

2024

A Decentralized Graduate Admissions Process And The Impact On Black Student Enrollment In A Selected Higher Education Institution: An Action Research Study

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<https://dx.doi.org/10.25774/w4-8ek1-bq21>

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A DECENTRALIZED GRADUATE ADMISSIONS PROCESS AND THE IMPACT ON
BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN A SELECTED HIGHER EDUCATION
INSTITUTION: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Crystal Hall Buckley

July 10, 2024

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By

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to Sean, Liam, my mom, and my dad. In your own ways, you all inspire me to want more, do better, and persist through adversity.

Acknowledgments

There are so many people who supported me on this journey, and I am forever grateful. First and foremost, I wouldn't be me if it wasn't for my mom and dad. Thank you for being my original cheerleaders, setting the bar high, and encouraging me to do my best. My boo boo ice husband, Sean, you are my rock. Your constant support and positive affirmations kept me moving forward. In moments of being overwhelmed, you continued to remind me that I could push through it. Thank you for cooking more, solo parenting when I had class, and making me laugh when things got too serious. Liam, my sweet little boo boo, thank you for finding me studying and quietly cuddling up next to me so we could spend time together. My village (family, friends, and colleagues who became friends), thank you for always checking in, listening to me talk about my latest class, and making sure I kept a positive perspective. Special shout-out to Team Miller! Overy family, without hesitation you opened your home to me and took care of me while I was in Williamsburg. You are the best and I am so thankful! Confusion Cohort, you are some of the most authentic and affirming people I've ever had the pleasure of knowing. I could not have done this without your WhatsApp texts, tapas dinners, zoom calls, or laughs. Thank you for making this experience so memorable. To the participants in the study, thank you for your time and engagement. Lastly, but with great appreciation, thank you to my chair, Dr. Tschannen-Moran and committee members, Dr. Constantino and Dr. Pittman-Hampton. Your insights and thoughtful feedback greatly enhanced my study.

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Abstract

This study examined the lower enrollment of Black students in graduate programs compared to their enrollment in undergraduate programs. In today's climate with the recent Supreme Court case rulings and the enrollment cliff, recruiting Black students is both challenging and incredibly important. To address this problem, the study explored how a decentralized graduate admissions process affects enrollment for Black students. The participants in the study are Graduate Admissions Professionals (GAPs) at The University who oversee the graduate admissions process for their individual academic units. For this action research study, the GAPs completed a diversity and inclusion workshop that focused on admissions requirements and the evaluation process of applicants to measure the impact a workshop would have on Black student enrollment. Participants completed a pre-intervention survey, a feedback survey, a post-intervention survey, and an individual one-on-one interview with the researcher. Mixed methods were employed by first analyzing the pre- and post-intervention surveys using descriptive analysis through a Paired Samples t-test. The feedback survey and interview responses were transcribed and analyzed using a coding process. The study findings suggest that a diversity and inclusion-focused workshop can help align graduate admissions practices with institutional missions and values. Practical recommendations from the study are (a) detailed diversity goals with accountability metrics, (b) partnerships with the DEI office to make data-driven decisions regarding application requirements, (c) expand workshop participation to all who are involved in the process, and (d) modify workshop to include interactive experiences.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Human capital theory states that an educational investment made by an individual benefits not only that person but also their community (Langelette, 2002). Yet, most students in the United States would directly relate their decision to enroll in college to it being an investment in their own financial stability and career opportunities (Bae & Patterson, 2014). By combining both the human capital theory and the individual student perspective, the perceived value of higher education continues to be strong. More students are going beyond earning only a bachelor's degree and are completing graduate degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). Enrollment in graduate programs has increased over time due to the ability to gain access to better paying positions and overall long-term financial gains for advanced degree holders (Webber & Burns, 2020). This belief held true during the recent global pandemic and economic recession in which US graduate programs saw continuous growth (Chan et al., 2022). Although enrollment has increased overall, Black students are disproportionately under-enrolled in graduate programs compared to undergraduate programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). This is particularly concerning because for Black students, the ability to earn a graduate degree affects their ability to earn higher wages and close any income gap with their White counterparts (Pyne & Grodsky, 2020). Posselt et al. (2017) noted that “graduate school is an increasingly critical part of the American opportunity” and as such, access to it is critical for Black students (p. 2). Recent Supreme Court cases in June 2023 eliminated universities' ability

to use race as a criterion in the admissions decision. This action disrupts strategies many universities have employed to ensure a diverse enrollment. Seeking ways to reduce bias in the admissions process and increasing accessibility is now more crucial than ever.

Statement of Action Research Problem

Historically, the percentage of Black students enrolled in academic programs decreases as they advance through the educational pipeline (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). As universities seek to increase diversity in the graduate space, an examination of why there is a decrease of Black students enrolling is instrumental in understanding the barriers and identifying contributing factors. This study investigated how University driven diversity goals are carried through in a decentralized graduate admissions application process and how program-level decisions impact Black graduate student enrollment. Specifically, the purpose of this action research study is to examine if training admissions professionals about inclusive admissions practices at a large mid-Atlantic university will help increase the number of Black students who enroll in a graduate program.

Evidence Supporting the Existence of the Problem

The U.S. Census Bureau (2023) reported that 13.6% of people who live in the United States are Black. This number is inclusive of people who identify their race to be Black or African American. The percentage of Black undergraduate students nationally sits at 13% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). A recent data report revealed that students enrolled in postbaccalaureate programs that are Black increased from 9% to 14% over the last year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). While currently there are a higher number of students in graduate programs that are Black, this number is an outlier in decades of data. A global pandemic and weak economy temporarily increased enrollment in graduate programs

across the country causing record high numbers. Additionally, Black enrollment at the undergraduate level has decreased by 27% over the last decade which will have a long-term negative impact on the overall educational pipeline (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023b). The reduction in the number of students enrolling in undergraduate programs further supports that the current increased enrollment numbers by Black students in graduate programs is most likely temporary. Additionally, the Supreme Court 2023 decisions in the cases against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina have further complicated the admissions process. The Court decided to eliminate the ability for institutions to make race-conscious decisions when reviewing applications for admissions. The impact these decisions will have on Black students has yet to be determined.

Enrollment/Demographic Cliff. Many educators are preparing for a looming “enrollment cliff” due to changing demographics in the United States (Campion, 2020). Though the enrollment cliff focuses on the decline of enrollment at the undergraduate level due to lower birthrates, the long-term effect will affect the entire postsecondary education pipeline including graduate programs. Institutions are now more than ever focusing on strategic recruitment to supplement the loss of White students who projected to enroll in reduced numbers in the coming years. Boeckenstedt (2022) found the following:

Among the many dubious reasons people may have for being concerned about the drop in White students, there is at least one legitimate one: Who goes to college in America is driven by several factors that tend to overlap strongly, and those factors affect market viability: parental attainment of a college degree, parental income, and student ethnicity.

(p. 1)

Market viability, the ability for the market to sustain the organization, is important because institutions of higher education rely on dollars brought in through enrollment to help cover their operating costs.

Strategic recruitment recognizes that enrollment demographics are changing, and operations need to evolve to meet new demands. Although the purpose of an institution is to educate, they cannot lose sight of their finances in order to carry out their mission and maintain operations. Good financial health requires support from tuition dollars paid by the individual student as a considerable portion of the operating budget. Black students are a segment of the population that have potential to grow in enrollment despite the enrollment cliff.

Probable Causes Related to the Problem

Practices around creating diversity in the classroom and on campus have gone through many battles. Politically and legally, incorporating race into the admissions process has been a hot-button topic for decades. As seen in *Grutter vs. Bollinger*, enrollment practices that consider race or ethnicity during the review process are divisive (Guinier, 2003). Recent Supreme Court cases against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina on affirmative action in the admissions process have once again changed the enrollment landscape (Santoro, 2023). These cases eliminated the ability to use race as one of the criteria evaluated during the admissions process. The review process is now race blind for all institutions and all program levels, undergraduate and graduate. As a result of legal battles or a fraught political climate, schools have adapted their admissions practices to continue to support diversity efforts as it enhances the classroom experience and supports the development of students during their studies (Gurin et al., 2004). Many graduate programs have adopted new application review processes that use a holistic approach, which allows for reviewing requirements differently and more

broadly (Michel et al., 2019). Though this process provides more flexibility, it lacks clear and measurable parameters around including race in the admissions review process (Michel et al., 2019). A holistic review requires faculty to review quantitative measures and qualitative assessments and weigh them based on their own values (Posselt, 2015). At the graduate level, this practice takes on many different shapes due to the decentralized nature of graduate admissions (Michel et al., 2019). In some universities, individual programs are allowed to establish their own application requirements and review processes with little oversight.

Admissions is the gatekeeper for enrollment which means any university diversity goals can be significantly affected by the decisions made by admissions professionals and faculty during the application process (Posselt, 2014). An examination of research indicates that a decentralized admissions process at the graduate level can cause inequities in the process due to inconsistent practices (Michel et al., 2019). These inequities could be related to a decrease in enrollment by Black students as well as other marginalized groups as shown by the data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a).

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed methods action research study is to examine how a decentralized admissions process affects Black student enrollment at the graduate level at a large mid-Atlantic university. Specifically, *can training admissions staff on inclusive admissions practices increase the number of Black students enrolling in graduate programs?*

Context of the Action Research Study

An organization's culture, whether spoken or perceived, impacts faculty's decision-making during the admissions process. "Culture in academic organizations, then, informs stakeholders, both inside and outside, about the values and goals to which the institution and its members attach greater or lesser importance" (Bess & Dee, 2008a, p. 338). Without an explicit

set of standards for the review process, faculty rely on the culture, observed or communicated, to inform them (Posselt, 2018). They operate off the three levels of culture observed through artifacts, values, and basic assumptions as described by Edgar Schein (1990). Faculty take on the values of the those around them without being able to articulate why (Bess & Dee, 2008a). If asked, many faculty will say diversity is of interest but that quantitative evaluations are their primary concern (Posselt, 2014). A change in the culture around diversity would rely on key stakeholders leading the charge and influencing those around them (Posselt et al., 2017). In the case of graduate admissions, due to the decentralized nature, faculty would have to be involved in leading the charge and be the ones who can influence each other.

Information Related to the Organization

The university at the heart of this case study, a large urban institution in the mid-Atlantic, will be referred to as The University, which has 12% Black students at the undergraduate level and 10% of students at the graduate level. Thus, the numbers at the institution are similar to historical national enrollment averages. However, when examined at the state level, the numbers tell a different story. The institutions within the state enroll 16% Black students at the undergraduate level and 15% Black students at the graduate level (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, n.d.). As shown, the institution's numbers align with national averages yet are lagging in comparison to other institutions in the state. Therefore, one of the goals of The University is to increase the number of Black students enrolling in graduate programs each year to improve diversity in the student body as well as align with state averages.

To increase Black student enrollment numbers, many institutions have created diversity goals in the enrollment management space. Admissions is the point of entry and any significant impact on the demographics of the student population lives within the admissions process. At

The University, at the undergraduate level, the admissions process is run centrally by one staff with shared plans and processes. Aligning goals across a team and monitoring progress during the admissions cycle is easier in this environment. As noted by Griffin and Muñiz (2011), for diversity initiatives to work, they must receive support and a commitment from the campus community. The structure of the undergraduate admissions process allows for a university-level initiative to be operationalized easier. Leadership can track enrollment numbers through the pipeline and intervene if they need to increase the number of students enrolling for any population. However, at the graduate level, most institutions, including The University, have decentralized this process and have allowed each program to run its own admissions process. Individual programs or schools have their own admissions team and applications are reviewed by staff or faculty in the given program or school. Admissions decisions made on applications by staff and faculty are then based on their own or the program's collective understanding of merit or program fit (Posselt, 2015). There is generally little to no oversight on these decisions and no intervention during the admissions cycle. Therefore, as recognized by Michel et al. (2019), there is the strong possibility of a disconnect between university diversity goals and how faculty or staff review and admit graduate students.

Information Related to the Intended Stakeholders

The findings of this study will be reported to The University's Office of the President, Provost, Senior Associate Provost of Graduate Education, Vice President of Enrollment Management, the Dean of Admissions, the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, the graduate admissions professionals, and the academic units. All parties have a vested interest in enrolling a diverse student population and will want to be aware of any barriers they face. There are no plans to change the current structure of the decentralized graduate admissions process,

however, information learned could be used to better support Black student enrollment in graduate programs. To do this, all parties affected need a seat at the table to discuss improvements. Cultural changes, such as the one being examined in this study, often do not come from a top-down directive. Therefore, it is important that all parties are informed and work together as any resolution to the findings will require collaboration across campus.

Conceptual Framework

There are many layers to the graduate admissions process; the decentralized system, how policies are created, the role faculty play, and the culture of the institution. The additional layer of examination from a diversity and inclusion lens increases the complexities. As such, one theoretical framework is not adequate. Therefore, the use of three theories; collective impact, appreciative inquiry, and organizational learning are most appropriate. Collective impact helps organizations solve complex social issues by establishing a shared agenda and coordinating efforts (Weaver, 2014). Through the discovery process, appreciative inquiry is leveraged to find existing strengths at the institution. Those successes can be explored, and plans can be made to replicate across academic units and programs. As this is happening, individuals and the organization are learning and growing in new ways. The conceptual framework used in this study guides the exploration of the problem, the creation of cross collaboration within an organization, the generation of new knowledge, and the execution of an intervention. This framework can be used in the context of higher education and within a decentralized graduate admissions model.

Collective Impact

The collective impact frame aims to make large-scale changes to complex social issues (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). The framework states there are three pre-conditions and five

conditions that must be met to adequately address the social issue (Weaver, 2014). “The three pre-conditions include having influential leaders, a sense of urgency for the issue, and adequate resources” (Weaver, 2014, p. 12). These three pre-conditions are instrumental foundational pieces that are required to make any substantial impact. Additionally, collective impact has five conditions which are “a common agenda; shared measurement; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous communications; and a backbone infrastructure” (Weaver, 2014, p. 13). The first three conditions are established by the organization or leadership and set the tone for the changes to come. The last two conditions are required to maintain momentum and to keep moving forward.

Kania and Kramer (2011) developed a set of five components to help guide the process. The first component is a common agenda. A common agenda is a shared understanding of the shared goal that everyone is working towards (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). Details on how to approach the problem and reach the goal are discussed and agreed upon. Along with the agreed upon approach, a shared measurement of success is defined. A shared measurement is the second component and helps to align efforts and focus energy (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). Mutually reinforced activities are agreed upon as the third component (Weaver, 2014). Each person or group does not need to take the same approach; however, each approach must support the agreed upon agenda and work towards the shared measurement. Mutually reinforced activities also happen more than once as any complex issue cannot be solved with one intervention. Collective impact also necessitates strong communication that occurs throughout the intervention (Weaver, 2014). As such, the fourth component is communication which allows the coordination of many moving pieces over an extended period of time in order to reach the group’s goals (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). The last component is the backbone organization (Christens & Inzeo, 2015).

Organizations often already overstretch their staff's job responsibilities, therefore adding additional ones on to meet the goals of the collective impact may make the efforts unsuccessful in the long run. Kania and Kramer (2011) found that a separate staff dedicated to the collective impact was the best way to ensure goals are met.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative inquiry is a change model used to leverage the successes and strengths found within an organization (He & Oxendine, 2019). Its foundation is in social constructionist theory which implores people to seek answers or solutions outside of traditional confines (Priest et al., 2013). Appreciative inquiry is an adaptable tool that focuses organizational energy on identifying their positive attributes and utilizing those in the creation of a new path forward (Fifolt & Stowe, 2011).

Priest et al. (2013) noted that there are five key principles to appreciative inquiry which are the constructionist principle, inquiry process, poetic principle, anticipatory principle, and the positive principle. The five principles provide the infrastructure for understanding and using appreciative inquiry most effectively (Priest et al., 2013). There are four stages to the appreciative inquiry process that allow for discovery, dreaming, designing, and destiny (Evans et al., 2012). The discovery phase is for participants to discuss the positive characteristics of their organization to find strengths. The dreaming phase allows for exploring what their organization could be and to think outside of current operations. The designing phase is where participants develop an evolved vision or plan based on identified strengths. The last phase, destiny, is where an action plan is created, and implementation defined. Fifolt and Stowe (2011) noted that they observed that the successes utilizing the appreciative inquiry process were due to conditions they found on campus which included receptiveness to new ideas, bringing the right people to the

table, transparency in the process, a positively oriented process, and shared commitment for the results.

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is a theory that states organizations have the capacity to experience growth and learning in a similar fashion as individuals (Kirwan, 2013). For this to take place, organizations must create structures that turn knowledge into tangible skills that are implemented (Evans et al., 2012). Knowledge is acquired at the individual level and then taught to others which affects the organization; it must move through the organization in order to be considered organizational learning (Bess & Dee, 2007). Organizational learning can help disrupt the status quo and move organizations away from patterned behavior to the creation of new responses (Weick, 1991).

Organizational learning relies on transformations to occur within an institution due to the actions of individuals who promote change and work together. There are three different types of organizational learning: single-loop learning, double-loop learning, and deuterio-learning (Evans et al., 2012). Single-loop learning is used for simple problems in which the core values are not impacted. Double-loop learning is used for complex problems in which the values, beliefs, and policies of an organization change. The double-loop learning process allows for reflections, interventions, developing plans and repeating steps as needed with the goal of impacting core values. Deuterio-learning is the process of organizations learning “how to learn” (Evans et al., 2012, p. 161). Kirwan (2013) noted that for it to be truly learned, organizations must create structures to retain information that is acquired to ensure that it is not lost or forgotten. Formalizing retention policies is key though often challenging. Lastly, organizations should develop processes to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention selected to confirm learning

outcomes and practices have been affected (Kirwan, 2013). Without the assessment piece, learning may not be happening, or it may be erroneously attributed to the intervention (Bess & Dee, 2007).

Conceptual Framework for a Complex Social Issue

Each theory from the conceptual framework has a history of being used in the higher education space. Successful college campuses adapt to the current needs of students to better serve them. As change is constant, institutions need the proper tools to help facilitate conversations and manage the process (Evans et al., 2012). Many leaders do not have the experience or knowledge to effectively lead change therefore should use theories and frameworks to guide their system-wide efforts (Evans et al., 2012). Additionally, complex social issues require strategies that allow institutions to be proactive instead of reactive (Williams, 2014). Layered together, the theories and frameworks allow for the sharing and creating of knowledge, practices, and activities using a positive lens and leveraging current successes. Highlighted below are the specific parts of the conceptual framework from each theory.

Collective Impact: Shared Agenda and Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Reducing silos and creating a shared campuswide plan for addressing inequities in higher education is challenging. Structures found at institutions of higher education were built to be loosely coupled systems (Gagliardi, 2015). Faculty argued that disciplines required the autonomy to build processes and programs that would meet their needs with little governance from other administrators (Gagliardi, 2015). With the creation of centralized administrative offices, tensions increased between administrators and programs (Gagliardi, 2015). Balancing the needs of the program and the institution can be challenging. Collective impact allows the alignment of a shared agenda with the flexibility of autonomous mutually reinforcing activities (Weaver, 2014).

The shared agenda should be a goal that can be linked back to an institution's mission or vision which unifies all operations. Individual programs or departments can then create their own activities that support the goal and tie them back to the shared agenda.

Appreciative Inquiry: Discover Existing Strengths to Leverage

As previously noted, a decentralized systems creates gaps in knowledge. Administrators and faculty across campus are unaware of the successful processes or actions being taken by other programs or departments. Innovation is happening constantly, and organizations need to tap into that resource (Fiorentino, 2012). Benefits of the process occur when leadership reframes the conversation from what is going wrong to what is going right (Fiorentino, 2012). Complex social issues have many layers and if examined closely enough, there are areas of strength that can be leveraged within an organization. In the DEI space, Alston-Mills (2011) noted that appreciative inquiry allows organizations to celebrate its differences while building a vision for the future that brings everyone together.

