

Do Grades Matter? Admission into a Graduate Program

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Abstract

In this study we wanted to see if there is a relationship between student undergraduate entrance marks and their exit Master's of Education (M.Ed.) final marks. We undertook this action research project to help improve our program and to better meet the needs of our students by examining if the policy of expecting students who enter our graduate program to have at least a B average is justified. A total of 896 students were included in this research project. The variables provided by the registrar's office included their current status in the M.Ed. program, the starting date, the date of the last credit earned, months to completion, total credits accumulated, the secondary school marks (entrance marks) and finally the M.Ed. GPA. The overall conclusion that can be made is that there is no relationship between entrance marks from undergraduate and the M.Ed. marks.

Keywords: grading, admission, graduate program, action research

We felt the need to write this paper because of an event that happened while our faculty was undergoing an Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) review. The OCGS defines itself in the following way:

[OCGS] is an affiliate of the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). Housed within the Secretariat offices in Toronto, Ontario, Canada, OCGS strives to ensure quality graduate education and research across Ontario.

In order to achieve this, OCGS conducts quality reviews of graduate (master's and PhD) programs that have been proposed for implementation in Ontario's universities. It also performs quality reviews of existing programs on a seven-year cycle. (OCGS)

One criticism in particular that stand out in Ricci's mind that, in part, inspired this paper is an interview that he had with the OCGS team. During the interview the review team seemed displeased because the university was too frequently letting in students who had an average below 70 %. They were suggesting that this was a negative thing. Ricci on the other hand countered that he thinks that this is a positive thing. Most enlightened educators believe that a grade says little about the individual and so he argued that by allowing people in with an average that is less than 70 % allows people an opportunity to grow and succeed or not on their own present context rather than hold them accountable to their past.

We firmly believe that a grade lacks context and therefore is not an accurate predictor of what a person is presently motivated to achieve. As well, we JUDGE that a person should not be eternally punished for scoring a number, in some cases 20 years earlier. We support Paolo Friere (1998) that people are unfinished:

Among us women and men, we recognize our unfinishedness. And this awareness necessarily implies our insertion in a permanent process of search, motivated by a curiosity that surpasses the limits that are peculiar to the life phenomenon as such, becoming progressively the ground and foundation for the production of knowledge, for that curiosity is already knowledge. (p. 56)

To make our thinking clearer, imagine a person as a single parent raising six children and fully and solely responsible for their care, verses this same person as someone who has no dependents and is being fully supported, would the grades be different? Imagine someone with no time for themselves verses this same person with plenty of time to focus on schooling. Or even imagine a person with a love for a particular subject verses this same someone who has little interest in the subjects of schooling at that time.

These out of school life experiences may very well have an impact on the grade that someone receives and therefore, we believe that, the grade itself tells us very little about the individual's ability to do well in a graduate program. In short, we were very disturbed by the huge emphasis placed on a number that may in the end tell us very little about how well a person will perform in our graduate program.

It is clear that some people have advantages over others that have little to do with ability and more to do with how they were thrown in the world: Heidegger (1962) writes, "As thrown, Dasein has indeed been delivered over to itself and to its potentiality-for-Being, *but as Being-in-the-world*. As thrown, it has been submitted to a 'world', and exists factually with Others" (p. 435). Kris shares a story about how his daughter was applauded by a university professor for her ability to use SPSS, a data mining, statistical analysis software that Kris is very comfortable with and that his daughter has been helping him with since she was 12. A student of Ricci's during a graduate class shared how during his high school years math was never a problem because his father was a math teacher and if the student had questions he would simply holler and have a valuable resource at hand. As well, students may have a host of problems such as grieving the loss of a loved one, an illness, abuse and so on; hopefully, these example highlight that grades in themselves do not reveal the whole story. Given the differences in resources and circumstances that people have available, we believe that those who decide on admission criteria have an ethical obligation to redress these potential injustices by allowing for those with a lower grade, opportunities when possible. Again, even before we did our study, we intuited that a student's entrance grade into our graduate studies program would not be a good predictor of success in the program.

