

Reducing Biases in the Graduate School Admissions Process

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We all have [personal prejudices](#), whether intentional or not, and we can all take steps to reduce them within ourselves, such as by finding more opportunities for [intergroup contact](#). But when [biases and other stereotypes](#) are ingrained in a larger system, such as an academic institution, it takes a dedicated strategy to break the cycle. During the Inclusivity Spotlight discussion at the 2022 APS Annual Convention in Chicago, Illinois, three social scientists who are thought leaders in the area of [diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) in higher education shared research-based perspectives on and potential solutions to bias in the graduate admissions process.

Dev K. Dalal (University at Albany, State University of New York), Julie Posselt (University of Southern California), and APS Fellow Cynthia Pickett (California State Polytechnic University, Pomona) drew from their research to explore where [racial and other biases](#) arise during the graduate application process, how those biases can be reduced, and the empirical research needed to find solutions over the short and long term.

The perfect storm

The graduate admissions process for psychological science programs is something of a “perfect storm” for fostering biases, said Pickett, the Presidential Associate for Inclusion and chief diversity officer at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. Some programs receive dozens if not hundreds of applications each enrollment period—leaving those on admissions committees rushed to select attractive candidates before they commit to another school or program. Given these circumstances, stereotypes and other biases often tend to be a main driver in committee members’ judgments of who gets accepted, she said. “We rely on heuristics, schemas, and shortcuts to arrive at decisions that we think are good enough to then act on those decisions.”

“Admissions is certainly biased because it very reliably produces outcomes that disproportionately admit people who are from backgrounds already represented within the academy and doctoral education,” said Posselt, who has conducted extensive research to improve diversity and equity efforts at the [Pullias Center for Higher Education](#). The systems that institutions use for outreach, admissions, and recruitment—including individual evaluations and broader policy environments—have “stacked the deck” against historically marginalized groups.

[Related content: Research collection on Implicit Bias](#)

If discussions about biases in the graduate admissions process are limited to individual criteria or elements of the application, “We will always fall short” of addressing the full range of biases within the system, Posselt added.

Instead, she said, institutions should conduct holistic reviews of candidates, referring to an approach that entered the public lexicon in 2003 during the [U.S. Supreme Court Grutter v. Bollinger case](#) on race-conscious law school admissions. The Supreme Court defined the approach as a “highly individualized, holistic review of each applicant’s file, giving serious consideration to all the ways an applicant might contribute to a diverse educational environment” (Grutter v. Bollinger, 539 U.S. 306, 2003).

Yet viewing each individual’s application with the holistic approach requires admissions committees to be trained on how to balance candidates’ academic metrics with their experiences and attributes, an approach that is not yet standard practice.

See the 2021 APS Inclusivity Spotlight on [Reducing Race and Other Disparities in and Through Psychological Research](#)

Breaking old habits

The panel also discussed the empirical research needed to determine the possible benefits and drawbacks of a whole-context approach. For instance, exploring different deployments of evaluation rubrics during the admissions process—and providing training to use these rubrics—might help researchers determine where the problems lie and how to fix them.

Dalal, an associate professor at the University of Albany, State University of New York who researches human judgment and decision-making, explained the need to analyze whether new research would convince those who have been selecting graduate students for years to change their methods. One potential pushback, he said, might be admissions committees being more likely to trust their own instincts over new research.

[See all articles from this issue of the *Observer*.](#)

In addition to researching admission committees’ willingness to break old habits, Pickett suggested that institutions and individual graduate programs ask why their programs select the students that they do, as well as define what success in their program looks like.

“It’s easy to say that students need to fit with the institution, but it needs to be the other way around if we want to see more diversity and inclusion,” she said. “Going that route and studying the effects would be helpful in terms of transforming our field.”

Relatedly, Dalal argued that having graduate admissions committees clarify how they define and predict academic, interpersonal, and social success could help further researchers’ understanding of the students and the admissions process.

In a question submitted on the conference app, one attendee asked about the practical steps institutions can take to help students prepare for the intensity of graduate school. “A first practical step is getting specific about what is meant by ready and why those characteristics are considered essential,” Posselt

answered. “Do we assume that to be ready means having a certain set of skills or experiences, to move at a certain pace? And is it because we assume that we shouldn’t have to provide training or support in that area? A more honest assessment of our ideas about readiness is organizational ‘inner work’ that lays the groundwork for assessing whether, as advisors and graduate programs, we are *student* ready,” she added.

“Often people worry about readiness because our programs are set up as sink-or-swim environments, and we assume that a certain set of entry characteristics will reduce the risk that students sink. In this world, the ‘best’ students are the ones who need us the least. It’s time to rewrite the standard scripts about readiness.”

Tackling systemic bias in graduate school admissions is daunting, but, ultimately, “It’s important to make the implicit explicit,” Pickett said. “Talking about it can determine where the bias lies so that we can move forward.”

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