

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

A Lottery-Based Admissions Process for Faculties of Nursing: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

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Nursing programs across North America are typically significantly oversubscribed, resulting in inflated admitting averages thus making it an unattainable profession for many qualified students. This article proposes a lottery-based admissions process, whereby students who meet established selected criteria for entry would be selected at random until all seats are filled. This would allow all qualified applicants equal chance of admission, and may address issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and may lessen some of the significant burden on prospective applicants.

Over the past decade, nursing programs across Canada have seen increased applications for admission, with some universities reporting ten to fifteen applicants per seat (C. MacKay, pers. comm., February 1, 2021). Unlike many Faculties of Medicine, most nursing faculties¹ do not have the resources required to interview all suitable applicants, and most rely on high school grades (GPA) as the sole criterion for entry. Because of the high demand for nursing education, coupled with the reliance on GPA as the principle admission criterion, the minimum high

school average to be admitted into Faculties of Nursing² is often 90 percent or more for high school entry students. This is a barrier to entry for many eligible and well-suited applicants and has inadvertently created a feeling of elitism in many nursing faculties where only students with near perfect marks have a chance of being admitted. Because of this, not only might nursing programs be attracting students who view nursing as a “pit stop” on their way to a medical degree, they are missing out on a significant cohort of excellent students who could greatly contribute to the profession.

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¹ Some universities require prospective students to include a profile along with their application.

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² For consistency we will refer to Faculties of Nursing and universities only, recognizing that baccalaureate nursing programs are also offered from Schools of Nursing and colleges.

While issues of racism, lack of diversity, inequity, and legacy admissions have long plagued elite American postsecondary institutions, Canadian universities are not without their own admissions concerns. For example, since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 2008 report, Canadian universities have been tasked with not only increasing their Indigenous student population, but also to include programs to make postsecondary education more accessible for Indigenous students (*e.g.*, bridging programs) (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015). Several authors have proposed that the extremely high GPA required of many professional faculties (in this case, nursing) is inequitable, unnecessary, and considered a barrier to entry for well-qualified applicants (Kamanetz 2019; Lyons, Phillips, and Santos 2005; Schwartz 2019); in other words, reliance on GPA as the sole indicator of predictive performance is problematic.

Background and Literature Review

Postsecondary education has experienced a dramatic uptake since Canada's first census in 1871, just prior to Canada's Confederation. One hundred and fifty years ago, very few people attended primary school, let alone postsecondary school, due to the demands of what was then predominantly a farming and food production-based economy (Statistics Canada 2017). Since World War II, full-time university enrollment has risen dramatically, from under 3 percent in 1941 to 23 percent in 2015 among youth aged eighteen to 24. Currently in Canada, 54 percent of the population aged 25 to 64 have college or university qualifications (Statistics Canada 2017). Since the 1990s, Canada has been a world leader in postsecondary education, ranking first among other Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (OECD 2019).

As the population, culture, economy, and societal landscape have evolved, universities have adapted to the changing educational requirements of the labor force (OECD 2019). With the emergence of the information society, for example, new fields such as information technology and computer science were offered. Nursing too, has evolved to meet the changing demands and needs of society and healthcare systems. Once taught as

hospital-based programs (*e.g.*, hospital training schools), nursing education is now offered at the undergraduate and graduate levels, with a baccalaureate degree now being the minimum entry requirement into the profession (CASN 2012). Throughout Canada's history, nursing education has been a crucial factor in the quality of health care, and nursing education has been a focus of both provincial and federal governments (CASN 2012).

Admissions practices to nursing programs differ across Canada and certainly between countries; however, Canada and the United States face similar problems. Headlines like "Nursing schools are rejecting thousands of applicants—in the middle of a nursing shortage" (Kavilanz 2018), and "Why it's so difficult to get into nursing programs" (Mintz 2020) reflect part of the problem with nursing education; the likelihood of employment after graduation has exponentially increased the demand for nursing education. The increased demand has raised the competitive average to gain admittance to a nursing faculty to well beyond what it has been historically, with many faculties now at 90 percent or above, and the National League for Nursing (2020) reported that minimally, one third of qualified applicants to nursing programs are rejected. The North American-wide nursing shortage coupled with the high demand for nursing education is indicative that the problem of inflated GPAs needed to gain admission to nursing programs is here to stay. Unless, of course, the admissions process is changed.

