

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

An Exploration of Admissions-Related Practices from Institutions' Admissions Web Pages and Implications for Equity

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This study investigates current practices in how admissions policies are communicated through student-facing web pages. One hundred fifty web pages (30 institutions, 5 admissions web pages each, stratified by degree-level and major) were scraped for information about holistic admissions policies and required application materials. Overall, more holistic language was used in undergraduate web pages than graduate web pages, particularly among non-minority serving institutions (MSIs). Graduate web pages required more application materials than undergraduate web pages, with more materials required for graduate web pages that used holistic language. Additionally, undergraduate web pages that used holistic language identified more qualitative cutoffs (e.g., identifying relative importance of application components, in-depth discussion of how factors are balanced) than the web pages that did not use holistic language. The paper concludes with a discussion of directions for future research and of best practices and practical takeaways for admissions officers to help increase equity in admissions.

Holistic admissions systems have a long history at American colleges and universities (Zell 2016), yet in recent years, and in parallel with the test-optional movement, holistic review has gained increasing popu-

larity and visibility. Yet despite the high-profile holistic review has attained in popular discourse, there is little consensus around the exact meaning of this term in theory or practice (Bastedo 2021; Kent and McCarthy

TABLE 1 ► Admissions Selectivity,¹ by Highest Degree and Minority Serving Institution Status

Selectivity by Highest Degree	Institutions (n)	
	MSI	Non-MSI
Doctoral		
Inclusive	1	3
More Selective	2	2
Selective	2	2
Not Indicated	1	0
Master's		
Inclusive	0	7
More Selective	0	0
Selective	1	5
Not Indicated	4	0

¹ Subjective assessment based on the content of five categories of web pages: General Undergraduate, General Graduate, STEM, Humanities/Social Sciences, and Education.

■ MSI = Minority Serving Institution

2016; Moody Rideout 2017), even among admissions officers who say they practice holistic admissions (Bastedo, *et al.* 2018; Hossler, *et al.* 2019).

In consideration of the diversity of views held by admissions officers about what constitutes holistic review, this study investigates the strategies and practices adopted by admissions teams when trying to convey information about admissions requirements and the admissions decision-making process. In particular, this study examines student-facing admissions websites for the language used to describe admissions requirements and the information made available to students on the particulars of the decision-making process (*e.g.*, importance or weight of various factors). The analysis investigates how admissions policies and language about holistic review can impact issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which are important in the admissions landscape. The goals of this research include identifying trends and best practices in student-facing admissions web pages and distilling practical takeaways for admissions officers. Admissions professionals may find these recommendations to be a useful aid for increasing equity in graduate and undergraduate admissions, benefitting institutions and prospective students alike.

About this Study

This study sought to identify how holistic admissions is defined, which elements of it are emphasized, and how such information is conveyed to prospective graduate and undergraduate students through admissions web-sites. The process for selecting institutions to include was to first stratify U.S. not-for-profit institutions offering advanced degrees using Carnegie Classification data (Carnegie n.d.). Institutions were stratified by MSI (Minority Serving Institution) status, selectivity, and highest degree awarded. Then, 30 institutions were randomly selected, using the same proportions per category as are reflected in the total population. MSI status is based on either legislative assignment or the percentage of minority student enrollment (Li 2007). For instance, MSIs include institutions that have been assigned by Congress to be historically black or indigenous serving as well as institutions that have a significant percentage of minority enrollment. For each institution that was selected, five types of admissions web pages were analyzed: general undergraduate; general graduate; and one graduate program from each three areas of focus (STEM, or Science, Technology, Engineering, Math; education; and the humanities or social sciences). This led to a total of five web pages reviewed for each of the 30 institutions, a total of 150 web pages. These web pages were accessed between February and April 2022. Throughout this article, the term “program” web page will be used to refer to the web pages for graduate STEM, education, or humanities programs. The term “global” web page will be used to refer to those admissions web pages that cover the entire undergraduate or graduate school.

