

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Rethinking Recommendation Letters: A Critical Tool in Holistic Admission

By Tara P. Nicola, Mandy Savitz-Romer, and Julius DiLorenzo

Holistic review considers applicants within the context of their lived experiences. But it fundamentally relies on contextual materials like recommendation letters that differ in quality. In this literature review, the authors highlight promising practices and policies for better leveraging letters to promote equity in the undergraduate admissions context, specifically for traditional, high school-aged applicants.

Carlos sat back after reading yet another vague letter of recommendation among this year's applicants to Winn University. The school had adopted a test-optional policy during the pandemic and Carlos' team had come to depend more heavily on school profiles and letters of recommendation from teachers and counselors to provide necessary context in the reading process. Unfortunately, this particular letter, which came from a school counselor at a large, urban high school he had not heard of, read like so many others: broad statements that lack descriptive examples such as "Emily is a good student," "Ja-Hon is a leader among his peers," and "Raina will be a great member of the community" make it hard for Carlos to genuinely decipher what kinds of students his college would be admitting. Making matters worse, Carlos notices a trend he's seen before of letters about Asian students disproportionately referencing interests in STEM, and mentions of trauma being more prevalent in applicants from low-income communities. Carlos knows better than to generalize in this way, but he can't help but

wonder if there isn't more he could do to decipher these letters so he can better leverage them in his assessments.

Carlos was particularly struck by one applicant with what looked like a mediocre academic background and a commitment to social justice. Because there was no testing information and no school profile submitted for the applicant, Carlos was hoping for more context in the counselor letter, but was disappointed by what he found. The letter included the usual boilerplate text about the student's academic performance, along with a brief paragraph about how the student's family troubles prompted his involvement in community service. Since the student himself did not reference these obstacles in their personal statement, Carlos was not sure if the counselor was unconsciously relying on racial stereotypes in the content they included. Furthermore, given the letter generally lacked specificity, Carlos struggled to avoid jumping to the conclusion that this letter could apply to anyone. One of Carlos' colleagues suggested he call the applicant's counselor for more context; while

he certainly couldn't manage to do that for all of his applicants, this one seemed worth it.

After talking with the counselor, Ms. Hatim, Carlos felt affirmed that this was a strong admit. Ms. Hatim shared that she didn't know the applicant well but had heard from colleagues that he was a good student and thoughtful young man who was admired for his involvement in the community food pantry, something she realized she had not even included in his recommendation. She acknowledged that her letter probably was not all that helpful given the varying needs of the 600 students on her caseload and the fact that she never really knew what to put in these letters. Combined with the rush to get so many letters done by early decision deadlines, Ms. Hatim was just glad to submit something.

Despite feeling good about this potential applicant, Carlos found himself reflecting a lot on this one conversation. He couldn't help but wonder whether the process wasn't totally flawed. Not only did he feel uneasy about his own actions, having called one counselor out of hundreds, but he also began to question the strengths of the system on the other side of the admissions desk. Although he knew that recommendation letters are subject to bias, he also believed that counselors and teachers have a unique vantage point to a student's experience throughout high school. With application numbers rising and less information available to distinguish between candidates, Carlos felt confident that these letters had the potential to be powerful tools in the reading process. If only there was a way to clarify the information he desperately needs from counselors and other educators, while considering the pressures Ms. Hatim described on their call.

Introduction

Each year, enrollment management professionals like Carlos face the daunting task of deciding which applicants should be admitted to their institution. In theory, recommendation letters and the other components of the application portfolio, such as personal statements, are supposed to make those decisions, if not easier, at least more equitable by providing contextual information that admissions officers need to fairly evalu-

ate applicants. But as reflected in the opening vignette, undergraduate admissions officers are at the mercy of others—namely, high schools and applicants themselves—to supply the contextual information they need.¹ Unevenness in the quantity and quality of contextual data supplied across applicants has significant implications not only for admissions officers' efficacy in their reviews but also for equity in the holistic review process as a whole.

