

 GRAD AND PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS

Potential Bias Within Holistic Master's Admission Processes

By Alyssa Orlando

This exploratory study examined potential bias within holistic master's admissions processes through interviews with multiple admissions professionals located in New England. Data analysis revealed three overarching themes within the professional experience that follow critical race theory's five tenets (Hiraldo 2010). These themes are: differences in defining diversity, a lack of bias training, and colorblind admissions processes. Coded narrative from study participants suggests that bias exists within master's admissions, and that the process differs from previously researched undergraduate and doctoral processes due to a lack of understanding surrounding types of bias at the reviewer and administrator level.

This study explores the potential impact of bias within a holistic master's admissions process. Kent and McCarthy (2016) defined holistic admissions processes as the consideration of noncognitive or personal attributes to determine a candidate's admission to an academic program. Most current research on holistic review processes study either undergraduate or doctoral admissions (Bastedo and Bowman 2017; Bastedo, *et al.* 2018; Paris and Winfield 2024; Posselt 2014; Posselt, *et al.* 2020). Although these admission levels share similarities with master's admissions review, several variables can cause the actual application of holistic review processes for master's program admissions to greatly differ. There is a consensus within existing literature that individual staff review undergraduate admissions applications, and faculty committees review doctoral admissions applications (Bastedo

and Bowman 2017; Posselt 2014). At the master's level, who reviews application files depends on the academic discipline, program and institution size, and available staffing and training (Kent and McCarthy 2016). Institutions use faculty review committees, staff reviewers, or a combination of both methods to review master's degree applications (Okahana, Gao, and Zhao 2020). Blagg (2018) identified that master's programs may bring in more tuition revenue like an undergraduate population but recruit an advanced study population that identifies more with doctoral programs. The differences between undergraduate and doctoral review processes, combined with a limited amount of research on master's specific processes, warrant additional research on master's level review. Additionally, bias within master's admissions processes is not individually studied within existing lit-

erature (Orlando 2021). It is either coupled with doctoral admissions review or left out altogether. What little research we do have suggests master's programs may share potential biases with both undergraduate and doctoral admissions processes based on each level's review structures (Nicola and Vultaggio 2024).

However, it is not clear from existing literature how much each level does or does not overlap due to a lack of targeted master's admissions research. This presents a need to further study master's holistic admissions processes: without this research, it cannot be determined whether master's admissions processes and potential bias are or are not different from the other levels. This study aimed to explore potential bias within the holistic review of master's degree applications. Specifically, this study aimed to answer two research questions: 1) How do holistic admissions practices for master's programs differ from undergraduate and doctoral review? 2) How does bias impact a holistic admissions review at the master's level? The study analyzed emergent themes from qualitative exploration and identified next steps for further research.

Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks

This study used critical race theory (CRT) to analyze graduate enrollment management from an equity mindset perspective. Ladson-Billings and Tate's (1995) seminal work on CRT in education said that institutions have grown into what they are due to relationships between race, racism, and power. CRT proves useful for examining policies in higher education because "racial subordination is among the critical factors responsible for the continued production of racialized disparities and opportunity gaps" (Harper, Patton, and Wooden 2009, 392). In reviewing current scholarship about holistic admissions practices with equity-based frameworks, some utilize CRT for its ability to challenge existing practice and "promotes increased equity and social justice for people of color" (Gildersleeve, Croom, and Vasquez 2011, 96). CRT also acknowledges impacts on the variance of access between institution types and academic disciplines. Using CRT as a framework for

exploring admissions-practitioner mindset assists in moving racism and segregation's effects on higher education to the forefront of inquiry. This study used CRT in both evaluating the current body of literature and as themes in coding qualitative data, specifically the five CRT tenets applied in the setting of higher education (Hiraldo 2010).

Additionally, Boske, *et al.*'s (2018) holistic socio-cultural inquiry admissions model served as a key framework for determining interview questions. The framework was created knowing that "deepening ways of knowing and responding to race and equity consciousness is essential to supporting the acquisition of culturally-responsive practices, policies, and experiences throughout the admissions process" (Boske, *et al.* 2018, 8). This model's creation serves as a fundamental conceptual equity framework for exploring master's program admissions-practitioner mindset and background effects on the holistic admissions process. It attempts to create a space to engage in more informed dialogue surrounding applicants of color.

