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Developing a Standardized Letter of Recommendation

Abstract

The Standardized Letter of Recommendation (SLR) is a Web-based admission tool designed to replace traditional, narrative letters of recommendation with a more systematic and equitable source of information about applicants to institutions of higher education. The SLR includes a rating scale and open-ended response space that prompt evaluators to describe applicants on a set of qualities identified by faculty in previous research as important to academic success, including knowledge and skills, creativity, communication skills, motivation, self-organization, professionalism and maturity, and teamwork. Admission committees, in turn, receive a Web-based, interactive report of the applicant information. Researchers asked 421 graduate faculty and administrator respondents to use the SLR and then report their interest in and preferences for the form, content and function of an SLR. Overall, a majority of faculty and administrators preferred the SLR to the system currently being used at their institutions. The researchers list several practical implications that adopting institutions may wish to consider, and provide recommendations for subsequent activities to develop the project.

Research to Develop a Standardized Letter of Recommendation

Admission committees currently rely on letters of recommendation as important sources of qualitative information about applicants to institutions of higher education (Briel, Bejar, Chandler, Powell, Manning, Robinson, Smallwood, Vitella, and Welsh, 2000; Powers and Fowles, 2000; Walpole, Burton, Kanyi, and Jackenthal, 2001). Letters of recommendation allow committees to glean valued information about students such as motivation, persistence, creativity, and personality that are otherwise difficult to obtain from traditional admission tools. Moreover, surveys of psychology graduate admission committees have found that letters of recommendation are one of the top three criteria for admission of students, along with undergraduate Grade Point Average (GPA) and Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Spiegel, 1994; Landrum, Jeglum, and Cashin, 1994).

However, there are several limitations to the reliance on these letters that may impair their usefulness and fairness as a central component of the admission process. First, letters often contain overly general and vague language, and admission committees report having to "read between the lines" to determine the letter writer's true intentions (Walpole et al., 2001). Not surprisingly, letters with specific examples of applicants' qualities stand out and are considered more powerful (Knouse, 1983). Therefore, the information contained in letters is often left to the subjective interpretation of the reader, leading to misinterpretations or mistakes.

Secondly, letters of recommendation lack standardization—one evaluator's "extremely hard worker" could be another's "typical student." Thus, whether or not a letter includes valid evidence for qualitative variables such as motivation and teamwork will often depend on the evaluator's standards, letter-writing

skills, and knowledge of the admission office agenda. Finally, letters of recommendation are time intensive for both the letter writers and letter readers. Writers must recall an appropriate set of experiences and qualities on which to base their evaluations. As noted previously, readers must attend carefully to both explicit and implicit information about the applicant in order to interpret the evaluation. These limitations reduce the inherent value of the letter of recommendation for admission committees.

This article outlines the development of a Standardized Letter of Recommendation (SLR) to address these limitations. Maintaining a standard language, set of concepts, and response options could remove much of the ambiguity and the need for subjective interpretation and also provide a more efficient format. Standardization could also reduce the importance of letter writing ability and savvy about the letter writing process that currently exists in conventional letters of recommendation.

The Standardized Letter of Recommendation

The researchers designed the SLR as a Web-based admission tool to supplement or replace existing letters of recommendation for graduate school admission. The hope was that the SLR would provide a more valid and systematic source of information about applicant qualities than current letters of recommendation. The SLR directed an evaluator to describe an applicant on seven qualities: (a) knowledge and skills, (b) creativity, (c) communication skills, (d) motivation, (e) self-organization, (f) professionalism and maturity, and (g) teamwork. For each quality, the evaluator is asked to rate the candidate on four specific items (e.g., for "creativity," an item is "produces novel ideas") on a five-point scale ("below average" to "truly exceptional" with a "don't know" option). The evaluator was also allowed to elaborate on or provide examples of that quality in a comment box. In this way, evaluators who prefer written text to a rating system will not be constrained by the SLR.

The SLR was paired with an interactive Web-based graphical summary of the evaluations of each applicant designed for use by an admission committee. The summary provided individual and aggregated evaluator responses on each quality. It also enabled additional comparisons, such as with other applicants, or with reference groups, such as all admitted students, or all applicants across the country.

