Increasingly, top institutions in the country are shifting away from using scores on the
standardized Graduate Record Exam (GRE) as a factor in admissions, and, as of the 2018-
2019 admissions cycle, the majority of UCSF’s graduate programs will no longer require
applicants to submit their GRE numbers.

In an influential 2014 article in Nature, physicists Casey Miller and Keivan Stassun focused
the attention of educators on the two most troubling issues around using the GRE test in
STEM graduate programs: GRE scores are an unreliable predictor of students’ success in
graduate school, and requiring the test impedes women, minorities, and socio-economically
disadvantaged students from entering the sciences.

The National Institutes of Health stopped requiring that GRE scores be included in
applications for fellowships and training grants in 2015, removing a significant barrier to life
sciences PhD programs like those at UCSF from discontinuing the GRE requirement. The
primary temptation for busy faculty across the country, though, is that it is less time
consuming to winnow down a pool of student applicants by looking at a set of numbers, than
to evaluate the more qualitative pieces of the application. With the decision not to require the
GRE, UCSF graduate programs are strengthening their commitment to a holistic approach to
admissions, regardless of the time commitment.

One leader in the effort to reduce reliance on the GRE has been Orion Weiner, PhD,
professor in UCSF’s Tetrad graduate program. In his published research looking at Tetrad
program alumni, Weiner showed that the most powerful predictor of student success is neither
GRE nor GPA, but rather the subjective assessments of students’ undergraduate teachers,
who know the students well. Their letters of recommendation often address crucial but hard to quantify factors, like whether a student will have the perseverance, resourcefulness, and work ethic to make it through a challenging graduate program. Weiner also found that students who had significant prior experience doing hands-on research were more likely to do well in the Tetrad program. Studies at UC Berkeley, University of Michigan, University of North Carolina, Ponce Health Sciences University in Puerto Rico, and Vanderbilt have drawn similar conclusions about the relatively poor predictive power of the GRE.

At UCSF, the policy of the Graduate Council and Academic Senate has long been to leave GRE requirements up to the individual graduate programs, and several programs had already moved to abandon GRE scores as a factor in admissions decisions. More recently, the Graduate Division facilitated a conversation among the program directors, who have jointly agreed not to require GRE scores from student applicants going forward.

"We hope that dropping the GRE requirement will help open up our graduate programs to a broader pool of students. This will not only strengthen the programs, but also boost our diversity efforts across the University," said Elizabeth Watkins, dean of the Graduate Division and vice chancellor of Student Academic Affairs.

See the list of programs not requiring GRE scores [3]. If you are a prospective student, please be sure to consult your program of interest for complete application requirements.

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