

 GRAD AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

The Inequality of Holistic Graduate Enrollment Management

By Alyssa Orlando

In this article, the author analyzed relevant literature focused on the evaluation and holistic admission practices of American graduate programs, including application materials, academic achievement, and non-cognitive variables. This article mainly focuses on the higher education graduate school admission system within the United States after World War I. The social conditions for holistic admissions, specifically those of graduate schools and programs, stem from elitist gatekeeping practices that minimize or reduce certain populations of prospective students. Holistic admissions practices contribute to the inequity of applicants admitted into U.S. graduate schools through their systemic and structural policies, furthering an elitist mindset. This topic is significant because it affects the decisions made by colleges and universities on submissions for admission, and can be impacted by levels of bias held by individual admissions officers or full departments.

Historically, colleges and universities granted admission into graduate programs mainly on academic background, rigor, and performance on entrance exams with little attention paid to the candidate's other personal factors (Hagedorn and Nora 1996; Ingram 1983). Indeed, even graduate entrance examinations were not created with a purpose of program admission; initially, the Carnegie Foundation ran and promoted the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) as a way to study undergraduate student outcomes (Wendler and Bridgeman

2014). Ingram (1983) posited early in the GRE's history that the test held less predictive validity than it claimed. In addition to declining validity, researchers write that students of color and other underrepresented populations at the graduate level consistently underperform on graduate school entrance exams comparatively to their background, limiting the visibility of potential academic success (Garces 2012; Bastedo, *et al.* 2018). A student's results on an entrance exam often correlates with family income and access to academic preparation

(Garces 2012). Even Wendler and Bridgeman's (2014) research for re-developing the GRE, which was produced by the testing organization itself, indicates that the test does not fully indicate future academic potential. But as graduate programs grew—and continue to grow—in enrollments, administrations required admissions processes and predictive modeling to assist in the selection of students who planned to enroll and ultimately succeed at the institution (Hagedorn and Nora 1996). Thus, the movement to holistic admissions processes began.

The introduction of strategic enrollment management (SEM) divisions further supported the move to holistic admissions at the graduate level (Hossler 2015). As a concept, Hossler (2015) defines enrollment management as integrating an institution's programs and planning, leading to the successful recruitment and retention of eventual university graduates. Linking essential university functions like admissions, financial aid, registrar, and student affairs require faculty, staff, and administrators to work together in pursuing institutional strategic goals.

Kent and McCarthy (2016) define holistic admissions processes as the consideration of noncognitive or personal attributes to determine a candidate's admission to an academic program. Although graduate school entrance exams serve as a main point of contention in graduate admissions, researchers have commented on the need for a holistic admissions framework since the late 20th century (Hagedorn and Nora 1996). From an administrative perspective, broadening the range and type of admissions criteria allows admissions officers and faculty members freedom to expand their recruitment of qualified candidates for the institution's programs (Kent and McCarthy 2016).

Although holistic admissions can allow colleges and universities to grow diverse student bodies and select candidates who will ultimately persist to graduation, many higher education researchers criticize institutions for reproducing inequity and inequitable practices (LePau, Hurtado, and Davis 2017). The ability to focus on the merit of the whole person is a widely advertised facet of holistic admissions rooted in religious and ethnic discrimination from the post-World War II era (Bastedo, *et al.* 2018). Many elite institutions turned away

academically qualified Jewish candidates based on their religious beliefs (Bastedo, *et al.* 2018). Instead, these institutions devised their own non-academic admissions criteria on which they scored and rated characteristics (Bastedo, *et al.* 2018). Over time, universities have implemented holistic admissions practices to fit the needs of their institutional goals. Holistic admissions can open doors to biased—and sometimes institutionally prioritized—choices by marketers, admissions officers, and committee members in order to gain certain students or shut them out of the institution (Bastedo, *et al.* 2018).

This article highlights the inequities of the holistic admissions process used in American graduate schools. Specifically, it aims to answer the question: How do holistic admissions practices impact the equity of a particular school's graduate enrollment management (GEM)? Most current research covering holistic review processes revolve around undergraduate admissions, which poses concerns surrounding available research to analyze equity practices at the graduate level (Morris 2016). However, Kent and McCarthy (2016) identify the shift to graduate admissions in utilizing a more holistic approach stemming from practices initially trialed at the undergraduate level. Graduate admissions review differs from undergraduate in that it typically involves faculty review committees, but in some cases institutions utilize a collaborative approach with non-academic staff members serving as additional or sole reviewers (Kent and McCarthy 2016). Thus, this article also includes key undergraduate practices that academicians used to enhance graduate review processes.

