



Oregon State University

Graduate School

June 11, 2021

Overview

Holistic admissions is a strategy that considers the whole student and touches all aspects of the admissions process. Typically, holistic admissions augments the consideration of traditional measures of academic achievement (e.g., GRE, GPA) with rigorous consideration of an applicant's unique experiences and non-cognitive factors associated with success in graduate school. Best practices in graduate admissions include careful evaluation of a program's outward-facing materials and communications with prospective students, an application process (including tailored questions) carefully designed to elicit valuable information about a candidate's strengths in a variety of dimensions, and a rubric for evaluating those strengths in several relevant areas.

In many graduate programs, admission to the program is solely or largely dependent on an individual faculty member's ability to advise and fund the student, rather than a shared decision by a committee representing the larger goals of the department, school, or college. Faculty making these independent decisions are encouraged to interact with other faculty and staff in their program in the systematic review of candidates' files to gain a broader view of applicants' abilities to succeed in graduate school. In all cases, those who play a role in graduate admissions decisions are urged to use rubrics to ensure rigorous, consistent, and fair evaluations of candidates and to couple rubrics with other opportunities (e.g. interviews, written prompts) for candidates to demonstrate their skills, abilities, and alignment with the major professor's research interests.

This document provides materials to support faculty and staff who work with graduate students, including a (1) a general framework in organizing holistic admissions criteria, (2) guidelines on implementing holistic admissions, (3) suggestions for outward-facing materials and communications with prospective students, (4) sample rubrics currently used by OSU programs in their graduate holistic admissions processes, and (5) a curated list of holistic admissions resources available when this document was developed.

1. A holistic framework

The following four admissions criteria offer a framework in the development of holistic admissions processes in graduate programs. The four criteria offer a *general organizing scheme and starting point*, along with possible indicators that applicants may provide in demonstrating their readiness to pursue graduate studies in your unit. Additional sample artifacts¹ as well as applicant prompts and questions are provided to offer examples of the ways in which a unit may request information related to the indicators. Note that creating tailored application questions is an effective way to support the evaluation of candidates according to these criteria.

This framework is informed by colleagues' general work at other institutions, namely University of Michigan (<https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/resources-for-directors/holistic-review-of-applications>) and Stanford University (<https://admission.stanford.edu/apply/selection/>) as well as William Sedlacek's decades of literature on noncognitive admissions (<http://williamsedlacek.info/>).

Admissions Criteria #1: Academic Success

Academic performance and the potential to grow and succeed can be demonstrated by a combination of these possible indicators, listed in no particular order.

- previous institution(s) of higher education attended and opportunities afforded at these institutions
- Previous degrees and major(s)/minor(s)
- Prior coursework, including its depth and variety, and performance in courses specifically related to the student's intended graduate degree
- Honors, awards, scholarships or other academic distinctions
- Progression of academic performance over time and contextual factors, if appropriate
- Quantitative metrics including overall GPA, GPA in major(s)/minor(s), standardized test scores
- Participation in scholar programs such as McNair, MARC U-STAR, LSAMP, Gates Millennium, GEM Fellowship, Ford Family Foundation Scholars, RISE, and TRIO SSS
- Industry- or discipline-specific certifications
- Skills and aptitudes that would support academic success including, but not limited to, motivation, persistence, self-direction, planning, organization, and initiative
- Written communication skills
- Realistic appraisal of work, time, and skills involved in pursuing this specific graduate degree
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- Foreign language fluency

¹ The term "artifact" is gaining currency in the field of holistic admissions, and refers broadly to the type of evidence learners may present to demonstrate their knowledge or skills in lieu of "documentation," acknowledging that in some fields evidence may take on a variety of formats (e.g. video, audio) and be more personal.

Sample artifacts, prompts or questions for applicants that may provide evidence of above indicators:

- Academic statement of purpose
- Faculty, advisor, or employer recommendations that speak to the student's previous academic or work achievements broadly
- Curriculum vitae/resume
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Please tell us about your previous formal academic experiences (e.g. degrees pursued, coursework, certificates) and how those have prepared you to pursue graduate studies at Oregon State University? Please address preparation that is specific to this discipline.
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Please tell us about other relevant experiences (e.g. work or volunteer experience) that have prepared you to pursue graduate studies at Oregon State University? Please address preparation that is specific to this discipline.
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) What skills and aptitudes do you believe are essential to succeeding at graduate studies? Describe ways in which you have honed these skills and aptitudes and which are still emerging.

Admissions Criteria #2: Scholarly Potential

Scholarly performance and the potential to grow and succeed can be demonstrated by a combination of these possible indicators.

