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What is Holistic Review in College Admissions?

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Admissions officers have varying definitions of holistic review, but those who espouse contextualized admissions practices are significantly more likely to admit low-SES applicants, particularly at the most selective colleges.

Holistic review is both a very new and very old idea in college admissions. Developed by elite colleges before the Second World War – in part to deny admission to growing numbers of Jewish applicants – holistic review is now lauded as a legally viable method to reduce inequality and promote college access. "So long as the university proceeds on an individualized, case-by-case basis," Justice Potter said in the ***Bakke*** decision, "there is no warrant for judicial interference in the academic process." In his most recent decision in the ***Fisher*** case, Justice Kennedy cited the University of Texas's "holistic review" no fewer than 19 times.

However, our results suggest that little consensus exists among college admissions officers about what holistic review should entail and how it should be enacted. Although today's prospective applicants are often told selective institutions will evaluate their applications using holistic review, definitions are vague and vary both within and across institutions.

This lack of transparency has consequences for students and families. Previous research has shown that a lack of admissions transparency feeds the admissions consulting industry who advise wealthy families, the arms race of extracurricular activities, and the increased influence of college rankings. It also exacerbates the gap in admissions knowledge between wealthy and poor students, which may contribute to increased undermatching among low-income students. Increased transparency and simplicity of communication can thus have the benefit both of increasing the public trust in college admissions and reducing inequality in admissions knowledge among families.

Given the commonality of the phrase "holistic review" or "holistic admissions," we sought to take a deeper exploration of a concept that is relatively opaque to outsiders. We also sought to understand whether differences in review processes had implications for low-SES applicants' odds of admission. Our study extends existing research by exploring how holistic review is operationalized by admissions professionals and whether these definitions have real world effects on admissions decision making.

The Study

With help from the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), we recruited 311 admission officers from 177 institutions in the top three tiers of selectivity as identified by Barron's Profiles of American Colleges. These admissions officers participated in an experiment and answered survey questions. We then followed up with focus-group discussions engaging a select group of 15 volunteer admissions officers to deepen our understanding of holistic review. Using the focus group and open-response survey data, we derived a three-part typology capturing participants' conceptualization of holistic review. Although 95% of our respondents said they practiced holistic admissions, a small number of their responses (2%) were categorized as not holistic.

The admissions officers were asked to review three simulated admissions files from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants were encouraged to use the same standards and criteria that they would use when reading files at their own institution. Because admissions recommendations can vary notably depending upon the race/ethnicity and gender of applicants, and the college or major to which they apply, these attributes were identical across applications (male, white, engineering). The grades, coursework, and test scores were adjusted across selectivity tiers so that these hypothetical applicants would be competitive at institutions with very different admissions standards.

We hypothesized that, in a simulated application review, our "participants who espoused a contextualized view of holistic review" participants would be more likely to recommend admitting a low-socioeconomic applicant when provided with more detailed information on the high school context. An experimental manipulation was conducted so that participants were randomly assigned to have differing information about the high school and applicants' performance relative to their high school peers.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Although 95% of selective college admissions officers say they practice holistic review, half of these admissions officers simply read the entire application.
- There is no consensus on the definition of holistic review, but three distinct definitions predominate among admissions officers: Whole File, Whole Person, and Whole Context.
- Contrary to how holistic review is often discussed publicly, only 29% of our participants espoused a "Whole Context" or contextualized view of holistic admissions. Admissions officers at the most selective colleges were more likely to espouse the "Whole Context" view.
- Our research suggests that admissions officers with a "Whole Context" view of holistic review are disproportionately more likely to admit low-SES applicants. These officers recognized the unequal playing field that students face in their primary and secondary school careers and used contextualized review to account for these disparities.

All participants were provided with the following: high school name (fictitious), state, institutional control (public), number of students, and graduation rate. This last piece of information is especially important, because graduation rates are strongly associated with the average socioeconomic status of students at the high school. Participants were also given the applicants' parental education, so they knew at least one dimension of applicants' socioeconomic status.

