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**BUILDING ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND EDUCATING THE WHOLE
PERSON THROUGH THE HOLISTIC ADMISSION APPROACH. THE U.S.
UNIVERSITY MODEL**

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Abstract

U.S. universities - which lead all international academic rankings - have developed a twofold intertwined mission of building academic excellence within the student corps, at the same time promoting the integrated, multi-tier development of the students as fledgling scholars/professionals and, necessarily, as community members and well-rounded individuals. In my presentation I will explore the goals, requirements, and benefits of the holistic admissions system in place at U.S. universities, so as to highlight the admissions approach and the applicant selection philosophy that account for the ultimate mission of the U.S. higher education institution, that is building academic excellence and educating the whole person. A final survey of admissions approaches at a range of elite U.S. institutions will document the golden benefits the approach yields for strengthening academic standards and developing community spirit.

Keywords: holistic approach, admissions requirements, academic excellence, well-rounded student, community involvement.

Holistic Admission: Goals and Requirements

The holistic admission approach that is the signature feature of U.S. universities has been designed to attract students who have the potential to excel on the campus and make the most of its opportunities, at the same time ensuring a vibrant learning community which will nurture the students' comprehensive development into well-rounded professionals and engaged community members.

This twofold objective is accomplished through a coordinated effort, with the admissions requirements simultaneously gauging the applicants' academic prowess, talents, accomplishments, interests, and compatibility with the campus values and its specific educational vision [1]. To this effect, the admission requirements will commonly include a range of objective, quantifiable and measurable items, that is quantitative features, that will be complemented by subjective, qualitative elements. Together, these two sets of features are capable to realistically sound and assess the applicant's current abilities and potential for growth [2].

With an exceptionally diverse [3] higher education system including over 4,500 colleges, universities, and institutes, all enjoying full academic autonomy, the USA is still very consistent in its admissions approach as all accredited institutions will require the same core items in the application package:

- an academic record showing the applicant's performance in high school, in the case of applicants to undergraduate study, or in the undergraduate program, in the case of applicants to graduate programs;
- standardized test scores - SAT for undergraduate applicants and GRE for graduate ones - that provide a common denominator and facilitate a comparative approach to applicants graduating from diverse institutions in the USA and worldwide, with a range of academic standards;
- letters of recommendation from teaching staff and other professionals that know the applicants well and are therefore able to evaluate abilities and potential, at the same time contextualizing their accomplishments in school and outside, as the case may be [4];
- a personal essay that is intended to allow applicants to convey their own ideas, interests, and aspirations to the admissions committee, so as to provide a vivid, truthful and comprehensive picture of their unique features and the way they can enhance the campus and make it a rich and fertile learning environment; also referred to as personal statement or statement of purpose [5];
- extracurricular activities that unfailingly point to the applicants' value system and the way they will externalize it outside class.

In a huge higher education system fully decentralized, with no Ministry of Education to impose standards and requirements, the five items above will consistently act as the core elements of the application package throughout the USA, no matter the size, the vision and mission, the complexity, or the location of each and every higher education institution.

The Holistic Admission Philosophy across Sample U.S. Higher Education Institutions

In support of the above statement, I will survey some of the American flagship universities that constantly top international academic rankings for the purpose of documenting their admissions policies, as highlighted in their promotional materials and websites, as well as the relevant literature. The variety ensured by the close up on the admissions requirements at a range of superb universities across the USA will be balanced by the consistency of the admissions approach revealed also across levels of study, that is by both the undergraduate admissions policies and the graduate ones. In addition, I will aim to provide evidence that the holistic admission philosophy is the cornerstone of the admissions system in any academic institution in search of excellence, no matter its form of ownership.

I will first focus on California and then move east, to demonstrate that the university admissions pattern ensuring compatibility between applicants and institutional academic standards and goals and, thereby, academic excellence, prevail throughout the USA. The majority of the universities selected for this purpose rank in the very elite group of the top 20 institutions worldwide in all major academic rankings [6], [7], [8], and none ranks lower than nr. 50.

