA program in the northeast city that comprises one demographic of the local community for this project will be further informed about an empirically-based admission practice that includes varied types of program-entry assessments through the project white paper's exposition of current research. The white paper will include a synthesis of the current research so that MPA administrators and faculty may use it as a single reference for convenience as well as elect to explore the cited researchers' works for further review of applied concepts. MPA administrators and faculty of the case institution who did not participate in this study may contribute additional research and perspective dispositions about MPA graduate admissions that were not garnered through the data collection segment of this case but may further inform the meeting segment of the project. MPA administrators and faculty may engage inquiry and analysis stances to review the premises of their program's current admission framework, consider distinct



criteria for possible inclusion and exclusion, assess the concept of student access, and determine future predictive validity measures. The interviewed participants related their distinct perspectives that inclusion of the GRE as an admission criterion may alternately inhibit applicant access and limit its predictive cogency for gauging student academic readiness and persistence in the MPA program. Cases provide close reviews and analyses of a phenomenon that may be applied to deliberations about policy (Lindle, 2014). The project white paper will provide a resource for further reflection and deliberation on the suggested role of the GRE and distinct non-cognitive assessments as part of a holistic admissions approach from an empirical premise that elucidates the significance of distinct criteria options aligning with applicants' differentiated modes of demonstrating readiness for graduate study.

MPA student applicants comprise a second significant demographic of this project study in the local context. MPA program graduates apply varied competencies in the field that require the use of cognitive and non-cognitive ways of using situational intellect and acumen (Levine, Christian, & Lyons, 2013). In the study university's current admission framework, applicants may demonstrate their qualifications for admission by providing the following materials: (a) an application, (b) two recommendation letters, (c) a resume, (d) a personal statement, and (e) official undergraduate transcripts. Applicants are not required to provide GRE scores for consideration. The case institution's MPA admittance criteria are fixed. Student applicants may exhibit distinct types that are aligned with graduate study competencies when they are assessed through test performance, single interviews, multiple brief interviews, academic portfolios, and professional portfolios

(Bleske-Reчек & Browne, 2014; Haberman & Yao, 2015; Kelly-Riley, Elliot, & Rudniy, 2016; Kerrigan et al., 2016; Kruger, Holtzman, & Dagavarian, 2016; Lam, 2017; Wilson, Hallam, Pecheone, & Moss, 2014).

Holistic admissions concepts and practices may involve the inclusion of differentiated evaluation instruments and methods to assess applicant capacities as well as student selection of varied modes to represent their qualifications for MPA study (Kent & McCarthy, 2016). The institution of this case may determine a set of admission review standards to expand and distinguish the means for applicants to demonstrate graduate study readiness. The university may also adapt a student selection policy for submitting application materials. Distinct forms of assessments and students' self-selection of admission criteria may further support applicant access and efficacies to present academic and professional competencies that demonstrate qualification for MPA study (Kent & McCarthy, 2016).

### **Far-Reaching Implications**

Researchers have posited distinct ways for admission administrators and faculty to determine student candidates' preparedness to engage graduate program study based on applied, empirically-based methods (Artinian et al., 2017; Bleske-Recheck & Browne, 2014; Felix et al., 2012; Haberman & Yao, 2015; Kent & McCarthy, 2016; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2016). My study findings suggested that university administrators and faculty who are responsible for MPA applicant reviews may rely on their experiential knowledge, perceptions of the efficacy of admission criteria, and existing institutional frameworks to make determinations about candidates' merits for entry (Pohling et al.,

2016). Universities that offer MPA programs may consider and establish procedural means for periodic, current research-based reviews of their admission policies to further inform institutional approaches and practices (Gast & Ledford, 2014). Enacting admission policies based on empirical research may underpin institutional efforts toward program inclusiveness by providing the bases for differentiated candidate application reviews. MPA administrators and faculty may further enact or adapt predictive validity reviews based on data analyses of student persistence from the inception of empirically-based admission schema.

