

# Admissions Officers as Street-Level Bureaucrats: Exercising Discretion to Enact Competing Conceptions of Equity

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*Selective higher education institutions around the world are increasingly adopting holistic admissions practices—making it crucial to understand how admissions personnel make decisions, with what consequences for access and equity. Based on 51 interviews with admissions officers and faculty at Korea’s most selective universities, we examine competing definitions of who is worthy of admission and how these in turn influence evaluations. We demonstrate that admissions decisions are profoundly shaped not only by formal policy but also by values and interests stemming from evaluator’s own personal and professional backgrounds, as well as power dynamics among evaluators. Our findings suggest that microprocesses of discretion among admissions officers and faculty undermine government policy efforts to increase equity in admissions outcomes.*

**Keywords:** *holistic admissions, policy implementation, equity, Korean higher education, qualitative research*

UNDERSTANDING how admissions officers make decisions under holistic review is critical to assess whether and how holistic admissions practices lead to more equitable admissions outcomes. Unlike standardized test-based admissions that solely evaluate raw performance, holistic admissions seek to evaluate student achievement in light of the opportunities that were available to applicants in their own unique context (Bastedo et al., 2018). This approach incorporates considerations of the degree to which students maximized the educational opportunities available to them, as well as various other credentials requiring more subjective evaluation, such as college essays, recommendation letters, and interviews. Holistic admissions thus requires admissions officers to engage in a highly professional—but also very subjective—evaluation process. Yet existing research primarily focuses on examining the *outcomes* of holistic admissions, leaving the *underlying logics and motivations* that produced these outcomes

understudied. This gap has led to the admissions process being often described as a “black box” (Lucido, 2015). To better understand sources of inequalities in college admissions outcomes, we must understand what happens during the decision-making process itself—specifically, how admissions officers evaluate students from different backgrounds, and what logics, motivations, and preferences drive their decision-making.

Examining these questions becomes even more important given holistic admissions practices, which originated in the United States, are now progressively spreading to countries around the world (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020). Highly selective universities in the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Japan, China, and Korea (to name but a few) are facing growing pressure to broaden access for traditionally underrepresented populations and to address concerns that standardized test-based admissions promote rote learning, stifle creativity and

innovation, exacerbate inequality, and bolster costly shadow education (Bastedo, 2021). These universities are thus moving away from admissions determined solely by standardized test scores and increasingly adopting holistic admissions practices, in an effort to identify merit and potential not captured by quantitative performance indicators. Despite the global diffusion of holistic practices, however, research directly examining admissions officers' decision-making is rare and focuses mainly on the United States (Bastedo, 2021). This highlights the need for further investigation into how holistic practices are translated and implemented across different country contexts.

South Korea (hereby Korea) presents a particularly intriguing setting to examine how holistic review operates beyond the United States. Given the high level of tension surrounding who gets into top universities and the resulting implications for social equity, the Korean government heavily regulates university admissions at both selective public and private universities. The government introduced holistic admissions into the country in 2007 to address criticisms of *suneung*-based admissions—the dominant admissions paradigm at the time—which relied solely on applicants' performance in an annual, high-stakes, standardized test, and was widely criticized for being unnecessarily stressful, of limited educational value, and inequitable due to differential access to test-prep services (Byoun, 2012). To address these issues, the government adopted holistic admissions from the United States, claiming this new form of admissions would allow admissions experts to evaluate applicants' aptitude and potential by considering not only test scores, but also more qualitative indicators and the context in which those achievements occurred (Korean Ministry of Education, 2007). Ever since, the government has aggressively leveraged performance-based funding to incentivize selective institutions to adopt holistic admissions practices. Approximately 40% of students admitted to the country's highest-ranking institutions are now selected through holistic admissions—and Seoul National University, the most esteemed institution in Korea, admits the highest percentage (62%) of students through holistic admissions in the country (Hwang, 2023).

But evaluating applicants “in context”—what an idealized version of U.S. holistic review aims to achieve—necessitates relying on the somewhat subjective judgments of admissions personnel. For many Koreans accustomed to admissions determined by a single standardized test, this has been a hard pill to swallow: 80% of respondents in a national survey believed holistic admissions privileges the socioeconomic elite (Song, 2017). This perception is particularly strong given that students from selective exam high schools (schools that admit students through competitive entrance exams) not only dominate admissions to selective universities but also tend to come from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> The average proportion of students admitted to the country's top three universities, for instance, is far higher at exam schools (15%–30% of a high school class) compared to non-exam schools (2%; S. Lee, 2022).<sup>2</sup> In fact, H. Kim (2024) finds that the implementation of holistic admissions at selective Korean universities has failed to alter the proportion of students enrolling from exam versus non-exam schools when comparing periods before and after the adoption of holistic admissions. These disparities have fueled ongoing, widespread public accusations that selective universities are unduly biased toward privileged students from exam schools (Choi, 2021). Lack of transparency regarding what goes on inside admissions offices during holistic review has done little to assuage these criticisms.

This study, therefore, aims to deepen our comprehension of how admissions personnel evaluate college applicants—specifically, how students from exam and non-exam schools are evaluated by various admissions officers, and what logics, motivations, and preferences drive their decision-making. We particularly focus on how and why individual officers use their discretion to fold their preferences into formal evaluation in ways they impact equity. We draw upon an unprecedented dataset: 51 interviews with admissions personnel at Korea's most selective institutions, as well as supplementary data and documents collected from the government and universities. The result is the first empirical study to be published in English from the perspective of the people conducting actual admissions evaluations at Korea's most selective universities.

Drawing on concepts from the literature on street-level bureaucracy, we argue that microprocesses of discretion among admissions officers and faculty undermine government policy efforts to increase access to selective institutions among traditionally underrepresented populations.

### **Street-Level Bureaucracy and the Importance of Discretion**

Traditional studies of policy implementation, prior to the 1970s, assumed formal policies were akin to a well-defined blueprint, with clear goals and thoroughly defined operational steps that eliminated the need for implementers' subjective judgments (Hupe et al., 2016). Failures of public policy to achieve intended goals were therefore attributed to problems in implementation, with studies pointing to deviations from policy guidelines due to institutional priorities, which led to implementation gaps (Byoun, 2012). Essentially, individual variations in policy implementation were dismissed as noise that would not and should not have occurred if bureaucrats were performing their jobs correctly.

Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy was a paradigm shift, one of a number of contemporaneous studies highlighting that public policy is often vague and ambiguous (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1973). Lipsky argues it is simply impossible to anticipate all potential scenarios policy implementers may encounter during their daily interactions with policy recipients. Street-level bureaucrats (SLBs)—workers at the end of the policy chain who directly interact with policy subjects in their day-to-day operations—thus often have to make sense of vague policies. Using their professional judgment, SLBs have the leeway to decide whether or not to take action in certain situations or to choose among different courses of action. A police officer enforcing speeding laws, for example, may or may not choose to pull over a certain speeding driver; the officer can also decide whether to let the driver go with a mere warning or impose a stricter sanction such as a fine. Lipsky (1980) refers to this leeway for choice or judgment—all within boundaries set by formal policy—as “discretion.”

Given the discretion granted to them, SLBs are active policymakers, not just passive policy implementers. How SLBs use their discretion

has direct implications for policy implementation and social equity: Their discretionary decisions determine who gets access to limited opportunities and resources, and thus can either alleviate social inequities or further perpetuate them (Grote et al., 2020; Honig, 2006; Rodriguez et al., 2022). Due to the importance of discretion for policy implementation and outcomes, a large body of literature has examined the factors driving discretion (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Olaison et al., 2018; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). Among these many factors shaping discretion, we highlight two that we deem particularly relevant for studying discretion in the Korean admissions context.

#### *Differing Conceptions of Worthiness*

“A growing body of literature emphasizes how SLBs often allocate limited opportunities based on their own perceptions of who is deserving” (Jilke & Tummers, 2018; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Watkins-Hayes, 2009), or in other words, worthy of their help. Some studies report that perceived worthiness increases if the individual in question has little control over the circumstances leading to their neediness (Van Oorschot, 2000). Other studies find that perceived worthiness increases if the individual maximizes the opportunities available to them (Jilke & Tummers, 2018). Some SLBs consider the highest-performing individuals to be the most worthy of limited resources, as they are believed to be the most likely to succeed if provided scarce resources (Jilke & Tummers, 2018).

