

The Surprising Factors that May Influence Holistic Admissions Decisions at Selective Colleges

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In a national study of selective colleges and universities, admission officers reveal that many applications do not receive a full holistic read, and admissions officers' backgrounds can influence their likelihood to admit low-SES applicants.

Although access to college has expanded significantly in the past several decades, institutional selectivity continues to drive the stratification of college opportunity, especially for students from low socio-economic status (SES) families. Disproportionately, students from low-SES families attend underserved high schools where course offerings lag behind the advanced courses often available at more affluent high schools. These same students are far less likely to attend selective institutions even when their academic performance appears aligned with rigorous college admission standards, enrolling instead at open-access community colleges and four-year colleges. These factors point to one meaningful cause of lower bachelor's degree completion rates among low-SES students: They don't attend the colleges where they have the highest chances of graduating.

In fact, institutional selectivity is only becoming more important as the job market grows increasingly competitive. Students who attend these high-performing colleges have access to better networks, greater lifetime earnings, and higher enrollment into selective graduate programs. When they are able to access resources in equal measure, high-achieving low-SES students stand to benefit even more than their affluent peers.

But while there's been substantial focus on the dearth of low-income students in top tier colleges, there remains less focus on the factors that influence admission officers' decisions. These admissions officers—many of whom are alumni from the college—are the proverbial gatekeepers to selective colleges. They conduct and review the applications, make recommendations to the dean, and perpetuate the cultural ethos of the admissions office. We know surprisingly little about the practices inside of admissions offices, the demographics of admissions officers, and how differences in people and practices may influence admissions decisions.

The Study

In light of the critical role that admission officers play in the selection process, we set out to understand whether

and how individual characteristics of admissions officers—as well as the structure of the admissions office—are associated with differences in admissions decisions for low-SES students. By simulating the decision-making process that takes place in admissions offices at selective colleges, the study allows for an unusual opportunity to look systematically inside the process and explore how variations in admissions offices may have an influence on access and equity in higher education.

With help from the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC), we recruited 311 admissions officers from institutions in the top three tiers of selectivity as identified by Barron's Profiles of American Colleges. Of these participants, 57% were female, 77% White/Caucasian, 10% Black/African American, 9% Latino/Hispanic/Chicano, 6% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 1% were American Indian/Alaska Native. The majority of participants had at least six years of experience (69%) and read at least 100 files per week during busy times of year (67%). Just under half (45%) of the participants work at the institution at which they received their bachelor's degree, and most participants (60%) reported that their recommendation is never the sole determinant of the admissions decision for the files they read.

Participants were asked to review three simulated admission files of hypothetical applicants from different socioeconomic backgrounds. To control for differences that may occur in the way that admissions officers assess applicants based on race/ethnicity, gender, and academic interests, all applicants were white males applying to engineering programs. Further, files were presented to participants in a random order to ensure that recommendations reflected an assessment of each application on its own merits, rather than in contrast to the other applicants. Participants were encouraged to review files and make a recommendation to accept or reject the application using the same standards and criteria that they apply when reading files at their own college or university.

Simulated files included information pertaining to students' high school, academic qualifications (high school

HIGHLIGHTS

- Despite admissions officers' frequent claims that all applications are reviewed holistically, academic criteria often solely determine admission for applicants at the top and bottom of the pool.
- Nearly half of all admissions officers work at their alma mater, and these admissions officers were the most likely to admit a high-SES, high-achieving applicant in a simulation of admissions decisions. Admissions officers of color were the least likely to admit this applicant.
- Admissions officers who rate the quality of high school information in their office as poor were less likely to admit the low-SES applicant, reinforcing our research showing that the quality of contextual data matters in admissions decisions.
- Despite existing inequities in decision making, admissions offices can implement practices that show evidence of leading to more favorable decisions for low-SES applicants. One such practice, writing a brief paragraph to explain an admission recommendation, is associated with an improved likelihood of favorable recommendations for low-SES applicants.

GPA, the number of honors or AP courses completed, SAT/ACT scores), transcript information, extracurricular involvement, and a personal statement. Each of the three hypothetical files varied in terms of socio-economic status, performance in and rigor of high school coursework, and SES composition of the high school. The first hypothetical applicant had strong academic credentials and attended an upper-middle-class high school. The second hypothetical applicant also attended an upper-middle-class high school, but had lower grades, coursework, and standardized test scores. The third applicant had good grades and took the most difficult courses at his lower-SES high school (though these courses were still less advanced than the first applicant).