### **Conclusion**

MPA administrators and faculty who review program candidate application materials to determine entry may inform their perceptions of the efficacy of institutional admission policies and procedures through current graduate admission practices research and analyses. The case university for this study may benefit from a review of the scholarly literature to consider whether exclusion of the GRE is aligned with current research suggesting the inclusion of cognitive and non-cognitive methods to determine student candidates' qualifications for admission to the MPA program. Administrators and faculty of the case university may further support their current admission framework by adapting distinct non-cognitive applicant assessment criteria that expand the means by which student applicants may demonstrate graduate study competencies. Finally, while the MPA administrators and faculty of the case university may determine and adapt cognitive and non-cognitive review criteria, student candidates may be allowed to self-

select from the required application materials to determine the means by which they best demonstrate graduate study competencies.

Section 3 was developed to provide details about planning and implementing the white paper, meeting with MPA administrators and faculty of the case university, and meeting for a follow-up report. These elements comprised the study project to disseminate admission research to the case institution for consideration to further inform perspectives about current policies and practices. I wrote a review of the current literature about organization stakeholder policy and procedure stances as well as holistic graduate admissions frameworks. The literature review provides a contextual basis for the relevance of MPA administrators' and faculty considerations of empirically-based data to examine their admissions policies and practices. The project evaluation process is described and its implications for social change at local and broader levels are highlighted. The project's strengths, limitations, and related remediations are elucidated in Section 4. The ways I have evolved as a scholar and practitioner as well as my learned understandings about leadership and change are also described. I conclude the section with a synopsis about the project's possible social change impact and directions for research in the future.

## Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

### **Introduction**

Academic scholars use interviews to investigate individual perspectives and derive meaning from participants' related experiences in a case study to synthesize concepts for varied analyses that may contribute to scholarship (Josselson, 2013; Seidman, 2013). The rationale for conducting this single case qualitative study was to examine the insights of MPA admission committee members into the predictive validity of the GRE. My study approach was centered on examining individual conceptions about the efficacy of the GRE at the participant college to understand viewpoints that may support the current admission policy that does not require GRE scores for entry. I interviewed a purposive sample comprised of an MPA administrator and a full-time faculty member who both serve as admission committee members. The data from the individual and focus group interviews informed the project literature review, goals, and implementation. This section includes the project's strengths, limitations, and development to address my study findings. I also discuss my self-reflections on this experience as a scholar. Finally, this section includes a description of potential social change from this study and suggestions for further research.

### **Project Strengths**

To enact graduate admission practices that facilitate, and support student access, colleges and universities can use applied research to guide the formation of their policies (St. John, Daun-Barnett, & Moronski-Chapman, 2013). Empirical research provides the necessary rigor for institution members to examine and articulate admissions policies and

procedures (St. John et al., 2013). For the current study, I developed a white paper to present current peer-reviewed research about the holistic admissions method and its resulting student access outcomes. The participants and other university stakeholders may use the white paper as an initial basis to consider current MPA admission policy and adapt a holistic method. The white paper will also provide the MPA administrators and faculty with a single source of synthesized research so that they may proceed to review current information without having to dedicate time and resources to conduct admissions practices research. The participants of the study expressed interest in learning about current research on graduate admission policies and practices.

I will transmit electronic copies of the white paper to MPA administrators and faculty of the university through e-mail. The e-mails will include an invitation for case university MPA administrators and faculty to participate in a video conference meeting for follow-up discussion related to the white paper. E-mail allows for ease of initial and subsequent access to both the white paper and meeting information details. Video conference, as the primary meeting format, will offer convenience to participants who may attend without having to travel to a designated location. Video conference meetings provide facilitators and audience members with flexible options to join and share viewpoints through visual, audio, and typed participation modes in a single session or multiple sessions (Wilcox, 2017). Providing meeting participants with the white paper and a convenient, facilitated forum will support their efforts to consider adapting a holistic admission model.

### **Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations**

The project study sample included the MPA program chair and one faculty member, both of whom review student candidate applications. Though this was a small sample, a single case, small interview sample may reveal the depth and complexities of a type of setting to inform research questions (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2014). But the implementation of my project may necessitate broader participation by additional MPA administrators and faculty members who enact admission reviews. MPA administrator and faculty member participation will involve reading the project white paper, meeting to discuss the current research and its implications for the case university's current MPA admission policies and procedures and considering ways to adapt a holistic admissions model. As the senior administrators, the program dean and chair would need to be present for a discussion meeting. However, the MPA administrators and faculty may be pressed for time with management, teaching, and department meeting responsibilities.

