



## **Bias Happens:** **Reduce Its Impact In Your Admissions**

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We all have bias. Bias—the positive or negative associations we have with a person, place, or behavior—informs everything from whom we decide to sit with when we walk into the EMA Annual Conference to the affinity we sometimes feel when we first meet an applicant. Even though bias is natural and impossible to completely eliminate in the admissions process, it's critical to increase our awareness and understanding of how and when it occurs. When we do, we're better able to ensure that every student gets a fair, more equitable admissions process and that we admit students who are the best fit for our unique school community.

The reality is that bias can show up in nearly every element of the admissions process: a teacher who prefers extroverts writes a letter of recommendation for an introvert, an interviewer loves Star Wars and the interviewee happens to wear an Obi Wan Kenobi shirt, or a file reader advocates for the unique candidate they remember because

the student was a circus professional for six years. Think about it this way: if every interviewer, application reader, and recommender adds their perspective (and their bias) to an applicant's file, that's three opportunities for bias to impact an applicant. In a pool of 100 applicants, that makes 300 times that biased perspectives may influence your application decisions.

Having a process that mitigates bias is key for the recruitment and selection of new students, as well as the composition of the school community. When we increase our awareness and start to talk about and name our own biases, we are better equipped to recognize them and create a more impartial process that upholds the integrity of our school. It's not always easy—most biases are subconscious things we've learned from our environments over time. But with continued focus and intent, we can begin to see how bias influences our decision making and take steps to significantly reduce its impact.

## Recognizing Different Types of Bias

Understanding the different types of biases and how they can show up is the first step. Kira Talent published a helpful eBook, "Breaking Down Bias in Admissions: The How-to Guide to Reducing Admissions Bias at Your School," that outlined the most commonly seen bias in the admissions process—along with examples of each. I reference this blog and the nine types all the time, plus I added one more to the list that I see a lot:

### Groupthink Effect

When members of a group set aside their own opinions, beliefs, or ideas to achieve harmony.

### Halo Effect

When one remarkable quality gets all the focus and overshadows other factors about the applicant.

### Confirmation Bias

When you go into a situation looking to support an existing belief or opinion.

### In-Group Bias

When you give preference to someone who aligns with your own group. (This is a tough one because it's so deeply ingrained. Here's a personal example: I get excited when a young woman of color steps into my office. I see myself reflected in her, and I want her to have a great experience. Owning this bias help me and my team hold me accountable and keep bias in check.)

### Stereotype Bias

An oversimplified understanding of a particular type of group, person, or thing.

### Conservatism Bias

When you hold on to a prior point of view despite receiving new or additional information.

### Bizarreness Effect

When you recall and emphasize only the most unusual information in a series of facts or details.

### Status Quo Bias

When you have an attachment to the current state of being or an aversion to change (aka, the "we've always done it this way" mindset).

### Recency Bias

When you give more weight or importance to a recent event or interaction than others in the past.

### Presentation Bias

When the order of information being shared or the attitude of the presenter affects your perception.

*Maintain awareness of the different ways bias occurs by regularly reviewing these definitions and reflecting on how they may be coming into play. **Then, take action.***

## Reducing Bias in Your Admissions Process

Every school takes its own unique approach to admissions and is entitled to prioritize different requirements in its application process. The most important element that must be built in no matter what is consistency. Consistent processes and requirements reduce bias. For example, if you require two letters of recommendation, require it for everyone. If you require one applicant to do a second visit, require it for everyone. Or, if you give a student an opportunity to re-do their interview, give that opportunity to all students. Of course, there will be outliers, but they should be the exception, not the rule.

To me, consistency should also extend to interviews. I often see admissions officers favor a more responsive and adaptive interview where the questions change depending on the student and their responses. While it's true that this approach can help build a more personal connection, asking different questions doesn't set every interviewee up with the same opportunity. Instead, I encourage all interviews to include the same questions. Often, hearing different answers to the same question allows us to listen for the nuances and differences in how one student answers versus another.

Standardized tests can be an equalizer to help us understand students, but it's important to recognize potential bias in the process. Students do not take the test under the same physical and emotional conditions. What one student produces when they are sad is different from what another might produce, even if they're in the same room. Standardized test scores should be triangulated with other materials and considered as a part of a student's overall assessment. Take the time to understand the information you're getting from standardized test scores and what they can tell you.

Across the board, I recommend two quick things that admissions teams can do to mitigate bias in the process. First, start taking notes in the moment. Our memories are not as impeccable as we imagine and can be influenced by so many things. Taking notes reduces the chance that we (or someone on our team) will remember something incorrectly. When you are interviewing three to four students over a few days, the details can start to blend together. Alert interviewees that you are taking notes in the moment because you want to capture what they say accurately. They won't be upset; it's for their benefit.

The second immediate strategy is to make the implicit explicit. For admissions staff, that means clearly naming the "givens" in your process. For instance, are there qualities of a student that make them a fit for the school? Are there qualities that make someone not a fit? Are disciplinary flags a concern for one member of your team or everyone? Naming and defining the things we may assume creates consistency in how we evaluate applications.

Making the implicit explicit has benefits for applicants as well. By articulating the "unwritten rules," you help to level the field. For example, do you have an expectation for how a student should dress in an interview? Tell them! Interview attire means different things to different people based on their backgrounds, experiences, and identities. Perhaps the best outcome of making the

implicit explicit is the opportunity it provides to convey to families that you are doing your best to set them up for success with a fair, impartial review. I name practices that are rooted in equity when speaking with families. For instance, I tell families that we are asking the same interview questions to everyone and explain why I'm taking notes during our interview.

## Leading the Discussion Around Bias

For school leaders, it's important to understand how bias applies across schools, not just in admissions work but in things like assessment feedback or hiring practices. Once school leaders create a schoolwide anti-bias culture, they empower others to name and question their own biases.

In committee, as someone who leads the group in conversation, I will name when I think my bias is impacting my perspective. By modeling vulnerability to identify my biases, I can inspire others to be more reflective too. And if I think someone else may be using a personal lens, I may ask them about it in the moment or at a later time, depending on the setting. When we know we're all accountable for identifying and naming bias as we see it, everyone can trust the process a bit more. Most importantly, having practices that educate, discuss, and call colleagues into a conversation about bias is essential to your recruitment process and in creating a balanced, thoughtful, and mission-appropriate class. ✦



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