

ETS Draws the Ire of Public-Health Schools by Limiting Access to Score Reports

By ELIZABETH F. FARRELL

A four-digit number has incited a heated conflict between the Educational Testing Service and a group of graduate schools of public health. The number is 5688, and in the standardized-testing industry, it is known as a "designated institution code."

Such codes, which ETS assigns to colleges and scholarship organizations, allow test takers to indicate which ones should receive their official Graduate Record Examination scores. And ETS, which owns the GRE, is the sole judge of what is code-worthy.

In November company officials decided that a nonprofit group of public-health graduate schools was not.

Recently, member institutions of the group, the Schools of Public Health Application Service, created a single application form that students can use to apply to any of their programs. Sophas is now encouraging admissions deans at its member institutions to write letters to ETS. And it has support among other leaders in the health professions who feel that ETS is not responsive to their institutions and students.

ETS officials say the decision was a matter of fairness. The board that oversees the GRE says it could not ensure that Sophas would send scores only to accredited institutions. And it did not want to give an advantage to a group that does not include every school of public health.

"Their membership could be skewed by any number of factors," says Maurice C. Taylor, the chair-elect of the GRE Board and dean of graduate studies at Morgan State University, in Baltimore. "We don't want to be involved in deciding which membership services can have a code. ... That would be endorsing schools that are members over those who are not."

Changing Needs

Whether or not ETS's decision is fair, it is undoubtedly consistent. Other professional health programs that use the GRE in admissions have been denied codes or anticipate a battle in their future requests.

To Sophas and those other application services, ETS's decision is about more than codes for GRE scores. Not having the codes means a lot more administrative work for admissions offices and less convenience for students, but the bigger issue, many admissions deans told *The Chronicle*, is that ETS does not understand — or want to understand — the needs and technology shifts in their profession.

Centralized application services are the wave of the future, and ETS is stubbornly trying to hold back the tide, say many graduate-school admissions deans.

"We hope there's an opportunity for further discussion, to understand the true reasons why we can't get this done," says Kara B. Robinson, director of admissions at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. "Centralized applications are becoming more and more the norm, and we have reached a point in time where this should be given a closer look."

Twenty-five of the country's 40 accredited graduate programs in public health are participating in Sophas's application service. More are expected to join, and admissions deans and professors from 37 institutions collaborated on research, surveys, and meetings for more than three years to create the central application.

The rationale for the service was simple: fewer redundant forms for students to fill out and less paperwork for admissions officials. Representatives of Sophas also say the service helps them keep up with their peers in the professional health-education field. Eight other health disciplines, including medical schools, dental schools, pharmacy programs, and physician-assistant programs, provide similar centralized application services.

"It's not just a question of procedure, it's a bigger question of equity for the profession," says Jeffrey Thomas Johnson, associate dean of admissions at Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. "I want public-health schools to be on the same playing field as other health fields that all offer these services."

The number of accredited graduate public-health programs has grown from 27 to 40 in the past 10 years, and applications have jumped from 18,000 to 28,000 over the same time period. With budget cuts and more paperwork to process, efficiency is all the more vital.

An Abrupt Turn of Events

ETS originally granted Sophas its designated institution code in the spring of 2005, making it possible for applicants to send their GRE scores through the service.

Students began using the service in the fall of 2006, and in surveys they praised the new application model. Then, on June 1, 2007, Sophas officials received an e-mail message from ETS informing them that it had deactivated the code. In the brief message, ETS explained that it had granted the code in error, and that it revoked the access because Sophas was not an accredited institution.

The abrupt decision caught Sophas members by surprise, says Allison J. Foster, deputy executive director of the Association of Schools of Public Health, which created Sophas.

The group questioned the decision, and ETS agreed to temporarily reactivate the code so students would not be confused in the middle of the application cycle. Jacqueline B. Briel, executive director of the GRE program, also agreed to meet with Ms. Foster and representatives from other Sophas member schools to learn more about the service. According to Ms. Foster and copies of e-mail correspondence she provided to *The Chronicle*, Ms. Briel expressed concern that ETS might lose revenue from students who use Sophas because they would no longer have to pay to have their scores sent separately to various schools.

It was a concern, Ms. Foster says, that her organization could understand. Along with other members of Sophas, she gathered data on applicant numbers and created revenue-sharing proposals to compensate ETS for revenue it might lose from declines in test-sending fees. Both groups met in late July at ETS's headquarters, in Princeton, N.J.

"It was a very cordial meeting," says Ms. Robinson, of Emory. "We explained our service to them very thoroughly and were hopeful they would come around."

But in November, the testing organization sent a letter informing the group that the GRE Board had decided to permanently revoke the code, effective July 2008. The reasons Ms. Briel cited in the letter — concerns about the accreditation status of Sophas members and the fairness to nonmember institutions — were different from any others ETS had previously raised.

Ms. Foster defends her organization by pointing out that there are no membership fees, and that many more programs are seriously considering the Sophas application.

"All of our members are required to be accredited institutions," says Ms. Foster. "Our schools have made it clear that they want this. Who is ETS to not accommodate this request?"

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