

WHITE PAPER

**Promising Practices in Holistic Admissions Review:
Implementation in Academic Nursing**

December 2020

Overview: The demand for nurses who are more representative of the patients they serve has initiated many conversations in higher education regarding institutions' responsibility to recruit, admit, and retain a more diverse student enrollment. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) engaged in a process of providing guidance and workshops focused on Holistic Admissions Review during the spring of 2016. Following these initial workshops offered to deans of member schools, the initiative was accelerated when the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, released a Nursing Workforce Diversity funding opportunity that included a provision for nursing schools to implement holistic admissions practices. Beginning in fall 2017, AACN engaged in providing technical assistance for 32 of the 34 (94%) nursing schools who received 4-year HRSA grants to increase nursing workforce diversity using holistic admissions as one of the strategies. AACN provided workshops for additional schools implementing a holistic admissions review strategy to increase diversity in their enrollment. This Paper provides an overview of the process nursing schools experienced when implementing holistic admissions review and concludes with promising practices. The technical assistance was supported and provided in large measure by a team of consultants prepared and engaged by AACN to assist with the delivery of workshops and customized training. The collective experiences of this team of consultants are presented in this paper.

Introduction

By 2050 the federal government projects that racially and ethnically diverse persons will comprise 53 percent of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). As the population becomes more diverse, cultural competence and humility among healthcare professionals becomes essential to meet complex healthcare needs.

In his book *Diversity Explosion*, Frey (2018) used data from the U.S. Census Bureau to examine population projections through 2050. He presented data that supported the expansion of minority groups over the next 30 years where each group will more than double. Racially and ethnically diverse individuals contributed to more than three quarters of the nation's population growth in the past decade, and this trend will accelerate in the future. As a profession, nursing is committed to providing safe, quality care to all persons in an equitable manner. Preparing a richly diverse nursing student population is essential to improving health outcomes for the nation and achieving a robust supply of healthcare providers who better reflect the society served. Holistic admissions review is a proven strategy to increase the diversity of student enrollment and diversity in the nursing workforce.

According to the most recent available data from US Department of Health and Human Services (HRSA, 2017), the demand for registered nurses (RNs) was projected to increase from 2,806,100 in 2014 to 3,601,800 by 2030 (an increase of 795,700 RNs between 2014 and 2030). This projection is based on current healthcare utilization and staffing patterns and assumes the national RN demand equaled supply in 2014.

Diversifying the nursing workforce will provide compelling benefits for healthcare systems – especially in medically under-served communities. Specifically, diversity within the workforce will help address health inequities in historically underserved communities and promote greater access to care (Smedley, Stith, & Nelson, 2003; Williams, Walker, & Egede, 2016; Glazer, Tobias, & Mentzel, 2018; Thomas & Booth-McCoy, 2020). Additionally, increasing the diversity of nursing school enrollment will enhance the cultural competence of the workforce and the practice of cultural humility across healthcare systems to ensure more providers are representative of the patients being served (Jackson & Garcia, 2014; see also Komaromy et al., 1996; Edwards, Maldonado, & Engelgau, 2000; Terrell & Beaudreau, 2003; Manetta, Boker, Rea, & Stephens, 2007; Marrast, Zallman, Woolhandler, Bor, & McCormick, 2013, Thomas & Booth-McCoy, 2020). Cultural humility refers to a commitment and active engagement in a lifelong learning process that allows individuals to better meet the complex healthcare needs of patients, communities, and colleagues (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

Evidence indicates that diversity is associated with improved access to care for racial and ethnic minority patients, greater patient choice and satisfaction, and better educational experiences for health professions students, among many other benefits. A 2014 HRSA report titled *The Rationale for Diversity in the Health Occupations: A Review of Evidence* examined and reported on four pathways to better understanding the impact of workforce diversity on health outcomes. These pathways that impact workforce diversity were described as: *service patterns* (diverse providers are more likely to serve diverse

populations, thereby improving access); *racial, ethnicity, and language concordance* (patients who see providers of a similar, diverse background will have improved communication and decision-making); *trust in the healthcare delivery system* (greater diversity will increase trust); and *occupational advocacy* (diversity among providers will lead to more leadership and policies benefiting vulnerable populations). The study concluded that more research is needed to further understand the full impact of having a diverse, inclusive workforce on health and patient outcomes. Similarly, the Institute of Medicine (2010) report on the *Future of Nursing* identified increasing diversity as a key priority for both healthcare administrators and schools of nursing.

According to the 2018 Survey of College and University Admissions Directors, most colleges were failing to fill their new classes and meet enrollment targets. However, data from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) has consistently reported that the number of qualified applicants turned away from entry-level baccalaureate nursing programs ranged from 38,415 in 2006 to 67,785 in 2019. As of 2020, nursing schools have continued to increase their enrollment numbers. With such a high demand for nursing education, the admission decision-making process is critical in selecting those applicants who will meet the patient care needs of the future.

Glazer and others (2016) reported findings from a 2016 holistic review study that nursing schools “evaluate outcomes related to employer satisfaction. If employers and nursing schools are on the same page as to what is needed from nurses, then we can look at these attributes during the admissions process (p. 309).” These researchers recommended the need for administrative buy-in as well as more education and training for the holistic review process to be successfully implemented.

Holistic admissions review was identified as a proven strategy to increase diversity in enrollment of health professions schools in a national study conducted in 2014 by Urban Universities for Health. Fundamentally, holistic review is about mission-driven admissions and assessing college applicants in a manner that encourages reflections regarding which characteristics are most relevant and important for future nurses, and how to sustain a learning environment that fosters these characteristics. The model that a school designs must be consistent, based on sound decisions, and consonant with the institution’s values. At the same time, the model needs to be flexible and poised for change. Holistic learning environments must be inclusive and create a sense of belonging for everyone. In inclusive environments, all students have fair and impartial opportunities to learn, advance academically, and graduate.

