

(De)Constructing the Admission Process in Higher Ed

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Abstract

A holistic review admission process may increase equitable access for Latinx students and their degree completion rate. Currently, the Latinx community still has the lowest proportion of college and graduate degree earners in California. According to the Campaign for College Opportunity, “more than 15 million (40%) of California’s population is Latinx” (2018). Thus, the success of the Latinx community is critical since it is the biggest ethnic group in the state. This data is significant both statewide and nationally since the Latinx’s academic success directly affects students’ socio-economic future. I am addressing and examining the holistic review admission process within institutional spaces and its effects in the success of students. I have interviewed ten administrators, one Ph.D. student, and I have examined documents and publications by institutions that have implemented a holistic review process. Equitable access might lead to higher education rates, free of standardized admissions. This approach’s validity will be based on who can contribute to the academic community in meaningful ways, going beyond standardized exams and other requirements.

Necessary Terminology

First, a **Hispanic Serving Institution**, commonly known for its acronyms “HSI,” refers to a federal designation that requires at least 25 percent of full-time undergraduate Hispanic enrollment. The purpose of the HSI designation is to move institutions of higher learning towards the reflection of the institutions’ demographics, compared to the state where the institutions are located. Moreover, the HSI funds come from the federal government to reinforce the infrastructure on campus, develop new buildings or facilities, hire a more diverse faculty or staff, and create opportunities to further academic success and make the environment more inclusive and accessible for Latinxs¹ and Chicanxs², as well as other BIPOC³ students.

Next, **the Holistic Review**, also known as **Comprehensive Review**, refers to mission-aligned admissions or selection processes that consider a broad range of factors when reviewing applications, such as:

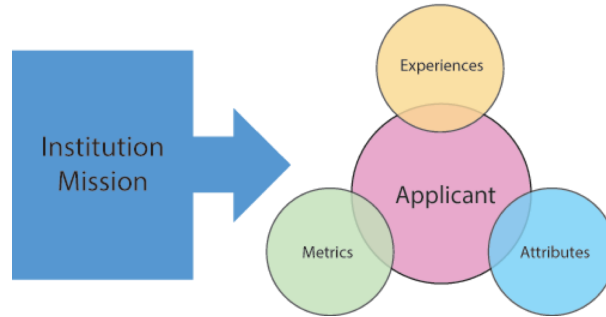
¹ The term Latinx refers to a person of Latin American origin or descent (used as a gender-neutral or nonbinary alternative to Latino or Latina).

² The term Chicanx refers to or relating to Mexican Americans or their culture (used in place of the masculine form Chicano, the feminine form Chicana, or the gender-binary form Chican@).

³ The acronym BIPOC refers to black, indigenous, and other people of color and aims to emphasize the historic oppression of black and indigenous people.

- Experiences related to the predetermined background of applicants
- Attributes, such as strengths and skills from the applicant.
- Academic metrics, such as the overall performance of the applicant, not emphasizing standardized tests as the only academic metric to account, but an overall understanding of the academic performance

Figure 1: The Holistic Review in the Admissions Process



Introduction

While learning about the HSIs and the program's impact on Chicana and Latina students' community, I fostered a deep interest in the Inclusivity in the Holistic Review Process compared to the Standardized Admission Process in Higher Education, from an emerging (HSI) perspective. Through research, data collection, and networking, I reflected on the holistic review and how I aim to intervene in students' success with my research, based on a complete comprehensive individual holistic evaluation. I am aware that students throughout their path and knowledge gained through higher education experience different expectations, such as physical, intellectual, emotional, social, career, spiritual, among others. Furthermore, as a preservice leader and advocate of student affairs in higher education, I want to understand, advocate, and ensure educational **and** social justice. The Latina's community success is crucial for the state of California mainly because diversity is thought to reflect a balance of interests and richness in our society. Also, diverse authorship at higher learning institutions enhances the creation of more diverse ideas, the contribution of innovation, and the preparation of more diverse professionals in our society overall.