Stanford University - a leading private university always ranked among the top 10 universities worldwide - is very explicit about their selection process [9]. The guiding principles of their admission philosophy are spelled out on the website and the beauty of the holistic approach that helps attract powerful applicants that make well-rounded students is encoded in every single paragraph. Holistic admission is implicitly stated, no matter how briefly, in the section on Academic Excellence - "The most important credential that enables us to evaluate your academic record is the high school transcript. Remember, however, that our evaluation of your application goes beyond any numerical formula." - or comprehensively affirmed under Intellectual Vitality, to be then repeatedly revisited in the sections on the Personal Context, the Essay and the Extracurricular Activities, as the quotes below clearly indicate:

"We want to see your commitment, dedication, and genuine interest in expanding your intellectual horizons, both in what you write about yourself and in what others write on your behalf. We want to see the kind of curiosity and enthusiasm that will allow you to spark a lively discussion in a freshman seminar and continue the conversation at a dinner table. We want to see the energy and depth of commitment you will bring to your endeavors, whether that means in a research lab, while being part of a community organization, during a performance, or on an athletic field. We want to see the initiative with which you seek out opportunities that expand your perspective and that will allow you to participate in creating new knowledge." ([9], section on Intellectual Vitality)

"By focusing on your achievements within context, we evaluate how you have excelled within your unique school environment and how you have taken advantage

of what was available to you in your school and community.” ([9], section on Personal Context)

”... We read essays to get to know you as a person and to learn about the ideas and interests that motivate you....” ([9], section on Essay)

“Learning about your extracurricular activities and nonacademic interests helps us to discover your potential contributions to the Stanford residential community.... An exceptional depth of experience in one or two activities may demonstrate your passion more than minimal participation in five or six clubs. We want to see the impact you have had on that club, in your school, or in the larger community, and we want to learn of the impact that experience has had on you.” ([9], section on Extracurricular Activities)

Equally prestigious UCLA - University of California at Los Angeles, this time a leading public university - takes very much the same approach as the campus publication *UCLA Today* carried in its Faculty and Staff News section of as early as 2009 an article, by one of the university vice chancellors, in favor of holistic admission under the title “Holistic evaluation makes admissions fair”. As UCLA chose to embrace holistic admission in 2009, alongside Stanford, MIT, UC Berkeley and the Ivy League super-elite schools - Harvard, Princeton, Brown, Dartmouth, Columbia, Cornell, Yale, University of Pennsylvania, in random order [10] - the local perception was that

“the holistic approach is a fair and judicious method of assessment designed to avoid admissions decisions on the basis of narrow differences in quantitative criteria, The UCLA faculty’s move toward a holistic model is intended to make the university more accessible to the most qualified and academically competitive students as the university continues to look for students who reach beyond academic excellence and demonstrate outstanding personal achievement, distinctive talents and the potential to make meaningful contributions to the campus and to the world” [11].

As major benefits of this all-inclusive selection process, the UCLA article quoted above mentions superior integration of applicant information provided in the application package that can be better contextualized and personalized, therefore adding a qualitative dimension to the overall assessment. The UCLA leadership was quite explicit about the enhanced quality of admissions through the holistic approach, as stated in the 2009 article: “Under the new model, the review of each application will be an integrated process that will consider the full record of a student’s achievements and experiences, as well as the challenges faced, and provide a more carefully individualized and qualitative assessment.” [11].

The Holistic Admission Philosophy across Levels of Study: Undergraduate Programs

The trend originally initiated by private elite universities flooded with applications and in need of more refined admissions criteria soon began to spread and what started in late 20th

century and reached momentum in the first decade of the 21st century – described in the above paragraphs – has become by now the norm in admissions to U.S. higher education. Consequently, the overall long-term benefits of holistic admission have turned this comprehensive approach to academic selection into the standard, routine procedure at higher education institutions across the USA and North America in general.

The move started by American private colleges and universities soon spread to their public counterparts and what appeared innovative a few years ago, has developed strong roots throughout the academic community and has grown by now into the very norm for admissions. *The New York Times* carried an article entitled “The Whole Applicant” in its issue of October 26 2009 stating the very essence of the holistic admissions approach: “When you look at an application holistically you have a clearer picture of who that student is.” [12] In addition, when applicants are able to “easily meet academic requirements” [12], higher education institutions need to come up with more refined selection criteria. All the more so as “merely pushing average grades and test scores ever higher won’t necessarily yield the most vibrant student body” [12].