A holistic admissions process focuses more on an understanding of the whole student, as opposed to ranking students by their academic credentials. Holistic review presents an opportunity for institutions to move away from trying to simply attract large numbers of students with high grade point averages (GPAs), high standardized test scores, many advanced placement (AP) courses, and other traditional academic trophies.

Equally important, admitting a diverse cohort of students improves the learning environment for all students. Diversity in our classrooms provides what Harpalani (2016) termed a “healthy discomfort” where critical conversations can take place in a safe

learning environment to expand the worldview of all who engage in that learning environment. Educating students in environments that value diversity and create inclusive learning can produce nurses more prepared to care for the underserved, who understand the cultural needs of their patients, and dedicated to improving patient satisfaction through renewed trust in the provider (Saha, 2008; AACN, 2017; Hughes et al., 2020).

Implementing holistic admissions review is one structural action that nursing schools may embrace to increase student diversity. Nursing schools must transform their admissions guidelines to require applicants to demonstrate a commitment to health equity and inclusion. Additionally, leaders of nursing schools should implement evidence-based practices that support recruitment, mentoring, and retention of underrepresented faculty members.

Defining Holistic Admissions

The holistic admissions review process is most commonly defined as “a flexible, individualized way of assessing an applicant’s capabilities by which balanced consideration is given to experiences, attributes, and academic metrics” (Addams, Bletzinger, Sondheimer, White, & Johnson, 2010, p.10). As these elements are considered in combination, consideration is given to how the applicant will contribute value to the educational environment and as a future healthcare professional. First developed by the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), this definition and model of holistic admissions has been widely accepted and adopted by the other health professions, including nursing.

A foundational tenet of holistic admissions, as described by the AAMC in 2011, is that “selection criteria are broad-based, clearly linked to school-specific mission and goals, and promote diversity as an essential element to achieving institutional excellence” (p. 4-3). A holistic admissions process must be mission-driven with language and activities imbedded throughout the organization that reflect diversity as an important element for institutional excellence (AAMC, 2010). Mission, vision, and value statements communicate an organization’s priorities and how they define and will achieve excellence. From these identified priorities university, school, and department strategic plans follow as do faculty, staff, and student development activities. These elements are the fundamental vehicles whereby the words and actions of diversity are infused into the culture and functioning of the institution (Rosenberg & O’Rourke, 2011). Within this context, diversity becomes part of the school’s landscape of educational excellence and is institution specific. The experiences, attributes, and metrics chosen by a school as part of its holistic process are developed within the more immediate context of their mission, vision, and values.

While holistic admissions policies have faced legal challenges (Gratz v. Bollinger, 2003; Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003), the most recent court ruling has conceded that universities – rather than the courts – are best positioned to assess the benefits of diversity on their campuses and how to achieve diversity goals (Fisher v. UT at Austin, 2016).

Experience, Attribute, Metric Model (E-A-M)

Succeeding academically in nursing school, and then as a nursing professional, goes well beyond a strictly academic, metric-derived definition. Predictions on who will make an excellent nurse can be improved by considering non-cognitive variables, which provide a more complete understanding of an applicant's abilities (Sedlacek, 2011). Schools must decide which personal attributes are most important to them in the selection of candidates and then include modalities within the application process to measure those personal attributes. An **attribute**, broadly defined, may refer to a quality, characteristic, ability or skill of a person or population. In a survey of experienced nurses, Paans, Robbe, Wijkamp, & Wolfensberg (2017) identified personal characteristics of nursing excellence, which include empathy, communication skills, evidence-based decision-making, and ability to function effectively in teams.

Researchers LaVeist and Pierre (2014) found that provider diversity is associated with improved access to care for racially and ethnically diverse patients, increased patient satisfaction with the care experience, improved patient outcomes, and better educational experiences for health professions students. Valentine and Collins (2015) reported that "diversity among physicians and allied health professionals improves access to care for underserved groups, develops culturally informed care, and broadens the health research agenda" (p. 12241). Gilliss and Powell (2016) noted in a summary evaluation that health professions diversity would result in improved population health outcomes. Their findings indicated that underrepresented minority health professionals, "disproportionality serve minority and other medically underserved populations" (p. 295). Their review noted that "minority patients and non-English-speaking patients tend to receive better interpersonal care from practitioners of their own race and ethnicity" (p. 295). These studies provide evidence that attributes such as ethnicity, race, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location are important considerations in educating a more diverse health workforce.

Applicant **experiences** refer to those lived events or encounters that may result in knowledge acquisition or practical wisdom. These experiences provide additional important data in the holistic admissions process. Life experiences may include community service, healthcare experience, or leadership that contributed to personal growth. Difficult personal, family, or social experiences and how the applicant dealt with those challenges may provide evidence of "grit" or perseverance. Some schools have found that students with varsity athletic experience have the ability to be organized, handle a demanding schedule, and understand the importance of working with teams.

For many years, **metrics** have been the overriding mechanism for applicant selection in nursing programs and remain as an important consideration in the holistic model. Metrics refer to those measurements of academic achievement or testing measurements. However, metrics are only one part of the holistic process. Nursing programs should identify the necessary quantitative measures for academic success based on historical data. This has sometimes been referred to as establishing the "metric floor." This concept is useful in helping schools create a broader admissions perspective and de-emphasizing the notion of high metrics as a singular indicator of student and professional success.