Figure 2: The Holistic Chart



Background

According to the Campaign for College Opportunity, “more than 15 million [40%] of California’s population is Latinx” (2018). These demographics show how critical the Latinx’s community success is since it is the biggest ethnic group in the state. This data also makes it a big deal state and nation-wide since this community’s success will be related to the state’s success. More education means more innovation and preparation in life.

Tara Yosso (2006) mentioned, “an understanding that inadequate educational conditions limit equal access and opportunities in Chicana/o schooling reveals that they usually attend overcrowded, run-down, and racially segregated schools and that they are found in a cultural disadvantage as well.” Following along, the Campaign for College Opportunity described in 2018, “Latinx students lag 13% behind White students, [and] High schools graduate Latinx students at a lower percentage than other races and do not provide equitable access to a college-prep curriculum.” Moreover, only 21% of the students who graduated from high school completed the minimum requirements to enter a 4-year university (Yosso, 2006). Followed up by the previous statistics, the Latinx community is still underserved across all levels of education. It is assumed that it has the lowest proportion of college and graduate degree earners in California due to the lack of focus on them. According to Yosso (2006), Latinx “earned 1% of all the doctorate degrees produced in U.S. universities from 1990-2000.” The struggle can be seen since the moment students are in high school, as mentioned by the Campaign for College Opportunity and Yosso(2006) describing the direct pipeline of having only seven Latinx students graduating from college from a 100 elementary students starting cohort. A holistic review admission process in higher education may be the solution to increasing equitable access for Latinx students and their degree completion rate to improve this situation. This takes us to other questions for higher education institutions after high school, such as how a student gets admitted to higher education at the undergraduate and graduate levels?

In the undergraduate admissions level, the focus that a student is applying to may or may not be defined. At the graduate level, the focus usually has to be well defined. A student in undergraduate admissions might have the flexibility to learn and develop their interests. At the graduate level, their interests have to be more narrow. In undergraduate admissions, previous experience might not be required. However, there might be a requirement or recommendation for

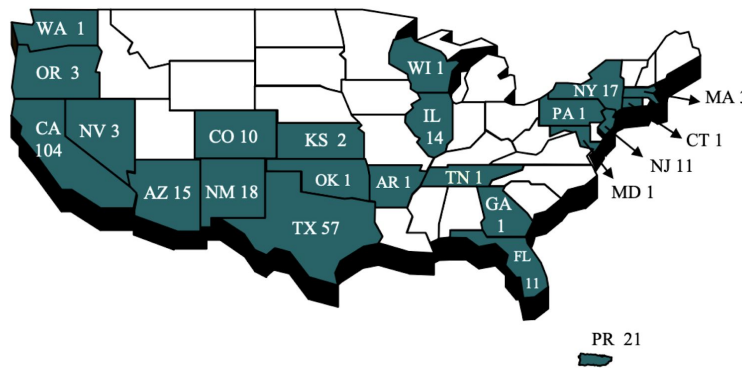
an internship or some exposure in the field of study for graduate programs. Undergraduate admissions have a centralized system in which all applicants go through the same process. In graduate admissions, the system is not as centralized. Different departments or disciplines from one same school, which have a crucial power in admissions, might have different admission processes.

Figure 3: Table Contrasting the Undergraduate and Graduate Processes

Undergraduate level:	Graduate level:
Focus may or may not be defined	Focus more defined
Previous experience not required	Research or internship is usually required or recommended
Central Admissions	Non-centralized admissions

The Bigger Picture

Figure 4: Map of the HSI Institutions in the United States



The map shown above represents the institutions that have a current active HSI status. This map was retrieved from the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU) website, and it is updated up to the year 2020. There are 298 HSI Members in 22 States and Puerto Rico in 2020. As it is visible, California has the most significant number of HSI members in the country, which stresses the importance of the Latinx community within the state and the country. Also, it is important to recognize that several institutions in other states are in the mission of becoming HSIs.