Similar to standardized tests, the SLR yielded stable population norms, facilitating candidate evaluation. Standardization allowed for comparisons across a variety of factors, such as ethnicity and gender. Further, the SLR created an on-going data collection effort, which will enable validation against a wide range of educational outcomes. Continued research ensured that the constructs included on an SLR represented those most valued by admission committees. In these ways, the SLR can generate a feedback loop of student data, which will inform education practice, policy, and retention efforts.

Previous Research on Non-Cognitive Skills and Graduate Admission

The SLR was designed to assess the qualities of most interest to institutions. The SLR that was designed for graduate admission assessed a set of qualities derived from a series of GRE-sponsored projects that have attempted to identify the factors that faculty members consider important for success in graduate school. The Horizons initiative staff (Briel, et al., 2000) interviewed 71 faculty members, graduate directors and deans from a variety of departments at 14 U.S. institutions. When asked to describe factors important for admission, interviewees consistently mentioned non-cognitive factors, such as motivation, persistence, teamwork, and research initiative. This led the authors to recommend that a standardized assessment of key non-cognitive skills be developed.

In a follow-up to Horizons, Walpole et al. (2001) conducted open-ended telephone interviews with 16 faculty members and five deans. Interviewees consistently mentioned motivation, curiosity, persistence, goal orientation, communication skills, organizational skills, and the ability to multi-task as important admission criteria. Given the importance of these factors to admission decisions and the relative difficulty of extracting this information from applicant folders, interviewees expressed a desire for a means to measure and present information on student attributes. Interviewees believed that such a service might minimize attrition rates and time to degree.

Additional GRE-sponsored research has furthered understanding of the constructs that graduate admission committees hope to learn from letters of recommendation. Powers and Fowles (2000) asked nine psychology faculty members and 14 history faculty members to review simulated applicant admission folders. The folders contained quantified ratings of information contained in each applicant's letters of recommendation and personal essays. In addition to rating the extent to which they would recommend admitting the student, participants indicated the importance of several non-cognitive factors contained in the letters and essays. While intellectual ability and research aptitude were the two most important variables gleaned from letters of recommendation, several "soft skills" (including communication skills, creativity, independent thinking, reliability, initiative, character, emotional maturity, and motivation) were also rated as highly important.

Past research has demonstrated both interest in, as well as some direction for the content of a non-cognitive supplement to current admission materials (Briel et al, 2000; Powers and Fowles, 2000; Walpole et al, 2001). Currently, some colleges and universities present their own versions of recommendation forms. However, these institution-specific forms have two limitations. First, content has typically been chosen informally, without a documented research base. Second, their use precludes some of the benefits available with a common, widely adopted standardized letter of recommendation, such as stable national and applicant school norms that could be used for evaluating applicants' scores.

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> prototype."

Overview of Research to Develop the SLR for Graduate Admission

In an effort to develop a viable and effective admission tool, researchers surveyed graduate faculty and administrators who would be potential users of the SLR. The research proceeded in two steps. Preliminary research included focus groups to determine the preferred format and function of an SLR prototype. In the primary research initiative, participants interacted with the prototype that emerged from the preliminary research and described their preferences and overall reactions to the SLR via an extensive telephone survey.

Preliminary Research to Develop an SLR Web site Prototype

A necessary first step was to conduct focus groups with a sample of potential SLR users to inform the development of a working SLR Web site prototype. Four focus groups were conducted with graduate faculty and department chairs at colleges and universities in Boston, Atlanta, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Participants were 38 faculty members representing institutions that varied according to key factors such as size, public versus private, and terminal masters versus doctoral level programs. Researchers included Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) and programs that cater to international students. Participants came from a broad array of disciplines that fell into five areas: natural sciences, engineering, social sciences, humanities and arts, and education.