Recommendations to address the limitations include the following:

1. Consult with the MPA program chair to determine key administrators and faculty to participate in the project implementation.
2. Stagger meeting dates to provide expanded, distinct timeframes for enhanced alignment with key participants' availabilities.
3. Meet in several small groups, as indicated by responses, so that individuals who wish to participate may have multiple opportunities to join discussions.
4. Provide meeting summaries via e-mail for individuals who wish to participate but are unable to attend any video conferences.

5. Be open to extending the timeframe for meetings and project follow-up as necessary to be more conducive to the participants' schedules and responsibilities.

Although this study was limited to one institution, it may be replicated at other universities to further assess individual viewpoints about the GRE's results.

### **Scholarship**

My project study has provided an opportunity for me to develop and expand professionally from an academic educator to the role of an academic researcher. Conducting a literature review and establishing empirical relevancy for the study challenged my critical thinking and planning skills. I learned to determine the scope and depth of research necessary to inform doctoral-level inquiry. The critical significance of alignment to determine and coalesce research questions, a conceptual framework, and qualitative research methodologies was also an area of study. Working on the data segments further challenged me to learn about and assess distinct methods for information collection and analysis to underpin the reliability of the findings. Conducting the study presented also opportunities to interact with the participant MPA program chair and faculty member to discuss their perspectives of the GRE as well as broader admission criteria and practices. Engaging with the participants in the research interviews informed my active listening and questioning skills to garner the insights of others, identify thematic points of discussion, and probe for clarifications. Self-reflection throughout the processes of data collection and analysis was intrinsically significant to maintain an objective researcher stance. Analytical memo writing helped me assess distinctions



between my discernments and the participants' perspectives; it was important to confirm that the derived data themes informed the research question and project rather than related to my assumptions. My professional education program development practice was further guided by the research, analysis, project development, and evaluation undertakings that have been requisite for this doctoral study.

### **Project Development and Evaluation**

Determining the project steps and dissemination genre from existing current empirical inquiries and study development segments has been a significant learning experience. Based on the study literature review as well as data collection and analysis results, I considered a policy paper as an alternate, potential project genre. I opted for the white paper primarily because of the study participants' expressed interest in current research-based graduate admission practices. A white paper that synthesizes current research in the field can provide graduate program-based admission policy, process modes, and student outcomes. These points of information related to the participants' articulated interests to inform their program admission practice from applied research as well as served to define varied approaches for their institutions' adaptation. By contrast, a policy statement would not have yielded the depth and scope of empirical data for consideration by the program stakeholders of this case; rather, it would have presented a defined strategy that may or may not have been suitable for the university's MPA admission framework and stakeholder discernments from a broad base of scholarly information.

### **Leadership and Change**

Collecting and analyzing data for this study made me particularly cognizant of leadership and change from the standpoint of how leadership may be informed through scholarship. Policy formation and implementation are areas of education administration that require resourcefulness and cooperative work among institution stakeholders (Lindle, 2014). Leaders who apply scholarly research to disseminate information as well as garner collegial inputs for policy adaptation or revision extend their practice beyond individual conceptions. Empirical research on graduate admission practices may provide support for leadership and change initiatives through rigorous analyses of policies and practices to understand specific approaches and measuring outcomes. The participants of this study conveyed their individual perspectives of the GRE as related to the institution's admission policy stance. My project work has led to a better understanding of the significance of policy research as a resource to substantiate leadership and change by examining existing cases. Empirical research may or may not support individual outlooks, but these authors' aim to present objective information and evidence underpins its significance as a resource for institutional leadership and change.

### **Analysis of Self as Scholar**

I chose to pursue my doctorate at Walden University to learn how to be a scholar and contribute to existing research. Throughout this project study undertaking as a student researcher, I found that the significance of diligence has been an overarching lesson relating to each aspect of developing this work. I realized the importance of devoting time organization and persistence to the research process. Identifying topics for

investigation that are germane to a subject under study requires considerable hours dedicated to critical thought in order to discern subject-matter relevance. The search and synthesis process entailed comprehensive identification and explication of background and research topics that aligned with the exploratory nature of this inquiry. Additionally, conducting research to explore perspectives led to me question and investigate the elements that may inform distinct viewpoints in an institutional context. This pattern of thought led to further identifying and ordering the topics for research investigation that formed my first literature review.

