



A PROMISING PRACTICE:  
**HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS**  
IN U.S. GRADUATE  
EDUCATION



## What is all the talk about holistic admissions?

Holistic admissions is becoming an increasingly hot topic among U.S. graduate schools and programs. It's not a new idea. Programs have long used multiple criteria such as undergraduate grades, standardized test scores, English-language proficiency tests, essays, personal statements, letters of recommendation, interviews, and résumés in evaluating prospective students.

What is new is the increased focus on the intentionality of the process and whether it is being carried out in the best way to identify the most promising prospects while ensuring equity, equality, and inclusivity. In a true holistic review, no single data point is considered in isolation.

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Rather, all the data points together paint a broad picture of each applicant's abilities, attributes, and experiences to help decision makers identify who most effectively match-

es the goals of the program and stands the best chance of thriving in it.

Many graduate programs say they are practicing holistic admissions, yet because there isn't one universal definition of the term, they are not entirely sure that they are doing it correctly. What is clear is that each program is using its own unique version of a holistic approach, based on its own understanding of the definition. Those most committed to the concept are taking steps to include more information on candidates, trying to educate professors and reviewers against unconscious bias, and establishing more formal rubrics and practices to build consistency.

"Like any system change, designing and implementing holistic review should be more like chess than checkers," says Julie Posselt, associate professor of the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education, and author of *Inside Graduate Admissions – Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping*. "You need to think out a few moves to imagine how both students and reviewers will respond to the system you create. You need to be disciplined and systematic."



## What's driving the conversation?

The intensified attention to holistic admissions has grown out of concern that faculty committees traditionally have given too much weight to just one or two academic indicators, and studies show that students from underrepresented groups tend to have lower grades and test scores than students who have had access to more educational resources.

At the same time, a growing body of evidence suggests that noncognitive skills such as grit, resilience, and motivation can help predict future success, for students of all backgrounds. Many consider holistic reviews a more race-neutral way of achieving diversity.

Another driving force is that decision making in higher education is becoming more and more informed by data. Institutions want to be sure they are using the most predictive measures of a student's ability to do the work, contribute to the program, and excel in their field.

That's why, when it was created in 2014, the Professional and Graduate Education

Program of Mount Holyoke College put into place a holistic admissions process. In addition to the traditional academic indicators, applicants must submit a personal statement, two letters of recommendation, and a résumé. Each application is also evaluated by an external reviewer who holds the same teaching license that the candidate seeks to pursue. In addition, prospective students have to interview with an admissions committee — and teach a prepared mini-lesson on a subject of their choice.

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"This gives us real insight into their suitability around content knowledge and pedagogical skills," says Ruth Hornsby, Mount Holyoke's assistant director of teacher licensure programs. "This helps us to see not only the teaching potential of a student, but how they prepare and plan this component."



## What are alternatives to using grades or test scores as an arbitrary cut?

It has been relatively common in years past for graduate admissions officials to make an initial cut based on grade point average, standardized tests scores, or some other arbitrary threshold to reduce the prospect pool to a more manageable number. This is especially true for larger programs that might get hundreds or thousands of applicants. However, many institutions are developing other ways to strategically narrow the pool.

One strategy involves considering multiple measures. In addition to undergraduate transcripts and test scores, graduate schools can consider relevant research experiences or significant obstacles an applicant has overcome. Staff can identify such cases to be put into the pool for full holistic review. The final review, as is customary, would still be done by regular faculty members.

Suzanne Barbour, dean of the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says that the traditional metrics of grades and test scores work best when

they are considered with other factors, like letters of reference and personal statements. Even still, she says, it is a challenging task to dissuade faculty members, especially in large programs, against using arbitrary thresholds to weed out applicants who might initially be perceived as academically weak.

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“Faculty are very busy and service responsibilities like graduate admissions are sometimes not rewarded,” says Barbour, also a professor of biochemistry and biophysics. “We are still working hard to convince programs that holistic admissions processes are worth the additional time and investment.”



## How do you find the time to carry out the holistic application process?

Time is perhaps the biggest challenge of undertaking a holistic process. It simply takes more time to go through all of the parts of an application and interviews — and to coordinate feedback among the reviewers, especially when as many as 10 to 15 people might be involved.

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Technology has helped. Many programs are using online systems so that applications can be read anywhere and anytime. Reviewers can also make online comments within the electronic application materials to be seen by their counterparts, but not the prospective students.

Video conferencing makes personal interviews logistically easier. Programs are developing systems for the interviewers to discuss and compare their impressions.

To streamline the process and provide consistency in review, some institutions are coming up with rubrics for professors to follow as they conduct their reviews. At UNC-Chapel Hill, graduate admissions is decentralized, as it is at many institutions. Applicants are reviewed by the departments or programs, and then their recommendations are made to the Graduate School. The dean's office recommends that programs use a "reverse design" to identify desired characteristics for their graduate students. "Start with your strongest students, identify the characteristics that underlie their success, and devise a strategy to review applicants for those characteristics," Barbour says.



## When can noncognitive indicators balance academic inconsistencies?

The University of Rhode Island recently instituted new policies for graduate admissions to make “implicit” holistic experiences “explicit,” says Alycia Mosley Austin, the university’s assistant dean of graduate recruitment and diversity initiatives.

The university has 35 master’s programs. Each one requires an undergraduate GPA of at least 3.0, a personal statement, two letters of recommendation, and a résumé. The résumé component, added for the fall of 2019’s entering class, is valuable for seeing candidates’ employment history, volunteer work, or research endeavors, which are often more telling of future success than their academic record, she says.

Looking beyond academic data points, she says, helps reviewers discover students who might have struggled with grades, but have valuable research or career experience. The expectations are different for someone who has been out in the working world. “The holistic approach helps us focus on our outcomes,” says Austin. “We can identify a creative person versus a person who got all A’s in their classes, but doesn’t have any creativity.”