Conceptions of worthiness among SLBs are not arbitrary, but rather heavily influenced by concerns and interests deriving from their own personal and professional backgrounds. Notably, empirical studies highlight that SLBs' professional knowledge heavily shapes their judgments of who is worthy (Harrits & Møller, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Olaison et al., 2018). In their study of nurses, childcare workers, and teachers, for example, Harrits and Møller (2014) found that SLBs relied on their professional knowledge and experience to decide which children needed policy interventions, and not so much on formal criteria or manuals. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000) further demonstrate that many SLBs thought uniform

application of formal rules was neither practical nor effective in their daily interactions with citizens. By using their own judgment tempered by professional knowledge and experience instead of formal guidelines that were not tailored to specific situations, SLBs were “in their own view, acting responsibly” (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000, p. 55). Especially when SLBs perceive a particular policy as limiting their ability to act in accordance with their own professional knowledge, SLBs use their discretion to work toward outcomes supporting conceptions of equity that better align with their professional knowledge—in the belief that these outcomes are more equitable than those produced by administering formal policy by rote.

While not specifically drawing upon an SLB framework, Lamont (2009) demonstrates in particular detail what happens when evaluators have different conceptions of worthiness shaped by their own professional knowledge. In her study of how faculty on national-level research grant peer review panels evaluate research proposals, Lamont highlights how faculty from varying disciplines defined merit in different ways. Despite funding agencies offering formal criteria with which to evaluate merit (e.g., originality, significance), faculty interpretations of given criteria differed based on their disciplinary backgrounds: Faculty from different disciplines, for example, favored different forms of originality. Lamont emphasizes this is natural, given that faculty have been trained and socialized for substantial amounts of time within their own discipline. She therefore argues that professional knowledge and disciplinary logics should not be seen as corrupting the process of evaluation, but rather that assessment of merit is impossible without them.

Watkins-Hayes (2009) adds further nuance to these arguments by showing that SLBs’ perceptions of worthiness are also informed by concerns and interests derived from their personal lived experiences. In her ethnographic study, Black and Hispanic caseworkers who shared histories of poverty with their Black and Hispanic clients acutely understood how institutionalized racism blocks opportunity for low-income people of color. The caseworkers used their discretion to reflect their own ideas of who was worthy of help when implementing policy. These SLBs were not necessarily giving Black and Hispanic

clients more privileged treatment at the expense of White clients, but were responding to social contexts about which they had firsthand knowledge. Other studies echo these findings, showing that the personal and professional are very closely intertwined—to the extent where, when asked to reflect upon how they made decisions, SLBs find it hard to distinguish whether their decisions are based on their personal or professional knowledge (Harrits, 2016).

### *The Role of Power and Social Hierarchies*

How SLBs use their discretion is also shaped by professional power dynamics and social hierarchies within their institution. Evans (2010), for example, argues that the extent of discretion provided to SLBs is influenced by their relationships with low-level, frontline managers. The managers in Evans (2010)’s study of social service agencies, for example, were themselves former professional social workers who moved into management positions. Sharing the same profession resulted in similar concerns, priorities, and commitments when implementing policy. Managers sympathized with SLBs’ concerns about policies that, in their view, prioritized financial efficiency over meaningful care. This led managers to expand SLBs’ discretionary spaces to navigate policy restrictions they believed impeded meaningful care. SLBs and their managers saw one another as “partners” and “fellow professionals” (p. 289) and leveraged discretion to pursue shared professional priorities.

An underexplored area of research concerns how discretion plays out in contexts where SLBs have clashing professional views, particularly different conceptions of worthiness. Conflicts among professions are common, as different groups (each based on their own professional knowledge) claim they have the expertise to address specific problems or provide particular services within society. Professions use their specialized knowledge to defend their areas of expertise and expand their areas of jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988). Existing hierarchies within organizations can intensify these jurisdictional conflicts: Professionals find it easier to assert jurisdiction based on their expertise more readily—thus hindering other professionals’ ability to challenge their decisions—if they themselves are

higher up in the organizational hierarchy (Oh, 2014). Insights from this body of literature suggest that professional power and existing social hierarchies within an organization may lead to jurisdictional conflicts among SLBs, especially when they come from different professions. These dynamics of professional power and jurisdictional conflict are particularly evident within higher education institutions. Studies highlight that power struggles between faculty and administrators are a longstanding problem due to differences in work priorities, commitments, and levels of autonomy (Holton & Phillips, 1995; Kuo, 2009).

Taken together, the literature suggests that who admissions officers perceive to be worthy of admission will likely be shaped not only by formal policies on holistic admissions but also by perceptions of worthiness deriving from admissions officers' own personal and professional backgrounds, as well as power dynamics among evaluators. These insights—when combined with insights from the SLB literature—suggest that admissions officers' own perceptions of worthiness will play a critical role in determining who gains admission to selective universities. Given that bureaucrats in even the most heavily regulated environments have some degree of discretion, admissions officers also likely have room to exercise discretion when evaluating applicants. In this context, an admissions officer's beliefs on who is worthy of admission are no longer mere personal beliefs but rather become standards that inform policy implementation. We therefore need a stronger understanding of who admissions officers at selective institutions are, how their personal and professional backgrounds shape the ways they exercise discretion—and with what implications for social equity.

#### *Korean Admissions Personnel as SLBs*

In light of the SLB literature, we draw attention to *who* works in admissions at selective Korean universities. Unlike in the United States, tenure-track faculty play a key role in Korean admissions. Faculty comprise 87% of the admissions workforce nationwide (Korean Ministry of Education, 2022), and at more selective institutions, the majority of faculty (70%) are men (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019b). Faculty

evaluate students' high school transcripts and conduct student interviews alongside full-time staff admissions officers. Since Korean students must apply to specific majors, faculty mostly evaluate students applying to their own respective major, while admissions officers assess candidates across many majors.

Admissions officers and faculty, however, come from very different walks of life. Faculty at prestigious Korean universities are the country's educational and socioeconomic elite, ranking highest among all occupations in the country in a composite variable of social reputation, satisfaction with salary, employment stability, working conditions, and future career prospects (Korea Employment Information Service, 2019). Professors at the country's most selective universities also come from a highly elite educational trajectory: 88.7% of faculty at Seoul National University, 76.6% of faculty at Yonsei University, and 60.9% of faculty at Korea University—the top three institutions in the country—have undergraduate degrees from their own respective institutions (D. Kim, 2021). In other words, the majority of faculty at selective institutions were themselves stellar performers in test-based college admissions. Professional admissions officers, on the other hand, are a very different group—both in terms of professional and socioeconomic background. Many are on short-term contracts and experience heavy workloads, and the most recent available data shows that they earn much lower salaries (approximately \$29,000-\$37,000/year), which are not considered competitive in light of their working conditions (Min, 2017). These factors likely influence the demographics and characteristics of individuals entering this profession. Admissions officers are typically young women in their 30s with a master's degree and approximately 2 to 3 years of work experience (Im & Noh, 2016).

Furthermore, while admissions officers are themselves SLBs, they are also the frontline managers of faculty. Admissions officers are responsible for training, norming, and reining in faculty who deviate from institution- and government-level guidelines. However, faculty have been trained and socialized in their respective fields for several decades prior to serving in admissions. While they have been invited to

evaluate students during admissions season, their core professional identities revolve around conducting research and teaching students in their own department. Admissions officers, on the other hand, are involved in admissions-related work year-round as a living. It is therefore unlikely that faculty and admissions officers will share similar professional experiences, knowledge, and interests. This raises questions as to whether, and if so how, admissions officers and faculty exercise discretion differently when evaluating applicants, and what implications this may have for social equity.

### Structural Features of Korean Higher Education and College Admissions

Korea presents a particularly interesting setting to study how admissions officers exercise discretion in ways that impact equity, given the profound, lifelong consequences of one's undergraduate pedigree. Social mobility in Korea is disproportionately shaped by *hakbeol*, a unique Korean concept likened to a “degree-caste system” (J. Kim, 2011, p. 118) where the prestige of one's undergraduate diploma heavily dictates one's career prospects, social status, and even marital opportunities (Grubb et al., 2009; J. Kim, 2011). The rigid hierarchy of the country's higher education system only further compounds this issue: The overwhelming majority of selective institutions are disproportionately located in the country's capital, Seoul, with the three “SKY” institutions (Seoul National University, Yonsei University, and Korea University) at the top of the hierarchy. Given that only a handful of institutions are recognized to offer prestigious *hakbeol*, it naturally follows that competition for entry into Seoul-based institutions—and SKY institutions in particular—is extremely fierce.