The recommendation letter is one application component in particular that admissions stakeholders can better leverage to convey critical contextual data about applicants. Many selective colleges require recommendation letters as part of their admissions process.² These letters are a counterweight to the more quantitative aspects of the application portfolio, such as grades and test scores, shining light on applicants' achievements and future potential in ways that cannot be captured by singular numbers. Especially in the current admissions landscape where test-optional policies and the Supreme Court's recent decision to limit the consideration of race in the admissions process are making it more difficult to obtain quantifiable data on applicants, the qualitative data embedded in recommendation letters is as important as ever for admissions officers to consider (Bennett 2021; Maguire Associates 2021). And yet, structural barriers prevent many K–12 educators from having the time and knowledge to construct letters that effectively advocate for their students while also meeting the needs of admissions officers. These opposing pressures from the postsecondary and secondary sectors

¹ This article focuses on recommendation letters used in the admissions process for traditional, high school-aged undergraduate applicants. These applicants are typically submitting letters from high school teachers and counselors. Older, adult learners applying for undergraduate programs might also submit letters, but their letters of recommendation are often from employers or others in their community rather than high school staff. The expectations about what those letters should convey—and the challenges those letter writers face in crafting strong letters, are thus distinct and necessitate their own discussion that is outside the scope of this article. However, many of the broader points in this piece about how admissions officers can mitigate bias in considering recommendations are applicable to evaluating all letters, including those for nontraditional students.

² The authors define selective colleges broadly as institutions that are not open-access and have procedures in place for evaluating the admissibility of applicants.

ultimately contribute to an admissions process that is as misaligned as it is misunderstood.

This literature review aims to empower undergraduate enrollment management professionals with the knowledge and tools they need to start ameliorating this misalignment.³ After introducing the notion of holistic review, the authors synthesize extant research on the recommendation letters used to support this evaluation process, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges these application components present for promoting equity. This article also shares a few findings from an ongoing study of recommendation letters submitted by high school counselors that documents unevenness in content and quality across letters. The authors argue that disparities in the quality and quantity of contextual data in letters have significant equity implications, and provide recommendations for how enrollment management professionals can address these inequities through intentional design of their holistic assessment practices and through increased support to colleagues on the “other side of the desk.” The article concludes by reflecting more broadly on holistic review and advocates for an overhaul of this fundamentally flawed system.

Holistic Review

Many selective institutions embrace a holistic process for evaluating applicants (Coleman and Keith 2018). Although there is no single accepted definition of what constitutes holistic review (Bastedo, *et al.* 2018; Kent and McCarthy 2018), it is broadly characterized as the act of “evaluating prospective students in the context of the educational, personal, and financial conditions experienced by the applicant” (Bowman and Bastedo 2017, 431). Through intentional consideration of the multiple, intersecting factors that shape an applicant’s achievements, interests, and future potential, holistic review can promote more diversity and equity in the admissions process (Lucido 2014). This mission-aligned

practice thus supports the dual aims of admissions officers to admit those students most likely to thrive and to strategically build a class that enriches academic and extracurricular life with the diversity of thoughts, backgrounds, and experiences it brings to campus (Coleman and Keith 2018).

Because holistic review emphasizes considering the intersectionality of various factors that define an individual applicant, it fundamentally relies on contextual data about applicants and their home and school environments (Coleman and Keith 2018). Contextual data can take many forms, ranging from a simple explanation that a teacher includes in their recommendation letter about why a student earned a subpar grade to a robust high school profile attached to a student’s transcript that provides detailed information about a particular high school. Experimental work has indeed found that consideration of contextual data can produce more equitable admissions outcomes (Bastedo, *et al.* 2019, 2022; Mabel, *et al.* 2022). Notably, Bastedo and Bowman’s (2017) study, where admissions officers simulated application reviews, found that a low-SES applicant was 26 percent more likely to gain acceptance when admissions officers received contextual data about their school, including the number of students enrolled, average graduation rate, percentage of students eligible for free-or-reduced price lunch, and the number of Advanced Placement courses offered. Recent work building on this experiment has found that these contextualized measures of high school achievement, particularly high school GPA, are positively correlated with indicators of college success for women, Pell recipients, and students of color (Bastedo, *et al.* 2023).