A Case for a Different Way to Admit Students

In order to address the problems inherent with the current way of admitting nursing students, the authors propose that nursing program admissions be processed via a lottery. A lottery system could relieve some of the intense pressure on prospective students, offer a more fair and equitable way to admit prospective students, and may streamline the admissions process thus saving administrative and faculty resources. The lottery system proposed is not a "pure" lottery, *per se*, but rather students must first meet established selected criteria for entry (*e.g.*, GPA, pre-requisite courses). Students who

meet these criteria would then be selected at random until all seats are filled. This would allow all qualified applicants equal chance of admission. This idea is not novel, as Schwartz (2019) argued that admission to elite postsecondary institutions should be processed via lottery, and some European countries already have admissions processes similar to a lottery style for some programs (Kamanetz 2019). Turkey, for example, reported that its student selection and placement process in higher education is an efficient and fair approach to higher education (Grant 2007). However, overall, very little data exists on the relationship of a lottery-based process and equity/fairness in student admissions.

A lottery system for admitting students to nursing programs would accomplish several things. First, it would relieve some of the intense pressure on students. Students would know they need to reach a certain bar, and after that it is luck. Schwartz (2019) suggested that high school students in particular would be free to do more of what interests them versus only what made them an attractive candidate to an admissions officer. Easing the pressure may encourage high school students to view their acceptance to a program as the starting point versus the finishing line, which could lead to more engaged, enthusiastic, and resilient learners once their nursing education begins (Luthar, Small, and Ciciolla 2017).

The current process of admitting students to nursing faculties ensures only those with the highest GPAs are eligible. While nursing consistently ranks as one of the top trusted professions (Brenan 2018), there is danger to ascribing this kind of “elite-ness” to it and admitting only those students with near perfect GPAs. Anecdotally, some students with extremely high GPAs see nursing as a stepping stone to medicine, or a “stop along the way” to their preferred career. In other words, institutions may not always be attracting students who *want* to be nurses; they may also be attracting students who want to be physicians and/or consider nursing as a back-up profession. Similarly, current admissions processes breed and/or attract individuals who are almost exclusively focused on grades, often with an “intolerance” for anything less than perfect marks in their nursing education. Leaves of

absence and program withdrawals due to mental health issues and incidents of student academic misconduct are rising, with no sign of abating. It is important to consider that admissions practitioners may be setting these students up for failure on the premise that they need near perfect marks to even make it through the door of nursing school; this stays with them throughout their nursing education. An academically near-perfect student does not always translate to a clinically strong and safe student nurse. Theoretical and clinical knowledge should be held in equal esteem in a practice profession such as nursing, and it starts with the kind of student institutions admit.

Second, a lottery-style admissions process could bring transparency, equality, and efficiency to a complicated and often hidden admissions process. Stone (2013) suggested that when programs are oversubscribed (more applicants than there are seats), coupled with limited or ineffective ways of determining the most deserving or suitable applicants, a lottery becomes the fairest way to choose candidates. While current thought tends to view postsecondary admissions as a meritocratic process, this negates the fact that elite students may not, in fact, be more elite; they simply may have had more opportunities and advantages than others (Warikoo 2016).

Third, an admissions lottery may also save Faculties of Nursing time and money, and free up resources for other university processes. Admissions processes are often complicated and labor intensive not only for universities but also for applicants and their parents. A lottery may eliminate much of the stress they experience as they navigate a competitive admissions system (Warikoo 2019). The difficulty of getting accepted to a highly competitive program such as nursing has led to increasing costs, anxiety among applicants, and inaccurate perceptions of merit; this situation can be addressed if institutions move toward an admissions lottery (Warikoo 2019).

How Would an Admission-Based Lottery Work?

Faculties of Nursing would start by establishing baseline criteria. Typically these would include minimum GPA and pre-requisite courses; however, this could also

include other criteria deemed as appropriate. Establishing this baseline criteria would be the most important step in the lottery process, and regardless of the criteria established, must be made transparent from the outset. Eligible applicants would then be selected at random until all seats were filled. Seats may be “held” for underrepresented groups in the interest of faculty diversity (*e.g.*, Indigenous, Black/Indigenous/People of Color, etc.), however Schwartz (2019) urged that to work properly, the lottery must be conducted without exceptions; “no one is guaranteed admission” (para. 3).

Risks and Benefits of a Lottery Admissions Process

Arguments against a lottery-style admissions process have come mostly from elite universities in the United States. Hess (2019) claimed it would be detrimental to the prestige of universities and hiring practices into private business, and other critics of this idea often cite arguments relating to meritocracy, “robbing students of a sense of ownership over their destiny” (Finger and Gift 2019, para. 5), conveying the message that one’s fate is tied to uncontrollable factors. It counters the long-held narrative that hard work and persistence pay off. Additionally, many universities have competitive sports teams, student newspapers, and musical programs, and a lottery-based system could not ensure occupancy into these specialized roles (Finger and Gift 2019). Critics also purport that lottery admissions negate the ability to see the applicant holistically, and rather reduce them to a checklist and luck. While it is not the authors’ intent to imply that a lottery system is flawless, most of the arguments presented against this admissions process are not only refutable, but come with convincing counterpoints. The benefits of a lottery-based admissions approach are numerous and affect both the student applicant and universities that offer nursing programs.