Organizational Learning: Double-Loop Learning

In the context of tackling complex social issues on a college campus, organizational learning provides the necessary structure to support meeting institutional goals (Smith & Parker, 2005). Complex social issues are not issues that can be resolved with surface solutions that are provided when single-loop learning occurs. Therefore, double-loop learning is used by organizations when current practices, policies or values need to be amended (Williams, 2014). The process allows for the exploration of achieved outcomes and how to garner different results, while providing a platform to really dive into challenges and explore how to move forward to achieve desired results (Williams, 2014). Double-loop learning allows for an intervention, evaluation of results, apply changes to the intervention, and run through the cycle again (Bess &

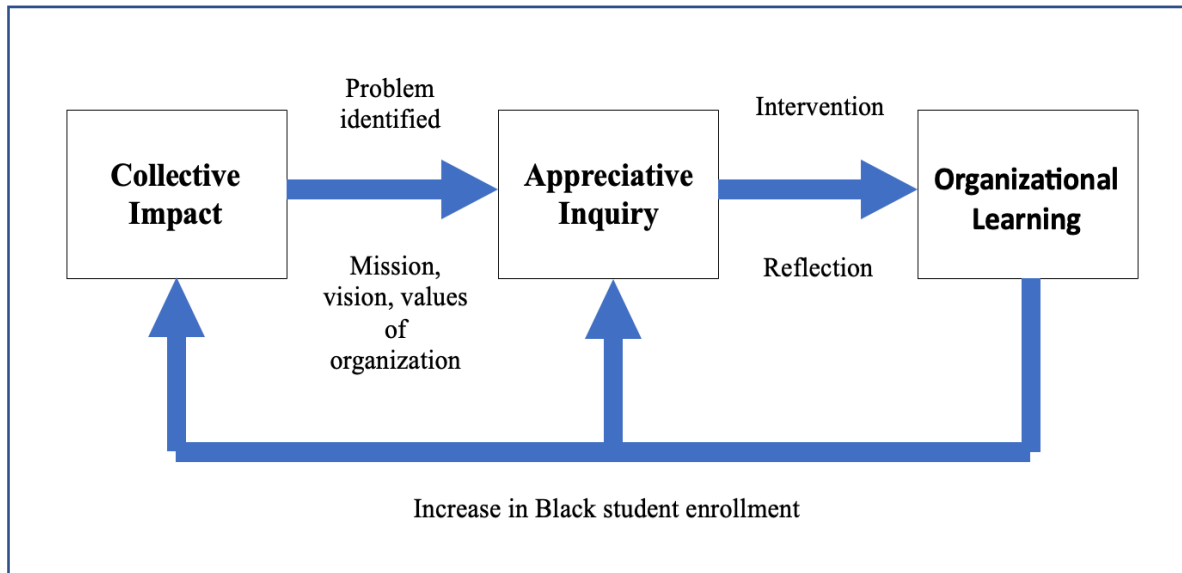
Dee, 2007). Double-loop learning allows space for re-evaluating goals after initial implementation as the ones selected may not have been appropriate (Bess & Dee, 2007). Both scenarios foster an environment of constant learning, growing, evaluating, and editing.

Black Student Enrollment

In this study, I used this conceptual framework to examine how a decentralized graduate admissions process impacts the enrollment of Black students in graduate programs at a Virginia institution of higher education. Refer to Figure 1 to see a visual representation of how the theories supported the study. Collective impact was at the beginning of the process and was used to discuss the complex issue and define it based on misalignment with the institution's mission, vision, and values. Once defined, the next step was to use appreciative inquiry. This step allowed for exploration of successes around campus that have positively impacted the issue. At this stage, the group collectively and individually reflected on how to move forward. They examined options for interventions and the next best course of action. During the development and execution of the intervention, the organization started changing, and individuals were growing. All steps worked together with the goal of increasing Black student enrollment. If it is determined that an action is not working as planned, the organization can go back one or two steps to re-evaluate and start the process over. Changing the culture around inclusive admissions practices in a decentralized setting will not be easy or quick. This change will also not work for all programs in the same way. This visual representation can be adapted to be used at the program or academic unit level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Note. Adapted from “Theoretical Frameworks to Guide School Improvement,” by L. Evans, B. Thorton, and J. Usinger, 2012, *NASSP Bulletin*, 96(2), p. 161 (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0192636512444714>). Copyright 2012 by Sage Publications.

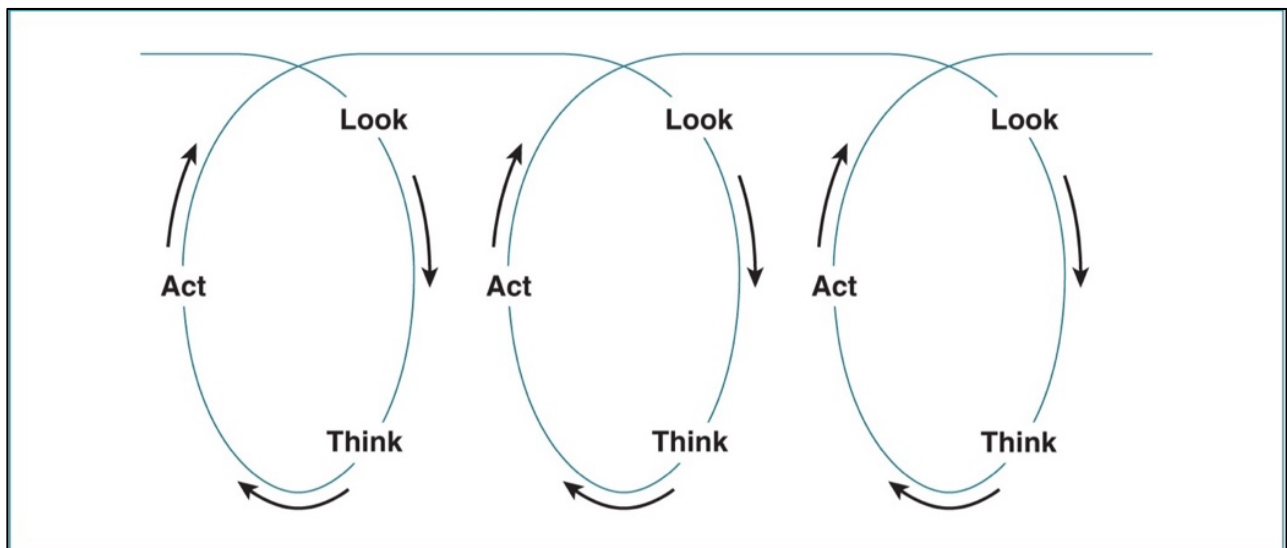
Action Research Model

The action research model that was used is the Stringer Model (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). There are three main components to the model that are repeated in a cycle as frequently as necessary. The first step is to “Look,” which can be defined as gathering data or other important information as it relates to the problem. The second step is to “Think,” which is about analyzing the information gathered and the third step is “Acting” on a plan. As it relates to Black student enrollment in graduate programs, the Look phase is an opportunity to examine current admissions practices for graduate students. In the Think phase, the barriers to enrollment are

explored through a DEI lens as they relate to inclusive admissions practices. “Acting” is about increasing Black student enrollment through the expansion of current inclusive admissions practices or the building of new ones. All the steps will lead to discoveries made and actions taken to support Black student enrollment. Figure 2 represents the Stringer model of action research (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021).

Figure 2

Stringer Model of Action Research



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Brief Description of the Action Research Intervention

Graduate admissions at The University are a decentralized operation in which the academic units and individual programs have autonomy to establish their own policies and procedures. They are part of a larger organization, The University, which has an overarching

mission, vision, and values. The central Office of Graduate Admissions was charged with overseeing the enforcement of a small set of the University standards related to admissions. In the current structure, there is a loosely coupled relationship between the academic units and the Office of Graduate Admissions. The Office of Graduate Admissions collaborates with admissions professionals from each academic unit to streamline information gathering and sharing as it relates to enrollment. The individuals from each academic admissions offices are called Graduate Admissions Professionals (GAPs). They are responsible for training faculty and ensuring that policies communicated to them from the central admissions office are followed by their academic programs. The process currently uses a train-the-trainer model; the central office provides training to the GAPs and the GAPs train the faculty admissions committees.

Universal graduate admissions policies are documented in The University catalog which make them easily trackable and enforceable. Any misalignment can be resolved quickly. Comparatively, ideas or concepts as described in the University mission statement or values are more challenging to execute. Diversity is listed as a core value of the institution and as such should be evident in The University's operations. The strategic plan released in 2022 reaffirmed the institution's commitment to diversity and increasing access over the next 5 years. Admissions is seen as the point of entry and has the biggest impact on achieving that goal. This study used the current admissions partnership between the GAPs and the Office of Graduate Admissions to leverage an educational opportunity focusing on building and executing inclusive admissions practices. The Office of Graduate Admissions, the Office of Admissions, and the Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion collaborated to create an enrollment workshop for the GAPs. The workshop helped the GAPs prepare for training faculty on admissions processes and reviewing applications from a diversity lens. The workshop provided current information on The

University’s enrollment statistics, areas of strengths, barriers applicants face, moments of individual and group reflection, provide a space for the participants to make meaning of the data, and wrap up with a plan on how to move forward to achieve The University’s diversity goals. The objective of the workshop was to influence organizational change and help grow the enrollment of Black students in graduate programs. See intervention steps for GAPs in Table 1.

Table 1

Intervention Steps for GAPs

Step	Details
1	Pre-intervention Survey: Before GAPs attend their DEI workshop, they completed a pre-intervention survey.
2	GAPs receive a 2.5-hour, 1 day, DEI workshop which addressed inclusive enrollment practices which includes Black graduate student enrollment from the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in collaboration with the Office of Admissions
3	GAPs completed a brief survey immediately after the workshop to provide feedback on initial thoughts of the training, strengths of the workshop, and areas of improvement
4	Post-intervention Survey: After GAPs participated in the DEI workshop, they complete a post-intervention survey.
5	GAPs participant in a one-on-one interview with the researcher

Action Research Questions

The action research questions all relate to training in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and creating or sustaining inclusive admissions practices as they relate to the graduate admissions in a decentralized setting. The process, that is run at the academic unit level or program-level, can affect the institution's ability to enroll Black graduate students. The research questions for this study are the following:

1. Considering the Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard University* that race should not be a factor in admissions, how do GAPs perceive the admissions process to be connected to the greater mission of the institution, as articulated in the mission and vision statements, regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?
2. To what extent do GAPs perceive admissions requirements to be connected to the greater mission of the institution regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?
3. How do GAPs perceptions of inclusive admissions practices at the University, including for Black graduate student enrollment, change through a DEI-focused professional development opportunity?
4. To what extent, if at all, did GAPs feel better equipped to have conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices after receiving their DEI-focused professional development opportunity?

Significance of the Study

The study examined how an institutional mission or values are operationalized in a decentralized graduate admissions process. Academic departments or programs establish their own admissions processes which impact Black student enrollment. The University in this study stated a commitment to diversity and inclusivity in their strategic direction, institutional mission, and values. Reviewing how those translate to the graduate admissions process can help minimize misalignments or barriers students, including Black students, may face applying to graduate school.

Definitions of Terms

- Affirmative action – The practice of increasing opportunities to those from marginalized groups to help overcome past wrongdoings that put them at a disadvantage (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-a). In the admissions context it is used as one of many factors and helps review applicants from the lens of inequities in educational or opportunities applicants may have experienced while reviewing their application for admission (Ford et al., 2023).
- Black students – Students who self-identify as Black or African American
- Decentralized – No central office on campus oversees the functions of the operations
- Diversity – Students or applicants from marginalized populations
- Faculty – Faculty at any level that are involved in the graduate admissions application process for an academic unit or program
- Graduate Admissions Professional (GAP) – Admissions professionals that work in each academic unit selected to represent their unit’s needs and interests with central offices. They work directly with the Office of Graduate Admissions to operationalize admissions policies and procedures with their programs directly

- Graduate school – Degree seeking programs that are at the master’s or doctoral level.
- Inclusive admissions practices – Admissions standards and recruitment practices that consider and incorporate various student experiences. Specifically, students from marginalized groups are represented in the policies and processes to support enrollment (Kilburn et al., 2019).
- Market viability – Viability is the capacity for a particular thing to be sustained in the current environment (Merriam-Webster, n.d.-b). Market viability in higher education is the ability for an institution to be successful in the current climate or market.
- Office of Graduate Admissions – central office of graduate admissions at the institution for this study. Oversees the enforcement of university admissions requirements found in the university catalog
- People of color/students of color – People or students who are not White/Caucasian (Kilburn et al., 2019)

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

An examination of admissions statistics from institutions of higher education shows a lack of proportional representation in the enrollment of Black students in colleges and universities. The problem is exacerbated when reviewing historical graduate school enrollment numbers. The origins of educational inequities of Black students do not originate in postsecondary education, however, there are steps institutions can take to make a positive impact. The structure of higher educational systems equips schools with the ability to grapple with social issues given their access to staffing, resources, and research. An intervention supported by research was selected to address the problem, provide education, and train to the major actors in the graduate admissions space. Lastly, the intervention once used should start the process of improving the Black applicant experience in the graduate admissions process.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) has been of great interest in higher education for many decades. Whether it is through affirmative action in admissions, programming, or hiring faculty or staff, institutions of higher education have executed various tactics to attract more diverse applicants. Colleges have a history of intentionally diversifying their student population to allow for more enriched learning opportunities from people from various backgrounds (Gurin et al., 2004). However, building a diverse class is not as straightforward as it sounds. When developing policies and practices, institutions have also had to consider state and federal laws that govern their institutions. Most institutions state that they have an obligation to appropriately

educate their students for the globalized society in which they live in. The changing demographics of the United States means that people of color will soon be the majority and learning to properly attract and serve that community is important (Kilburn et al., 2019). The changing demographics also require creating an on-campus experience that is inclusive of people from various walks of life. The way diversity is achieved and defined varies by institutional type, mission, and values of each organization.

Efforts That Support DEI in higher education

College administrators and faculty participate in many activities that currently support DEI efforts. There are centralized missions and values that apply across the board and guide decisions made, which are widely discussed in strategic plans or addressed by senior leadership. Lastly, the use of organizational learning to examine problems and facilitate change in a structured manner helps institutions progress with their DEI goals in a productive manner.

Institutional Mission. Colleges have the responsibility to provide their students access to situations that allow them to learn and engage with other students from various backgrounds as part of their development (Ford et al., 2023). Due to this shared responsibility, an evaluation of mission statements at institutions of higher education shows a commonality of including diversity and inclusiveness in the text. They charge themselves with providing an education that will be transformative for their students (Gurin et al., 2004). Although this is a campus-wide effort, the fulfillment of missions is driven by presidents and senior leadership. Without their commitment to the mission and diversity, an institution cannot meet their vision and goals are not reached (Chun & Evans, 2018).

Institutional Values. In an increasingly globalized society, leaders will be unable to solve future problems without engaging with people who have different life experiences than

themselves. Higher education is the perfect environment to foster these types of interactions as it promotes the exchange and challenge of ideas or thoughts (Gurin et al., 2004). Strategic plans often include diversity as an institutional value without any specific details or explanations of how it is achieved. Smith and Parker (2005) assert that accountability should be at the core with qualifiable metrics to ensure diversity values are adhered to and are not forgotten.

Committed Leadership. Leadership that values diversity is instrumental in establishing a campus culture that invests in it. Smith and Parker (2005) insist that leaders must exhibit behaviors that display their commitment to diversity. For many, that means representation within leadership as well as behaviors that support their commitment and the value they place in diversity (Williams, 2014). Leaders should be actively engaged in facilitating diversity that infiltrates their strategies and processes as to help ingrain it into the culture (Williams, 2014). Leadership not only needs to keep DEI at the forefront of all discussions, but they should also be responsible for making sure efforts are regularly evaluated for forward movement towards institutional goals (Smith & Parker, 2005).

Organizational Learning. The structure of colleges creates many challenges in making organizational changes therefore using a framework to guide their efforts is essential. The decentralized nature breaks down collaboration and the sharing of knowledge (Bess & Dee, 2007). Organizational learning provides a structure to help facilitate conversations around concerns and create action plans. Several interventions are used in organizational learning such as trainings or workshops that create a train-the-trainer model (Evans et al., 2012). Another method that is common in higher education is the creation of communities of practice that are used to foster organizational learning through the co-creation of knowledge (Kirwan, 2013).

Although organizations might not formally call these activities out by name, they are occurring daily around college campuses.

Developing inclusive admissions practices is an evolving process. As student's needs change, so should processes and policies. The double-loop learning approach allows space for those changes and steps to take place. How to move forward is not always clear and organizational learning supports taking time to reflect, examine, and intervene. Barriers for Black student enrollment in engineering might not be the same barriers they face in the humanities. Employing a process, such as organizational learning, that supports the investigation of multiple challenges through a continuous learning cycle is crucial.

Challenges to DEI in Higher Education

As is the nature with complex social issues, there are many challenges college campuses face in the DEI space (Ching, 2018). State and federal agencies have oversight over some campus activities as well as on spending that can affect University functions. Additionally, operations on campus are highly decentralized and central administrative offices are often unaware of the activities taking place at the program level. Lastly, the establishment of diversity offices, while good, are often small, and not empowered to make necessary changes.

Affirmative Action. Institutions of higher education commonly use affirmative action and practice race-conscious admissions during the application process to support diversifying their student body (Ford et al., 2023). Affirmative action helps marginalized groups have better access to educational opportunities (Ford et al., 2023). Until recently, the Supreme Court maintained that the use of race in the admissions process was allowed if it was one factor among many others (Guinier, 2003). In *Grutter v. Bollinger*, the Court stated that diversity benefits society therefore incorporating it in educational practices supports democracy (Guinier, 2003).

That belief held true until June 2023, when the Supreme Court decided on two significant higher education cases brought forward by Students for Fair Admissions against the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Harvard University (Santoro, 2023). In those cases, the Supreme Court determined that race-conscious admissions decisions were unconstitutional (Santoro, 2023). The recent decisions overturned decisions made in prior Supreme Court cases over the last 3 decades. College and universities are now in a place of evaluating practices to ensure their commitment to diversity is still met, reducing the existing learning gaps while not violating the law (Guinier, 2003).

Loosely Coupled System. The structure of higher education organizations creates considerable challenges when trying to implement changes due to it being a hierarchical and decentralized system (Chun & Evans, 2018). There are tensions at each level of the structure that can debilitate progress. There are strains between centralized offices and academic units, between departments and programs, and lastly strains between faculty and administrators (Chun & Evans, 2018). Each program or school may operate independent of each other making the implementation of any centralized diversity goal difficult (Adserias et al., 2017). As a loosely coupled system, the decisions they make or the actions they take could have little to no effect on other programs therefore collaboration is not required. However, when assessed collectively, those individual actions add up and may cause misalignment with university goals (Adserias et al., 2017). Campus-wide changes to support diversity require the buy-in and a commitment from the entire community to be able to move forward (Griffin & Muñiz, 2011).

Centralized Diversity Offices. The establishment of diversity offices on college campuses became popular over the last few decades (Chun & Evans, 2018). The offices themselves are not the issue, but how they have been charged, resourced, and used is problematic

(Chun & Evans, 2018). They generally have a small staff tasked with supporting an entire campus without being empowered to be true change agents (Chun & Evans, 2018). In addition, the offices are under constant scrutiny by political or social forces that can minimize their contributions. Even prior to the recent Supreme Court rulings, DEI offices were in jeopardy of being eliminated in major educational systems by state politicians in over a dozen states (Iyer & Boyette, 2023).