The qualities that were deemed important to faculty participants in prior studies were used to develop the content of the SLR prototype. Using an a priori set of well-established qualities (i.e., Kyllonen, Walters, and Kaufman, 2004) as a framework, these skills were grouped into a set of seven core qualities: knowledge and skills, creativity, communication skills, motivation, self-organization, professionalism and maturity, and teamwork. Participants evaluated paper versions of five sample evaluator forms and five sample report forms for an SLR and discussed its overall purpose and potential usefulness.

The marketing team prepared a comprehensive final report, summarizing and analyzing the findings and recommendations from the focus groups (Cohn Research, 2002). Participants expressed a wide range of preferences for the features and functionality of an SLR. We then developed a working Web site prototype to accommodate this range of preferences. Web delivery allowed the accommodation of divergent preferences—faculty preferring written text needed simply to click on a comments box, while faculty preferring numeric ratings could use graphs and normative data.[1] The input and output forms that received the highest rankings by focus group members became the basis for the site format. For the final Web site, each quality was defined by a preliminary set of four items, which were developed in collaboration with Lewis Goldberg, a leading personality psychologist who served as a consultant for the project.

Primary Survey Research

The primary study included a telephone survey with a large, representative sample of graduate faculty and administrators to accomplish the following objectives: (1) Obtain feedback from graduate institutions about the value and usefulness of the SLR and gather recommendations for improvements to a prototype of the SLR; and (2) evaluate issues related to the likelihood of adoption of the SLR in the admission process.

Method

Information gleaned from the focus groups was used to develop a comprehensive telephone survey that was designed to evaluate faculty reactions to completing the SLR Web site prototype.

Participants

The telephone survey was conducted with 421 institutional representatives. The institutions included in the study are a representative sample of current GRE score recipients. To ensure that the appropriate types of respondents were selected for the study, GRE program direction did some advance investigation with institutional contacts to determine the appropriate level and mix of study participants. The selected participants represented the range of programs and institutions outlined in the focus groups. Individuals who provide input into graduate admission policy and/or make admission decisions participated in the study. This includes graduate faculty (n = 349), faculty from HBCU's (n = 33), and graduate school administrators (n = 39). For the graduate faculty sample, the median number of letters written per year was 10, and the median number of letters read per year was 60. For the HBCU faculty sample, the median number of letters written per year was 12.[2]

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[1] Seven GRE Board members participated in a usability study of an initial version of the Web site. Each participant was assigned one observer who asked a series of scripted questions and recorded all feedback and observations. Several changes were made to the Web site in response to this feedback.
[2] Most HBCU faculty did not read letters because they represented undergraduate institutions.

Procedure

The marketing team developed a survey using input from both research staff and the GRE program staff. Institutional respondents were contacted by telephone and screened to determine their eligibility and interest in participating in the study. Confirmed study participants received a Word file via email that contained the Web site information and a confidentiality statement for signature. Participants were given approximately one week to view the Web site and be available for the telephone interview. Participants were instructed to complete the SLR as if evaluating the last applicant for whom they wrote a letter of recommendation. On the scheduled date the interviewer contacted each participant and administered a 20–30 minute survey. The survey included questions about the input and output forms, as well as some additional questions that will help evaluate the viability of the SLR concept.
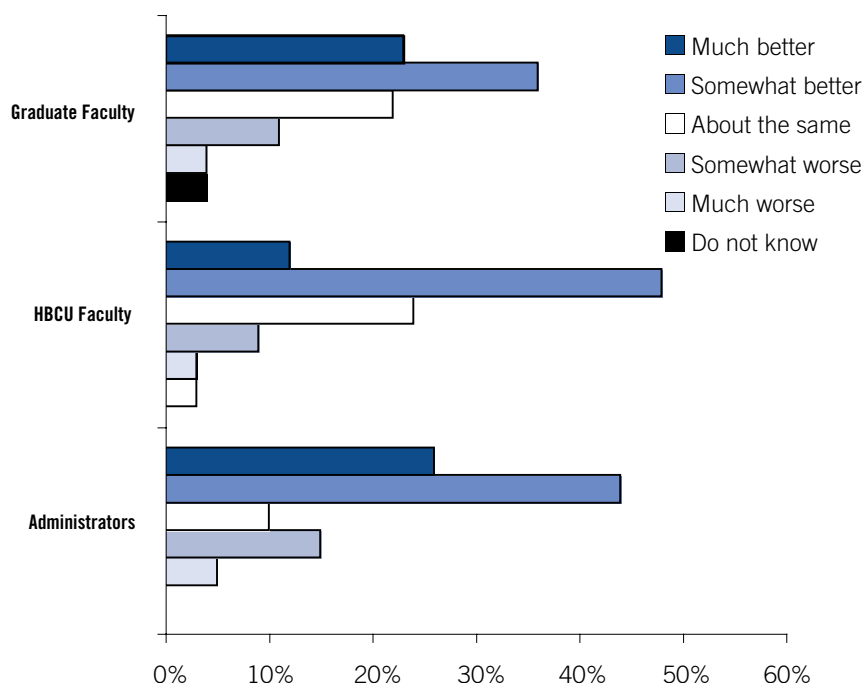
Results