Recommendation Letters

Undergraduate admissions officers glean contextual information from the various components of the application portfolio, including the application form, student essays, and school-furnished documents like school profiles (College Board 2012). Recommendation letters submitted by teachers and high school counselors are one critical source of this context. Letters can offer the type of rich, qualitative descriptions about students

³ While this article focuses on the undergraduate admissions context, many of the topics discussed also apply to the graduate admissions realm as well given the use of recommendation letters in the admissions process for graduate and postgraduate (e.g., medical residency) programs.

that other application components like grades and test scores fundamentally cannot. Letters can especially provide evidence of non-cognitive traits like autonomy, perseverance, and concern for others that predict outcomes related to leadership potential and academic and extracurricular success (Hossler, *et al.* 2019; Sedlacek 2005, 2017). But like every other type of assessment, letters are not without flaws. Research has found, for example, that letter writers are often reticent to critique an applicant (Aamodt and Williams 2005). And because the judgements of letter writers are so subjective, it is difficult to compare across letters.

Furthermore, recommendation letters can reflect the implicit biases of letter writers through including gendered and racialized descriptions—this language can in turn taint admissions officers' perceptions of an applicant. Implicit bias refers to the negative attitudes and stereotypes that individuals associate with groups of people without conscious awareness. Because implicit biases are involuntarily activated and do not necessarily align with one's explicit beliefs or intentions, they shape the behavior of even the most well-intentioned individuals, including educators (*e.g.*, Carlana 2019; Francis, *et al.* 2019).

Recommendation Letters in Undergraduate Admissions

Despite how common they are, recommendation letters have been understudied in the literature on the college admissions process. Most of the academic research on letters has focused on their use in personnel selection and in graduate school admissions (*e.g.*, Kuncel, *et al.* 2014; French, *et al.* 2019; Turrentine 2019). Discussion of letters used in undergraduate admissions for traditional high-school aged students has instead largely taken the form of practitioner-developed resources about the nuts and bolts of writing letters as well as thought pieces about how letters can be improved (*e.g.*, College Board 2012; Johnson 2022; Sackstein 2015; Skinner 2019).

Just three academic studies have examined letters from the undergraduate admissions context. The first study by Akos and Kretchmar (2016) analyzed 4,800 teacher recommendation letters from applicants to a

selective public university and found that letters for male and underrepresented minority students were less likely to describe students as being hard workers than letters for female and white applicants with similar academic profiles, respectively. The second study by Rothstein (2022) examined the impact of receiving a recommendation letter on the likelihood of admission for applicants to UC Berkeley; he found that underrepresented minority applicants benefited from having a recommendation letter considered in the evaluation process. Finally, in the third study, Heseung Kim (2021) analyzed 1.6 million letters submitted by teachers via the Common Application, finding that the tone and positivity of letters were relatively similar across students, but that topical content differed, after holding constant student characteristics. Notably, female students were more likely to have letters that discussed community engagement, extracurriculars, and time management compared to letters for males, which more heavily emphasized sports participation, STEM, and academic excellence. He also found evidence of differences in content across student race, but the magnitude of those differences was smaller than those for gender. In summary, these studies provide not only compelling evidence of biases in the language that recommenders use in their letters but also emphasize the value of these letters in promoting equity in admissions decision-making.

High School Counselor Recommendation Letters

The authors' own work on counselor recommendation letters confirms and extends findings from this extant literature on recommendation letters used in undergraduate admissions. They have utilized a range of quantitative and qualitative methods to understand what information high school counselors put in their letters, how that content differs across letters, and what factors are potentially driving those differences and other differences in quality more generally. The quantitative work draws on a rich data set of over 1.6 million recommendation letters submitted by high school counselors through the Common Application between the 2017-18 and 2019-20 application cycles. One of the analyses leverages a computational text analysis tool called topic modeling

to identify prominent themes in letters. After identifying 90 key themes, which encompassed everything from students' academic interests and career aspirations to their extracurricular passions and the obstacles they overcame during their high school career, the authors used regression models to compare differences in how frequently themes were mentioned across letters for students of different genders, races, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of the emerging findings include:

- Counselors were much less likely to reference interest in engineering for females than for males. Counselors also consistently included more discussion of the extracurricular involvement, social issues, and volunteering topics in letters for females. By contrast, letters for female applicants were more likely to reference the compassionate topic, which encompassed descriptions of a student having a “big heart,” possessing a warm personality, and being a good friend.
- There were notable differences in topical prevalence between white students and their Asian and Hispanic counterparts across multiple themes; differences in topic proportions between letters for Black and white students were statistically significant but small. The topic with the biggest difference in prevalence was STEM, with counselors mentioning STEM-related interests like engineering and medicine more for Asian students than white students. By contrast, the topics with the largest difference in prevalence between Hispanic and white students focused on family. Finally, letters for Black students tended to include fewer references to sports than white students; instead, the letters more strongly emphasized advocacy work and Black students' desire to improve their communities.
- Family was a key theme in letters for low-income students, with counselors emphasizing family struggles in particular. By contrast, sports was consistently mentioned less frequently in letters for low-income students than their higher-income counterparts.

The quantitative analyses in and of themselves are not necessarily evidence that counselors letters are

overtly bias against certain applicants and thus inherently putting them at a disadvantage in the admissions process. But they raise important questions about counselors' thought process in deciding what information can and should be shared in letters—how and why, for example, counselors are choosing to disclose the family situations of particular applicants (who overwhelmingly tend to be low-income and students of color) over others on their caseload. This information is important for admissions officers to recognize as they are reading letters. The authors are currently undertaking robust qualitative work to answer these questions.

Strengthening Recommendation Letters

The job of admissions professionals is fundamentally about making difficult choices in identifying which applicants are worthy of acceptance. Institutional processes, priorities, and budgets are just a few of the plethora of factors that shape admissions officers' decision-making; within these parameters, however, admissions officers tend to have great autonomy, undertaking highly subjective evaluations. This subjectivity is both a blessing and curse; on the one hand, it means that students who don't fit the mold of a typical admit at an institution have a shot at acceptance, but on the other, subjectivity infuses every admissions decision with the whims, heuristics, and biases of admissions officers—forces that time and time again reproduce inequities in the education system and society (Bastedo 2017; Coleman and Keith 2018; Kent and McCarthy 2016).

Many colleges, particularly selective institutions, have embraced holistic review processes to combat the perpetuation of these inequities. A fundamental flaw of holistic review, however, is that it assumes admissions officers actually have access to contextualized data about applicants; because the current holistic review system requires applicants themselves and educators at the high school level to voluntarily supply this data, holistic review assumes that these stakeholders know what information to share and how to best convey it. The authors' work as well as the emerging literature on application components like letters (Akos and Kretchmar 2016; Heseung Kim 2021; Rothstein 2022), essays (Geb-

re-Medhin 2022), and the school profile (Nicola 2022) that convey this contextualized information suggests this is not the case in practice. In the absence of accessing high quality contextual information, there is thus a high burden on admissions officers to appropriately modulate the limited data they receive.

In summary, the literature on recommendation letters shows that these documents can play an important role in the holistic admissions process that many selective institutions embrace to review undergraduate applicants. This same literature, however, also highlights the limitations of letters—including their highly subjective nature and inclusion of gendered and racialized language. Promoting practices that improve the quality of letters and consequently reduce the biases in them, can thus have important equity implications in the holistic review process.

