
FEATURE

Does Our Diversity Talk Match Our Walk? Aligning Institutional Goals and Practice

To help admissions professionals achieve their diversity objectives, a strategy should be adopted that encourages universities to be more broadly self-reflective across a range of interrelated admissions policies and practices. Educational scrutiny is a data-analytic framework for campus-based understanding of the extent to which internal policies and practices cultivate or undermine efforts to admit and enroll a diverse student body.

By Catherine L. Horn and Patricia Marin

Members of the higher education community have long articulated the benefits of a racially and ethnically diverse student body (e.g., Bollinger 2007, Bowen 1977). Having originated as a reaction to the legal questions posed in the *Hopwood v. Texas* (1996) affirmative action case, a substantial body of research now exists that reinforces this position (e.g., Bowen and Bok 1998; Bowman 2010, 2011; Chang 2011; Deo 2011; Fischer 2008; Hurtado 2001; Tropp and Page-Gould 2014). In particular, rigorous empirical research now documents the contributions of a diverse student body to a host of outcomes that are important to higher education, including cross-racial understanding and reduction of prejudice; improved cognitive abilities, critical thinking, and self-confidence; civic engagement and leadership development; and improved classroom environments (see the Brief of the American Educational Research Association *et al.* [2015] and the Brief of 823 Social Scientists [2015] for reviews of this literature).

Professional admissions organizations such as the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and

Admissions Officers and the National Association for College Admission Counseling have contributed to this discussion by filing an amicus brief with the U.S. Supreme Court that prioritizes diversity in higher education as a national interest:

*The American workplace is diverse and global and becomes more so each year. Success is dependent upon an individual's ability to engage with diversity of all kinds, be it diversity of ideas or cultures or diversity of race and ethnicity. Indeed, the nation's future depends on ensuring that pathways exist that exhibit such diversity, with education settings being among the most critical. Accounting for the reality of the current and evolving American workforce necessarily includes providing the learning experiences that will facilitate student success in a diverse world, which in turn necessitates considerations of achieving diversity within educational institutions—including, but not limited to, racial and ethnic diversity (Brief for the College Board *et al.* 2012, 3).*