Whether and how admissions officers and faculty exercise discretion when evaluating students from different types of high schools carries particular importance for the purposes of our study. How to fairly evaluate students from different types of high schools has long been a source of controversy in Korean holistic admissions (C. Kim & Shin, 2020). Most students in the country attend general academic high schools (hereby *non-exam schools*), which are government-run institutions offering a largely standardized curriculum, limited access to

tailored educational opportunities, and free tuition. In contrast, *exam schools* (including foreign language, global, autonomous private, and science high schools) select the highest-performing middle school students in the country through a combination of grades and entrance exams. These schools provide a more rigorous curriculum and extracurriculars than those at typical non-exam schools, more tailored to the college majors students aspire to—but charge tuition and fees ranging from \$6,100–\$25,000/year (K. Kim, 2022). Given these differences in early selection and training, it is unsurprising that exam school graduates tend to outperform their non-exam school peers in selective college admissions: The average proportion of students admitted to the country's top three universities, for example, varies drastically between exam schools (15%–30% of a class) and non-exam schools (2%; S. Lee, 2022).

Whether it is equitable for exam school students to dominate selective college admissions has long been subject to policy debates and reflects clashing views on what constitutes merit in Korean society. N. Park (2018, p. 27) notes that “the question of what constitutes merit in college admissions is inherently tied to the question of who is defining and evaluating merit,” and critiques how Korean society—as well as the various administrations implementing various admissions reforms—lacks social consensus on the meaning of merit in college admissions. The influence of parental background on a student's access to educational opportunities is more indirect in Korea, compared to countries like the United States. Wealthy parents in the United States can directly secure superior educational opportunities for their children, either by paying for expensive private high schools or by residing in affluent neighborhoods with well-resourced public schools. In Korea, on the other hand, admission to prestigious exam schools is not directly purchasable through family wealth: Students must prove their ability by passing rigorous high school selection processes, reinforcing the idea of a purely merit-based system. Yet it is also true that students from high socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are far more likely to enroll in exam schools due to parental preference, concerted cultivation, and ability to pay tuition (Byun & Joo, 2012; S. Kim & Woo, 2020). Critics thus question the extent to which exam school

students' performance can be attributed solely to their own talent and effort (Shim & Kim, 2017).

Critics have also taken issue with various elements evaluated in holistic admissions, arguing that these elements disproportionately benefit higher-SES and/or exam school students. As shown in Table 1, the government has thus implemented a stream of admissions reforms over the past decade in the name of increasing fairness and equity (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019a). It banned consideration of out-of-school extracurricular activities; then high school profile sheets and recommendation letters from high school teachers; eventually, the government also banned applicants from revealing the name or type of their high school altogether, to assuage concerns about possible halo effects associated with exam schools. Given admissions officers can still easily identify whether applicants have attended exam schools based on whether student transcripts include coursework not offered by the standardized government curriculum, many have questioned the utility of these policies (J. Park, 2020).

What remains of the current holistic admissions process after these reforms is as follows (detailed in Figure 1). First-stage file evaluations consider the applicant's high school class rank provided in nine categories, from 1 (*highest*) to 9 (*lowest*); government-approved in-school extracurricular activities; and teacher comments. Students who pass the first stage proceed to on-campus interviews where interviewers ask follow-up questions based on students' high school transcripts and, at some schools, also test their academic competence. Institutions emphasize that applicants are evaluated by at least two people in every stage of the admissions process to "prevent subjective judgments entering admissions decisions" (Seoul National University, 2022, p. 19). This desire to preclude "subjective judgments" from influencing admissions decisions overlooks the complexities involved in policy implementation and fails to acknowledge situations in which admissions personnel must exercise discretion when evaluating applicants.

## **Methods**

To prevent potential corruption, directory information on who evaluates students in selective Korean institutions—whether as admissions

officers or faculty—is not publicly available. The first author's alumni network was thus instrumental in identifying participants, obtaining consent, and building rapport. People recruited through this personal network provided referrals to other potential interviewees. Through this process the first author interviewed 25 admissions officers and 26 faculty evaluating holistic admissions applicants at the country's most selective institutions, resulting in a total of 51 interviewees across 14 institutions (Figure 2). These institutions constitute the country's most prestigious—in terms of selectivity, domestic and international rankings, as well as public sentiment, and have admissions rates ranging from 4% to 10%.

Our interviewees ranged from people relatively new to admissions work to seasoned professionals (Figure 2, 2-3, 2-4). Moreover, most faculty we interviewed were already well-established, with 81% titled as full professor (Figure 2, 2-7). This contrasts with the admissions officers who participated in our study: Many were much younger, in their 20s or 30s, and included recent graduates with master's degrees (primarily in education), individuals transitioning from contract-based teaching positions in high schools, and those temporarily working in admissions while seeking other positions in academia upon completing their PhDs.

Interviews were conducted in Korean, lasted 60 to 120 minutes, and were audio-recorded and transcribed when participants consented. Participants were asked about their life experiences prior to working in admissions, how they defined holistic review and equity, and what qualities they look for in applicants, among other topics. Following Korean norms, participants were offered significant remuneration (\$75). Additionally, supplementary data were collected at the government and university level. These included policy documents on admissions reforms from 2007 to 2023 obtained from the Korean Ministry of Education, and reports published by institutions in our study sample that provided definitions and weights assigned to their own holistic evaluation criteria. Finally, the first author observed faculty training sessions for the 2021 admissions cycle at two institutions in our study sample. The result was a rich dataset on how the admissions process works—from the perspective of the government, institutions, and the people conducting actual admissions evaluations.

TABLE 1  
*Government Admissions Reforms for Fairness and Equity*

Holistic Admissions Components	'07-'09	'10	'11	'12	'13	'14	'15	'16-'18	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23	'24
High school transcripts														
Extramural awards	o	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Standardized language proficiency tests	—	—	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Extramural competitions	—	—	—	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Patents	—	—	—	—	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Book publications	—	—	—	—	—	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Journal publications	—	—	—	—	—	—	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Info alluding to parental socioeconomic status	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
High school name/type	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	x	x	x	x
High school profile sheets	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	x	x	x	x
Recommendation letters from high school teachers	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	x	x	x
College essays	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	x

Source. Adapted from Korean Ministry of Education (2019a).

Note. o = inclusion approved by government; x = inclusion banned; — = no guidelines.

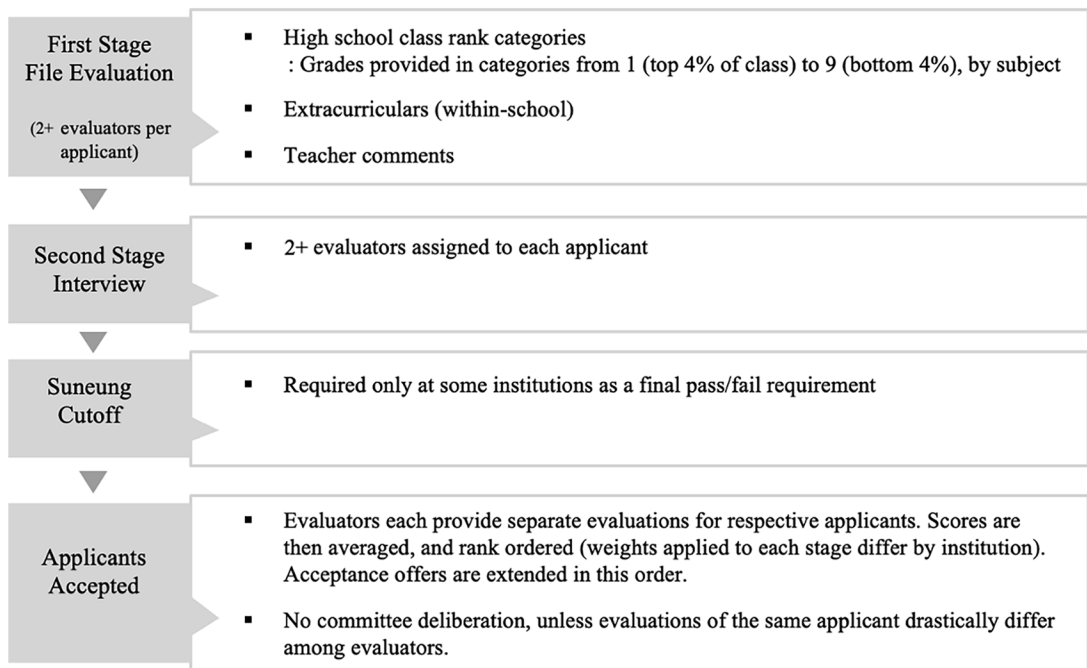


FIGURE 1. *Components of Korean holistic admissions (2023).*

We analyzed the data after each batch of three to four interviews, and again after the conclusion of data collection. We started by open coding our pilot data using ATLAS.ti to develop emerging themes, using techniques drawn from grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2014). The importance of discretion became relevant early in the project, leading us to alter our interview protocol to delve into related questions in more detail. We also developed additional codes to better represent how and why admissions personnel exercised discretion, including (a) how interviewees exercised discretion when evaluating applicants, (b) factors driving use of discretion, (c) who interviewees perceived to be “deserving,” and (d) power dynamics in the use of discretion.

