

# HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS IN NURSING: WE CAN DO THIS



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Research shows that holistic admissions review practices can increase diversity across students without decreasing the workforce preparedness and academic success of students. Therefore, many disciplines have readily adopted the widespread use of holistic admissions review. Despite its proven effectiveness in addressing student diversity, nursing has been slow to implement holistic admissions review. The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the barriers to implementing holistic admissions review in nursing and the feasibility of adopting holistic admissions review across nursing programs. A biphasic qualitative research study was conducted with nursing deans from across the United States. Qualitative data collection consisted of two phases of focus group discussions conducted over a 3-month period. The qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis. The categories and subcategories identified in Phase 1 informed the discussion in Phase 2. One overarching category from Phase 1 was identified, which was the lack of nursing schools' knowledge regarding holistic admissions review. Four subcategories also identified in Phase 1 included the need for better dissemination of evidence, the need for additional support from university leaders and administrators, the need for legal guidance to facilitate implementation of holistic admissions review, and ensuring appropriate resources to support the holistic admissions review process. Three categories emerged in Phase 2, which included everyone's buy-in is required, the need for a model, and a need for training. The adoption of holistic admissions review in nursing may be feasible. However, certain barriers need to be overcome so that nursing schools can successfully take on this process. Therefore, five recommendations have been developed to assist nursing schools in the implementation of holistic admissions review. These recommendations include increasing knowledge and understanding of holistic admissions review among nursing deans; obtaining buy-in and support for holistic admissions review and conducting a self-assessment of current admissions practices; providing nursing administrators, faculty, and staff with diversity training; and conducting further research to identify factors most critical for success in nursing. Although the transition to a holistic admissions process requires some effort, arming ourselves with the appropriate tools will mitigate barriers during implementation. (Index words: Nursing admissions; Holistic admissions; Holistic review; Admissions) *J Prof Nurs* 32:306–313, 2016. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

UNIVERSITIES ARE FACING increased pressure to graduate students who will succeed in the workforce and meet changing labor market demands. This need is particularly urgent in the health professions. Growing health workforce shortages, a rapidly diversifying patient popula-

tion, and transformative changes to the health care system have combined to create new challenges for universities with health professions schools. University leaders are increasingly concerned with preparing graduates who will be successful in the workforce while also satisfying the health needs of the communities they serve.

To achieve this goal, many universities have begun making changes not only to their curricula and learning environments but also to the practice used to select students for admissions. Many universities have begun to incorporate “holistic review” into the admissions process, with the goal of admitting a diverse body of students that will not only excel academically but also have the qualities needed for success in the current work environment.

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The intent of holistic review is to increase the diversity of their student bodies. The need for diversity is particularly important in health professions, where lack of diversity may contribute to disparities. Minority providers currently provide care for many of the minority in the United States and in particular those in poor health (Edwards, Maldonado, & Engelgau, 2000; Terrell & Beaudreau, 2003; Komaromy et al., 1996; Marrast, Zallman, Woolhandler, Bor, & McCormick, 2014). In addition, research supports that patients who can identify with medical providers with similar racial, ethnic, and social economic backgrounds have better outcomes (Ferguson & Candib, 2002). Thus, there is a need to increase the diversity of students entering the health professions.

Urban Universities for HEALTH, a partnership of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities (USU)/Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU), the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), conducted a research study in 2013–2014 to improve evidence around preparing a culturally sensitive, diverse, and more prepared health workforce. The ultimate goal of diversifying the workforce is to improve health in underserved urban communities. The purpose of the survey was to determine the extent to which health profession schools have adopted holistic admissions review and its impact on diversity and student success.

Holistic admissions review is defined as a flexible, individualized way of assessing how an applicant will fare as a student and as a future professional and member of society (AAMC, 2014). Under a holistic admissions review process, the admissions team considers a student's life experiences and personal qualities alongside traditional measures of academic achievement such as grades and test scores. A total of 104 universities across 45 states participated in the study. Survey respondents included colleges of dentistry, medicine, nursing, pharmacy, and public health.

Researchers reported that holistic admission processes have been adopted by 93% of dentistry schools, 91% of medical schools, 82% of public health schools, 78% of pharmacy schools, and 47% of nursing schools (Urban Universities for Health, 2014). Further analysis of the survey results showed that 72% of the schools utilizing holistic admissions review reported an increase in diversity of their incoming class. There was a statistically significant relationship between the use of many holistic admissions review practices and increased diversity. Standard student success metrics (e.g., average incoming grade point average [GPA], graduation rates, pass rates on required licensing examinations) remained unchanged or increased. Schools using holistic admissions review also reported positive changes to the learning environment, including increased community engagement, student cooperation and teamwork, and students' openness to perspectives different from their own.

Despite the growing body of evidence that supports a holistic admissions process and the increased adoption of holistic admissions processes' across academic health

colleges (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies, 2004; Sullivan Commission, 2004), nursing has been slow to adopt holistic admissions review practices (Urban Universities for Health, 2014). The results of the Urban Universities for HEALTH survey demonstrate that schools using holistic admissions review have experienced increased student diversity without seeing any decline in student success outcomes. This relationship suggests that nursing schools may benefit from adapting their admissions practices to become more holistic. To gain a better understanding of the barriers to implementation and the feasibility of adopting holistic admissions more broadly in nursing schools, a subsequent biphase qualitative research study was conducted with nursing deans from across the United States. The research questions that guided this study were, "What are the benefits and barriers to using holistic admissions review?" and "How can perceived barriers to holistic admissions review be addressed?"

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were nursing deans and their designees, recruited from the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) and deans recruited from member institutions of the USU/APLU. The study inclusion criteria included (a) nursing school deans who attended the USU summer meeting and/or nursing school deans and their designees who attended the AACN holistic admissions review spring session; (b) were English speaking; and (c) older than 18 years. Thus, this was a convenience sample linked with conference attendance.

### Recruitment

The first author and university presidents sent e-mail invitations for focus groups to 180 nursing deans. Deans were also invited in-person during both the AACN and USU conference events where the focus groups for Phase 1 and Phase 2 were taking place. A total of 41 deans and their designees, including 12 USU deans, attended and participated in focus group discussions. The University of Cincinnati Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted IRB approval for this study prior to initiation of research.

### Data Collection Overview

Qualitative data collection consisted of focus group discussions over a 3-month period. Phase 1 included two focus group discussions that were held in March 2014. Phase 2 included one, 1-hour focus group that occurred in June 2014. Data from Phase 1 were analyzed by the research team and used to iteratively guide the Phase 2 focus group. Specifically, Phase 1 included nursing deans identifying the benefits and barriers for holistic admissions review adoption and identifying limitations that may be unique to nursing's academic processes. Phase 2 of the study addressed troubleshooting the challenges and limitations, previously identified by nursing deans, and determining solutions to assist with

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