

Using Non-Traditional Admission Factors to Gauge Student Potential

As demand for admission to the university grows, DePaul is faced with this challenge: how do we manage the resulting increase in selectivity while at the same time remain committed to our historical mission to provide college opportunities for high-ability students who are from low-income families, who are the first in their families to pursue postsecondary education, and who are from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups. These students often face systemic, structural and societal challenges that are reflected in the academic measures traditionally used in college admission, namely standardized test scores.

DePaul's Approach

In order to address this issue, EM&M began exploring additional indicators of student potential and decided to introduce noncognitive variables into DePaul's admission process in order to gauge noncognitive indicators of success that may be appropriate to our mission and our students. This initiative is known at DePaul as the DIAMOND program: **D**eveloping **I**nsights for **A**dmission through the **M**ining of **N**on-traditional **D**ata.

There have been decades of research on specific non-traditional, or so-called "noncognitive," factors related to student success in college, factors such as high self-confidence, long-term goal directedness, supportive home environments and leadership experiences. Much of that research has used the factors developed by Dr. William Sedlacek, a psychology professor and researcher at the University of Maryland and author of *Beyond the Big Test, Noncognitive Assessment in Higher Education* (2004). Nearly three decades of research support the utility of these factors in predicting student success in college, and particularly the success of students of color. These criteria, for example, are used by The Gates Foundation in selecting recipients of the prestigious Gates Millennium Scholarships.

DePaul's Implementation

DePaul's strategy was to expand the admission review by incorporating revised admission essays to enhance the non-cognitive profile of its freshman applicants. The new essay questions first appeared on the admission application for the fall 2009 entering freshman class and were used to complement the admission review of freshman applicants for whom further review was required and additional academic credentials were solicited. More recently, the essay questions have been used to supplement applications for students applying under the test-optional pilot program.

Bringing this innovation to scale required the rapid development of systems to efficiently and effectively manage the collection, review and rating of the DIAMOND essays. Members of the DIAMOND implementation committee collaborated with Information Systems staff to build a totally online tool for the collection and review process. This new online tool was designed and built in spring/summer 2008 and was operational by fall 2008 for students to submit their essays online as part of their online application for admission to the fall 2009 class.

In addition to the technological development required to bring the DIAMOND innovation to scale, a significant component of implementation was enlisting the help of volunteer essay readers from across the DePaul community. More than 75 volunteer readers have assisted in the program; DIAMOND evaluations have been obtained for more than 20,000 applicants.

Initial Research Outcomes

DePaul's enrollment management approach is a research-driven enterprise and has a national reputation for effectively using research and data analysis in strategy development and evaluation; therefore, the DIAMOND program is naturally the focus of considerable quantitative evaluation. Based on two years of collecting and analyzing DIAMOND essays, our institutional researchers found that the DIAMOND essays and their ratings do enhance the admission process in ways that avoid some of the persistent difficulties of other selection criteria; some of the initial findings are noted here:

- DIAMOND scores are not related to family income, in contrast with standardized test scores which highly correlate with family income.

- DIAMOND scores are race/ethnicity neutral, again in contrast to what some research reveals about standardized test scores.
- DIAMOND scores are not significantly related to ACT/SAT scores.

These preliminary findings provide confidence that the DIAMOND essays and the rating process can effectively bring additional information into the admission review that is not statistically related to applicants' socioeconomic and racial/ethnic background. These findings were the first prerequisite for moving forward with the DIAMOND program; if the ratings were highly correlated with income, race and standardized test scores, they would be of no value in responding to the enrollment challenges DePaul faced.

The second phase of the DIAMOND research focused on the relationship of the individual DIAMOND ratings and students' success at DePaul.

- Preliminary results show that DIAMOND essays are predictive of first-year success at DePaul—both in GPA and in students' academic progress and retention.
- Preliminary results show that DIAMOND essays are especially predictive of first-year success for students of color and low-income students.
- For students who perform well in high school, but receive low ACT scores, DIAMOND essays appear helpful in predicting first-year success. These might be students who would choose a test-optional route to admission at DePaul, and the DIAMOND essays appear to contribute significantly to assessing likelihood of success in the freshman year.

The analytic evaluation of the first years of the DIAMOND program show that these essays are helpful in assessing the potential of students who are underrepresented in four-year colleges and reveal additional information about applicants that is different from what standardized test scores provide. Some specific benefits of the essays are that they: relate to student success, broadly defined; look at the whole person; allow applicants to make their own case; ask straightforward and specific questions based on student experience; establish a process for more systematic review and assessment of admission essays; and provide additional information on student interests and goals for initial advising and educational planning.

The lessons learned from these initial years provided a foundation for confidently inserting DIAMOND essays into the review process for those students choosing not to submit a standardized test score starting with the fall 2012 application process.