

Holistic Admissions Review: Advancing Access, Equity and Opportunity for Nursing Admissions

Upstate Medical University College of Nursing

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BACKGROUND

Historically, admissions review within nursing education has often relied heavily on academic metrics, particularly GPA, as an initial screening mechanism. While academic readiness remains important, exclusive or early screen rejection based on GPA alone may unintentionally exclude highly qualified applicants with strong leadership potential, healthcare experience, resilience, community engagement, and alignment with the mission and values of the institution. This approach may disproportionately impact nontraditional applicants and those from historically underrepresented or disadvantaged backgrounds. The American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) and the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) both advocate for holistic admissions practices that evaluate applicants beyond academic metrics alone in order to support equity, diversity, access and workforce readiness.

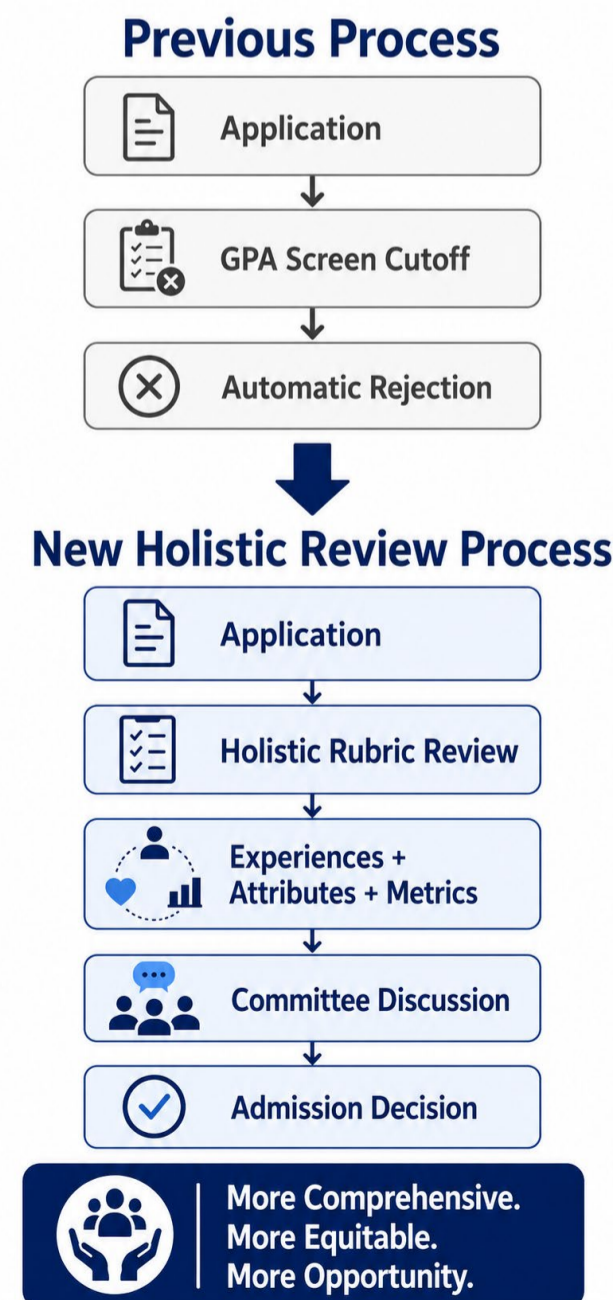
To support a more equitable, mission-aligned admissions process, the Upstate College of Nursing developed a Holistic Admissions Rubric grounded in the AACN and AAMC Experience, Attributes, and Metrics (EAM) framework. The rubric was designed to move beyond GPA-driven decision making by incorporating structured evaluation of applicants' lived experiences, personal attributes, service orientation, professionalism, and potential contributions to the nursing workforce. The goal of this initiative was to improve consistency, transparency, and fairness in admissions review while supporting workforce diversity and alignment with the college's mission of patient-centered care, collaboration, leadership, and equity.

