

# Research Notes

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## Graduate Admissions After Affirmative Action

Results From the  
ETS/NAGAP 2024 Admissions Survey

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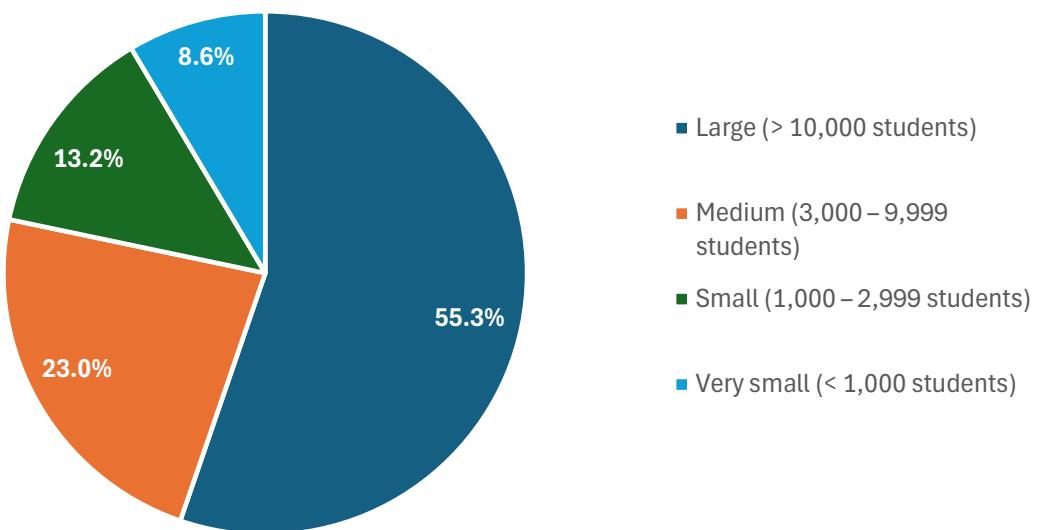
**On the tail of changes to testing policies** and other graduate admissions practices through the COVID-19 era, 2023 saw a further major change in the admissions landscape through the U.S. Supreme Court's striking down of race-based affirmative action in admissions processes through the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) cases.

The ETS Research Institute and NAGAP, the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, partnered on research to understand how this ruling is affecting interest holders and, in particular, how it has affected practices of holistic admissions, which have often been defined with respect to the explicit goal of promoting diversity (see, e.g., Glazer et al., 2014). This research note focuses on the viewpoints of graduate admissions officers and department leaders surveyed in 2024 on the effects they expected to see from the U.S. Supreme Court's decision on affirmative action in admissions processes and on the reactions that they were seeing at their own institutions.

## METHODS

ETS and NAGAP began administering an annual pulse survey in summer 2021 focusing on the rise of test-reduction (e.g., test-optional, test-free) policies (see Haviland et al., 2022), with a follow-up survey administered in fall 2022 on test-reduction and holistic admissions policies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (see Haviland et al., 2023). The 2024 survey reported on here represents a continuation of this partnership. Questions in this administration focused particularly on responses to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the SFFA court cases on race-based affirmative action in higher education admissions. The survey was distributed to all NAGAP members ( $N = 1,079$ ) via email in January–February 2024 and consisted of 18–26 questions, depending on branching.

FIGURE 1: Enrollment Size of NAGAP 2024 Respondents' Institutions



## Survey Administration and Participants

The study was also advertised to NAGAP members through the organization's newsletter. A total of 174 members completed at least part of the survey, for a response rate of 16.13%.

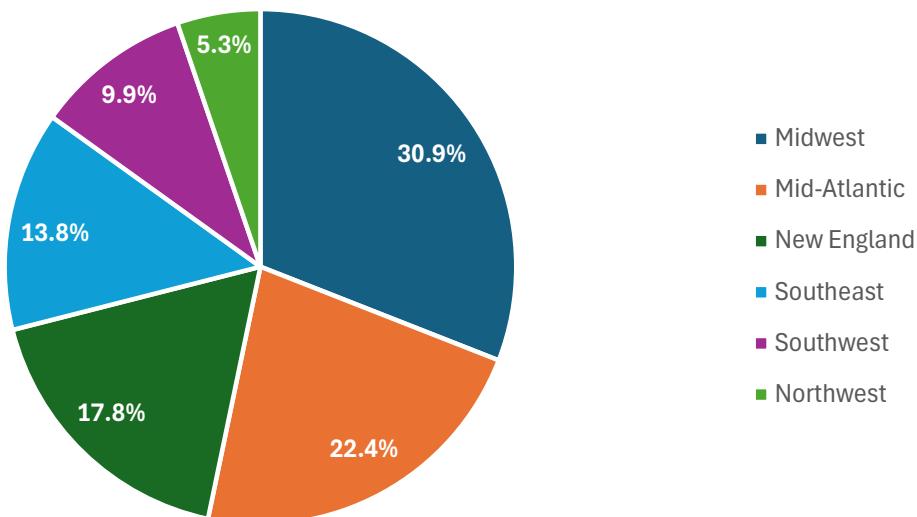
Continuing the theme of previous ETS/NAGAP surveys, questions included a focus on holistic admissions practices, with an added special focus this year on reactions to, and implications of, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmative action decision.