California’s Point of View

Figure 5: Map of the UCs that are HSIs

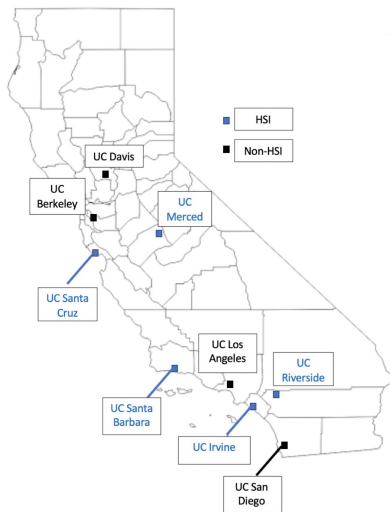


Figure 6: Map of the CSUs that are HSIs



The map above on the left side represents schools in the University of California system that are Hispanic Serving Institutions. I made the map with the data found on the Hispanic Association of Colleges & Universities (HACU) website, which is updated up to the year 2020. As it is visible, only 5 out of the 9 Undergraduate campuses are HSI.

The map on the right side represents schools in the California State University system that are Hispanic Serving Institutions. The map was found on the California State University website. It represents information from 2016, which has not changed since then. In this map, it is easier to appreciate how 21 out of the 23 schools in the system are HSI. From a California focus, these maps include institutions with the possibility to continue education through master or Ph.D. programs. Also, only 26 institutions out of the 104 are 4-year universities, which means that there can be a potential continuation to further expand knowledge at a higher academic level. The other 78 institutions in California are Community Colleges mainly.

Methods

To gain better insight, I conducted a qualitative study and used semi-structured interviews and theoretical frameworks as instruments. I interviewed nine influential administrators, one faculty member, one Ph.D. student, all of them forming part of the UC Davis higher education community from different perspectives. The interviews were conducted through Zoom video calls and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Answers were recorded with consent, and the interviews were transcribed, and an analysis was conducted. Some implications to my method include the lack of voices from scholars in different graduate programs and individuals who make direct decisions within the admission processes outside of the University of California system.

Furthermore, my approach was also influenced by Julie R. Posselt's approach in the book *Inside Graduate Admissions Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping* (2016), which examines her

journey with the admissions processes in higher education at the graduate level, explaining what institutions care about during their admission decisions. Her research was done by conducting interviews with other staff and faculty members of diverse higher education institutions. Moreover, this approach also contributes to new knowledge by directly challenging these essential school administrators and voice holders to understand their perspectives.

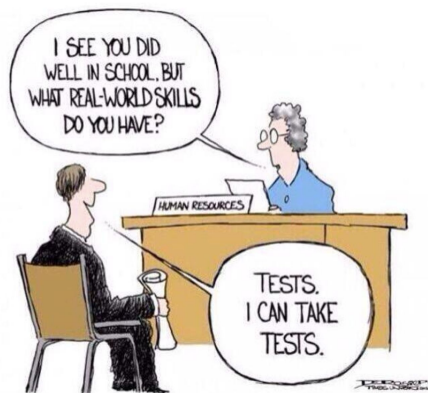
For the interviews, I used similar questions to the ones shown below:

- *What is your understanding of the holistic review process?*
- *Do you know if there have been any short-term benefits of the holistic review process? Long-term benefits of engaging in the holistic review process?*
- *How does the holistic review diversify the student body?*

Significance

This research's significance goes back to the idea of equitable access to potentially lead to higher education rates, free of standardized admissions. This approach's validity will be based on who can contribute to the academic community in meaningful ways, going beyond standardized exams and other requirements. In one study mentioned by Posselt (2016), the results indicated that "making standardized tests scores optional increased the enrollment of women, students of color, and international students, without changing the institution's mean GPA or graduate rate." These are the early results of many more to improve our community as a whole without impacting the education's quality from different institutions across the nation.

Figure 7: Life Outside of Standardized Tests



Findings and Discussion

"The holistic review is the mechanism by which we're achieving HSI status" - (Josephine Moreno, Academic Coordinator for Graduate Studies).