- Scholarly activity at previous institution(s) or employment including, but not limited to publications, presentations, posters, grants, patents, and research experiences for undergraduates (REU)
- Scholarly engagement outside of coursework and employment including, but not limited to, volunteer or service activities, membership in and/or meeting attendance at professional organizations related to the discipline, mentorship activities
- Performance in previous research-specific coursework, trainings, and academically oriented employment (if any)
- Field or lab-specific trainings in an academic or non-academic setting
- Skills and aptitudes that support would scholarly activity including, but not limited to, curiosity, creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and initiative
- Written communication skills
- Honors, awards, scholarships, or other related distinctions

Sample artifacts, prompts or questions for applicants that may provide evidence of above indicators:

- Academic statement of purpose
- Faculty, advisor, or employer recommendations that speak to the student's readiness to pursue graduate studies and academic promise in their chosen discipline
- Curriculum vitae/resume

- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Please tell us about relevant experiences that demonstrate your potential to pursue graduate studies and scholarly work at Oregon State University. Please address preparation that is specific to this discipline.
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) What skills and aptitudes do you believe are essential to scholarly work at the graduate level? Where and how have you honed these skills and aptitudes and which still need to be developed?
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Please tell us what discipline-specific areas of inquiry excite you and which you believe might make for compelling research topics?

Admissions Criteria #3: Commitment, Persistence, and Leadership

Personal resolve, dedication, and initiative can be demonstrated by a combination of these possible indicators.

- Progression of academic performance over time and contextual factors, if appropriate
- Extracurricular involvement including the diversity of activities, duration and type of involvement, and growth in leadership
- Community service or volunteerism including the diversity of activities, duration and type of involvement, depth of contributions, and progression toward leadership
- Quality and impact of leadership role(s)
- Personal hardships or obstacles encountered and evidence of resilience
- Identification and availability of academic, professional, and personal support networks
- Commitment to building an inclusive environment across contexts
- Commitment to ongoing learning and development related to issues of justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity

Sample artifacts, prompts or questions for applicants that may provide evidence of above indicators:

- Academic statement of purpose
- Faculty, advisor, employer, or community member recommendations that speak to the student's commitment to inclusivity, their ability to persist and overcome obstacles, and their involvement and leadership as it relates to extracurricular activities and volunteerism
- Curriculum vitae/resume
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Please tell us about a time when you were disappointed by an academic, work, or extracurricular outcome. How did you handle this situation?
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Please tell us about your previous formal or informal leadership experiences and how you think these will help you succeed with graduate studies?
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) How have your previous experiences demonstrated your commitment to fostering inclusivity in your educational and/or work settings?

Admissions Criteria #4: Life Experiences and Background

The diversity and richness of an individual's background and the value of how these experiences have prepared them for graduate study can be demonstrated by a combination of these possible indicators. Note that admissions decisions should focus on the life experiences and background and not on the identity itself.

- Previous institution(s) attended, including, but not limited to, HBCUs, tribal schools, community colleges, and international institutions
- Previous educational program participation, including, but not limited to, Federal TRIO programs, college assistance migrant programs, immersion programs, and honors programs
- Previous work experiences
- Special talents or skills
- Citizenship and parents' citizenship
- Native language and/or languages spoken
- Life experiences related to identity status, including, but not limited to, those that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education (e.g. students of color, veterans, disabled students, first-generation students) that have helped the candidate grow in perspective, maturity, ability to adapt, etc.
- Geographic home(s) as well as significant travel experiences
- Cross-cultural experiences and opportunities for meaningful engagement with those different from self
- Extenuating circumstances (e.g., health challenges, frequent moves, economic hardship, responsibility for raising a family)

Sample artifacts, prompts or questions for applicants that may provide evidence of above indicators:

- Personal statement
- Faculty, advisor, employer, or community member recommendations that speak broadly to the student's identity and unique experiences as they relate to motivation for graduate studies
- Curriculum vitae/resume
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) How have your past life experiences prepared you to pursue and successfully complete graduate studies and contribute to the university community? Please provide specific examples.
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Based on your diverse life experiences, what lessons have you learned that you believe will support you on your graduate journey?
- (possible prompt for interview or written response) Do you have any extenuating circumstances that have affected past educational opportunities or your ability to be successful in them? If so, please describe to the extent you are comfortable doing so.

2. Implementing a holistic approach to the admissions decision

Moving away from the current approach to admissions decisions requires consideration of both cultural and procedural aspects. In our experience, cultural change happens when faculty are able to consider evidence that (a) GRE scores are unfavorably skewed for underrepresented groups (b) GRE scores are poor predictors of success in graduate school (c) consideration of other cognitive and non-cognitive factors leads to better selection processes and student outcomes; and (d) holistic admissions provides a supportive, rigorous approach to doing what many faculty already do informally - assessing quantitative and other, qualitative evidence to determine the likelihood that an applicant will succeed in the program and in working with the advisor.