DEI in the Graduate Admissions Process

The graduate admissions process is where prospective students to a program submit transcripts, essays, letters of recommendations, or test scores to be reviewed by an individual or a committee for admission into their program (Hagedorn & Nora, 1996). The graduate admissions process can look different depending on the program, degree type, or the discipline. Unlike an undergraduate process, the graduate admissions process is decentralized and managed by the program or school/college instead of a central administrative office (Orlando, 2021). Therefore, the actors involved, the admissions requirements selected, and the review process can have a different effect based on the processes implemented by individual programs or departments.

Holistic Review

Graduate programs often state that they engage in a holistic admissions review process. A holistic review is when programs review various requirements for an application that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature (Michel et al., 2019). This process can include other evaluations such as the perceived caliber of the undergraduate institution attended, motivation, or other soft skills (Orlando, 2021). Reviewers use this method because it focuses on the individual student and allows the weight of each requirement to vary based on their strengths (Michel et al., 2019). A holistic review can work in favor of all applicants if applied using an equity lens.

However, if not, the practice can be problematic for students from marginalized populations. For example, larger programs often first use quantitative measures to eliminate applicants and reduce the pool of applicants (Posselt, 2015). The holistic review is then employed on the smaller population, therefore affecting more diverse applicants with lower quantitative scores but who may be a good fit for the program (Michel et al., 2019).

Degree Type Variance

Research shows there can be a difference in the evaluation process for master's students compared to doctoral students. The actors who participate in master's review process can be staff as well as faculty, which is not the case for most doctoral review processes (Orlando, 2021). The different type of reviewers, staff versus faculty, can lead to different outcomes in the process. In one study of graduate physics program admissions processes, Posselt (2015) found that faculty had an aversion to risk and therefore relied heavily on quantitative measures to ensure success among their students. The investment made by the program for doctoral students, both financial and time, is higher than those in master's program, therefore are scrutinized more intensely (Posselt, 2015). The differences in review processes can lead to inequities in the applicant experience.

Gatekeepers

Institutions view the acceptance of each student as a reflection of their program, departments, and overall reputation (Hagedorn & Nora, 1996). As such, faculty and staff involved in the graduate admissions process act as gatekeepers to their programs. They evaluate applicants based on what they perceive their intelligence to be based on quantitative measures (Posselt, 2014). Without formalized policies, the reviewers operate the process based on their own understanding of fit and merit and use that to rate the applicant (Posselt, 2014). This

practice introduces bias and puts marginalized applicant, such as students of color and non-traditional students, at a disadvantage if done without equity in mind (Orlando, 2021).

Fit and Merit. In graduate admissions process, fit can be described as whether the applicant belongs in the program as assessed by the reviewer (Posselt, 2014). Reviewers evaluate an applicant's prior academic grades, institution, internships, or jobs to see if they align with what they think makes a successful student, which can vary person to person or based on the culture of the program. It is a metric used by reviewers that is unquantifiable in practice yet carries significant weight (Posselt, 2014).

Additionally, in the graduate admissions context, merit can be described as an attribute or characteristic that makes an individual worthy of being admitted and part of the program (Posselt, 2014). Posselt and colleagues (2017) reported from their study involving the graduate admissions process for a physics program, faculty often defined merit using quantitative measures which created barriers for underrepresented applicants. A focus on quantitative measure such as Graduate Record Examinations (GRE) scores and grade point average (GPA) are generally lower for students of color and can reduce their chances of admission (Posselt et al., 2017). One of the major results from the global pandemic was the inability to administer standardized tests such as the GRE and Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) due to state and federal social distancing requirements (Sullivan et al., 2022). This forced programs to move away from using the tests as part of the admissions process as the test was inaccessible and many have elected to permanently remove the requirement due to their ability to recruit and enroll successful students without utilizing that metric (Sullivan et al., 2022).

Diverse Staff and Faculty

The way faculty assess an applicant greatly affects enrollment including diversity goals (Posselt, 2014). Individually or collectively, they construct and define what makes a successful student (Posselt, 2014). Scholars noted that having someone on staff or involved in the process from an underrepresented background helped with recruitment efforts and translate the needs of that population (Posselt et al., 2017). For example, in the study there was a Black, first-generation Ph.D. student on staff that helped build community with the students and advocated for them with faculty (Posselt et al., 2017).

DEI Training and Impact on Graduate Admissions Process

A change in diversity and culture on a college campus is not resolved easily or quickly (Chun & Evans, 2018). Institutions of higher education are loosely coupled systems that make facilitating change challenging. Additionally, changing the culture of a school is one of the most challenging endeavors that can be taken on. The culture of an institution delineates the practices and processes of an organization (Chun & Evans, 2018). A coordinated effort of educating faculty and staff through trainings and workshops is a necessary step to change the status quo. De Meuse et al. (2007) found that diversity training continued to positively affect participants several months afterwards.

DEI Culture Change

The educational landscape has changed on college campuses significantly over the last few decades. The types of students attending college has expanded, the variety of life experiences they bring with them have evolved, as well as the responsibilities they have outside of the classroom. Additionally, institutions are also dealing with powerful external factors such as local and federal politics and world events that can influence operations (Chun & Evans, 2018). Schools, more than ever, must now be ready to take on change in an organized and

methodical way instead of a reactive manner (Chun & Evans, 2018). Strong leadership grounded in diversity minded values will need to lead the charge using established theories or frameworks to be strategic. As leadership sets the tone for their institutions, those that properly resource it and participate in DEI training demonstrate their commitment to diversity which positively impacts the organizational culture (De Meuse et al., 2007). Training graduate admissions staff and faculty is one intervention that help lead the way in a campus-wide culture change.

Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative inquiry is used frequently in higher education due to its co-construction of knowledge and a process driven by positive change (He & Oxendine, 2019). The practice involves bringing in actors from various levels to gather their thoughts and ideas on how to move the organization forward in a new direction (Fifolt & Stowe, 2011). In higher education it can foster collaboration between faculty, staff, and students where they learn new knowledge to help inform new practices (Priest et al., 2013). Appreciative inquiry is about developing new ways of thinking and creating new structures that can respond to complex issues (Priest et al., 2013). In an ever-changing environment, higher education benefits from the trust-building practices of appreciative inquiry to garner buy-in and set a positive tone.

Due to the decentralized nature of the graduate admissions process, not all practices look the same between academic units or programs. Therefore, programs will organically be in different places regarding inclusive admissions practices. Appreciate inquiry looks at practices that exhibit the attributes the organization is aiming to achieve and leverages those for large scale change (Evans et al., 2012). “Within this framework, the organization itself becomes a source of inspiration; the organization’s past, present, and future guide the inquiry process” (Evans et al., 2012, p. 166). Using the four stages to appreciative inquiry—discovery, dream, design, and destiny—organizations can focus on movement in a positive direction (Evans et al., 2012).

As an institution that wants to improve diversity in graduate admissions, tough conversations will need to happen. Conversations around challenging topics, such as complex social issues, can put people on the defense. Appreciative inquiry allows an organization to set the tone as positive by first leveraging successful practices from around campus (He & Oxendine, 2019). Appreciate inquiry helps to lower defenses and support constructive discussions. There is no finger pointing; only knowledge gathering and sharing.

Equity-Minded Practices. Equity-minded practices are those that are designed to create long-term changes to policies or practices at an institution that combat inequities found in student experiences or outcomes (Liera & Desir, 2023). Providing DEI trainings is one-way institutions can educate faculty and staff of inequities students may experience within their organization. A study focused on DEI professional development for math professors at a community college found that training could be impactful even if short-term (Ching, 2018). Ching's (2018) results showed that over half of the participants in the equity training developed new knowledge and could translate that into making changes in their educational space. Additionally, the training led some faculty to take ownership of their processes and policies and make changes that were equity focused (Ching, 2018). The study focused on faculty and their syllabus/academic plans but is comparable to the ownership faculty have over the admissions processes they create. Ching (2018) noted that faculty only received one training therefore the results did not have a long-term impact.

Breaking Down Silos

As mentioned previously, higher education operates as a loosely coupled system. The graduate admissions process is no exception. At most institutions, graduate admissions are a decentralized process. Programs determine the application requirements, define how to evaluate,

and shape their incoming classes how they see fit. Although they are part of a larger organization, they can act independently in how they choose to carry out institutional values or policies (Griffin & Muñiz, 2011). One of the purposes of training is to move away from an individual or program mindset to an organizational mindset in which change happens long-term (Liera & Desir, 2023). Unlike other studies examined, the training for this study will be facilitated through a collaborative effort of invested stakeholders to break down silos and encourage cross collaboration on campus.

Creating New Knowledge

Trainings can serve a powerful tool in efforts to change the graduate admissions process. Institutions of higher education have been investing in DEI trainings for the last few years as to help develop equity minded individuals on campus (Liera & Desir, 2023). However, those changes have been focused on the individual and not the organization at large (Liera & Desir, 2023). Ching (2018) found that a single equity minded workshop does invoke learning even if it does not provide lasting changes. This finding is supported by the fact that DEI problems are a complex social issue and require many interventions. The use of the double-loop organizational learning method as described by Williams (2014) is a necessary process to obtain lasting changes. To support long-term transformations, institutions should facilitate mutually reinforcing activities (Keller & Aiken, 2015). There are many different types of interventions that can be employed during the education process and should be adapted based on the situation.

Courageous Conversations. One intervention used to engage faculty and administrators to discuss concerns about inequities in the admissions process is to use courageous conversations (Boske & Elue, 2017). A facilitator sets the tone for the group and establishes the rules to ensure it a space in which people are comfortable to be open with their dialogue (Guth et al., 2019). In

the context of graduate admissions, courageous conversations would create a safe space to talk about biases in the process and how they might affect the type of students who enroll (Boske & Elue, 2017).

DEI Training and Impact on Black Student Enrollment in Graduate Programs

DEI trainings and workshops can positively affect the Black student's experience during the graduate admissions process. Though the trainings do not always directly call out supporting this population, they still directly benefit from them. The trainings provide a space for new knowledge to be created, thoughtful conversations, and plans of action to be formed, with the goal of positively evolving or adapting admissions practices at the graduate level and aligning organizational practices with espoused values.

Achieving Diversity Focused Goals

DEI may be defined differently based on a person's understanding and experiences (Ching, 2018). Centralized support, cross campus collaboration, and education on DEI helps to reframe the problem and align practices for those who want to engage in changing the culture. Kilburn et al. (2019) found that partnering the Nursing school with the DEI office provided many benefits. The partnership allowed for DEI training to staff and faculty, the evaluation of current admissions practices, and eventually the creation of new admissions processes which increased enrollment among students of color (Kilburn et al., 2019). They worked together over several cycles and different interventions to change the culture around diversity in their school and with faculty to create an environment that felt inclusive to applicants. Their study was limited to one graduate program which makes cultural shifts less laborious than a campus-wide change. Similar results on a larger scale may take more time to accomplish. Campbell et al. (2021) found similar results to Kilburn and colleagues through the alignment of a department's diversity initiative and

university-wide diversity goals. Their study included the enrollment data of nine Ph.D. programs over the course of 10 years (Campbell et al., 2021). They, too, saw an increase in enrollment from students of color over the duration of the study.

Reducing Barriers

Training on DEI practices in the admission process can help programs objectively view their application requirements through an equity lens. As research shows, some commonly used admissions requirements are biased against students of colors and other marginalized populations (Hagedorn & Nora, 1996). Sullivan et al. (2022) found that the elimination of the GRE standardized test from admissions requirement did not negatively affect student success in their graduate program. Data were collected over three cycles from applicants to one master's program showed that the quality of applicant did not decrease nor did historical graduation outcomes (Sullivan et al., 2022). However, what did change was a slight increase in the number of students of color who applied which was inclusive of Black applicants (Sullivan et al., 2022). The study was small in scale since it only covered one program, however, in a decentralized graduate education system, changes will be made at the program-level therefore making this study useful to evaluate. Similarly, Hooker et al. (2022) collected 6 years of data around the GRE/GMAT requirement for a master's in health administration to see if eliminating the requirement would have any negative results. They found that removing the test from application requirements increased offers of admission or Black students from 5.4% to 15.7% (Hooker et al., 2022). Both studies attributed wanting to increase the diversity of their study body as the reason for the change and noted that testing requirements can create barriers of enrollment for students of color. DEI trainings can help increase these types of conversations that are already happening

around campus. They create a safe space to learn about challenges in the process for Black applicants and discuss ways of eliminating them.

Collective Impact

Higher education is not designed to foster a collaborative environment which makes any collective impact efforts more challenging (Keller & Aiken, 2015). Institutions often compete amongst each other or from within the college for resources, funding, students, and faculty (Keller & Aiken, 2015). Yet, they are often leaned on to help resolve complex problems that require collaboration on campus or in the community. Institutions have access to resources and people due to the work they do in teaching, research, connections to their communities through services, and workforce development, all of which equips them to take on challenges (Keller & Aiken, 2015). Therefore, institutions of higher education have a duty to serve as the backbone with collective impact because they have the infrastructure to support the process and keep it moving forward (Keller & Aiken, 2015).

The principles found in collective impact can help the campus community define the issue, work towards a resolution, and measure change. Increasing Black student enrollment by transforming admissions practices to be more inclusive is a complex social issue. It requires a culture shift in a subjective, decentralized process administered at the program level by faculty.

Conclusion

The graduate admissions process is a decentralized process at most institutions of higher education. As such, it can look different depending on the institution or even within the same institution. It is up to the individual programs or departments to create practices and policies that recruit and enroll students. Without centralized guidance or support, those systems can introduce bias or produce unforeseen barriers and obstacles for Black students. Evaluating practices and

developing new knowledge using a conceptual framework focuses efforts in a structured manner. Pivoting efforts to align with university diversity goals through a DEI training is one intervention used to reduce inequities experienced in the graduate admissions process. Finally, campus-wide changes made due to knowledge gained during trainings could improve the Black applicant experience.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This explanatory sequential mixed methods action research study relied on data gathered from the Graduate Admissions Professionals (GAPs) about inclusive admissions practices including Black graduate student enrollment. This study was an explanatory sequential study because I first conducted quantitative research, analyzed the results, and then built on the results to explain my findings in more detail with qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 15). Invested stakeholders from across campus were involved through participation in the action research team and helping to execute the intervention. The study was conducted through a social constructionist view. Social constructionist view is used as the paradigm due to it relying on individuals as well as collective groups constructing reality through their interactions and experiences (Bess & Dee, 2008b). Reality is constructed at the program or organizational level during the admissions process because of the unstructured, decentralized nature of the graduate admissions process. Surveys and individual interviews were employed to understand the current culture around DEI and how training can affect a cultural change especially as it pertains to Black graduate student enrollment.

Action Research Questions

The following action research questions guided this study:

1. Considering the Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard University* that race should not be a factor in admissions, how do GAPs perceive the

- admissions process to be connected to the greater mission of the institution, as articulated in the mission and vision statements, regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?
2. To what extent do GAPs perceive admissions requirements to be connected to the greater mission of the institution regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?
 3. How do GAP perceptions of inclusive admissions practices at The University, including for Black graduate student enrollment, change through a DEI focused professional development opportunity?
 4. To what extent, if at all, did GAPs feel better equipped to have conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices after receiving their DEI focused professional development opportunity?

Action Research Approach

The study drew upon a conceptual framework that blended three theories of change to ground the research: collective impact, appreciative inquiry, and organizational learning. The complexities of the research problem required multiple steps that are supported by the different theories. Additionally, since graduate admissions is decentralized, each academic unit and program can establish their own policies and culture, further complicating the issue. Affecting change requires involving all parties with a stake in the process. Each theory addresses the problem from a different angle. Collective impact helps organizations solve complex social issues by creating a shared goal and constructing a path forward (Weaver, 2014). Appreciative inquiry starts the change by leveraging any existing practices that align with the shared agenda. Those successes can be explored and plans to replicate across academic units and programs are

created. As this is happening, individuals as well as the organization are learning and growing in new ways.

Description of the Action Research Intervention

The Office of Graduate Admissions was recently charged by senior leadership to help improve the diversity of future incoming classes. This goal has become more challenging since the Supreme Court ruled against two universities for their practices of taking race into account as a factor in admissions. The institution is now seeking ways to ensure their mission and values do not get lost in the implementation of new federal regulations due to the Supreme Court decisions.

Like most institutions, graduate admissions are decentralized. Application processing is done by a central office; however, admissions recruitment and decision making is done at the unit or program level. Most programs use their own faculty or staff to recruit and to make admissions decisions. Therefore, any University goals of increasing diversity must be created by and carried through at the program-level. This study investigated graduate admissions practices and the review processes to see how University driven diversity initiatives are implemented at the program-level and how they affect Black graduate student enrollment.

The intervention in this action research study was a DEI workshop for GAPs as it relates to inclusive admissions practices. This training came in the wake of a training from university council on the implications of the Supreme Court rulings in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard University*. Originally the intervention included staff and faculty in the graduate admissions space, however, with the change of the legal landscape faculty were removed. The workshop only included the GAPs as the change in policies left many of the GAPs feeling concerned about their possible liability were they to promote DEI objectives among their faculty. Training was facilitated by the

Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the Office of Admissions, and the Office of Graduate Admissions. The GAPs participated in an educational opportunity that focused on inclusive enrollment practices, and how diversity goals can be met without specific reference to race. The Dean of Admissions started the training off showing data about current enrollment at the institution, followed by the strategic direction released by the President last year, and then presented on how the admissions process can create barriers for various populations. He then led the group in a discussion about research showing specific admissions practices that support diversity initiatives. Through engagement with the GAPs, he looked for examples of ways current admissions practices on campus support diversity and for opportunities to replicate in other spaces.

The workshop also included a training about compassionate conversations and how GAPs can navigate challenging dialogue as it relates to DEI. Before the workshop, they completed a pre-intervention survey that gauged their knowledge on inclusive admissions practices, including questions related to Black graduate student enrollment and their reaction to the current climate in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling. The training the GAPs received was a two and half hour in-person session, with a Zoom option for those who are remote workers. After receiving the training, each GAP answered a post-intervention survey that gathered feedback about the training itself. A week later they received the same survey they took pre-intervention. Over the course of two weeks, the GAPs each had a 45–60-minute individual interview with me to discuss their admissions process as it relates to diversity and inclusivity.

Collective impact was used to design the intervention and relied on addressing the five conditions that need to be met to affect change. Collective impact has five conditions: “a common agenda; shared measurement; mutually reinforcing activities; continuous

communications; and, a backbone infrastructure” (Weaver, 2014, p. 13). Appreciative inquiry occurred during the GAP training to discover successes around campus and encouraging GAPs to replicate similar tactics in their own units. Many graduate programs were not using race-conscious practices in their admissions process prior to the recent Supreme Court decisions, and therefore have policies that resulted in diverse enrollment that they can share with others. Organizational learning happened in multiple spaces during the study. Organizational learning took place during the GAP training as well as during post-intervention interviews and it occurred at the individual, program, and organizational level.

Validity is supported by the triangulation of different data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The surveys and interview questions are grouped using the same themes related to the research questions of the study. The questions were developed through the evaluation of research related to DEI in graduate admissions and DEI trainings. All instruments were pilot tested prior using them in the study. The Assistant Dean of Admissions took each survey and answered the interview questions. No edits were made to any of the instruments as the questions were judged to be clear, relevant, and appropriate for the participants. Reliability is displayed through detailed documentation of the protocols used and steps taken that allows others to easily follow the process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Role of the Researcher

I elected to study this topic because it relates to my own personal journey in higher education as a person of color and because of my professional experiences. I am a half Black and half White woman which has shaped my perceptions in life. In addition, I serve in a leadership position in graduate admissions at the institution in my study. I have no oversight over the GAPs or their programs, yet they both generally operate in a private manner regarding the

innerworkings of their space. My office is often viewed as a bureaucratic outsider which has impacted my relationship with the GAPs and their programs. To help mitigate any bias I may bring, I participated in reflexive journaling during the research process, which helped me examine any judgements, beliefs, or assumptions I may have to ensure they did not affect the research.