Admissions web pages are the most visible and accessible sources of information for prospective students, so they make ideal artifacts to analyze for the purpose of understanding how admissions information and criteria are communicated to prospective students, with implications for equity in college admissions. Table 1 shows the frequency of schools in each sampled category.

For each of the 150 web pages reviewed, page content was coded according to several factors related to the substance of content conveyed to prospective students (*e.g.*, required application documents to submit),

and to the messaging of that content (*e.g.*, explicit description of holistic admissions). Specifically, web pages were coded for the following factors:

- School and program information (selectivity, MSI status, highest degree awarded, web page type [*e.g.*, graduate STEM program, global undergraduate admissions])
- Application requirements (test score[s], transcripts, grade point average [GPA], prerequisites, recommendation letter[s], essay[s], work sample[s], CV/resume, application fee, immunization [*e.g.*, for meningitis], interview, professional license, other [*e.g.*, experience in field])
- Information provided about the decision-making process
 - Messaging (admissions testing policy, holistic review language)
 - Cut scores (GPA/rank cut scores, test cut scores, “typical candidate” information such as average test scores in admitted class)
 - Indication of how individual elements of the application are weighted in the decision-making process (*e.g.*, if relevant career experience is of particular importance)

Following coding, the data were examined for emerging themes, with the aim of drawing some preliminary conclusions to inform admissions best practices—and inform future, more expansive research.

Study Results

Holistic Language by Web Page Type

The first trend the study explored was where holistic language (*e.g.*, the explicit calling out of holistic practices on the admissions web page) was used across the various web pages. Web pages were coded for whether they used holistic language (*e.g.*, key terms such as “holistic/holistically,” “whole person,” “holistic review/ap-

proach”) to describe their approach to admissions. The summary in Table 2 shows that most of the holistic language in the sample was within the global undergraduate admissions web pages. Graduate program and global admissions web pages contained little holistic language. In fact, only 14 percent of the entire sam-

TABLE 2 ► Use of Holistic Language, by Web Page Category

Uses Holistic Language	Undergraduate	Graduate	STEM	Humanities	Education
No	17	28	29	28	27
Yes	13	2	1	2	3

ple contained holistic language, and only 6.7 percent of graduate global or program web pages contained holistic language.

The study also explored the relationship between the use of holistic language and the number of application requirements indicated by the web page. To do so, the average number of requirements listed on web pages that used holistic language was compared side-by-side with the number of requirements listed on web pages that did not use holistic language. This comparison showed that graduate web pages that used holistic language required on average one more application component ($\bar{x}=6.37$) than those graduate web pages that did not use holistic language ($\bar{x}=5.23$). Undergraduate web pages that used holistic language listed a slightly greater number of application requirements ($\bar{x}=3.69$) than those web pages that did not use holistic language ($\bar{x}=3.24$). Additionally, on average, there are more requirements needed to apply to graduate ($\bar{x}=5.3$) than undergraduate ($\bar{x}=3.4$) schools/programs. There is also greater variability in the number of requirements for graduate web pages (Holistic Language $SD=1.90$, No Holistic Language $SD=1.51$) than for undergraduate web pages (Holistic Language $SD=0.83$, No Holistic Language $SD=1.18$). The left panel of Figure 1 depicts the average number of requirements for applications listed on global and program web pages at the graduate level. The right panel shows the number of requirements listed on global undergraduate admissions web pages.