APPROACH

The Upstate College of Nursing developed and implemented a structured Holistic Admissions Rubric informed by the AACN and AAMC Experience, Attributes, and Metrics (EAM) framework to support equitable, mission-aligned applicant review. The rubric weighted applicant evaluation across three primary domains: Experiences (45%), Attributes (45%), and Metrics (10%), intentionally reducing overreliance on GPA as a sole screening measure. Faculty reviewers used standardized scoring criteria to evaluate applicants using multiple data sources, including academic records, personal statements, healthcare and service experiences, letters of recommendation, and interviews. Scores were entered into an automated spreadsheet that calculated weighted totals to support consistency and transparency in committee review. The process emphasized whole-person evaluation, recognition of resilience and nontraditional pathways, and alignment with the college's mission of patient-centered care, collaboration, professionalism, and equity.

DESIGN

The project utilized the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) quality improvement cycle to design, implement, and evaluate a holistic admissions review process within the Upstate College of Nursing. During the **Plan** phase, faculty leaders as members of the Admissions Committee reviewed AACN and AAMC holistic admissions guidance and identified concerns regarding the use of GPA as an initial screen rejection criterion. A weighted rubric grounded in the Experience, Attributes, and Metrics (EAM) framework was developed to support equitable, mission-aligned applicant evaluation. In the **Do** phase, the rubric was implemented as a pilot during the admissions review process, with faculty reviewers using standardized scoring criteria to assess applicants across experiences, attributes, and academic metrics. During the **Study** phase, the admissions team evaluated the usability, consistency, and perceived fairness of the rubric while reviewing trends in applicant scoring and committee decision making. In the **Act** phase, feedback from faculty reviewers and admissions outcomes were used to refine the rubric and inform future admissions cycles, supporting continuous improvement and alignment with institutional values of equity, diversity, professionalism, and patient-centered care.



OUTCOMES

Prior to implementation of the holistic admissions rubric, applicants who did not meet the initial GPA screening threshold were automatically screen rejected, and the number of applicants excluded from full committee review was not consistently tracked. As a result, applicants with significant healthcare experience, leadership, resilience, community engagement, and strong mission alignment may not have received comprehensive evaluation. Following implementation of the holistic review process during the current academic year, four applicants who would have previously been excluded during the GPA screening phase were fully reviewed and ultimately admitted to the program. These findings suggest that the holistic admissions framework improved equity and expanded opportunities for mission-aligned applicants by supporting whole-person review beyond academic metrics alone.

CONCLUSIONS

This pilot project highlights the potential for holistic admissions review to improve access, equity, and opportunity within nursing education. Reliance on GPA alone as an initial screening mechanism may unintentionally exclude applicants from diverse, nontraditional, or historically underrepresented backgrounds who possess strong leadership potential, healthcare experience, resilience, and commitment to service. By implementing a structured holistic review framework grounded in the AACN and AAMC Experience, Attributes, and Metrics (EAM) model, the Upstate College of Nursing created a more equitable process that supports whole-person evaluation and mission-aligned student selection. Early outcomes demonstrated that applicants who would have previously been screen rejected were identified as strong candidates and admitted through the holistic review process. Next steps for this initiative include ongoing evaluation of student progression, competency attainment, retention, and overall academic success to better understand the long-term impact of holistic admissions practices. Future PDSA cycles will focus on tracking student outcomes across academic performance, clinical competency, progression benchmarks, graduation rates, NCLEX outcomes, and engagement within the nursing profession. Additional evaluation will examine whether holistic admissions practices contribute to increased diversity, improved student support needs identification, and development of a workforce that reflects the communities served. Continuous review and refinement of the rubric and admissions processes will support sustainability, fairness, and alignment with institutional and workforce priorities.