I am a graduate admission professional at The University. I have two main roles in the study: facilitator and interviewer. As facilitator, I ensured that the study moved forward and involved all relevant parties. As interviewer, I gathered and analyzed the qualitative data required to explore the information gathered during the quantitative step.

In preparing for the intervention, my role was the facilitator. I collaborated with the action research team comprised of members from the Office of DEI, Office of Admissions, and the Office of Graduate Admissions. An action research team was important for this study because they are key stakeholders around campus and have an active interest in monitoring the ongoing progress of the project.

Additionally, I conducted the interviews. I met with each GAP individually after they participated in the DEI workshop. I interviewed the GAPs to gather qualitative data about their experiences related to DEI and how it relates to institutional culture, the admissions process, and self-reflection. I also analyzed and made sense of the data.

I hold a leadership position at the institution, therefore there is a power dynamic at play that was addressed with participants. I oversee the group of the GAPs in a non-supervisory manner yet have control over many of their admissions processes. Participants were notified that the professional role I serve on campus was not part of the research and any information gathered during the interviews or surveys would not be used later in my professional role. I assured the

participants that the survey responses would remain anonymous and that the interviews were held in strict confidence to make them as comfortable as possible providing honest answers. During the interviews, I made sure to keep identifiable information out of any discoveries such as program names, academic units, or the name of the interviewee. Each person was given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality during the process. Recordings and notes were not shared with anyone else and will be destroyed within one year.

One way validity was addressed was by acknowledging the bias I bring to the study and reducing the impact it has (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). My role as the Director of the central Graduate Admissions office is to manage the admissions process for all graduate programs at The University. I also coordinate and oversee the relationship with the GAPs through a non-supervisory relationship. Acknowledging the leadership role I play in graduate admissions at the institution created transparency and honesty to the process. Additionally, I used the action research team I assembled to review the instruments and protocol to help with the validation process.

Participants

Participants in this study were GAPs who represent a collection of academic units on campus. Eight of the nine academic units invited to participate had at least one GAP participant; one academic unit had two. Selecting a wide variety of academic units allows for a greater understanding of how the size of a school or the discipline affects the admissions process. Additionally, this study focused only on programs that are on-ground or hybrid, so no online programs were used. The online programs are part of a contract with a third-party vendor therefore operate differently than programs that are on-ground or hybrid. Table 2 lists a

collection of academic units on campus and the number of GAPs that represent each unit who participated in the study.

Table 2

Participants

Academic Unit	No. of GAPs
College A	1
College B	1
College C	1
College D	2
College E	1
College F	1
School A	1
School B	1
School C	0

Note. GAPs are the Graduate Admissions Professionals that work for each academic unit.

Data Sources

Quantitative data was first collected by administering a pre-intervention survey to all GAPs about inclusive admissions practices. Immediately following the workshop, a feedback survey was administered to participants. Lastly, post-intervention surveys were completed by the GAPs shortly after the conclusion of the workshop to look for any differences in results. Qualitative data was then gathered using individual interviews conducted with each GAP after they completed their training. The survey and interview questions were driven from the

information found in the literature and other studies related to DEI in education, DEI trainings, and the recent Supreme Court rulings. Using surveys, feedback forms, and individual interviews gives better insight into the data; qualitative data gives context to the quantitative data collected.

Validity concerns were addressed by using the same groups from the surveys for the interview data collection process. Reliability is supported by incorporating survey and interview questions from other studies related to the topic that have a demonstrated reliability. De Meuse et al. (2007) used surveys to analyze the effectiveness of DEI training in the workplace for cultural and behavioral changes. Companies often have the same decentralized structure making it comparable to the university system. The Cronbach's alpha for the De Meuse et al. (2007) study was a 0.89 to 0.76. Additionally, Posselt and colleagues (2017) interviewed faculty and staff of a physics graduate program that had high rates of enrollment of Black students in their program for over a decade to understand their admissions processes and what led to the diverse enrollment. I used triangulation, member checking, multiple data sources, and a diverse research team.

Quantitative Data

As this is an explanatory sequential mixed methods study, the process began with quantitative data gathering (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Surveys were administered as the first step to gather the quantitative data needed for the initial baseline of understanding. Starting with a survey reduces sampling error by reducing potential bias that could occur. Data gathered was related to the research questions as to provide the necessary context to move on to the qualitative process (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Surveys were used to get an understanding of the individual perspective regarding their role in the admissions process and how it ties to diversity and the enrollment of Black students. Since surveys are completed individually, the responses were not influenced or heard by colleagues. The surveys were anonymous and gave the

responder the freedom to be honest in their responses. Surveys used for this study were designed specifically for this study. All surveys used, pre- and post-intervention and feedback form were pilot tested prior to implementation.

Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey. The pre- and post-intervention survey are the same: same questions, sections, and Likert scale. The pre-intervention survey was sent to all GAPs who volunteered to participate a week prior to the intervention to gather data about inclusive admissions practices they employ, including for Black student enrollment. GAPs were asked to complete the survey before they participated in the workshop led by the Dean of Admissions, and the Office of DEI. The survey gauged their current understanding of inclusive admissions practices, including how it influences Black student enrollment. The pre-intervention survey provided a baseline to compare results of the post-intervention survey after receiving training. The post-intervention survey was sent to the same GAPs a week after the intervention.

The surveys included questions that used a Likert scale to gauge the participants' reaction to the question. The questions were based on institutional culture, the admissions process, and self-reflection as they relate to DEI, the institution's commitment to diversity and inclusivity, and how the admissions process aligns with both (see Appendix A). There are 19 questions on the survey that align with the research questions for the study. The questions are broken down into three sections: institutional culture, admissions process, and self-reflection. The surveys used a Likert scale to measure each GAP's level of agreement with a series of questions. The Likert scale included: 1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *somewhat disagree*, 3 – *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 – *somewhat agree*, 5 – *strongly agree*. Each respondent was required to rate their response using the scale provided. Sample items include:

Institutional culture: The University's mission and values include a commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Admissions process: The admissions process should represent The University's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Self-reflection: I reflect on the mission and values of The University when working with programs or faculty to establish application requirements.

There were nine responses for each question and the mean for each individual question was calculated to get the average of all GAP responses to that question. Using SPSS, descriptive statistics were run to analyze GAP responses to the individual pre- and post-intervention surveys. The results informed Action Research Questions 1, 2, and 4.

Qualitative Data

Due to the complex nature of this research topic, not all relevant information can be gathered in a survey. The topic has many complicated elements that should be explored in a conversation. Following the steps of an explanatory sequential action research study, the pre-intervention survey was followed by a feedback form, and individual interviews.

Workshop Feedback Form. Immediately following the conclusion of the workshop, GAPs were asked to complete a feedback survey found in Appendix B. This survey gathered data based on open-ended questions regarding the workshop and the participant's experience. Seven of the nine participants completed the feedback survey. The feedback form had six questions which inquired about areas of improvement, topics that should be addressed, and if there was a desire to attend more trainings. Information gathered was incorporated into the findings and will be used to help develop additional workshops.

Interviews. An interview allows for layered questions that also incorporate follow-up questions. The interview style used was semi-structured which aligns with a social constructionist’s view. This method allows “participants to be free to define and describe issues and events in their own terms, unfettered by the necessity of framing their response according to the terms and directions of previously defined questions” (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021, p. 127). The use of an individual interview method is to allow for a further in-depth conversation around inclusive admissions practices used in the GAPs academic units. The interview protocol and questions were pilot tested prior to implementing.

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a description of the purpose of the study and their rights as participants and asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix C). Any GAP who was not willing to sign the consent form was not interviewed. Each GAP agreed to sign the form and participated in the interview. The interview followed a semi structured questioning procedure to help guide the conversations and lasted around 45 to 60 minutes. The questions were approached in a delicate manner due to the nature of the topic and to avoid participants reacting negatively or assuming “implied judgment or criticism” (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021, p. 127). Individual interviews provided the participant space to give honest feedback that was not compromised by another GAP which may happen in a focus group setting. The interviews helped give context to the survey data collected. The interview questions followed a similar structure and grouping as the survey questions. Similar to the survey, there are three sections to the interview questions: institutional culture, admissions process, and self-reflection. There are 16 questions for the interviews with a few questions having follow up questions based on the response given. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix D. Sample items include:

Institutional culture: How do you perceive the institutional mission, values, and strategic direction to be connected to the work you do in admissions?

Admissions process: How do you create the metrics in which you evaluate students based on?

Self-reflection: How do you define the institution's mission and values?

Data Collection

The data collected for this research was done through surveys and interviews. I sent the survey to GAPs electronically to their University email accounts using Qualtrics pre-intervention. After GAPs received the intervention, I sent a feedback survey and a post-intervention survey.

The interviews allowed me to ask guided questions as they pertain to the culture of the institution or the program as it relates to enrolling Black students. Interviews give the space for responses that are complex and cannot be answered easily. Interviews were conducted in December 2023 and January 2024. Interviews took place through the video option of a Zoom call for ease of planning during a high-volume time. I recorded all interviews with approval of participants for accuracy of what was said. Interview data went through a coding process to identify emerging themes and categories for organization.

It was most beneficial to start this process at the beginning of the admissions cycle which runs late September to August of the following year. Pre-intervention surveys to the GAPs were sent in late November 2023. The feedback form was sent the Monday following the workshop. Post-intervention survey was sent a week later and post-intervention interviews took place in December 2023 and the beginning of January 2024.

Information gathered was stored securely in password protected documents on William & Mary's OneDrive system. Qualtrics was used to gather responses to the three surveys (pre-intervention survey, feedback form, post-intervention survey). Data from the surveys were stored in password-protected files the William & Mary OneDrive account. Survey responses are confidential. Interview participants received pseudonyms and identifiable characteristics were removed. All data gathered, inclusive of consent forms, are kept following IRB guidelines of 1 year and then destroyed.

Data Analysis

Data were collected through surveys and individual interviews conducted with the GAPs at The University. I analyzed surveys using a paired samples t-test evaluating pre-intervention and post-intervention results. Descriptive statistics captured the pre- and post-intervention level of agreement of the GAPs who were surveyed. The feedback form and individual interview transcripts went through a coding process. During the coding process I identified themes from the participants to strengthen the validity of the study. Lastly, I journaled during the qualitative process to reduce the introduction of bias and to support validity. See Table 3 for details about the data analysis per research question.

Table 3*Decentralized Graduate Admissions Process*

Action Research Question	Data Sources	Data Analysis
Question 1: Considering the Supreme Court ruling in <i>Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina and Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard University</i> that race should not be a factor in admissions, how do GAPs perceive the admissions process to be connected to the greater mission of the institution, as articulated in the mission and vision statements, regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?	GAP Interviews: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 12, 13 Pre and Post Intervention Survey: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13	Qualitative: Emergent and Axial Coding Descriptive statistics, t-tests
Question 2: To what extent do GAPs perceive admissions requirements to be connected to the greater mission of the institution regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?	GAP Interviews: Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 Pre and Post Intervention Survey: Questions 10, 11, 12	Qualitative: Emergent and Axial Coding Descriptive statistics, t-tests
Question 3: How do GAP perceptions of inclusive admissions practices at the University, including for Black graduate student enrollment, change through a DEI focused professional development opportunity?	GAP Interviews: Questions 14, 15, 16	Qualitative: Emergent and Axial Coding
Question 4: To what extent, if at all, did GAPs feel better equipped to have conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices after receiving their DEI focused professional development opportunity?	Workshop Feedback Form: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 Pre and Post Intervention Survey: Questions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19	Qualitative: Emergent and Axial Coding Descriptive statistics, t-tests

Note. GAPs are Graduate Admissions Professionals who work for the academic units. DEI stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Paired Samples t-test

A paired samples t-test was run to compare the pre- and post-intervention data. A paired samples t-test was selected because the data being compared took place at two different points, the same number of participants completed the survey each time and the questions were the same. Additionally, this test was appropriate to select because the study is looking at before and after behaviors in which an intervention is administered. The mean for all surveyed items was found and then compared between the pre- and post-intervention results in SPSS. The results were used to respond to Action Research Questions 1, 2 and 4. Pair 1 represents Question 1 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys, and Pair 2 represents Question 2 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys (see Appendix E).

Coding

Emergent coding was used for all qualitative data. Codes were created through several rounds of review of the transcripts and were then entered into an Excel document and codes were organized by questions and grouped together into categories. Then categories were grouped into themes. Multiple cycles were completed for the coding process for all the data. Quotes from the participants from the feedback surveys and interviews were selected to support the themes. Nine structured interviews were conducted, and 100 pages of transcripts were coded. Seven feedback surveys were completed, and nine pages of feedback surveys were coded.

Triangulation

Triangulation is used in research to bring together different data sources to test validity (Carter et al., 2014). In this mixed methods research study, triangulation occurred using a pre- and post-intervention survey, a feedback form, followed by individual interviews, representing the use of different methodologies to address the same topic. Triangulation is used to support the

validity of the research and helps reduce the bias that can be introduced if relying on a single research method. “If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study” (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 200).

Action Research Question 1: Considering the Supreme Court ruling in Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina and Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard University that race should not be a factor in admissions, how do GAPs perceive the admissions process to be connected to the greater mission of the institution, as articulated in the mission and vision statements, regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?

Interviews. Coding was used in this research to find key themes and ideas that are present in the collection of interviews. Member checking was conducted once the transcripts were completed to ensure participants assent to their accuracy. “Reporting back to stakeholders gives them opportunities to ensure concepts, terms, and categories resonate with their experience and perspective” (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021, p. 175). This is particularly important when there might be a power relationship at play. I developed codes based on information gathered from participants and they were not predetermined (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I chose emergent coding because it allows the data gathered during interviews to drive the process. In the coding process, my first step was to read over the transcripts to get a better grasp of the information relayed during the interviews (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). Once I reviewed the data, made meaning of it, and understood it through the creation of unified “word, phrase, sentence,” I then categorized the data (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021, p. 170). Categories allow for information to be organized into groups of like units (Stringer & Ortiz Aragón, 2021). Lastly,

I arranged the categories into themes and these themes were determined by axial coding (see Table 3).

Surveys. Comparing the results of the pre-intervention versus the post-intervention helps note any significant differences in perceptions of DEI topics, enrolling Black graduate students, and the effectiveness of the training. The surveys are quantitative data, therefore descriptive statistics and a Paired Samples t-test were used to analyze the results between the pre-intervention survey and post-intervention survey (see Appendix F). The t-test results show if there was a significant difference between the means of the pre- and post- surveys and whether the intervention had the intended impact. The responses to Questions 1–9 and 13 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys were used to inform action research question one.

Action Research Question 2: To what extent do GAs perceive admissions requirements to be connected to the greater mission of the institution regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?

Interviews. A line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts was used. Codes were added as categories emerged. A second round of review occurred to ensure accuracy and consistency. The grouping of categories led to the creation of themes for the data. Each question used for the interview ties back to the questions asked on the pre- and post-intervention surveys and the research questions.

Survey. Quantitative data was used to help support the qualitative data gathered from the interview process. Analysis was conducted as described in action research question one. The responses to Questions 10, 11 and 12 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys were used to inform Action Research Question 2. Table 3 provides a summary of the data sources and data analysis procedures related to research question two.

Action Research Question 3: How do GAP perceptions of inclusive admissions practices at the University, including for Black graduate student enrollment, change through a DEI focused professional development opportunity?

Interviews. The interviews took place two to three weeks after the intervention allowing time for GAPs to have put what they learned into practice. In a decentralized system, there is no one specific way in which GAPs manage their admissions process, therefore it was important to rely on interview questions to gather data related to the various experiences. I analyzed these data using coding to find categories and overall themes as detailed on Table 3.

Action Research Question 4: To what extent, if at all, did GAPs feel better equipped to have conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices after receiving their DEI focused professional development opportunity?

Surveys. Faculty and non-admissions staff did not receive the intervention, take the surveys, or participate in interviews, yet they are an important part of the admissions process. Some of the survey questions included GAP interactions with faculty or other staff as they relate to DEI and the admissions process. The responses to Questions 14–19 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys were used to inform Action Research Question 4.

Workshop Feedback Form. The use of a feedback survey with open-ended questions allowed GAPs to express which part of the workshop did or did not provide the support for them to feel equipped to engage in the DEI space with other staff and faculty.

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Assumptions

The data sources used in this study assumed that participants are honest and truthful in their responses to surveys and during their interviews. Surveys are assumed to be completed by the participant and not others not involved in the study. There is an assumption that participants will respond honestly, and conversations will be authentic. It is also expected that all participants believe in the mission of the institution and want to achieve any diversity goals The University establishes. Additionally, there is an anticipation that the GAPs are honest in expressing their desire to recruit and enroll a more diverse student body.

Delimitations

The major delimitation of the study was the decision to focus on a single large university in an urban setting. In this study, all GAPs who participated received the surveys and were interviewed. Due to the decentralized nature of graduate admissions, GAPs and faculty interact differently depending on the program or academic unit. Therefore, excluding faculty from the study allowed for the focus to be on the GAP structure as it relates to the admissions process. Given that the institution has over 400 graduate programs with over 800 faculty and staff involved in the process, this approach does limit the scope of information obtained. The design of the intervention was intentional to allow for feasibility within a reasonable timeframe as to remain relevant to current climates on campus. The intervention aligns with The University goal of providing a centralized training to all GAPs involved in the graduate admissions process and can be considered a pilot program.

Limitations

Biases could have been introduced to the data sources by participants or me. The professional position I hold on campus could have introduced bias to participant responses. Although there is no formal reporting structure between the GAPs and myself, or between me and the faculty, there could have been perceived power assumed by the participants. The degree to which that has an impact is hard to determine or gauge. Concerns that responses could affect their access to resources within their own colleges could have introduced bias to their responses. Resources defined as specialized technology requests with the admission software or access to support from the Senior Associate Provost of Graduate Education whom I work closely with daily might have influenced responses.

Interview responses may be influenced by the power dynamic between me and the GAP or between the GAP and the faculty. Further, there is generally no reporting structure between the GAPs and the faculty but that does not mean they do not have perceived power as well. GAPs may be cautious in their interview responses due to their relationships with faculty or leadership in their unit. Additionally, not all GAPs may be “articulate and perceptive,” which may hinder their responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 188). Study results are intended to be relevant to the institution in which the research took place and not generalizable to all institutions.

Ethical Considerations

The study went through the William & Mary Education Institutional Review Committee (EDIRC) as well as the institution where the research is taking place. All parameters of the study were evaluated by the IRB committee and once approved, followed explicitly. The GAPs and faculty were told about the reasons for the study and how the data obtained would be used

(Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Informed consent was collected from GAsPs who participated in the study (see Appendix C). All information gathered from surveys were kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used in place of their names and that information will not be released. Findings will be released to senior leadership in the Provost's office and Enrollment Management without participant's names or identifiable characteristics. Academic programs or units are left out of the study findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The study focused on evaluating how a decentralized graduate admissions process impacts the enrollment of Black graduate students at a large mid-Atlantic institution. As an explanatory sequential mixed methods action research study, data were gathered from Graduate Admissions Professionals (GAPs) about inclusive admissions practices including Black graduate student enrollment. GAPs from each academic unit were invited to participate in the intervention and the data collection portion of the study. The study was administered as a pre-test post-test design involving a single group of participants. Since this is a mixed methods study, quantitative data were first collected through a pre- and post-intervention survey and qualitative data were collected next through a feedback survey and individual structured interviews. Eight out of the nine academic units invited provided at least one GAP to participate. There was a total of nine participants in the study. Each action research question has its own section below which includes data analysis and findings.