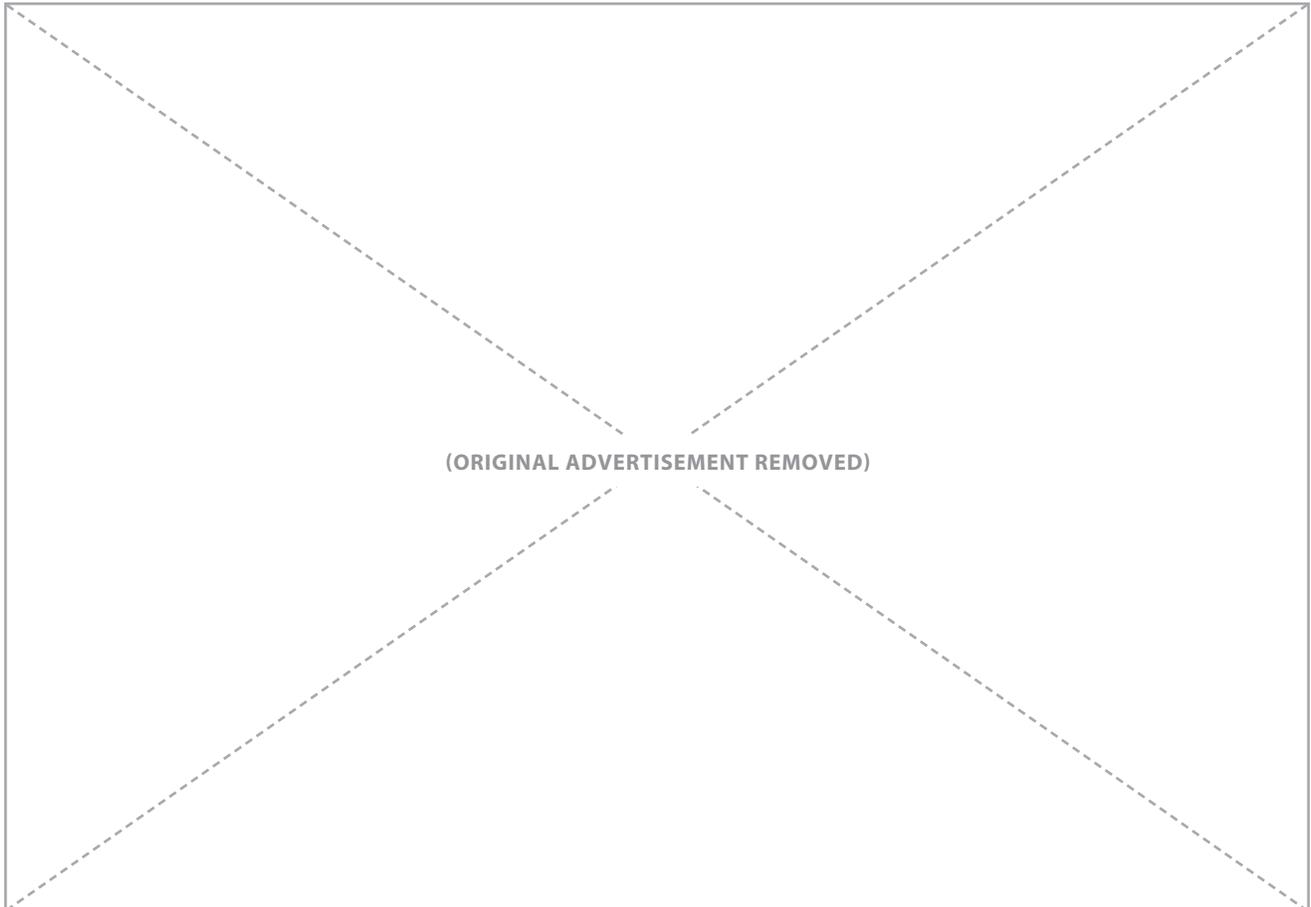
In short, admissions officers continue to advocate for the educational benefits of a diverse student body.

After years of confusion following the *Hopwood* decision, the 2003 University of Michigan *Gratz* and *Grutter* cases gave higher education a set of broad guidelines regarding how to incorporate race/ethnicity into admissions policies. However, the use of affirmative action in higher education continues to be debated (culminating

most recently in the Supreme Court’s decision in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*). Perhaps more than ever before, admissions professionals are being challenged to consider their procedures and justify the consideration of race and ethnicity among many other factors. To help admissions professionals achieve their diversity objectives, a strategy should be adopted that encourages universities to be more broadly self-reflective across a range of interrelated and, in some cases, seemingly disparate admissions policies and practices—race conscious and race neutral. Specifically, *educational scrutiny* (Marin and Yun 2005) is a data-analytic framework for campus-based understanding of the extent to which internal policies and practices cultivate or undermine efforts to admit and enroll a diverse student body. The educational scrutiny framework is at the intersection of the educational benefits of diversity, the Supreme Court’s requirements (*i.e.*, strict scrutiny), and higher education’s institutional goals. Simple yet not often employed, educational scrutiny can be applied to those “common sense” assertions regarding the

interrelated effects of seemingly disparate components of the admissions process. Specifically, it allows admissions officers to consider multiple policies concurrently rather than assessing a single policy in isolation.

To provide a roadmap for how admissions officers can incorporate educational scrutiny into their procedures, two components of the admissions process that are often highlighted in discussions and debates are considered: (1) the relative weight given to various admissions criteria and (2) early decision policies. Using these components we consider the impact they may have on the ability of these institutions to achieve and maintain a diverse student body overall. Data from a sample of campuses that have publicly supported the benefits of diversity (through the submission of a joint amicus curiae brief in the *Fisher* case) enable illustration of the potential student admission outcomes associated with implementation of these discrete practices. As colleges and universities grapple with how to maintain and maximize the educational benefits of diversity in the context of changing demographics, an evolving



legal and political worldview, and institutional policy and practice, it is important to assist admissions officers in their efforts to admit a racially/ethnically diverse student body—particularly in the midst of public inquiry and challenge.