The marketing team prepared a comprehensive report of survey responses (Cohn Research, 2003). Below are the frequencies and percentages for all major findings.

Reactions to the SLR

Using a one to five scale with anchors at much better and much worse, 59 percent of the graduate faculty sample rated the SLR as somewhat better (37 percent) or much better (22 percent) than traditional letters of recommendation (11 percent rated it as somewhat worse and 4 percent rated it as much worse). Responses did not vary significantly as a function of discipline. Similar patterns emerged for both the HBCU faculty and administrator samples[3]. (See Figure 1). Across all samples, the most common reason provided for preferring the SLR was that the "Detailed list of qualities is more thorough and stimulates the writer" (the most common reason for a negative evaluation was "Prefer a personalized and tailored letter"). Appendix A lists the top reasons provided for using each response option.

Figure 2 describes participants' reactions to specific features of the SLR (using a one to five scale with anchors at strongly agree and strongly disagree). A majority of respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that in comparison to narrative letters of recommendation, the SLR includes the qualities that are important to success, results in fairer comparisons,

**Figure 1:
Responses to the question: Do you think the SLR is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than the letter forms you typically use for graduate school applicants?**

Legend:
- Much better
- Somewhat better
- About the same
- Somewhat worse
- Much worse
- Do not know

Groups: Graduate Faculty, HBCU Faculty, Administrators

Axis: 0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60%

[3] Examination of responses revealed that the three samples varied little. However, we did not conduct formal statistical comparisons across groups.

is quicker than sending separate letters to multiple schools, is easier to complete, obtains more useful information, and is more convenient. Also, 73 percent of the respondents strongly agreed (34 percent) or somewhat agreed (39 percent) that rating the candidate on four items per quality would make the SLR a more reliable assessment.

When prompted to suggest revisions to the SLR, the top four suggestions were: (a) the SLR should be shortened (seven percent of all respondents); (b) the response scale needs to be more clearly aligned with the questions (five percent); (c) Add questions about specific experiences and knowledge of the field (four percent); and (d) Programs should be able to customize the forms (four percent).

Reactions to the SLR Report
Sixty-two percent of the graduate faculty sample rated the SLR report as much better (32 percent) or somewhat better (30 percent) than the format their graduate school currently uses to analyze applicants' letters of recommendation. (See Figure 3). Similarly, 69 percent of the administrator sample rated the SLR report as much better (33 percent) or somewhat better (36 percent). The top reasons participants used each response option are described in Appendix B.