Action Research Question #1

*Considering the Supreme Court ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. University of North Carolina* and *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard University* that race should not be a factor in admissions, how do GAPs perceive the admissions process to be connected to the greater mission of the institution, as articulated in the mission and vision statements, regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?*

Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys

Pre- and post-intervention surveys help to answer Action Research Question 1. Questions 1–9 and 13 gauged GAP levels of agreement with the institutional culture and the admissions process related to diversity and inclusivity. They addressed leadership’s role in creating a diverse culture, how applicants are treated during the admissions process, and if GAPs exhibit the institution’s mission and values in their actions at work. Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics associated with survey responses to the pre- and post-intervention surveys for Action Research Question 1.

Table 4*GAP Survey Responses Descriptive Statistics (Questions 1-9, 13)*

Survey Question and Text	Survey	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
1. [The University's] mission and values include a commitment to diversity and inclusion.	Pre	4.67	0.5	4	5
	Post	4.67	0.5	4	5
2. [The University's] policies operationalize their commitment to diversity and inclusion.	Pre	4.22	0.67	3	5
	Post	4.33	0.5	4	5
3. [The University's] leadership educates their community (staff, faculty, students) on how to be members of a diverse and inclusive institution.	Pre	3.89	0.6	3	5
	Post	4.11	0.6	3	5
4. [The University's] leadership creates an environment where people feel safe to share and express different opinions.	Pre	3.56	0.73	3	5
	Post	3.89	0.78	3	5
5. [The University's] leadership is successful at creating an inclusive and diverse institution.	Pre	3.89	0.6	3	5
	Post	3.89	0.6	3	5
6. [The University's] commitment to diversity will not be negatively impacted by the recent Supreme Court cases involving race conscious admissions.	Pre	3.22	1.3	1	5
	Post	3.67	1.12	2	5
7. The admissions process should represent [The University's] commitment to diversity and inclusion.	Pre	5.0	0.0	5	5
	Post	4.89	0.33	4	5
8. Applicants are treated equally regardless of their background (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, etc.) during the admissions process.**	Pre	4.0	1.0	2	5
	Post	4.44	0.73	3	5
9. Applicants are all valued regardless of their background (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, etc.).	Pre	4.11	1.05	2	5
	Post	4.44	0.88	3	5
13. My responsibility as an employee at [The University] is to ensure that my actions at work represent the institutional mission and values.	Pre	4.78	0.44	4	5
	Post	4.78	0.44	4	5

Note. N = 9, * = p<.05, ** = p<.01

GAPs are Graduate Admissions Professionals who work for the academic units.

In planning the intervention, the action research team discussed the objectives of the training, which included creating a stronger tie between the institution's mission and the daily work of the GAPs. In execution of that workshop, the facilitators did not actively connect the mission to the GAPs and the admissions process as they were more focused on the Supreme Court rulings since they had recently been released. Therefore, the increase in means from the pre- to post-intervention survey for Questions 2–4 is a bit surprising (see Table 4). Although not directly articulated, the GAPs were able to make a connection between the mission and their roles during the workshop. This is further supported by their responses to question two from the interviews where the GAPs were asked how they perceive their work to be connected to the institutional mission and goals. Five of the nine GAPs stated that the mission guides their actions. Therefore, they articulated understanding the mission and practices that support it.

Question 6 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys moves into an area extensively covered in the workshop. The question on the pre-intervention survey had high levels of agreement which remained high after the intervention. Question 6 addresses the impact of the Supreme Court cases on the admissions process which was covered in the workshop as well as extensively prior to the workshop during GAP monthly meetings. Prior information was conveyed by University counsel and the workshop coverage of the rulings was led by the Dean of Admissions which have been more digestible and relatable for the GAPs. The mean increased for Question 6 and the range decreased. Questions 7–9, and 13 are questions directly related to the admissions process and areas that the GAPs oversee. Specifically, question eight from the pre- and post-intervention surveys was the only one to have a statistically significant change. Question 8 asked GAPs to rate their level of agreement with the following statement,

“Applicants are treated equally regardless of their background (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, etc.) during the admissions process.” It should be noted that with a sample size of only nine participants, the study lacked statistical power, so the lack of statistical significance in the differences should not be taken as definitive. It is of interest to note the generally high scores for these survey items. The *M* range was 3.22–5.0, with the means of six of the 10 items four or above. This indicates that the GAPs had a high level of agreement with over half of the statements prior to receiving the intervention. GAPs generally perceive The University to have a strong commitment to diversity which is seen in the policies created, actions taken by leadership, and the applicant experience.

Qualitative Data

Each GAP was given the opportunity to interview after participating in the intervention. Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 12 and 13 from the structured interview are used to answer action research question one.

Lack of Awareness of Initiatives. Question one of the interviews asked GAPs about their familiarity with the Strategic Plan released by the President’s office in December 2022 and if they could describe what it states about diversity and inclusivity goals for the institution. GAP responses were overwhelming “no” and they were unaware of the Strategic Plan. Only two of the nine participants were confidently aware of the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan emphasized the importance of diversity and inclusion as the institution moves forward in the coming years. Institutional goals were addressed in the document. Those that were aware summarized the plan differently.

Participant B: Yes. Basically, that it’s a foundation of our institution and a reflection of our students.

Participant D: Just that diversity is important, and that the university strives to recognize it.

The other seven participants were completely unaware of the Strategic Direction. One felt that there were a lot of initiatives that were released regularly and found them hard to keep up with.

Participant F: Am I familiar? I'm going to say no, I should be.

Participant I: Am I familiar? No, probably not.

Question one and two from the pre- and post-intervention surveys asked GAPs to rate their level of agreement with statements about The University's commitment to diversity and inclusivity as found in the mission, values, and policies. The means and standard deviation for those two questions had minimal if any change between the pre- and post-intervention surveys. Even though GAPs could not speak directly to current initiatives that support a commitment to diversity, it did not affect the high level of agreement they had with those statements (see Table 4). Question 3 asked "[The University's] leadership educates their community (staff, faculty, students) on how to be members of a diverse and inclusive institution", and the mean for this question was among the lower mean responses on the survey ($M = 3.89$). Lastly, most of the GAPs struggled to articulate the actual mission or cite policies related to diversity and inclusivity which may lead to a misalignment with their practices.

Interpretation of Strategic Direction. Participants who were familiar with the Strategic Direction were asked to describe it in their own words to gauge their understanding. The two participants who could confidently say they were aware of the Strategic Direction tied it to diversity goals for the institution.

Participant A: For the first time in [The University's] history I saw in writing where someone at that level actually made diversity a priority.

Participant C: The gist of what I've gotten is that we're committed to diversity not only of race, gender and ethnicity, but also to like, for variety of thought as an institution, and we want to continue growing that as [The University] continues to grow, is what I've gotten from the president's message.

Admissions Process Connected to the Mission. GAPs spoke of a strong connection between their work and the institution's mission as it relates to recruitment. They cited the mission as being the foundation for their interactions with prospective applicants and in determining who is an appropriate fit for the institution.

Participant B: We're usually the first person in line to greet students and reflect The University in their values, but also to ensure that the admissions process itself is fair and equitable to every student that comes in from any background and that we're building bridges for them in the admissions process.

Participant I: There's never an applicant that we can't potentially work with.

Participant I's response reflects the different roles each GAP may have in their own academic unit. This participant is a GAP who also makes most of the admissions decisions for their college therefore could speak to in-depth about the admissions practices of their office.

The mission provides a guide to GAPs as they make policies and processes around admissions. It specifically supports them in their efforts to make an equitable and individualized process. Five of the participants spoke directly about striving to improve access and reducing barriers.

Participant D: Look at the applicant individually and you try not to look at race as a factor, right, or ethnicity or gender, or any of that.

Five of the nine participants stated that the mission is the guide or foundation for their work. They do not specifically quote the mission but suggest that the spirit of the mission plays out in the way they interact with students and while creating admissions processes.

Participant C: I think it helps guide us in, in ensuring that we maintain fair admissions processes as well as like, I would say the integrity of our processes and then of our practice and our name as an institution.

Participant E: It is a good starting point and jumping point, you know, to be able to point you in the right direction.

Faculty Alignment With the Mission. Faculty are actively involved in the admissions process. They are often at the forefront of recruiting students, reviewing their application files, making application decisions as well as deciding funding offers. GAs generally have the most interaction with faculty regarding the admissions process and can appropriately gauge their connection and implementation of the mission. Two of the participants addressed faculty aligning with the mission due to their personal values being tied to diversity.

Participant C: I would say with most faculty that [aligning the admissions process with diversity or inclusive goals] is brought up. It is not in every conversation with every faculty I have.

Participant E: Yes, most definitely. I think and I don't know so much if it is. I think a large part of it is probably more so because of our subject matter.

Since faculty hold such a key role in the admissions process, their understanding and support of the mission is important. Misalignment can lead to problems in the process and the

inability to meet diversity and inclusive goals. Three of the participants addressed faculty misalignment being attributed to good intentions, but lack of awareness of their problematic thinking.

Participant A: So I do hear it from a few, a few departments where they are trying to align themselves with those, with those goals, but I also hear from other, from other departments where they specifically are not.

Participant B: Because there are certain processes that they want to introduce that can have equity concerns. So yes, they care about it, but the line is blurred on what they, what they want versus what might be a best practice.

Leadership Consistently Communicating Diversity Goals. Seven of the nine participants discussed strongly believing that leadership communicates diversity goals for the admissions process of their units or of the institution in a consistent manner. They felt more of a connection between leadership alignment to the mission regarding the admissions process than they felt with faculty.

Participant B: Both [The Dean of the College and the Assistant Dean of Admissions] talk about integrating DEI efforts and making sure that the process is reflective of the student population that we are attracting and bringing in and supporting.

Participant G: We've had a lot of discussions about how we can recruit a more diverse population from the undergraduate level directly.

Only two of the participants felt that they only inconsistently heard directly from leadership about diversity goals as they relate to the admissions process. They either heard the message in a trickle-down manner or irregularly.

Participant I: Admissions process, no, they don't typically get involved in the actual process of both, from applicant or inquiry through showing up to the first day of class.

Participant C: I'd say 50/50.

Ongoing DEI Education Organized by Leadership. Successfully tying the admissions process to the diversity and inclusive goals of the institution requires ongoing education and support from leadership. One participant mentioned regularly organized DEI focused trainings for their staff and faculty reviewers that occur within their academic unit which made the workshop feel somewhat repetitive to them. Two other participants spoke about resource sharing and DEI trainings that were organized by their leadership but did not specify frequency or cadence. One noted that:

Participant F: As a whole, our unit is, any resources that we are provided by the university we are sharing widely and repeatedly.

This GAP provided a recent example where unit leadership sharing resources received from central offices to support diversity and inclusive efforts. The GAP continued to say,

Participant F: Having them [Graduate Program Directors] attend trainings, you know, not just the required ones, but we're going to hopefully have a workshop available through the DEI office.

Including program-level diversity training for key stakeholders in the admissions process is recommended by this GAP.

Supporting Growth. Five of the participants talked about the importance of supporting students in various growth capacities being tied to the mission of the institution. The GAPs defined the mission of higher education to include learning in and out of the classroom to support the development of the whole person. The GAPs expanded that definition to include growth that

starts with one person but having an impact felt not only by that individual, but their families and future generations.

Individual growth also supports the collective growth of an institution and the ability to meet its mission. The GAPs talked about The University's focus on having a greater impact in the state and region through higher enrollment. Four participants spoke to growth through strategic recruitment and increasing in market share.

Participant F: And I think that the, the faculty, that we have, the initiatives that we're seeing at the university to be more broad, broader, in our reach are definitely paying dividends and it's, it's exciting to see it grow.

Participant I: Much more so, the mission of the University to me is always to grow in terms of market share, in terms of student population, but also in terms of impact, both with our faculty and also with our students.

Lastly, the GAPs addressed the responsibility of supporting community growth by serving the people of the state as specified by the mission. By focusing on addressing the needs of the state and outside of its immediate region, the institution can positively influence change on a larger scale. Five participants described social change through community engagement throughout the state.

Participant C: We come back to (and by we I say the institution and the President) comes back to being a university that is instrumental and helps folks.

Mission of the Institution. GAPs described the purpose of the institution as educating people. Access, innovation, and achievement go hand in hand for them and can be found when educating individuals as described by four of the participants. While they struggled to give particulars of the mission itself, they cited themes they thought were in the mission.

Participant G: You have highly educated academic people in a classroom teaching this next generation and part of it is not only they're teaching them, but they're instilling new ideas and creativity and innovation.

Participant I: I think it's a place for, like I said in the beginning, place for access, opportunity, but also achievement.

Values found in the mission are instrumental in guiding most of the GAPs. The GAPs were able to express the values of the institution more successfully compared to their ability to describe the mission. However, the GAPs did not necessarily align when defining the purpose and defining the values therefore it is important to review the findings separately. Four of the participants described the values of the institution to include access, diversity, and inclusivity for all to support social change.

Participant B: I think that the written mission and values acknowledge that we have a diverse student body, encourage equity in our processes and demonstrate what systems are already in place to create an inclusive environment for students of all backgrounds.

Participant I: And that to me is the mission of the University, to, to provide everyone some access.

Barriers to Enrollment. When discussing existing barriers to enrollment, GAPs spoke most about funding issues. Budget limitations either in their staffing, operations or related to offering scholarships to students were the barriers discussed most frequently. Budget concerns limit a GAP's ability to positively impact diversity goals of the institution. GAPs cited funding being necessary to provide scholarships which is important when recruiting students of color.

Participant B: I think one of the biggest things, it's hard because we're short-staffed and underfunded. We try our best.

Participant C: But also thinking about where we are going out to recruit and are we offering financial aid that can help make Graduate School because Graduate School is expensive.

Barriers to enrollment can be reduced through inclusive recruitment practices and supporting applicants through the process. Four participants specifically talked about recruiting historically disadvantaged student populations, creating equitable processes, supporting students through the process, and advocating for funding.

Participant E: So I will make every effort that I can to fight through the bureaucracy. If there, you know, if there is an issue to try and assist students regardless of their, you know, background, their belief systems, so that they can pursue an education.

Participant I: But I want to be a team, now we are resource bound, that unturns every stone, and I'd like to recruit in, in areas that we have not historically recruited in.

GAPs Supporting the Mission. There are many actions the GAPs take to support the mission in the admissions process. Two of the GAPs gave examples of having honest and frank conversations when faced with biases or inequities in the process. Four GAPs talked about educating applicants about graduate school, the process, and funding opportunities.

Participant B: So we've been putting extra efforts into educating students who come to us to figure out what their needs are and might not also have the information at play and trying to bridge gaps in their knowledge to make sure that they're fully aware of the funding that [The University] can provide for them and talking too about our DEI efforts within the college.

Participant A: But I'm, I'm not afraid to speak it. I'm not afraid to say what needs to be said.

Supreme Court Cases Impact. The Supreme Court cases involving Harvard University and the University of North Carolina ruled that using race as a criterion in the admissions process is unlawful. Question 6 on the pre and post intervention survey asked participants their level of agreement to the following statement: “[The University’s] commitment to diversity will not be negatively impacted by the recent Supreme Court cases involving race conscious admissions.” On the pre-intervention, this question garnered one of the weakest means (3.22); after the intervention, the mean level of agreement increased somewhat (3.67). Nonetheless, these results indicate a level of concern among the GAPS. Five GAPS commented that the cases had an impact on many operations at The University, some which were potentially negative for students of color.

Participant A: We don’t truly believe in the word conservative, but we need to take a conservative approach to a lot of what we do to make sure that we don’t end up on, you know, the front page of some newspaper.

Participant F: I’ve always tried to get as much information as I can to figure out how it applies to anything at [The University] so that we can share that with faculty. But I don’t have all the necessary tools and resources to do that confidently without misguiding someone.

Though initially thought of in a negative light, there were some positive outcomes of the Supreme Court cases as it relates to reinforcing the importance of diversity according to some GAPS. Five out of nine participants specifically mentioned how the cases invited more dialogue about diversity in the admissions process. A similar sentiment was documented on the pre- and post-intervention surveys as well. Question six on the pre- and post-intervention surveys asked GAPS to rate their level of agreement with the University’s commitment to diversity not being

negatively impacted by the Supreme Court cases. Prior to the intervention the level of agreement was neutral and after the intervention, the GAPS level of agreement went up slightly (see Table 4).

Participant F: But I feel like we've come a long way, so I, I don't know that I, I was disappointed when I saw that decision, but it has sparked a lot of good conversations and I think has provided an opportunity for a lot of institutions to look within and to make things better.

Participant B: If anything, it's shed light on the importance of it, which helps us make, make greater arguments for the events that we need to go to or the processes that we need to look at, but it hasn't changed the way that we've done things.

Five out of nine participants addressed how their processes have not changed at all considering the rulings. They cited things such as their institution's reputation and the selectivity of their programs being a different caliber from those involved in the cases. Their programs focus on access versus being elite.

Participant H: I think we continue to do what we do, and we you know, and it had no impact at all, actually, none.

Participant B: If I can be honest, I don't think it's changed the way that we do things in our specific unit.

Overcoming Supreme Court Challenges. Many of the participants focused their comments on strategic and targeted recruitment, such as attracting diverse applicants through the creation of pathways, going to areas that have a higher diverse population, and connecting faculty of color with applicants of color.

Participant A: So, I think we, our last recruiting cycle, like, I think, I think we just continue to do what, what we were doing. You know whether it's recruiting students from a specific part of a certain state because we know there's socioeconomic background.

Participant I: So instead, it's more recruitment aspects, where we choose to go recruit and growing the number of applicants in those spaces.

Summary

The answer to action research question one is that the GAPs expressed a strong connection between the admissions process and the greater mission of the institution. The recent Supreme Court cases had a mixed impact on the admissions operations of the GAPs; some experienced challenges and concerns and others felt that it did not change their practices. Many spoke about diversity being important in the process as well as inclusivity and access which did not change despite the Supreme Court rulings. Overall, they described a commitment to creating equitable application processes, treating applicants as individuals, and wanting to make graduate school affordable and attainable. The interviews did highlight that there sometimes is a disconnect between GAPs responsibility to manage admissions for their units and faculty creating autonomous admissions practices. Additionally, there is a lack of clarity about faculty processes and behaviors as they relate to the admissions process and whether diversity goals are considered or prioritized.

The survey data showed a range of level of agreement about the mission of the institution and the beliefs and behaviors of leadership. The wide range of agreement levels about leadership behavior in the surveys supports the differences in experiences of the GAPs as described during the interviews. This can be attributed to the decentralized nature of graduate admissions and the

autonomy the units and programs have in the process. The uncertainty about faculty behavior during the admissions process and the decentralized process run by programs leaves room for potential challenges in achieving diversity and inclusivity goals of the institution which can then affect the enrollment of Black students.

Action Research Question #2

To what extent do GAPs perceive admissions requirements to be connected to the greater mission of the institution regarding diversity and inclusiveness, including for Black graduate student enrollment?

Qualitative Data

Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 from the structured interview and questions 10, 11, and 12 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys were used to answer action research question two.

GAPs Involvement. Due to the decentralized nature of graduate admissions at The University, it was important to gauge GAP involvement in the admissions process and their relationships with faculty and the individual programs. The interviews revealed a wide range of involvement, from rarely interacting with the programs to frequently interacting with the programs. Three of the nine participants interviewed could confidently state the process in which requirements were researched and selected by the programs.

