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Holistic Review Is Just One Part Of The College Admission Process

**Willard Dix** Contributor ⓘ*I cover the college admission process and how it affects families.*

Today's college admission word is "holistic," which means the same thing as "comprehensive" but sounds a lot trendier. Schools that have been reading students' applications thoroughly for years now describe what they do as "holistic evaluations," the same way everything that's even moderately famous is now described as "iconic." But there's a lot more to the process than just reading students' applications and making yes or no decisions.

To read college applications thoroughly, an institution, first of all, needs to have a reasonable ratio of readers to applicants. They may hire readers for application season and have them work in teams to provide multiple perspectives on each application and balance subtle prejudices that may color any individual's assessment. Readers in the holistic-reading group of institutions look at all aspects of an applicant's folder, from the numbers to the number and depth of extracurriculars to the quality of essays and courseload. They're trying to create a fully-realized portrait from all the application's puzzle pieces. The primary question to be answered is, "Will this applicant add to our campus life and will he/she be successful here?"



If these questions were being answered in a vacuum and if the number of available seats in a class were more elastic, it's safe to say that most applicants could be accepted (as most students are at most colleges and universities, by the way). But other factors

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invisible to outsiders make the process much more complex, holistic or not.

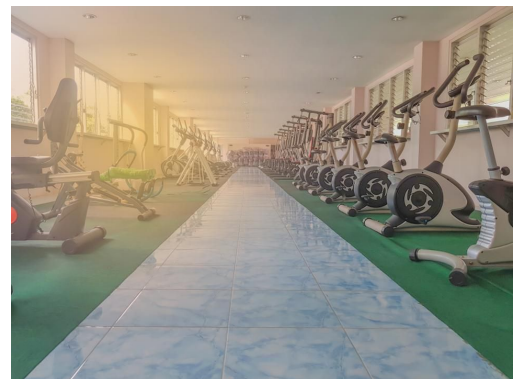
Colleges and universities have needs and one of their primary needs is to stay in business. Without students, they're just clusters of buildings. This situation isn't new or unusual: Colleges have struggled to stay open from the earliest days of their existence. For many, especially the older ones, the cushion of a healthy endowment makes life a little easier. But that begs the question, Where did that endowment come from?

Like it or not, colleges and universities need to do what they can to thrive in a highly competitive environment where government doesn't provide much financial support or can even be hostile to their work. So we see the construction of elegant dining complexes, massive athletic facilities (check out the one at [Ohio State](#), for example) and, perhaps most excessively, the new version of the oft-maligned "climbing wall," the "[lazy river](#)." (Which makes climbing walls look puny.) Although we may lament the intense competitiveness these perks indicate, they're simply the result of a long history of competition.

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All of this activity represents a very particular calculus designed to bring in not just the right number and quality of student, but also those who will serve very specific needs of the institution. These needs include:

1. Enough full-pay students to keep the budget as balanced as possible.
2. Enough diversity to serve the institution's stated desires for a diverse population.



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3. Enough students on significant financial aid to enable the institution to fulfill its stated commitment to serving students from every economic level.
4. Enough qualified students to keep up the college's reputation, however defined.
5. Enough athletes to populate teams important to the institution's local, regional and (if Div I) national reputation.
6. Enough "legacy" admits to keep alumni happily supporting the college.
7. Enough "development" cases to stack the deck in favor of future financial benefits. Not a *quid pro quo*, exactly, but perhaps a bet on a favorable windfall at some point in the future.
8. Enough students with other talents and interests to keep small departments, the arts, and various other campus activities active.
9. Enough attention to the president's, trustees' and professors' requests for more potential computer scientists, philosophers, writers and so on.
10. Enough students, period.

Getting to #10 means figuring out how many applicants to accept by predicting how many of them will actually enroll so you can have a "Goldilocks" class--not too few, not too many, but just the right number. Too many means a strain on resources; too few means not enough money coming in. That also means keeping track of what happened last year: An overage then means accepting fewer students now; underenrollment means taking more students this year. An admission dean can be fired either way if targets aren't consistently met.

The bottom line for students? Once they submit their applications, they'll be read holistically at many schools (even large universities may offer to do a special read if requested instead of relying primarily on numbers), but they'll then be buffeted by all the other forces tugging at the admission office. You can't control any of them. The best you can do is present yourself fully and forcefully as someone who will be an asset to the institution. After that, you simply have to ride it out and hope for the best.

See my blog at collegeculture.net for essays about the college admission process as well as a resource list of books, articles, and films related to the college process.



Willard Dix Contributor

I was an admission officer at Amherst College for eight years and college counselor at a Chicago private school for six. For the last 12 years, I've helped underserved students navigate the college process. I've also taught high school English and theater. Since 1990 I've w...

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