Figure 2:
Responses to questions about specific features of the SLR
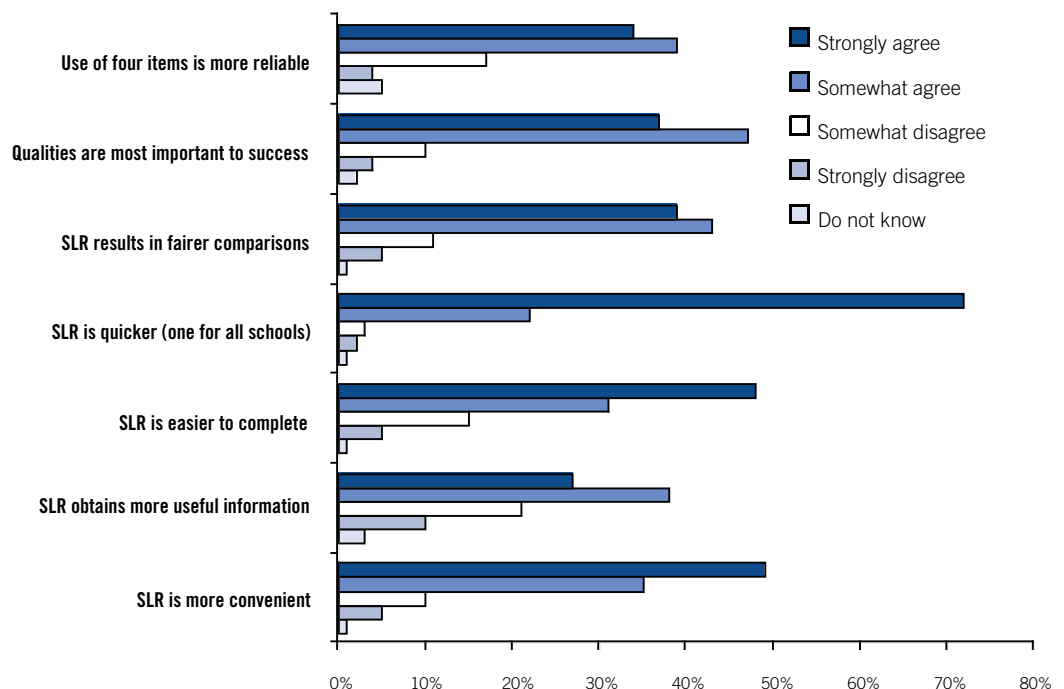

Figure 3:
Responses to the question: Do you think the SLR report is much better, somewhat better, about the same, somewhat worse, or much worse than the format your graduate school uses to analyze applicants' letters of recommendation?
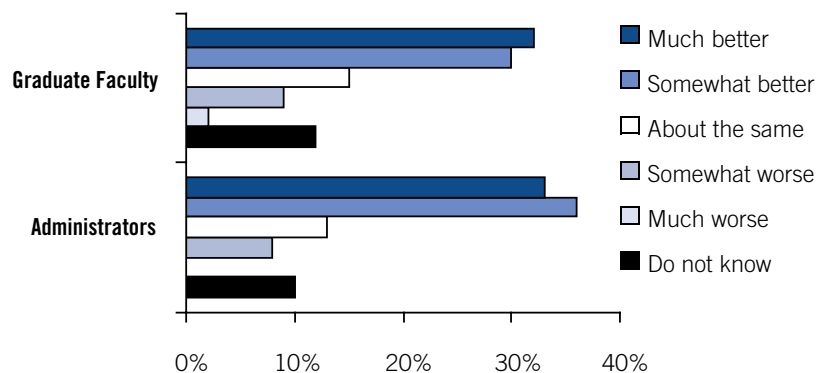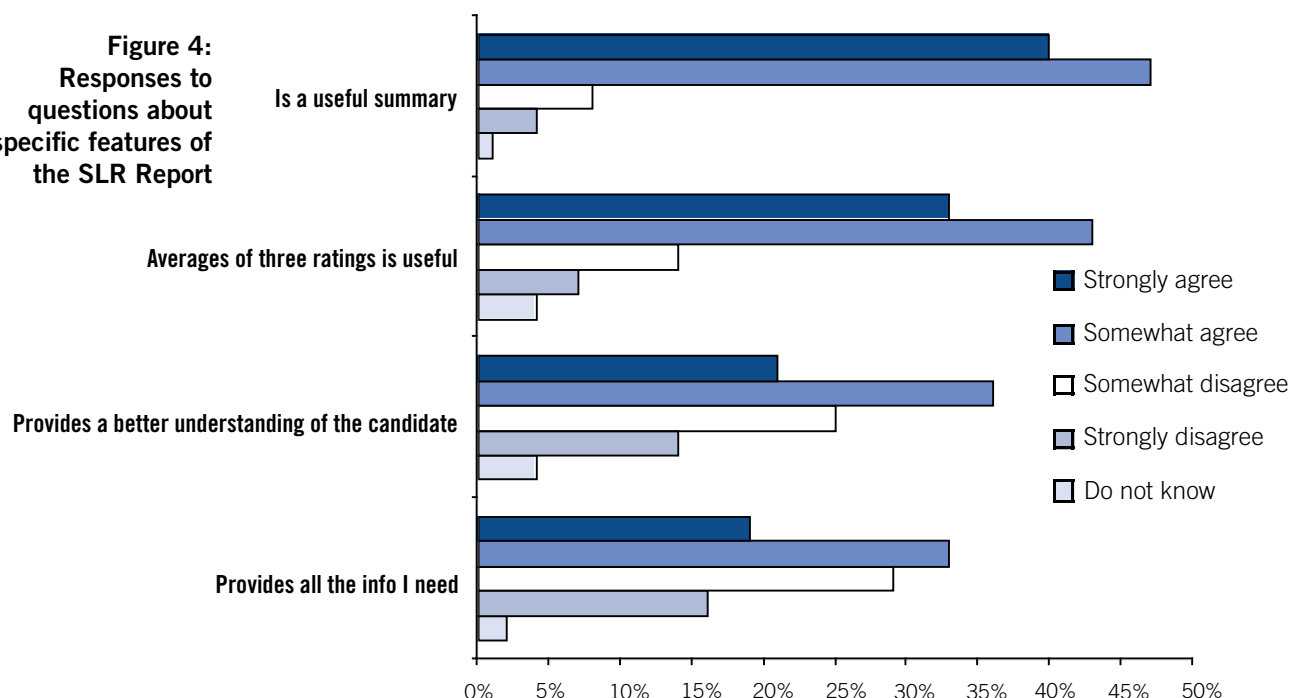
**Figure 4:
Responses to
questions about
specific features of
the SLR Report**