Similar to previous surveys with this population of graduate enrollment management (GEM) professionals (Haviland et al., 2023; Haviland et al., 2022), respondents' institutions represented a variety of enrollment sizes, with most respondents working in large or medium institutions (see Figure 1). These institutions were distributed

across the United States, with the largest portion of respondents working at institutions in the Midwest region (Figure 2). Respondents' roles within those institutions included oversight of the admissions process as an administrator, recruitment of prospective students, and reviewing or forwarding applications for admissions or institutionally funded financial support.

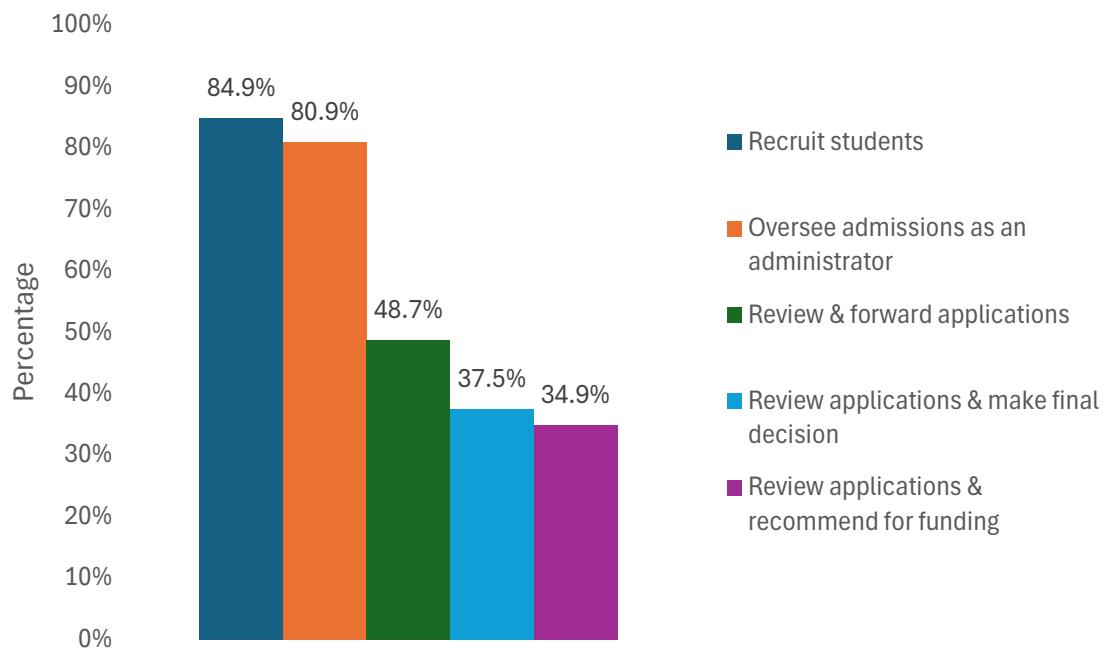
Respondents indicated that they had a variety of responsibilities across the GEM space. Most common to the respondent pool was playing a role in the recruitment of prospective students (84.9%) and overseeing admissions as an administrator (80.9%). A lesser, but still substantial, portion of the pool also had responsibilities around reviewing applications for admissions (Figure 3).

FIGURE 2: Location of Respondent's Institution



Note.  $n = 152$ .

FIGURE 3: Respondent Role in Graduate Admissions



Note.  $n = 152$ .

## RESULTS

The two foci of the survey were holistic admissions practices and responses to the affirmative action decision. The first section of results focuses on holistic admissions practices and how they may be changing, including the degree to which GEM professionals thought improving equity in admissions to be an appropriate priority. The second section focuses on questions related to reactions around the U.S. Supreme Court affirmative action rulings.