Upon concluding data collection, we created a matrix data display (Miles & Huberman, 1994), wherein every interviewee was assigned a row, and each column contained quotes associated with the aforementioned major codes. We then examined data segments across columns to draw inferences about inter-relationships among our codes. Repeating this across all rows suggested patterns in how interviewees from different personal and professional backgrounds defined merit, and how this in turn led them to exercise discretion in

certain ways. To better understand these emerging relationships, we proceeded to evaluate each interviewee’s personal and professional background information in light of their quotes pertaining to each of the four codes. Throughout this process, we continually discussed our interpretations of the data, revising when necessary.

It was crucial for our work to maintain participant confidentiality. Numerous participants were wary about the possibility of their identities being revealed—with some explicitly requesting we mask information such as exact years of work experience, institution-specific context clues, and department/major. We therefore took great care to anonymize all potentially identifying information, and for faculty, to disclose their departments only when explicitly consented. As a result, this study says little about varying patterns of decision-making among different majors, disciplines, and institutions—not because they did not exist, but to protect participant confidentiality.

#### *Trustworthiness and Researcher Positionality*

We engaged in several established practices to enhance the trustworthiness of our data and findings. While collecting data, the first author asked

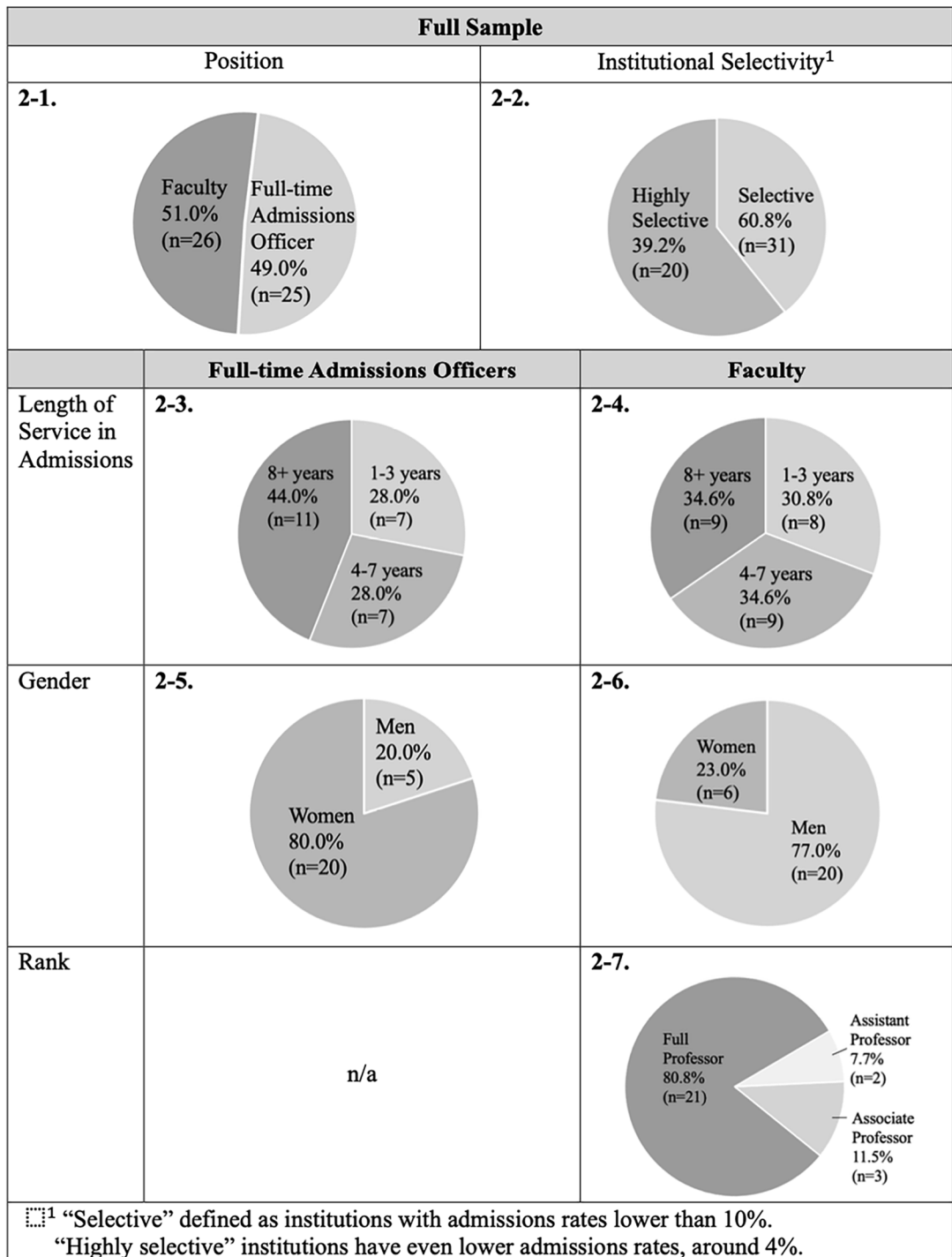


FIGURE 2. Participant characteristics (n = 51).

admissions officers about their views on themes drawn from faculty (and vice versa) and triangulated these data points to better understand

emerging trends (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study was also reviewed by three faculty and three full-time admissions officers (all with more

than 8 years of admissions experience) and incorporates their commentary. Our analysis cannot capture the full picture of admissions decision making, and we have therefore made particular efforts to incorporate disconfirming evidence of major themes to provide a balanced analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Networks and connections were essential to our ability to conduct the study. The first author attended a selective exam school in Korea and subsequently gained admission to a SKY institution through holistic admissions. This background was instrumental in recruiting and establishing rapport with interviewees. Five faculty interviewees were direct acquaintances from the first author's alumni networks. Leveraging referrals, we were eventually able to recruit a total of 26 faculty from across various institutions (12 from highly selective, and 14 from selective institutions; details in Figure 2) and disciplinary fields (6 from the humanities, 12 from the social sciences, and 8 from STEM). The first author's experiences at her exam school seemed to resonate strongly with many faculty members who themselves had attended exam schools or had children attending them, as faculty frequently said things like "you know what it's like." She thus took great care to encourage faculty to elaborate on what they meant in their own words to avoid imposing her own assumptions. Admissions officers were also recruited through a similar process: The first author attended a SKY graduate school of education, as is the case for many admissions officers working at selective Korean institutions. She is also a woman in her early 30s, like the majority of admissions officers working at selective institutions, and has years of experience working with faculty. This likely helped her establish rapport with admissions officers, especially when talking about their difficulties working with faculty.

While it could be argued that the first author's identity may have led to social desirability bias, this does not seem to be the case. If anything, interviewees who had personal connections with the first author were even more frank. ("You know what it's like at [exam school interviewer and interviewee both attended] so let me just put it plainly . . ."; "I'll speak openly and trust you to decide if any parts need to be edited out later if they're too controversial"). We therefore argue

that our findings, albeit not representative, still contribute to expanding current understanding on how admissions decisions are made.

The co-author contributed a complementary outsider perspective. As an American with decades of experience conducting research on U.S. holistic admissions but no professional experience with Korean admissions, he took an active role in investigator triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During regular meetings, the first author circulated thematic memos presenting initial themes from the data; the co-author pressed for clarification when themes risked over-generalization, highlighted culture-specific assumptions, and encouraged the examination of rival explanations. This iterative and collaborative peer-debriefing process helped surface blind spots and added more nuance to our interpretations, ensuring the analysis reflected a synthesis of both authors' perspectives rather than any single researcher's interpretation.

## **Findings**

Both admissions officers and faculty strived to "level the playing field" among students from varying educational backgrounds by using their discretion to incorporate high school context—but did so to reward very different conceptions of merit. These trends were particularly noticeable in how interviewees evaluated applicants' academic achievement and major-related fit, the two most heavily weighted evaluation criteria across all institutions in our study sample. Their differing conceptions of merit, the widely differing constraints on their discretion, and the power dynamics between faculty and admissions officers all contributed to undermining the government's equity goals in promulgating holistic admissions policies.