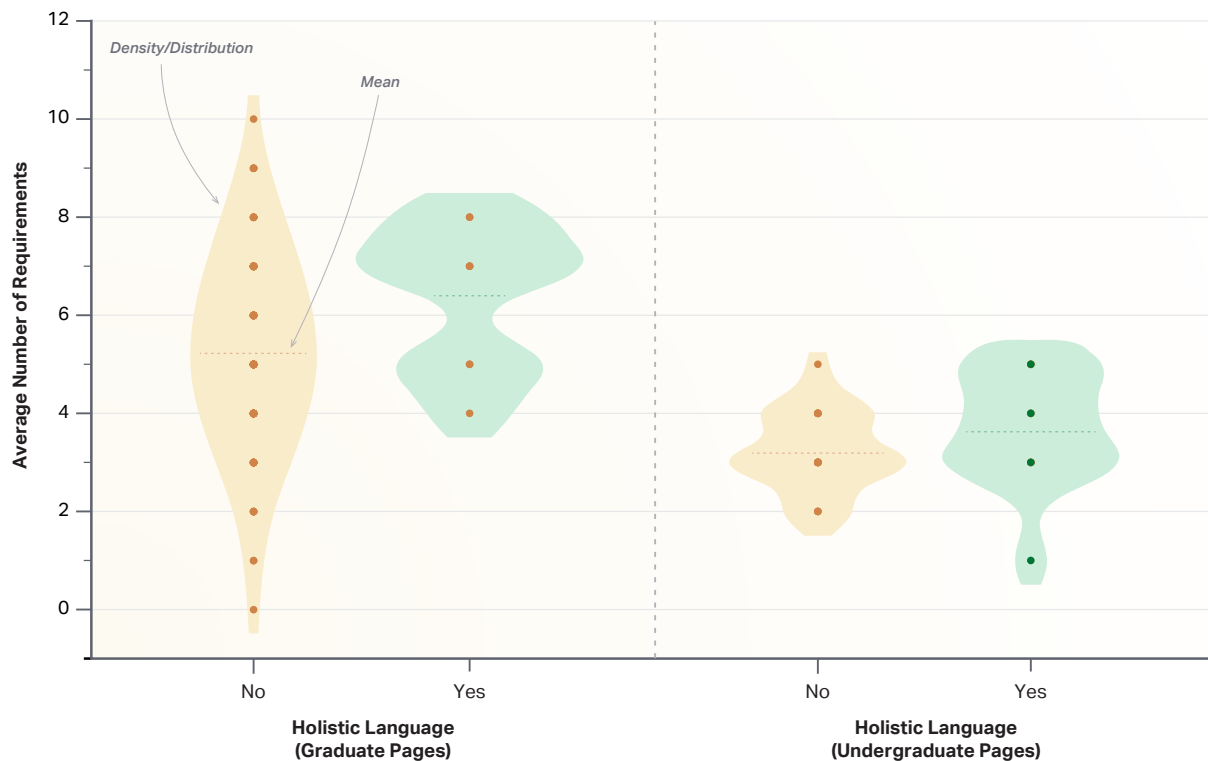


FIGURE 1 ► Number of Admissions Requirements Listed on Graduate and Undergraduate Admissions Web Pages, by Holistic Language Usage

Although there are a similar number of required application components across web pages regardless of whether they used holistic language, web pages that use holistic language were far more likely to indicate the use of a test-optional policy (81%) than other web pages in the sample (22%). It is also notable that many schools and programs did not include information on their testing policy on their admissions websites (41%).

Minority Serving Institutions

Additionally, this study investigated the pattern of holistic language use among MSIs and non-MSIs. This distinction may be of particular use to admissions officers interested in promoting equity, inclusion, and diversity, as MSIs attract and enroll students from underserved populations at a higher rate than non-MSIs (Flores and Park 2013). Results showed that within the graduate programs, there were no differences in holistic language used between web pages for MSIs and non-

MSIs—only 5 percent of web pages in either group used holistic language. Within the undergraduate web pages reviewed, a larger proportion of non-MSIs used holistic language (52 percent) than MSIs (27 percent). The left panel of Figure 2 (on page 23) depicts the percentage of graduate-level web pages that used holistic language, disaggregated by MSI status, while the right panel depicts this trend within the undergraduate web pages.

