

Primer: An Overview of Holistic Review

Read the information in this document and work through the sample activities with a group of 3-5 people.

Learning Objectives

You will be able to:

- Reflect on your current admissions practices to determine if there is a more systematic approach to evaluation of graduate applications.
- Align admissions best-practices with your program's goals to create a more holistic admissions process.

Activity: Graduate Students

1. Think about your most successful graduate students. What made them successful?
2. Think about your least successful graduate students. Why did they not work out?
3. What part of your current admissions process selects **for** the qualities you described in Q1?
4. What part of your current admissions process selects **against** the qualities you described in Q2?

Evaluation Practices

"So much of [the graduate admissions process] is behind closed doors, by design."¹

Despite the importance having of well-organized admission and rules-of-thumb, personal experiences often dominate evidence-based approaches in practice and admission remains "informal, ad hoc, and lacking in continuity."² Below are examples of *analytical evaluation practices* that are systematic and thorough, and *intuitive evaluation practices* that are often informal and inconsistent.

Analytical Evaluation

Double-Blind Peer Review

Promotion and Tenure Review

Grant and Fellowship Funding Panels

Intuitive Evaluation

Listing desired qualities instead of eligibility requirements

Making decisions based on singular parts of an application

Systems where inter-rater reliability is highly variable

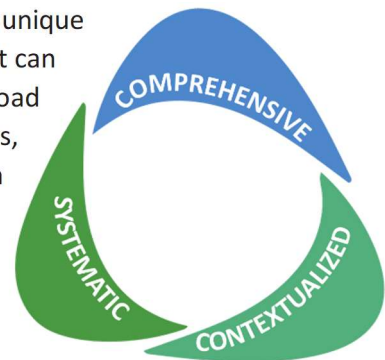
Analytical evaluation practices minimize the possibility of bias influencing outcomes. Double-blind review removes personal demographics and professional affiliations from the authors and allows manuscripts to be judged on their merit. In addition, analytical evaluation practices are comprehensive. Promotion and tenure are based on a dossier of accomplishments in the areas of scholarship, teaching, and service, allowing for a more holistic view of a scholar's work.

Intuitive evaluation practices are at risk for bias influencing outcomes. For example, deciding whether or not to admit an applicant solely based on their GRE-scores, which do not accurately reflect a student's ability to do research³. Intuitive evaluation practices are especially problematic in the absence of interrater reliability. For example, if a single admissions committee member reads 20 applications and makes an admissions decision, lack of corroboration with another committee member could result in decisions based purely on personal taste.

While graduate admissions on the surface often stems from analytical evaluation practices, intuitive practices can be unconsciously included.

A Framework for Holistic Review

Holistic review is an admissions strategy that assesses an applicant's unique experiences alongside traditional measures of academic achievement. It can help admissions committees in graduate STEM programs consider a broad range of factors reflecting the applicant's academic readiness, contribution to the incoming class, and potential for success both in school and later as a professional.⁴



Holistic review is Comprehensive, Contextualized, and Systematic.

Comprehensive

- Utilizes Numerous and diverse criteria
- Considers the whole person and the sum of their potential
 - Note that diverse perspectives improve scholarly work
- Considers that socio-emotional skills are necessary for outstanding professional performance

Contextualized

- Utilizes metrics in context
 - Note intrinsic error
 - Note societal patterns
- Looks at achievements in context
 - Considers the distributions of opportunities relative to societal patterns
 - Recognizes that achievements do not always signal aptitude or ability
- Considers students in context
 - Questions how students align with program identity/mission and broader goals

Systematic

- Bases review on shared, predefined criteria with structured protocols, for efficiency & consistency
- Creates space for flexibility and nuance
- Builds in safeguards & checks to promote equity and limit biases
- Selects & trains gatekeepers
- Coordinates evaluation with recruitment and yield efforts

Specific professions have added their own content to the definition of holistic review. For example, in medical professions holistic review is “a flexible, individualized way of assessing an applicant’s capabilities by which balanced consideration is given to experiences, attributes, and academic metrics and, when considered in combination, how the individual might contribute value as a medical student and future physician.”⁵

A member of the admissions committee at the University of Maine - Farmington describes how their admissions practice considers the whole applicant:⁶

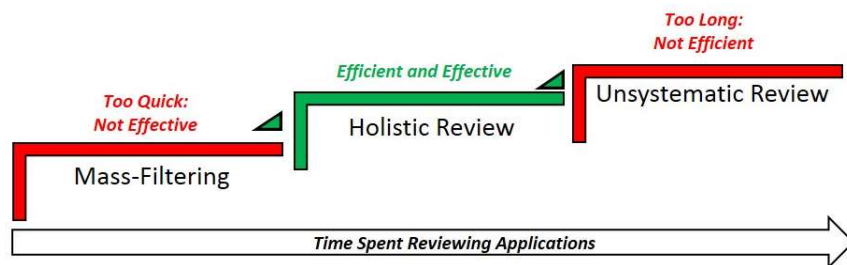
“We’re far more interested in who you are and what you can bring to our campus community than how you happened to score on a high-pressure, high-stakes standardized test.”