Literature Review

Undergraduate admissions researchers began diving into the potential bias of holistic admissions practices over the last decade. Three main ideas have emerged throughout this research from this space. First, undergraduate admissions officers often do not have contextual information about applicants when reviewing files, and therefore cannot truly make a holistic decision from a singular representation of that student (Bastedo and Bowman 2017). Some admissions officers may have more knowledge than others about an applicant's high school or background and use that to make their decision (Bastedo and Bowman). This bias can sometimes display in only certain students being reviewed at a deeper level (Bastedo and Bowman). Undergraduate admissions officers often do not have time within the review cycle to research every applicant's high school and other key background contexts (Bastedo and Bowman). Holistic admissions processes without guidance or context can allow for a "gray zone of bias" (Zell 2016, 78). Lack of context or vague information can cause

biased decision-making when reviewers make judgments (either positive or negative) about an application criterion that does not directly impact the student's potential ability to succeed (Sukumar, *et al.* 2017; Rosinger, *et al.* 2021).

Second, there is no standardized holistic review matrix across universities or even within programs at one institution (Paris and Winfield 2024; Rideout 2018). There are common materials requested like transcripts, a resume, and a personal statement, but no two institutions necessarily employ precisely the same evaluation process (Paris, *et al.* 2024; Sukumar, *et al.* 2017). Since reviewers have their own heuristics, this allows individual bias—both conscious and unconscious—to affect the result of the application review (Sukumar, *et al.* 2017; Rosinger, *et al.* 2021). Additionally, each institution may look for different applicants to comprise its incoming class based on the university's priorities or concerns (Sukumar, *et al.* 2018). This may result in different “tags” or notes, potentially elevating identifying characteristics from the application, elevating a student from the waitlist to being admitted (Rosinger, *et al.* 2021).

Finally, applications at the undergraduate level have the potential to be reviewed quickly, and almost solely by staff members (Bowman and Bastedo 2017). Most undergraduate admissions officers face a tight reviewing schedule with sometimes as little as fifteen minutes to read an application (Bastedo and Bowman 2017). This does not allow contextual information to be drawn before moving on to the next applicant, and often students who do not stand out as unique may be overlooked for those with other connections to the university (Zell 2016). Later in the holistic review process, undergraduate admissions officers often gather for group committee sessions where individual admissions officers present snapshots of applicants to additional staff members to finalize the admitted class (Metoyer, *et al.* 2020). In general, the short amount of time allowed for decision-making within undergraduate admissions processes allows room for bias at all stages of file review.

At the doctoral level, Posselt's (2014) work over the last decade has proven pivotal in analyzing the meritocracies of doctoral admissions. Although several of the

aforementioned themes of bias within undergraduate admissions processes are shared at the doctoral level, the key difference lies in reviewer role and potential motivation. Faculty members comprise almost the entirety of admissions reviewers for doctoral programs, often serving on small program- or discipline-based committees (Posselt 2014). These faculty members may prefer a combination of cognitive factors and holistic review measures for efficiency purposes (De Los Reyes and Uddin 2021). The literature revealed that faculty typically perceive academic rigor and higher quantitative measures as a means to predict applicant success in their programs and are less inclined to use holistic measures (De Los Reyes and Uddin 2021). Posselt's (2014) case study on selective doctoral programs indicated that faculty members who sit on doctoral admissions committees rely on conventional achievement flags and are, at times, risk averse to candidates they feel are academically underqualified. Although most faculty understand the sociocultural factors at play in applicant backgrounds and access, a fear of student attrition could exist (Posselt 2014).

There are similarities between master's, undergraduate, and doctoral holistic admissions processes. Both undergraduate and master's holistic reviews face limited contextual information in reviewing applications. Due to their frequently shared faculty, both master's and doctoral programs see issues of gatekeeping within academic disciplines and a desire from faculty for cognitive factors such as grades to play a larger role in the decision. However, while master's programs share some process similarities with both undergraduate and doctoral admissions, the limited research on bias in the former leaves gaps for further research. Specifically, the differences in who reviews the applications comes into question. Like undergraduate admissions, some master's programs utilize staff members to review applications and render decisions (Kent and McCarthy 2016). However, many master's programs use similar (or even the same) faculty review committees as their institution's doctoral program counterparts. Finally, a subset of programs uses a combination of both staff and faculty reviewers. Holistic admissions is a human-centered

practice with room for error and bias, so it follows that research should analyze the people enacting and performing the review (Alvero, *et al.* 2020; Rideout 2018). Since the roles of reviewers differ between institutions and within program levels, it is necessary to further dive into master's programs and their holistic review processes to determine the types of bias that stem from these differences.