Educational Scrutiny

The recommendation that admissions officers review their practices is grounded in the concept of educational scrutiny (Marin and Yun 2005). Modeled after the law’s “strict scrutiny,” it offers a framework for colleges and universities to examine the impact of their admissions processes on racial/ethnic outcomes. (Strict scrutiny, the highest level of judicial review, governs the review of any racial classification [Ancheta 2004]. To meet strict scrutiny, a “compelling governmental interest” must be determined, and then evidence of narrow tailoring to achieve that interest must be confirmed [see Coleman *et al.* (2010) for a more detailed description].) Specifically, educational scrutiny asks institutions to consider their goals and whether their practices can achieve those goals. Marin and Yun posit that without such an ongoing examination of all institutional policies and practices (not only those that are race conscious), “equitable access to higher education will remain elusive” (199). Specifically, this framework is predicated on the assumption that through ongoing policy review, an institution can be more successful in achieving its diversity goals by identifying or problematizing longstanding practices that undermine its larger diversity mission. Further,

regular examination of policies and their rationales can improve practices by isolating those that no longer suit or promote the institutional mission....and [can determine] whether other university practices are at odds with the goal of achieving student diversity (199).

Serving as a guide for educational practice, the framework “calls for the alignment of institutional policy with the university’s educational mission and a simultaneous examination of the horizontal alignment of university policies that could affect the implementation of that mission” (Marin and Yun 2005, 202). The framework therefore “moves beyond justifying a policy on its own merits to evaluating its impact within the context of a specific educational mission and of other policies that may enhance or detract from that mission” (205).

The educational scrutiny framework has four main components: First, individuals must identify the various components of the institution’s mission. Next, a “policy-to-mission alignment” (205) should be conducted to identify institutional policies that directly or indirectly impact the listed missions. Third, theories of action must be delineated to explain how the listed policies “contribute to the fulfillment of” (206) the listed missions. The final step asks institutions to consider the “cross-policy and cross-mission complexity by highlighting the horizontal alignment of policies” (206). This allows universities to identify policies that are at cross-purposes and to make choices about next steps to explain, mitigate, or eliminate the conflict(s).

The concepts underlying educational scrutiny have been used by others interested in promoting best practices in admissions policies. For example, Coleman *et al.*’s (2010) description of well-developed policies reflects key ideas from the educational scrutiny framework. Specifically, Coleman *et al.* suggest that good admissions policies:

- ◆ are integrated and aligned with related enrollment policies;
- ◆ establish clear criteria for judging the academic qualifications of applicants and ensure that all students offered admission are academically qualified;
- ◆ consider the race and/or ethnicity of applicants only where it has been determined that such consideration is necessary in order to achieve institutional diversity-related goals, and in such cases:
 - are periodically evaluated for effectiveness in the achievement of diversity-related goals as a foundation for policy changes (as appropriate); and
- ◆ reflect the evolution of changing circumstances, including shifts in applicant pools and the evolution of institutional goals (16).

As Coleman *et al.* (2010) note, institutional review of admission policy ought to be undertaken regularly, and a comprehensive lens should be applied to defining and assessing effectiveness. Ultimately, a policy review based on educational scrutiny allows universities to be self-reflective across a range of interrelated and seemingly disparate policies and practices. Without such self-reflection, institutions run the risk of implementing programs and criteria that undermine diver-

sity efforts, thus compromising this key component of their educational mission. Of course, every practice and policy may not support an institution's diversity goals. Instead, each institution has to decide its priorities and, in so doing, clearly understand and acknowledge how they may result in complimentary and/or competing goals and eventual outcomes.