What do you think makes a successful scientist? How does your current admissions process select for those traits?

Why Use Holistic Review?

Holistic Review is an appropriate method to align admissions practices with admissions goals of your program.

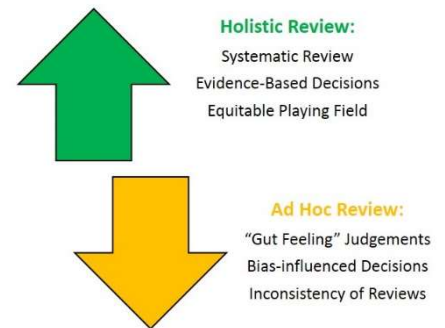
1. Goal: To efficiently read applications and make admissions decisions...



Holistic review offers a compromise between the informal and often biased “weeding” of applicants. An example of weeding is putting all applicants whose Physics GRE score is less than 760 into a “Do Not Admit” pile without looking at any other information in the application. and an overwhelming unsystematic review of all information in the application.

2. Goal: To increase the diversity of graduate cohorts...

A survey conducted by Urban Universities for Health showed that of the 57 medical programs (medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, and public health), that incorporated multiple elements of holistic review in their admissions, 81% saw an increase in the diversity of their incoming classes.¹



3. Goal: To minimize bias in admissions decisions...

Holistic review is systematic and each decision is backed with evidence from the application, avoiding decisions based on “gut feelings.”

4. Goal: To increase consistency among applicant reviewers...

Holistic review utilizes rubrics or other evaluation protocols so that admissions committee members are all judging an applicant on the same criteria using the same scales.

5. Goal: To withstand legal scrutiny of admissions practices and outcomes...

Holistic review is systematic and transparent to other members of the admissions committee and to anyone who requires justification for how admissions decisions were made.⁷

The Process of Holistic Review

Develop Evaluation Criteria	Systematic Review	Application Decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build Rubric • Academic Preparation • Research Potential • Fit with Program • Non-Cognitive Variables 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate Application Using Rubric • Read Personal Statements • Read Letters of Recommendation • Evaluate Transcripts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss Evaluations • Make Informed Decisions

The next Module, The Legal Landscape of Admissions, will discuss the critical need for being transparent in the application process, and how holistic review addresses that need. Then, the next set of modules (03-06) will help you develop and practice one or more pieces of the Holistic Review process. Following that, we have incorporated two modules (07 -08) to aid in the recruitment and on-boarding of new students based on best-practices of holistic support and research. Finally, the training closes with a module (09) dedicated to helping your program facilitate and sustain changes in your admissions process.

Activity - Holistic Review: Context in Evaluation

There are three graduate student applicants below, each of whom has different experiences in doing undergraduate research. Rank these three students in terms of *most likely* to be admitted to your graduate program to *least likely* to be admitted.

John	Mark	Gary
Attends Prestigious R1 University 2 years of research experience in the same lab doing AMO	Attends Liberal Arts College An AMO REU at a state school during the summer between junior and senior year.	Attends Medium R3 University 3 years of research experience in the same lab doing AMO

References

¹ Morris, C. (2016). Holistic review for graduate school admissions under scrutiny. *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 33, (para 12). <https://diverseeducation.com/article/81206/>

² Cuny, J. and Aspray, W. (2002), "Recruitment and retention of women graduate students in computer science and engineering: results of a workshop organized by the computing research association", SIGCSE Bulletin, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 168-174.

³ Miller, C., Zwickl, B., Posselt, J., Silvestrini, R., & Hodapp, T. (2019). Typical physics ph.D. admissions criteria limit access to underrepresented groups but fail to predict doctoral completion. *Science Advances*, 5(1), eaat7550-eaat7550. doi:10.1126/sciadv.aat7550

⁴ Urban Universities for Health (2014), "Holistic Admissions in the Health Professions: Findings from a national survey." <http://urbanuniversitiesforhealth.org/media/documents/Holistic Admissions in the Health Professions.p>

⁵ Addams, A. N., Bletzinger R. B., Sondheimer, H. M., White S. E. and Johnson, L. M., (2010). Washington DC: American Association of Medical Colleges. *Roadmap to diversity: Integrating holistic review practices into medical school admissions processes.*

⁶ Grove, A. (2019), ""What Are Holistic Admissions? Selective Colleges Consider More Than Just Grades and Test Scores," ThoughtCo. [thoughtco.com/what-are-holistic-admissions-788426](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-are-holistic-admissions-788426)

⁷ Op. Cit. Urban Universities for Health (2014)