Decision Indicators

The preceding section has described the data in terms of where holistic language was found within the sample as well as how that language related to the number of requirements for application, but another goal for this study was to understand what type of information is presented to prospective students about admissions selection criteria. For the next phase of the analysis, the scope of the data exploration was narrowed to the global undergraduate web pages because that is where

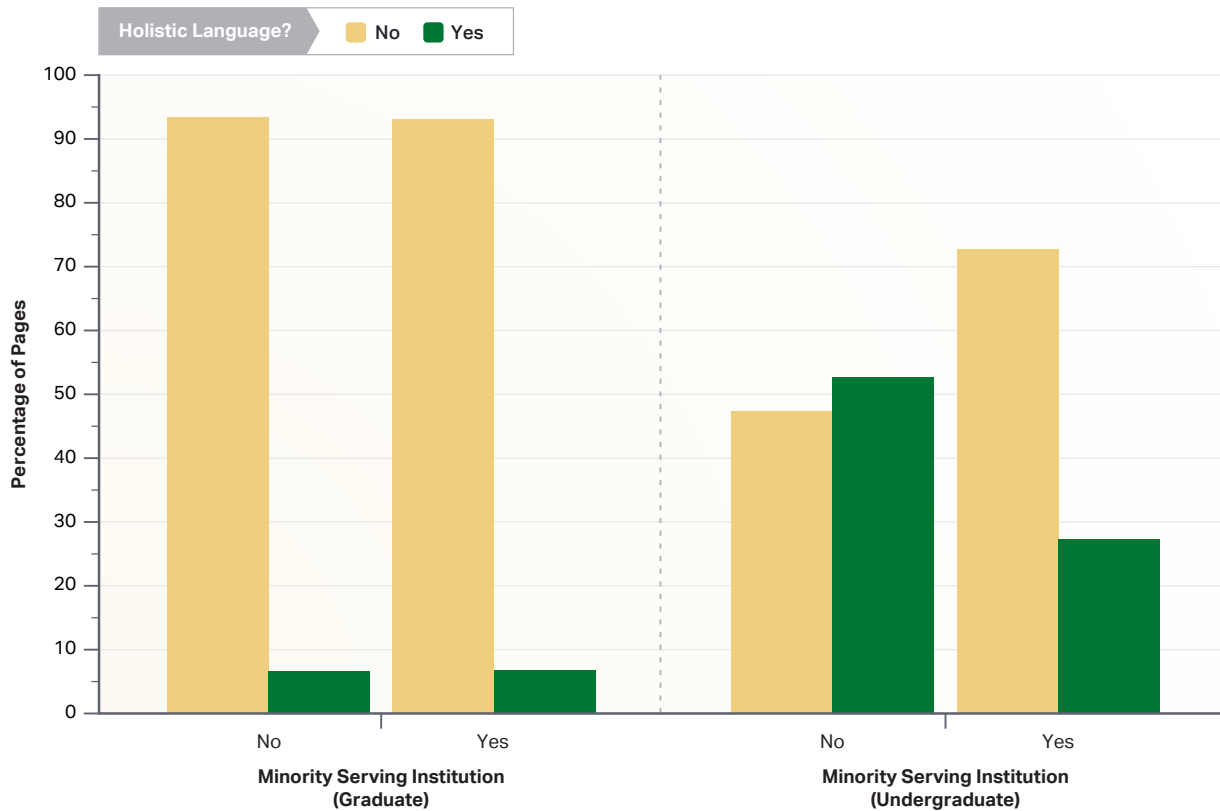


FIGURE 2 ➤ Percentage of Web Pages That Use Holistic Language by MSI Status (n=150)

the most holistic language in the sample was found. The data showed four different types of “cutoffs,” or ways in which applicants are selected, which were described on the undergraduate admissions web pages. The four general categories were: (1) using GPA or rank cut score (*e.g.*, a 3.0 or above high school GPA or being in the top 20 percent of your graduating class is *required* for admission), (2) using GPA or class rank averages to describe a “typical candidate” profile (*e.g.*, language such as “admitted applicants have *on average* a GPA of 3.0” or “are *typically* above the 20th percentile in their graduating class rank”), (3) using GPA/rank and test cutoff (*e.g.*, a 3.0 high school GPA or being in the top 20 percent of their graduating class is required to apply *as well as* an SAT math score above 500), and (4) using qualitative indicators (*e.g.*, indication of relative importance of essay vis-à-vis other factors).

