

U. T. System Proposed Admissions Policy for Academic Institutions

The University of Texas System – August 2015

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Background:

In 2013, the U. T. System Office of Academic Affairs (OAA) began an in-depth analysis of the various admissions processes and policies at each academic institution for both undergraduate and graduate programs. The analysis included input from a representative group of more than forty admissions directors, program directors, and staff from all U. T. System academic institutions. As a result of the analysis, OAA issued a white paper recommending best practices in admissions processes that were designed to ensure fairness and transparency. Since 2013, both internal and external investigations were conducted to evaluate admissions processes at The University of Texas at Austin. Reports were issued by both the U. T. System Office of General Counsel and Kroll Associates, Inc.

Under the direction of the newly appointed Chancellor McRaven, a blue ribbon panel of former university presidents and chancellors was convened in early 2015, and the panel offered a number of recommendations designed to maintain the integrity of the admissions process by eliminating undue influence. In the interest of fostering an environment of trust, accountability, fairness, confidence, and excellence, the U. T. System administration has carefully considered each recommendation from Kroll Associates, the OAA white paper, and the blue ribbon panel and adapted them for use by U. T. System academic institutions. The proposed policy can be found in the Attachment.

Current Admissions Processes and Criteria – U. T. System Academic Institutions:

Admission into U. T. System institutions as an undergraduate student is typically granted through one of the three following mechanisms: (1) automatic admission under the top 10 percent law; (2) admission by meeting a combination of specific qualifications, typically related to class ranking, grades, and SAT/ACT test scores; or (3) a holistic review process.

In 1997, the Texas Legislature passed a law that extended automatic admission to Texas public universities for eligible students who placed in the top ten percent (top 10 percent law) of their high school class. Though modified since that time to provide flexibility to The University of Texas at Austin, this legislation provides a clear criterion to prospective students interested in attending a Texas public university.

In addition to guaranteed admission under the top 10 percent law, the Legislature has granted authority to boards of regents to determine admissions policies as set forth in Texas Education Code (TEC) Section 51.352, assigning responsibility to governing boards to “set campus admission standards consistent with the role and mission of the institution and considering the admission standards of similar institutions nationwide ...” For students who do not qualify for automatic admission, a policy must be developed that specifies the criteria to be considered when making admission decisions.

TEC Section 51.805 lists a number of factors that institutions may consider in an admissions policy for first-time freshmen who do not qualify under the top 10 percent law. Those factors may include performance on standardized tests, extracurricular and community activity involvement, and socioeconomic factors, among many others. TEC Section 51.805(b)(18) also states that “any other consideration the institution considers necessary to accomplish the institution’s stated mission” may also be considered. While some U. T. System institutions offer a more quantitative approach for setting minimum admissions criteria based on factors such as GPA, class rank, and test scores, other U. T. System academic institutions have adopted a holistic review process that incorporates academic performance, academic competitiveness, community involvement, and many other factors. For example, U. T. Austin has developed a sophisticated methodology for evaluating academic and personal achievement of freshman applicants within the holistic admissions process, including a scoring rubric and scoring of a personal achievement index. The assessment of applicant qualifications is performed by well-trained and informed evaluators.

The materials required for a freshmen application vary with institution, although all U. T. System institutions utilize the common application ApplyTexas. The most selective of the U. T. System academic institutions, U. T. Austin, requires two essays, encourages but does not require

submission of a résumé, and permits but does not require letters of recommendation. Regarding letters of recommendation, the U. T. Austin web site for freshmen admissions notes that “letters of recommendation are appreciated but not required” and instructs applicants to “ask someone who knows you well to write a letter about your character and accomplishments.” The web site advises students that “letters of recommendation are helpful only when they provide meaningful information about you.”

Admissions officials at some institutions also review applications for individuals with special talents, such as athletes, creative artists, and performing artists. Such applications may be reviewed with consideration given to special talents of the applicant and with the expectation that all admitted students must be qualified to successfully complete degree requirements at the university.

For graduate and professional programs, TEC Section 51.842 lists the factors that an institution may consider when making admission decisions. Each institution must adopt policies for admission that comply with this statute. For relatively competitive programs, holistic review processes with multiple reviewers is typical but not always required. A majority of graduate admissions decisions are made by departmental committees composed of faculty members.

The institutions of the U. T. System operate in accord with admissions policies approved by the Board of Regents. Institutions have maintained responsibilities for ensuring that appropriate processes are in place to support approved admissions policies. Institutional undergraduate and graduate admissions criteria and policies can be found in detail on each campus website.