Nursing programs will often review cumulative GPA, science-specific GPAs, grade trends, and scores from standardized examinations. The combination of metrics used should be the result of past and present performance reviews of a school's student body.

The Myth of Metrics

Rarely do test scores and grade point averages (GPAs) provide the full context of an applicant's potential to succeed in higher education (Page, 2008). Gleaning information about the full applicant – their prior lived experiences, their unique characteristics that shape them as individuals – coupled with their academic history should be utilized to determine which students should be admitted into nursing programs (Sedlacek, 2004; DeWitty, 2018). For example, a student might have a 4.0 GPA and a 98% score on a predictor exam, but may demonstrate a lack of compassion for other people, or worse, manifest biases against under-served populations. Finding students who possess and demonstrate the core values of the nursing profession along with the potential to succeed in nursing's rigorous courses should be the primary aim of every admissions office.

The [Urban Universities for Health Study](#) (2014) was the first comprehensive national study to examine the outcomes of health profession schools using a more holistic admissions process. A total of 228 individual health professions schools completed the survey, including 66 nursing schools, 44 medical schools, 43 dental schools, 39 schools or programs of public health, and 36 pharmacy schools. The majority of schools that self-identified as using holistic review reported: 1) an increase in the diversity of the student body over the past decade; 2) reported that measures of student success over the past decade were unchanged or improved, including the academic quality of the incoming class, student retention, and student academic performance.

Nursing schools using holistic admissions are beginning to report similar findings with incoming GPAs, attrition rates, and nursing licensure (NCLEX-RN) pass rates remaining unchanged pre- to post-holistic admissions review with a concomitant increase in student diversity (Rosenberg, 2019; Zerwic, Scott, McCreary, & Corte, 2018).

Challenges and Solutions when Implementing Holistic Admission

A major concern related to holistic admissions is the time required to assess applicants. Reviewing each applicant's portfolio and conducting interviews requires more time than ranking candidates according to numerical metrics and drawing the line when program capacity is reached. However, nursing programs can no longer ignore the need for a holistic review based on time and money for the following reasons:

- Holistic review of applicants is critical to diversifying the professional nursing workforce as recommended by the Institute of Medicine (IOM, 2011). Students from educationally underserved populations will continue to be marginalized if programs look only at numerical metrics such as GPA and test scores. Although programs need to determine the minimum requirements for entry, **every** applicant who meets or exceeds the minimum requirements should be considered.

- Most colleges and universities emphasize a commitment to diversity in their mission, vision, and/or strategic plans. A holistic review of applicants is essential to fulfilling the mission of today's higher education institutions.
- The profession of nursing embraces the concept of human dignity. Provision 1 of the Code of Ethics for Nurses states, "the nurse practices with compassion and respect for the inherent dignity, worth, and unique attributes of every person" (ANA, 2015). Nursing schools should not continue to engage in a process that systematically ignores the unique attributes of applicants to the profession and reduces each applicant to a number.

The process of holistic review allows the nursing program to learn more about each individual and offers applicants an opportunity to learn more about the profession of nursing. This approach incorporates consideration of attributes and experiences not apparent from numerical metrics. From a practical standpoint, the cost of admitting an academically strong applicant who is ill-suited to the nursing profession could be much higher in terms of time, money, and emotional distress for the student, faculty, and administrators than the use of holistic review. Nursing programs should consider a variety of strategies to address the time burden of holistic admissions. Strategies include prioritization of faculty and advisor time, determination of workload and service, effective engagement with pre-nursing advisors, and appreciating the admissions process as a tool for recruitment.

Strategies

Prioritization: Many elements of the admission process can be streamlined using technology that is managed by administrative personnel (see technology section). Faculty and professional nursing advisor time should be prioritized for meaningful review of experiences, attributes, and metrics. When interviews are conducted as part of the holistic review process a standardized pool of questions should be used. Interviews may be conducted by faculty and professional staff. Although dependent on faculty time commitments, multiple mini-interviews can increase the effectiveness of recruitment efforts and ultimately lead to the admission of diverse students (Wagner, Maddox, Glazer, & Hittle, 2020).

Faculty Engagement: Most colleges and universities require service to the institution, the local community, and the profession as part of the faculty role. Service on the admissions committee can be personally and professionally rewarding for faculty members, and they should receive appropriate credit during their annual performance reviews and for purposes of tenure and promotion. Faculty service for participating on admission committees should be acknowledged. To the extent possible, nursing faculty who participate in holistic admissions processes may receive some workload credit or a stipend for work performed during time periods in which they are off contract. Expanding the opportunity to a larger number of faculty members lightens the burden for all. Inviting nursing program alumni to participate in the interviews strengthens their connection to the program and gives them an opportunity for meaningful service. Additionally, nurses from clinical partner sites in the local community can be invited to participate. Faculty, nursing alumni, and practicing nurses who represent diverse

backgrounds during the interview process help students from underserved demographics envision themselves as future nurses.

Advisor Engagement: Professional nursing advisors can lead the review, especially for pre-nursing students currently enrolled at the institution or within the system. Positioning professional nursing advisors in pipeline schools such as community colleges and partner institutions allows the holistic review process to begin when the student enrolls in the first prerequisite courses. Advisors can advocate on behalf of advisees who consistently demonstrate the attributes valued by the program and the profession.

Recruiting Investment: Finally, nursing programs should appreciate and invest in the interview as a powerful recruiting tool. Education is a competitive business, and in many cases, multiple programs seek to admit students from the same pool of applicants. Kilburn, Hill, Porter, and Pell (2019) reported increased applications and admissions of diverse students into a certified registered nurse anesthetist program as a result of interventions that included, but were not limited to, increasing diversity among interview panel members, using a standardized question pool, and training their interviewers. Students who perceive that nursing faculty members care enough to meet them in person, and who have an opportunity to learn about a program from the faculty, are more likely to enroll. Healthy enrollment strengthens a program's ability to continue serving students and society.