### Holistic Admissions

#### *Equity as a Priority in Admissions*

The goals of affirmative action in higher education include righting past wrongs and improving diversity (Greenberg, 2002), and our previous survey indicated that holistic admissions policies at graduate programs are likewise motivated by the goal of improving equity (Haviland et al., 2023). In line with the goals of affirmative action and holistic admissions, the majority of respondents agreed with the statement "improving racial equity in higher education is an appropriate priority for admissions." To a slightly lesser extent, GEM professionals also found improving wealth equity

to be an appropriate priority for admissions; 85.0% and 71.4% of respondents selected either "agree" or "strongly agree" on the appropriateness of improving racial equity and wealth equity as a priority for admissions, respectively. Notably, all 79 respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed that wealth equity was a priority for admissions also selected "agree" or "strongly agree" that racial equity is an appropriate priority for admissions (i.e., those who see wealth equity as an appropriate priority for admissions are a subset of those who see racial equity as an appropriate priority for admissions). See Table 1.

**TABLE 1: Respondents' thoughts on appropriateness of improving equity as a priority in admissions**

STATEMENT	MEAN	SD	STRONGLY DISAGREE (1) (%)	DISAGREE (2) (%)	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE (3) (%)	AGREE (4) (%)	STRONGLY AGREE (5) (%)
<b>IMPROVING RACIAL EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IS AN APPROPRIATE PRIORITY FOR ADMISSIONS</b>	4.29	0.78	0.7	0.7	13.6	38.6	46.4
<b>IMPROVING WEALTH EQUITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IS AN APPROPRIATE PRIORITY FOR ADMISSIONS</b>	4.04	0.88	0.7	2.1	25.7	35.0	36.4

## *Widely Used and Viewed Positively*

The first major section of our survey concerned perspectives on holistic admissions. Respondents expressed attitudes very similar to those reported in the 2022 ETS/NAGAP survey (Haviland et al., 2023). Overall, respondents saw widespread use of holistic admissions practices at their institutions and shared perceptions that holistic admissions practices are beneficial for equity.

Of the GEM professionals surveyed, 74.6% considered the admissions practices at their institutions to be holistic. Most GEM professionals using holistic admissions believed that such practices may improve equity (83.7%), and a lesser majority (68.0%) felt that holistic admissions had

already improved equity at their institutions. Other top perceived benefits of holistic admissions were that they may better showcase student strengths and abilities (83.7%) and foster a more diverse admitted student class (81.6%). See Table 2 for more details.

Among the subset of these respondents who indicated that they felt that holistic practices had improved equity at their school ( $n = 66$ ), the perceived benefits to equity included accepting students who may otherwise have been missed (72.7%), admitting students from a broader range of socioeconomic statuses (69.7%), and accepting students who can succeed in graduate school but do not do well on tests (66.7%). See Table 3.

TABLE 2: Perceived advantages of holistic admissions

ADVANTAGES OF HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS	N	%
<b>MAY IMPROVE EQUITY</b>	82	83.7
<b>MAY BETTER SHOWCASE STUDENT STRENGTHS AND ABILITIES</b>	82	83.7
<b>MAY FOSTER A MORE DIVERSE ADMITTED STUDENT CLASS</b>	80	81.6
<b>MAY IMPROVE APPLICANTS' PERCEPTION OF HAVING A "FAIR CHANCE" TO GAIN ADMISSION</b>	65	66.3
<b>MAY FOSTER A LARGER APPLICANT POOL</b>	43	43.9
<b>MAY REDUCE APPLICANTS' ANXIETY</b>	34	34.7
<b>TO MORE EFFECTIVELY COMPETE WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS</b>	15	15.3
<b>MAY REDUCE COSTS FOR APPLICANTS TO PREPARE THEIR APPLICATION</b>	12	12.2
<b>MAY IMPROVE RANKINGS FOR SCHOOL OR PROGRAM</b>	4	4.1
<b>OTHER</b>	1	1.0

Note. *n* = 98.

TABLE 3: How have holistic admissions practices improved equity at your school?