Methodology and Sample

The study consists of nominal data collected through a survey, followed by qualitative interviews sourced from a purposeful sample within the New England Graduate Admission Professionals organization (NEGAP), a regional chapter of NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management. NEGAP serves as the main professional association in New England for faculty, staff, and administrators working in the graduate admissions field. The call for participants asked for higher education professionals who currently participate in or manage a holistic application review process for one or more master's programs. As a current employee within the field and a member within the organization, the author has continued professional relationships with many other NEGAP members. For the pilot study, the author began her interactions with the study participants through a pre-interview survey. The survey was followed by interviews specifically targeting potential bias within holistic admissions processes with current admissions professionals who work specifically with master's programs.

Data Collection

Eight subjects agreed to participate in this study. After opting in to participate via email, the subjects completed a consent form and pre-interview survey. The pre-interview survey covered two of three guiding topics. First, the author began by exploring the professional's background, as not one specific professional type such as faculty, admissions officer, or administrator was recruited, and they have varying levels of preparation for participating in a holistic review process. Second, the author asked several questions regarding the

professional's institutional admissions practices. These questions permitted an understanding of how the subject's specific graduate admissions practices work in action and identify themes within each interview. Each participant completed the pre-interview survey before participating in the exploratory interview.

Data analysis was completed over several weeks in two parts. First, the author examined the pre-interview survey results, which were mainly nominal or ordinal demographic data. The author examined this data before completing the interviews to ensure all study participants met the minimum criteria to be part of the sample. Eight participants completed the pre-interview survey, and all moved onto and completed a virtual interview for this study.

Second, the author hand-coded the data in Microsoft Excel. Zoom's transcription feature was used, and each interview was then pasted into Excel. After marking all data lines with anonymous study IDs, the author completed an initial coding of the data (Table 1, on page 63). Two of these codes—explanation and question—were only descriptive and do not add to the data collection process. After an initial coding of the data, the five tenets of Critical Race Theory as outlined in higher education were used to code the data a second time (Hiraldó 2010). Once completed, the overlaps in the coding were compared to determine initial themes from the qualitative interview data.

Findings

Data analysis was completed using an Excel database to compare multiple coding schema. Out of 602 data lines, 97 (16%) were questions, and 50 (8%) were general explanations or filler text between questions providing no insight or findings. The other four codes in the first schema—admission structure, diversity definition, review process, and bias—comprised the majority of the data at 455 lines (75%). Admission structure was the smallest code with only twelve lines of data; this corresponds to the large amount of demographic and structural data collected within the pre-survey. Most study participants did not expand on the structure of their overall application process.

Once initially coded, the author went back through the data with the CRT themes from the theoretical framework. She did not integrate question, explanation, or admission structure data lines into the second phase of coding. The second coding schema followed teachings from CRT in higher education's five tenets: counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest conversion, and the critique of liberalism (Hiraldo 2010). It also includes not applicable as a marker for lines coded as question or explanation in the first schema, as well as lines with no premise for CRT application. Counter-storytelling and interest convergence appeared as the most frequent secondary codes for statements encompassing definitions of diversity. Critique of liberalism appeared as the most frequent secondary code in statements about the review process overall. Finally, within statements related to bias, permanence of racism and whiteness as property appeared as the most frequent secondary codes (Table 2).

Most of the participants had diversity recruiting goals within their enrollment plans. One participant mentioned the academic discipline informing what type of diversity the institution hoped to increase, while three others mentioned U.S. citizens being a target demographic as underrepresented communities in their application pools. For one participant, their division did not define student diversity within their applicant or admitted student population, but instead spoke of a larger goal to increase the size of the overall enrollment pipeline. This participant noted the "opportunity and value" in broadening a population's diversity but followed that by describing their institution's lack of measurements for or implementation of diversity recruiting initiatives (Participant F, October 17, 2021).