### *Contextualizing Academic Achievement*

Korea is one of many countries evaluating academic achievement contextually in selective college admissions, as part of a holistic process. Holistic admissions requires institutions to incorporate considerations of the contexts in which applicants achieved their grades, in an effort to identify merit and potential not captured by those grades (Bastedo et al., 2018; Mountford-Zimdars

& Moore, 2020). This rationale is also reflected in admissions guidebooks published by selective Korean universities. For example, Seoul National University—the country’s most prestigious institution—explains that “a student’s academic competence does not necessarily equate to their high school grades, as high school grades are but one of the many factors we use to evaluate academic competence” (Seoul National University, 2022, p. 15). Similarly, in a faculty training session we observed, admissions officers repeatedly emphasized that evaluating students’ academic performance based solely on raw class rank categories was unacceptable. “It’s just not possible to evaluate a class rank category mechanically, because the contexts in which respective students have earned their grades all differ,” one explained.

The admissions officers we interviewed shared this perspective. They discussed in detail how educational opportunities were unequally distributed among high schools across the country and highlighted significant disparities in educational opportunities among different high school types (exam/non-exam), regions (urban/rural), and even districts within the same region (high-income/low-income). Given this reality, they argued it was unfair to determine whether a student was worthy of admission based solely on their raw achievement and firmly believed the more appropriate approach was to evaluate a student’s achievement in light of the opportunities that were available to them. One admissions officer, for example, recounted how he was careful not to penalize students who had been unable to take advanced coursework because the courses had not been offered. “A Biology applicant who failed to take Biology II [the hardest Biology course in the government curriculum] even though it had been offered at their school, and a biology applicant who wasn’t able to take the course because it hadn’t been offered at their school, are in my eyes completely different,” he said. Another admissions officer—who was also in charge of training admissions officers and faculty at her institution—repeatedly emphasized, “I evaluate how much effort an applicant has made to maximize the opportunities in their given context, as opposed to just raw achievement.”

Faculty took a very different approach. They argued that applicants from exam schools had studied diligently from an early age to secure

admission to a selective exam school; that the curricula these students had taken was much more rigorous than what was typically offered at non-exam schools; and that the reason applicants from exam schools had lower class rank was because these applicants had been comparatively graded within a pool of exceptionally high-achieving peers. To support this logic, faculty often emphasized that high schools with the highest average *suneung* scores were overwhelmingly exam schools. In the eyes of faculty, the most deserving applicants were therefore those who would achieve the highest percentiles if all students were to sit for the same college entrance exam. This was somewhat ironic given that holistic admissions was explicitly introduced as an alternative to *suneung*-based admissions. “It’s not that I’m trying to favor applicants from exam schools, I’m just trying to be fair,” one faculty member shared. “I think it’s unfair to evaluate high school class rank categories from exam schools and non-exam schools equally, when everyone knows it’s harder to obtain a high class rank category at a more selective school.” Another professor put it even more bluntly. “I understand that students in exam schools tend to come from higher-SES backgrounds,” she said, “but it’s also hard to deny that these students are truly outstanding.” This tendency to favor students with the strongest raw academic performance was particularly prevalent among STEM professors, who emphasized that students needed to enter with a strong understanding of basic concepts to learn more advanced material in college.

Many faculty thus often used their discretion to mechanically elevate class rank categories for students from exam schools, despite admissions officers explicitly imploring them not to do so during training and norming sessions. One professor, who had served in admissions for more than 10 years, acknowledged this was “standard practice” among faculty in his department. “The exact amount differs among individual faculty, but I, for example, consider a 3 from an exam school to be more or less similar to a 1 from a non-exam school.” Some faculty valued raw achievement to such an extent that they saw little problem with relying solely on class rank—after elevating ranks from exam schools—to initially screen applicants. Faculty jokingly referred to this process as “*cho-beol-goo-ee*” (prepping

meat so the actual cooking can begin) and explained how this allowed them to focus their limited time and energy on applicants who are “more likely to make the cut.”

That said, about a third of faculty diverged from this overall trend. These faculty drew upon various experiences—their own research on equity and diversity in education, serving on their institution’s diversity committee, or anecdotes from their own educational experience (or that of their children) attending non-exam schools—to explain why they thought it made more sense to evaluate academic performance in context. “For some applicants, gaining admission to our university may be their biggest opportunity to climb the socioeconomic ladder,” said one faculty member, “I think we should give these students a chance.” Another added, “For some applicants, you can see they’ve done everything possible to succeed within their limited environment—but objectively speaking, their achievement falls slightly short.” This professor believed that if these students received a high-quality education, they would be more than able to catch up to their more privileged peers. “This is our role as a leading institution in the country,” she said. These interviewees, however, acknowledged that their “rather idealistic” views represented minority opinions among their faculty colleagues.

### *Evaluating “Fit”*

Across a wide range of studies, an evaluative focus on subjective conceptions of fit has often been shown to be problematic for equity and diversity (Lamont, 2009; J. R. Posselt, 2016). While many organizations ask evaluators to assess fit, few provide guidelines on how to measure it—which invites evaluators’ own idiosyncratic preferences into evaluations (Rivera, 2020). Evaluators frequently leverage fit to pursue personal rather than organizational interests; recruiters at elite professional service firms, for example, use fit to ensure new hires are agreeable social companions (Rivera, 2012); U.S. faculty use fit to select graduate school applicants based on their own immediate research needs, even if this means rejecting exceptional candidates (J. R. Posselt, 2016). Evaluations of fit, purportedly based on professional expertise, may thus derive more from personal preference and tastes (Lamont,

2009). This suggests that assessments of fit are heavily dependent on who is doing the evaluation, as different evaluators each bring different sets of experience and knowledge.

Fit is a key evaluation criterion among institutions in our sample, but the focus is on fit with the academic major, rather than fit based on character or personality (J. R. Posselt, 2016; Rivera, 2012). Institutional guidelines emphasize that applicants should only be evaluated for fit in the broader field rather than with a specific, individual major. In one of the training sessions we observed, for example, an admissions officer stressed that “equating major-related fit to whether students participated in activities directly related to their own major is a common misconception” and emphasized evaluators should look for signs of general field-related fit, by assessing whether an applicant had sufficient academic competence and personal interest in the broad disciplinary field (social sciences) rather than the specific major (economics). According to their training, greater involvement in more advanced major-related activities during high school should not necessarily indicate higher major-related fit. Kyunghee University’s admissions guidebook, for example, explains how a biology applicant with limited advanced coursework in biology still received top marks for major-related fit. The applicant’s strong performance in core math and science subjects, alongside excellent performance in the only advanced biology course available in his high school, provided “sufficient evidence of major-related fit” (Kyunghee University, 2022, p. 16).

Many admissions officers believed it was “dangerous” to over-emphasize major-specific fit, as they felt this disproportionately disadvantaged students from lower-resourced high schools. “Major-related fit is a very abstract concept—and through the years, I have come to realize that it is highly influenced by high school type,” one admissions officer said. “This realization has led me to develop the belief that considerations of major-specific fit should be kept to a minimum.” Another admissions officer, who had previously served as a high school teacher, explained, “The variety and depth of major-related activities students have access to within their own school heavily depends on how motivated their high school teachers are, and how

much extra time and effort they put into providing these opportunities.” She added, “It really isn’t fair to penalize students just because their teachers didn’t happen to provide them with various opportunities.” Admissions officers were thus careful to define and evaluate major-related fit in a very broad sense. “If I were evaluating an applicant for Mechanical Engineering, I’m not really looking for evidence of coursework or extracurriculars in Mechanical Engineering per se,” one explained. “I’m just trying to discern if the student seems like someone who can digest college-level engineering material.”

Faculty, on the other hand, mostly evaluated students applying to their own major, and were extremely interested in identifying how well an applicant would fit into their specific major. In their eyes, major-specific fit was a key indicator determining an applicant’s merit and worthiness of admission. Faculty in popular majors explained how they learned, through many years of teaching, that students with in-depth knowledge and affection for their specific major not only did well in class themselves but also positively influenced the overall class dynamic. Faculty were therefore excited to use fit when evaluating applicants, something they were unable to do for students admitted solely on *suneung* scores. Conversely, faculty in less popular majors worried that students they had devoted so much time and effort to selecting might “run away” and switch to more popular majors after gaining admission to their less-popular major. These interviewees thus viewed holistic admissions as a much-needed way to identify talented students who showed—through their high school academics and extracurriculars—that they were “completely smitten” by their major:

My major probably has the lowest admissions bar among all majors at our university—so we really try to identify those students who will be loyal to our major. And I think our approach works, the students we admit rarely abandon our major, they are very loyal.

Another interviewee, a philosophy professor, shared a similar perspective. “The applicants I value most are those whose high school transcripts and college essays are just completely plastered with philosophy—the ones that make you think, given this trajectory, there’s absolutely

no way this student will want to go to any major other than Philosophy.”