Student Applicants

A lottery admissions approach could alleviate part of the enormous stress students have when applying for nursing. As standards keep increasing, what it means to “deserve” admission no longer relates to an applicant being

an excellent student but rather that they are a *more* excellent student than other applicants (Schwartz 2019). The struggle over postsecondary admissions in general has led to increasing costs, anxiety among applicants, and a disproportionate emphasis placed on grades. This hyper-focus on grades reduces the intrinsic motivation of students; it becomes all about the grade and not about the learning (Lyons, Phillips, and Santos 2005). This is a problem in an applied profession like nursing. Additionally, this approach may dissuade students who may see nursing as a stopover on the way to applying for medicine, opening up the field for those who want to enter the profession of nursing.

Universities

Kamanetz (2019) stated that a lottery admissions process would be more credible and transparent, and less chaotic and burdensome for universities. This approach follows the “flat maximum principle,” which asserts that in situations involving uncertainty, the likely outcomes of most selections are essentially equivalent. Said differently, the degree of uncertainty in selection makes it impossible to know “which excellent student will be better than which other excellent student” (Schwartz 2019, para. 4). Universities may save time, money, and effort while creating a fairer admissions process with essentially the same outcomes.

Ultimately, the profession of nursing could benefit from this approach as well. By allowing *all* excellent students the same access or chance for admission to a Faculty of Nursing, the profession stands to benefit from an influx of capable, intelligent, and resilient new nurses, most of whom would have chosen nursing as their primary choice of profession.

Discussion and Next Steps

The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers outlined the goals of strategic enrollment management as: increasing academic quality and student success; achieving optimum enrollment; delivering top-quality service; optimizing financial opportunities; and building campus collaboration (AACRAO n.d.). Particularly salient to this discus-

sion is the goal of *achieving optimum enrollment*, where “optimum” is defined within the academic context of the institution (Dolence 1993). The authors suggest that “optimum” should also be considered within the context of the faculty, where appropriate. Hossler and Kalsbeek (2013) noted the multifaceted-ness and complexity of enrollment goals in universities, and how each goal is often in competition with the others for resourcing and attention. Necessarily, scarcity of resources requires “the management of multiple trade-offs” (Hossler and Kalsbeek 2013, 9), as few institutions can do them all.

A holistic approach to admissions may be the most comprehensive, fair, and accurate way to admit prospective students into nursing faculties. The Urban Universities for Health outlined this approach as: admission and selection criteria that are aligned with the mission and goals of the university; consideration of applicant experiences, attributes, and academic metrics; an admissions committee to make individualized decisions regarding the unique profile of each applicant with respect to the learning environment and profession; and diversity among applicants (*e.g.*, race, ethnicity, gender, etc.) is considered (Glazer, *et al.* 2014). Unfortunately, the cost and labor-intensiveness associated with this approach makes it unrealistic for many faculties and universities.

A lottery-based admissions process for Faculties of Nursing could benefit both prospective students and universities alike. Future research could entail a longitudinal mixed methods pilot research project where nursing programs trial the lottery-based admissions process for two full academic admissions cycles (*i.e.*, two years). Students admitted via the lottery-based approach would be followed for the length of their academic career plus one year after graduation. Independent variables could include student satisfaction, graduations rates, employment after graduation, incidents of academic/non-academic misconduct and forced withdrawals, leaves of

absences, failures, etc. Additionally, questions related to the psychological impacts of the current admissions process, the impact (intended or unintended) on a lottery-based system, and whether or not the lottery-based system achieves what it is intended to with respect to equity, diversity, and inclusion criteria could be considered. The authors hypothesize that a lottery-based admissions process would have no deleterious effects with respect to these independent variables, and may, in fact, have a positive effect particularly with respect to student satisfaction, levels of academic/non-academic misconduct and forced withdrawals, leaves of absences, and failures. The dearth of research in this field also calls into consideration other questions, some of which research may or may not be able to answer. For example: What equity outcomes should be achieved, and will a randomized selection of candidates actually achieve these outcomes? What are the legal implications of this type of admissions system? How much time and resourcing are saved with a lottery-based admissions process? As with all new ideas and fields of study, sometimes answering one question leads to others not even considered. The pathway through though starts with a single step—in this case, a rigorous multi-method pilot study (described above) where efforts in understanding can begin.

Conclusion

Across North America, postsecondary institutions are under intense scrutiny and challenge to increase their relevancy to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society. Not only are they being asked to make these changes, but many are also facing significant budget limitations in the midst of this. Innovation, bold ideas, and challenging the status quo is needed not just to meet these needs but to lead the way in nursing education. A lottery-based admissions process is a bold, innovative, and relevant idea; an idea whose time has come.

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