I reflected on the learning process during the collection and analysis of my data. This stage of developing my study brought to mind instances of self-examination and questioning that I undertook in an effort to be vigilant about identifying and segregating my views from those of the participants. To this end, a primary focus was maintaining a stance of objective inquiry during the interview stage. Similarly, during the data analysis process, I took care to frame the thematic premises of discourse to the participants' described discernments. A further challenge of this study was to plan and carry out the second literature review that underpinned my study findings toward the development of this project.

### **Analysis of Self as Practitioner**

I developed new critical inquiry and assessment outlooks during the course of undertaking this study that I will apply to my professional education work. In my current career role as an education program developer for a northeast state organization, applied research is a key, foundational facet of creating learning units for public administrators.

To undertake the data collection segment of this study, I first had to determine the essential individuals who could substantively inform this project. Similarly, this approach has been applicable to determining internal and external research sources for information about program training needs, distinct forms of delivery, and alignments with prospective learners, program logistics, and scope.

### **Analysis of Self as Project Developer**

Through this undertaking, I have learned to apply others' viewpoints to develop a project that addresses a particular phenomenon. The research and development processes of this project have been particularly informative for ascertaining the importance of creating a project that others may contemplate and modify in ways that are particularly applicable to their institutional contexts. Specifically, the white paper genre of this project will elucidate current research about a graduate admissions approach. The institution of this case may assess the research and alternately consider, reject, or adapt variations of the approach. Ultimately, I have developed an interest in discerning and coalescing data to inform professional practice rather than providing determinative project information, implementation, and outcomes.

### **The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change**

Through its exploration of individual perspectives about the predictive efficacy of the GRE, my study highlights discernments about distinct graduate admission assessments and their access effects. In the northeast region that is the local setting for this project, MPA admission practices alternately require the GRE as a requisite criterion for admission. The addition of my study as part of current literature may further support

the alignment of admission policies and practices with related, empirical research. The concept and practice of holistic admissions that will form the basis of the white paper genre for this study highlight the relationship between differentiated approaches to graduate admissions policies and practices with student efficacies and access outcomes. Institution stakeholders include university provosts, MPA program administrators and faculty, as well as prospective student applicants. More broadly, public administration government and non-government organizations are stakeholders from the standpoint of a potentially enhanced number of program graduates for employment recruitment. Beyond the local MPA context, this study may impact broader admissions policies and practices for more enhanced pathways for candidates to represent their competencies for graduate education.

### **Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research**

The purpose of my study was to explore faculty and administrator stances on the prognostic utility of the GRE for MPA students at one university. The peer-reviewed authors of the GRE validity studies discussed its predictive efficacy relative to comparative assessments of candidate UGPA and GPA outcomes. Additionally, researchers have presented bodies of work that assess distinct types of admission evaluation methods. My study findings revealed that further research to investigate MPA administrator and faculty perspectives is needed to explore the ways that their understandings relate to institutional decisions on the inclusion and exclusion of MPA admission assessments. Future research may further introduce and align the significance of applied research with the formation and revision of MPA admission policies.

## Conclusion

In this section, I described the project's strengths in informing MPA graduate admission policy formation based on empirical research. The project was limited by the extent to which MPA admission administrators and faculty of the case institution may participate in follow-up meetings about the white paper and discuss the holistic admission framework. I described five potential steps that may be enacted to remediate participation limitations. The outline of remediation steps is centered on providing alternate ways for administrators and faculty of the case institution to participate in the project. It is possible to facilitate multiple meeting sessions as well as provide written meeting summaries. Individuals who cannot engage through videoconference sessions to assess the current research in relation to the case university's MPA admission framework may use email communications as the means of participating in the project.

I detailed the significance of scholarship for both developing this project and underpinning doctoral-level inquiry. My explanation of the relationship between the depth of scholarship to undertake doctoral research and the ways it may influence policies is germane to concepts of variation and governance as topics that further underpin this study. In the course of conducting research for this project, I learned that leadership to enact change may be supported through research and application of practices attained through empirical data analyses. Relatedly, the necessary critical thinking and time to discover and assess the peer-reviewed literature for my project highlighted the depth of scholarship to develop a qualitative case and attendant project. I learned to take a broad view of my study problem to identify and synthesize distinct,

related areas of investigation. These learned and applied research skills will further my professional endeavors to develop training content and programs that are informed by empirical data. Additionally, this scholarship endeavor is aligned with my professional project development through the use of research to disseminate information. In a broader context, this study project may impact social change in the local setting and beyond because of its focus on applied empirical data as the underpinning for admission frameworks toward enhanced student efficacy and access in the graduate education milieu.