Educational Scrutiny in Application

Consider a sample of ten institutions that affirmed, via an amicus curiae brief to the U.S. Supreme Court in *Fisher* (2016), the importance of a diverse student body and the use of race in admissions (Brief for California Institute of Technology *et al.* 2015). The ten universities are private and highly selective; the brief's "Interest of Amici Curiae" states that "each amicus believes that diversity within its student body and across all academic programs is essential to fulfilling its academic mission to provide the best education to its students" (1). (The "Interest of Amici Curiae" identifies the amicus/amici filing the brief, describes the interest in the case, and indicates the source authorizing the filing of the brief.) The statement continues, "Amici undertake a holistic, individualized review of each candidate that takes into account many factors, of which race is only one" (2). (Only one brief is considered in this paper, but it is important to note that this statement is typical of many others submitted by institutions of varying types and sectors.)

Campus-level data from the publicly available 2014–15 Common Data Set (CDS) were compiled for this group of institutions. The Common Data Set provides standardized data that are collected using shared definitions established by the U.S. Department of Education (Common Data Set Initiative 2016). Two common admissions practices—the relative weighting of academic and non-academic factors and early admission decisions—were examined. (The term "non-academic" is used by the Common Data Set to represent a broad range of cocurricular and psychosocial characteristics.) Then, with the educational scrutiny framework as its basis, a framework is proposed by which institutions might use data to reflect on the alignment—or lack thereof—of their goals and these two practices. To protect institutions' anonymity, findings are presented in aggregate.

Relative Weighting of Admissions Criteria

Internal motivation for institutions to assess their admissions practices is bolstered by public recognition of the increasing importance of a college degree, the affirmative action debate, and ongoing deliberation over the use of test scores, alumni/legacy admissions, early admissions policies, and high school GPA, among many other factors. Consider, for example, the National Association for College Admission Counseling's (NACAC) conclusion in a 2008 report:

Although many colleges find benefit in using admission tests in admission decisions, the commission believes that there may be more colleges and universities that could make appropriate admission decisions without requiring standardized admission tests such as the ACT and SAT. The commission encourages institutions to consider dropping the admission test requirements if it is determined that the predictive utility of the test or the admission policies of the institution support that decision and if the institution believes that standardized test results would not be necessary for other reasons such as course placement, advising, or research (Clinedinst 2008, 21).

The NACAC report reminds its readers that admissions practices are scrutinized regularly even as they seek to be internally reflective, leading to multiple sources of motivation for active reconsideration of policy.

In the current example, the CDS asks institutions about six admissions factors it labels "academic:" rigor of secondary school record, class rank, academic GPA, standardized test scores, recommendations, and essays. Institutions are relatively consistent in the substantial emphasis placed on all characteristics in this category (see Figure 1, on page 21). For example, all rated the *rigor of an applicant's secondary school record* "very important." Class rank is the only category that received any "not considered" ratings. Interestingly, relative to the other academic criteria, recommendations and essays are considered less important.

Figure 1 presents similar information for non-academic factors, including: interview, extracurricular activities, talent/ability, character/personal qualities, first-generation status, alumni/ae relation, racial/ethnic status, volunteer work, work experience, and level of applicant's interest. Among these factors, far fewer

(only five of ten) are weighted “very important.” Despite the fact that all factors have some indication of importance, they are not given highest priority compared with academic factors. Specifically, with regard to the consideration of race and ethnicity, institutions varied in their relative consideration, from “not considered” to “important;” 29 percent of institutions considered it “important.”

In this example, an admissions office could apply an educational scrutiny framework to understand these trends in relationship to the broader goal of achieving the institutional mission through the creation of a diverse student body. One step would be to call on the available literature to understand the implications of these data. Research on the use of standardized test scores (particularly the SAT), for example, suggests that heavy emphasis of these scores is likely to have a negative impact on an institution’s racial/ethnic diversity (e.g., Carnevale and Rose 2003; Horn and Yun 2008; Long 2015). In contrast, there is evidence to suggest that greater attention to the characteristics often traditionally categorized as “non-academic” may increase racial/ethnic diversity (see, for example, the University of California Board of Admissions and Relations with Schools, 2003 and 2015). For these reasons, it is important to examine institutional efforts and data in these broader research contexts.

Clearly the weight placed on academic factors (particularly standardized test scores) is likely to undermine institutions’ stated preference for diverse classes of admitted students. Were the institutions to place greater emphasis on non-academic factors, their admissions policies might better align with their diversity goals. This clash of admissions practices should be understood and considered in future policy discussions.