Retention, Graduation, and NCLEX-RN/Board Certification Pass Rates

Some nursing faculty members and administrators worry that retention, graduation, NCLEX-RN (prelicensure), and board certification (graduate) pass rates will suffer when admitting more diverse students. In fact, schools that have effectively implemented holistic admissions have not experienced declines in academic performance. A more diverse student population can enhance programmatic success in terms of completion and standardized exam performance (Barton, Willis, & Hsin-Hui Lin, 2017). Diverse students bring knowledge and experiences to the classroom that better prepare all students to care for patients from multiple demographic backgrounds. Critical strategies to enhance and sustain academic success according to standardized measures include: (a) pre-programmatic support, (b) evidence-based admissions processes, (c) academic support for nursing coursework, and (d) an environment of inclusion for all students.

Strategies for Academic Success

Pre-programmatic Support: Support needs to begin before students are admitted to programs of nursing. Many students struggle with prerequisite courses and never even apply to nursing programs. Professional nursing advisors can help advisees to develop study and time management skills when they enter the prerequisite courses, provide assistance and encouragement along the way, and help students navigate the nursing program admission process. Approaches will vary across settings, but many schools have successfully adopted direct admit to nursing tracks, mentoring by current nursing students, summer bridge courses to enhance college writing and math readiness, peer tutor programs, and pre-nursing or interprofessional freshman seminar courses that

expose first time in college (FTIC) students to various healthcare careers. Summer outreach programs to underserved school districts that expose middle and high school students to nursing – and to practicing nurses who look like them – can be used to develop pathways for future applicants and help young people see themselves as future professional nurses. Additionally, faculty mentors can provide outreach to practicing nurses – especially those working to serve historically underserved communities – to recruit outstanding nurse leaders into advanced practice and graduate nursing programs. Diversifying our graduate enrollment will provide the added benefit of providing diverse nurse practitioners and help educate a diverse workforce for future faculty vacancies.

Evidence-Based Admissions Processes: A holistic admissions process designed to promote student and programmatic success should include a thorough review of applicant metrics as well as information that provides more than numbers alone. The entire academic record should be analyzed, noting the average course load taken each semester, GPA trajectory, course withdrawals, and courses repeated. Grades that trended upward as the student gained experience with college course demands are often a better predictor of future academic success than GPA alone. A solid GPA accompanied by a pattern of course withdrawals across multiple semesters, possibly to maintain the GPA, is less reassuring. Strong grades earned during a semester of full-time enrollment demonstrate that the student can achieve with a challenging course load. However, students who took only one or two courses at a time should have the opportunity to explain why that occurred. Many low-income students work full-time throughout their college journey to support themselves and their families. Admissions committees must recognize that finances, work or military obligations, and family care needs, among other factors, can impact a student’s ability to enroll full-time. This type of review can lead to discussion with prospective students regarding the time they will be able to devote to studying if accepted to the nursing program.

The use of a standardized nursing entrance exam measures performance on one test as compared to the GPA (which reflects academic performance over time). Although standardized exams have been criticized as unfair to students not within the majority population demographic, passing a standardized exam – the NCLEX-RN – is required to enter the profession. Additionally, an entrance exam offers one more datum point, in combination with other measurements, that could help a student who has persisted to master foundational knowledge. Many students begin their academic journey ill-prepared for college-level work. A student who had a difficult transition to college that negatively impacted the GPA may demonstrate his or her existing level of knowledge by taking a standardized entrance exam. A rising GPA trajectory accompanied by solid standardized exam scores may be a better predictor of future academic success than GPA alone.

Subject area scores within an entrance exam provide information about improvement needed prior to admission and support needed after admission to enhance academic performance.

Finally, programs that use an entrance exam can be more lenient in terms of recency of courses. An entrance exam allows students to demonstrate current knowledge and is less burdensome in terms of time and money than retaking a course completed in the distant

past. Programs that use a standardized entrance exam should offer a no- or low-cost course designed to help students prepare for the exam. Offering the course to any student who indicates their intention to apply to the program during the next cycle helps to level the playing field for students at risk because of standardized testing barriers.

Programs should track performance of admitted students in nursing courses to inform future admission practices. Use of a rubric that weights admission data such as the overall GPA, prerequisite course GPA, science GPA, standardized entrance exam composite and subject scores, will calculate an overall metric score for each admitted student. Following current students within each range of weighted metrics longitudinally helps predict which students are fully ready to enter the program and who may need extra assistance with nursing course work to be successful. Programs should identify applicants who need to improve their foundational knowledge base before entering the program. In fairness to students not admitted, an advisor should inform them of how they need to improve prior to the next application cycle.

Academic Support for Nursing Coursework: Nursing programs must be prepared to support all students' academic and professional success. Admissions data coupled with longitudinal performance data should be utilized to identify the support resources and tactics that must be created to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed, graduate, and join the workforce. Strategies to support learners include bootcamps that prepare students for the rigors of nursing courses, mentoring by alumni and practicing nurses, peer and faculty tutoring, standardized integrated testing, and writing assistance (Byrd & Meling, 2020). Most importantly, however, nursing faculty need to engage in ongoing review of curricula to ensure that it is relevant, offers a solid foundation, uses culturally relevant pedagogy by building on pre-existing knowledge, connects complex material to concepts already mastered, and offers clinical experiences that are aligned with curricula. Clinical faculty must be well-versed in the didactic content to help students recognize clinical application of what they learned in the classroom. Faculty need to help students reflect on their performance to tie pieces together at the end of each clinical experience. Similarly, interactive learning strategies that connect theory to practice must consistently be used in the classroom. Mastery of complex course material does not happen by passively listening to PowerPoint lectures. Students learn, retain, and grow when they have multiple opportunities to engage with material in different ways over time. Case studies, simulations, debates, student-led presentations, and problem-solving activities allow and encourage all students to share pre-existing knowledge and experiences in ways that raise the overall level of knowledge in the classroom. Professional nurses are expected to actively collaborate as members of a team, and nursing students should have multiple opportunities to engage in this way beginning with their very first nursing course.