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Appendix A: The Project

Holistic Admissions: An Approach for Master of Public Administration Programs

Janet Thompson, MPA

### Abstract

Holistic admissions is a framework based on applicant efficacy in the graduate admission process through assessment selection. The purpose of this white paper was to synthesize the literature about the holistic admission approach to inform the Masters of Public Administration (MPA) admission policy review at the case university. Based on this paper, MPA stakeholders may include learning style measurements in admissions to inform the inclusion of cognitive and noncognitive admittance criteria. Holistic admissions include distinct, noncognitive approaches to assess graduate school applicants' readiness for program entry and persistence. For example, student portfolios that incorporate exemplar undergraduate work, which represents applicant undergraduate academic progress toward graduate program preparedness, may be included in the case university MPA admission setting. Additionally, multiple mini interviews, another form of noncognitive admission evaluation, may be adapted by the case university admission committee to assess applicants' potential graduate study capacities that are relevant for public administration practice. Interview assessments can measure candidates' scholarly inquisitiveness, professional abilities, and emotional intelligence.

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## **Introduction**

MPA program administrators of the case university for this study established criteria for admission that do not include GRE scores. Student applicants must provide the following materials: a completed form application, official undergraduate transcripts, resume, personal statement, and letters of recommendation. The administrator and faculty participants of the case study that informed this white paper described the long-standing practice as a principle means to enhance student access to the program. The study participants further suggested that the combined application form data and document artifacts present a differentiated means for assessing pre-service and in-service candidates' academic competencies for graduate-level study. They identified the GRE as a potentially inhibiting factor that may deter potential program applicants from pursuing admittance. Participants wish to further inform their admission policy and procedures with empirically-based research toward review and potential revision.

The holistic admissions framework is described in this white paper as a research-based approach that may be adapted by the university's MPA program administrators. The holistic admission method is premised on the ideal that student candidates have enhanced efficacy in representing their graduate study competencies. Researchers of the current peer-reviewed literature have suggested that the holistic approach broadens graduate education access through the inclusion of cognitive and non-cognitive admission assessments. A principle premise of the approach is student determination and selection of admission materials for submittal, from an inclusive array of criteria, to demonstrate graduate study readiness.

### **Problem Statement**

In policy and practice 11 MPA programs in the US northeast alternately do or do not require the GRE for MPA student applications. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (2014), describes that the GRE is required at six of the universities and is a provisional requirement at one of the schools when applicants' undergraduate grades are below minimum standard requirements. Authors of the peer-reviewed literature suggest contrasting standpoints about the predictive validity of the GRE exam that parallel its distinct application as a criterion for admissions in MPA programs in New York state.

The predictive cogency of the GRE for graduate student performance is efficacious when evaluative criteria include faculty assessments, undergraduate and first-year graduate grade averages (Klieger, Bridgeman, Tannenbaum, Cline, & Olivera-Aguilar, 2018). The GRE may also amplify prognostic student candidates' graduate persistence when paired with other program-based tests (Ward, 2018). Standardized tests are predictive indicators for graduate programs that require licensure examinations for degree attainment (Randolph, 2017). Constructs for measuring validity are engendered through impartiality as a standard for assessing test scores (Piattoeva, & Saari, 2018). The ideal of impartiality is predicated on measurement neutrality as guided by methodological processes (Piattoeva, & Saari, 2018).

Contrastingly, distinct authors of empirical studies suggested that the GRE's prognostic soundness is not definitive and that it is insufficient for assessing student applicants (Perkins & Lowenthal, 2014; Wao, Ries, Flood, Lavy, & Ozbek, 2015). MPA

faculty and administrators review select criteria to assess applicant capacity for efficacious degree completion. The veracity of assessment results is not assured (Bright, & Graham, 2018; Darolia, Potochnick, & Menifield, 2014). A conceptual stance of validity is that its efficacy is predicated on what scores mean in the contexts of interpretation frameworks and value measures (Kane, 2015). Quantified scores may not be predictive when factors of student test-taking inhibitors are not addressed through additional, alternate means of knowledge assessments (Bainbridge, Melitski, Zahradnik, Lauria, Jayaprasah, & Baron, 2015).