As for procedural considerations, graduate programs' admissions decisions fall into three broad categories: (a) those in which admissions decisions are typically a matter of simply meeting a minimum GPA or standardized test score, and decisions about whether they meet the criteria are rapid and quantitative; (b) those in which an admissions committee makes all decisions; and (c) those in which a prospective major professor makes the decision, or at least drives the decision making process.

Programs with the first type of admissions decision might consider whether the diversity of admitted students could be improved by considering other factors in some circumstances, especially with the national movement away from requiring the GRE and the complications of testing during the pandemic.

In the second type of admissions decision, implementing holistic admissions requires a partnership between the program director, anyone involved in recruiting, and the admissions committee. Committee members will need to become well versed in the rationale and best practices for holistic admissions. Perhaps the most efficient way to understand the scope of holistic admissions and the thoughtful planning and training that is involved is to read this document:

https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS_HolisticReview_final_web.pdf

The admissions committee, with the consent of the graduate faculty in the program, should develop a holistic admissions plan, including a rubric and application questions, appropriate to the discipline (see section 4). Each applicant will then be scored using the rubric, and admissions decisions will be informed by comparing the scores across all applicants.

The third type of admissions decision requires a more substantial process change. Various approaches to the current process are possible: (a) applicants can be divided among faculty members, with some consideration given to the preferences applicants express for advisors; each faculty member will use the rubric for all applicants at this stage, then all faculty gather to discuss all applicants, calibrate their use of the rubric, and arrive at a ranked list of applicants matched to advisors; (b) a subset of faculty serve as a screening committee, apply the rubric to all applicants, and then provide a ranked list with notes from which potential advisors then make their own decisions, perhaps after interviewing some applicants; (c) as with (b), but in reverse order: potential advisors first return their own ranked lists to the committee, and then the committee makes final decisions considering the demographic makeup of the entire applicant pool and admitted pool. This third approach may be appropriate for programs in which the diversity of incoming students is an unmet goal.

3. Suggestions for outward-facing materials and communications with prospective students

Outward-facing materials like a program website, print materials, and email communications provide an opportunity to highlight a unit's commitment to and rationale for employing holistic admissions. Some points to consider featuring are:

- Benefits of employing holistic admissions processes and admitting students from diverse backgrounds in terms of supporting the field of study and related industry. Examples include:
 - [University of Washington Graduate School](#)
 - [UC San Diego Biomedical Sciences Program](#)
 - [University of Minnesota Medical School](#)
 - [Princeton University](#)
- Reasons why the program, school, or college is using holistic admissions for graduate admissions. At times, a unit will share its rationale to eliminate standardized testing requirements or other traditional metrics in a press release or similar public announcement. Examples include:
 - [Cornell University School of Biomedical Engineering](#)
 - [University of North Carolina Department of Chemistry](#)
 - [Colorado State University Department of Atmospheric Science](#)
- Evidence that holistic review is supported across the academic unit. Examples include:
 - [Oregon State University College of Earth, Ocean, & Atmospheric Sciences](#)
 - [University of Pittsburgh School of Education](#)
- Thorough description of the review process including required application materials and typical qualities and attributes of admitted students. Examples include:
 - [Stanford University Department of Physics](#)
 - [Duke University Department of Chemistry](#)
 - [UC Davis Graduate Group in Ecology](#)

4. Sample rubrics

A number of OSU graduate programs currently employ robust holistic admissions processes including the development and utilization of rubrics to evaluate candidate's application materials and interview. Scores from the rubrics provide important information in the decision making process, but rarely are the sole determinant in an admission decision.

SAMPLE holistic admissions rubric (used in tandem with the reviewer worksheet) from the College of Veterinary Medicine, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program