Evaluation serves as the most integral component of holistic admissions impacting the equity of GEM. In order to synthesize its inequity, the evaluation process must first be explained. The literature agrees that several review factors exist in all holistic admissions processes at the graduate level. First, admissions committees evaluate prior academic performance, including required completion of a bachelor's degree, as well as any prior graduate education (Karazsia and McMurtry 2011; Roberts and Ostreko 2018; Stratton and Elam 2014). Findings from most research indicate that academic performance may not directly indicate persistence in

graduate school, but indicate prior learned knowledge in specific subjects areas which allows applicants to succeed (Karazsia and McMurtry 2011; Kent and McCarthy 2016). Academic persistence and comprehension directly relate to attending graduate school, so it follows that faculty reviewers still highly value this component of an application (Scherr, *et al.* 2017).

Second, admissions committees pursuing holistic practices review the other required materials with a close look at the strength in relation to academic performance. This factor can encompass the majority of a candidate's application to graduate school, including letters of recommendation, essays, and resume containing internship or work experience (Boske, *et al.* 2018). The level of impact of these factors vary between academic disciplines as a result of faculty interest in specific applicant characteristics such as work experience or academic aptitude (Boske, *et al.* 2018; Karazsia and McMurtry 2011).

Finally, reviewers frequently assess an applicant's non-cognitive or non-academic variables. Definitions of these variables vary between researchers, but include demographic background, access to specific education, applicant motivation and engagement, and perception of the reviewer or review committee (Hossler, *et al.* 2019). Most practitioners state the review of non-cognitive variables as the reason that holistic admissions processes should become best practice in the industry (Roberts and Ostreko 2018; Wilson, *et al.* 2019). Evaluating non-cognitive variables allows review committees to look at the "whole applicant," including examining their fit with the program compared to successful graduates (Kent and McCarthy 2016). Sedlacek's (2004) work on assessing noncognitive variables in holistic graduate admissions states that nontraditional students show ability through experience and ability to adapt to a changing system. The literature on graduate student demographics indicates that across the board, graduate students come from different backgrounds and a larger age range (Hagedorn and Nora 1996; Kent and McCarthy 2016; Sedlacek 2004). However, Hedlund, *et al.* (2006) note that most admissions committees only use non-cognitive predictors to determine applicant viability if cognitive predictors fall below a set of minimum cognitive criteria. Hedlund, *et*

al. (2006) developed a measure of intelligence covering problem solving and leadership skills, but this measure has not gained much traction in the GEM field.

Traditionally, faculty members feel a need to protect their professions and academic areas from outsiders, inserting themselves as gatekeepers to graduate programs through admissions processes focusing primarily on academics and standardized test scores (Boske and Elue 2017; Ingram 1983; Lumadue and Duffy 1999; Ruscio 1998). Various resources indicate these quantitative factors do not necessarily predict student success in graduate study, and disadvantage minority, older, and nontraditional students (Carnevale and Rose 2004; Ingram 1983; Kent and McCarthy 2016). These gatekeeping practices are rooted in inequity, specifically designed to exclude underrepresented applicants and favor white, wealthy candidates (Posselt 2014). If enhanced critical thinking skills and elevated cultural competency serve as core purposes of graduate school, a student's success depends on the diversity of its enrolled population (Kent and McCarthy 2016).

If cultivated with candidate equity in mind, holistic evaluation and admissions practices can diversify an institution's population while eliminating gatekeeping and maintaining conventional faculty standards of quality (Boske and Elue 2017; Kent and McCarthy 2016; Roberts and Ostreko 2018). Most institutions see this range of practices as a benefit to increasing diversity and promoting student success through evaluation and admissions processes (Roberts and Ostreko 2018). Both cognitive and non-cognitive characteristics comprise the diversity of an institution's student population (Megginson 2009). In order to cultivate a diverse learning environment, admissions offices review the demographics of the class they plan to admit through their own refined holistic admissions process (*Regents of University of California v. Bakke* 1978; Roberts and Ostreko 2018). When enrollment management divisions discuss, formulate, and implement holistic reviews, several factors motivate the final decisions, including the current demographic breakdown of the institution's student population and how that portrays a commitment to diversity (Boske and Elue 2017).

