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Current Admission Criteria for Texas Master of Music Degree Programs: Piano Performance, Piano Pedagogy, and Music Education with Piano Emphasis

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Administrators in graduate music degrees use a variety of admission criteria in the selection process of student applicants. These components are reliant on the individual school's emphasis and weighting of particular guidelines. Unfortunately, all of the admission elements are not always communicated clearly and stated in policy documents for faculty or prospective students. Ultimately, these factors determine a level of success for both the student and the long-term success of the school curriculum. Choosing and applying to college is a difficult and time-consuming task in any field and at any level. Students can benefit from viewing not only a general criteria list but from referencing the specifics of particular admission requirements before deciding to pursue graduate studies at a given college.

Achieving and maintaining program criteria and accreditation is an important responsibility of graduate institutions. It ultimately affects the success and long-term health of masters level and doctoral programs. Most graduate music programs are accountable to various state and national accreditation agencies such as the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), as well as cooperative organizations such as the Texas Association of Music Schools (TAMS).

During the 1999-2000 academic year, there were 273 graduate piano majors in Texas colleges out of approximately 1488 music graduate students. Thus, a case study was deemed important in determining certain criteria emphasized in the 20 Texas colleges offering graduate degrees with piano emphasis.

The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine general and specific graduate criteria and their weight in Texas colleges. The problem primarily lies in which criteria are regarded as most important. It was necessary to not only investigate the spectrum of graduate entry criteria but also the various departmental admissions policies (in this case performance, pedagogy and music education) and their weightings, such as the performance audition area.

The rationale for this study is based on the fact that there is little existing research in the area of graduate admission criteria in music. Furthermore, there is a need for more current studies which follow regional trends in admission criteria. Extensive research of undergraduate admission criteria in non-arts disciplines exists: such as in medicine (Cooke, 1992; Elam, 1997, 1998), pharmacy (Duncan-Hewitt, 1996), mathematics (Conley, 1997), and engineering (Zinatelli & Dube, 1997). This type of research provides new perspectives into music criteria enabling administrators, professors and students to project broad and specific guidelines for admission.

The accuracy of effective measures of pharmaceutical applicant characteristics, combined with GPA, a problem-solving essay score, and college entrance examinations, attributed to acceptable admissions criteria (Duncan-Hewitt, 1996). The structured interview in selecting prospective graduate chemical engineering students was found to be a method for improving the traditional approach and to reduce the chance of rejecting the 'right' student (Zinatelli & Dube, 1997).

A number of studies have investigated medical school admission criteria procedures, particularly the relationship of academic and personal characteristics. Elam (1998) showed that the admission interview was beneficial in showing the interest of a prospective student in their field, and relating experiences to validate this. Good communication skills and enthusiasm about the particular school was also demonstrated as an important admission factor.

The importance of grades in gaining admission into highly selective medical schools at the graduate level, illustrated that the grade-point average (GPA) was a major influence on the final admission decision (Cooke, 1992). So too, premedical students' perceptions of GPA validated its importance and critical use in the admissions process (p. 848). Medical education research has identified a number of important prospective student characteristics related to the admissions process. Depending on the school, some factors are more important than others. Identifying and giving weight to particular entry items is likely to increase the quality of medical student intake by "broadening criteria to produce the best physicians" (Rabinowitz, 1999, p. S42).

Several studies have focused on selective admissions procedures in both theory and practice (Wallace, 1997; Ebel, 1982; Linn, 1982). According to Ebel (1982), selective admission practices should be justified, policy guidelines clarified for students, and the administrative decisions made by qualified and appropriate admission officers (pp. 22-23). As indicated by Ebel (1982), neither grades nor test scores are free of problems, but neither should be neglected as solid measures of admission at any level.

The use of nontraditional college admission variables was also shown to be a good predictor of college admission and academic success (Hawkins, 1993; Hirschorn, 1988; Tom, 1982). The submission of videotape applications (Hirschorn, 1988), interests and skills statements (Tom, 1982), and the consideration of diversity in graduate school admission criteria, particularly for minority groups (Hawkins, 1993), are all valid nontraditional admission variables.