Admissions characteristics are the starting line for whether a student will ultimately succeed in their pursuit of graduation, licensure, and practice. Faculty instruction and curriculum must play a significant role in the student's development and growth toward becoming a competent professional nurse. To claim that increased diversity enrollment through the implementation of holistic admissions practices will inherently have a negative impact on an institution's NCLEX-RN pass rate may indicate a lack of

appreciation for diversity's impact on the educational environment and potentially overt racism. Schools of nursing have a role to play in all students' ability to succeed. By creating a supportive environment coupled with culturally relevant instruction, we collectively can have a positive impact on the diversity of the future nursing workforce.

Fostering Inclusion: A sense of belonging and a belief that one will be successful in the profession is essential to nursing student success, yet this is not the universal experience. Underrepresented nursing student alumni who persisted at primarily white institutions experienced barriers related to bias, exclusion, and isolation; lack of student and faculty diversity; difficulty finding mentors; and preconceived cultural assumptions on the part of faculty (Gona, Pusey-Reid, Lussier-Duynstee, & Gall, 2019). Male nursing students reported exclusion and gender bias as experiences that impacted them negatively during their education (Carnevale & Priode, 2018). Englund (2019) discovered a sense of marginalization in nontraditional prelicensure nursing students. Programs need to provide an inclusive environment for all students throughout the nursing school experience to support academic and programmatic success.

The commitment to inclusivity that enhances academic success needs to begin prior to program entry. Many underrepresented students are intimidated by the application to nursing school. Introductory seminars, counselors, and advisors that prepare, encourage, and assist underrepresented students to navigate the admissions process as well as the complexities of financial aid are critical to increasing diversity within nursing programs (Woods-Giscombe et al., 2015). Programs should review their websites for accuracy, ease of navigation, and institutional commitment to diversity that goes beyond mentioning the concept in a cursory manner. Things to consider:

- Does the website document inclusion of programs, courses, and experiences that reflect a commitment to diversity?
- Are there photos of diverse students, faculty, invited speakers, or clinical partners?
- Would the website encourage prospective students from diverse groups to see themselves as belonging in this setting?

In addition to the website, programs should look at the processes and individuals that applicants encounter. Questions to consider include:

- Are application processes clearly explained, streamlined, and as straightforward as possible?
- Do admissions advisors and counselors reflect local population demographics?
- Do any of the counselors and advisors speak the predominant languages of the geographic area?

Although applicants need a requisite level of English fluency, their family members may benefit from speaking with bilingual admissions staff members. Schools should prioritize the hiring of staff members to meet their mission and the needs of students in the communities that they serve.

Following admission, programs must be designed to support students, not only with academics, but to give them confidence and a sense of belonging. Interventions such as mentoring, offering leadership opportunities, and service learning are methods to foster inclusion (Cowan, Weeks, & Wicks, 2015). Courses that reflect a commitment to all types of diversity, and that offer students from diverse demographic groups opportunities to contribute perspectives that inform the learning – without being signaled out or forced - should be threaded throughout the curriculum. Faculty members that incorporate service learning must be aware of issues such as transportation, time, and cost to ensure that the opportunities are available to all students.

An integrative literature review determined that the faculty-student relationship is vital to the development of resilience by nursing students (Reyes, Andrusyszyn, Iwasiw, Forchuk, & Babenko-Mould, 2015). Every student should have a faculty advisor who knows them as an individual and to whom they can go for support. Faculty must be highly engaged with students in didactic and clinical settings to offer targeted support for each student with unique learning needs. One of the most basic faculty interventions to facilitate inclusion is to know and acknowledge students by name during every class, in tutoring and advising sessions, and when passing one another in the hallways or on the campus. Despite large classes, faculty members can use nameplates, seating charts, flashcards, and enrollment technology that includes student photos. We expect students to commit a great deal of information to memory, and we should expect the same from ourselves when it comes to this most basic form of respect and acknowledgement.

Lastly, an essential step to fostering the inclusivity required for individual and programmatic success involves critical thinking and self-reflection by nursing faculty members. No faculty member can fully appreciate the perspectives of each unique student or of each student group. A high percentage of nursing faculty are white women with lived experiences very different from those of underrepresented students that we educate. We need to develop an awareness and appreciation of racism as a public health issue that is not limited to overt gestures of prejudice. Rather, racism encompasses subtle and often unconscious biases as well as decades of policies, systems, and historical precedents that favored the white majority and disenfranchised others within our society in terms of housing, education, health, and nearly every aspect of daily life. Similarly, diversity in all its forms should be acknowledged and celebrated. Society benefits from a nursing workforce that includes individuals from all walks of life, including allies and members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities, nurses from different geographic regions and socio-economic statuses, political affiliations, and religious beliefs, just to name a few.