Is a useful summary

Averages of three ratings is useful

Provides a better understanding of the candidate

Provides all the info I need

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Do not know

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40% 45% 50%

Participants described their reactions to specific features of the SLR Report. (See Figure 4). A majority of respondents strongly agreed or somewhat agreed that the SLR Report provided a useful summary of the evaluators' assessment and the averages of the three evaluators is a useful way to summarize evaluations. A smaller majority agreed that the SLR Report gives the reader a better understanding of the applicant than does the narrative letter and "includes all the information I want to know from the letter writers."

When asked about the usefulness of the comparative norms in the report, 25 percent of the sample rated them as very useful, 61 percent as somewhat useful, and 12 percent as not useful. Moreover, 70 percent of the sample would like to have the SLR report combined with the applicant's GRE Score report.

The majority of participants did not provide suggestions for revisions to the SLR Report. However, the top four suggestions were: (a) the narrative should be displayed with the rating for each quality (four percent of the total sample); (b) add more qualities to the SLR (e.g., discipline-specific) (two percent); (c) add questions about specific experiences and knowledge of the field (four percent); and (d) programs should be able to customize the forms (four percent).

The SLR Adoption Process
When asked whether they believed that the SLR would be widely adopted by graduate schools, 50 percent strongly agreed or somewhat agreed while 30 percent strongly disagreed or somewhat disagreed. Overall, 42 percent of the sample believed that it would either be very easy or somewhat easy to get their graduate school to switch to the SLR, while 45 percent believed that adoption would either be very difficult or somewhat difficult. When asked whether they thought that most faculty members in their department would prefer the SLR to current letters of recommendation, 51 percent of the participants said yes, 34 percent said no. When asked about the likelihood of their schools adopting the SLR in the next three years (if it was available today), 60 percent said it would be very likely or somewhat likely, and 32 percent said it would be very unlikely or somewhat unlikely.

