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part of picture for new UW admissions plan

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By [Nick Perry](#)

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Starting in the fall of 2006 admission to the UW will be based on what the school terms a "holistic" admissions system.

Beginning this year, the University of Washington will no longer automatically admit top students based on their high-school grades and test scores.

The university is ditching a statewide student-ranking system called the Admissions Index, which it relied on to admit about half its students. The university is also getting rid of an internal system called the "grid," which ranked remaining students on a combination of academic and personal factors.

Instead, university staffers plan to read and review every one of the 16,000 annual freshmen applications to come up with a "holistic" assessment of each candidate. Besides academic performance, they will consider factors such as whether a student has overcome personal or social adversity, their leadership skills and their extracurricular interests.

The changes are in line with a national shift by competitive public universities. The shift was prompted in part by a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2003 that universities could consider race or ethnicity as a factor in a comprehensive admission review, but could not award points for it in any admission formula.

Using race as an admissions factor has been illegal in Washington since voters passed Initiative 200 in 1998. A UW official said the new system would not consider race, but would take socioeconomic factors into account.

"It's a very big shift," said Philip Ballinger, the UW director of admissions. "The basic difference is that there is no grid anymore, no Admissions Index, no database, no pointing this or weighting that," he said. "It will allow us to create a full context to understand what a student has done and to know something about a student's family, history and the opportunities they have or haven't had."

But Tim Eyman, a co-sponsor of I-200, said the changes are a "sneaky, underhanded attempt" by the UW to skirt the initiative and give preference to students of color.

Gaining entrance

The New Admission System:

Under the UW's new "holistic" system, each student application will be reviewed by two staff readers. They will rank students as: deny; marginal; admissible; strong; or highest recommendation, also assigning them a number between one and nine. In cases when the two staff assessments greatly diverge, a third, senior reader will give a final assessment.

What it will take to get in: A "highest recommendation," for example, would be a student that has "exceptional academic preparation" or "unique talents, perspectives or backgrounds" that would contribute to the university community, said Philip Ballinger, the UW's director of admissions.

Readers will also separately evaluate a student's academic and personal qualities to help distinguish between closely rated students. Senior university admissions staff will make the final decision on who makes the cut, Ballinger said.

The old admission system: The UW has been using the Admissions Index to admit about half of its students. The index uses a formula which gives about three-quarters weighting to a student's GPA and the remainder to the student's score on the SAT or ACT test. Students are given a numerical rank between 1 and 99.

What it took to get in: The state stipulates that students must get a minimum 28 on the index to be allowed admission at the UW or WSU. But because UW admissions are increasingly more competitive, the university has traditionally set a much higher bar — this year it was 70 — for automatic admission. A student got that score with, for example, a grade-point average of 3.5 and a SAT score of 1420; or, under another scenario, a GPA of 3.8 and a SAT score of 1110.

The UW is also getting rid of its internal "grid" system which ranked students who scored less than a 70 on the Admissions Index. The grid system assigned specific points to factors such as academic performance, socioeconomic background and extracurricular activities such as athletics.

Source: University of Washington

"At the father-knows-best admissions office they will ordain who gets in and who doesn't," Eyman said. "It's the complete end of admission by merit."

Under the Admissions Index, a student could generally gain admission with a grade-point average of 3.5 and a SAT score of 1420; or, under another scenario, a GPA of 3.8 and a SAT score of 1110.

The new admission-policy changes will affect students applying for classes beginning in the fall of 2006. Those seeking scholarships and other considerations have a Dec. 1 application deadline, while all students have a Jan. 15 final deadline.

The UW changes are welcomed by many high-school students and counselors who believe a more in-depth review of applicants will reward students such as the late bloomer, the math genius with poor English skills or the person who would be the first in his family to attend college. Many argue the new system will also help discourage students from attempting to protect their GPA by taking easy courses during their senior year.

Garfield High School senior Yuval Barash, 18, who is considering applying to the UW, said he likes the idea.

"This will give a lot of insight into a student's personal qualities that GPA and test scores won't reveal," he said. "It's the kind of admissions policy that will let me express myself."

\$200,000 in extra costs

The extra work reading applications is expected to cost \$200,000 per year, money the UW plans to largely recoup by raising application fees from \$38 to about \$50. The university plans to add three permanent staffers and hire 20 graduate students part time to help read the applications.

Using broader admissions standards to measure a whole student rather than just a test score is important, said state Sen. Rosemary McAuliffe, D-Bothell, who chairs the Senate's Early Learning, K-12 & Higher Education Committee.

But Dave Schmidt, R-Mill Creek, the ranking minority member on the committee, said he can see potential problems.

"The big questions are: Is it an objective process? Is it fair for students? Will they know what's required of them?" he said.

The changes at the UW may hasten the demise of the index at other state universities.

Jim Sulton, the executive director of the Higher Education Coordinating board which devised the index, said the index fails to include many aspects of a student's learning capability. He hopes to phase it out altogether within the next 18 months.

"The Admissions Index has more or less outlived itself, and for the UW to take action on its own is a very smart thing to do," he said.

But Jim Meadows, a higher-education specialist at the Washington Education Association, the teachers union, said some counselors support keeping the index as a baseline measure of a student's performance and predictor of college success.

Admissions officers at both The Evergreen State College and Central Washington University said they continue to rely on the Admissions Index to assess the majority of freshmen.

Wendy Peterson, the admissions director at Washington State University, said WSU has recently stopped using the index but still accepts many students based on their GPA, test scores and courses. But she said the university is moving toward looking at applicants in a comprehensive way.

The index and similar systems have been used by the UW since the mid-1970s, said Tim Washburn, the retired head of UW admissions. Before that, the university primarily relied on students' GPAs to determine whether they were eligible to attend, he said.

Holistic admissions system

The landmark Supreme Court decision upheld the University of Michigan Law School's practice of considering race as a factor. But, in another case, the court found the same university's undergraduate system of awarding points for race was unconstitutional.

Ted Spencer, the director of admissions at the University of Michigan, said the cases prompted the university to switch to a holistic admissions system two years ago.

"I think it's something that works very well when you give it a chance," he said. "A majority of selective universities have adopted processes similar to the University of Michigan. It's a great thing for them, and it will be a great thing for citizens of the state of Washington."

But Eyman said he might consider trying to get another initiative on the ballot to reassert the will of voters who supported I-200.

Referring to the UW's intention to consider socioeconomic factors but not race, Ballinger, the admissions director, said, "Most people understand the role of the institution is to be an engine of opportunity and not a bastion of privilege.

"If it's ever decided in the future that race or ethnicity could be used, the holistic system puts us in line with the Supreme Court decision."

The new enrollment system, similar to that at many private colleges, is part of broader changes as entry to UW becomes more competitive and the school tries to position itself as a top research institution.

Last year, for instance, the university ended its 15-year practice of automatically accepting community-college transfer students.

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