Faculty cannot say that we “don’t see color,” because to do so invalidates the experiences and history of many of our students. We need to appreciate that we all are on the sometimes personally uncomfortable journey to becoming more culturally competent as educators. In addition to completing education in unconscious bias, faculty need to seek out experiences that expose them to diverse perspectives and history lessons not necessarily taught in 20th century US classrooms. Personal study and critical self-reflection are the first steps to the inclusion that enhances academic success for all

students. Suggested readings and inclusive resources include:

- American Association of Colleges of Nursing Diversity and Inclusion website. <https://www.aacnnursing.org/Diversity>
- Amar, A. (2020). Why race matters: A letter from the dean. UNLV, Las Vegas School of Nursing. <https://www.unlv.edu/news-story/why-race-matters-letter-dean>
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Budgets and Institutional Priorities

Challenges: Many of the strategies recommended in this document require funding. Despite the economic constraints facing institutions of higher learning, nursing leaders must ensure that the university and nursing program budgets reflect an institutional commitment to diversity and the call of the nursing profession to support diversity. Deans and chairs should develop strong relationships with chief academic officers and chief financial officers to advocate for funding that supports diversity. Additionally, academic nursing departments should look beyond the university for sources of revenue from academic-practice partnerships, clinical practice, and contracts with local businesses or public agencies. Deans and faculty need to cultivate relationships with potential donors, alumni, and nursing organizations, particularly those that support minority nurses to increase funding that supports holistic admissions. Faculty should pursue federal and private foundation grants designed to support nursing education and nursing student success.

Leveraging Technology in Holistic Admissions

With limited budgets and staff, implementation of holistic admissions can seem like a daunting challenge – especially in times of diminishing financial resources. However,

technology solutions may be available that can be employed to expand the capabilities of limited admissions teams. Software and web-based programs provided by third party providers and existing technology platforms can be utilized throughout the enrollment management funnel (i.e., prospect identification, recruitment, application, review, admission, and matriculation).

Identification and Recruitment: At the earliest stage of the enrollment management funnel is the need to identify prospects and build a diverse applicant pool. Clearly, an institution's website can serve as a constant presence for prospective students to learn about offered degree plans and the admissions process. Within the site, institutions must provide a way to capture analytics of page usage to determine if the site is as effective as it can be and provide prospective students a mechanism to request more information through an online form. When possible, these data can be captured and shared through a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool that can help offices organize prospect lists and schedule regular communication through SMS text messaging, emails, or electronic invitations to on-campus events.

A quality CRM can streamline the work that needs to be done, reduce the human resource component through templated communication, and provide enrollment data to help offices determine the effectiveness of their recruitment efforts. Although some CRM products can be expensive, schools of nursing can leverage economies of scale by partnering with other offices on campus to partner in purchasing a system, and the data that is collected will assist leadership in making informed decisions about how to use limited resources to determine where to recruit, the conversion rate for an information campaign, the effectiveness of advertising campaigns, etc. A quality CRM can certainly be worth the cost and be a valuable investment for the school.

Application and Admission: Third party providers can assist with the application process for extending admissions offers. Smaller staffs may not have the capability of processing and reviewing all of the documents required for admission (e.g., transcripts, letters of recommendation, resumes, writing samples, etc.). There are common applications available to schools of nursing that can help streamline these processes and expand staff capabilities. For example, all AACN member institutions can partner, free of charge, with NursingCAS, the nation's centralized application service for nursing programs offered at all levels. This application can be customized for the institution, so school-specific and branded webpages are unique for each program. NursingCAS organizes and verifies that submitted transcripts are official and allows for references, test scores, essays, and student GPAs to be uploaded.

When reviewing applicants, the application service will provide a space for rubrics to be utilized by reviewers and easily display the needed information for each applicant in a way that allows for remote access. Reports can be generated to help admission professionals compare their cohorts to the national pool, and documents from admitted students can be exported into various formats to help with matriculation efforts for enrolled students.

Multiple Mini Interviews (MMIs) have become a common practice in holistic admission to glean additional subjective information about applicants. Although these efforts can provide a significant amount of supplemental information about the applicant, the MMI process is inherently time-consuming and dependent on a critical mass of reviewers – typically, faculty members with little free time and the time they invest is not always considered in the promotion and tenure process. There are alternatives to the traditional on-campus MMI. Some schools have invested in remote interviewing systems that allow students to record responses to interview questions and provide proctored writing samples so reviewers can score applicants at their own pace during times that might be more convenient than a dedicated 2-3-day period for MMIs.

Another alternative to MMIs are video-based situational judgment assessments. These systems ask applicants to view a staged scenario on a web-based platform and respond to questions about how they would approach the situation. As an example, the video may place the student into an ethical dilemma where the student may have to decide between following an organization’s written policy or violating the policy to improve another person’s living situation. The student’s response can then be scored to determine their ability to think creatively, critically, ethically, and clearly. Many of these systems have paid staff who score the responses and send the institution a list of how applicants performed using Z scores that can be utilized in the admissions review.

Technology options can help ensure your admissions office provides required services and information when students seek them. We know it is not realistic for admissions personnel to be available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, but websites never sleep. Inquiries, applications, and supporting documents can be organized in a manner to allow for more efficient workflow, and timely responses can be provided. Moreover, the cost invested in technology solutions can be returned in the form of decreased human resources, more efficient recruitment plans, and a higher conversion rate for the students you recruit.

Promising Practices for Implementing Holistic Admissions

The following section identifies promising practices for implementing a robust holistic admissions process. Each practice is accompanied by a definition and exemplars from institutions that have adopted these best practices at varying levels.

Mission Statement Valuing Diversity and Inclusion

Institutions should review their mission, vision, and values statements to identify the significance placed on diversity and inclusion. If the institution’s statements do not reflect a commitment to diversity and inclusion, the necessary adjustments need to be made, as these statements play a key role in the foundation of the holistic admissions review model for that institution. These statements are an indicator of an institution’s readiness to adopt holistic admissions as a practice. The following examples of mission, vision, and value statements support the implementation of holistic admission review.