Methodology

The data were supplied by the Registrar and the data represented the years from 1999 to 2004. The data was comprised of all entry level marks, courses enrolled in, and final grade in the various courses. Also, recorded was the exit choice of the candidate – comprehensive examination, a research project (MRP) or a thesis. The data were supplied by the Registrar's Office of the university. A total of 896 students were included in this research project. The variables provided by the registrar's office included their current status in the M.Ed. program, the starting date, the date of the last credit earned, months to completion, total credits accumulated, the secondary school marks (entrance marks) and finally the M.Ed. GPA.

The marks were translated from Microsoft Excel to SPSS V 17.0 for the subsequent analyses. The analyses included correlations, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation & range), analysis of variance and correlations. The assumption is that if a decision to admit or not to admit someone largely based on their score is going to be made, that this decision needs to be made on clear evidence rather than what we perceived as an arbitrary number based on a theoretical assumption; especially, given the impact that this decision may have on someone's lived experience. Accordingly, we asked the registrar to provide us with information about past students' entrance grades so that we could compare them with the same students' exit grades in the graduate program in which we teach. As well, we examined other factors such as time to completion (how long it took students to complete the program), Again, we felt that given the importance of the 70 % rule in our university context, we wanted to be sure that the evidence supported this admission policy.

We undertook this action research project to help improve our program and to better meet the needs of our students. Being an action research project our intention is not to generalize to a larger context, but to look at our very specific context and to see where the data leads us. We encourage others to do the same; specifically, make decisions after focusing on their own specific context rather than trying to implement programs and policies after reviewing research that has been conducted in a different context because no matter how general and objective a study appears to be there are always anomalies and their context may be among one. As well, we wanted to contribute our findings because we believe that they are provocative but not unique to the literature around grades and their ability to predict future success; in fact, we wanted to present our position because we believe that our findings and others like it are too often ignored and are not given the attention and respect they deserve. Grades may be convenient for the end users, but they are embedded in injustice and therefore we believe that this paper serves as a very important reminder and caution either against or when using grades.

Literature Review

We are not alone in questioning the connection between a grade received in the past and a person's success in a program.

We discussed that even if a connection is found, we need to consider whether the exit grade or experience is based on “potential” or whether it is based on out of school factors such as resources and circumstances. Again, looking at the score alone tell us nothing about a person’s life experience and context and may lead to a decision that is ethically questionable.

Example 1

During World War II, the United States was facing a serious dilemma about what to do when their war veterans returned. With so many people returning and not enough jobs to placate them all, what could they do? In *Schooled to Order* Nasaw (1979) remind us of the G.I. bill in the United States and how it allowed for returning war veterans to be admitted into post secondary institutions regardless of their prior schooling experiences. He writes,

Surprisingly enough, for the higher education experts at least, these veterans who were not traditional “college material” managed to do as well as those who would have attended college, benefits or not. Every test, evaluation, and survey showed the same results: “The veterans who would not have gone to college without the G.I. Bill ‘earned slightly better grades relative to ability than did those who probably would have attended in any case.’” When all veterans were measured against nonveterans, the differences in performance were even more striking. (p. 180)

Nasaw suggests that “the best solution to the problem would have been guaranteed employment,” since this was not available the decision to hold them over in schools was implemented. The results are a clear endorsement for rethinking not only the value of grades but also having prior schooling experiences before entering post secondary institutions. Homeschoolers and unschoolers know and continue to demonstrate how schooling and education are not the same things and that being successful in postsecondary schooling does not mean that you need to attend or participate in the elementary and secondary schooling curriculum (Ray, 2005). The evidence is clear as a result of the current study.