Early Admission Policies

To further examine how institutions might employ educational scrutiny to determine whether their policies might be working in tandem or at cross-purposes regarding their diversity goals, another common admission practice—early admission—is considered. Steve Cohen’s 2011 *Daily Beast* story, “The Biggest Admissions Edge,” clarifies why institutions should do so. Cohen describes the advantages afforded those who apply early decision: “Applying early admission can often double or even triple your child’s chances of getting into a top school. It is the single most effective admissions strategy there is for most students—and the most underutilized” (para. 3). Empirical studies of such programs have shown that underrepresented students are less likely than their white counterparts to apply for early admission and that use of early decision has

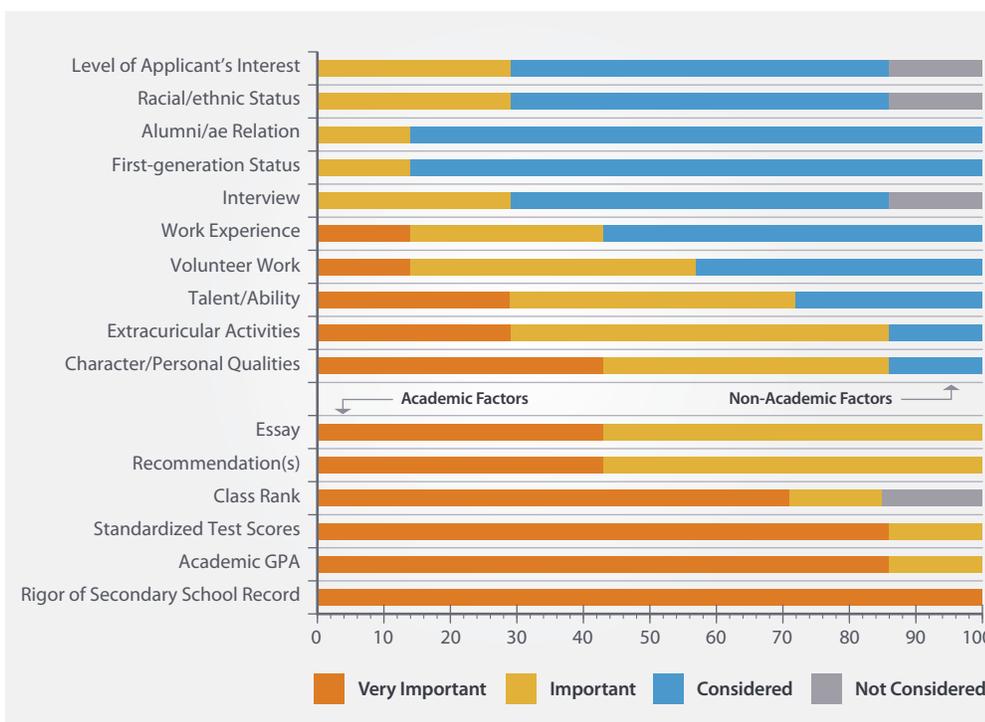


Figure 1.
Distribution of Emphasis Placed on Academic and Non-Academic Factors, 2014–15

Source: Common Data Set Initiative (2016).

a negative impact on the overall diversity of enrollment (e.g., Antecol and Kiholm Smith 2012; “Why the early decision” 2001). In addition, students who need financial aid may be less likely to apply via early decision programs because the acceptance and need award offers typically are not in sync (Hoover 2002); financial aid packages often are determined only after a student would be required to accept an early admission offer. At best, as a 2016 Peterson’s article warns,

Probably the most apparent problem of applying under the early decision (ED) option is that if you receive early acceptance, you will get one—and only one—financial aid offer....Once you’ve made your commitment, the school may not offer you the Cadillac of financial aid offers, since they know it’s a take it or leave it deal. Getting early acceptance also means you’ll probably need to pay a deposit on your enrollment—at least several hundred dollars. If your financial aid offer just isn’t going to cut it, backing out of your early action commitment will not only lose you your coveted spot but the cash you laid out to insure it. (“So what’s the final catch in early decision?”)