Although it is evident that admissions criteria are well-defined within most institutions and programs, it is essential that U. T. System institutions implement these processes in a manner that is as fair and transparent as possible. Therefore, the U. T. System Administration recommends that the Board adopt an admissions policy that clarifies the handling of potential issues that may arise, especially in the context of holistic admissions reviews, and that could result in undue influence or the perception of undue influence.

Proposed Admissions Policy – U. T. System Academic Institutions

To ensure that institutions uphold the integrity of the admissions process, the Chancellor recommends that the Board direct U. T. System academic institutions to incorporate and implement the provisions found in the Attachment in their institution-specific admissions policies. Much of the proposed policy is based on recommendations from the April 2015 *Report of the Blue Ribbon Panel on Admissions*, along with information from the *Summary of Key Findings* by Kroll Associates and the *Best Practices in Admissions Processes* white paper prepared by the Office of Academic Affairs.

Attachment - Proposed Admissions Policy for
U. T. System Academic Institutions

- (1) Identify for prospective students the criteria used in a holistic review process to determine admissions decisions.*

To ensure fairness and transparency throughout the admissions process, universities shall establish written policies that outline the admissions process and expectations for all admissions categories, including freshmen, transfer students, graduate students, and professional school students. Descriptions of the process and factors to be considered in the admissions review process, including those used in holistic review processes, shall be made readily available to prospective students, in a clear and consistent manner, on an institution's web site and through other appropriate outlets. The information provided to prospective students shall include written policies regarding admissions, factors considered in holistic review, deadlines, notification dates, and response dates. Although each institution's process may be tailored to the specific needs of its campus and its student population, the following elements shall be common to all academic institutions:

- A. A prospective student shall apply to an institution using an accepted application method for the relevant degree program.
- B. The applicant shall submit required information such as transcripts, test scores, letters of recommendation, or other information identified as required or as optional.
- C. Applicants who are automatically admitted by law or approved institutional policy shall be promptly notified of admission.
- D. Applicants whose files are incomplete shall be notified of missing information.
- E. An applicant with a complete file who is not automatically admitted by law or approved institutional policy may be reviewed through a holistic process.
- F. Holistic review shall be conducted in accord with an institution's approved and published process and evaluation criteria, considering the relevant factors identified for a particular degree or program. An applicant admitted after holistic review shall be notified in accord with published notification policies.

- G. Because the admissions process is a rolling process, applicants may be admitted at any time after the applicant's file is complete.
- H. Any applicant who is not qualified for admission or who has no realistic chance of admission shall be notified that he or she has not been admitted.
- I. An admissions file may be flagged to manage the timing of an admissions decision or to assist with administration of the admissions process, but not in any way that would manifest advantage for a particular applicant in the holistic review process.

(2) *Ensure consistency and fairness in the holistic review process.*

Admissions decisions shall involve collaborative decision-making among multiple qualified, well-trained parties. Admissions decisions shall be based on the substantive information contained within the applicant file. Undue influence on the admissions process shall be avoided. It is the responsibility of admissions officials, deans, the provost, and the president to protect the admissions staff from undue influence. The president shall provide leadership to ensure compliance with policies and rules.

(3) *Uphold the integrity of the admissions process by eliminating undue influence and conflicts of interest.*

Institutional leaders and other personnel may receive third-party inquiries, calls, emails, letters, or other forms of communication about a prospective student that may range from providing substantive information about an applicant to an attempt to unduly influence or coerce decision makers into admitting an applicant. The presidents, provosts, and deans of U. T. System institutions shall ensure that the admissions offices are shielded from undue influence and shall handle these communications as follows:

- A. *Letters, electronic messages, or other communications that provide substantive, relevant information about an applicant.* Communications that provide credible, substantive input about an applicant shall be forwarded to the appropriate admissions office or staff member. The individual forwarding such communication shall make clear that in providing information, there is no request for special treatment of the applicant or attempt at undue

influence or favoritism toward the applicant. Presidents shall provide leadership to ensure that admissions officers understand that they are to independently evaluate recommendation letters based on the substance of the letter and not the status of the author or the fact that the letter was forwarded by the president or other university official. The person who originally received the communication may respond to those who provided the information with an acknowledgement that the information has been received and forwarded to the relevant office for consideration.

B. *Letters, electronic messages, or other communications that provide a general endorsement of an applicant without containing substantive information pertinent to evaluating the relevant qualities, character, or ability of an applicant.* If the communication does not contain substantive information pertinent to the qualities, character, or ability of the applicant, the communication shall not be forwarded and shall not become part of the applicant file. The individual receiving the communication may acknowledge receipt without referencing any further specific action regarding the communication or the applicant.