In reviewing the practice, the literature also exposes several flaws of holistic admissions. In today's higher education marketplace, administrators face a need to increase student headcount numbers and institutional revenue and ask enrollment managers to implement a holistic admissions process that best serves those needs (Kent and McCarthy 2016). When institutions broadly define a holistic review process, graduate programs run the risk of admitting candidates who may not persist and graduate (Posselt 2018). Proponents argue institutions should implement holistic review to prevent discrimination against candidates with lower scores or grades, but committees face the challenge of determining their definition of success, which can continue to work against underrepresented applicants (Kent and McCarthy 2016; Sedlacek 2004). Wilson, *et al.* (2019) provide a framework for a singular holistic review process removing standardized testing from criteria, stemming from analyses that metrics-based admissions review eliminated half of underrepresented applicants from the applicant pool studied in the research. Sedlacek (2004) and Posselt (2014) share similar models. However, as each graduate academic discipline requires different skill sets, it would follow that these programs would not share admissions review models. Ultimately, with a wide range of definitions and criterion needs, one singular holistic review process cannot and does not exist (Kent and McCarthy 2016; Hossler, *et al.* 2019).

A second issue stemming from the laws surrounding holistic review is affirmative action in higher education. Although diversity levels have increased within graduate education through holistic review, underlying issues and polarization still exist (McCall 2018). Affirmative action stems from the belief that higher education has excluded and continues to exclude certain groups of individuals from accessing an equal education. The lawsuits brought before the courts establish that the implementation of these processes did not come without flaws. Colleges and universities attempted to remedy the lack of diversity they saw in their incoming classes of students, and it did not go unnoticed by the applicants affected in the process.

Affirmative action practices began appearing as subject matter in court cases related to higher education after the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) set a precedent of race-based admissions in higher education through a case raised to the United States Supreme Court. The *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978) case first raised race as a factor in admissions that could both aid or discriminate against a student's application; the court decided that since "creating a diverse classroom environment" is a compelling state interest under the Fourteenth Amendment, affirmative action programs that take race into account could continue to exist. However, the University of California at Davis set quotas for specific numbers of students per race per incoming class, and the courts ruled that was unconstitutional (*Regents of University of California v. Bakke* 1978). After *Bakke* (1978), the courts began rendering a series of decisions regarding the legality of affirmative action in college admissions processes through the late 20th century and as recently as 2016 with *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (Swink 2003). These cases made and continue to make a direct impact on many policies within higher education.

Still, the need for holistic admissions procedures presents itself through the knowledge of historic segregation and elitism within graduate admissions and higher education as a whole. Over time, lawsuits have shaped the way colleges implement diversity- and demographic-conscious admissions through holistic processes (Swink 2003). Holistic review cannot compensate for the ways in which affirmative action attempts to remediate former discriminatory policies, and does not change current underlying institutional racism practices (Sedlacek 2004; Swink 2003; Thornhill 2019). Future lawsuits will continue to shape this body of literature and the law, as most applicants to a specific school believe they deserve admission. By breaking down discriminatory barriers and negative stereotypes, institutions can deliver more holistic and equitable admissions processes (McCall 2018). Foley (2010) discusses contextual review as a means to admit students more equitably to institutions. This process solicits feedback

from students on which elements of the application should stand out to the committee as most important (Foley 2010). However, Foley (2010) mentions that contextual review can confuse some people as an applicant's chances of admission become less predictable. If institutions choose to implement this type of process, admissions processes will require an additional, more meaningful definition of diversity in order to continue revising their standards of strict scrutiny for the courts. This cycle of back-and-forth between institution and student will continue as long as graduate education remains inequitable.

Retention and persistence serve as additional components of holistic admissions that impact the equity of GEM. The processes and inequities established during evaluation and admissions mentioned above directly impact academic progress and student retention. Primarily, graduate programs must still deal with the impacts of structural racism and gatekeeping for the elite within higher education (Thornhill 2019). Much of the literature details the lessened chances students from underprivileged backgrounds have to access discipline-specific academic preparation, certain internships or work experiences, and service experiences requiring volunteered time (Posselt 2018). Warikoo (2017) points out the unequal advantages given throughout the educational journey to students who usually identify as white. While admissions teams can implement some structures to combat this inequity, larger systemic issues become even more apparent once a student arrives on campus and begins coursework.

Though minimal research exists in following graduate students through a SEM cycle from admissions through graduation with an equity lens, Jeffreys' (2014) work on holistic competence and proactive inclusive enrichment directly combats the inequitable structures within graduate education. Jeffreys (2014) describes eighteen strategies for educators to include when optimizing student success, noting that success for a diverse student population requires investing in continual student support through the end of the program. Kudlas' (2006) research indicates positive academic and social

experiences allow students to integrate successfully into the institution over time. Integration can combat attrition, especially for underprivileged students who already may be at risk for dropping out of graduate school (Kudlas 2006).