Undergraduate global admissions web pages were compared to identify the degree to which they indicated

use of each of these four categories of “cutoffs” across two different splits—first looking at potential differences or trends between schools according to MSI status, then according to use of holistic language on the web page. Results are displayed in Figure 3. The left panel of Figure 3 demonstrates that web pages for non-MSIs communicate qualitative factors or averages as admissions indicators in greater proportions, while MSI web pages more often indicate use of GPA cutoffs. Those web pages that use holistic language tend to provide relatively more qualitative and average indicators to students, whereas web pages that do not use holistic language tend to provide more GPA cutoffs as decision indicators.

Key Takeaways

The data from this study show that holistic language is used minimally across all admissions web pages (14 percent of the sample), but that it is used more in undergraduate web pages than in graduate web pages.

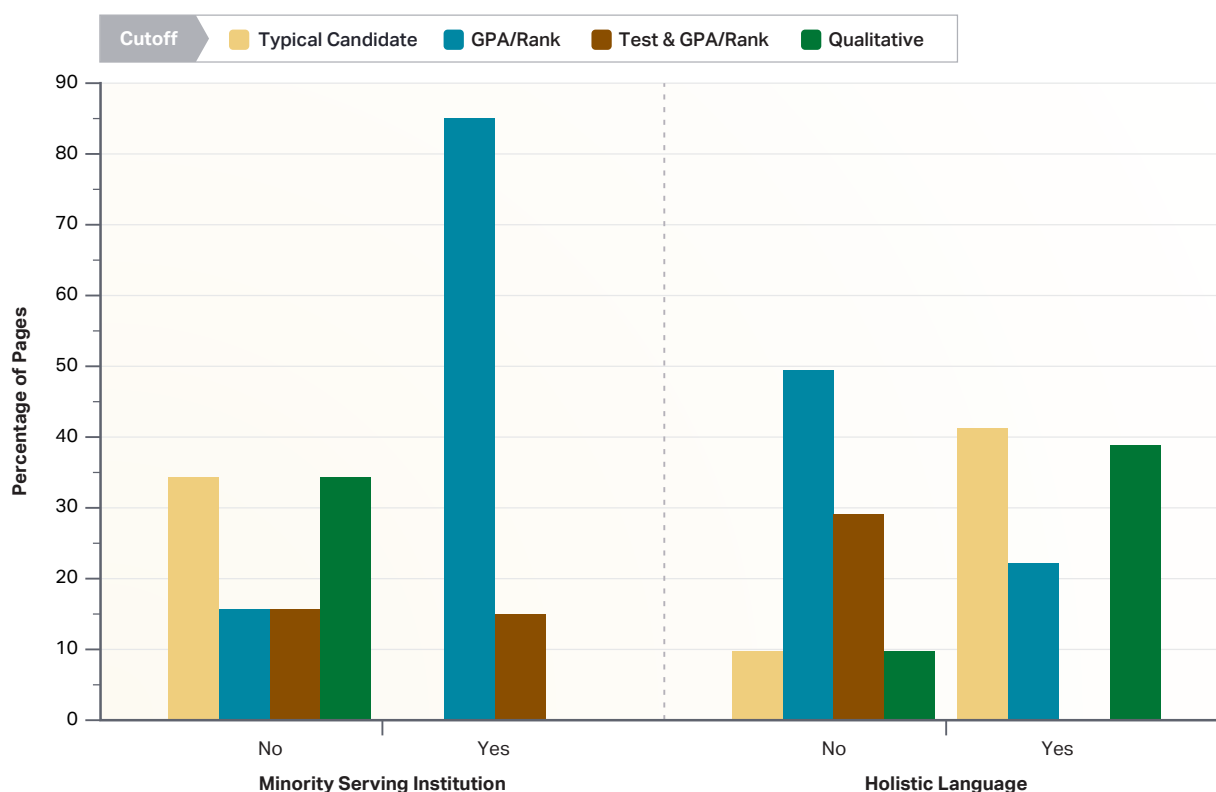


FIGURE 3 ➤ Percentage of Decision Indicators Indicated by Web Pages in the Sample (n=109)