Example 2

Maclean’s (2007, September 10) magazine included a story with an interesting title: *Do Grades Really Matter? Why A+ Students Often End Up Working for C+ Students*. The pictures, personalities and captions in the article contribute powerfully to the stories overall point. The first picture is one of the Presidents of the United States, George Bush. The caption reads, “Triumph of the academically middling: Bush was a solid C student at Yale, but showed political promise by remembering everyone’s name” (p. 70). Other pictures include Sir Winston Churchill and Sir Richard Branson. The caption reads, “Famously mediocre students such as Sir Winston Churchill and Sir Richard Branson can still go on to lives of success, thanks to a burning need to achieve” (p. 71). Perhaps, most famous of them all, a picture of Bill Gates and the caption reads as follows: “Microsoft founder Bill Gates has called himself ‘Harvard’s biggest failure’” (p. 72). Examples like these are endless, whether it is famous people or people we know within our personal circles, they all highlight that brilliance and schooling are not the same things, and they all serve to diminish the importance that so many try to place on high grades. Again our research supports this finding.

Example 3

Schmidt (2006, October 31) reports on a situation that we find very troubling. In an attempt to cut dropout rates, universities have used various strategies. One strategy that Schmidt says they use is to raise entrance requirements. She goes on to write the following:

The open-door approach invites interested students to take on the challenge of a university education. Many may falter, but some will thrive. The alternate path is a system of tighter controls built around an emphasis on excellence and high admission standards to attract top-tier students. It’s a strategy sure to produce exceptional success rates, but perhaps fewer graduates.

We believe that an open admission policy is an attractive alternative (Ricci, 2008). The problem, the way we see it, is not that students are dropping out, but the question is what are they doing after they leave. As witnessed in the Maclean’s article there are many that drop out because they have other opportunities. The gentleman’s C (although a sexist word) is a term that was coined to mean that someone gets a high enough grade to pass, but not one that is so high where the student has abandoned other interests to attain a high grade. We do not know how many of these people went on to do other things, nor do we know how many continued their education after the studies parameters ended or how many transferred to a different institution.

Schmidt goes on to note that,

Waterloo determined a few years ago that about half the students admitted with an average below 75% failed to graduate within seven years. It has since raised admission standards to increase its completion rate, now at about 80% .

This study tracked people for seven years and another that Schmidt sites tracked students for six years. One measure used to evaluate a university's performance is completion rate. Are students being sacrificed to placate those who audit universities? Are universities trying to keep students with a lower average out because in the long run they cost the university more money, an argument suggested in Schmidt's article? Is this ethical? For example, Schmidt also point out that, "In Alberta, the degree completion rate is just 66 %; in Ontario, it's about 75 %." This is not surprising given the booming economy in Alberta and the opportunities that people have to work. For example, we heard on a news report that a Tim Horton's in Alberta is paying its employees over \$20 an hour; in Ontario they are paid significantly less.

And Schmidt writes,

Meanwhile, UBC identified many years ago, showing those with high-school averages below 75% had a significantly lower chance of completing a degree. But that's not why UBC raised admissions standards over the years, driven instead by limited space available for the growing numbers of qualified students admitted to UBC; this fall, the average entering grade of successful high-school applicants was 87 % .

Given what we have argued above, that universities raise admissions standards because of limited space needs to be ethically challenged. This simply leads to what Chomsky refers to as a system run by commissars that perpetuate the status quo. In *On Miseducation*, Noam Chomsky (2000) writes,

Those who exercise control over the educational apparatus should be referred to as a class of "commissars." Commissars are the intellectuals who work primarily to reproduce, legitimate, and maintain the dominant social order from which they reap benefits. Real intellectuals have the obligation to seek and tell the truth about things that are important, things that matter. (p. 26)

It ensures that those who have the best resources and circumstances will thrive. Schools have a shameful history of continuing to marginalize those who have been traditionally marginalized. What we are trying to do in this section is to argue that the assumption that students drop out because they cannot achieve is too simplistic, and that the solution of banning people from entering a program because of grades is therefore unconscionable.