Participant D: I meet with them very regularly. So, I know that they're doing a lot of research as far as, like, looking at different articles and [looking] at other institutions that are like-minded, then a lot of online research at different institutions.

Participant H: This is something that we approach faculty with quarterly, yearly, maybe, maybe yearly and what we do do is kind of gather our competitors with other schools in the area and see what they're asking.

Even within the academic units there is a lack of information about individual program operations about the admissions process and requirement setting. Six of the nine participants expressed an unclear understanding of the process or are removed from it entirely.

Participant F: So, the programs have complete autonomy over that.

Participant E: I honestly didn't, don't know what kind of research is used to support the decisions.

Participant B: I can't necessarily speak for them in this regard, I don't get to make a final decision.

Data Informed Decisions. Data is cited as being a factor in deciding admissions requirements and advocating for change. Four out of the nine participants review peer institutions requirements to assess their own and to ensure market alignment.

Participant C: So at least from my side, I will be reaching out to peers and similar admissions positions at similar sized colleges, institutions in a way like almost our competitors.

Reviewing student success data is one-way programs audit their application requirements. Another way is to pilot requirement changes and gather those data to see how it affects graduation rates. Internal data supports application requirements decisions for three of the participants.

Participant I: So, we come from a position of the, the less we ask for the applicant, the better, and that is typically based in data.

Participant I continued to say, "And then we, then we run regression analysis trying to predict or deciding what was the highest indicators of success in all the different courses within all the different programs at the core courses."

It is worth noting that Participant I's team makes the majority of the admissions decisions for their college and is responsible for setting application requirements. They could provide more detailed responses of the processes used because they were responsible for analyzing the data. None of the other GAPs had this level of responsibility within their academic units.

Increase Access. Many of the participants spoke of access as it relates to the application process. They talked about increasing access through the reduction of requirements or the removal of standardized exams. Access is defined differently based on the discipline and the program level.

Participant I: It's more the equity and inclusion aspect, but by making the application process as simple as possible for people, reducing the time from starting the application to submitting and completing the application, are not just competitive advantages for us, but also reduce the burden on candidates to our programs.

Participant G: I would say the biggest requirement changes that we've have had happened within the past 10 years and that has been reducing requirements in order to remove barriers to the application.

Student Success Data Incorporated in Admissions Requirements. Two of the GAPs could confidently say that student success data is reviewed and used for creating or modifying admissions requirements. Using that information has led their teams to making data-driven decisions about the admissions process.

Participant I: Yeah, probably every other year since I've been here, we've, we've run some type of analysis.

Participant A: So, I think before they...I don't think people thought there was, there was truly a need for it. But with that, this new Associate Provost, I'm sorry, Associate Dean and Senior Associate Dean and we're, we're looking at things a lot, a lot, a lot different.

Seven of the participants could not confidently say they use student success data or that it is used by the individual programs. They cited a challenge with the data not being collected or lacking resources to run the analyses.

Participant B: There is a gap between alumni of the program and the knowledge that they have and bringing that back in so that we as admissions can understand the journey of a student who went through a full cycle.

Participant C: I do want to do it more; it just hasn't been able to be done because of resources.

Standardized Exams. The use of standardized exams has been greatly reduced, according to the GAPs. They are generally optional at the master's level and only required for doctoral level programs. Only one GAP directly admitted to still using standardized exams while others alluded to it indirectly.

Participant I: So we look at the percentiles more than the actual scores, even though our admissions, out of the handbook has coded things in there.

Three of the GAPs stated that standardized exams were removed entirely, while two others spoke about them being mostly removed. Reasons, such as bias concerns and the barriers they create, were cited as an explanation for the removals in addition to tying the requirement change back to diversity goals of the institution.

Participant B: We waived the GRE completely for all of our master's and doctoral and certificate programs because we saw it as a barrier to admissions.

Participant C: For standardized tests we have, I'm trying to make sure, I believe we've done away with the GRE for all of our standardized tests, and I think that started in COVID before I joined the team.

Grade Trends. Cumulative grade point averages for the entire undergraduate experience were not stressed as important or relevant to graduate education success. Six of the participants address reviewing transcripts in terms of major courses or grade trends.

Participant F: Transcripts, they are looking for required courses, they are looking for strong academic performance, especially in the content area, and they are looking for um, you know, a strong overall GPA, if it's a little bit lower, they're looking for improvement from beginning to end.

Participant I: We try to look more at the major classes as, as an indicator of potential success as opposed to classes outside of it.

Program Autonomy. In reviewing application requirements, the weight of each requirement can be different depending on the program or the faculty's discretion. Four of the GAPs describe the differences in processes based on the discipline. Faculty can elect to build the process differently for each program and sometimes each applicant. They noted that it depended on the discipline or on the department.

Funding Offers. The trend of weighing application requirements differently carries over into the review process. During the application review process, faculty will also make decisions regarding funding offers. Research interest comes into play during the evaluation of an application for funding. Two of the GAPs highlight the differences related to funding.

Participant A: But it, that changes a little when you look, when you're looking to hire a GA [Graduate Assistant] or GRA [Graduate Research Assistant]. They, they look at, at some things a bit different, especially in the GRAs.

Participant A continues to say, "They do weigh them, but for direct admits, I don't think they weigh them as much as those they want to, for those that they want to hire."

Letters of Recommendation. During the admissions review process, three the GAPs stated that the value of recommendations varies based on the content of the recommendations. They spoke about recommendations needing to stand out to carry any weight.

Participant I: So, I think the recommendations are the least important and the lowest weighted. If you look at the bell curve of recommendations, it's like so many of them are exactly the same.

Recommendations have maximum value during the admissions process when there is a strong relationship between the recommender and applicant that can be clearly identified. Four of the participants tied recommendations importance to facilitating a holistic review process.

Participant E: We always tell students when you're looking for letters of recommendation, you want to find somebody who's really going to sing your praises. So you want to find somebody who's really, knows who you are and to me, that's important.

Participant G: It's more just to get that balanced picture of how the student's performing outside of an academic space.

Statements of Purpose. Like letters of recommendations, seven of the GAPs found that statements of purpose aid in the holistic review process. They described the exercise as a way of giving the applicant a voice in the process.

Participant B: Oh, significantly important. I think there are some departments every year that want to adjust their statements to better reflect and understand a prompt to their students to show more of themselves, their interest, their fit with the program.

Participant E: Your goal statement, as I, you know, I kind of inferred earlier is a really big deal for our faculty members because since we don't interviews, for you know, for the most, it is a great way for the faculty and for us to get to who the students and their interests are and why, why are they are passionate about this field.

Conversely, in some arenas, statements of purpose or goal statements are losing value in the admissions process due to changes in technology. Two of the participants cited the use of artificial intelligence (AI) devaluing their worth during the review process.

Participant I: It used to be more important, but now with ChatGPT, I don't trust them as much as I used to.

Participant A: They're not written by the student. It's you know, a lot of it is AI.

GAPs Review of Metrics. Understanding the metrics used for the evaluation of an application during the admissions process is extremely important. Due to the decentralized nature of most academic units, many programs operate autonomously. As such, three of the GAPs stated being uninformed of the metrics or processes for all or some of their programs.

Participant H: I think each program creates a metric and I don't think it's modified.

Even if decentralized within their academic unit, three GAPs had processes in place to review metrics used by programs or staff during the admissions review process. Some use an audit completed annually at the end of an admissions cycle and others oversee creating them because they make admissions decisions.

Participant B: I think that we get the best understanding of those during the annual updates each year when they're talking about their scorecard and the different rating systems that they have for the students.

Holistic Review. Holistic reviews allow faculty to cater the admissions review process to the individual. Those with stronger professional backgrounds can have a slightly weaker academic record which then balances out during the review.

Participant I: Like I said at the beginning, we're trying to find something for everybody and not trying to just straight to deny people.

Many of the GAPs use the phrases "holistic review" and "individual review" interchangeably to describe a process that allows them to review applicants differently. They may weigh various requirements differently based on the applicant's story if their experiences align with the program's content. Four GAPs express this to be case in their responses.

Participant B: So they're not one-size-fits-all, but they, they're trying to hit a point where it's customized to the students that they're bringing in to help them the most.

Participant E: I think our metrics are created based on what the field is as far as their interest in the field, their passion about the field, their desire to do the work in the field, not just in the classroom.

Equity Concerns. Equity concerns in the creation and use of metrics were described by some of the GAPs. Faculty discretion is used frequently in the process; therefore, bias can be introduced into the process. Four GAPs detailed bias concerns during the admissions process due to the changing metrics used by faculty.

Participant I: Faculty often think to themselves and bring that bias into the situation. And they think about their GPA was in undergrad and what their GPA, but like, the, the goal

of the student is not the same as your goal was, and remind, the goal of this person often is to one, get a job, become a professional, or they already have a job, to get a better job, or to get the job they want.

Participant A addresses concerns about faculty creating metrics without any oversight or input from their admissions team or the DEI office: It is solely up to them, and it is them and what they think are a good fit.

Life Experiences. Lived experiences can be detailed by applicants in their personal essays or resumes. Six GAPs could confidently state that they carried value in the admissions review process when being evaluated.

Participant C: So it [lived experiences] is something that faculty consider in their reviews based on what students are giving us in their application.

Participant F: But I have witnessed faculty making comments about just what you said, a very, an interesting background, how that, you know, their experiences would make them be interested in offering admission to someone who didn't necessarily have the identical academic or career path that many of the other applicants had.

Participant E: Lived experiences are really important because we have a lot of students who, you know, have one lived in war-torn countries, have grown up in conflict areas, and so their experiences and what they interpreted from those experiences play a big factor.

There were three GAPs who were either confident that lived experiences carried no value in the admissions process or they were unsure. Due to the decentralized nature of their academic unit, they were removed from the admissions review process run by the programs.

Many of the participants cited the use of lived experiences because they give the applicant a voice. Four of the GAPs said that the applicant voice gives context to their academic or professional histories; context that otherwise would be unknown to the faculty reviewer but is relevant to their application.

Participant B: Like look at what they're doing, they're doing cool stuff. They have showed their prowess, but I don't get to make the final call.

Participant I: We've had candidates that have come from pretty difficult backgrounds or have had pretty unique circumstances and we have given them opportunities to study here.

Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys

Questions 10–12 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys were used to answer Action Research Question 2. The questions are from the admissions process section of the survey.

Table 5

GAP Survey Responses Descriptive Statistics (Questions 10-12)

Survey Question and Text	Survey	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
10. There are a variety of experiences that can make an applicant successful as a graduate student.	Pre	5.00	0.0	5	5
	Post	4.78	0.441	4	5
11. An applicant's non-academic attributes, such as lived experiences, can improve the academic experience in the classroom.	Pre	5.00	0.0	5	5
	Post	4.78	0.667	3	5
12. Application requirements can create barriers for certain student populations.	Pre	4.89	0.3	4	5
	Post	4.44	1.3	1	5

Note. N = 9, * = p<.05, ** = p<.01

GAPs are Graduate Admissions Professionals who work for the academic units.

The level of agreement with Questions 10–12 decreased between the pre-intervention survey and the post-intervention survey, although the differences were not statistically significant and should be considered to have happened by chance (see Table 5). Participants showed less agreement that applicants can be successful who have had a variety of experiences (Question 10), lived experiences can enhance academic experiences (Question 11), and that application requirements can create barriers for certain student populations (Question 12). The workshop presenters addressed biases in the admissions process and areas of concerns. The GAPs were also invited to share their experiences with application requirements. Both of those activities may have influenced the GAPs and their perceptions of barriers created during the admissions process. Though the differences were not statistically significant, it is an interesting data point to note as a practitioner as additional interventions are considered.

Tying the qualitative data to the quantitative data helps to better understand the results. As described by responses to the interview questions five through 10, the knowledge the GAPs have about the decision-making process is limited in most cases. Since many of the GAPs are not involved in deciding application requirements or reviewing applications, their responses to Questions 10–12 on the surveys were inconsistent which aligns with their individual experiences.

Summary

The answer to action research question two is that GAPs verbally expressed that the admissions requirements are tied to the mission of the institution, and specifically the diversity and inclusivity goals. Few GAPs have conducted research to really explore that connection due to being removed from the process and programs generally choosing requirements autonomously. As far as individual requirements and the assessment of those, GAP responses

varied. The use of standardized exams was universally understood to be a barrier for students but only as it is seen at the master's level and not the doctoral level. GAPS spoke a great deal about holistic reviews helping to improve access but are not sure how requirements are weighed or how those reviews are being executed by faculty who generally make most of the admissions decisions. Many stated access limitations preventing them from being able to take a deeper dive into the data. With the lack of oversight or knowledge on many of the admissions practices at the program level, there are potential barriers to achieving the diversity and inclusive goals of the institution including for Black student enrollment.

Action Research Question #3

How do GAP perceptions of inclusive admissions practices at the University, including for Black graduate student enrollment, change through a DEI focused professional development opportunity?

Qualitative Data

The overall results of the pre- and post-intervention surveys, along with interview Questions 14–16 from the self-reflection portion of the structured interview are used to answer Action Research Question 3.

Priority Setting. Information gathered during the workshop was used by five of the participants after the intervention to help prioritize immediate interventions to support DEI efforts.

Participant B: I think [Participant C] and I keep prioritizing the website, just to have that confirmed that some of the efforts that we were putting in or prioritized, were in the right direction.

Participant C: From the, can't remember if it was called difficult or crucial conversations, but from that piece I've been writing down some talking points that I'd like to bring up to the faculty after we return from the break and kind of reevaluating what to me is the nitty gritty, but really affects the admissions process.

Evaluation of Current Barriers. After the workshop, many GAPs discussed assessing current barriers in their practices and seeking ways to address them. Three participants talked about funding barriers limiting access. Two GAPs spoke about barriers created by faculty in the admissions process.

Participant F: So that [the facilitator from DEI Office] can share her work and her resources with, I think, too the faculty and they matter so much more than sharing it with me, because they're the ones that are actually making decisions, interacting much on a much more personal level with applicants and students.

Participant C: So when it comes to reevaluating what's been put in place, I think that can be a tender subject for a lot of folks. I'm not trying to pull the rug out under this house that they've built so carefully, but I do want to make sure that what's been put in isn't holding us back from recruiting diverse students.

Creation of Actionable Items. Six of the GAPs noted immediate action items that were sparked by attending the workshop. The workshop addressed the changing demographics in student enrollment and the need to evaluate current practices to assess their ability to meet the evolving needs for students. Three GAPs mentioned using information acquired in conversations with staff and faculty to help prioritize diversity goals.

Participant A: So really looking at, really looking at what we do now and how we can do it better by really breaking down what we have and we're talking about paying a student,

making a student come, and we are retaining them here, we, we're going to have to figure out a way to pay them some more money.

Participant G: And sort of how it's, it's we're moving away from sort of this traditional college career that we've sort of been confined to and like this is how we operate. And so actually started some discussions on our team, not only about recruiting, but really going all the way up to leadership to say how can we reframe how we're offering courses and who we're offering them to.

Participant B: I keep prioritizing the website [the academic unit's graduate admissions website] just to have that confirmed was like OK, then we can go forward, we make a place for this year. This GAP described the important role a graduate admissions website can play in effectively communicating to applicants their inclusive admissions process.

Four of the participants spoke of not using the information acquired at the workshop at the time of the interview. Those GAPs were unable to clearly tie the information presented to actionable items in their processes.

Participant D: I haven't used it yet, but I think that, not specifically, but it's made me think a bit.

Participant H: So the information that they gave was great and it's just more information.

Supporting Change to a Complex Social Issue. The workshop was built on the idea supporting change to a complex social issue. Eight of the nine participants expressed that the workshop was a good initial step in that process but more needed to be done. Five GAPs expressed enthusiasm at the idea of more workshops in the future.

Participant G: I think it was a good start, right? It's like the tip of the iceberg.

Participant C: I would say it needs to be done again.

Two GAPs stated a specific section of the workshop provided minimum to no support to impacting change. Their interview responses focused on more hands-on problem solving being more effective if future workshops are going to be conducted.

Participant E: I don't see it having an impact, it's just more presenting, more information and it's some of the same information that's been circulated previously.

Participant I: If you're, you're, if the first time you're exposed to the things in the workshop, it's the first time you're exposed to the things, you probably have, you've been sleeping a lot on the job.

Creating a Space for Conversations. The workshop tried to engage participants in discussions around DEI best practices and successes in their admissions processes. Seven GAPs spoke about learning from others and information sharing being a key benefit of the workshop.

Participant A: And allow people to, to speak openly. And to learn from other people because they [other GAPs] don't learn, they're too busy, you know, trying to show how they're different.

Participant G: Given the new generation and how they view things differently than the older generation, we need to continue to have these conversations in order to institute any type of change or address the issues that people are facing.

Having honest conversations about challenging topics like diversity and inclusion can be intimidating. Three GAPs described having a safe space to have open dialogue without judgement being a key benefit of participating in the DEI workshop. Those types of environments encourage brainstorming and the exchange of ideas.

Participant G: And folks being more comfortable coming to these types of meetings and having these conversations is what's going to create change.

Participant A: So I think just bringing people to a place where, where they consider a safe space.

Question 4 on the pre- and post-intervention survey asked participants to rate their level of agreement with the statement “[The University’s] leadership creates an environment where people feel safe to share and express different opinions.” The mean score pre-intervention (3.56) was lower than the post-intervention mean (3.89).

Summary

GAPs had a range of responses to the workshop including the impact a DEI focused workshop had on their perceptions of inclusive admissions processes at the University. The focus of the workshop was to create a baseline understanding of DEI concepts, engage in conversations around the current state of admissions and the changing demographics, and to help build skills to navigate challenging conversations. The GAPs found the workshop mostly helpful because it created a safe space where they could openly discuss issues and others felt like the information was not new to them. Some had some challenges taking the information presented and turning it into actionable items. Those who were able to make the connection immediately created action items and put the information learned to use in their practices. There was generally an agreement amongst the participants that the workshop did add value, information was learned, and it should be repeated in the future with some tweaks to the programming.

Action Research Question 4

To what extent, if at all, did GAPs feel better equipped to have conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices after receiving their DEI focused professional development opportunity?

Pre- and Post-Intervention Surveys

On the pre- and post-intervention surveys, Questions 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 were used to answer Action Research Question 4. The questions are from the self-reflection section of the survey. Table 6 contains the data for the descriptive statistics for the two surveys.

Table 6

GAP Survey Responses Descriptive Statistics (Questions 14-19)

Survey Question and Text	Survey	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
14. I feel comfortable identifying any practices during the admissions process that do not align with the institutional mission and values.	Pre	4.67	0.5	4	5
	Post	4.0	1.3	1	5
15. I reflect on the mission and values of The University when working with programs or faculty to establish requirements.	Pre	4.2	0.67	3	5
	Post	4.2	0.83	3	5
16. I feel comfortable articulating and executing a holistic admissions process.	Pre	4.67	0.71	3	5
	Post	4.56	0.53	4	5
17. I feel comfortable identifying any bias that I bring to the admissions process.*	Pre	4.78	0.44	4	5
	Post	3.89	1.27	1	5
18. I feel comfortable addressing any biases that are articulated by others during the admissions process.	Pre	4.22	0.97	2	5
	Post	4.0	0.87	2	5
19. I feel comfortable navigating challenging conversations as they relate to the admissions process to ensure an equitable process.	Pre	4.22	1.09	2	5
	Post	4.22	0.97	2	5

Note. N = 9, * = p<.05, ** = p<.01

GAPs are Graduate Admissions Professionals who work for the academic units.