The School of Nursing prepares highly skilled nurse clinicians and nurse leaders who promote health and well-being across diverse populations and communities, recognize the importance of Social Determinants of Health, and practice with compassion, kindness, and respect. The faculty of the School of Nursing are guided by the following values: Social Justice, Diversity, Lifelong Learning, Teamwork, integrity, and Scholarship.

The School of Nursing prepares nurse leaders for professional holistic nursing practice and advancement of nursing knowledge, through the pursuit of wisdom. Faculty create an educational experience that embraces diversity, equity, and inclusion within the values of caring, wisdom, integrity, collegiality, and commitment for faithful service and ethical leadership in a global community.

Develop E-A-M Model that Directly Connects with Mission Statement

Once the mission statement is evaluated, institutions can develop an admissions model that gives balanced consideration to experiences, attributes, and metrics (E-A-M). The E-A-M model must articulate a connection to the institution's mission statement.

One school redesigned their admissions process to undergird their *mission* "to teach and support professionalism and professional values in the care of individuals and populations across diverse cultures, ages, and environments." From this foundation, they developed the following E-A-M model: a) attributes: critical thinking, caring attitude, leadership ability, problem-solving ability, ability to work with others, values learning, and values diversity; (b) work and life experiences, and (c) academic metrics: HESI Score, overall GPA, and prerequisite course GPA.

Identify Recruitment Practices that Align with E-A-M Model

In order to achieve increased diversity in a nursing program, special attention must be given to the methods and practice of recruiting underrepresented students. This follows a thorough understanding and transparent communication of the identified E-A-M model. Institutions must adjust their recruitment practices to align with the holistic review model and overarching diversity goals. For example, some schools have created program models that support seamless transition with affiliated institutions. Similarly, some schools have partnered with select high schools as part of targeted recruitment strategy. One program created an advisory council with community partners to strengthen institutional and community partnerships. Members meet quarterly to share knowledge about existing resources and needs of the target population, propose and design additional resources, and make data-based recommendations for improving processes and services.

Design Rubrics Reflective of the E-A-M Model

Institutions should examine the method by which they will assess the experiences, attributes, and metrics. In order to establish inter-rater reliability and promote equity

throughout the admission cycle, the process should include a clear and purposeful rubric. This rubric should be used for internal processes by admissions committees.

One school designed a rubric for the multiple mini interviews that looks at the strength of evidence for (a) applicant's understanding of the role of the nurse, (b) life experiences that influenced their interest in nursing, and (c) what excites the applicant about nursing. This rubric is directly connected to the newly implemented review of work and life experiences, as well as an applicant's critical thinking abilities, caring attitude, and value of diversity.

Engage Faculty and Staff in the Review Process

Faculty and staff engagement in the review process is essential to the success and sustainability of a holistic admissions review process and is primarily accomplished through the implementation of an admissions committee. The committee should be exposed to all elements of the holistic admissions review model and receive training on topics including—but not limited to—inter-rater reliability, unconscious bias, and rubric review.

At some nursing schools the admissions office collaborated with a faculty undergraduate admissions committee and instituted multiple mini interviews for selected students. Faculty conduct the interviews and make the decisions. Additionally, an annual diversity and inclusion symposium was developed and implemented by the school of nursing, in addition to periodic diversity training for faculty.

Utilize Technology to Maintain Efficiency

Maintaining efficiency is crucial to the sustainability of a thorough holistic admissions review process. Utilization of technology resources can aid immensely in increasing process efficiency. Incorporating resources such as a centralized application or virtual interview process are methods of maintaining an efficient admissions process. The following institution has increased process efficiency through integration with a third-party online application service.

For example,

The NursingCAS centralized application system has successfully been implemented throughout all degree programs at our school. Benefits of this system involve automated demographic data collection and reporting mechanisms to inform the admissions committee of applicant characteristics, including first-generation college students, disadvantaged background, and rural residence. Point systems have been configured into the application system by the admissions committee to capture characteristics consistent with and reflective of our values/commitment to diversity and inclusive criteria. Scores are produced through the automated system in a standardized method decreasing evaluation bias. Additionally, the built-in support provides clarity in the application process and promotes successful application completion by maintaining documentation organization and communication reminders. It is important to note that

contemporary technology-based application systems are only as holistic as the organizations that configure the criteria and point systems. Development and configuration must be conducted through an inclusive lens for holistic admissions to be successful.

Develop Support Services for All Students

Commitment to recruiting and accepting underrepresented students necessitates dedication to providing tailored support services for all students. Support methods that range from a student's encounter with the admission process through to program completion must be evaluated and developed. Admission process transparency, access to resources, onboarding assistance, and mentoring are just a few of the support services that institutions should consider. A little-used resource or student support service is academic advisors. Academic advisors can work with pre-nursing students through graduation. They can monitor how students are progressing and act as an early alert should difficulties arise. Program sustainability is essential for ongoing success.

One school addressed the issue of sustainability by including the Academic Success Center and the Office of Financial Aid to coordinate and track study hours and tutoring; develop workshops on financial literacy; and coordinate financial aid packages, among other support services.

Another school reported "we offered a pre-entry immersion program for grant-funded scholars, which has been very successful. The 2-day "boot camp" was designed by a faculty member who serves as the academic coordinator for the grant. This program provided a very interactive, fun, relationship-building introduction to nursing school. Participant satisfaction with the boot camp is high. Faculty, staff, consultants, and collaborators participate. Additionally, the admissions team with some input from faculty initiated a Pre-Immersion Day for all incoming junior students in Year 3. We see this as part of our sustainability efforts. A mentoring program also was initiated to support new graduates' transition into professional practice."