Example 4

Another important issue that needs to be considered throughout this discussion is the myth that a 70% is a 70% in every time and place. In an article written by the Associated Press (2006) they write,

Grade inflation is hard to measure, and experts caution numbers are often misleading because standards and scales vary so widely. Different practices of "weighting" GPAs for AP work also play havoc. Still, the trend seems to be showing itself in a variety of ways.

The average high school GPA increased from 2.68 to 2.94 between 1990 and 2000, according to a federal study. Almost 23% of college freshmen in 2005 reported their average grade in high school was an A or better, according to a national survey by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. In 1975, the percentage was about half that.

Again, this begs the issue of how pure an average of 67% is over an average of 70% . Nevertheless, in admission sessions that I have participated in the scores are unfortunately viewed as being pure.

Example 5

Even a school as prestigious as Harvard recognizes that grades are not the be all and end all. In a footnote Gatto (2003) writes,

The *New York Times* of March 9, 2003, reported in an article by Sara Rimer that Harvard rejects four valedictorians out of every five, quoting that school's director of admission as saying: "to get into [Harvard], you have to present some real distinction..." A distinction which apparently, 80 Percent of "top" students lack. (p. 306n. 3)

We would like to close this section with Goleman (2005) who states,

When 95 Harvard students from the classes of the 1940s were followed into middle age, the men with the highest test scores in college were not particularly successful compared to their lower-scoring peers in terms of salary, productivity or status in their field, nor did they have the greatest life satisfaction, nor the most happiness with friendships, family and romantic relationships.

Throughout this section we have tried, in part, to challenge the myth that grades are a pure, biased and untainted way of determining who should be admitted and who should be rejected from a given program. What we are trying to do in this section is to argue that the assumption that students drop out because they cannot achieve is too simplistic, and that the solution of banning people from entering a program because of grades is unconscionable, misguided and unethical. In the section that follows we will present our findings based on the entrance and exit scores of all of the students that entered and exited our graduate program for the years 1996 to 2006. As well as grades we looked at time to completion, what route they chose and determine if there is real evidence that students with grades above 70% will have more success in a particular graduate program in a faculty of education.

Results

The results of the analyses yielded the following information. The descriptive statistics included the mean, median as well as the standard deviation and range for the credits (courses) completed, secondary school entrance marks and GPA (Grade Point Average) and other relevant variables at university. Table 1 summarizes the results of this analysis. Bar graphs of the various variables are included for ease of understanding.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for Admit GPS and the M.Ed. GPA and other Important Variables

Category	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Admit GPA	748	61.70	93.30	75.59	75.70	4.60
M.Ed. GPA	838	59.00	97.50	87.49	88.00	4.12
Time to Completion	896	Not appropriate	Not appropriate	54.76	40.00	138.60
Number of Credits Earned	838	3.00 ¹	36.00	20.10	24.00	10.04