Questions 15 and 19 asked GAPs to rate their level of agreement about how they reflect on the mission and values of the institution when working with programs and faculty as well as

how comfortable they feel navigating challenging conversations when they are working with that same group. The data show no change in mean between the pre- and post-intervention surveys. The other four questions had means that decreased after the workshop which designates that the GAP level of agreement decreased after the intervention. They expressed less comfort identifying practices that do not align with the mission and values, less comfortable articulating and executing a holistic admissions process, and less comfortable identifying and addressing biases in the admissions process. The standard deviation for those questions also increased between the pre- and post-intervention surveys indicating a wider spread of responses compared to the pre-intervention survey.

Only Question 17 is statistically significant using the One-Sided p calculation of 0.052 (Appendix E). One-Sided p calculation was selected because the results of the workshop were being evaluated on how level of agreement increased after the intervention; a one directional relationship. The level of agreement actually decreased after the intervention; therefore, a two-sided p calculation was run which showed a result of 0.104 which was not statistically significant. Question 17 asked about the level of agreement with a statement about comfort identifying bias that the individual brings to the admissions process. Additionally, the One-Sided p result of 0.098 for question 14 is worth mentioning because it asked the participant to rate their level of agreement with identifying any practices in the admissions process that do not align with the institutional mission and values. Though not statistically significant, the One-Sided p result was close enough that it brings value to the practitioner. Action Research Question 4 asks about GAPs feelings about being better equipped to have conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices after receiving their DEI training. The responses to Questions 14 and 17 are both important when evaluating the effectiveness of the workshop.

Feedback Surveys

The feedback survey allowed GAPs to respond to open-ended questions about the content of the workshop and future iterations. As the intervention was intended to be the first of many, the feedback provided will be crucial for future versions. Seven of the nine GAPs offered feedback in the open-ended section of the survey.

DEI Statistics. The Dean of Admissions was one of three presenters during the workshop. His presentation included statistics related to current and future enrollment. He addressed the enrollment cliff and changing demographics in the United States. GAPs commented that the presentation held a lot of value and was one of their favorite parts of the workshop. Participants of the study gave the following feedback:

“The Dean’s presentation on graduate admissions data, the state of admissions and recruitment across the nation, and ideas for recruiting and retaining diverse applicants.”

“The Dean’s overview of where [higher education] is going in the next 10 years and how different the student population will be.”

DEI Trainings. The feedback from the GAPs included requests for future DEI trainings and proposed content. There were six comments requesting additional trainings with the DEI office for either themselves, their faculty, or their units. A participant of the study gave the following feedback:

“Learning the structural set up of DEI. Providing a clear layout of the multiple services available to us to utilize.”

Expanded Participation. GAPs expressed a need for the workshop to be expanded and other stakeholders invited to participate. Specifically, they listed program coordinators, faculty, and senior leadership as those who should be at the table due to their involvement with the

admissions process. Recommendations for expanding participation was suggested eight times throughout the feedback. Participants gave the following feedback:

“Involving more high-level stakeholders in the workshop and having follow-up meetings scheduled for different units to discuss and decide their next steps.”

“Program coordinators and chairs, as we often discuss bias in the admissions process, and a training would open this conversation.”

Areas for Improvement. An area of improvement was the delivery of the information. GAPs feedback included a request for more hands-on experiences in which they walk through different scenarios that they may encounter in their admissions work. The request for more hands-on experiences was made five times. Participants of the study gave the following feedback:

“I would like to see this training conducted in a more creative/interactive manner.”

“However, I think it should be more of an interactive training rather than simply a presentation of information. I believe that people learn from interaction and experience differently than they do simply from listening.”

Summary

The pre- and post-intervention surveys exhibited only one statistically significant change in the GAPs’ thinking after the workshop. There was one significant data point with question 17 and a response of interest with question 14. The open-ended responses to the feedback survey added context to the survey data. The GAPs found the information to be extremely helpful but were hesitant when putting it into action by articulating bias concerns to faculty and staff. The desire to have more hands-on experiences during the workshop was repeated several times throughout the survey responses. Additionally, the desire to have more workshops and expanded

participation was also noted considerably. Though the GAPs did not say they felt more equipped to handle conversations with faculty and staff about inclusive admissions practices, they did display levels of growth that would support those conversations and build confidence with additional DEI hands-on trainings.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Graduate school enrollment has increased over time due to students correlating graduate degrees with financial growth and stability (Webber & Burns, 2020). As the enrollment numbers have increased, Black students continue to be disproportionately under-enrolling in graduate programs compared to undergraduate programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023a). With the most recent Supreme Court rulings in the Harvard University and University of North Carolina cases, concerns are rising about how the decisions will affect Black student enrollment.

The purpose of this study was to understand how Graduate Admissions Professionals (GAPs) participating in a DEI graduate admissions focused workshop about inclusive admissions practices at a large mid-Atlantic university helps to increase the number of Black students who enroll in a graduate program. Questions about barriers in the admissions process and misalignments to the mission were identified and ways to improve were explored. Data sources include a pre- and post-intervention survey, a feedback survey, and structured individual interviews. The University operates a decentralized graduate admissions process. The structure relies on the graduate admissions office for each academic unit coordinating efforts with the central Office of Graduate Admissions as well as their academic programs. Important policies and processes are communicated through the central office to the unit's graduate admissions offices and GAPs are responsible for informing relevant faculty and staff in their college/school and ensuring compliance.

This chapter covers the findings of the study, a discussion of the literature that supports the findings, and where there is room for further exploration. The findings are organized by themes with recommendations for future studies addressed for each action research question. Recommendations for practice are presented.

Summary of Findings

The structured interviews, pre- and post-intervention surveys, and the feedback survey revealed important information about the graduate admissions process at the institution. The surveys supported by the structured interviews were very telling. There is often a disconnect in communication between senior leadership, the academic unit's graduate admissions office and the individual programs. One example was seen through the discussions of the Strategic Direction released by the President's office. Interviews revealed there was a poor dissemination of information, a lack of measurable goals, and no accountability. While that was just one situation, it is an example of what happens with diversity or inclusive goals that are not implemented with intention.

Another concern is the lack of insight some GAPs had into the decisions programs make regarding the admissions process. There was great variation in the selection of application requirements, how requirements are weighed, and the way faculty review applications. These variations can cause equity concerns and negatively impact the diversity and inclusive goals of the institution, if not addressed.

The surveys revealed that GAPs have a strong level of agreement that applicants are treated equally regardless of their background, a variety of experiences can make an applicant a successful student, they can identify practices that do not align with the institutional mission, and

they feel comfortable identifying any bias they bring to the process. All of these are important when trying to address the complex social issue of the study.

The Intervention

The workshop aimed to draw a stronger connection between the diversity goals of the institution and the day-to-day operations of the academic unit's office of graduate admissions. Though considered a good initial step, most GAPs addressed the need of continuous engagement and education to make a longstanding impact.

The workshop was created to help GAPs better align their practices with diversity and inclusivity goals of the institution. The execution of the workshop was timely as it took place shortly after the decisions regarding the Supreme Court cases about the use of race as a criterion in the admissions process were released. The workshop was able to address the graduate admissions process, diversity and inclusivity goals of the institution driven by the mission, as well as navigating the barriers created by the Supreme Court cases. The workshop was hosted for GAPs as they oversee the graduate admissions processes for the programs in each of their academic units. Any alignment or misalignment of the applicant experience can be tied back the GAPs and their ability to influence change. The literature supports DEI focused trainings as they have been shown to positively impact diversity goals of an institution (Ching, 2018; De Meuse et al., 2007; Kilburn et al., 2019; Liera & Desir, 2023). Although the focus of trainings is not on Black applicants, an overall understanding of barriers or inequities in the process can help increase the number of Black students who apply and are admitted to a graduate program.

Admissions Process Tied to Diversity Goals

GAPs perceived the admissions process to be closely connected to the greater mission of the institution as demonstrated by the structured interview responses and level of agreement with

the statements on the pre- and post-intervention surveys. However, with limited staffing and a complex decentralized admissions process, focusing on examining current practices and reducing barriers can often be a challenge. As described by Poon et al. (2023), “we found that the interplay between competing institutional priorities (e.g., institutional financial goals, desires for geographic diversity and binary gender balance, managing litigation risks, etc.) can diminish the effects of racial diversity as one of many priorities” (p. 2). GAPs expressed a desire to support the mission by creating diverse and inclusive practices but described actions that demonstrated that they sometimes lack the knowledge, the data, or the resources to make necessary changes.

Interviews with the GAPs highlighted that there was no universal understanding of diversity, inclusiveness, or equity as it pertains to the admissions process and application requirements. Many of the GAPs had different definitions depending on the discipline or degree type. Question 8 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys demonstrate that the level of agreement with the statement, “Applicants are treated equally regardless of their background (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, etc.) during the admissions process,” increased after the workshop. As a practitioner, this is important to note because the motivation and desire is present with the GAPs but the understanding of how to use data related to admissions requirements to support diversity goals could be lacking. High agreement with question eight supports equity-minded practices which are used to help address barriers created by application requirements. However, as many GAPs noted, they do not decide application requirements and can only help guide the process for the individual programs.

Question 10 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys addresses the experiences applicants reveal in the admissions process through resumes, goal statements, writing samples, or letters of recommendations. Though not statistically significant, it is close enough to invite

exploration in future studies. The statement is “there are a variety of experiences that can make an applicant successful as a graduate student.” There was a slight decrease in mean and increase in the standard deviation, however with only nine GAPs participating in the study, it is difficult to draw any significant conclusions due to the low number of participants. However, as a practitioner, the change of mean can symbolize that the workshop presented information that might have caused reflection and questioning of assumptions by at least one GAP about application requirements and how they are tied to an important diversity piece; lived experiences. As a pilot program, this may be enough of an argument to host more workshops in the future.

As Ching (2018) noted, trainings can provide the knowledge for individuals to make equity focused decisions. In particular, additional workshops or trainings can help GAPs increase their confidence in identifying problematic behaviors with selecting admissions requirements and better address them with their programs using data to drive the conversations.

Uncertainty Around Supreme Court Decisions

The recent rulings in the Supreme Court cases have further complicated the situation by adding additional parameters around defining diversity in the admissions process. Some GAPs noted in their responses to question 13 during the interviews that they are being more “conservative” and are “nervous” to take actions in fear of making missteps and having legal ramifications. While the inclination to support the mission of the organization is there, the guidance they are seeking to navigate the new federal policies is not. GAPs oversee the admissions process for their entire academic unit and support their programs in executing the recruitment and review process for applicants. If there is confusion on their end, it raises the question of how they are assisting the programs to ensure they are properly assessing applicants to align with diversity and inclusion priorities. GAPs discussed wanting to support diversity

goals, but there is a lack of information to confirm that individual programs have that same goal and are treating the process in the same manner. Ultimately, as many of the programs are the ones making the final admissions decisions, they are the ones who create alignment or misalignment with the mission of the institution inclusive of diversity goals. This is true for the recruitment and enrollment of Black students as well in graduate programs.

Loosely Coupled System Challenges

The structured interviews highlighted the siloed nature of the institution related to the admissions process. Many GAPs were unaware of how their programs made decisions related to application requirements, the review process, and funding offers. Best practices that are taking place on campus are often not shared or replicated in other spaces. In a loosely coupled system, leadership must be intentional in creating spaces or processes that support collaboration. The workshop is one example of that behavior. However, as noted by the GAPs in both the structured interviews and the feedback form, others need to be invited to table to make a bigger impact as well as better guidance on the legal aspects of the recent rulings.

Workshops Support DEI Efforts

The workshop that the GAPs participated in addressed DEI from three different angles. The three approaches used supported diversity and inclusion efforts found in the institution's mission.

Collective Impact. The first section of the workshop gave an overall education about diversity and inclusivity; not just as it pertains to higher education or the specific institution. The presenter focused on ensuring all participants understood the basics of DEI before trying to apply it admissions. Guided by the framework of collective impact, the presenter focused on building a shared agenda and shared measurement through his presentation and discussion (Weaver, 2014).

Though the feedback from some of the GAPs was that the section was too general, it was included to help reinforce that everyone had the same foundational information to build from. This section in the workshop removed assumptions about GAP knowledge of diversity and inclusivity and confirmed they all received the same resources.

Appreciative Inquiry. The next presentation was from the Dean of Admissions. The Dean's presentation covered the current and future state of admissions which allowed the focus to be narrowed down to enrollment management through a diversity lens. He used an appreciative inquiry approach to set the tone of the discussion. The presentation highlighted the growth of the institution and the access-driven mission. He then transitioned into discussing the changing demographics the United States will face over the next decade through several different data points. During that conversation he challenged the GAPs to think about how current operations might create barriers for the next generation of students and how the group can proactively address them now. The Dean's presentation initiated the four stages of the appreciative inquiry process, which was discovering strengths, dreaming about what could change, designing a path forward for change, and destiny where the group discussed action plans (Evans et al., 2012). The workshop helped to start the process and give the group a direction.

Organizational Learning. The third and last presenter gave strategies on navigating challenging conversations. The last part was especially important because confronting biases or equity concerns can be intimidating for some people. The presenter aimed to give the GAPs the tools to feel confident in those conversations. Using organizational learning, the presenter supported the individual growth of each GAP and ultimately, the growth of the institution (Bess & Dee, 2007).

Experiencing Change

After participating in the workshop there were some changes experienced by the GAPs. One statistically significant change was noted in the pre- and post-intervention surveys. GAPs had a high level of agreement with Question 17 which was “identifying any bias that I bring to the admissions process.” The information presented in the workshop affected GAPs’ understanding of biases in the processes and their ability to recognize them. Additionally, though not statistically significant, one other result was close enough that it is worth mentioning: the GAP response to Question 14 from the pre- and post-intervention surveys. The participants responded with a strong level of agreement with the statement “I feel comfortable identifying any practices during the admissions process that do not align with the institutional mission and values.” Though both questions saw a decrease in means between the pre- and post-intervention surveys, as a practitioner this can be viewed positively. The workshop disrupted current thinking and provide information that caused participants to question assumptions. Through the creation of new knowledge, GAPs were able to explore different thinking which leads to different responses (Weick, 1991).

Over half of the GAPs reported using the information from the workshop immediately. Specifically, two of them used it to address barriers created by faculty in the admissions process and six created actionable items based on the information they acquired. The majority felt that the information supported the start of a movement related to collective impact. DEI culture change is not a simple process and takes approaching the challenges from many different angles. The workshop was the first step in that process for the GAPs.

Implications for Policy and Practice

This section includes recommendations for policy and practice that align with the findings of this study and are supported by the literature. The findings, related recommendations, and relevant research can be found on Table 7.

Table 7

Recommendations Related to the Findings of the Action Research

Findings	Related Recommendations	Relevant Literature
Diversity goals without implementation guidance can lead to misalignment	Detailed diversity goals with accountability metrics	Chun & Evans (2018); Smith & Parker (2005); Williams (2014)
Lack of data to support current application requirements	Partnering up with DEI office to make data driven decisions regarding application requirements	Campbell et al. (2021); Kilburn et al. (2019)
Diversity training needed for all involved in the admissions process	Expand workshop participation to all who are involved in the admissions process	Adserias et al. (2017); Griffin & Muñiz (2011); Liera & Desir (2023)
Hands-on experiences needed to build confidence in addressing diversity concerns	Modify workshop to include interactive experiences	Boske & Elue (2017); Ching (2018); Keller & Aiken (2015)

Note. DEI stands for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Policy/Practice Recommendation 1: Detailed Diversity Goals With Accountability Metrics

Initiatives or goals without action items and accountability metrics are hard to achieve. Without direction, individuals or units are left to define success differently or to choose to not participate at all. The Strategic Direction released by the President in 2022 was unknown by almost all of the GAPs. Since no quantifiable success metrics were included with the plan, the GAPs did not feel accountable for implementing any of the goals. The same is true for a general mission statement or diversity as a value at the institution. The institution in this study is not

unique in this regard, Smith and Parker (2005) noted that many schools are unable to quantify how, and if, diversity plans are successfully implemented. They highlighted that schools need to create measures to track and evaluate the progress. Like Smith and Parker, Chun and Evans (2018) also recommended leveraging organizational learning to systematically address diversity goals. In their process “accountability mechanisms” are put into place to support the desired outcomes (p. 108).

Policy/Practice Recommendation 2: Partnering Up with DEI Office to Make Data Driven Decisions About Application Requirements

There are currently many unknowns about the admissions process and the practices of the programs at The University. Data can help to provide insight into those situations. A few of the GAPs cited limited staffing and limited resources which makes leaning into data a strategic move. Once GAPs have the data, they can then work with programs to add context to the numbers. With that information, GAPs can then create partnerships with the DEI office to help identify any process or practice that may create barriers for applicants. Scholars have found positive outcomes working with DEI offices to achieve diversity goals for their schools and programs (Campbell et al., 2021; Kilburn et al., 2019). Incorporating a central office, like the DEI office, can help to ensure alignment with the mission of the institution as well as work towards reaching diverse and inclusive goals.

Policy/Practice Recommendation 3: Expand Workshop Participation to Those Involved in the Admissions Process

Adserias et al. (2017) reported that the decentralized nature of institutions can lead to challenges with implementing diversity goals. The GAPs frequently stated not being involved in decision making, being unsure of processes, and generally not being at the table when important

admissions decisions are being made; therefore, expanding participation to include faculty and other staff is important.

Overcoming Silos. Griffin and Muñiz (2011) wrote about the need for a campus-wide commitment to support diversity and encourage change. Adding additional participants to the workshop will aid in achieving that goal. Some of the GAPs noted that programs operate autonomously from their offices therefore they are unsure of their admissions processes and have equity concerns. Each GAP expressed different levels of authority or power to institute changes which can create further complications when trying to improve processes. Even more concerning, some GAPs felt they did not have a seat at the table therefore their ability to influence change was limited. Thus, expanding participation of the workshop to include all those involved in the admissions process would benefit the institution. Specifically, including faculty and program-level staff who review and make admissions decisions would help align their practices to the mission and goals of the institution. Liera and Desir (2023) noted that the trainings needed to not only focus on individual change but organizational system disruptions to support real change.

Policy/Practice Recommendation 4: Modify Workshop to Include Interactive Experiences

The presentation included a lot of data and points for discussion. Feedback from the participants included a desire to have more case studies and interactive experiences. One GAP wrote on the feedback form, “I believe that people learn from interaction and experience differently than they do simply from listening.” Specifically, they spoke of the desire to build confidence in addressing biases and understanding the data to support their statements. The responses to the surveys support their understanding of the information but had lower levels of agreement with statements that asked them to address their comfort addressing biases.

Ching (2018) had participants apply information and skills learned in the first part of the workshop to reviewing and changing their class syllabi. The interactive part of the workshop sparked additional conversations and questions that otherwise would've been missed without the activity. Boske and Elue (2017) wrote about leveraging curriculum modules that utilize both learning activities and courageous conversations in addressing equity concerns in the admissions process. Modules created by the U.S. Department of Education in collaboration with the University Council for Educational Administration provide interactive experiences to help prepare faculty and administrators for a diverse student population. According to Keller and Aiken (2015), "effective skill-building programs are replete with interactive simulations and role plays to ensure time spent in the training room is most effective" (p. 51). The GAPS' request to add more interactive discussions during the workshop aligns with best practices found in the literature.

Recommendations for Future Studies

The conceptual framework for the study incorporated double-loop learning which supports organizational change. The subject being explored is a complex social issue which cannot be resolved easily or with one intervention. Incorporating diverse and inclusive practices requires additional exploration, growing, and evaluating to achieve desired results. As such, additional areas of research are suggested based on initial findings.