HOW HAVE HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS SPECIFICALLY IMPROVED EQUITY AT YOUR SCHOOL?	N	%
<b>WE ACCEPT STUDENTS WE MIGHT OTHERWISE HAVE MISSED.</b>	48	72.7
<b>OUR ADMITTED CLASS INCLUDES STUDENTS FROM A BROADER RANGE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUSES.</b>	46	69.7
<b>WE ACCEPT STUDENTS WHO CAN SUCCEED IN GRADUATE SCHOOL BUT DO NOT DO WELL ON TESTS.</b>	44	66.7
<b>WE HAVE REMOVED BARRIERS TO APPLYING BY ALLOWING APPLICANTS FLEXIBILITY IN HOW THEY REPRESENT THEMSELVES.</b>	43	65.2
<b>OUR ADMITTED CLASS IS MORE REPRESENTATIVE IN TERMS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY.</b>	37	56.1
<b>OTHER</b>	2	3.0

Note. *n* = 66.

## *Some Concerns Over Holistic Admissions*

Although holistic admissions are widely used and are viewed positively for the most part, GEM professionals also had concerns with some aspects of holistic review. We asked the GEM professionals who reported implementing holistic admissions at their schools or programs ( $n = 98$ ) what their concerns were regarding holistic admissions and found that the most common concerns revolved around consistency, subjectivity, and efficiency. Specifically, the top concerns included that application evaluation

may become inconsistent or unreliable (71.4%), that holistic review may introduce too much subjectivity in the decision process (67.3%), and that application evaluation may take longer (65.3%). Interestingly, although improving equity had been cited as the top advantage of holistic admissions (see Table 2), a number of respondents (12.2%) were concerned that holistic admissions practices would actually have the opposite effect and worsen inequity (Table 4).

**TABLE 4: Concerns for holistic admissions**

CONCERN FOR HOLISTIC ADMISSIONS	N	%
<b>APPLICATION EVALUATION MAY BE INCONSISTENT/UNRELIABLE</b>	70	71.4
<b>MAY INTRODUCE TOO MUCH SUBJECTIVITY IN THE DECISION PROCESS</b>	66	67.3
<b>APPLICATION EVALUATION MAY TAKE LONGER</b>	64	65.3
<b>STANDARDS FOR APPLICATION EVALUATION MAY BE UNCLEAR</b>	62	63.3
<b>POTENTIAL LACK OF TRANSPARENCY FOR STUDENTS</b>	38	38.8
<b>MAY EXACERBATE INEQUITY</b>	12	12.2
<b>MAY NOT FOSTER A MORE DIVERSE INCOMING CLASS</b>	12	12.2
<b>MAY INCREASE APPLICANTS' ANXIETY</b>	10	10.2
<b>MAY INCREASE COSTS FOR APPLICANTS TO PREPARE THEIR APPLICATION</b>	7	7.1
<b>UNSURE/NO CONCERN</b>	3	3.1

*Note. n = 98.*

## Affirmative Action

### *Practices Prior to the SFFA Ruling*

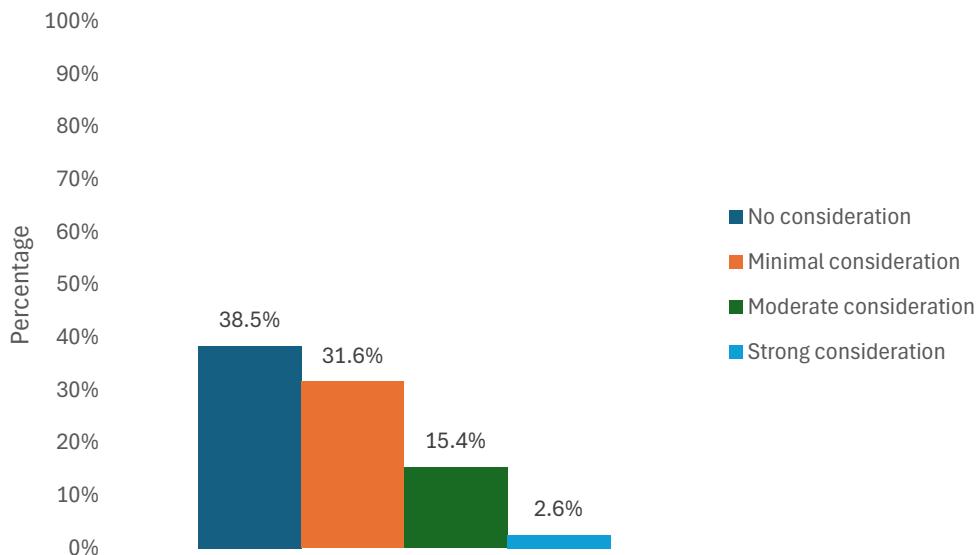
The second major theme of our survey concerned reactions and responses to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling ending race-based affirmative action in higher education admissions. To better understand changes that may be taking place, we first asked GEM professionals to describe the role that race and ethnicity had played in their admissions and funding decisions prior to the ruling (Figure 4).