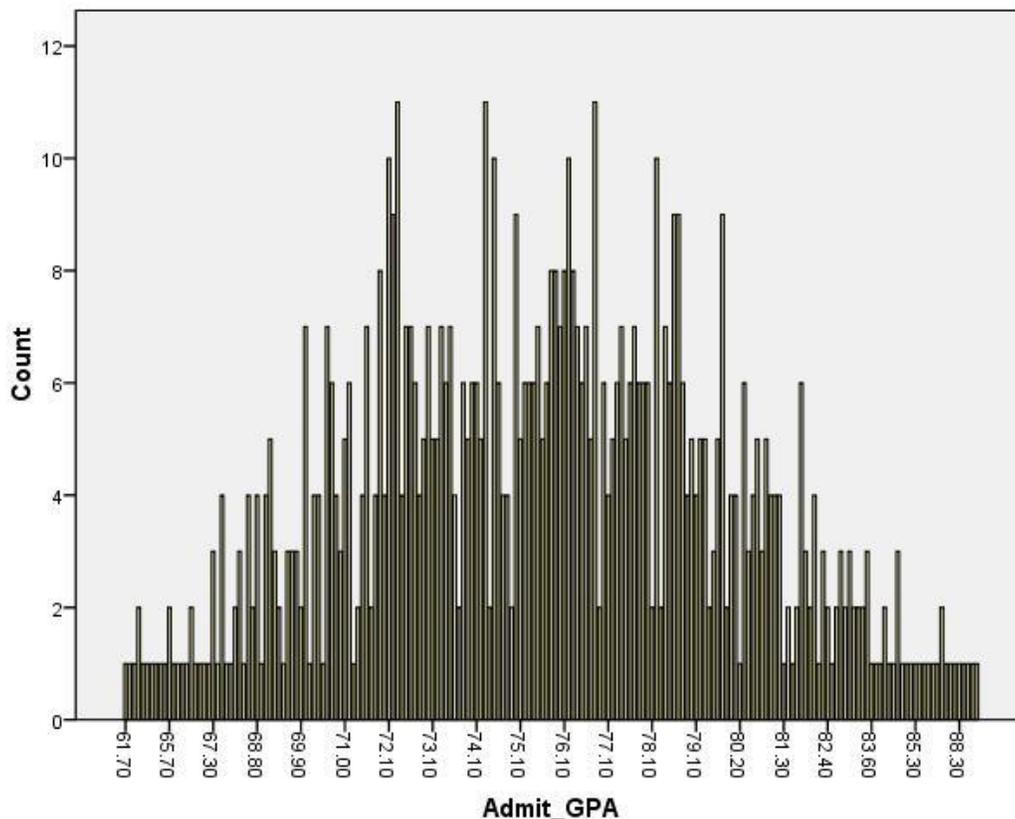


Figure 1. Marks when admitted into the M.Ed. Program

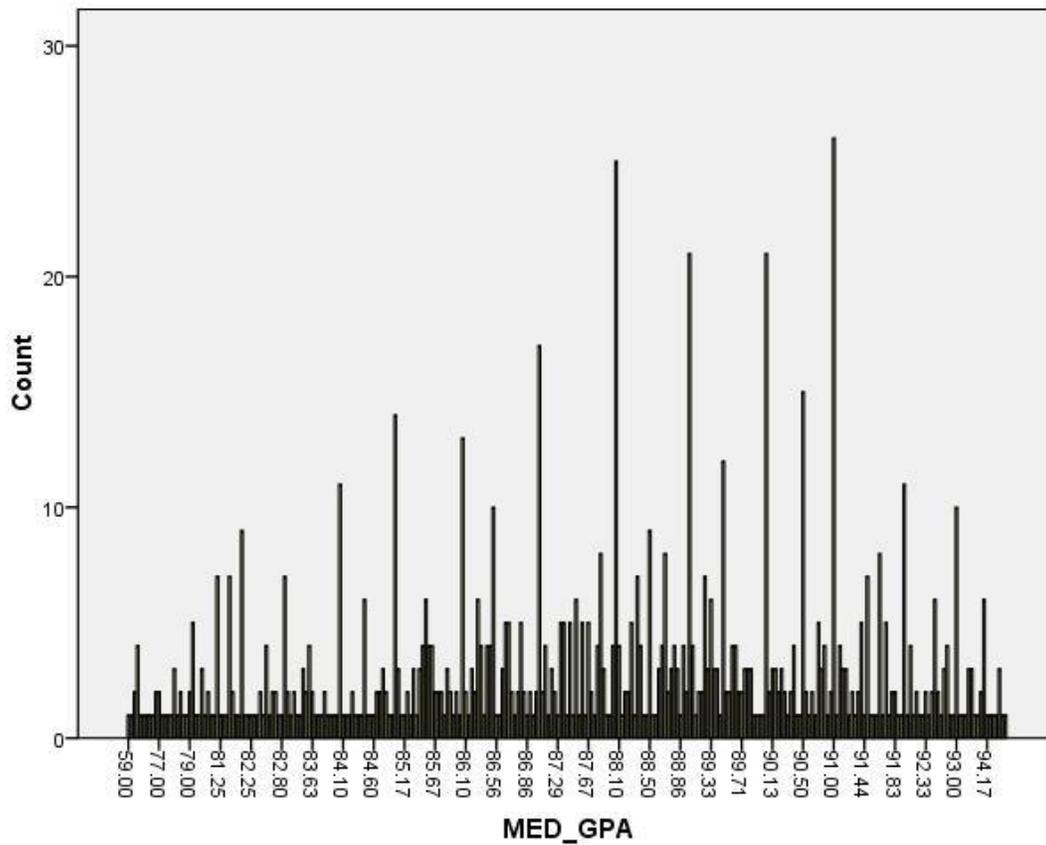