In particular, holistic language is used most on undergraduate global admissions web pages at non-MSI institutions (see Figure 2). Additionally, graduate web pages that use holistic language list a greater number of requirements to apply than those that do not use holistic language. There was also greater variety in the number of requirements for graduate web pages when compared to undergraduate web pages. For undergraduate web pages, there is no difference in admissions requirements between those web pages that use holistic language and those that do not use holistic language; however, those requirements may be qualitatively different (*e.g.*, higher instance of test-optional policy indicated at schools using holistic language). Additionally, undergraduate admissions web pages that use holistic language or are from non-MSIs list more *qualitative* and *typical candidate* admissions cutoffs, while web pages that do not use holistic language or are from MSIs tend to list *GPA* and *test* admissions cutoffs.

Navigating the admissions process is difficult for all parties involved. Students and family members attempt to select an institution or program that is the best fit, while institutions and programs provide information about their school or program to attract the largest and most qualified pool of applicants. This process can become more challenging with the adoption of test-optional policies and the use of holistic admissions, as applicants and admissions officers may have a different understanding of these terms, and prospective students may be confused by shifting and varied policies across schools (Korn 2022). Ensuring the application process is as straightforward as possible is critically important—not only is the amount of information and guidance an applicant has about college correlated with their likelihood to ultimately enroll successfully, but lack of knowledge about college and financial aid is particularly pronounced among Latino and African American/Black students and parents (Bell, *et al.* 2009). Transpar-

ency is therefore an equity concern; the imperfect flow of information about the admissions process disproportionately and negatively affects these groups. Although the data in this report cannot answer all the questions surrounding the presentation of holistic admissions on university admissions web pages, they provide a window into the type of information that is presented to applicants at the institutions reviewed.

This study is one of the first to examine closely what has been described on web pages facing prospective students and applicants at the graduate and undergraduate levels. The findings presented here contribute to the literature about how holistic language and test-optional policies are utilized when communicating application requirements to prospective students. Although this study focused on admissions web pages, the principles discussed here can be fruitfully applied to any form of messaging where admissions requirements are articulated by institutions. These findings also raise interesting questions for future investigation: How do different types of information influence students in terms of admissions results and post-admission outcomes? How do students perceive the relative importance of different application package components? Are these perceptions different from the views of admissions officers (*e.g.*, student perceptions of the importance of an optional application item versus the perceptions of admissions officers)? But as interesting as these questions may be, it is even more crucial that future studies move beyond admissions to consider how transparency in messaging about admissions requirements and decision-making may affect decisions such as scholarship selection, admission to honors or academic support programs, or course placement. For example, do students know whether they will be helping or hurting their consideration for a scholarship by choosing to submit or not submit an optional application component such as a test score?

Although much evidence remains to be gathered, practical implications can be drawn from the current study to guide admissions offices in seeking out ways to improve equity in admissions.

Implications for Practice

One goal of the study was to distill practical tips for admissions officers based on the trends and practices uncovered through this analysis of admissions web pages in order to encourage equity in undergraduate and graduate admissions. In particular, there is an opportunity for admissions officers to improve the transparency of admissions messaging in order to better serve prospective students and to demonstrate and align with the values of their institutions more clearly. Although the below recommendations are pertinent to all forms of student outreach, it is especially vital for admissions offices to consider improvements they can make to messaging on their admissions web pages. Admissions web pages are key sources of information and the most common way that prospective students research higher education institutions (Simões and Soares 2010).