MPA application rules and procedures do not equivalently distinguish measures of applicant preparedness and curriculum (Darolia, et al., 2014; Naylor, Wilson-Gentry, Wooldridge, 2016). MPA admission decisions about student candidate capacities may be subjectively guided and potentially result in the exclusion of viable program candidates and the admission of individuals who may not persist to program completion (Bright, 2018, Darolia, et al., 2014; Henderson, & Chetkovich, 2014). In this milieu, admission stakeholders may underpin institutional policies with empirical literature toward student-centered practices that enhance access through differentiated assessment metrics. Synthesis of current literature as a means to determine admission policy aligns empirical evidence with practice toward evidentiary determinations of admission criteria and their predictive efficacy.

### **Holistic Admission Model: A Research-Based Approach**

The MPA administration stakeholders at the case university maintain an admission policy that does not require the GRE as an entrance criterion. This paper

section presents an empirically-based admission approach to further inform the institution's current framework and enhance assessments of distinct student candidate efficacies. University admission stakeholders may consider the holistic admissions approach as a means to further enhance student efficacy. The model includes cognitive and non-cognitive candidate assessments for admission committees' reviews. A key feature of the model is applicant selection of application criteria as an individuated process that includes varied assessment modes (Kent, & McCarthy, 2016).

The concept and practice of holistic admissions is based on the ideal of providing distinct types of assessments in an application criteria framework so that decision-makers may discern candidates' readiness for graduate study through varied, student-centered measurements (Artinian, Drees, Gazer, Harris, Kaufman, Lopez, Danek, & Michaels, 2017; Holden & Kitchen, 2016). Application criteria is modeled to align with the self-identified means for students to demonstrate competencies for MPA studies. Holistic admissions may also be contextualized so that applicants' education attainments are reviewed with consideration to individual, personal circumstances that may have presented significant challenges to academic persistence (Mountford-Zimdars, Moore, & Graham, 2016). Student candidate intentionality is a significant factor that may be assessed by reviewing admission artifacts that present intellectual curiosity, occupational progression, and academic preparation (Baldelli, Botero, Ferreol, Horton, & Ma, 2018; Francois, 2014).

Kent and McCarthy (2016) suggested three overarching principles for university admission stakeholders to consider toward developing and supporting a holistic

admission framework: 1. “Diversity” as an essential enrollment consideration; 2. “Recruitment, admissions, and ongoing student support as mutually reinforcing”; 3. Alignment between “holistic review processes and the institutions’ mission and program goals” (p. v). Researchers further suggested that stakeholders may establish a holistic admissions process of assigned application reviewers and an evaluation rubric. The use of a rubric helps committee members to determine value points for candidates’ application documents (Zeeman, McLaughlin, & Cox, 2017).

### **Student Learning Styles and Cognitive Assessment**

Student candidates’ distinct learning styles may inform a research-based approach to develop and establish admission policies that attend to differentiated ways for program candidates to present graduate study capacities (Labib, Canos, & Penades, 2017). Distinct student learning styles may also provide a reference context to guide the formation of a test-optional criterion and further underpin individuated modes of assessment (Hiss & Franks, 2015). Consideration of student candidates’ quality of engagement at the undergraduate level may be a prevalent factor for considering learning styles toward determining modes of admission assessment (Buckless, & Krawczyk, 2016).

Intentionality is another dimension of student candidates’ capacity profiles that warrant consideration toward determinations of learning styles in relation to understanding whether cognitive assessments will be determinative in the admission context (Alas, Anshari, Sabtu, & Yunus, 2016). The inclusion of curriculum sample assessments in the admission milieu may provide program administrators and faculty with student candidate learning style dispositions (Niessen, Meljer, & Tendeiro, 2018).

University stakeholders may consider test-optional admission policies that facilitate student candidates' agency to demonstrate graduate study capacity through elective test-taking and resultant performance (Furuta, 2017). From a holistic admission standpoint, graduate applicant test scores may be alternately prioritized as representative of candidates' capacity for graduate study when students choose a test option, or aggregated with non-cognitive criteria to form the basis for determining program admission (Kerrigan, Akabas, Betzler, Castadi, Kelly, Levy, Reichgott, Ruberman, & Dolan, 2016; Bleske-Reche, & Browne, 2014).