Jeremiah Nelson, director of enrollment management for the business school at Wake Forest University and vice president of the National Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, says there is more risk associated with admitting a candidate who has poor academic performance, but he has seen multiple examples of people who thrive in graduate school after they have matured and are motivated and goal oriented.

One student who is currently in her second year at the business school was marginal based on test scores and grades, but her experience as a senior executive and her leadership in the community was extensive. She was a great fit and has thrived in the program. She needed a tutor for one class since her foundation wasn’t strong, but she was determined to succeed and has shown that at every step of the process.

“You can’t admit a whole class of students with low GPAs,” Nelson says, “but the benefit of averages is that there is always room for some people whose GPA was not the best indication of their potential for success.”



## How can you elicit the most meaningful information from prospects?

JoAnn Canales, senior-dean-in-residence for the Council of Graduate Schools and a GRE board member, says that for a graduate program's admissions to be truly holistic, officials first must think about what they are looking for in a student and come up with an overall rubric that uses components that align with those outcomes. It's also necessary to put together an informed admissions committee with review members who understand the nuances of the process and applications, says Canales, who retired in August 2019 as the founding dean of the College of Graduate Studies at Texas A&M University at Corpus Christi.

She recommends that every candidate be evaluated based on the same criteria. Programs that are clear and explicit about their application requirements and what materials and information they are looking for, she says, have a better chance of ensuring that comparable data is collected. Providing a standard form for résumés, for example, can ensure that all prospective students present the same types of facts and details in a singular format. It is also advisable, Canales says, that work experience of all kinds, regardless of setting, be

included to give a broader impression of the candidate.

Likewise, programs might want to create a process in which recommendations are submitted on a standard form, rather than individual letters on letterhead that might impress — or disappoint — a reviewer. This also precludes giving too much weight, says Canales, to well-written letters or letters from prestigious schools.

Being deliberate about personal statement prompts is also key, Canales says. If a college is too general in its request for a personal statement, it is open to interpretation. In some cases, that can be good because it lets admissions officials see what the question evokes in the student. However, if the question is too broad, then the response could be too ambiguous.

“Different individuals might interpret it differently, and reviewers may react differently, which could lead to an inequitable assessment,” she says. “Additionally, without an explicit rubric for assessing the content focused on clarity, mechanics, specificity, the assessment can be quite subjective.”



## How can you guard against bias?

A 2018 report entitled *Master's Admissions: Transparency, Guidance, and Training*, by the Council of Graduate Schools, recommends that institutions provide information and support to help admissions committees avoid unintentional bias in the review process. Only 26 percent of the graduate schools participating in the survey reported that their institutions provided such training.

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At Cornell University over the past couple of years, many graduate programs have

been critically examining their admissions review practices, including how to prevent bias. The university has held faculty workshops and panel discussions on such topics, and it has set up an [online resource](#) to educate professors. The site includes a series of videos that describe how biases can influence decision making without a person realizing it. One lesson, for example, is entitled *Explicit vs. Implicit Bias*, and another is *Attitudes and Stereotypes*.

“Our directors of graduate studies are very engaged,” says Sara Xayarath Hernández, associate dean for inclusion and student engagement at the Graduate School. “Many are willing to consider ways in which they cannot only improve their admissions practices, but also how they can contribute to creating more inclusive research and learning environments.”





## How can you be sure the essays and recommendations are authentic?

Many admissions teams say there really is no way to adequately or accurately assess whether the words are the words of an applicant or whether they've been finessed by a parent, professor, or college consultant. Many institutions require applicants to certify that the content is theirs, not someone else's, and that they didn't receive undue help. Still other admissions committees rely on actual GRE essay responses because they are written in a monitored setting, where candidates cannot receive any help or coaching.

Some institutions are moving away from asking for formal recommendations, as most candidates choose recommenders who are going to make nice comments. Instead, the applications ask for references who can be contacted to answer questions about the candidate.

The University of Nebraska Medical Center's Interdisciplinary Graduate Program in Biomedical Sciences, which has been using ho-

listic admissions since it was created in 2015, no longer accepts letters of recommendation that are personal in nature. Rather, it requests letters from specific categories of individuals, such as a faculty member from whom the applicant has taken an upper-level science course, a research mentor, or a supervisor. All of these changes have been made to the program's application forms and associated instructions.

Interviews with the biomedical candidates are a huge component of the admissions decisions process because they are an effective way to assess noncognitive variables. The reviewers also compare the communication skills evidenced in the personal interviews with the quality of the writing in the personal statements. "This can often identify situations in which the student received considerable assistance with the written personal statement," says Karen Gould, associate professor and vice chair for graduate education for the department of genetics, cell biology, and anatomy.



## What does the future hold for holistic admissions?

Admissions professionals are uncertain what the future of holistic admissions looks like, except to say they are sure it will continue to grow. Some say their institutions need to invest more in admissions staffing so more time could be spent getting to know candidates in a multifaceted way.

Many graduate-admissions decision makers desire more guidance and direction. They are not sure they are doing it right, and they would like to know more about the process and how to develop effective rubrics. Most caution that they are not advocating for standardizing holistic admissions practices to the point of a one-

type-fits-all kind of approach. Rather, they are looking for general techniques to adopt that still can be flexible to meet the needs of the individual program. Only then can a graduate program create a unique and effective learning environment for students who have different educational backgrounds and life experiences.

“Holistic review affords opportunities for access that might otherwise be overlooked, and that better levels the playing field,” says Canales. “I would argue that holistic admissions can work for all graduate programs anywhere especially because it forces conversations that otherwise might not occur.”



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