Figure 2. Current marks in the M.Ed. Program

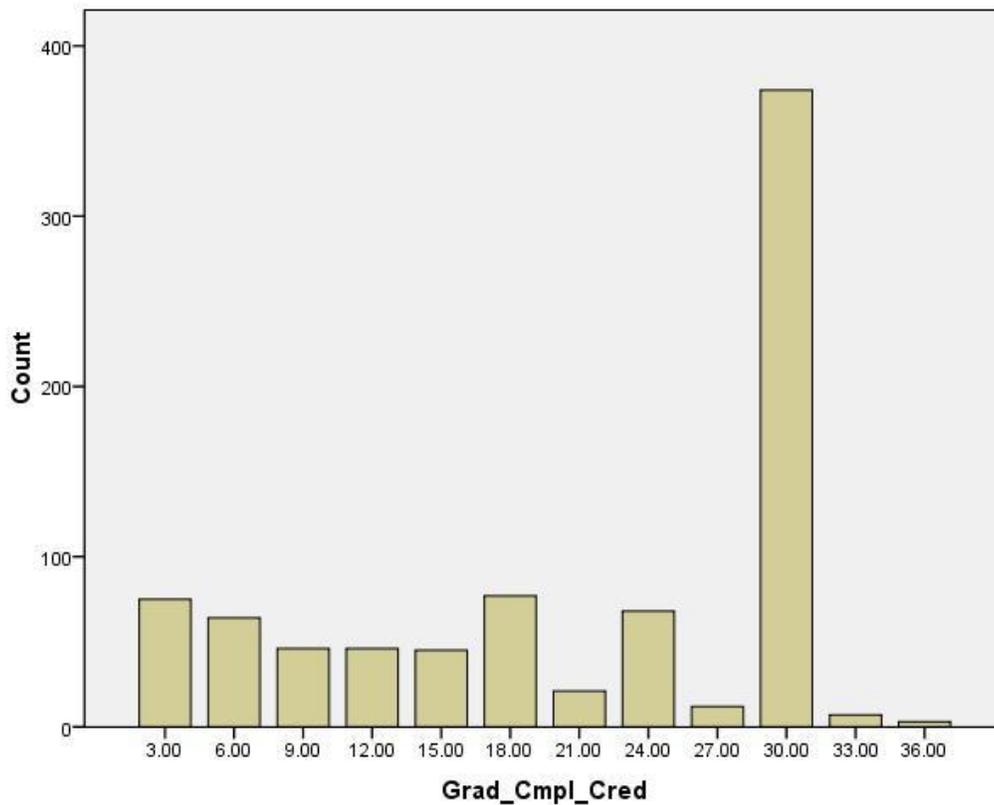


Figure 3. Graduate Course Completed

