What Is Holistic Admissions Review, and Why Does It Matter?

Disparities in health and health care in the United States have been a long-standing persistent challenge for certain segments of the population that historically have received less and a lower quality of health care. Although many factors contribute to some groups experiencing a higher burden of illness, injury, and disability, one leading cause has been limited access to health care providers from diverse backgrounds. Bentancourt, Corbett, and Bondaryk (2014) reported the degree to which the nation’s health care leadership and workforce reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the general population is an important factor which impinges on both the availability and acceptability of health care for members of minority groups. The structure of health care systems and processes of care are shaped by the leaders who design them and the workforce that carries them out. As the population becomes increasingly more diverse, addressing disparities is important for improving the overall quality of health care and population health. One recognized strategy to assist with reducing health disparities is to increase the diversity of the health care workforce.

Researchers have reported that minority physicians are more likely than their White counterparts to provide care to poor and minority patients and may provide more effective care to patients of their own ethnicity (Bentancourt et al., 2014). Similarly, LeVeist and Pierre (2014) found that patients who can identify with medical providers from similar racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds have better outcomes. The challenge for health professions schools, considering multiple recommendations, has been to increase the enrollment and graduation of more diverse health care providers. The implementation of Holistic Admissions Review (HAR) practices is an effective approach adopted by institutions to meet this goal.

HAR is a flexible, individualized way of assessing an applicant’s capabilities for success in a collegiate environment. Balanced consideration is given to experiences and attributes, as well as academic metrics and, when considered in combination, how the individual might contribute value as a nursing student and member of the nursing profession. Many health professions schools have successfully implemented HAR to increase diversity in student enrollment and have realized the benefits of a more diverse student population and profession.

Two recent research studies addressed HAR—one focused on the prevalence and outcomes of using holistic review practices, and the second on identifying barriers to implementing holistic review in nursing schools. The first was conducted in 2013 to 2014 by Urban Universities for HEALTH (2014), a partnership of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, the Association of Public and land-grant universities, and the Association of American Medical Colleges, with funding from the National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities, and the Health Resources and Services Administration. This study examined: (a) how many health professions schools were using holistic review and to what degree, and (b) what impact holistic review had on diversity and student success. A total of 104 universities (228 individual schools) across 45 states participated and included schools from public health, pharmacy, nursing, medicine, and dentistry. The second study conducted by Glazer et al. (2016) reported findings from a qualitative study to better understand barriers to implementing holistic admissions in nursing schools.

Findings from these studies show that 72% of health professions schools utilizing holistic admission practices reported an increase in student diversity and no change or an increase in student success measures (i.e., incoming grade point average, graduation rates, and pass rates on licensing examinations). Schools also reported several positive changes in learning environment, increased community engagement, student cooperation, and teamwork. Schools that self-reported their use of holistic practices included: dentistry schools (93%), medical schools (91%), public health schools (84%), and pharmacy schools (78%). When compared with other health professions schools, nursing schools reported less use of holistic admissions practices (47%). Glazer et al. (2016) identified the lack of knowledge in nursing schools regarding HAR as the overarching barrier to use of holistic review. Additional barriers included the need for better dissemination of evidence, support from university leaders and administrators, legal guidance to facilitate implementation, and appropriate resources to support implementation of the HAR process.

During the fall of 2017, the American Association of Colleges of Nursing entered agreements with 29 of the 31 nursing schools selected as recipients of...
Health Resources and Services Administration Nursing Workforce Diversity grants to provide HAR workshops and technical assistance with diversity development. These schools are engaged in dialogues about nursing workforce diversity and are developing policies and practices to guide their implementation of HAR when selecting a more diverse student population who will succeed in the workforce and meet the needs of populations served.

Research shows that when groups of students with different backgrounds and perspectives are brought together, there is a positive effect on all students’ attitudes regarding access to care and an increase in the number of students who indicate an interest and intent to work with the underserved (Saha et al., 2008). Educating students in environments that value diversity and inclusion, produces graduates who are better prepared to practice in underserved communities and whose understanding of the cultural needs of patients improves patient satisfaction and trust. Diverse learning environments help students to challenge their assumptions; contributes to their active thinking; broadens their perspectives regarding racial, ethnic, and cultural differences; increases socialization across racial and ethnic groups; and leads to improved intellectual and social outcomes, as well as greater cognitive outcomes for all group members (Saha et al., 2008).

Throughout the years, many schools have used academic metrics as the single driver for admitting students. By relying solely on such metrics as the funnelling process, many otherwise qualified students are not considered for admission. HAR asks those involved in screening applicants to consider other variables that better describe and inform who the students are and what they can contribute. Holistic review involves considering the entire person and his or her experiences, and personal attributes, and not only the data about academic performance reflected in grades and test scores. This flexible framework uses institution-specific variables as a part of the overall rubric to understand and assess each applicant’s accomplishments and potential to succeed. This holistic approach involves assessing not only the applicant, but the composition of the class as a whole and what contributions each applicant will bring to the community.

HAR represents a major organizational change that requires support of the larger academic institution and nursing school leaders for successful implementation. When framed through the lens of guiding missions and values, holistic review is a change strategy that presents real opportunities for increased organizational effectiveness and strategic aspirations. With any major change, the culture of an organization will define what is accepted or rejected within a group and should be aligned with the mission and values of the organization.

A holistic admissions process facilitates identifying a broadly diverse student body that contributes to an enhanced learning environment for all students and a better prepared health care workforce. HAR is not a diversity quota system or a means to exclude grades and test scores from consideration. Most importantly, implementation of HAR is not the same across all nursing schools and should be mission driven, and strategically focused. The process should be informed by the data that the nursing school collects as indicators of student success. The admissions committee is the gatekeeper who decides who has access to your institution and who gets to learn in your environment. Even minor changes to the admission process can have a large impact on the types of students applying, those who are admitted, and those who ultimately succeed, graduate, and join the nursing workforce.

References

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