Admissions Scoring Rubric

Item	High (3)	Medium (2)	Low (1)	None (0)
Academic Load (average credits per term)	Heavy >16 hr	Moderate 12-15 hr	Light <12 hr	None
Work Load (average hours per week)	Heavy >16 hr	Moderate 12-15 hr	Light <12 hr	No work experience
Volunteer/Extracurricular Load (average hours per week)	Heavy >16 hr	Moderate 12-15 hr	Light <12 hr	No volunteer or extracurricular experience
Research Experience	Yes/No. Please use your discretion when evaluating the quality of research. Space is provided for comments.			
Additional Animal Experience	Extensive experience caring for and handling animals	Moderate experience caring for and handling animals	Minimal experience caring for and handling animals	No animal experiences provided
Veterinary Medicine Experience (Please consider the quality and diversity of experiences as well)	Extensive veterinary experience in a clinical setting. 1000+ hours	Moderate veterinary experience in a clinical setting. 300-1000 hours	Minimal veterinary experience in a clinical setting. <300 hours	No veterinary experiences provided
Personal Statement & Supplemental Essays	Above Average	Average	Below Average	None given
Writing Skills	Above Average	Average	Below Average	None given
Demonstration of commitment to diversity and inclusion	Has been an active advocate for diversity, equity, and/or inclusion	Some evidence of engagement with diversity, equity, and/or inclusion	Limited evidence of engagement with diversity, equity, and/or inclusion	No evidence of engagement with diversity, equity, and/or inclusion

LOR DVM:	Exceptional	Very Good	Good	Poor
LOR 2	Exceptional	Very Good	Good	Poor
LOR 3	Exceptional	Very Good	Good	Poor
Confidence in Academics		Does the applicant's past academic performance generate confidence in their ability to handle the veterinary curriculum? Yes or No. If uncertain, please provide comments.		
Overall Remark		Provide overall remark: recommend, highly recommend, or DO NOT recommend. If you feel that the student deserves a second look by the admissions committee, be sure to mark them "highly recommend," especially if their academics are numerically not stellar.		

Comments: Please do make comments in the overall comment box as they are very important for the decision-making process of the admission committee. Please DO NOT include information such as GRE scores or GPA, as that information is easily accessible to the admissions committee. Please DO provide information from the personal statement, interesting research experiences, overcoming adversity, commitment to diversity & inclusion, anything important in the letters, etc. This may be the most valuable information you can provide to the committee!

SAMPLE holistic admissions reviewer worksheet (used in tandem with the rubric) from the College of Veterinary Medicine, Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program

Applicant Name: _____

	Score	Comments
Academic load (0-3)		
Work load (0-3)		
Volunteer/extracurricular load (0-3)		
Research experience (Yes/no and describe)		
Additional animal experience (0-3 and comments)		
Veterinary medicine experience (0-3 and comments)		
Personal statements and supplemental essays (0-3 and please provide comments on content)		
Writing skills (0-3 and comments)		
Demonstration of commitment to diversity & inclusion (0-3 and please describe)		
Contribution to diversity of student body (If so, how?)		
DVM letter of recommendation (0-3 and comments)		
Letter of recommendation #2 (0-3 and comments)		
Letter of recommendation #3 (0-3 and comments)		
Confident in academics (Yes/no. Please comment if uncertain)		

Overall comments (Please provide information from the personal statement, interesting research experiences, commitment to diversity & inclusion, anything important in the letters, etc. This may be the most valuable information you can provide to the committee!):

Reviewer recommendation: Recommend / Highly recommend / Do NOT recommend

SAMPLE applicant screening tool from the College of Education, Community College Leadership/ Leadership in Higher Education graduate program

CCL/LHE Applicant Screening

Applicant: _____ Evaluator: _____

1. Career aspirations/goals following completion of the EdD/PhD focus on assuming a leadership role in a community college / four-year college or university. (Aspiration to assume a faculty or administrative leadership position in a college or university; professional experiences indicate an interest in and commitment to education.) Potential evidence: statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy; reflection paper; letter(s) of recommendation; publications.

- ___ Exceptional Potential
- ___ Good Potential
- ___ Low Potential
- ___ Unqualified

Comments:

2. Prior educational achievement allows applicant to benefit from the program within a reasonable time frame. (At least 33 quarter credits of graduate course work appropriate for your career aspirations; minimum combined GPA of 3.0 (A=4.0) for the last 90 quarter credit hours of graded undergraduate course work for the first baccalaureate degree plus all work completed thereafter.) Potential evidence: transcript(s) or grades for both undergraduate and graduate preparation; GRE verbal, quantitative, and analytic scores; letter(s) of recommendation; statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy; reflection paper.

- ___ Exceptional Potential
- ___ Good Potential
- ___ Low Potential
- ___ Unqualified

Comments:

3. Prior work experience allows the applicant to benefit from the program in a reasonable time frame. (At least three years of successful professional experience appropriate for the applicant's career aspirations.) Potential evidence: resume, statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy; reflection paper; letter(s) of recommendation.

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

4. Ability to communicate orally and in writing which demonstrates that the applicant will benefit from the program, including the writing of the doctoral dissertation. Potential evidence: summary of experiences, goals, and philosophy; reflection paper; transcript(s) of undergraduate grades; professional writing including thesis and journal articles; GRE verbal score; for international students a minimum 575 combined TOEFL score and 4 TWE score; interview.