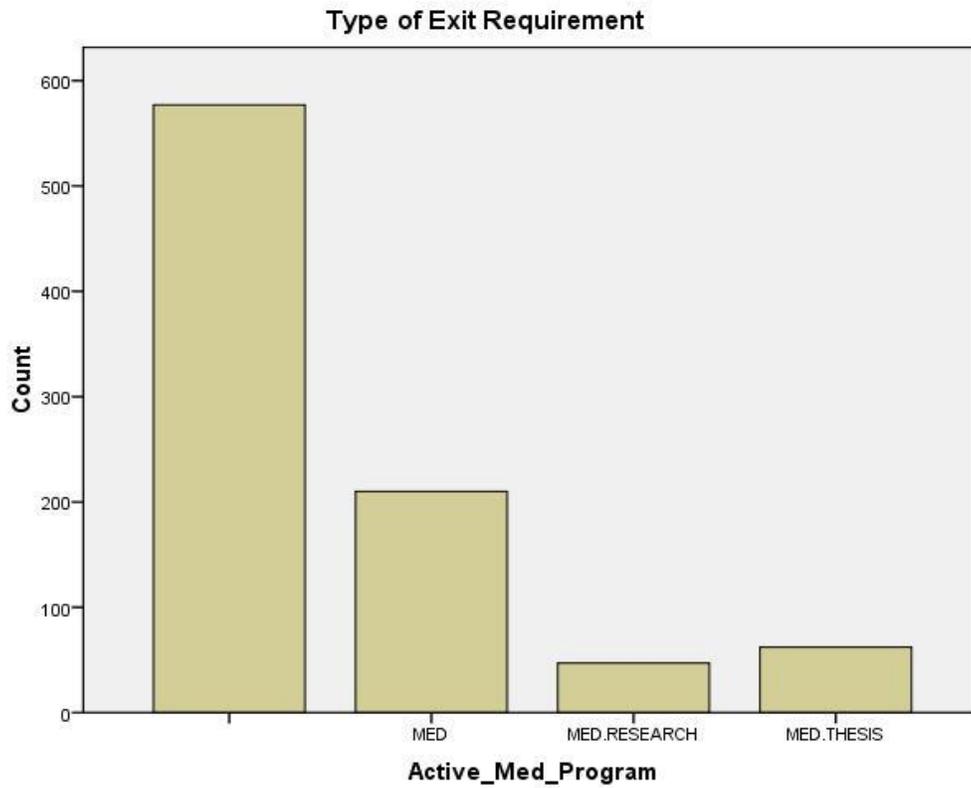


Figure 4. Type of Exist Requirement

Note that most students have not decided on their respective exit requiremen.