During my research process, I found that the admission process has been evolving and has begun taking a turnabout towards progress. Before, standardized requirements during the admission

process were the most optimal way of offering entry to a new student. Focusing at the graduate level, faculty would evaluate potential graduate students in the initial review of the application through standardized exams, grades, and grade point averages (GPAs). It is understood that due to a surplus in the applicant pools, faculty and departments were forced to develop an admission process to play a role in the judgment of students' admissibility. What was considered an efficient decision-making process is currently seen as a practice that creates inequalities among underprivileged minority students and damages their potential success at higher learning institutions. This admission process' practices have created a more significant impact on the Latinx community by reducing their chances of succeeding, making the pipeline to graduate school even more narrow. Moreover, Dr. Moreno (2020) argues that UC Davis wouldn't be able to be close to achieving the HSI status without the holistic review.

“Faculty members are trying to quantify qualitative information to be able to have a way of giving a number, to create a value on personal and diverse experiences” - (Sheri Atkinson, Associate Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs)

The standardized admission process reflects faculty members' belief that these standardized requirements represent ability and effort, which could help them signal student success or failure in their programs if they were to be accepted. According to Posselt (2016), faculty from different departments or disciplines believed that they have an institutional imperative to avoid risky candidates and have the luxury to reject those whose test scores and grades failed to reach a very high standard. They fundamentally want students that would have an easier transition into their programs instead of struggling in them. Furthermore, the committees from standardized application processes tend to quantify qualities through judgment to facilitate ranking purposes, as mentioned by Dr. Atkinson. In this way, the quality of education seems to be relying on convenience. Students' quality is subjectively assessed and socially constructed based on various interests from departments and faculty members.

“If the holistic review had been available for me back in the days that I was trying to get to college, I probably would have had a different trajectory to my experience” - (Donald E. Hunt, Associate Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Management).

Following this idea, the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores have been used for decades to measure the applicant's academic achievement and intelligence. The higher the scores or grades would translate to, the better they would likely succeed in a program. Moreover, as explained by Yosso (2006), “the GRE provides invalid and culturally biased measures of academic potential, graduate programs continue to use these exams to deny admission to and financial support for [Latinx].” These scores would influence committee members to reject anyone who could be seen as a financial or reputational threat to their programs, like Hunt's experience, because they also do not want to lower their standards and prestige. Lastly, Posselt (2016) warns, “as long as systemic disparities in GRE scores and elite college enrollment persist, it will be more difficult for programs to diversify if their initial standards of quality rely heavily on those qualities.”

“I understand that the test is biased and I understand that the ability to prepare for the standardized tests reflects bias in the students’ wealth and income” - (Gary May, Chancellor).

To whose standard are these requirements? Who do they build the standard around? The reality has been that standardized tests have been measuring acquired skills, not innate skills. This standardized design is critical in the Latinx community and other minority groups because many have not had the same opportunities to excel in those requirements than more privileged students with greater access to economic and academic resources. When there is a flawed test, inherently flawed, the institutions have to critique that relying on the test also creates inequalities. These inequalities create a contrast and a preference between who can and who cannot hire a personal tutor, buy testing materials to prepare for these standardized tests, or have the resources and the capacity available to engage in extracurricular activities without worrying about potential financial, emotional, and social threats, as acknowledged by the Chancellor. For example, many Latinx students "express concerns about student loan debt and employment to offset loans, academic work, and socioeconomic adjustment, and contributing financial support to their families" (Yosso, 2006).

“I don’t let a test score define what my capabilities are academically and professionally”- (4th year Ph.D. student)

An interviewed Ph.D. student described, "I did not do well on these tests. The results reflected that I would have dropped out soon or that I wouldn't have been successful in my doctoral program. That hasn't been the case, I've been very successful in my doctoral program. This is my 4th year advanced to candidacy last year, and ever since I don't let a test score define what my capabilities are academically and professionally." Similarly, as mentioned by Posselt (2016), "GRE scores fail to predict whether a student will complete the Ph.D. reliably." Also, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) indicates that the GRE measures skills and that the scores should not be used as the primary admission consideration.

Conclusions

“The access to resources, access to social capital, economic capital, and a holistic admissions process really capture talents in these students that we should really think about to get a full picture of the student's potential” - (Marcela Cuellar, Associate Professor for the Education Department).