The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is considered by many schools to be an important criteria, as studies have shown that the test scores predict some level of success in graduate school (Bornheimer, 1984). However, university administrators should be wary of its validity in each case, as reported by Tisue & Whitaker (1999). In this particular study, the validity of the GRE for the women returning to graduate school (older adult women) was questioned and alternatives to the exam were suggested. Lannholm (1968) investigated the use of GRE scores together with other factors in graduate school admissions in various fields. The study showed that few graduate school departments relied solely on GRE scores in judging the fitness of their applicants. On the other hand, Lindle & Rinehart (1998) reported that there is little existing accurate information which shows the GRE as a predictor of success for nontraditional students'

graduate studies. The results indicated that the most significant predictors of student scholarship potential were GPA combined with analytic score on the GRE.

The study of music admission criteria in various contexts is beneficial for developing appropriate entry procedures at different levels. Aliferis and Stecklein (1953) developed the *Aliferis Freshman Test in Music* (an undergraduate test) as a measure of musical ability. Its purpose was to “provide a measure of musical achievement” (p. 83). The test itself exhibited a high level of reliability and administrators used it for “purposes of grouping, comparison, and specific diagnosis” (p. 96).

A decade later, a concise study of national entrance requirements for graduate study in music indicated certain admission factors that prospective music students should keep in mind (Cheyette, 1962). Some important criteria were determined: grades earned in the undergraduate program, objective examinations in theory and history, and the performance audition (p. 292). The findings of this study found that it was difficult to impose an arbitrary list of admission requirements for a music student seeking a higher graduate degree (p. 294).

Ross (1986) specifically researched graduate music requirements of selected NASM schools. A more recent approach to this study has been the same author’s continuation of the 1986 national graduate research (Ross, 1997). This study monitored the effects of changing demographics, uncertain financial support levels, and job market conditions, on admission procedures. Recent changes in graduate admission practices included the volatility in performance major enrollments, and more interest in music education programs. More than half of the schools questioned required the GRE, however in the majority of the schools which included the GRE as an institutional requirement, the music faculty did not necessarily demand its use (p. 44). Most schools used the GRE as added advisory information available about the prospective student. The main intent of the study was to survey national trends and practices regarding general degree requirements.

There is some merit in viewing admission procedures from other countries as there are differences and similarities in graduate entry practices. The extent, to which entrance examinations and intelligence measurements are used in other school contexts, provides administrators with strategies to continue research and practice in admission standards (Handa & Gordon, 1999; Caseiro, 1996; Hyusamen, 1996; Aldrich-Langen, 1983; Fain, 1973).

Judging musical performances is no easy task as it relates to levels of musical ability, subjectivity, complex decision-making, and grading (Fiske, 1983). The issues Fiske mentions are dealt with on a regular basis in the audition process. Robert (1967) viewed the college level entrance audition as oftentimes “highly charged and presenting a distorted picture of the prospective student and their capabilities” (p. 47). There are levels of performance behavior exhibited during the audition and it is vital for higher education institutions to have selection policies in place that are versatile and yet clear in application (Castiglione, 1985; Stiggins, 1985). At the same time, Castiglione (1985) found that committees or boards tend to be “reluctant to state their policies in a forthright, written statement they might someday be required to defend” (p. 34). Ultimately, colleges are challenged to design comprehensive assessment plans that evaluate student achievement in performance. They are also responsible for surveying current assessment practices used in NASM accreditation (Wilborn, 1999).

Obviously, there are several approaches for effective music admission criteria. These approaches require an awareness of the differences in music programs offered. At the same time, admission practices of other disciplines and countries should also be considered. Unfortunately, there is a lack of current national or state music admission research available to faculty, administrators, and prospective graduate students. Educational admission procedures

have changed considerably over the last few decades and yet there is very little research tracking the current criteria developments in music programs (Ross, 1997). Different schools adopt their own admission requirements depending on factors of changing

demographics, financial support levels, tradition, experience, accreditation regulations, committee procedures, and philosophies. Admission criteria and standards in any field should encompass many elements. They should be descriptive, progressive, evolutionary, comprehensive, democratic, realistic, and most of all accessible.