Notably, there is a wide gap between admissions officers' own understanding of whether they practice holistic review, and the language used on admissions websites. A survey by Bastedo, *et al.* (2018) found that 95 percent of admissions officers classified their own practices as "holistic review," yet this study found that only 14 percent of admissions web pages explicitly included language about such an approach. This rate is even lower among graduate admissions web pages; just 6.7 percent of pages surveyed explicitly called out the use of a holistic approach—despite considering a larger number of elements per application on average than undergraduate admissions (5.3 for graduate compared to 3.8 for undergraduate). These numbers suggest that messaging on admissions web pages may not present the program or institution's values to prospective students in a full and accurate manner, and schools that wish to promote their focus on equity and diversity may be missing an opportunity to communicate that focus to prospective students and to make prospective students from underserved backgrounds feel welcome.

Also of note, MSIs, which typically receive a larger proportion of minority applicants than non-MSIs, more often indicated the use of GPA or test cutoff scores. One possible contributing factor could be that having explicit benchmarks for admissions might be a way for

minority prospective students, who often have less experience navigating college admissions than white applicants (Holland 2014), to decide what programs they should apply to. Additionally, it could impact the amount of minority applicants an institution has if their guidelines are similar to those of MSIs. Further research is needed to substantiate whether the use of cutoffs along with explicit wording as to how distinct aspects of an application are weighed, might be an effective way to attract minority student applicants.

Relatedly, prospective students would benefit from other types of transparency that could make the application process less of a barrier for them. Although practical considerations may place barriers on the specific types of information that can be made available to prospective students, to the extent possible, more programs should provide information about the decision-making process or provide other helpful guiding information for students, such as a description of which values are particularly important to the mission of a program in building its incoming class. This kind of information could benefit applicants by helping them determine which schools and programs are likely to value their particular strengths most highly.

A final recommendation is organizational in nature; crucial information such as application requirements on many school sites are split across pages, hidden in long catalogue documents, or even inaccessible until the student has created a login and begun completing an application. For example, 42 percent of graduate admissions web pages in the sample had no explicit mention of their testing policy or requirements. Centering the most important application information on a splash page is a best practice that some programs use, and which others could benefit by imitating, which would make the application process smoother and easier for students. A simple improvement many programs could make to their web pages would be to publish the amount of the application fee without requiring students to make an account and begin (or even fill out) an application before finding out. Although many web pages do provide information on application fees up front, 28 percent do not. The authors hope that these

findings contribute to keeping admissions professionals well apprised of the practices of their peers and provide some useful ideas for improving practice.

Limitations and Future Directions

The results and recommendations from the information gathered from the 150 web pages is a first step in understanding how the holistic admissions process is presented to possible applicants, but there are still many unanswered questions and fruitful directions for this area of research in the future. When thinking about the current data source of student-facing web pages, it would be beneficial to gather data from more institutions to see whether the trends found in this relatively small sample hold across institutions in the United States. The results are also limited because the researchers did not have information about the number and type of applicants associated with the institutions and programs affiliated with the web pages that were coded. Having these data would allow the researchers to make claims about how information depicted on web pages might influence the applicant pool an institution receives. Additionally, a more in-depth analysis of accessibility of information and aesthetics of a web page might help create a clearer picture of the impact of web pages on applicants. For instance, identifying the number of clicks it takes to find important application information like application deadlines or requirements might also have an impact on whether information-seeking students ultimately apply to the institution. Similarly, a better understanding of how web page aesthetics (such as pictures of students of diverse backgrounds) impact applicant perceptions could provide useful insights on the way web page design ultimately affects the makeup of the applicant pool.

Another interesting area of future research would be to gather data from different stakeholders in the holistic admissions process such as student applicants and admissions officers. These direct voices are missing from the current study but would allow for better triangulation of what the holistic admissions process ought to be and its potential impact on applications and admissions. For instance, understanding what aspects of a web page or application is most important for a pro-

spective student and whether that view correlates with what aspects an admissions officer thinks is important could illuminate a potential disconnect in the application process. Additionally, understanding how stakeholders define holistic admissions, along with qualities considered important among applicants, could further

advance understanding of how holistic admissions can be defined. This study begins to examine how the holistic admissions process is communicated through student-facing web pages, but there is still work to do to pinpoint how applicants understand and are affected by communication on the holistic admissions process.

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