“ For offices seeking to improve equitable outcomes, hiring greater numbers of women, people of color, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may help the institution pursue diversity goals more effectively. Admissions offices should also consider more deliberate hiring of admission officers who earned degrees from outside their institution. ”

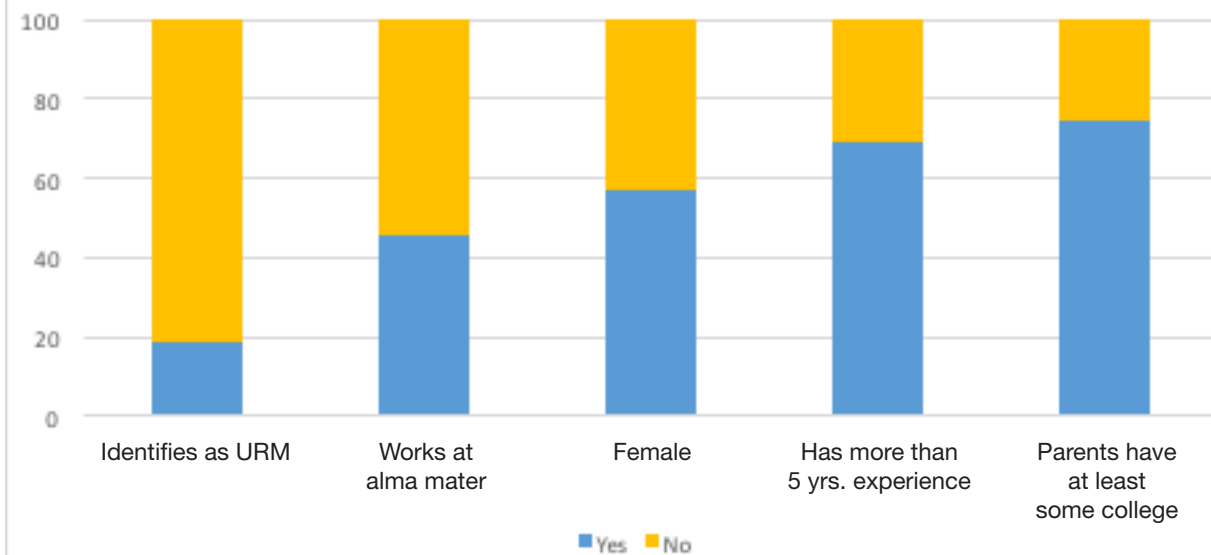
Results

We found that an admissions officer's recommendation on whether to admit the low-SES student differed across demographic characteristics, years of experience, and whether an admissions officer is employed at her alma mater. The graph below shows the distribution of characteristics among participants, which demonstrates the potential for admissions offices to increase equitable decision-making through, at least in part, increasing the proportion of officers with certain characteristics.

Admissions officers employed by their alma mater, as well as those with more work experience in admissions and greater parental education, provided relatively more favorable recommendations for the high-SES applicants than the low-SES applicant. In contrast, officers from racial/ethnic minority groups were less likely to provide favorable recommendations for the high-SES, high-achieving applicant than were White/Caucasian participants. Female participants were more likely to admit both the low-SES applicant and the higher-SES, middle-achieving applicant.

To successfully improve diversity at selective colleges and universities, it is likely that admissions offices will need to reconsider how officers' evaluations of admission files influence the ultimate recommendation. The results highlighted here point to several strategies that admissions offices can implement to ensure that officers themselves are examining their decision-making process with a lens to equitable evaluation of all applicants. In particular, participants who engage in the practice of articulating in a brief paragraph why an application was or was not admissible gave more favorable ratings to the low-SES applicant relative to the higher-SES applicants. Further, admissions offices committed to the goal of admitting and enrolling more low-SES students might consider focusing on diversity in the hiring of admission officers.

Characteristics of Participating Admissions Officers



Policy and Practice Implications

The findings of this work suggest several possible strategies that admissions offices at selective colleges can implement to improve rates of admission among low-SES students.

- **Increase the Quality of High School Information**

The majority of participants indicate that the quality of high school information they typically receive is good (44%) or very good (36%), yet they also describe persistent problems in obtaining consistent information. Admissions officers may be overconfident in the quality of their information. Better-quality contextual information about students' high schools is found to benefit low-SES applicants, yet results of the simulation find that participants who report typically receiving higher-quality information about applicants' high schools were less likely to admit the low-SES applicant than the high-ability, high-SES applicant. This finding likely points to the importance of the type of information officers receive—and what they consider high-quality information—rather than a meaningful signal that high-quality information negatively affects low-SES students. Admission offices grappling with how to recruit more low-SES applicants may benefit from re-defining high quality information as robust information about the high school context.

- **Establish Accountability Mechanisms for Making Decisions in Context**

In our study, admission officers who are required to write a brief paragraph explaining the rationale for their recommendation were more likely to have a favorable view of our low-SES applicant. Although this is only an association, mechanisms that ensure accountability for admissions decisions may increase the likelihood of making more equitable decisions when this is consistent with office policy.

- **Increase the Diversity of Admission Officers**

Results indicate that female admissions officers, admissions officers of color, and officers from lower-SES backgrounds tended to provide relatively more positive recommendations for the low-SES applicant and relatively less positive recommendations for the higher-SES applicants. These results suggest that admissions officers from historically underrepresented groups may be more inclined toward equity in the decision-making process (or perhaps simply toward giving sufficient consideration of the challenges that many low-SES students face), even when accounting for other admissions office practices and admissions officer characteristics. For offices seeking to improve equitable outcomes, hiring greater numbers of women, people of color, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may help the institution pursue diversity goals more effectively. For the same reason, admissions offices should also consider more deliberate hiring of admission officers who earned degrees from outside their institution.



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