As long as higher education continues to exist, there is a need for ongoing review of the nature of the graduate admission process. Selecting graduate students and finding effective models for predicting success in the short and long term is of benefit to administrators (Hagedorn & Nora, 1996). The ongoing evaluation of general admission criteria procedures should be based on establishing new frameworks with the consideration of other disciplines.

Method

The purpose of this study was to identify current graduate admission trends in three graduate piano degree programs. The graduate admission criteria for 20 Texas music units were collected. The higher institutions were selected from the listing of schools and departments of music in the 1999 College Music Society Directory of Music Faculties in Colleges and Universities (U.S. and Canada) and the 1998-1999 National Association of Schools of Music (NASM) Directory. Internet web pages of individual colleges were also consulted for more current information. The 100% response rate demonstrates the interest of this information by music administrators of Texas colleges.

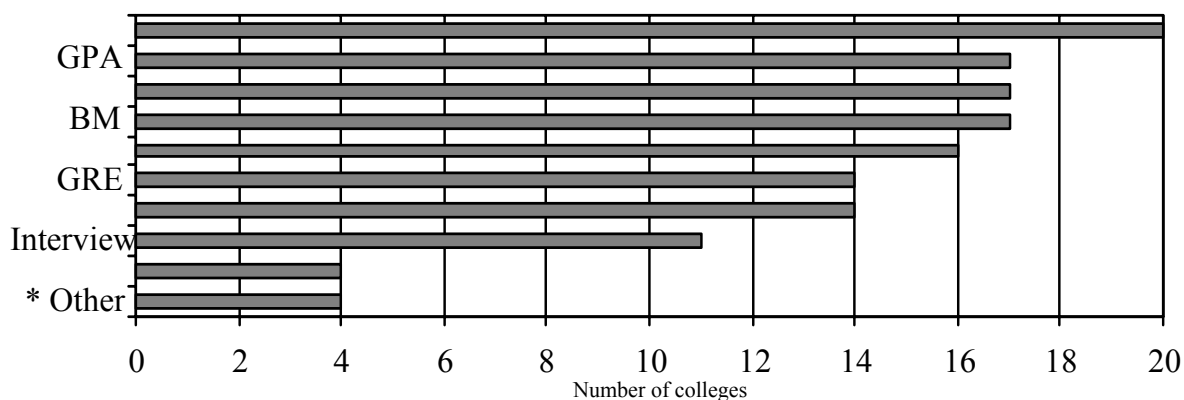
The process involved asking the Director of Graduate Studies or Music Unit Heads to answer a questionnaire including the following data: demographic information, degree plans offered, general criteria list, and the rating of specific criteria of the graduate piano programs in performance, pedagogy, and music education. Additional information included the level of satisfaction with stated criteria, performance audition requirements, and current and future use of the GRE Subject Music Test.

Data received was entered and stored in a database (Filemaker Pro). Data was transferred to a statistical program (Statview) for further analysis. The Fisher exact test was used for the analysis of categorical variables and the Mann-Whitney *U* test for continuous variables.

Results

The number of all graduate music students in the 20 Texas colleges ranged from 2 to 443 (median 33). The combined music units had a total of 273 graduate piano majors (median 10). Music staff to student ratio ranged from 1:7 to 5:1. The most frequent Master of Music (MM) degrees in piano were the performance ($n = 16$) and music education ($n = 12$).

Among general graduate admission criteria, all 20 music units used transcripts. Other frequently used general criteria were GPA ($n = 17$), audition ($n = 17$), and the Bachelor of Music degree ($n = 17$). The general GRE test and recommendations were used by 14 out of 20 colleges. The full breakdown of the general admission list is presented in Figure 1.



* Other General Admission Criteria include: repertoire list, qualifying exams (department placements tests in theory and music history), and statement of objectives.

Figure 1. Frequency of general graduate admission criteria used in Texas colleges.

