

# DEI and Innovation in Admissions

By Rodney Glasgow, Ed.D.

I can clearly remember my first admissions experience in independent schools. I was 11 years old, and my 5th-grade teacher had suggested that I look at Gilman School instead of going with my peers to the magnet public middle school. The two schools were actually only a few blocks from each other and, at the same time, worlds apart. I would take the same bus to get to either school, but the price of admission, the cost of the trip, and the return on investment was remarkably different.



The importance of the interview day was not lost on me. My mom had worn one of her good dresses and taken off work; that was a strong symbol by itself! She had me lay out my clothes the night before, and my father took great pains to give my pants the army crease. The bus dropped my mom and me right at the base of the Gilman campus, and in one look, I knew that everything about this was bigger than I had even thought. My mom and I were both a bundle of nerves — she was laughing nervously and making small talk in her professional voice. I was largely quiet and trying to figure it all out so that, as my mom would say, I would “know how to act.” My mom went in for the interview, and I was left alone on the couch. She gave me a look before she went in that said, “Sit there, and don’t mess with anything! I’ll be right back.”

My mom came back, and the white man in the suit and tie who had talked to her asked me to come into his office. I looked in my mom’s face for clues about what the tone of this conversation would be and, more importantly, what I needed to do to get this right. In the interview, he asked me questions about what I liked about school and what my home routine was like. I felt like there were right and wrong answers, and I kept looking in his face to make sure I had been close to right on each one. He was writing in his notebook. What was he writing? When I told him how much TV I watched after walking myself home from school and letting myself in to our apartment to manage myself during the hours before my parents got home at 6, I saw a little bit of an eyebrow raise, and his pen moved a little slower and with a little more pressure. I thought, “I’ve blown it! Why did I tell him that?” I thought for sure I wouldn’t be asked to come to school there. But by that point, I really wanted Gilman School. Coming from where I came from, how could I not want it? I felt like I had come to some magical place far, far away. And while later in life I would see behind the curtain and realize that they



were just ordinary people, to that little 5th grader from the other side of life, they were powerful wizards. I had hoped that I showed them I had a little magic to offer, too. I went home not so sure about that.

The rest of the story is truly an Oz experience, complete with wonderful friends, lessons learned, and a feeling of home. There was even a return to Oz as I came back to work in independent schools and, now, a head of school. My admissions story from 1990 is still the basic template for any student from an underrepresented or non-normative identity looking to come to independent schools. Schools were looking to diversify then as much as they are now. So, 30 years later, how could we innovate in admissions to better meet our goal of creating and sustaining diverse, inclusive school communities?

For parents, remember that the opportunity to write a personal statement on the application can privilege some and disadvantage others. Some parents will have sharper writing skills and higher comfort levels around presenting themselves and their child in writing. The admissions process should rightly be an assessment of the student’s academic ability, but not the parents’. We should provide multiple ways for candidates to “show up” in the process. What if our interview questions asked more about what we really wanted to know, with more opportunities for our students and families to tell their stories in their own way? Right now, we interview for fit — the books you’ve read, the classes you enjoy, what you are looking for in your next school. We end up at times with cookie-cutter information at best, and often with information that we match against a profile of a “typical” student for us, unleashing all of our implicit bias on the interpretation of answers. But what if we interviewed for narrative, to better understand the story behind the family as they engage in this process?

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## Enrollment Innovation in a Time of Crisis *(continued)*

What if we included questions like these in our interview process?

- + How did you end up sitting here with me today?
- + If I were to come to your house, what would I need to know in order to fit in with how you do things there?
- + If I dropped in on one of your/your child's classes unexpectedly, what would I see happening in the class, and what would I see about you/your child?
- + If I saw you/your child at home on a regular day, what would I notice about you/your child?
- + Everyone in our community teaches and learns. What could you/your child teach us, and what do you/your child hope to learn from us?
- + What would coming to our school mean to you/your child?

What if we asked references the questions we really needed to know and move away from checkboxes to a set of 3–5 narrative questions?

- + How are they as members of the community?
- + How do they support the diversity in the community?
- + How do they enhance your school and/or your classroom?
- + If you could set a goal for this student at their next school, what would it be?

What if we were honest in our marketing and sales job about where we are in DEI?