Engage in Review/Assessment of the Process

Implementation of holistic review is not a singular experience. Rather, it is an ongoing process that requires a feedback loop to review the outcomes associated with each admissions cycle to determine if enrollment targets were met, if students perform as expected after matriculating, and what the long-term impact of any changes might be on student success, graduation rates, and NCLEX-RN pass rates. Adjustments to the weights, admission rubrics, interview questions, required documents for admission, and other aspects of the admissions process will need to be amended periodically to ensure students are identified who both represent the mission, vision, and core values of the school and demonstrate the potential to be successful in the academic program. Once holistic review has been fully integrated and stakeholder feedback obtained, institutions can begin to seek out technology and improve training of reviewers to make the process more efficient and ensure inter-rater reliability is improved. This type of follow-up will promote the ongoing support and sustainability of a holistic admissions process.

One school has developed an annual review process and expanded the holistic admissions process to all undergraduate programs. There have been revisions to the E-A-M model and weighting of each element based on experience and data. The training of applicant reviewers also has been more formalized. All of these changes have been brought through faculty governance for approval. Data is continuing to be collected.

Next Steps

Developing a planning process for an institution's transition to implementing holistic admissions review is not always straightforward. Holistic admissions represent a major change initiative for the nursing school that requires attention to many associated departments in the institution. The admissions policies and practices that are implemented must be uniquely tailored to each institution's faculty resources; the school's mission, vision, and core values; and long-term diversity enrollment objectives. The following guidelines, separated into three phases, are intended to help schools engage in the conversation to assess where they might be in both having the capacity to transition to holistic admissions review and to determine the resources needed to make the shift.

Phase One: Schools of nursing at this early stage have not yet incorporated any other information into the review of prospective students for admission beyond academic metrics (e.g., GPAs, test scores, grades in pre-requisite courses, etc.), but are interested in making a transition to holistic admissions practices. The first step for these institutions is to engage in serious dialogue with faculty and staff about the mission, vision, and core values of the school. Is diversity and inclusion represented? Is there an appetite to change what is valued if diversity and inclusion is not mentioned? Have campus climate studies been conducted and support resources for diverse students been identified? These questions and others can help serve as guides for the preliminary work that must be completed before implementing holistic admissions review.

Phase Two: With each holistic admissions review cycle, schools of nursing will find ways to refine their questions, modify their interview process, clarify rubrics and writing prompts, and make other improvements to ensure the correct information is gleaned from prospective students to align admissions offers with diversity enrollment goals. Although schools must be willing to experiment with the process, all decisions must be based in the admissions and academic performance data that is available. For example, if you wish to change the weight that GPA or test scores play in your admissions decisions, how do you know that those metrics have any predictive validity for how students will perform in your program once enrolled? Additionally, if you wish to change a writing prompt, is it because you have evidence that students misunderstand the question or is the faculty's unconscious bias manifesting to seek unnecessary information that is not rooted in the school's mission or vision? At all times, admissions committees must be committed to providing a fair and data-based review of applicants that is in the best interest of all – student, staff, faculty, and ultimately, the institution.

Phase Three: Once holistic admissions review is fully implemented as a process for review and matriculating students, the next phase is a review of the impact of this process on multiple outcomes, including impact on enrollment targets, student retention and academic performance, graduation rates, and pass rates on licensure exams. Feedback from analysis of student performance and demographics should inform any future revisions that might need to be implemented to modify the process to better achieve the nursing program's overall goals. Additionally, faculty and staff should continue to be trained to improve the efficiency of the process, the inter-rater reliability of review scores, and to mitigate any unconscious bias that manifests throughout the process.

Conclusion

The holistic admissions review consultants utilized by AACN realize that schools of nursing are at various stages of implementation, and there is not a one-size-fits-all approach. All agree that adopting holistic admissions review is an effective mechanism for ensuring a robust population of racially and ethnically diverse students in schools of nursing. AACN is committed to working with member schools and the larger academic nursing community to prepare a fully representative community of clinicians, educators, researchers, and leaders who understand the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in meeting the nation's healthcare needs.

The following checklist can serve as a guide to help schools of nursing transition to holistic review.

List of Holistic Review Practices

Holistic Review Practice	Does your school currently use this practice?	Practices to explore further
Mission statement for admissions that includes diversity	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Admissions committees receive training related to the school's mission	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Admissions committees receive training on diversity and/or unconscious bias	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Broadening the composition of the admissions committee (e.g., including members of the community, diversity staff)	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Non-academic criteria considered alongside metrics in the initial screening process	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Applicants required to submit an essay/personal statement	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
A subset of applicants are interviewed (in person or over the phone)	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Applicants are drawn from the waitlist according to criteria that contribute diversity to the school	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Specific criteria related to school mission and goals are evaluated (e.g., global health mission)	Yes / No	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please note: The practices listed here are not a comprehensive list of all possible holistic review practices, nor would it be expected that a school would adopt all components.

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David A. Byrd, PhD
Associate Dean for Admissions and Student Services
Associate Professor/Research
UT Health San Antonio School of Nursing

Vernell P. DeWitty, PhD, MBA, RN
Director for Diversity and Inclusion
American Association of Colleges of Nursing

Jerryl W. Morris, MSCM, MPA
Interim Executive Director University Advising
Kennesaw State University

Julie W. Nadeau, EdD, MSN, RN, CNE
Associate Professor
University of the Incarnate Word

Lisa Rosenberg, PhD, RN
Associate Dean Emeritus
Rush University

Ashley Sonke, MA
Nursing Student Services Coordinator II
California Baptist University