Understandably, admission committee members tend to resist change as the applicant pool increases; the holistic review's burden increases. However, what if, to pick out the best people through the holistic review, there is a system where administrators or deans create a way to incentivize and encourage an environment of looking at applications holistically? What if faculty get rewarded for their time by giving them points for their merits and reviews? This approach would create a systematic change in the admission process. Faculty could be more intentional about their decision-making process and engage more in it. Currently, the holistic review has been seen as the scheme where some committee members measure an individual's intelligence in different ways, from overcoming challenges, being honest, and as someone who has engaged with research previously and is capable of producing different outcomes. As explained by Yosso

(2006), intelligence should be distributed based on the opportunities an individual had in their past, similar to Dr. Cuellar's point of view.

“The holistic review allows students that opportunity to talk about those life things that may have impacted them, that caused some starts and stops, but that doesn't change what their potential is to be very, very strong students” - (Emily Galindo, Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs).

Moreover, committees should also have at least one individual responsible for identifying diversity in the applicant pool from the start to ensure that students with exceptional promise have the advocacy they require. A trend that faculty should follow is seeking for individuals who are thirsty for knowledge, thrive, and finish the program to take what they learned to other spaces, without relying heavily on standardized requirements that do not predict success. As mentioned by Vice-Chancellor Galindo, the potential of students should be recognized besides the experiences that might have impacted them.

“We want faculty and staff to understand the adoption of the holistic review is a good thing and not think that is somehow watering down access to higher education” (Renetta Garrison Tull, Vice Chancellor of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion).

Although some programs, such as in Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), have a significant focus on precision and understanding in the field where the GRE is a valuable measure, there have been many programs that have been encouraged to stop using this standardized test, looking at an overall understanding from students beyond math, as explained by Vice Chancellor Tull. Examples of disciplines that do not focus on the GRE are in Humanities and Social Sciences, which focus on interpreting writing samples during the admission process (Moreno, 2020). These writing samples serve similar purposes as the counterstories proposed by Yosso (2006), where recognizing them as valid and valuable the stories challenge the stories that are used to distort the realities of oppressed communities through the reflection on the lived experiences by the applicants as the voice of the BIPOC community. These stories can potentially challenge research and academia's old perspectives with more diverse ones that reflect the contemporary social injustices within underrepresented communities while nurturing community wealth. A related and relevant question that Posselt (2016) asks is, “if diversity is valued and concerns about inequality are widely known, why do different schools or disciplines continue to rely upon the criteria that undermine equity and adversity?”

“Ideally, we want faculty members who have had very little experience with students of color, who come from poverty, to manage biases that they may have in those students, both in admissions and in the way that they teach them” - (Raquel Aldana, Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Diversity).

A suggested way to solve this question from my interviews was by providing different workshops for faculty and requiring them to educate themselves. Faculty are suggested to read literature outside of their areas and emphasize scholarship by communities of color to question assumptions built-in when identifying talent, like Aldana suggested. This idea is not something

that could be covered in a one hour workshop, but in constant training and engagement with different perspectives and experiences that they have not lived. If we want to see a change, the institutions must require faculty to begin immersing themselves in these practices and creating spaces.

“I don't think we can have a perfect system, but we need to find out a balance in giving access to students to higher education, and eventually meet the needs of our evolving society” - (Mayra Llamas, Executive Director of Community Resource Centers).

Similarly to Dr. Llama's point of view, the standardized review process is a system that has cracks and fails to serve underrepresented communities, and fails to implement diversity, inclusivity, and equity. However, “breaking this cycle requires strong leadership and conversations about how and why diversity matters, what it means for their scholarly work, what students from underrepresented backgrounds will gain from and offer to a program, and what climate is like for students from that group in the program, campus, and broader community” (Posselt, 2016). This dialogue is relevant to how students get admitted, how postdoctoral researchers and faculty are hired, how individuals for awards, grants, and fellowships are selected, and how the labor market in our society is changing intellectually and demographically. My research has shown that the holistic approach not only raises academic success for the Latinx community but the community in general. The idea is that if one underrepresented community rises, then all should rise together.

“[The holistic review] allows us to see applicants as more than just numbers. It allows us to recognize that they are human beings” - (4th year Ph.D. student)

Current and Future Connecting References

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