Of the total sample of respondents, 30 percent said that the SLR should replace current letters of recommendation, while 51 percent believed that it should supplement current letters. Eighteen percent said that it should neither replace nor supplement letters.

"Respondents were somewhat split in their estimates of the ease and likelihood of adopting the SLR into their graduate admission process. Clearly, adoption of the SLR will involve a general openness to transforming the current recommendation process and also a high-level of cooperation and coordination among graduate institutions."

Discussion

Overall, graduate faculty and administrators responded positively to the concept, functionality and content of the SLR system, with a majority of the respondents indicating that the SLR is better than what is currently being used by their institutions. In comparison to narrative letters, a majority of respondents agreed that the SLR Web site is quicker, easier and more convenient for the letter writer. Moreover, a majority agreed that the SLR Report provides a useful summary of the evaluators' assessments, reports more useful and reliable information about the applicant, and ultimately promotes fairer comparisons.

Further comments suggest that users would prefer other applicant materials such as GRE scores to be combined with the SLR Report. The SLR could be either a stand-alone service or a component of a larger new service for graduate schools. The full service approach would be a Web-based application service consisting of the application form, transcript summary, score reports, personal statements, and the SLR. The SLR graphical report might include candidates' GRE test scores alongside averaged ratings on each quality.

Respondents were somewhat split in their estimates of the ease and likelihood of adopting the SLR into their graduate admission process. Clearly, adoption of the SLR will involve a general openness to transforming the current recommendation process and also a high-level of cooperation and coordination among graduate institutions. Future work will need to expand on these initial estimates by collaborating with representatives from graduate institutions to discuss not only an appropriate strategy for adopting the SLR, but also to continue to assess the full range of practical and logistical implications involved.

Practical Implications of Adopting the SLR

This initial analysis of faculty and administrator reactions to the SLR indicates that the SLR produces information that may enhance the current admission process. However, its use also introduces several issues. First, quantifying the ratings of candidates generates an explicit evaluation of the applicant. This differs from the current practice in which implicit statements are embedded in text. The explicitness of the SLR ratings raises concern about legal accountability of evaluators. Currently, applicants can waive their right to access letters written on their behalf. This system would apply to the SLR, but it is critical that the legal boundaries of this waiver are established.

A second issue involves the capability of the SLR to generate data that can be used for a variety of research, evaluative, and applicant selection purposes. Currently, letters of candidates not admitted for study are destroyed. Perhaps SLR data could be retained so long as all personal identifiers are removed, but the potential legal ramifications of doing so must be considered. However, even if data on candidates who are not admitted cannot be retained for legal exposure reasons, data on admitted candidates would still be useful for comparisons of candidates with other students in the program and at the institution, to compare across programs and institutions, and to further our understanding of predictors of graduate school success.

A third issue to consider is that the longitudinal data can also be used to assess the rating standards of each evaluator—an option that might prove highly valuable to admission committees when assessing the validity of the evaluations. However, this idea is somewhat controversial given the heightened level of accountability it entails for faculty members. Perhaps faculty can indicate on the Web site whether they will allow the data to be kept. Again, the ability to retain the data of applicants who are not admitted remains uncertain, and the absence of such data would limit an accurate assessment of standards.

Finally, researchers must consider that it may become necessary to develop program-specific, or discipline-specific SLR's,

> "Schools can use this information to understand how to better prepare students for higher education and specific major areas."

or at a minimum, SLR's for more and less technical graduate programs. Focus group participants expressed doubt about a consensus of a sufficient list of qualities across departments.

Future Work to Develop the SLR

This study was a first step toward the development of the SLR. Additional studies could be done to determine the reliability and validity of the standardized letter. Researchers could assess the validity of the SLR by tracking a group of students longitudinally through their graduate programs. Data could be collected on degree completion, graduate-school grade-point average, faculty ratings of student performance, and other graduate school outcome variables. These could be used as criteria against which to conduct incremental validity studies of the SLR vs. letters of recommendation, college GPA, GRE scores, and perhaps other predictor variables.