Supreme Court Rulings

Additional studies should focus on the long-term ramifications of the Supreme Court rulings at both selective and non-selective institutions. Much of the research done on the rulings focuses on elite institutions and possible outcomes. Very little, if any research, focuses on the graduate school application process and the diversity of those programs. However, this study

highlights some of the challenges at a large, decentralized institution and the lack of information about individual program behaviors at the graduate level. More research is needed to understand the graduate student application experience, especially as it relates to Black students. Qualitative research could be conducted that involved interviewing faculty who make admissions decisions and how they operationalize the federal changes in their review processes. Since faculty are generally making the decisions, it is important to better understand how they are processing the changes and what type of interventions are needed to make sure their actions do not inadvertently put Black applicants at a disadvantage during the admissions process.

Operationalizing an Institutional Mission

GAPs felt a strong tie to the institution's values of diversity and inclusivity, yet the participants in the study could not necessarily connect that to the institution's mission or initiatives. Creating an institutional mission statement carries no value if it is not acted upon. Based on the information gathered from this study, future research needs to explore how institutional missions are operationalized in day-to-day operations to ensure alignment. Future studies could include a mixed methods approach of interviewing key stake holders at the institution to define the mission, survey faculty and staff to gauge their understanding of the mission, and where there are misalignments, develop appropriate interventions. Success metrics would also need to be defined and tracked for the duration of study.

Expanding Workshop Participation

Expanding the workshop to include other stakeholders is needed to support change in a decentralized, loosely coupled system. Future studies would benefit from involving other people who participate in the graduate admissions process and tracking their thought or behavior changes over a longer duration of time. Due to the nature of the work, qualitative data would be

collected through a series of interviews and focus groups to better understand those changes. Quantitative data could also be used to measure changes in applicant demographics over a long period of time. As noted by Chun and Evans (2018), culture changes on a college campus are not a quick process.

Hands-On Experiences

GAPs wanted more case studies during the workshop to help them feel better equipped to handle scenarios they face in their work. Future studies should highlight different types of hands-on experiences to see which best prepare individuals to address biases or other challenging conversations. This is especially useful as it relates to dynamics in which conversations are happening between colleagues and there is no supervisory influence. Additionally, not only what types of experiences but how many experiences are needed to build confidence. A workshop focused on courageous conversations is one example of a hands-on experience that could be measured through qualitative and quantitative data such as interviews and surveys.

Recommendations for Future Workshops

Leveraging the conceptual framework, the workshop was the first of many cycles in the double-loop system. There were lessons learned in the first iteration that can support the development of the next workshop by incorporating the data collected during the initial round. Capitalizing on the various components of collective impact, appreciative inquiry, and organizational learning, the next cycle can hopefully continue to move the dial towards better alignment with the mission regarding diversity and inclusivity.

Collective Impact

The initial findings of the first workshop display that there needs to be a better understanding of the shared agenda. The GAPs were quick to declare that their practices are tied

to the mission but could not comfortably and accurately explain the mission or values. The disconnect displayed how siloed the various academic units are from central leadership, sometimes institutional values, and often from each other. In a loosely coupled system, collaboration must be intentional, and spaces created to foster it by leadership. “Collective impact requires all participants to have a shared vision for change, one that includes a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions” (Kania & Kramer, 2011, p. 39). The next workshop will need to focus more on the building of the same shared agenda and development of activities that support it.

Appreciative Inquiry

The data from the initial workshop did highlight some of the positive movement the GAPs are having in the diversity and inclusivity space as it relates to the admissions process. Incorporating additional data points such as retention rates and time to graduation can further enhance admissions data when reviewing application requirements. Several of the GAPs did not use student success data to review application requirements therefore adding this exercise can help with the disconnect. A couple of the GAPs spoke specifically about the work they are doing in this space during the individual interviews that would benefit the other GAPs if shared in a group setting such as a workshop. Appreciate inquiry helps empower the individual to take ownership in helping to resolve the issue by using successes found around campus; it is not a top-down approach but relies on the community working together (Fifolt & Stowe, 2011).

Organizational Learning

Overall, the GAPs had a high level of agreement with most of the questions from the pre- and post-intervention surveys. Some of the responses saw a minor decrease of mean after the intervention which was not alarming because learning is not always experienced in an upward

trajectory. Organizational learning anticipates the need for double-loop learning because challenges are expected and interventions may need to be adjusted (Bess & Dee, 2007). The addition of hands-on experiences will help build GAPs confidence as it relates to navigating challenging conversations around diversity and inclusivity. Continuing to provide workshops and expanding participation not only benefits the individual GAP, but also benefits the group overall as they navigate the complexities of this social issue.

Conclusion

The graduate admissions process is built within a decentralized and complex system. The ability to make substantial change within that system relies on an organized, structured approach. Leveraging the principles found in collective impact, using appreciative inquiry, and leaning on organizational learning, a complex social issue can be addressed. Building an equitable graduate admissions process whose foundation is built on an institutions mission and values can be complicated. Evaluating practices to improve the enrollment of a marginalized community is complex. A DEI workshop for GAPs was an initial first step in disrupting the status quo and re-evaluating practices through a diversity and inclusive lens. Utilizing the Stringer Model of Action Research, The University is now able to use the information gained from the workshop, think about next steps, and take action. Organizational learning relies on double-loop learning as the cycle of change is continuous and interventions need to be evaluated, edited, and implemented as many times as necessary to reach the institutional goals. With the changing demographic landscape in the United States as well as higher education, focusing on supporting diversity is more important than ever. Institutions, like the one in the study, have a responsibility to appropriately prepare their graduates for what lies ahead. Gurin et al. (2004) discussed the following in their research:

In an environment that is different from their own backgrounds and thus unfamiliar, students are forced to consider new ideas and confront new feelings. It is through diversity on campus that they face change and challenge, the necessary conditions for intellectual growth and for preparation for citizenship in the diverse democracy that America is increasingly becoming. (p. 103)

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APPENDIX A

Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Survey for GAPs

Please read each statement and evaluate your level of agreement. Select one response for each statement.

Institutional Culture

Please use the following response scale: 1 – strongly disagree, 2, - somewhat disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – somewhat agree, 5 – strongly agree

1. The University's mission and values include a commitment to diversity and inclusion.
2. The University's policies operationalize their commitment to diversity and inclusion.
3. The University's leadership educates their community (staff, faculty, students) on how to be members of a diverse and inclusive institution.
4. The University's leadership creates an environment where people feel safe to share and express different opinions.
5. The University's leadership is successful at creating an inclusive and diverse institution.
6. The University's commitment to diversity will not be negatively impacted by the recent Supreme Court cases involved race conscious admissions.

Admissions Process

Please use the following response scale: 1 – strongly disagree, 2, - somewhat disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – somewhat agree, 5 – strongly agree

7. The admissions process should represent The University's commitment to diversity and inclusion.

8. Applicants are treated equally regardless of their background (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, etc.) during the admissions process.
9. Applicants are all valued regardless of their background (race, ethnicity, socioeconomic, etc.).
10. There are a variety of experiences that can make an applicant successful as a graduate student.
11. An applicant's non-academic attributes, such as lived experiences, can improve the academic experience in the classroom.
12. Application requirements can create barriers for certain student populations.

Self-Reflection

Please use the following response scale: 1 – strongly disagree, 2, - somewhat disagree, 3 – neither agree nor disagree, 4 – somewhat agree, 5 – strongly agree

13. My responsibility as an employee at The University is to ensure that my actions at work represent the institutional mission and values.
14. I feel comfortable identifying any practices during the admissions process that do not align with the institutional mission and values.
15. I reflect on the mission and values of The University when working with programs or faculty to establish application requirements.
16. I feel comfortable articulating and executing a holistic admissions process.
17. I feel comfortable identifying any bias that I bring to the admissions process.

18. I feel comfortable addressing any biases that are articulated by others during the admissions process.
19. I feel comfortable navigating challenging conversations as they relate to the admissions process to ensure an equitable process.

APPENDIX B

POST INTERVENTION FEEDBACK SURVEY

Thank you for participating in the DEI Graduate Admissions Workshop hosted by the Office of Admissions, the Office of Graduate Admissions, and the Office for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. We would like to gather your feedback on the workshop and your experience. Can you please answer a few short questions?

1. What part of the workshop did you find most helpful?
2. What part of the workshop do you think needs improvement?
3. Are there areas that you would like more information about or to see addressed more clearly?
4. Would you like more DEI training opportunities for the GAPs and/or your team? If so, please list specific interests.
5. Do you think this training would be helpful for others in your academic unit (faculty, staff, leadership)? If so, who do you think would benefit?
6. Would you like to provide any other feedback?

APPENDIX C

Participant Informed Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study regarding your experiences with the graduate admissions process as it relates to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The purpose of this study is to examine how University driven diversity goals are carried through in a decentralized graduate admissions application process and how program-level decisions impact Black graduate student enrollment.

As a participant, I understand that my participation in the study is purposeful and voluntary. All participants will have the opportunity to voluntarily participant in the survey. Additionally, they will have the opportunity to participate in one (1) interview after the workshop.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand that the data will be collected using an audio recording device and then transcribed for analysis. Information from the audio recording and transcription will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My true identity will not be associated with the research findings. These recordings will be destroyed within a year of the conclusion of the study.

I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William and Mary generally or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Crystal Hall Buckley, the researcher at 202-577-8276 and cmhall@wm.edu, Dr. Megan Tschannen-Moran, committee chair for the study, at 757-221-2187 or mxtsch@wm.edu, or Dr. Tom Ward, chair of EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS

COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON NOVEMBER 10, 2023, AND WILL EXPIRE NOVEMBER 10, 2024.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

The interview script used for this study was created by the researcher. This script was used for all nine interviews since each program has 1-2 GAP representatives. As the researcher, I shifted to being a facilitator for the interviews. I led the conversations therefore I recorded the sessions in order to be fully engaged. After the discussion I reviewed the data to find key ideas and themes through a coding process.

Introductions:

1. First name?
2. How long you have been at The University?
3. What is your title?
4. What academic unit do you work for?

Introduction of the facilitator: Disclose that I work in admissions at the institution but for this activity, I will not be serving that capacity. It is also important to note that for the study, I am an independent researcher looking at graduate admissions and the review process led by faculty. Inform the individuals of my desire to have an honest conversation where the things said will fall under the normal research guidelines dictated by IRB and not be disclosed in any other setting. Responses will remain confidential.

Questions about institutional culture

1. Are you familiar with the “strategic direction” released by the President in December 2022?
 - a. If yes, what do you remember what it says about diversity and inclusiveness as it relates to institutional goals?
 - b. If no, then inform them that it is a blueprint for The University to “create university infrastructure and human capacity to lead in the unfolding world.” Found on the President’s page of The University website.
2. How do you perceive the institutional mission, values, and strategic direction to be connected to the work you do in admissions?
3. In your work with faculty, do you hear them discuss aligning the admissions process with diversity or inclusive goals of the institution?
4. In your interactions with leadership within your academic unit, do you hear them discuss aligning the admissions process with diversity or inclusive goals of the institution?

Questions about the admissions process:

5. How do your programs decide on application requirements? What type of research do you use to support your decisions?
6. Do you regularly review or compare them to student success data from graduates of your program?
7. How do you or your programs review transcripts or standardized examinations?
8. How important are non-academic requirements such as letters of recommendations, statements of purpose, or writing samples?

- a. How are they weighed against other requirements?
9. How do you create the metrics in which you evaluate students based on?
 - a. Do you use those same measurements for all applicants or are they modified based on the applicant?
10. Do you consider lived experiences as described in a resume or personal essay in your evaluation of an applicant?
 - a. How are those incorporated into your decision?

Questions about self-reflection:

11. How do you define the institution's mission and values?
12. With that definition, how do you ensure your work aligns with them?
13. How have the recent Supreme Court cases involving Harvard University and the University of North Carolina impacted how you approach admissions and the recruitment and enrollment of a diverse student body?
14. How have you used the knowledge gained from the workshop to evaluate your admissions process and engage in conversations about your admissions practices?
15. After the workshop, have you encountered any situations in your admissions process that have required you to use the skills gained from the workshop?

The workshop was built with the idea of collective impact in mind. Collective impact aims to make large-scale changes to complex social issues. How do you see this workshop supporting or not supporting this idea?

APPENDIX E

Paired Samples t-test: GAP Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey Responses

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	<i>95% Confidence Interval of the Difference</i>		<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	α	
				<i>Lower</i>	<i>Upper</i>			<i>One-Sided P</i>	<i>Two-Sided P</i>
Q1 Pair	0.00000	0.70711	0.23570	-0.54353	0.54353	0.000	8	0.500	1.000
Q2 Pair	0.111	0.782	0.261	-0.712	0.490	-0.426	8	0.341	0.681
Q3 Pair	0.222	0.972	0.324	-0.969	0.525	-0.686	8	0.256	0.512
Q4 Pair	0.333	1.118	0.373	-1.193	0.526	-0.894	8	0.199	0.397
Q5 Pair	0.000	0.707	0.236	-0.544	0.544	0.000	8	0.500	1.000
Q6 Pair	0.444	1.590	0.530	-1.667	0.778	-0.839	8	0.213	0.426
Q7 Pair	-0.111	0.333	0.111	-0.145	0.367	1.000	8	0.173	0.347
Q8 Pair	0.444	0.527	0.176	-0.850	-0.039	-2.530	8	0.018	0.035
Q9 Pair	0.333	1.323	0.441	-1.350	0.684	-0.756	8	0.236	0.471
Q10 Pair	-0.222	0.441	0.147	-0.117	0.561	1.512	8	0.085	0.169
Q11 Pair	-0.222	0.667	0.222	-0.290	0.735	1.000	8	0.173	0.347
Q12 Pair	-0.444	1.424	0.475	-0.650	1.539	0.936	8	0.188	0.377
Q13 Pair	0.000	0.707	0.236	-0.544	0.544	0.000	8	0.500	1.000
Q14 Pair	-0.667	1.414	0.471	-0.420	1.754	1.414	8	0.098	0.195
Q15 Pair	0.000	1.118	0.373	-0.859	0.859	0.000	8	0.500	1.000
Q16 Pair	-0.111	0.928	0.309	-0.602	0.824	0.359	8	0.364	0.729
Q17 Pair	-0.889	1.453	0.484	-0.228	2.006	1.835	8	0.052	0.104
Q18 Pair	-0.222	1.302	0.434	-0.778	1.223	0.512	8	0.311	0.622
Q19 Pair	0.000	1.414	0.471	-1.087	1.087	0.000	8	0.500	1.000

Note. n = 9 (reported as valid)

GAPs are Graduate Admissions Professionals who work for the academic units.

APPENDIX F

Pre- and Post-Intervention GAP Survey Responses Descriptive Statistics

		Range Statistic	Minimum Statistic	Maximum Statistic	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	Kurtosis	
								Statistic	<i>SE</i>
Q1	PRE	1	4	5	4.67	0.500	0.167	-1.714	1.400
	POST	1	4	5	4.6667	0.50000	0.16667	-1.714	1.400
Q2	PRE	2	3	5	4.22	0.667	0.222	-0.040	1.400
	POST	1	4	5	4.33	0.500	0.167	-1.714	1.400
Q3	PRE	2	3	5	3.89	0.601	0.200	1.126	1.400
	POST	2	3	5	4.11	0.601	0.200	1.126	1.400
Q4	PRE	2	3	5	3.56	0.726	0.242	0.185	1.400
	POST	2	3	5	3.89	0.782	0.261	-1.041	1.400
Q5	PRE	2	3	5	3.89	0.601	0.200	1.126	1.400
	POST	2	3	5	3.89	0.601	0.200	1.126	1.400
Q6	PRE	4	1	5	3.22	1.302	0.434	-0.189	1.400
	POST	3	2	5	3.67	1.118	0.373	-1.486	1.400
Q7	PRE	0	5	5	5.00	0.000	0.000		
	POST	1	4	5	4.89	0.333	0.111	9.000	1.400
Q8	PRE	3	2	5	4.00	1.000	0.333	0.786	1.400
	POST	2	3	5	4.44	0.726	0.242	0.185	1.400
Q9	PRE	3	2	5	4.11	1.054	0.351	0.611	1.400
	POST	2	3	5	4.44	0.882	0.294	-0.446	1.400
Q10	PRE	0	5	5	5.00	0.000	0.000		
	POST	1	4	5	4.78	0.441	0.147	0.735	1.400
Q11	PRE	0	5	5	5.00	0.000	0.000		
	POST	2	3	5	4.78	0.667	0.222	9.000	1.400
Q12	PRE	1	4	5	4.89	0.333	0.111	9.000	1.400
	POST	4	1	5	4.44	1.333	0.444	7.418	1.400
Q13	PRE	1	4	5	4.78	0.441	0.147	0.735	1.400
	POST	1	4	5	4.78	0.441	0.147	0.735	1.400
Q14	PRE	1	4	5	4.67	0.500	0.167	-1.714	1.400
	POST	4	1	5	4.00	1.323	0.441	2.950	1.400
Q15	PRE	2	3	5	4.22	0.667	0.222	-0.040	1.400
	POST	2	3	5	4.22	0.833	0.278	-1.275	1.400
Q16	PRE	2	3	5	4.67	0.707	0.236	4.000	1.400
	POST	1	4	5	4.56	0.527	0.176	-2.571	1.400

Q17	PRE	1	4	5	4.78	0.441	0.147	0.735	1.400
	POST	4	1	5	3.89	1.269	0.423	3.152	1.400
Q18	PRE	3	2	5	4.22	0.972	0.324	3.194	1.400
	POST	3	2	5	4.00	0.866	0.289	4.000	1.400
Q19	PRE	3	2	5	4.22	1.093	0.364	0.770	1.400
	POST	3	2	5	4.22	0.972	0.324	3.194	1.400

Note. n = 9 (reported as valid)

GAPs are Graduate Admissions Professionals who work for the academic units.

HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE

GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY, FAIRFAX, VA <i>Director</i> , OFFICE OF GRADUATE ADMISSIONS <i>Interim Director of Operations</i> , OFFICE OF ADMISSIONS <i>Associate Director</i> , OFFICE OF GRADUATE ADMISSIONS	March 2023 - CURRENT June 2020- January 2021 August 2017- March 2023
THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM & MARY, WILLIAMSBURG, VA <i>Graduate Assistant</i> , UNIVERSITY DEVELOPMENT	August 2009- May 2011
OFFICE OF GOVERNOR ROBERT MCDONNELL, RICHMOND, VA <i>Intern</i> , SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, GERARD ROBINSON	January 2011- May 2011
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, DC <i>Director of Admissions</i> , SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES (SCS) <i>Admissions Coordinator</i> , SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES (SCS) <i>Information Officer</i> , MASTER OF SCIENCE IN FOREIGN SERVICE	June 2008- August 2009 October 2006- June 2008 September 2004- October 2006

OTHER RELEVANT EXPERIENCE

GAIA COMMUNICATIONS, LLC, ALEXANDRIA, VA <i>Assistant to CEO</i> , KWIKPOINT	September 2016- March 2018
LARA OVERY FOR HOUSE OF DELEGATES, WILLIAMSBURG, VA <i>Deputy Campaign Manager</i>	February 2015- November 2015

EDUCATION

THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM & MARY, WILLIAMSBURG, VA <i>Executive Ed.D. in Educational Policy, Planning and Leadership</i> <i>Master of Education in Higher Education Administration</i>	August 2024 May 2011
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY, RALEIGH, NC <i>Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, Minor in Spanish</i> Certificate in Business Management	August 2004

SKILLS/MEMBERSHIPS

- Admissions Software: Salesforce/TargetX, Hobsons Radius, PeopleSoft, Banner
- Awards: George Mason University Employee of the Month August 2019
- Membership: Kappa Delta Pi, International Honor Society in Education