In short, when evaluating major-related fit, faculty across both popular and less popular majors defined merit as having the academic ability to succeed in the major and a genuine interest and passion for that major. Faculty then used their discretion to reward students fitting these conceptions of merit, by capitalizing on information such as whether students had taken advanced-level courses related to the specific major and according grades; whether the student participated in and received awards from competitions related to their specific major; whether the student participated in extracurricular clubs related to their major; whether students’ teachers had commented on their competence and interest in the major—and most important, whether students had a consistent and compelling story to support how they developed an interest in the major (Stevens, 2009).

Only a few professors criticized the concept of major-specific fit. “It seems to me that students from exam schools inevitably benefit,” said one. “It’s hard to tell if the major-specific coursework and extracurriculars on an applicant’s transcript were of their own volition, or simply part of the school’s baseline curriculum.” Another professor questioned the notion of evaluating major-specific fit altogether, arguing that “what we currently evaluate as major-specific fit may likely just be ‘fabricated’ fit . . . the result of teachers or parents telling students to frame themselves in a certain way for college admissions.”

#### *The Role of the Personal and Professional in Shaping Perceptions of Merit*

The literature on street-level bureaucracy highlights that the personal and professional are closely intertwined, and together shape the way SLBs exercise discretion (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Watkins-Hayes, 2009). In line with this literature, our findings suggest that our interviewees’ varying understandings of merit—and use of discretion to reflect this in their evaluations—can be traced back to differing personal and professional experiences, knowledge, and resulting interests.

Admissions officers were continuously exposed to different types of high schools in various regions through their professional work experiences. Through high school visits, workshops with high school teachers and students, and self-organized study sessions on how to better read high school context, they were able to accumulate knowledge about a comparatively broader set of high schools across the country. Faculty, on the other hand, had less exposure to diverse high schools. They therefore relied heavily on values solidified through their own observations of undergraduate students, their children, and their own educational trajectories. One interviewee—an emeritus professor of English literature—explained how “exam school students just happen to fit my conceptualization of merit better,” drawing upon his many years of observing students in and out of the classroom:

The ones who really stand out to me in terms of how much they understand and participate in my classes always seem to be from exam schools . . . Students in the English drama club I advise, too—all of them are deeply passionate about English literature, and are mostly from exam schools. Continuously observing students like these over the years makes me confident that I should select more of such students.

Faculty across various other majors used similar logics to support why they conceptualized merit the way they did. One professor enthusiastically explained how exam school students “are just incredible, they’ve been exposed to so much rigorous, major-related material in high school.” He reminisced how he once even asked a particularly clever exam-school graduate in his class, “Where did you learn all this stuff?” Another professor explained matter-of-factly that faculty in his department openly favor students from exam schools, stating, “My colleagues and I know from experience that these students do better in our major.”

Faculty also frequently brought up their own children’s high school experiences. “The children of all the professors I know are attending or have graduated from exam schools,” one faculty member admitted. Many faculty, therefore, seemed to sympathize with the plights experienced by students in competitive exam schools. One interviewee, whose son was attending one of the most selective high schools in the country,

shared how surprised he had been when his son received a high school class rank of 4 (out of 9) after scoring 99 (out of 100) on one of his school subjects. This interviewee—himself a graduate of a non-exam school—explained that he had until then been critical of his colleagues’ “bias” toward students from exam schools. After observing his son’s struggles in high school, however, the interviewee admitted, chuckling, that he was now unsure what to think. Another professor highlighted how his bright, driven daughter struggled to rank highly in her competitive exam school—while his less academically intense son, who attended a local non-exam school, ranked highly in his class with much less effort. When asked whether and how experiences like these factored into his admissions evaluations, the professor replied, “Well whoever’s evaluating will deal with this issue as they see fit, but it’s a source of confusion. Everyone’s being ‘fair,’ it’s just that what is considered fair differs from person to person.”

Faculty experiences from their own educational trajectories also seemed to affect how they evaluated students from different types of high schools. When asked whether they thought lived experience affects how faculty evaluate students from exam and non-exam schools, for example, one professor bluntly responded, “Absolutely—how could it not?” while another also replied, “Very, *very* much so.” Many faculty sympathized with the struggles of under-performing students at competitive exam schools, and were able to provide explanations—from firsthand experience—on why these students were still worthy of admission. One faculty member who attended a hyper-competitive exam school unabashedly admitted that he had consistently ranked in the bottom half of his class. “I once even ranked at the bottom of my class,” he said, flashing a grin. “But speaking from personal experience, low-ranking students from exam schools have their own strengths,” he continued. “They’ve constantly had to compare themselves with their higher-performing peers, and thus come to college with a better sense of the skills they lack, and what they need to succeed,” he said. “They’re more worldly.” Another professor—who, as a member of her institution’s diversity committee, was a strong advocate of admitting more non-exam students—acknowledged that low-ranking

students from exam schools, as she herself had been, “have their own clear strong suits, such as resilience in face of future failure.”

That said, there was a smaller group of faculty who did not show a strong preference for exam school students, nor for students with the highest raw credentials. Interestingly, those who held this position tended to come from lower-resourced high schools themselves or from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. One faculty member even talked about how he favors higher-performing students from non-exam schools, in light of the purpose of holistic admissions. “I myself attended a lower-resourced high school, my family went through a very rough patch financially—but I still went on to Seoul National and graduated top of my class there,” he noted. “Holistic admissions exists to give these students a chance—the lower-performing ones at higher-performing schools can just gain admission through *suneung*-based admissions.” Another faculty member who had also attended a non-exam school in a low-SES neighborhood shared how, during his tenure as dean of admissions, he made active efforts to change the architecture of evaluation to admit more high-performing students from non-exam schools. For example, he increased the gaps in scores awarded to different class rank categories to give an edge to non-exam school students who were top of their class; he also introduced college essay prompts on overcoming adversity. Notably, these efforts were phased out after he stepped down as dean.

Along these lines, it is interesting to note how few faculty in our sample came from less privileged backgrounds. One faculty member explicitly commented on how the majority of his colleagues came from backgrounds that were “at least middle class, many even higher.” When asked why he thought this was, he mused, “people from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds typically seek employment straight out of undergrad instead of pursuing a Ph.D.” Another added, “We’re a Confucian society, so there’s a sense of duty to care and provide for your parents if they need financial or emotional support—you can’t just go do your own thing.”

Thus, while all faculty drew upon their own lived experience to justify their conceptions of worthiness, many faculty members’ lived

experience overwhelmingly aligned with those of students from more privileged socioeconomic backgrounds or exam school contexts. This alignment seemed to make it easier for faculty to find value in the achievements of exam school applicants, while discounting the achievements of non-exam school applicants. Most faculty were more aware of, and empathetic to, the potential disadvantages in selective admissions experienced by students in competitive exam schools than their non-exam school counterparts. This pattern aligns with Rivera’s (2012) study of cultural matching in elite hiring: Evaluators tend to rate candidates from similar educational or cultural backgrounds more favorably, in part because shared experiences enable evaluators to draw on a richer basis of personal-level data to interpret candidates’ achievements in more nuanced ways.

*Faculty: “As a Field Expert, I Know What Is Best for My Own Major”.* Faculty readily acknowledged admissions officers knew more than they did about admissions in general. When it came to selecting students for their specific major, however, faculty were confident that they knew what was best—and pointed to their professional knowledge, experience, and expertise. “Faculty in each major have their own know-how on how to select the optimal class for their own major,” one explained. Another faculty member elaborated this logic:

Students who flourish in my major have certain shared qualities—subtle nuances that I’ve picked up through many years of observing students in my major. Not all of these qualities are reflected in our official evaluation criteria, which mostly values students who are strong in a more general sense . . . I’d rather admit students who I know from experience are more likely to thrive in my major. I know I’m being stubborn, but we professors are a pretty stubborn bunch. [*laughs*]

This stance was widely shared among faculty from both privileged and less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds. Interestingly, while faculty had strong unyielding preconceptions of which qualities signaled merit when evaluating students applying to their own major, they aligned themselves more closely to their institution’s guidelines when evaluating students for other majors. Professors who criticized operationalizing major-related fit as major-specific fit,

arguing that doing so disproportionately favored students from exam schools, were notably all from majors that did not admit undergraduates. This seemed to alter their motivation and incentives when exercising discretion on who to admit. One professor, after ardently explaining why it was necessary to focus on major-specific fit when evaluating applicants for his own major, proceeded to add,

I don't do this when I'm evaluating applicants in other majors . . . When evaluating for other majors, I evaluate the way admissions officers tell me to. But when evaluating students for my own major, I evaluate the way I want, to select the students I want.

These findings suggest that faculty emphasis on major-specific fit is largely driven by disciplinary and departmental interests, by selecting students they believe will most benefit their major. This, in turn, continues to benefit students who come from exam schools and more privileged backgrounds, who have the counseling and cultural capital to emphasize major-specific fit through their course selection and choice of extracurricular activities. Thus, faculty interests largely take precedence over social equity concerns, regardless of the extensive training and norming provided to faculty by admissions officers.