C. *Letters, electronic messages, or other communications from government officials.* Government officials are often asked by constituents to write letters for or otherwise communicate on behalf of applicants. Communications from government officials shall be treated the same as communications from others. Communications that provide credible, substantive input about an applicant shall be forwarded to the appropriate admissions office or staff member. Admissions officials shall give no consideration to any relationship they or others at the institution may have with a particular government official. As with letters from others, the individual forwarding such communication shall make clear that in providing information, there is no request for special treatment of the applicant or attempt at undue influence or favoritism toward the applicant.

D. *Third party inquiries and requests for status updates of applicants.* Updates of applicants shall not be provided to third parties. Only the applicant may be provided updates and notified of the final admission decision.

E. *Letters, electronic messages or other communications that go beyond providing information about the applicant or are designed to influence or coerce admissions decisions.* There are occasions in which calls, letters, and inquiries are not confined to substantive information relevant to the applicant's qualifications or general endorsements. These may range from citing long service to the institution by a relative or friend of the applicant to more far-ranging contributions. One way or another, such communications attempt to influence admissions outcomes. In these instances, institutional leaders shall shield admissions staff from undue influence or coercion and shall act as follows depending on the nature of the communication:

- i. *Letters, electronic messages, or other communications indicating that special consideration is owed because of past actions.* An outside party may indicate that because of past actions of those who have some relationship with the applicant the institution owes the applicant special consideration. In such instances, the communication shall not be forwarded to the admissions process and shall not become part of the applicant file. The person receiving the communication may acknowledge the communication, according to the circumstances, but will do so neutrally with respect to prospect of admission.
- ii. *Letters, electronic messages, and other communications indicating that special consideration is owed and there exists a threat of action or promise of a quid pro quo.* There are very rare circumstances in which a communication may contain a threat regarding consequences of a negative admissions decision or a promise related to a positive decision. In such cases, institutional leadership shall respond with a firm reminder that only information pertinent to the qualifications of the candidate may be considered in the applicant file. The communication shall not be forwarded to the admissions process or become part of the applicant file. If the attempt to influence is egregious, the institution's president shall inform and confer, in a timely manner, with the Chancellor and the U. T. System General Counsel.

F. *Inappropriate internal influence.* Institutional personnel shall not allow their personal relational considerations to influence admissions decisions. If credible suspicion exists of inappropriate relational considerations influencing admissions decisions, such suspicions must be reported to the institutional or U. T. System compliance office or hotline.

(4) *Act optimally and properly in the best interest of the institution within the holistic admissions process.*

Since it is ultimately the responsibility of the president to operate in the best interest of the institution, he or she may, on very rare occasions, have cause to admit a qualified student who might not otherwise be admitted through the normal process. It is the policy of the U. T. System that such admissions decisions be very rare, be limited only to students who are qualified to pursue the degree for which admission is sought, be defensible decisions that take into consideration the overall best interests of the institution, and be reported by the president to the Chancellor at the conclusion of the admissions cycle. The expectation is that any such decision shall only be made under situations of highest institutional importance consistent with the concept of very rare. In no case shall such an admissions decision displace another student who would otherwise be admitted. For cases in which the president decides to admit a qualified applicant counter to the recommendation of the normal admissions process, the president shall:

- (1) discuss the merits of the applicant's admission case with appropriate admissions officials prior to making a decision to ensure that the president fully understands the admissions case, and
- (2) be required to meet with the Chancellor at the conclusion of the admissions cycle to discuss the process employed, the rationale, all personal or institutional relational considerations in each decision, and to explain why the decision was in the best interest of the institution. It shall be the responsibility of the Chancellor to ensure that the decisions of an institution's president are reasonable in terms of process, that the number of such admissions decisions is consistent with the policy of very rare, and that the rationale for such decisions is consistent with the requirement for highest institutional importance. The Chancellor shall report to the U. T. System Board of Regents should significant deviation from this policy occur. The rationale for admitting a student outside the normal process shall be documented by the president.

(5) Designate deans of graduate and professional schools, by presidential delegation, to be principally responsible for admissions to the school's degree programs.

The roles, duties and responsibilities of the deans in the graduate and professional schools shall mirror those designated for the president. The president should require an annual face-to-face report on admissions cases for which the dean made a final decision that is counter to the outcome of the normal admissions process. In addition, to the extent that the provost has authority to admit students directly and independently of the normal admissions process, the president shall require an annual face-to-face report from the provost on admissions cases that were external to the normal admissions process. In any case, decisions at any level that would admit a student outside of the normal admissions process must be reported by the president to the Chancellor and follow policies outlined above.