The article also speaks to the large-scale benefits of the holistic admission approach as it enables the selection of a range of students who each will be admitted in view of their distinctive talents and accomplishments, so as to enhance the U.S. campus and generate a fertile climate for the informal learning. This climate is encouraged through the multiple opportunities for extracurricular activities and service learning the U.S. campus provides to students. “A holistic evaluation, admissions officials say, allows the luxury of thoughtfully knitting together a multitalented student body as well as a diverse one” [12].

Another element that accounts for the success of the holistic admissions approach is the general limitation inherent in any academic evaluation relying heavily on numbers, that necessarily leaves out the non-quantifiable elements in any applicant’s file. Apart from capturing more fully and more realistically the complexity of each and every applicant’s personality, accomplishments and potential, the comprehensive approach to admissions also aims to set right what may be a common trend on both sides of the Atlantic, the all too common grade inflation: “It also counters the wave of grade inflation in American high schools that makes ranking applicants by a numerical index ‘more problematic’ ” [12].

The awareness of the need for a more comprehensive admissions process, able to go beyond the all too limited numbers and test scores, was felt even earlier, as evidenced, among others, by a 2006 article in *The Daily Princetonian*, the campus publication of Princeton University. “With so much competition for a limited number of spots, elite universities like Princeton have the ability to do more than select applicants merely on the basis of GPA and SAT scores” [13] which are perceived as “narrow, quantitative information” in the same article. In the American educational jargon, the GPA stands for the “grade point average” which compiles all the grades obtained by a student over a period of time, being thus indicative of student academic achievement [14]. The SAT is the standardized test commonly required for admission to higher education in the USA [15].

As early as 2006, educators on elite U.S. campuses were aware and convinced that

“while students who excel in subjects ranging from physics to classics contribute greatly to the student body, so do those applicants who provide the University with the blend of experiences, knowledge, skills and abilities it needs to create the best possible learning community” [13].

The conclusion is overtly in favour of the comprehensive admissions approach: “A holistic evaluation of candidates that takes into consideration each individual’s potential contribution to the University community should remain the foundation of the admissions process” [13].

To conclude this survey of the U.S.-based holistic admissions approach meant to evaluate the “ ‘whole student’, that is, considering the talents and potential that the grades and standardized-test scores do not reveal” [16], I will highlight the holistic philosophy at yet another highly competitive private university, this time Vanderbilt University. Their admissions blog captures in its Dec. 13 2008 post the very essence of this admissions approach and its beneficial impact on creating an enriching learning community on campus by selecting the applicants that will be able to make the most of the intellectual stimulation and personality growth that the undergraduate program is intended to foster:

“Please remember that we always have, and always will conduct a holistic, need-blind admissions process. So many students augmented their academic performance with co-curricular involvement, leadership, commitment to diversity, intellectualism, creativity, musical talent and service. We value these and many other attributes when building a class” [17].

The Holistic Admission Philosophy across Levels of Study: Graduate Programs

With ample evidence provided to support and document the U.S. universities’ embrace of the holistic admissions approach at undergraduate level, in what follows I will change focus and explore the admissions philosophy at graduate level, as reflected in the admissions requirements for general graduate education, that is master and doctoral degrees in a range of fields, as well as for admission to the law and business programs that are offered only at graduate level in the USA.

The first graduate academic destination will be Berkeley University, another bright star in the University of California system, actually the most prominent U.S. public institution in terms of graduate program excellence. All international rankings attest to the university’s superb academic standards and the Shanghai Top 500 University Ranking in 2014 includes Berkeley as the fourth best university in the world, right after Harvard, Stanford and MIT [8]. In order to select the best applicants to its graduate programs, Berkeley relies on the same holistic evaluation building on the staple application package, with the same sophisticated chemistry of objective and subjective items, alongside qualitative and quantitative features. Of the standard application requirements, the letters of recommendation strike a very specific note, as the instructions to the potential applicants demonstrate it:

“Your recommenders are asked to give their personal impressions of your intellectual ability, your aptitude in research or professional skills, your character,

and the quality of your previous work and potential for future productive scholarship” [18].