*Professional Power: "Fire Me if You Will, but I Refuse to Change the Way I Evaluate."* Although admissions officers were technically responsible for ensuring faculty evaluated applicants according to institutional guidelines, faculty often used their own standards of merit derived from years of experience teaching and advising students. Many admissions officers found themselves questioning whether they should actively intervene when faculty ignored official policy. Even when they did, faculty were often unwilling to give up their own preferences. "Some faculty are really fixated on selecting students with the highest major-specific fit," one admissions officer noted, "but we're not really trying to identify the next-generation professors in the field." In a later interview, another admissions officer nodded knowingly, sharing how she witnessed this tension at all three selective institutions where she had worked. "With all due respect, faculty only seem to hear what they want to hear," she said.

Younger, less experienced admissions officers had particular difficulty confronting obstinate faculty. "We do our best to train and norm them, but I suspect faculty don't fully trust our expertise," said one. Faculty were indispensable because institutions had to conduct holistic admissions within the short timeframe set by the government (September–December) and could not hire more full-time admissions staff given financial constraints. Nevertheless, one admissions officer who had joined admissions fresh out of her master's program found herself wishfully thinking, "If only we could conduct admissions without faculty."

The external constraints on discretion are very different for admissions officers and faculty. Securing continued government funding was pivotal for admissions officers, as it not only covered their salaries but also, in effect, determined whether they would be able to keep their jobs. One admissions officer, for example, winced while recounting how his former institution dismissed its full-time admissions staff after losing government funding for holistic admissions. "The institution just didn't want to hire admissions officers with its own money," he said, shaking his head. Indeed, there are many examples of institutions that had government funding for holistic admissions reduced or withdrawn due to "unsatisfactory" admissions practices (Chang & Lee, 2023). The government required institutions applying for funding to publish their holistic admissions evaluation criteria to the public and to submit evidence demonstrating that they were evaluating applicants in line with established criteria. Admissions officers were therefore extremely cautious about exercising discretion if it departed from their training. As one admissions officer shared,

Even if I personally think an applicant is amazing, I can't just give them top marks. That would create discrepancies with other evaluators. So I make conscious efforts to suppress my own preferences, and continuously revisit our scoring rubric to see how highly I can evaluate the student based on our evaluation criteria. It's heartbreaking when, after reading a student's college essay, you get the feeling that the student is really smart and very eager to learn—but their high school teachers just haven't written their transcripts in a way that allows me to give them a good evaluation based on our rubric. But I can't go rogue and evaluate as I see fit. I have to follow our norms.

Faculty, on the other hand, were much freer from such constraints. The biggest penalty they would receive for not adhering to official evaluation criteria was not being asked back to evaluate applicants in future years. Given how many faculty portrayed having to work in admissions as “more like jury duty” and a “nuisance that took away from research and teaching commitments,” this was hardly a constraint at all.

One interviewee, a professor of engineering in a particularly male-dominated department, exemplified the essence of this dynamic. Convinced his major would benefit from more women, he candidly explained how he took “great liberties when evaluating the ‘personal character’ evaluation criterion,” evaluating female applicants more generously than he would male applicants:

I know I’m biased toward female students—and so do admissions officers [*laughs*], I’ve been called out on this so many times. But I told them, in light of my major’s unique context, I feel my method of evaluation is indispensable. I also told them, fire me if you will, but I refuse to change the way I evaluate.

Although his rationale stems from a desire to redress his department’s gender imbalance—an issue beyond the scope of this paper—the interviewee’s earnest account vividly demonstrates how professors can elevate their own definitions of merit and worthiness over official guidelines, a dynamic central to this study. An admissions officer at the same institution said that she would have applauded the professor’s logic—if she were not an admissions officer. In her current role, however, she stressed his behavior was “very, very dangerous.” The professor’s blatant disregard for established evaluation criteria, if discovered by the government, could lead to significant financial penalties for the institution. She simply did not have the luxury of taking “great liberties” in her position.

### *The Power of Faculty Discretion*

Although admissions officers were able to recount many instances of how faculty held different conceptions of worthiness, when explicitly asked whether and how this may affect admissions outcomes, the majority immediately responded that it did not. They were quick to

highlight that their institutions assigned at least two evaluators to every applicant for both first-stage file evaluations and second-stage interviews; that if respective evaluators’ scores differed significantly, the applicant would be flagged for additional evaluation (the exact process varied by institution); and that because they were aware of such faculty tendencies, admissions officers made particular efforts to consolidate their faculty training sessions and ensure everyone evaluated with the same perspective. One chief admissions officer explicitly remarked that the topic of faculty being swayed by their own perceptions of worthiness was a “very dangerous” question that “challenged the legitimacy of Korean holistic admissions.”

Conversations with faculty, however, raised many questions about whether these aforementioned measures were as effective as admissions officers claimed. One faculty member, who had more than 15 years of experience in admissions and also previously served as dean of admissions, felt particularly strongly about this issue, his voice tinged with exasperation:

Trainings only work if the people taking them are *willing to be trained*. In a sense, faculty are actually *the worst* people to evaluate college applicants if you want evaluators who will strictly follow a given rubric. During my time as dean of admissions I’ve come across *so many* faculty who have their own philosophies on what they’re looking for in applicants, and evaluate accordingly without batting an eye. I’ve personally come to the conclusion that it’s impossible to get faculty to relinquish their personal philosophies on what constitutes merit.

Other faculty members poked further holes in admissions officers’ logic regarding the effectiveness of assigning multiple evaluators to each applicant and flagging those who received significantly different scores. “You’re required to submit a written explanation if you’re singled out, which is a pain,” explained one faculty member, “so you need to be mindful of how much deviation will trigger a flag.” Several faculty members argued that it was likely a lot of variation passes unflagged, and that this was likely to work in favor of students at the margin of admission.

Scores also would not significantly deviate from one another if faculty in that department shared similar conceptions of worthiness. In fact,

some senior faculty took strategic measures to ensure their own views on how to select the best students were passed onto newly-appointed faculty. One senior professor, for example, shared how he conducted his own renegade form of training with the other junior faculty in his major who were new to admissions work:

Before we go into evaluations, I'll round [junior faculty] up and share my know-how. The official training is very vague, you see—admissions officers lecture on and on about all these complicated details on different admissions policies, high school curricula—they don't directly address what we're actually interested in. So I'll explain things in a more straightforward way. I give them two main tips. First, during first-stage file evaluations, don't let the really good kids slip through the cracks. To do this, adjust class rank categories from exam schools—just make sure these students pass onto second-round interviews. Second, save the more refined evaluation for second-stage interviews. It's much easier to identify the really strong students when you meet them in person: just grill them on major-specific questions related to their high school activities.

Acknowledging these various trends among faculty, the former admissions dean strongly argued that faculty should be phased out of the admissions workforce. All admissions officers who were asked what they thought about decreasing faculty involvement in admissions, including three chief admissions officers, readily agreed.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Determining who is worthy of admission to the country's most selective institutions involves a great degree of subjective judgment, even with a multitude of government policies, strict enforcement, and detailed institutional guidelines. In line with Lipsky's (1980) theory of street-level bureaucracy, we find that Korean admissions personnel have many discretionary spaces when implementing holistic admissions policy. We argue that examining the logics behind how people make decisions in these discretionary spaces is key to better understand how holistic admissions practices have largely reproduced inequality.

Our findings resonate with insights from the SLB literature on how individual conceptions of worthiness, which profoundly shape discretionary practices, are deeply influenced by concerns and interests deriving from SLBs' own personal

and professional backgrounds (Harrits & Møller, 2014; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000; Olaison et al., 2018). Faculty and admissions officers tended to hold markedly different perceptions of worthiness that could be linked back to differences in personal and professional experiences, knowledge, and resulting values and interests between the two groups. Neither group sought to outright privilege students from exam or non-exam schools; rather, their evaluations reflected concerns and interests rooted in contexts most familiar to them.