One subject mentioned attending anti-racist workshops as part of their role as an admissions officer, advocating for and supporting resources that supported underrepresented students, and analyzing their institutional campus climate to minimize superficial diversity. Several others noted diversity workshops or bias training as part of their university employment but did not tie in hearing from community members of color as part of that learning experience.

TABLE 1 ► Qualitative Data Analysis:
Coding Counts, Initial Schema

Coding Schema	Count
Admission Structure	12
Bias	242
Diversity Definition	72
Explanation	50
Question	100
Review Process	126
Grand Total	602

TABLE 2 ► Qualitative Data Analysis:
Coding Counts, Expanded Schema

Coding Schema	Count
Admission Structure	12
Bias	242
PR	139
NA	34
WP	28
CL	19
IC	14
CS	8
Diversity Definition	72
IC	50
CS	15
NA	3
PR	2
WP	1
CL	1
Explanation	50
Question	100
Review Process	126
CL	71
NA	35
WP	11
IC	4
CS	3
PR	2
Grand Total	602

Coding Key:

CL = Critique of Liberalism; **CS** = Counter-Storytelling;
IC = Interest Conversion; **PR** = Permanence of Racism;
NA = Not Applicable; **WP** = Whiteness as Property

Only half of the subjects took an implicit bias test for their work in admissions. One other took a test for another professional role in the military. However, only one subject took an implicit bias test within the last three years. All subjects named training as a key deficiency in their work to minimize bias within their review. Several stated a desire to move toward more prescribed holistic review practices, indicating that their current review committees “don’t give reasons” for their admissions decisions (Participant H, October 18, 2021). Evaluation assessments may force reviewers to evaluate the implicit or explicit reasons for their decisions. Many of them have started implementing minor changes to their review process, such as making standardized testing requirements optional or eliminating quantitative score cutoffs.

Additionally, many of the subjects partnered with faculty to make admissions decisions within their holistic review processes. In a larger committee where faculty may share or hold the decision-making power, the participants did not feel they would be able to mitigate or eliminate bias within the holistic review because of the power dynamic between academic affairs and enrollment. Indeed, one subject mentioned that they saw similar applications return to the admissions department with different decisions based on who read the file and rendered the decision.

Several subjects identified that reviewers who shared commonalities with applicants could fall victim to bias in their review; some mentioned trying to target their own personal biases of developing bonds with students over common interests or identities. One subject specifically noted that “every single one of the readers that we have as a [w]hite person” and did not have any other racial or ethnic diversity (Participant A, October 6, 2021). Whiteness also manifested in several subjects’ responses to questions about points of bias within the review process, specifically relating to standardized testing’s role in holistic review. The same participant noted that “people of color or people from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to do differently” when compared to an applicant who may be a “white male engineer.”

Nearly all subjects indicated using holistic review to decide on each applicant’s file, but that the reviewers do not have the time to dig deeper into an applicant’s background or further reasoning behind potential reasons for denial. Subjects also indicated that the volume of application review supersedes the level of attention and detail given to each file: “We are at a point now where the faculty who are in that review committee are saying that the amount of time it takes to review applications holistically...it’s a lot to do” (Participant C, October 13, 2021).

Most subjects also mentioned a committee structure in some capacity that affords multiple reviewers on a single file and a “broad spectrum of feedback” to determine if a candidate is admissible. However, creating committees also affords those reviewers the opportunity to not amend the review process in other, more meaningful ways, as enrollment teams typically implement a group read as a mechanism for holistic review and do not move forward with other bias-minimizing process changes. One subject noted: “At the end of the day holistic admission just really means that you’re trying not to weed people out. You’re trying to just kind of look at everyone with the same kind of open-minded, whole person view” (Participant E, October 16, 2021).

Discussion and Future Research

Following the completion of analysis, three themes emerged from the most frequent findings from the exploratory interviews. These were differences in defining diversity, lack of bias training, and colorblind admissions.