Most independent schools seem to think if they can project themselves as a model of diversity and inclusion, they can then make it so. The issue with this is that families then come expecting to see larger numbers of students of color, more knowledgeable faculty on issues of gender and sexual orientation, and less of a class divide within the student population. When what they were told does not match up to what they are experiencing, students and families feel intentionally misled and become resentful. This contributes to negative admissions outcomes, such as higher attrition rates and damage to the school's reputation in certain communities. If we learn anything from the "Blackat" and "LGBTQat" movement among alums and current students in our schools, it should be that the core of the issue is not the incident itself that prompted the post. It is the cognitive dissonance between how the school depicts itself in terms of DEI and the actual experience of students from non-normative identities. It is the lack or ineffectiveness of the school's response. Students and families from non-normative identities expect to encounter resistance and inequity — their lives have taught them that. Schools that are honest about where they are, that openly acknowledge their challenges, and that are actively working in concrete ways to eliminate inequities in their community are the ones who will fare much better in sustaining diverse student populations. You can have 40% students of color on your campus, but are those the same students that make up your 40% in three years, or do you have a revolving door? We also cannot be afraid of exit interviews. We should be asking families, especially those from non-normative identities, why they left the school and what their experience of the school was. We should be tracking and sharing data for institutional improvement.

The physical campus can be a barrier and a nerves-maker for families who do not have a close proximity to whiteness and wealth. Our big, elite, college-style campuses are part of the hard sell on independent schools over public schools. But how do we leverage our campus and mitigate some of the intimidation

factor that students and families might feel?

Learning from our time in quarantine during this pandemic and utilizing the resulting widespread familiarity with video conferencing and virtual engagements, what if we used virtual tours on our website more to help folks prepare for what they are going to see in person? The opportunity to show students and families the campus before they arrive for an open house or an interview can help them to have more discussions at home, and within themselves, about what they are about to experience, lessening the shock and



discomfort that can happen on the first visit. Additionally, if you are engaging in a more virtual admissions process this year in response to the pandemic, think carefully about how to conduct virtual interviews and visits in a way that does not highlight inequity. If you're sitting in a posh office and a student is sitting at a busy kitchen table, the subtle cues about belonging can Zoom through. Consider making yourself a standard school-based background, and consider a background option to families.

Anti-bias training for admissions committees is key. Admissions is a personal process, and what we know is that all people have implicit biases. Because our task is literally to judge and discern about another family, having annual anti-bias training for your admissions staff and any members of the community who serve on admissions committees is of critical importance. The training should complicate and clarify what is considered a "typical student" for your school, an "acceptable profile," and a "stretch." Committees should practice before the real process happens by looking at sample files, discussing together what their impressions and ratings are, and helping to calibrate and challenge each other on what is seen and interpreted. Likewise, the approach to the admissions deliberations might focus less on "will this work?" and "is this student a good fit?" and more on "how can we make this work" and "what would it take to ensure that the student fits well?" This appreciative approach shares the responsibility of fit between student and school, and also relies less on easy, biased markers of fit and more on the possible experience of the student in the community. If the answer to "how can we make this work" is beyond what is feasible, then you know that the match may not be the most fruitful one.

This question of how well a student will fit and how much the school is willing to stretch to increase the likelihood of fit highlights the importance of educating the gatekeepers in the admissions process. Gatekeepers are those who have the power of green light or the option of veto to a family's offer of admission — typically a head of school, business manager, director of financial aid, or division head. If these folks ultimately feel like it won't work or isn't worth the stretch, then the Admissions Office is hard-pressed to accept and enroll the family. Helping those in these key roles to understand their own biases in how they assess fit and enlisting their allyship in how we present and support non-normative families can make a huge difference to

the experience of those students and families. I can recall as a division head being in the position to say whether or not I thought, ultimately, a student the committee was on the fence about would be successful in my division. I took those conversations very seriously and examined my own biases and willingness to stretch, and once we had our final class lists, I remember saying at the start of every August faculty meeting, "I don't want to hear anyone question why a student was admitted to this school. I was active in the admissions process, and I believe each of our students can succeed, with our help and support. Questioning why they are here is not helpful. The question is, 'Now that they are here, how can I help make them as successful as possible?'" That framing helped to bolster the safety nets around some students who could absolutely work out for us, and for those who didn't work out for us. We knew we had given it our all, and they did, too. This meant they were leaving feeling as good as they could about us, and that contributed positively to our reputation in key communities.

For so long, we have focused on the pool and neglected the process. We thought the secret to enrolling a more diverse student body was having a more diverse candidate pool. We have learned that a more diverse pool is only a cosmetic factor. If we want to enroll and retain a higher number of diverse families, we must turn more attention to the admissions process, ensuring that families are massaged well through the funnel and that those who come through have the absolute best chances at making it all the way through to graduation, and feeling positive and whole at the end of it! We must understand how it would feel to have our own personhood on display for a high-stakes judgment by others, and also, to be 11 years old as you try to secure yourself a place in a school that could change the whole trajectory of your story.



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