However, some research indicates that holistic admissions processes may not lead to a more diverse class, but less persistence overall (Zerwic, *et al.* 2018). Although holistic review lessens academic gatekeeping and allows underrepresented candidates to show application strength through nontraditional attributes, it does not compensate for structural flaws in education that lessen opportunities for disadvantaged students (Posselt 2018). Koerin and Miller (1995) indicate that while few studies have explored the relationship between applicant quality and student retention, some researchers question institutional persistence rates in periods of enrollment decline due to over-enrollment from underqualified candidates. As marketers broaden their segmented populations in an attempt to meet institutional financial needs, under-defined holistic review policies may grant admission to candidates afforded less academic preparation opportunities (Gibbs 2002; Posselt 2018). When underprepared candidates arrive on campus and begin graduate school, they have more difficult experiences integrating into academic and social life (Sedlacek 1996). Sedlacek (1996) writes that integration programs may not work for students experiencing discrimination, specifically racist barriers already built within education. Sometimes, an underrepresented or underprivileged graduate student may work toward persistence and graduation, but discrimination blocks them from achieving it (Posselt 2018; Sedlacek 1996).

This article aimed to answer the question: how do holistic admissions practices impact the equity of a school's GEM? After a review of the available and relevant literature, equitable practices for underrepresented and underprivileged candidates can be maintained as long as equity remains top of mind for SEM divisions. However, Kent and McCarthy (2016) state that institutional goals, specifically financial goals, drive the deci-

sions of SEM divisions. If an institution aims to increase revenue through graduate student enrollment, then holistic review practices may broaden the review capacity of admissions officers. Although at face value, this increases access to education, it does not increase equity for students enrolled on campus (Posselt 2018). SEM divisions must work with their graduate admissions teams to ensure a holistic approach does not mislead or falsely represent what a graduate education from a specific institution can offer.

Within SEM, there are implications of bias within holistic graduate admissions review processes for both practitioners and researchers. Practitioners in the graduate admissions field stem from a myriad of backgrounds; Kent and McCarthy (2016) note the diversity in admissions review committee composition has varied over the last decade. Institutions use faculty reviewers, staff, or a combination of both to make decisions on graduate school applications (Kent and McCarthy 2016). As the review's landscape, stakeholders, and key actors change regularly, this poses a need for continued training on the institution's definition of holistic review and common review practices. Additionally, enrollment management practitioners may find themselves focusing on student success initiatives in addition to traditional enrollment functions, and very little framework exists to evaluate student success after admission through a holistic review process (Morris 2016). Practitioners in enrollment management who oversee or coordinate onboarding and success programming should continue to work with their colleagues in admissions to ensure fruitful student transitions post-admittance.

In evaluating the literature, several themes arise that could and should lead to future research in the field. First, some researchers have completed studies on the impacts of holistic review on the equity of graduate admissions and enrollment management, but we know far

less about graduate admissions than undergraduate admissions (Morris 2016). Since graduate admissions processes are mainly decentralized and specific to academic discipline, studies that do exist typically spring from the faculty within those disciplines and may not apply across the entire field. We need more research on graduate admissions policies to make informed decisions regarding the field of post-baccalaureate education. Second, researchers have not identified an industry-wide, holistic evaluation framework that does not in some capacity negatively impact underrepresented and underprivileged students in gaining admissions to graduate school and persisting through graduation. Therefore, each institution must examine its practices, including recruiting, marketing, and evaluation, and determine if these processes are equitable. If not, how can institutions look to each other and leadership for guidance?

Future research in this area could also look to the field of faculty-led admissions review compared to admissions-office driven practices. Nearly no research discusses non-academic staff admissions reviews, which do happen in the GEM space, especially at smaller universities with large application pools (Kent and McCarthy 2016). Other future research could look to the retention and persistence practices of differing institution types; Jeffreys' (2014) model could serve as the basis for a study analyzing student success practices. This line of inquiry involving retention and student success could help to inform how bias within the review practice impacts the larger scope of SEM. Ultimately, the current scholarship displays correlations between the potential bias of holistic graduate admissions review processes, but very little study on implications of policy, actors, and stakeholders within the process. In order to begin building additional frameworks, SEM practitioners and researchers must unite to bring this critical inquiry further into the literature for both evaluation and application.

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