Section	Category	Criteria
Experiences – Total 45%		
Inclusive of all relevant life, work, volunteer, clinical, and educational experiences that demonstrate preparation, interest, and commitment. Focus on quality, reflection, and alignment with nursing mission rather than volume.		
Scoring Guide: 0-None, 1-Limited, 2-Moderate, 3-Exceptional	Healthcare/Clinical Experience	Direct patient care, observation, shadowing, clinical volunteer roles, caregiving, or other meaningful experiences demonstrating engagement with health/clinical environments
	Service & Leadership	Community involvement, volunteerism, advocacy, leadership in any setting (school, work, community)
	Resilience & Life Experience	Overcoming challenges, adaptability, life experience, caregiving, personal growth, or experiences demonstrating motivation for nursing
Attributes – Total 45%		
Personal qualities, behaviors, and potential aligned with nursing competencies. Includes traits revealed in personal statements, interviews, and letters of recommendation.		
Scoring Guide: 0- Poor, 1- Fair, 2- Good, 3- Exceptional	Personal Statement/Interview	Alignment with nursing mission, reflection, professionalism, empathy, communication, cultural humility
	Letters of Recommendation	Insight into character, work ethic, teamwork, potential in nursing
Metrics – Total 10%		
Academic indicators and competencies. Metrics contextualized; not penalizing applicants for nontraditional paths.		
Scoring Guide: 0- Poor, 1- Fair, 2- Good, 3- Exceptional	Academic Readiness	Prior coursework, rigor, certifications, foundation in sciences, degree completion
Scoring Guide: 0- Less than 2.0, 1- (2.74-2.01), 2 - (3.49-2.75), 3 - greater than 3.5	GPA	Cumulative GPA, contextualized with program rigor
Mission Alignment		
Reflect values like service, collaboration, and diversity that align with the Mission of Upstate Medical University.		
Mission Alignment	Optional qualitative	Demonstrates Upstate CON values: service, collaboration, diversity, resilience

REFERENCES

- American Association of Colleges of Nursing. (2020). *Promising Practices in Holistic Admissions Review: Implementation in Academic Nursing*. Washington, DC: AACN. Available at: [AACN White Paper on Holistic Admissions Review](#)
- Association of American Medical Colleges. *Mission-Aligned Selection and Retention*. Available at: [AAMC Mission-Aligned Selection and Retention Resources](#)

CONTACT

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Jennifer Vaughn, DNP, RN, NE-BC, CNE

Biography

Jennifer T. Vaughn, DNP, RN, NE-BC, CNE, is an accomplished nurse leader, educator, and academic administrator with a career dedicated to advancing nursing education, workforce development, student success, and equitable access to the profession. She serves as Executive Assistant Dean for Administration and Clinical Associate Professor at SUNY Upstate Medical University College of Nursing, where her work bridges academic leadership, program development, accreditation, enrollment strategy, faculty support, and systems-level innovation. Dr. Vaughn earned her Doctor of Nursing Practice degree in Healthcare Systems Leadership and holds a Master of Science in Nursing Education. She is nationally certified as both a Nurse Executive and Certified Nurse Educator, reflecting her commitment to excellence in leadership, teaching, and academic practice. Her professional work is grounded in the belief that nursing education must be responsive to workforce needs, accessible to diverse learners, and aligned with the evolving demands of healthcare delivery.

At Upstate College of Nursing, Dr. Vaughn has led and collaborated on multiple initiatives designed to expand pathways into nursing and strengthen the college's academic infrastructure. She has contributed to the creation and revision of several programs aimed at increasing enrollment and meeting regional healthcare workforce needs, including accelerated, online, and partnership-based models. Her leadership has supported innovative academic pathways, curriculum redesign, accreditation preparation, clinical education planning, and student-centered program development.

Dr. Vaughn serves as Principal Investigator and Project Director for a federally funded HRSA Advanced Nursing Education Nurse Practitioner Residency grant, a \$2.8 million initiative focused on strengthening the transition to practice for nurse practitioners. Through this work, she has helped build a structured residency model that integrates clinical immersion, interprofessional learning, competency evaluation, wellness, and workforce readiness. This project reflects her broader commitment to developing sustainable models that support both clinicians and the communities they serve.

Her scholarly and professional interests include holistic admissions, academic-practice partnerships, competency-based education, leadership development, access and equity in nursing education, and systems approaches to student success. She has led efforts to create mission-aligned admissions processes that move beyond traditional academic metrics and recognize applicants' experiences, attributes, resilience, service, and potential contributions to the nursing workforce. Her work emphasizes that equitable admissions practices are essential to building a nursing workforce prepared to care for diverse populations.

In addition to her institutional leadership, Dr. Vaughn is active in professional service and governance. She was elected President of Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing Omicron-at-Large Chapter and serves as a SUNY Senator. She has also been engaged in national nursing education service through her involvement with the National League for Nursing Commission for Nursing Education Accreditation Nominations Committee.

Dr. Vaughn is known for her collaborative, mission-driven leadership style and her ability to move complex initiatives from vision to implementation. Across her work, she brings together strategic thinking, operational execution, and a deep commitment to students, faculty, patients, and communities. Her leadership reflects a consistent focus on access, excellence, innovation, and the future of nursing education.

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