

Working Smarter, Not Harder, in Admissions

A team-based approach to initial reviews can often save time and may allow for better evaluations

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Mark Makela for The Chronicle

Admissions officers at Swarthmore College (above) began team-reading applications in 2015. "We do better by our applicants because our staff is energized," says the admissions director. "They're not dragging by the end of reading season."

Back in 2013, the University of Pennsylvania confronted the scarcity of time. For years an ever-increasing number of applications had swamped the admissions staff. Cycle after cycle, the days kept growing longer. "We were reading on weekends, reading in the evenings," says Yvonne Romero da Silva, vice dean and director of admissions. "We needed a more sustainable model."

When two colleagues proposed a new way of evaluating applicants, Ms. da Silva was skeptical. Then as the idea sunk in, she says, the hair on her arms stood up: "I thought, If this works, it could change the profession."

Penn has since revamped the traditional evaluation process found at many selective colleges. Previously, admissions officers reviewed applications from their own recruitment territories, writing long summaries that would inform a selection

committee's final decisions. That time-consuming "first read" was a solitary task.

These days, Penn's admissions officers read together in pairs, simultaneously reviewing each application on separate screens and discussing it as they go. They rate each applicant on specific criteria, recommend a decision (admit or deny), and type notes into the system — no more long summaries. Based on its competitiveness, the application is grouped into one of three categories en route to a final review and verdict.

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Before the change, admissions officers doing a first read reviewed four or five applications an hour. Now the two-person teams can get through as many as 15. Although the innovation might not sound revolutionary, "committee-based evaluations" mark a significant shift in the nature of admissions work. Overwhelmed by application surges, at least a dozen other selective colleges have

pool. "You're reading with an eye toward the whole class," Mr. Bock says. "You're advocating for the best class versus the students from your region."



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Josh Throckmorton and Andrew Moe review applications at Swarthmore College, where pairs of reviewers read about 90 applications a day, with no reading one day per week.

Like Penn, Swarthmore rotates its reading pairs, allowing less-experienced admissions officers to work side by side with seasoned colleagues (rookies don't read together). When newbies plowed through files in relative isolation behind closed doors, teachable moments were harder to seize, Mr. Duck says. Now, he can more readily help new colleagues understand complexities of the job, like how to fairly assess a student whose test score is low compared with other applicants — but high compared with scores of students from similar backgrounds. "There's stuff that gets caught on Day 1 that we wouldn't have caught before," Mr. Duck says. "Now we get to have these conversations in person, and it's worthwhile for me to know how everyone on my team thinks."

This year, Swarthmore received 22 percent more applications than last. With no additional staffing, the college is on pace to mail acceptances a week earlier than it did a year ago. The new model

has also allowed the college to reduce the number of part-time readers it used to hire to help carry the load. In a realm of limited resources, those are all concrete benefits.

The new application-review strategy has drawn positive reviews on many other campuses, too. The California Institute of Technology, Pomona College, and Emory University have embraced a version of the plan, and several other colleges are leaning toward adopting it.

Still, it's worth asking what, if anything, is lost when colleges scrap age-old rituals. "There is a beauty to really knowing the applicants deeply," says Daniel F. Evans, director of college counseling at William Penn Charter School, in Philadelphia. "Part of me worries about institutions being a mile wide and an inch deep — knowing more applicants but knowing them less well."

Mr. Evans, a former admissions officer at Penn, understands the heavy loads many staffs must carry. He recalls that he was required to read 35 to 40 applications a day, which left him about 12 to 15 minutes per file. Not a lot of time, but enough to feel like he had passed along solid recommendations to the selection committee. "Now, the pace at which colleges have to go just baffles me," he says. "But there may be a tipping point when your applicant pool gets so big that there aren't many alternatives besides reading all day, seven days a week."

The new approach is perhaps an inevitable attempt to solve a problem that colleges helped create by pushing for more applications and promoting themselves far and wide. Even so, Mr. Evans says he appreciates Penn's willingness to consider a new process, which, he believes, does not preclude a thoughtful review.

Ralph Figueroa is more skeptical. "This kind of worries me, this two-person triage," says Mr. Figueroa, dean of college guidance at Albuquerque Academy, in New Mexico. "We've spent so much time telling students that colleges pay attention to who they are, all the different aspects of themselves. This doesn't sound like it gets at much of that."

Mr. Figueroa, a former associate dean of admissions at Wesleyan University, in Connecticut, also understands the pressure colleges are under. The calendar, he says, has long forced admissions staffs to read at a "brutal" pace. But he sees a limit. "Understanding who a student is, the context of where they're coming from, what they're offering, and whether I want to advocate for them — that's a lot to process," he says. "That's rushed even at 20 minutes."

Robert G. Springall understands that concern. Yet he doesn't think a longer evaluation is necessarily a better one. "A good, professional admissions officer picks up nuances in an application very quickly," says Mr. Springall, dean of admissions at Bucknell University. "And they're good at understanding how it's different from other applications."

Mr. Springall keeps a six-minute egg timer on his desk. That's how long most first evaluations have taken since Bucknell moved to a team-reading model this past fall. Last year the admission staff barely finished its initial evaluations by March; as of late February, it was on pace to wrap up final decisions well before that.

One change often begets another. When Bucknell changed its evaluation model, it also changed its rating system. Admissions officers now have more leeway to account for subtleties they see, Mr. Springall says.

Previously, applicants with an SAT score of 1540, for instance, would have received a specific subscore that greatly boosted their academic rating, even if their academic record was otherwise mediocre. In short, some students might have been getting more credit than they deserved on the basis of a test — and vice versa. "We want to make sure we're not overlooking important characteristics," Mr. Springall says. "It's more of a mix-and-match process now. You can give someone the benefit of the doubt."

Now that early evaluations happen in the context of a conversation, admissions officers have more opportunities to hash out nuances. "There's an intermingling of ideas," Mr. Springall says. "You can ask, Why is it that you think this test score is telling you more than these grades and recommendations?"

Still, a tool is only a tool. Just because an admissions office might read applications differently than before doesn't mean it will make drastically different decisions, at least not in great numbers. After all, colleges balance many competing priorities when selecting a class. The engineering program will always need enough engineering majors, the athletic teams will always need enough goalies. And just because an institution says it uses holistic review doesn't mean all students get the full treatment.

Michael N. Bastedo, director of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, has shown how biases can shape admissions officers' decisions. He sees some promise in the team-reading strategy. "One potential benefit is that you can't have hidden criteria for why you make decisions," he says. "When you have to make the case to people, you can question each other's readings. I do think that could be productive."

But the new model by itself won't solve what Mr. Bastedo describes as a prevalent problem: Colleges often have too little contextual information about applicants.

And switching up a review process is surely easier than changing institutional opinion about what matters most in admissions. "If you didn't care about context before," he says, "you're not going to care about it now."

At colleges that do care about the subtleties in an application, however, the new method is a way to preserve elements of an old-school review in a high-volume age.

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