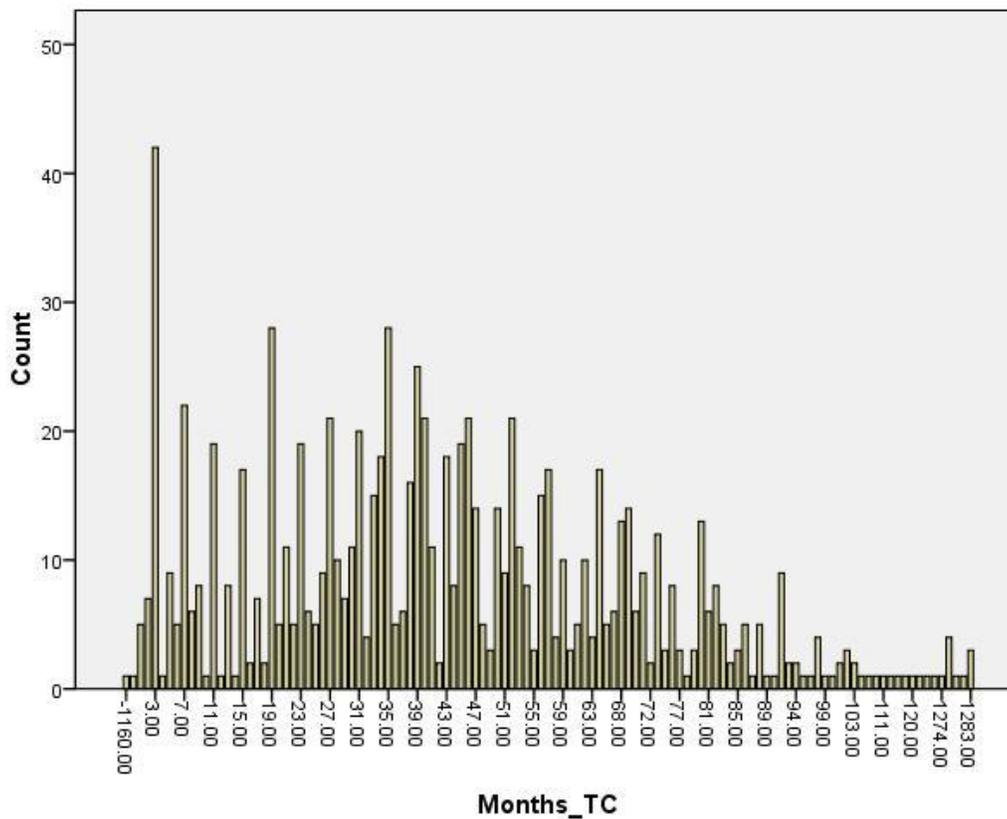


Figure 5. Total months to completion for the M.Ed. Degree

The cumulative frequency and percentage for the admittance marks (10% of the sample of applicants) is 69.90 and for the university GPA is 92.50. This means that 10% or less of the students were admitted with an overall average of 69.90 or less. This falls within the universities admittance policy. Only 10% of the M.Ed. cohort scored below 92.50. This most likely accounts for the low correlation between the admittance marks and the current M.Ed. GPA. Table2 reveals the result of this analysis.

Table 2: Summary of frequencies and cumulative percentages for admission group

Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
1.00 ¹	76	8.5	10.2
2.00 ²	549	61.3	83.6
3.00 ³	120	13.4	99.6
4.00 ⁴	3	.3	100.0
Total	748	83.5	
Missing System ⁵	148	16.5	
Total	896	100.0	

It was of interest to also determine the relationship between the secondary entrance marks and the university marks. The resulted yielded a correlations of .138 (p. < .001). Recall that significance is merely a measure of stability, if this relationship was to be calculated a 1000 times the same correlation would occur. This is really an artifact of the large sample size. The larger the sample size, the smaller the correlation to be significant. If the correlation is squared to become the coefficient of determination (.138² = 0.019) or less than 2% of the variance is accounted for. Conversely, this may be interpreted as 98% of the variance is unexplained or error. This means that there is no relationship between the entrance marks and the university GPA even though the correlation is significant.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion that can be made is that there is no relationship between entrance marks from undergraduate and the M.Ed. marks. This should have a profound effect on future admittances.

Ricci’s personal life reflects our findings and the literature that we reviewed. Briefly, as a high school student, Ricci’s grades were low enough that he was not initially admitted into a university. After a year of college, then reapplying to university, and once he was admitted his grades quickly climbed. Despite, his high school teacher’s lack of confidence in him, he ultimately excelled. The obstacles did not end there. Ricci applied to faculties of education two times, and was initially rejected both times. Then as luck would have it, he happened to call the registrar of one of the faculties that he had applied to on a good day and they notified him that someone just resigned their spot and that if he could get his act together in a week for the start of school, he would be admitted. When he applied to the graduate program to do his Master’s, again he was initially rejected and had to appeal the admission decision. Fortunately, the appeal was successful and he was admitted.

For all intents and purposes, ultimately, Ricci completed his Master’s and PhD in one year each while working as a full time high school English teacher. This is yet another example of how admission policies work as obstacles and fail to distinguish one candidate from another. Ricci is now a tenured associate professor with a large publication list, he is an activist and does a lot of work in the community and his students rate his work and teaching as exceptional. In fact, in the last course he taught he received a course evaluation of 4.97 out of a possible rating of 5. We share his story as yet another example of how flawed the admission process is. This paper is not meant to be merely a theoretical piece but we hope to convince those in positions of power that their current policy needs to change to reflect a new ethical reality.

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