Admissions portfolio for a graduate program: Matching practice and paradigm

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Admissions Portfolio for a Graduate Program: Matching Practice and Paradigm

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Gifted programs in K-12 education have been referred to as the "secret laboratory of school improvement" (Renzulli, 1994, p. 15). They have been credited with bringing exemplary practices into general education (Renzulli, 1994; Tomlinson & Callahan, 1992; USDE, 1993), practices that include teaching higher level thinking skills, problem solving, the notion of talent development, and on identification through product and or performance (Renzulli, 1994; Renzulli & Reis, 1997; Tomlinson & Callahan, 1992; USDE, 1993).

However, the field of gifted education continues to evolve and as such, new ideas continue to emerge related to giftedness, talent, and methods of identifying students. One shift that the field has seen is in the criteria for admission into special programs. Many schools have begun moving toward more inclusive identification approaches that utilize performance assessment, multiple criteria, and multiple pathways that allow students to demonstrate their capabilities in a variety of ways (Reid & Romanoff, 1997; Renzulli & Reis, 1997).

Calls have also been made to reform how prospective students are admitted into higher education programs (Norcross, 1996; Sternberg & Williams, 1997). Traditionally, admission to graduate school programs has been determined on the basis of objective standardized measures such as the GRE, Miller Analogy Test, or a test specific to the field of study, and examination of previous GPA. However, these scores have little predictive value of future achievement (Sternberg, 1996).

New Admissions Procedures

In the Fall of 1998 we implemented our newly revised graduate degree program in gifted education and talent development at Minnesota State University, Mankato. A set of standard admissions criteria was handed down to us from the graduate school that focused mainly on minimum GPA and GRE requirements. This criteria was based on what this and many universities considered standard admissions practice. However, as we became fully involved in implementing our new program, we began to consider the connection between changing practices in the education and identification of gifted children with those of educating and admitting students in graduate programs in gifted education. The existing criteria did not align with the program philosophy, did not model best practices for students, and did not meet program admission needs. In short, we were not practicing what we preached.

Program Overview

The Talent Development and Gifted Education Master's Degree at Minnesota State University, Mankato is based upon the notion that the development of a variety of talents and potentials is essential for all children, not just those talents that can be measured by standardized tests. Thus, we advocate an understanding of intelligence that reflects Howard Gardner’s (1996) definition, which is the ability to solve problems and create products that are valued within a cultural setting. Creativity is seen as having the same value as intelligence and might be defined as the ability to produce something apart from the ordinary, something remarkable, and something new (Feldman, Csikszentmihalyi, & Gardner, 1994). Both of these views complement the US Department of Education’s (1993) definition of gifted students, which is those who “exhibit high performance capability in intellectually, creative and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields” (pp. 54-55). We believe that these broader views of intelligence, creativity, and giftedness apply also to graduate students and their potentials.

New Practices in Admission

The goals for a new admissions procedure were to: ensure candidate/program match; provide information about the candidate's interests, strengths, and abilities; model best practices in identification/selection; and provide opportunities beyond standardized measures for students to demonstrate their strengths, and thereby attract quality students who might otherwise be overlooked or not apply. Any new method had to reflect the program philosophy and be aligned with emergent practices used to identify candidates for gifted education programming as well as evolving views of intelligence, creativity, and giftedness.

Ramos-Ford and Gardner (1997) recommended that portfolios be used in public schools to help in identify students for special services. Performance and portfolio assessments have also been suggested for use in graduate school admissions (Gardner, 1993; Sternberg & Williams, 1997). Thus, we developed and implemented a portfolio/choice admission procedure for admission into our graduate program in Gifted Education and Talent Development. Here, candidates are encouraged to use a variety of sources to make a case for themselves. While this process is certainly not as neat and tidy as using standardized cut-off scores, it allows for emphasis to be placed on candidates’ strengths. In creating their admissions portfolio, standardized test scores are used as only one criteria in a menu of options from which students choose.

Criteria

Students use the following menu of choices in developing their admissions portfolio. All candidates must submit the following three items: first, a completed application form (required by the graduate college); second, a two to five page statement describing personal philosophy of education, purpose for applying, educational achievements or honors, and
academic interests (This allows examination of a candidate’s writing skills as well as provides insights into the candidate’s beliefs, strengths, interests and purpose for applying to the program); and finally, official college transcripts. (This is required by the graduate college, and provides information about previous course work and degrees). Candidates then choose any two of the following menu items to complete their portfolio.

- Outstanding educational product or performance. Candidates may submit any of the following: curriculum, plans, or units that they have designed; unique or outstanding teaching products, methods, or techniques; interesting or unique applications of an educational theory or idea; original presentation related to something the candidate has developed (perhaps presented at a regional, state or national conference); evidence of outstanding teaching practice; or original research investigation. Anything submitted is evaluated using the Product and Performance Assessment Form (PPAF) on which submissions are scored from very low (1) to very high (5) in six areas of merit.

- Evidence of outstanding writing such as writing published in an academic journal. Such writing evidence is indicative of creative productivity and sharing of knowledge and closely aligns with the program mission. Unpublished writing samples are assessed using the MSU Writing Assessment form in which content and style are scored from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high) in six areas.

- GPA from most recent 2 years of study of 3.00 or above. This choice is given to students so that those who are good students can use their academic talent as a means of selection. The most recent years of study are more likely to reflect current potential as a student.

- Miller Analogy Test Score of 45 or above.

- Score of 500+ on one or more portions of the GRE. Both the GRE and the Miller analogy tests are traditional selection criteria and are still an option for those who chose to submit this as evidence of higher reasoning abilities.

- Evidence of accomplishments outside the field of education in areas such as arts, sciences, literature, and community service. This again reflects multiple ways to demonstrate quality and productivity. It is also an important validation of the belief that educators should be role models to their students regarding interests and real-world productivity. Those educators who are productive outside the educational realm often provide links to their students regarding possibilities traditionally not addressed by the general curriculum. Submissions in this category vary widely and are discussed holistically among the faculty when they are received.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

In a recent meeting with the graduate school dean, the portfolio/choice admissions procedure was given high marks with one caveat: as long as the program faculty are willing to review all the applications it is a wonderful innovation. The graduate office wouldn’t be able to make the admissions decisions because of the inherent variability among the candidates and their portfolios. However, based on the goals of the new admissions process, faculty should be primary and active in reviewing portfolios and making admission decisions, as they are the ones directly involved with the program and students. The time it takes to review the portfolios is well spent due to the insights gained regarding future students. Thus, when students begin the program, faculty are already familiar with their strengths and accomplishments. Further benefits include retention (to date, there have been no students who have dropped the program), and insights that assist with guiding students toward meaningful graduate products and graduation. Use of this process is being documented and data kept for future reporting. Early indications are that, although labor intensive, the benefits to both students and faculty outweigh the drawbacks. It may very well be, that like gifted education programs in K-12 schools, graduate programs in gifted education, such as the one discussed here, can serve as models for other programs that wish to change their admission criteria and procedures.

**REFERENCES**


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