While a majority of respondents in this sample believed that the SLR prototype contained the qualities most important to success in graduate school, validity and reliability data would allow an empirical determination about whether these qualities are, indeed, the best ones to include on the SLR for graduate admission. Moreover, on-going item-level analyses would allow us to determine the appropriate structure of the SLR (e.g., do seven qualities capture the evaluation better than three?).

Implications for the College Admission Community
SLR as a Contribution to Fairness Initiatives

Students who traditionally score low on standardized tests may benefit from the opportunity for evaluators to provide additional information about them in a way that is valid and systematic. Supplementing standardized tests with valid information on non-cognitive qualities that are also relevant to educational outcomes should increase prediction and reduce group differences (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, and Kabin, 2001). This opportunity would address college counselors' and admission professionals' concern for underperforming students.

SLR as a Research Tool for the Higher Education Community

Why would schools be willing to participate in the implementation of the SLR, once the background research has been conducted and the validity has been studied? A "feedback loop" may provide an incentive for school faculty to participate in the use of the SLR. As years pass, SLR data will provide information about perceived qualitative traits that predict successful academic outcomes. Schools can use this information to understand how to better prepare students for higher education and specific major areas. The SLR data will allow admission committees to garner a better sense of the types of students who will persist in specific areas of study and institutions, leading to better matches between students and programs, and perhaps therefore increased student performance and reduced attrition.

This study represented a necessary first step toward understanding the viability of introducing the SLR into the graduate admission process. Any potential user of the SLR for undergraduates or specific fields will need to conduct this initial first stage of research to determine the interest, functionality, and content that is appropriate for their user population.

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Why do you say that the SLR Report is *much better*?	(N = 94)	
	n	%
Detailed list of qualities is more thorough and stimulates the writer	24	28
A comprehensive list of qualities	21	24
It is convenient and easy	13	15
Provides more information than standard narrative letters	11	13
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *somewhat better*?	**(N = 120)**	
	n	%
Detailed list of qualities is more thorough and stimulates the writer	40	28
Allows for standardized evaluation/comparison of candidates	21	15
Comprehensive list of qualities	20	14
It is convenient and easy	12	8
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *about the same*?	**(N = 57)**	
	n	%
Basically, the same information as the narrative form	46	61
Prefer a personalized and tailored letter	8	11
SLR prototype is missing some qualities	5	7
It is convenient and easy	3	4
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *somewhat worse*?	**(N = 33)**	
	n	%
Prefer a personalized and tailored letter	9	20
SLR prototype is inconvenient, too long	8	18
SLR prototype has too many items per quality	7	16
SLR prototype is missing some qualities	6	13
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *much worse*?	**(N = 8)**	
	n	%
Report de-emphasizes qualitative information	5	31
Ease of completion may lead to a superficial evaluation	3	19
Does not provide for description of specific skills	3	19
SLR prototype is inconvenient, too long	2	13

Note: Not all participants provided an explanation for their responses.

Why do you say that the SLR Report is *much better*?	(N = 125)	
	n	%
Currently do not have a summary form	24	22
Provides a useful summary	20	18
Ability to compare applicants in a fairer way	19	17
Comparison norms	17	15
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *somewhat better*?	**(N = 120)**	
	n	%
Evaluation is more comprehensive than current one	21	19
Standardized, uniform information	18	16
Currently do not have a summary form	17	15
Ability to compare applicants in a fairer way	15	14
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *about the same*?	**(N = 57)**	
	n	%
Use a similar form	25	57
Report de-emphasizes qualitative information	5	11
Not the information I want	4	9
Our current process is better and more informative	3	7
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *somewhat worse*?	**(N = 33)**	
	n	%
Report de-emphasizes qualitative information	7	32
Not the information I want	6	27
Hard to understand the report	4	18
Our current process is better and more informative	3	14
Why do you say that the SLR Report is *much worse*?	**(N = 8)**	
	n	%
Report de-emphasizes qualitative information	3	43
Not the information I want	2	29
Averages conceal important individual rating information	2	29
Hard to understand the report	1	14

Note: Not all participants provided an explanation for their responses.