However, some participants received additional data about the high school: enrollment rates at four-year and two-year colleges, average standardized test scores, percentage of students who meet federal eligibility criteria for free or reduced-cost lunch, percentage of students with limited English proficiency, number of AP courses offered, and percentage of students who take AP examinations who receive a score of at least 3 (which is considered a passing grade at many institutions). These high-information applications also contained each applicant's percentile within his high school for weighted and unweighted high school GPA as well as number of honors/AP classes. The median ACT and SAT scores at the high school were also shown for each section of these exams (including ACT composite).

> **"Our results help to explain why there is significant confusion among students, parents, and the public about holistic admissions. The field lacks consensus on what holistic review means, and what is talked about in public by senior leaders has not diffused consistently to admissions officers throughout the field."**

Results

Our results help to explain why there is significant confusion among students, parents, and the public about holistic admissions. We found that three distinct definitions of holistic review predominate in the field: Whole File, Whole Person, and Whole Context.

Nearly half of survey responses fell under the "Whole File" category. Admissions officers who conceptualize holistic review as "Whole File" extend evaluative criteria beyond measurable academic achievements, such as grade point average and standardized test scores, to assure that all submitted application materials are considered when rendering admissions decisions. In contrast, a "Whole Person" review evaluates the applicant in light of unique characteristics and achievements. These admissions officers often rely on students' past behavior to determine institutional fit and whether they will contribute to their campus communities.

Admissions officers in the "Whole Context" category take into account academic opportunity in the high school, family background, ongoing hardships, extenuating circumstances, or other contextual factors. This form of review was more common among the most selective institutions in our sample. "Whole Context" readers often acknowledged how differential levels of resources might affect test scores and educational opportunities. One admissions officer described a process of "reading between the lines" to determine whether a student's access to resources and information may have influenced their application. These officers recognized the unequal playing field that students face in their primary and secondary school careers and attempted to use contextualized review to account for these disparities in the admissions decision-making process.

Regardless of selectivity, admissions officers who espoused a "Whole Context" definition of holistic admissions were more likely to admit our low-SES applicant. So the views of admissions officers on holistic review really do matter: They make a difference in their propensity to admit low-SES students.

A Typology of Holistic Admissions Practices

	Whole File	Whole Person	Whole Context
Approach	Admissions decisions are determined by reading all parts of the application.	Admissions decisions consider the applicant as a unique person in light of their individual characteristics and achievements.	Admissions decisions consider the whole person in light of their environmental contexts, family background, hardships, extenuating circumstances, and/or educational opportunities.
Sample focus group response	"Holistic admission means that we will evaluate all of the components of the application and not rely on any one component as the determining factor in our decision."	"Holistic means looking beyond just the objective like test scores and GPA to really try to get to know the applicant as a student and as a person."	"Our philosophy is that it is impossible to understand the achievements of a student without also understanding the various external influences - school setting, socioeconomic status, ethnic background, geographic background, and family background - that have contributed to his or her journey."
Percent reporting	50%	19%	29%

Policy and Practice Implications

This study highlights several strategies – for the both individual admissions offices and the wider field – to develop holistic review practices that raise the admission rates of low-income students.

- **Institutionalize a consistent conception of holistic review in your institution**
  We observed wide variation in the definitions of holistic admissions among admissions colleagues, even within individual institutions. For instance, we solicited responses from eight admissions representatives at one large, public university and found that half of the counselors described "Whole File" review, whereas the other half described "Whole Context" review. Training practices in admissions offices should not assume that everyone has a common understanding, interpretation, or enactment of holistic review.

- **Encourage contextualized holistic review**
  There may be legitimate reasons why contextualized holistic review is not yet pervasive in the field, including large and rising numbers of applications, the costs of time-intensive holistic review processes, and the financial aid expenditures needed to support low-income students. However, given our results, "Whole File" and "Whole Person" review may unknowingly limit the admission of low-income students and reinforce the status quo.

- **Engage the field in the meaning of holistic review**
  Our research is meant to begin a dialogue about how we define and communicate what is meant by holistic review. Ultimately, however, this discussion has to be led and reconstructed by admissions professionals – its leaders, professional organizations, and the colleges they serve. This effort may be crucial to understanding why we have made so little progress in reducing socioeconomic inequality in higher education, and serve as a first step toward a more inclusive set of admissions practices and language.

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