Theme 1: Differences in Defining Diversity

Master’s programs have varying or non-existent definitions of diverse student populations and goals to expand access to master’s education, further promoting interest convergence where white individuals benefit from structures initially implemented to offer People of Color equal opportunity (Hiraldo 2010). Institutions can stake a diversity claim through full-pay international students who financially benefit the university and culturally benefit their school’s diversity (Hiraldo 2010).

The participant narratives had a gap in counter-storytelling from faculty, staff, or Students of Color, which could allow these differences in diversity definitions to fester. Hiraldo (2010) defines counter-storytelling as providing campus community members of color a voice to tell narratives involving marginalized experiences. In not “looking to expand the diversity” of their application pool and minimizing the voice of diverse populations, institutions may contribute to ignoring policies and structures that perpetuate social inequity and increase bias.

Theme 2: Lack of Bias Training

The subjects in this study did not feel they received enough training from their departments or divisions related to potential bias within a holistic review, promoting permanence of racism by ignoring potentially systemic issues and not providing these resources to individuals involved in admissions. The majority of study participants did not participate in their holistic review process directly, and only one participated individually without faculty member input. Holistic admissions processes stake a division between academic and student affairs, perpetuating whiteness as property in possession of and exclusion from the review process.

Theme 3: Colorblind Admissions

The participants in this research indicated they face short timelines to make decisions that leave little room for previous cycle assessment and policymaking, thereby participating in a critique of liberalism by ignoring policies that perpetuate social inequities and promote bias. Although program fit may also lend itself to bias, the decision not to change or modify policy that directly impacts a lack of knowledge within the process creates a colorblind admissions process. These types of holistic reviews put all files on the same equal baseline from which to start a review.

A review of related literature suggested a gap in two major research areas related to bias within holistic graduate admissions. First, a majority of current scholarship evaluates bias within undergraduate and doctoral holistic review but does not shed light on practice

within master's programs. Second, reviews of master's programs do not focus on bias. This study aimed to explore the positioning of master's admissions practice and the potential bias in using holistic review processes. Specifically, this study asked two questions: 1) How do holistic admissions practices for master's programs differ from undergraduate and doctoral review? 2) How does bias impact a holistic admissions review at the master's level?

This study's findings suggest that bias exists within master's admissions in several different manifestations, and that the review process challenges differ from previously researched undergraduate and doctoral processes due to a difference in education and training between enrollment leadership, graduate faculty, and admissions professionals. The themes identified through data analysis are unique to holistic master's admissions when compared to previous research on undergraduate and doctoral review. Theme 1 and 3 combine tenets of both review levels, and Theme 2 is a unique problem to the academic-professional blend that is master's admissions. The subjects in this study all identified as professional staff, which could impact the findings and themes developed. Master's admissions review has both faculty and staff reviewers, so it will be important to identify and explore this difference in future research.

This study's findings do not fully answer the question of how bias impacts a holistic admissions review at the master's level. Limitations did exist in this research, including interviews completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a delay in publication of this research while the author completed her doctoral dissertation. Although the narrative exploration completed in this study begins to scratch the surface of how bias impacts the process, the interviews indicated two things. First, there is a general lack of understanding about types of bias. Each study participant had a novel definition of bias within admissions review. No two subjects described bias as exactly the same thing, and each viewpoint was partially molded by that person's professional experiences in the field. However, almost none of the subjects (only one) had completed an implicit bias test

within the last three years. As professionals who average four to seven years in the field, this warrants the finding that admissions professionals are not being trained on bias within their own processes. Further research should explore these themes by expanding on distinct types of bias within the master's admissions

process through quantitative survey research with a larger sample size. The future research should also include identifying the frequency and specific curriculum of bias training for admissions readers to address the inconsistencies with training surrounding bias within their practice.

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About the Author



Alyssa Orlando

Alyssa Orlando, Ph.D., currently works as the Senior Director of Graduate and Professional Enrollment at Clark University in Worcester, MA. Prior to Clark, Dr. Orlando

worked at numerous institutions in the New England area, serving the GEM profession for the last decade. Alyssa earned her Ph.D. in Leadership in Education in May 2024 from the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Her disser-

tation research focused on exploring the potential bias within holistic master's admissions processes. She holds a bachelor's degree in journalism from Ithaca College, and a master's degree in higher education from Boston College.