The Rise of Holistic Admissions: Origins, Evolution, and Consequences

Every elite college, or any college for that matter, touts its admissions process as fair and equitable, often highlighting its holistic approach. This approach means that decisions are not solely based on grades or test scores but also consider the full profile of an applicant, including personal interests, character, and extracurricular activities. Colleges claim their mission is to create a diverse student body and foster an environment that nurtures tomorrow's leaders.

For example, Harvard University's undergraduate admissions website states the following in response to the question, "What admissions criteria do you use?": "There is no formula for gaining admission to Harvard. Academic accomplishment in high school is important, but the Admissions Committee also considers many other criteria, such as community involvement, leadership and distinction in extracurricular activities, and personal qualities and character."

However, despite these lofty claims, holistic admissions often lead to the rejection of capable and deserving applicants who do not align with a particular school's desired mold while admitting less qualified candidates who exhibit specific sought-after traits, such as parental education or wealth. This inconsistency leaves countless high school seniors and their parents grappling with frustration and disbelief each year as they navigate unexpected rejections.

Despite its lofty goals, the introduction of holistic admissions in the early 20th century had a more sinister intent. It represented a significant shift in college admissions policies, driven largely by efforts to limit Jewish enrollment at elite colleges. While the holistic admission policy is now celebrated for evaluating the "whole student," its origins are rooted in deliberate exclusionary practices. Around the same time, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was introduced as a standardized measure to identify deserving students while subtly serving to exclude those deemed undesirable. However, the SAT did not entirely fulfill its creator's intentions. Instead, it paradoxically widened access to higher education by enabling academically gifted students, including those from marginalized backgrounds, to demonstrate their abilities and earn admission.

Before holistic admissions, colleges like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton relied on academic performance as the primary criterion for admission. Rigorous entrance exams in subjects like Latin, Greek, and mathematics favored students from elite preparatory schools. Women, minorities, and working-class students were largely excluded due to systemic barriers, while admissions often informally prioritized legacies, reinforcing social hierarchies.

By the 1920s, Jewish students, excelling academically, constituted a significant proportion of Ivy League student bodies—21–27% at Harvard and nearly 40% at Columbia. This rise alarmed administrators and alumni, who feared that Jewish students would alter the institutions' social and cultural fabric. Many Jewish students, often from immigrant families, were stereotyped as overly ambitious, and their achievements were dismissed as products of rote memorization rather than innate ability.

In response, colleges adopted holistic admissions to reduce Jewish enrollment without imposing explicit quotas. A. Lawrence Lowell, Harvard's president, pioneered this approach by incorporating subjective criteria such as character, leadership, extracurricular involvement, and

1. Nele Jacobs, Jim van Os, Catherine Derom, and Evert Thiery, *Heritability of Intelligence* (Cambridge University Press).

personal interviews. These measures favored affluent, white Protestant students while allowing administrators to limit Jewish enrollment under the guise of evaluating the "whole student."

In 1926, the Committee on Admissions, chaired by Pennypacker, articulated the ideal Harvard applicant, stating: "We are looking, then, for the all-round boy, and we intend to select him, considering every individual's record with respect to his promise, his intellectual power, to his character, and to the likelihood that he will profit by what Harvard has to offer." While the phrase "the all-round boy" may sound dated, it could easily be interpreted in modern terms as "the all-round applicant."

If so, Harvard and other colleges have long sought students with outstanding intellectual ability and character. However, how can one truly quantify or objectively judge whether one person's character is "superior" to another's? This inherent subjectivity raises questions about the fairness and consistency of such evaluations, particularly when character becomes a deciding factor in admissions decisions.

Introduced in 1926 by Carl Brigham, a psychologist at Princeton University, the SAT was designed to measure innate intelligence with a twofold purpose: to identify inherently gifted students and to exclude those perceived as achieving good grades through effort rather than aptitude. However, the test carried cultural biases that disadvantaged Jewish students, many of whom were recent immigrants or the children of immigrants, particularly due to its emphasis on verbal reasoning and analogies. Despite these biases, Jewish students quickly adapted and began excelling on the SAT, effectively undermining its intended use as a tool for exclusion. Over time, the SAT played a paradoxical role in democratizing access to higher education by enabling talented students from diverse backgrounds to compete on a more equal footing.

Although holistic admissions and the SAT were initially designed to limit Jewish enrollment, they had unintended consequences. Jewish students thrived, using the SAT to demonstrate their academic strengths. The SAT also expanded opportunities for rural and working-class students, challenging the exclusionary practices of elite colleges. By the mid-20th century, overtly anti-Semitic policies declined, and Jewish students became beneficiaries of the very systems designed to restrict their access.

For the past few decades, the SAT has been routinely criticized for its cultural bias, particularly against certain minority groups. Critics often cite statistics suggesting that the test favors children from wealthy families. However, many fail to recognize that the SAT, much like its earliest version, functions as a form of intelligence test—a claim the College Board, the maker of the SAT, vehemently denies.

If parents are professionals such as doctors, lawyers, or stockbrokers, it is plausible that they possess high levels of intelligence. According to a paper by Nele Jacobs and colleagues[1], children may inherit a degree of mental acuity. It can be assumed that when combined with a lifestyle that fosters learning, this natural ability may further enhance their SAT performance. In other words, attributing wealth as the sole or primary reason for affluent students excelling on the SAT is overly simplistic. The interplay of inherited potential, educational environment, and resources must be considered. This topic will be explored further in the next article.

1. Nele Jacobs, Jim van Os, Catherine Derom, and Evert Thiery, *Heritability of Intelligence* (Cambridge University Press).