Most graduate departments of U.S. universities expect, if not require, the applicants to demonstrate “vision, motivation/commitment, and accomplishment/scholarship” [18]. New York University as a leading graduate institution is no exception in this respect. By way of example, its Graduate School of Arts and Sciences - referred to as GSAS in what follows - has developed an admissions policy for Master and doctoral students that clearly resonates with the holistic approach.

“As an intellectual, research-driven community, GSAS actively seeks scholars with a wide variety of backgrounds, ideas, and interests in our student body.

Though specific requirements may vary by department, applicants must possess a minimum of a bachelor's degree (or equivalent foreign credentials) and demonstrate motivation, intellectual curiosity, and promise of great scholarly achievement.

In the admissions process, we consider carefully an applicant's academic record of achievement, recommendations, and research goals. Also important is the demonstrated ability to deal successfully with the rigors of a GSAS program and to contribute to a vibrant intellectual community” [19].

If you wonder how the applicants will convey their research goals, you may remember the admissions essay which is commonly referred to as statement of purpose at graduate level. In its traditionally concise style, Stanford University and its graduate school provide a short, yet very clear description of the goals an effective statement of purpose should meet for admissions purposes. What is commonly perceived as the most subjective piece in the application package, with Stanford becomes a concise, therefore polished, presentation of the applicant's self-perceived motivation, self-gauged academic accomplishment, self-determined research and study objectives, as well as career path.

Specifically, applicants to the graduate programs at Stanford are required to address in their statement of purpose key issues that will complement the information available in the other elements of the application package and provide clear indication of the depth of their academic motivation and passion that the quantifiable components of the application may miss, as the following quote illustrates.

“Describe in your statement of purpose:

- Your reasons for applying to the proposed program at Stanford and your preparation for this field of study
- Your research and study interests
- Future career plans and other aspects of your background and interests which may aid the admission committee in evaluating your aptitude and motivation for graduate study.

You may upload one file; it should not exceed two pages in length, single-spaced” [20].

As apparent, it is the applicant's own perception that imbues the statement of purpose, so as to contextualize and balance some of the dry, measurable features in the application package. But there is certainly more to the statement of purpose in the eyes of the admissions committee: “we also look for quality and clarity of thought in written answers and essays” [20].

A similar in vision yet richer, if not subtler approach is employed for selecting students to graduate professional programs, such as law and business. The Law School at Berkeley University prides itself on its tradition of excellence. The Dean of Admissions states it explicitly:

“Berkeley Law is one of the nation’s premier law schools, meaning that the academic demands are intense. But that’s only part of our educational picture. ... Our admissions process is quite selective, but in no way that focuses exclusively on numbers. Instead, we also consider the myriad subjective factors that define each of us as human beings. ... I can assure you that our evaluation process is both comprehensive and holistic” [21].

A similar approach characterizes the selection philosophy of another elite law program, this time at Columbia University in New York City. Although the admissions process revolves around the applicants’ “demonstrated qualities and proven skills” [22] that the program deems necessary “for academic success and intellectual engagement at Columbia” [22], due attention is paid to a comprehensive assessment meant to identify the candidates that have the talent, the inclination, and the drive to rise to “professional distinction and public service” [22]. The complexity of the selection process which involves over 8,000 applications for approximately 350 slots and the multiple tiers which the selection committee scrutinizes in order to select the most academically powerful and ethically appropriate student body, are spelled out in their admissions philosophy. Alongside scholarly abilities,

“We also value highly personal strengths that we believe predict professional distinction and public service. We endeavor to identify how and to what extent candidates have forged their values and achieved their goals – how they have actually chosen to commit their time, energies, and talents, and how they have made use of their opportunities. Applicants are evaluated, therefore, not only on their potential but by their demonstrated motivation, self-discipline and industry. Our Admissions Committee weighs carefully the elements in the application, which speak to the candidates background, interests, and goals, and which evidence sound character and judgment” [22].

The American trend of educating the whole person through the formal and informal educational opportunities the campus makes available to students, no matter what level of academic development they may be at, is echoed even by highly specialized professional programs, and the Law Program at Columbia is no exception. The admissions philosophy underlying the program thrives on it:

“This [comprehensive] approach to selection yields each year an entering J.D. class (of approximately 370 students) with especially strong prospects for academic success, for educating one another, for challenging our faculty, and for enhancing life and learning at Columbia Law School – learning that goes forward in our classes, seminars, clinics, internships, workshops, journals, conferences, brown bag luncheon discussions, and countless hours of engaging conversation” [22].

