

Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions

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Executive Summary

If performed well, graduate admissions processes support the key missions of universities and the vitality of graduate programs. Thoughtful, evidence-based procedures increase the likelihood that a student admitted to a master's or doctoral program will be among those most likely to succeed as a degree candidate and to make meaningful contributions to the learning environments making up the “whole”—labs, seminars and departmental cultures.

Holistic review, or the consideration of a broad range of candidate qualities including “noncognitive” or personal attributes, is a growing strategy for widening the evidence base that graduate programs consider when evaluating a candidate for admission. Two key trends drive this strategy.

First is a well-justified concern that undue weight on quantitative measures of student merit such as standardized test scores and GPA may not accurately predict success in graduate school, and may disadvantage underrepresented, non-traditional and older students (Awad, 2007; Louderback, 2008; Sternberg and Williams, 1997). Landmark legal cases concerning race-conscious admissions, most recently the Supreme Court's *Fisher* decision, have also condoned a holistic approach to admissions as an alternative to directly considering race as a factor.

A second reason for the current interest in holistic admissions processes is that decision-making at all levels of the university is becoming increasingly data-driven. To ensure that they are investing in the best students for a particular program, graduate institutions want to ensure that they are using the most predictive measures of a student's merit and likelihood to succeed in the program.

Graduate deans, graduate admissions professionals, faculty, diversity officers all stand to benefit from a deeper understanding of holistic review processes and their likely outcomes. This report is based on a one-year project consisting of a review of existing literature and initiatives on holistic review, a survey of CGS's 540 graduate institutions in the U.S. and Canada, and a workshop of 35 stakeholders and experts. Key findings of the project are summarized below.

Key Takeaways:

Findings related to the contexts surrounding admissions processes:

- **Compared with other higher education contexts, graduate admissions have a decentralized admissions process.** Of graduate school staff who responded to the survey, 75% reported that master's admissions are primarily the responsibility of academic units; this number was 78% for doctoral programs. This feature of graduate admissions is likely to pose special challenges for implementing holistic review processes, since procedures may be loosely tied to institutional mission, diversity objectives, or an overarching admissions strategy.
- **Graduate institutions are calling for more data that demonstrate the link between admissions criteria and student success.** A growing body of research has established this link in contexts outside graduate education. In a CGS survey summarized in Part IV of this report, 81% of graduate school staff respondents reported that these data are needed in the context of their own institutions.

- It is more important than ever for graduate schools to articulate their diversity objectives and tie them to the missions of their institutions. Doing so will make it easier for graduate schools to build a compelling case on campus for the need to review fairness and reliability of admissions practices.

Findings directly related to holistic admissions:

- Holistic review is widely viewed as a useful strategy for improving diversity of higher education. There is also some evidence that holistic admissions processes are associated with improved student outcomes. However, much of this evidence comes from outside graduate education contexts, and more work must be done to establish this connection in graduate institutions.
- The graduate education community would benefit from a clearer understanding of what constitutes a truly “holistic” graduate admissions process for master’s and doctoral programs. A CGS survey conducted for this project uncovered that different types of admissions practices and goals are associated with the term “holistic review.” A core set of practices essential to a holistic approach would give graduate institutions useful, practical guidance.
- Limited staff and faculty time is considered the greatest barrier to performing more holistic admissions processes for graduate programs, according to the same CGS survey. 58% of all survey respondents, which included graduate school staff, admissions professionals, faculty and others, reported time as a barrier.

Our hope is that this report will spark a wider national conversation about the practices of holistic admissions in graduate education, and ultimately, the creation of tools that can better demonstrate its value. An additional aim is to uncover strategies for making holistic review a rewarding and time-effective process for the many practitioners who may have a voice in the admissions process—faculty in particular.

To that end, the next pages of this report offer “Priorities for Graduate Institutions and Programs” seeking to support holistic review on their campuses. These principles and practices are designed to help graduate schools, graduate program directors, diversity officers and others work together to improve the strength of their programs through greater diversity. We hope that these resources, and this report as a whole, will be valuable to all those who support the admissions process on your campus.



Supporting Holistic Review: Priorities for Graduate Institutions and Programs

The following principles and practices emerged from CGS's workshop on holistic review in graduate admissions, which included graduate deans, researchers, and representatives of higher education associations and disciplinary societies. We encourage graduate institutions and programs to carefully consider these principles and practices when assessing graduate admissions processes at their universities.

First Principles:

1. ***Diversity is essential to the overall success of graduate programs.*** All students in a program, regardless of background, benefit from taking part in a learning environment that reflects various kinds of diversity.
2. ***It is critical to think beyond the admissions process when developing strategies for diversity and inclusion.*** Ideally, recruitment processes, admissions processes, and strategies for supporting student success should be mutually reinforcing.
3. ***Holistic review processes are most likely to be successful when well-aligned with a graduate institution's mission and with the goals of particular master's, doctoral, and professional graduate programs.***

Promising Practices:

We encourage graduate schools and program directors to work together to:

1. ***Demonstrate a clear commitment to excellence through diversity throughout the graduate education system at your institution.*** Engage in discussions with other campus leaders about making this a priority, and consider how policies and requirements might be leveraged to enact change.
2. ***Gather and analyze department-specific data on graduate admissions.*** Programs can use these data to:
 - identify gender- and race-based patterns in admitted and rejected student characteristics.
 - test whether evidence of student outcomes supports prevailing assumptions about who is likely to succeed (those with a certain GPA or standardized test score, for example).¹

¹ The specific benefits of analyzing department-specific data on graduate admissions were outlined by Julie Posselt, a University of Michigan researcher and faculty member, in her workshop presentation.

- 3. Provide faculty members who make admissions decisions with the context needed to evaluate students appropriately.** In particular,

 - ensure that faculty have opportunities to learn about the quality of undergraduate education at various Minority-Serving Institutions.
 - give faculty opportunities to work with underrepresented minority undergraduates (e.g., through summer programs) and build relationships with undergraduate institutions they may be less familiar with.
 - Provide additional information to the reviewers of applicant files to help them contextualize key criteria.
- 4. Provide faculty with information on the appropriate use of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE).** The Educational Testing Service offers materials designed to help reviewers avoid “mistakes” in using the GRE (www.ets.org/gre/bestpractices), such as adding scores together and using cut-off scores.
- 5. Offer guidance on the optimal sequence for reviewing application materials.** Guidance on which application materials might be most productively considered at the initial, final decision, and funding phases of admissions can help prevent programs from rejecting strong applicants in early rounds based on too few or inappropriate criteria.
- 6. Support communication and alliances between faculty and recruitment officers to ensure that admissions and recruitment efforts are well-aligned.** Faculty in graduate programs and recruitment officers may have opportunities to observe aspects of an applicant that the other group has not; communication can yield a more complete picture of an individual.
- 7. Provide faculty with rubrics for evaluating applicants so that admissions criteria are more transparent and consistently applied.** Rubrics have the added benefits of making evaluation processes more efficient and allowing faculty to more easily compare their assessments.
- 8. Consider alternative funding models (especially in doctoral admissions) that might enable new thinking about admissions.** Because in many doctoral programs, students are funded by their primary advisors, there is a stronger tendency to match students to advisors in the admissions process without considering the contributions of each student to an entire cohort.