Considerations in a Post-Affirmative Action Era

Qualitative sources of contextual data are perhaps more important now than ever given the implications of the recent decision in the *Students for Fair Admissions Inc. v. President & Fellows of Harvard College* Supreme Court case, which severely curtailed the outright consideration of race in holistic review. Notably, however, the court ruled that “nothing prohibits universities from considering an applicant’s discussion of how race affected the applicant’s life, so long as that discussion is concretely tied to a quality of character or unique ability that the particular applicant can contribute to the university.” For example, mention of a student’s experiences with racial discrimination can be situated within discussion of their “courage and determination” while a student’s racial or cultural identity can be elevated if linked to traits like motivation, leadership, and their “ability to contribute to the university.” The majority court opinion, therefore, explicitly ties discussion of race to the type of rich details about students’ experiences and non-cognitive traits that can only be captured in qualitative application components like the recommendation letter.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Since the announcement of this landmark Supreme Court decision, the higher education sector has been abuzz with discussion about how teachers, counselors, and other educators can leverage application components like recommendation letters to help admissions officers fill in the gaps about students’ racial and ethnic identities and its impact on their lives (*e.g.*, Anderson and Svrluga 2023). The burden on bolstering the utility of these letters—both for understanding applicants’ racial and ethnic identities as well as their backgrounds and experiences more broadly—should not fall solely on the shoulders of counselors and teachers. Admissions offices have an important role to play in rethinking their own policies and practices with regard to recommendation letters as well as supporting educators on the other side of the desk who write them.

Below are a few recommendations for improvements in policy and practice.

■ **Incorporate training on bias reduction.** Admissions professionals need not preemptively approach recommendation letters naively or cynically. However, it is important that readers—especially new industry professionals—are well informed of the limitations of these documents, including biases lurking within them. Bias training tools like the Implicit Association Test offer a starting point for officers to recognize their own biases and identify biases in application components.

However, more important than just recognizing biases is mitigating their impact. Coaching staff on how to correct for these biases in their evaluations can increase the diversity of an incoming class (Capers, *et al.* 2018; Nakae 2022). A promising mitigation technique is training readers to evaluate applications from a cultural capital lens (Comeaux 2022). Cultural capital, the strengths that individuals have acquired through lived experiences, can include aspirational capital (aspirational persistence in the face of adversity), navigational capital (the ability to navigate institutions without support or familiarity), and linguistic capital (the skills acquired through communicating in multiple languages and cultures), among others

(Yosso 2005). Rather than using context to justify traditional application deficiencies like limited extra-curricular activities or low testing, cultural capital shifts holistic review towards a strengths-based paradigm that centers equity in the review process.

- **Develop a standardized letter template.** One of the main challenges that letter writers in secondary schools face is knowing *what* to put in them and feeling compelled to write hundreds of words for the sake of filling up space on paper. Rather than giving teachers and counselors *carte blanche*, it would behoove admissions offices to invite them to provide specific commentary on students' academic performance, extracurricular involvement, or life circumstances that may not be reflected in the rest of the application. This could be achieved through short answer questions that ask counselors to select particular attributes and explain how the applicant demonstrates those values in a short answer format (Making Caring Common 2020). In fact, this type of more "standardized" letter is becoming increasingly common in the realm of medical school admissions where recommenders complete a mix of short, open-ended questions and closed-ended items about various dimensions of an applicant's past achievement and character (*e.g.*, Tang, *et al.* 2019).
- **Favor quality over quantity.** Rather than requiring recommendation letters for every student, consider requesting them in instances where they will truly be impactful. This can help reduce application barriers for students while allowing educators to be more thoughtful in the select letters that they are called upon to write. UC Berkeley piloted this model in 2015 in which, after a first review of the file, select marginal applicants were invited to submit two recommendations (Rothstein 2022; UC Berkeley 2020).
- **Support high school educators.** Recognize that access to professional learning varies significantly and that many teachers and counseling professionals would benefit from more guidance (*e.g.* Savitz-Romer 2012). Invest in professional development opportunities for educators—even free options, like webinars or dedicated webpages for counselors and teachers—

provide a valuable opportunity to disseminate the information practitioners wish to see in materials submitted by these educators. The Western Association of College Admission Counselors (WACAC) is one such organization that facilitates such convenings via their Share Learn Connect Programming, in which member universities put on half-day professional development for regional high school counselors (WACAC 2023).