### **Student Portfolios**

Student undergraduate portfolios may be included in a holistic framework as an application criterion that provides admission reviewers representations of student competencies that may be assessed to determine candidates' preparedness for graduate academic work (Cousins, 2016; Lam, 2017; Younger, 2015). Comprehensive appraisal methods to may be applied to assess applicant portfolios in the graduate admission milieu to ascertain applicants' capacities for academic development over time as well as level of scholarship upon undergraduate degree completion (Lam, 2017, p. 85). Student candidate portfolios that reflect academic progress and defined career foci may additionally provide graduate admission committees with data that aligns student competencies with program mission as relevant for field work preparation or advancement (Kruger, Holtzman, & Dagavarian, 2013). Graduate committees' consideration of the career segments of applicants' portfolios to assess admission may be particularly significant for applicants with experience that is aligned with program

curricula toward professional advancement (Wilson, Hallam, Pecheone, & Moss, 2014). Undergraduate portfolios provide admission stakeholders with artifacts of student candidates' intellectual acumen toward determinations of graduate program readiness (Pace, 2017). Student candidate portfolios may include cognitive and non-cognitive work products; distinct modes of academic engagement align with quantitative and qualitative admission criteria (Zilvinskis, 2015). Student candidate portfolios that are developed successively throughout the culminating year of an undergraduate program provide graduate admission administrators and faculty insight about students' progressive levels of academic proficiencies (Crowell, & Calamidas, 2016).

### **Mini-Multiple Interviews**

Mini-multiple interviews may be included in a holistic framework to discern student candidates' internal and external motivations for graduate study, as well as discern analytical skills (Makransky, Havmose, Vang, Anderson, & Nielsen, 2017, p. 1006). The real-time, conversant nature of mini-interviews provides a situational context where student applicants' deliberative processes may be assessed (Heldenbrand, Flowers, Bordelon, Gubbins, O'Brien, Stowe, & Martin, 2016; Makransky, et al., 2017). Evaluation of student candidates' responses may be performed by varied individual interviewers who ask different types of questions (Heldenbrand, 2016; Knorr & Hissbach, 2014, Makransky, et al., 2017). Interviewer questions may be aimed to alternately discern critical interest, management capacities, and emotional maturity (Heldenbrand, et al., 2016). Interviewers must be trained in the multiple mini interview structure, protocols for recording interviews, and scoring candidates' responses

(Heldenbrand, 2016). Interviewers may coalesce student applicant responses to determine composite candidate profiles and alignments with program criteria toward predictive discernments (Heldenbrand, et al., 2016; Knorr & Hissbach, 2014; Makransky, et al., 2017)

### **Recommendations**

The participants of this case study seek to amplify their MPA admission requirements with current, empirical research to strengthen student predictive validity outcomes and program access. Based on the peer-reviewed research, case university stakeholders may adapt the holistic framework approach to support applicants' self-determination in the admission context, inclusive enrollment, and prognostic retention outcomes (Hazelrigg, 2016). To enact the transition from their current MPA admission policy and practice, the case university stakeholders may apply specific principles from three distinct change management stances. Heifetz and Linsky (2017) posit "adaptive leadership" as a means for organization administrators to implement changes that engender organizational, cultural paradigm shifts (p. 3).

Correspondingly, the study participants may convene discussions with the MPA dean, assistant and associate deans, as well as senior faculty to convey the significance of positioning the holistic admission framework as an empirically-based policy and practice in communications with the university executive leadership and prospective students. The concurrent significance of this point is its distinction from the program's current, culturally situated MPA admission policy and practice. The case university's current admission policy and practice does not include a requirement for GRE grades, but



stipulates that candidates submit official undergraduate transcripts, a personal statement, resume, letters of recommendation, and a form application. The case university's MPA admission stakeholders may further consider the cultural shift for prospective applicants who may not be familiar with the practice of self-selected admission assessments.

Planning the modes and timing for communicating the change to prospective students will be a significant aspect of introducing the policy and practice shift (Heifetz & Linsky, 2017).

MPA admission stakeholders may also identify potential constraints to implement a holistic admissions framework. Essential considerations that are particularly relevant for participants and other stakeholders of the case university are resistance, resources, logistics, and timeframes (Goldratt & Cox, 2014). The MPA chair and dean may need to have subsequent discussions to relate and resolve possible concerns about enacting the holistic framework. Discussions to consider individuals' points of resistance may be extended to include admission committee members. Relatedly, the program chair and dean may determine personnel and time capacities for MPA admission committee members to review student portfolios and conduct multiple-mini interviews.