Given that early admission applications can make up more than half of many institutions’ entering class, such a policy might work counter to the goal of increased racial/ethnic diversity (Avery, Fairbanks and Zeckhauser 2003).

Among institutions in our study for which data were available, the vast majority (more than 70 percent in 2014–15) utilized an early admission plan. Among the more than 6,500 early applications received by institutions in this group, 33 percent were accepted. By comparison, that same year, approximately 17 percent of the total number of applications received (almost 100,000 across universities) were accepted. Moreover, the proportion of early admission applicants being admitted is increasing. Consider, for example, that in 2010–11, 31 percent of 5,300 early applicants were admitted. Several observations are of interest: First, as noted in the literature, the likelihood of admission for students who apply early is greater relative to those who apply in the regular admission cycle (perhaps in part because of selection bias among applicants). Second, as the number of applicants increases, so does the proportion of early admission applicants accepted “off cycle.”

When applying educational scrutiny, important questions can arise, including “What do these early ad-

missions data look like disaggregated by race/ethnicity, and how well do other policies—particularly financial aid—align with early decision timelines?” The context in which early decision policies are being implemented is critical. “While it may make organizational sense [to utilize early decision policies], the result is in conflict with the goal of increasing access” (Hawkins and Lautz 2005, 145–46). Specifically, given the greater proportion of students of color who receive need-based financial aid relative to their white counterparts (Aud, Fox, and KewalRamani 2010), early admission practices may have a disproportionately negative influence on the admission of a racially diverse class. Educational scrutiny provides a means by which institutions can proactively recognize and address the potential conflict between “organizational sense” and their goal of a racially/ethnically diverse student body.

With regard to the current example, the next step would be to consider these policies concurrently to examine their combined ability to support or hinder the goal of a diverse student body. The consistent high value placed on the use of test scores; the moderate to low value placed on non-academic factors; and the increase in the number of students admitted via an early admissions policy would all work in opposition to the goal of a diverse student body. A more extensive review of institutional data would help admissions professionals understand the collective impact of their policies and suggest practices that might enhance the diversity of their institutions’ student bodies.

Walking the Walk: Aligning Goals and Practice

This article offers a framework for admissions officers seeking to engage in systematic reflection through the application of educational scrutiny. It perhaps has its most significant implications for universities more broadly. As colleges and universities struggle to maintain and maximize the benefits of racial/ethnic diversity in order to achieve their educational missions, it will be increasingly important for them to better understand how their policies and practices are affecting those efforts either positively or negatively. As Coleman (2001) emphasizes, the importance of alignment extends beyond the scope of admissions policies. Interests in diversity should also be aligned with

the institution's academic, cocurricular, residential, and other policies. Evidence in this context is intended to show that an institution is not paying mere lip service to the educational benefits of diversity. It must actively implement policies and practices to facilitate the "robust exchange of ideas" that diversity makes possible (Coleman 2001, 8).

Race and ethnicity are by no means the only student characteristics of interest to colleges and universities. But as institutions continue to emphasize the importance of such diversity to their educational mission, they must determine whether their *practice* is matching their *rhetoric*. Such efforts not only enable institutions to improve their educational practice and work more effectively toward desired goals, but they also enable them to provide informed answers to stakeholders interested in higher education outcomes—something colleges and universities have been struggling to do given mounting demands for accountability.

In sum, higher education admissions officers and their colleagues should collaborate in considering the types of and approaches to scrutiny they apply to their policies in order to maximize the educational benefit to their students. Without using the self-reflective practices outlined by the educational scrutiny framework, institutions run the risk of implementing programs and policies that undermine diversity efforts and thereby compromise that component of their mission. Of course, institutions have many goals, so every practice and policy is not necessarily going to support an institution's diversity goals. Nevertheless, each institution must decide what its priorities are, and, in so doing, clearly understand how those priorities may result in complimentary as well as competing goals. Ultimately, the real reason such examination is important is to improve educational policy and practice in order to enhance opportunity and student success.

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