- **Adopt no-harm principles in evaluating recommendation letters.** As universities transitioned to test-optional policies during the COVID-19 pandemic, many adopted *do-no-harm* policies in which a student would not be penalized for submitting a low test score; the rationale was that students might have had limited access to counseling supports or were unfamiliar with the admissions process and thus did not realize the implications of submitting a low test score (Mapps 2022). The authors' work, and that of others, shows the strength of a recommendation letter (as well as other school-supplied documents like profiles) is as much a factor of a school's resources as it is a students' preparedness. While school materials should be reviewed in earnest, their deficiencies should not negatively affect the student.

Reimagining A Broken System

Given the subjectivity in both writing and assessing recommendation letters, some might say that eliminating these artifacts altogether might bolster equity in the holistic review process. The authors strongly believe that this is not the solution. Eliminating letters—however flawed they might be—would only take away one more layer of desperately needed context from admissions officers, disproportionately impacting applicants who may be most marginalized in a standardized review. The reality is there is no objective component of a student's application. Even the most seemingly objective material, such as transcripts, vary widely and are deeply impacted by course availability, access to academic advising, grade inflation, and teacher bias (Bowers 2011; Francis, *et al.* 2019). Rather than turning away from variable components of the application like recommenda-

tion letters, admissions offices have the opportunity to bring these components to the forefront by re-envisioning a systemic, equitable assessment approach to undergraduate admissions.

Indeed, systemic change is needed to overhaul the current holistic review process. The aforementioned recommendations may help admissions offices find short-term solutions to address the immediate inequities facing a deeply flawed system, but they are just band aids—they will not address the root disparities in the admissions process. Enrollment leaders must be willing to embrace (or at least entertain) new assessment models as well as policies and practices.

The admissions field doesn't yet have the perfect answer to what those assessment models, policies, or practices should be. But finding that answer is tenable with continued partnership between practitioners and

researchers. Too often, scholarship on college access is disconnected from the nuances facing enrollment leaders. Simultaneously, enrollment leaders often lack the time or resources to implement every potential intervention (Chun, *et al.* 2022). In conjunction with research partners who have the resources to effectively assess the outcomes, admissions leaders must take the plunge to experiment and identify promising paths moving forward in the post-affirmative action era. Researchers also must do more to put forth evidence-based solutions for colleges to apply and be responsive to the very real constraints that admissions professionals face. Through continued partnership and critical, longitudinal assessment, admissions officers can collectively construct a new vision for holistic review that honors the applicant, the professionals supporting them, and institutions' investments in building well-rounded classes.

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About the Authors



Tara P. Nicola

Tara P. Nicola, Ph.D., is a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University and Senior Consultant at

Gallup. Nicola's research focuses on issues of access and equity in higher education, especially in relation to the

college admissions process. Her research has been published in top education journals such as *AERA Open*, the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, and *Educational Policy*, as well as featured in media outlets such as *Education Week*, *Inside Higher Ed*, and *The Hechinger*

Report. Nicola holds a Ph.D. in education from Harvard University, an Ed.M. in education policy and management from the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a M.Sc. in higher education with distinction from the University of Oxford, and a B.A. in English from Johns Hopkins University.



Mandy Savitz-Romer

Mandy Savitz-Romer, Ph.D., is the Nancy Pforzheimer Aronson Senior Lecturer in

Human Development and Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE). She is also the faculty lead of the school counseling strand of the human development and education

program. She writes and speaks extensively on college and career readiness and school-based counseling, especially as it relates to students of color and first-generation college students. Dr. Savitz-Romer is the author of *Fulfilling the Promise: Reimagining School Counseling to Advance Student Success* and co-author of *Ready, Willing, and Able:*

A Developmental Approach to College Access and Success and *Technology and Engagement: Making Technology Work for First-Generation College Students*. Dr. Savitz-Romer earned her Ph.D. from Boston College and her master's degree in school counseling from Boston University.



Julius DiLorenzo

Julius DiLorenzo is an experienced admissions professional and recent graduate of

Harvard's Graduate School of Education (HGSE). His research interests focus

on increasing equity in the admissions process with particular attention to how school counselors and admissions officers are trained to produce and interpret application material. Outside of research, DiLorenzo serves as a first-year advisor

to new undergraduates at Harvard College. He earned his B.A. in politics from Occidental College and his Ed.M. in education policy and analysis from HGSE.