One approach to assess these elements of the change process would be to consider the current timeframe for committee members' review of candidate application materials and project additional time needs. Another approach may be to expand admission committees to include adjunct faculty who may serve to evaluate prospective students based on their areas of public administration subject-matter expertise. The program chair, deans, and senior faculty may coalesce their perspectives to determine rubric criteria for

student candidate portfolios and admission interviews. They may further determine whether to include rubrics as part of the application materials that are provided to prospective students. Finally, the inclusion of the GRE as a student-selected admission will engender the need to factor review of candidates' exam grades as part of application reviews.

To document potential constraints and systematize specific approaches to accomplish the implementation of a holistic framework, the MPA program chair or designee(s) may form a sequential matrix change project document (Brynjolfsson, Renshaw, & van Alstyne, 1997). A matrix document would include the comprehensive, transition steps to develop and establish a holistic admission framework. Brynjolfsson et al., 1997) suggested the following matrix segments: “ (a) “existing practices”; (b) “target practices”; (c) “identification of human interactions”; (d) “identification of process interactions” (pp. 2-4). The change project document may further include a chronology of timeframes to schedule the various process steps to support cohesion and communications (Brynjolfsson et al., 1997).

### **Conclusion**

A holistic graduate admission practice may be based upon the inclusion of cognitive and non-cognitive assessments for enhanced student access and diversity outcomes for university programs (Artinian, et al., 2017; Kent & McCarthy, 2016). Admission committee members may combine data from distinct assessment methods and allow student candidates to select from a fixed array of instruments to derive student candidate competencies profiles toward determining graduate program entry (Haberman

& Yao, 2015; Kent & McCarthy 2016). Student graduate school access that is achieved through deliberative assimilation of holistic graduate admission practices has correlated with and yielded predictive data of student performance and program completion (Kent & McCarthy, 2016). Subsequent to its adaptation, the efficacy of a holistic model may be assessed through an institutional data reporting schema to account for rates of admission, retention, and graduation. MPA stakeholders may analyze their report data to identify trend patterns pre-and-post inclusion of a holistic admission practice. The alignment of model adaptation, statistical trend reporting, and concomitant analyses of MPA program admissions may be applied toward considerations about expanding a holistic model to other graduate programs at the institution. In this scenario, MPA administrators and faculty who comprise admission committees may assume a collaborative stance with their institutional counterparts at other graduate programs to share data and relate practice protocols. University stakeholders may further consider highlighting a holistic admission model in their program, marketing literature toward prospective student candidate awareness and access (Baldelli et al., 2018).

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## Appendix B: Faculty/Administrator Individual Interview Guide

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Question #1: What is/are your understanding(s) of the role of the GRE for evaluating MPA student candidates?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:  
Please further explain....  
How would you illustrate....?

Question #2: What information source(s) and/or experience(s) has/have informed your current understanding(s) of the role of the GRE for evaluating MPA student candidates?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:  
Please further explain....  
How would you illustrate....?

Question #3: Based on your experience evaluating MPA student candidates' applications, please explain how you would rank the significance of GRE scores relative to other application criteria?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:  
Please further explain....  
How would you illustrate....?

Question #4: Based on your experience evaluating MPA student candidates' applications, what if any recommendations might you suggest about the GRE as a criterion for admissions?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:  
Please further explain....  
How would you illustrate....?

## Appendix C: Faculty/Administrator Focus Group Interview Guide

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Code: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Time: \_\_\_\_\_  
Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Question #1: Based on your experiential understandings, in what ways, if any, does the inclusion of the GRE for application(s) impact student program enrollment?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:

Please further explain....

How would you illustrate....?

Question #2: Based on your experiential understandings, in what ways, if any, does the exclusion of the GRE for application(s) impact student program enrollment?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:

Please further explain....

How would you illustrate....?

Question #3: In what ways, if any, does inclusion of the GRE as part of application review provide indication of student persistence in the program?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:

Please further explain....

How would you illustrate....?

Question #4: In what ways, if any, does exclusion of the GRE as part of application review provide indication of student persistence in the program?

Explanation/Add-on Questions:

Please further explain....

How would you illustrate....?