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

5. The applicant has knowledge of issues facing higher education. Potential evidence: statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy; reflection paper; resume; letter(s) of recommendation; transcripts.

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

6. The applicant has knowledge of the teaching and learning process. Potential evidence: statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy; reflection paper; resume; transcripts; letter(s) of recommendation.

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

7. The applicant has knowledge of social justice issues facing colleges and universities. Potential evidence: statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy; interview

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

8. The applicant will be able to enhance and enrich the experience of other cohort members.
Potential evidence: evidence for criteria 2 and 3; statement of experiences, goals, and philosophy;
interview

- Exceptional Potential
 Good Potential
 Low Potential
 Unqualified

Comments:

Overall Evaluation:

- Exceptional Potential
 Good Potential
 Low Potential
 Unqualified

Comments:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

**SAMPLE applicant interview questions from the College of Education, Community College
Leadership/ Leadership in Higher Education (CCL/LHE) graduate program**

Applicant: _____ Evaluator: _____

Introduce yourselves and share that the interview is 25 minutes and consists of six (or seven) questions. State there will be time for questions at the end.

1. Tell us about your pathway to becoming a higher education leader. Where do you hope your career will take you in the next 5 years?

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

2. How do you anticipate our doctoral program supporting your career trajectory?

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

3. How does social justice inform your leadership practice? In which areas of social justice leadership do you feel you need to grow?

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

4. Our department has a commitment to providing mentoring, engaging in holistic advising, and supporting student success. What are you looking for in a mentor and/or advisor?

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential
- Unqualified

Comments:

5. In addition to your primary advisor, you will need support from a variety of sources. Please share who or what will support you on your doctoral journey (i.e., time away from work, family, cohort, time management skills)?

- Exceptional Potential
- Good Potential
- Low Potential

___ Unqualified

Comments:

6. Choose one of the questions below based on PhD vs EdD interview:

EDD: Can you describe a problem of practice that you would be interested in exploring for your dissertation?

PHD: Can you describe the research interests that you would like to pursue for your dissertation?

___ Exceptional Potential

___ Good Potential

___ Low Potential

___ Unqualified

Comments:

7. *OPTIONAL:* Other questions that seem appropriate or are unique to the situation of the applicant (i.e., see notes in spreadsheet)?

___ Exceptional Potential

___ Good Potential

___ Low Potential

___ Unqualified

Comments:

8. What questions do you have for us?

Overall Evaluation:

___ Exceptional Potential

___ Good Potential

___ Low Potential

___ Unqualified

Comments:

Signature:

Date:

SAMPLE applicant interview questions from the College of Education, OSU-Cascades Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) graduate program

Scoring Scale:	1 significantly below	2 progressing toward standard	3 meets standard	4 exceeds standard
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Candidate Name: _____ Date: _____
Interviewer: _____

1. **Why would you like to become a teacher?**

2. **Applying to a full-time and rigorous graduate program is a serious undertaking. What personal traits and factors will contribute to your success? What concerns do you have about your ability to be successful in this graduate program?**

3. **Diversity in the classroom is growing tremendously in Oregon and throughout the nation.**
 - a. **What opportunities have you had working and collaborating in diverse, multicultural, and inclusive settings?**

 - b. **As a teacher, how will you capitalize on diversity to improve learning?**

4. **Tell us about a time in which you experienced a personal or professional “set back.”**

***Follow up if critical feedback is not addressed: Talk about the role of critical feedback in this process.*

5. **The MAT program runs on a cohort model. Tell us about a time in which you worked as a member of a team or group. What challenges did you encounter? What do you typically bring to a group or team?**

6. **What else should we know about you as an applicant and your decision to enter the teaching profession?**

5. General Resources

- Council of Graduate Schools, Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions
https://cgsnet.org/ckfinder/userfiles/files/CGS_HolisticReview_final_web.pdf
- CollegeBoard, Understanding Holistic Review in Higher Education Admissions
<https://professionals.collegeboard.org/pdf/understanding-holistic-review-he-admissions.pdf>
- ETS, Navigating Holistic Admissions for a Stronger Graduate Program
<https://www.holisticadmissions.org/>
- University of Washington, Graduate School, Holistic Admissions
<https://grad.uw.edu/equity-inclusion-and-diversity/programs-resources/for-faculty-and-staff/holistic-admissions-2/>
- University of Iowa, Graduate College, Holistic Review in Graduate Admissions
<https://www.grad.uiowa.edu/faculty-staff/dgs-graduate-faculty/toolkits/holistic-review-in-graduate-admissions>