Our study also refines and extends existing SLB literature by highlighting the significant—yet often underexplored—role of intra-organizational power dynamics in shaping discretion. While many studies in the SLB literature focus on organizations consisting of a single professional group with a more clear-cut chain of command (e.g., police departments, welfare offices), the literature pays less attention to settings where multiple professions collaborate on policy implementation—despite Abbott's (1988) theory of jurisdictional claims suggesting power struggles are likely in these contexts. Our findings demonstrate the importance of these struggles for how SLBs exercise discretion in higher education organizations. We identify two reinforcing advantages that grant faculty considerable discretionary leverage. First, disciplinary jurisdiction grants them reputational authority: Professors present their own interpretations of evaluation criteria as expert judgments based on professional knowledge of their own discipline, a claim that admissions officers cannot easily contest. Second, faculty's tenure and insulation from government audits lower the personal costs of exercising discretion in ways that align with their personal and professional values. Admissions officers, on the other hand, lack comparable protections: Most work on temporary contracts and are heavily impacted by government audits in terms of job security as well as securing much-needed funding for future programming. Paradoxically, this creates a situation where the very actors charged with training and overseeing faculty adherence to policy in reality possess the least discretion to interpret it, while faculty—who admissions officers ostensibly monitor—exercise the broadest level of discretion. Our findings thus highlight that the actual scope of SLB discretion in higher

education organizations is profoundly shaped by prevailing professional power dynamics, which can operate independently of—and even supersede—formal supervisory roles.

Taken together, our study contributes to our understanding of why professional discretion has such profound consequences for social equity. Holistic admissions, as well as the various ensuing admissions reforms over the past decade, were introduced in the name of increasing higher education access for students from a variety of different backgrounds. Yet if faculty—who comprise 87% of the admissions workforce—continue exercising discretion in the ways identified in this study, it is unlikely that government reforms will significantly increase equity and diversity through holistic admissions. As articulated by a faculty member who previously served as an admissions dean: “As long as faculty constitute the majority of the admissions workforce, any policy reforms the government implements to increase equity in holistic admissions will make little difference.” If government policies are to achieve their stated purpose, the people implementing them must share similar philosophies regarding who is worthy of admission. Unless government policies on equity resonate with the worldviews of the people implementing them, formal policies—no matter how well-intentioned and planned—are unlikely to bring meaningful change. J. Posselt et al. (2023) reinforce this perspective, highlighting how the design and implementation of holistic review must carefully address evaluators’ underlying biases and existing inequities to avoid perpetuating them.

### *Implications for Policy and Practice*

Our findings highlight several areas for potential intervention. The most obvious solution would be to increase the proportion of full-time admissions officers involved in the evaluation process by hiring more full-time admissions officers, while bracketing the role of faculty to parts of the admissions process that are most connected with their expertise. If institutions desire a body of well-trained, well-normed admissions readers, it is imperative that institutions start investing in hiring more full-time admissions officers. Our findings reveal unique dimensions of faculty discretion within higher education systems,

given their distinctive nature. Unlike at many other organizations, the core membership unit in research universities is discipline-centered: faculty professional identity and loyalties are overwhelmingly tied to their own discipline, rather than the university. Consequently, when faced with conflicts between institution- and discipline-level interests, faculty tend to prioritize the latter (Clark, 1983). This pattern was also evident in our study, where faculty defined worthiness in ways that benefited their own major—and were less concerned about the repercussions their actions might have on their institution obtaining government funding, or for social equity more broadly.

Recent developments in the field of admissions further justify reducing faculty involvement in admissions. Starting from admissions for the 2024 academic year, selective institutions are shifting from using “major-related fit” as a stand-alone criterion to a broader evaluation criterion dubbed “career competence.” This revised metric aims to assess whether students have engaged in and demonstrated competence in activities allowing for career (and in turn college major) exploration (Lim et al., 2022). The report clearly states that this shift intends to discourage the notion that students must commit to a specific major from high school, instead encouraging them to explore diverse interests. This shift toward assessing broader competencies rather than specific major-related fit illustrates the feasibility and advantages of reducing faculty involvement in admissions evaluations.

That said, phasing out faculty from admissions and hiring more full-time staff—while perceived by many of our interviewees as the ideal solution—is also the most costly. Chief admissions officers in particular were pessimistic about their institutions’ willingness to invest the necessary funds for such hires in the near future. In light of this reality, we also propose some other possible interventions. Our findings show that faculty had strong incentives to define and reward their own conceptions of worthiness when evaluating students applying to their own major. Experimental simulations with U.S. admissions officers suggest that ensuring people from diverse backgrounds evaluate an applicant together may be a promising strategy to mitigate these trends (Bowman & Bastedo, 2018). Systematically pairing faculty from different

majors, or assigning them to evaluate applicants in related majors (but not their own), could be another promising strategy. While these interventions are unlikely to eliminate differences in perspectives among evaluators, our findings suggest these measures have the potential to promote decision-making that better aligns with the government's goal to promote equity through holistic review.

### *Implications for Research*

While acknowledging the distinctive nature of Korean admissions, our study highlights several areas for future research that carry broader relevance beyond Korea. One promising avenue is examining how different admissions officers use their discretion within the constraints of institutional policies. In the United States context, for instance, Burns-Wallace (2009) highlights—from the perspective of senior admissions diversity officers—how regular admissions officers varied significantly in whether and how they valued racialized experiences as a form of context when assessing applicants. Lee et al. (2022), based on interviews of 50 admissions officers across 70 selective institutions across the United States, further note that training and norming sessions for admissions officers often lack specific guidance on incorporating applicants' racialized experiences as a form of context, leaving admissions officers to use their discretion in navigating these issues. These insights are further complicated by the lack of racial/ethnic diversity in the U.S. admissions workforce. Surveys indicate that the overwhelming majority (70%) of admissions officers in the United States are White, compared to only 12% Black, 11% Hispanic, and 3% Asian (Fuesting, 2023). Several professional organizations in the field of admissions have therefore called for increased racial/ethnic diversity in the admissions workforce (NACAC, 2022; NACAC & NASFAA, 2022; NADOHE, 2021; Phair, 2014). Professional organization reports suggest that a non-diverse admissions workforce may lead to “gaps in understanding” of applicants' experiences (NACAC & NASFAA, 2022, p. 42) and prevent a “demonstrable connection to students of color” (NACAC & NASFAA, 2022, p. 45). However, these calls currently lack strong empirical support and are largely rhetorical. The

field would benefit from more research that examines whether and how different admissions officers use their discretion within the constraints of institutional policies, and the impact this has on promoting equity in holistic admissions.

To do this, we need more direct research with admissions officers. The majority of studies on college admissions—regardless of country context—tend to assume that admissions officers' decisions are driven solely by the characteristics of applicants, institutional goals, and evaluation guidelines. In other words, these studies assume that all admissions officers will evaluate in the same way. However, our findings indicate that admissions officers' evaluations are also guided by concerns and interests stemming from their own personal and professional backgrounds. It is therefore crucial to gain a deeper understanding of who admissions officers at selective institutions are, and how their personal and professional backgrounds shape their evaluations of applicants from varying backgrounds. Research in this area will allow for more evidence-based recommendations to ensure holistic admissions is implemented in a way that promotes equitable outcomes.

Another promising direction for future research would be to examine how gender and age dynamics intersect with professional power to shape discretion in Korean admissions. Most admissions officers in Korea are women in their 30s (Im & Noh, 2016), whereas the majority of faculty at selective institutions are men (Korean Ministry of Education, 2019b). Since admissions responsibilities are assigned to tenure-track professors, faculty are also likely to be older than the average admissions officer. These demographic patterns take on added significance in the context of Korea's Confucian cultural norms, where gender- and age-based hierarchies shape power dynamics within organizations (Kim & Kim, 2021; Won, 2009). For example, Won (2009) finds that Korean male government bureaucrats often perceive their female managers as having weaker decision-making abilities than men, more focused on trivial matters—and that these attitudes intensified with age. Y. Kim and Kim (2021) similarly describe how younger female academics often struggle to challenge older male faculty, given the pervasive patriarchal culture in Korean academia. These dynamics raise important questions on how intersecting hierarchies of gender, age, and

professional status may shape the exercise of discretion among admissions officers and faculty. While these questions fall outside the scope of the present study, we believe future research could build on our findings to more fully examine how these intersecting dynamics influence equity-related decision-making in Korean admissions.

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### Notes

1. For more detailed context on exam schools, please see the section titled “Structural Features of Korean Higher Education and College Admissions.”

2. Evidence from government audits of 13 universities (most of which are selective) supports that exam school students tend to outperform their non-exam school peers in both admissions tracks: Under holistic admissions, 16.7% of exam school applicants were admitted, compared to 9.1% of non-exam school applicants. For *suneung*-based admissions, 29.9% of exam school applicants were admitted, compared to 16.3% of non-exam school applicants. These cross-institutional averages drawn from a sample of mostly (but not exclusively) selective universities likely understate the degree to which exam schools outperform their non-exam school peers at the very top tier of institutions. Media reports consistently show that exam school students dominate admissions to the country’s most selective universities, both through holistic and *suneung*-based admissions (Kim, 2017; S. Lee, 2022).

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