The GRE was more likely to be used by state than private colleges ($p = 0.04$). There were no differences between state and private colleges in the use of any other general admission criteria. In addition, there was no association between the size of the college and their use of the general GRE. Just over half the units believed the GRE to be a possible indicator of student success in graduate programs. Most units that regarded the

GRE to be an indicator of future success used it as a general admission criteria. Five of the units, who did not regard the GRE as an essential indicator of student success, nevertheless used it as part of their entry requirements.

Most administrators were at least moderately satisfied with their overall graduate music admission standards. Sixty percent of the respondents believed that their admission standards were at a similar level to other Texas colleges.

Piano performance was offered by 18 units. The specific ranking of criteria in the graduate piano performance program revealed that the audition performance ($n = 17$) and level of musicianship ($n = 14$) were considered most important. The GPA was ranked as most important by only 3 schools and the GRE by 2 schools. Each of the above mentioned two criteria (GPA, GRE) were ranked as less important by 8 schools. Both performance experience and reputation of the previous school were rated as moderately important by 9 music units.

The most important factors in the piano audition were level of musicianship and audition performance. Interestingly, applicant piano technique was thought to be of high importance by only 1 music unit in the piano performance admission process.

Piano pedagogy was offered by only 11 units. In the ranking of admission requirements of piano pedagogy applicants, the level of musicianship ($n = 8$) and the audition performance ($n = 7$) were regarded as the most important criteria. Teaching experience was regarded as most important by only 4 music units. The GPA score was regarded as moderately important by 7 units and most important by only 2 units.

Music education was offered by 16 units. In the ranking of admission requirements of music education applicants the GPA ($n = 11$), interview ($n = 10$), and level of musicianship ($n = 9$),

were all regarded as the most important criteria. Interestingly, previous teaching experience was ranked as most important by only 6 music units. The full breakdown of responses for each admission requirement is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Administrative Ranking of Graduate Admission Requirements in the Music Education Degree Stream (music units $n = 16$)

	Most Important (ranked 1-3)	Moderately Important (ranked 4-6)	Less Important (ranked 7-10)	No Rank Assigned
	<i>n</i> responses			
GPA	11	2	3	0
Interview	10	1	3	2
Level of Musicianship	9	4	2	1
GRE	6	4	5	1
Audition Performance	5	4	4	3
References	5	9	1	1
Reputation of Previous School	4	6	5	1
Teaching Audition/Tape	4	2	4	6
Writing Sample	2	3	5	6
Other*	1	0	0	15

Note. *Other: all criteria are considered of equal importance (no ranking given).

The GRE music test is currently only used by 2 of the Texas graduate programs surveyed. About half of the participants were unlikely to use this subject test as one of the admission requirements in the future.

The different criteria ratings showed significant variations in weighting among the three degree programs in the majority of schools. The results depended on the size of school, emphasis on certain degree programs, resources, policy statements, and personal perceptions of the academic and performance faculty. An interesting finding in the piano performance program was deemed to be the lack of importance in piano technique as a requirement for the audition performance. Instead, most respondents ranked the applicant's musicianship level and the audition performance as more important factors of the audition. Of special concern was the relative low weighting assigned to teaching experience and a teaching audition/tape by a significant number of the music units in the pedagogy admission responses ($n = 4$). The data presented from the three graduate programs demonstrates current Texas admission practices and the significance of specific criteria. The results provide useful data regarding standards of criteria and the need for standardization in the future.

Conclusion

With the emphasis on accountability in twenty-first century education, colleges are challenged to design and implement effective models of admission criteria at all levels. General and specific criteria in admission procedures at the graduate level are necessary to determine the quality of student admission and success within music schools. The application and weight of these admission criteria are dependent on current policies of schools that offer graduate programs.

In the future it will be essential to analyze case studies of a variety of different schools in order to view trends in the area of graduate admissions. Such research could affect many facets of educational and professional preparation, as it relates to the further study of music and ultimately assists students, educators and administrators in improving admission standards at the tertiary level. Within the music unit, the various admission requirements should be described in departmental policy statements, handbooks and guidelines. Hopefully in the future, prospective graduate music students will deal with clearly defined institutional regulations and requirements for admission.

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