A similar admissions approach operates in management schools, too, throughout the academic spectrum. Both an elite business school like Tuck School of Business at

Dartmouth College, that is the very institution that is credited with inventing the MBA program in 1900, and, for example, a solid, although less prestigious one like the Krannert School of Management at Purdue University share the admissions philosophy and reflect the multiple benefits of building a class by relying on holistic admissions.

Tuck School of Business has built its admissions strategy on “the interplay of six principal factors: demonstrated academic excellence ..., demonstrated leadership..., demonstrated accomplishments ..., interpersonal skills ..., diversity of background and experiences ..., and a global mindset” [23].

The School of Management at Purdue University resonates fully with the approach when they state that “in determining admission, the depth and breadth of each student application is carefully analyzed. The individual attention allows the Admissions Committee to take a holistic approach in the evaluation of each candidate’s application. ... In addition to solid academics and standardized test scores, work and personal experiences play a key role, We strive to enroll students who will add to the rich variety and diversity of the Krannert learning environment” [24].

Holistic Admission across North America

As ample evidence demonstrates, holistic admission has become the approach to selecting candidates to both undergraduate and graduate education in the USA. But the benefits of the approach in building well-rounded students as well as a well-rounded class recommend the approach as relevant and effective also outside the USA. Queen’s University in Canada provides one of the many examples that speaks to the widespread use of the approach at North American higher education institutions. Queen’s Law School and its admissions philosophy and criteria ring a familiar note as they seek to attract students with demonstrated strong reasoning and academic ability, but , in addition, “the Admissions Committee considers other attributes such as intellectual curiosity, avid interest in law, social commitment, reasonable judgment and insight, leadership potential, teamwork skills, creative ability and innovative endeavors’, self-discipline, time management skills and maturity. The Admissions Committee will review personal statements, letters of reference and the autobiographical sketch to obtain information about these attributes” [25]. The above statements were made as early as 2009.

Holistic admission is thus an effective tool, across North America, for selecting the applicants that have the demonstrated abilities to rise to the academic requirements of their study programs and to thrive on service learning, thereby fulfilling the university mission, their personal growth and community development.

Holistic Admission: The Way to Excellence, Academic and Beyond

The benefits of the holistic approach will have become apparent at the end of this cross-institutional and cross-study level survey of higher educational institutions in North America and their admissions policies to undergraduate and graduate programs. The core tenets of the approach appear to be recruiting well-rounded students who excel in class and outside of it, and who will be able to grow into solid professionals and impactful community members.

The holistic approach to university admission underlies the academic search for excellence which in the U.S. mindset combines academic achievement with community service. This type of admissions relying on a multi-tier approach which progresses from objective, quantifiable data – such as the school record and the standardized test scores – to subjective, qualitative information – as provided in the essay/personal statement and the recommendation letters - and integrates them all in a comprehensive, in-depth assessment of the application package, identifies the applicants who have the potential and the demonstrated ability to succeed in becoming leading members of the community and who can initiate, implement and sustain beneficial change on campus and in the society.

By requiring applicants to provide a range of data on their own accomplishments, as seen through their own eyes and through the eyes of select community members, North American universities are able to attract students who are ripe for acquiring an “education for life”, in Freire’s words, not just an education for securing a job on the labor market. With such a comprehensive output in mind, it is but natural that the selection process for university admissions will be equally wide in scope. Therefore holistic admissions is the perfect tool for recruiting the students who have the talent and the proven skills for becoming successful scholars or professionals, as the case maybe, alongside their social commitment as vibrant community members.

The current paper documents the multiple effects of holistic admission, both in a short- and long-term perspective. The short-term perspective is represented by the university’s quest for students who can help fulfill its mission and act out its vision. The long-term perspective brings in the community at large as well as the student’s, and after completion of the study program, the graduate’s engagement to provide service. In this way the large-scale societal benefits that holistic admission generates couple with the direct benefits universities reap from the system by attracting the students who have both the potential and the track record to excell on the U.S. campus, that is academically and beyond. And what better way to sound this student potential for success in conjunction with their own track record of success, if not holistic admissions?

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