For many schools, no consideration was given to race or ethnicity in admissions decisions even prior to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling (38.5%), and race and ethnicity were a moderate or strong consideration according to only 18% of respondents. Of the remaining respondents, 31.6% said that their institutions or programs

gave minimal consideration to race and ethnicity, and 11.9% were unsure.

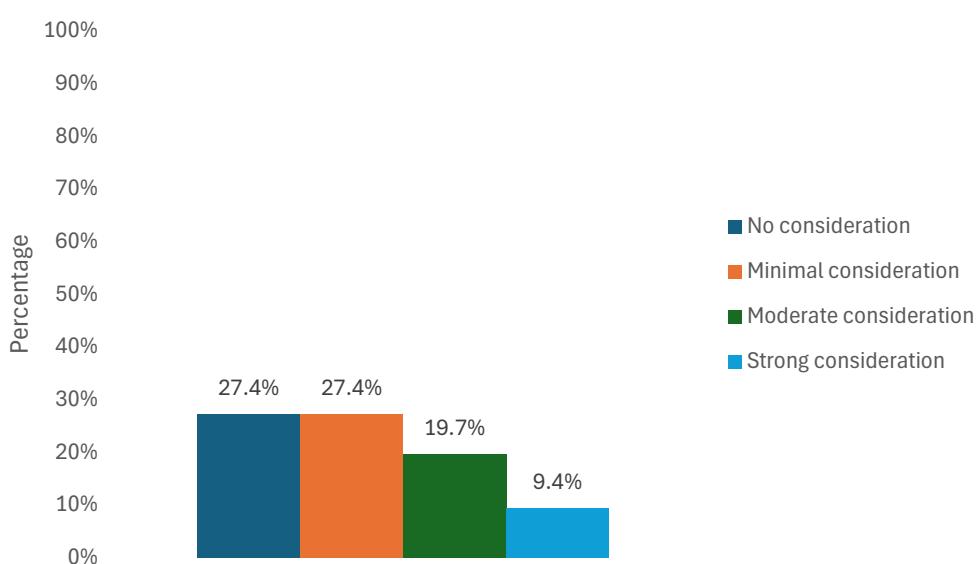
Prior to the U.S. Supreme Court decision, race and ethnicity were reported to play a stronger role in funding decisions than in admissions decisions. Figure 5 shows that 29.1% of respondents' institutions or programs gave moderate or strong consideration to race and ethnicity in funding decisions (vs. 18% for admissions in Figure 4), whereas 27.4% gave no consideration. Of the remaining respondents, 27.4% reported that their institutions or programs gave minimal consideration to race and ethnicity in funding decisions, and the remaining 16.2% of respondents were unsure.

FIGURE 4: Role of Race/Ethnicity in Admissions Decisions Prior to Ruling



*Note. n = 117.*

FIGURE 5: Role of Race/Ethnicity in Funding Decisions Prior to Ruling



*Note. n = 117.*

## *Changes Made in Response to the SFFA Ruling*

**Familiarity With Institution's Response.** Before asking GEM professionals about specific responses their institutions have had to the affirmative action ruling, we first wanted to understand how much insight the individuals responding to our survey felt they had into how their institutions or programs were responding. Overall, GEM professionals were familiar with the changes their institutions and programs were making—66.7% were confident in their knowledge, and 88.9% reported that they had at least some idea of how their own institution or program was responding.

**Changes in Response to Ruling.** Although the end of race-based affirmative action represented a major change in the legal landscape of

admissions, many GEM professionals (43.6%) reported no anticipated changes to their operations. See Table 5.

Of those who reported changes, the most frequently cited type of change was adjustments to the nature/wording of essay prompts (e.g., adding or removing opportunities for applicants to discuss their cultural background; 23.9%), followed by changes to the application components considered (e.g., removing or instituting standardized test requirements; 22.2%) and changes to scholarships offered or funding decision-making processes. In the “other” category, the most commonly cited change was related to hiding applicants’ race/ethnicity from reviewers (n = 7). See Table 6.

TABLE 5: Number of changes in response to ruling

NUMBER OF CHANGES IN RESPONSE TO RULING	N	%
<b>1 CHANGE</b>	27	23.1
<b>2 CHANGES</b>	20	17.1
<b>3 CHANGES</b>	11	9.4
<b>4 CHANGES</b>	8	6.8

Note. n = 117.

TABLE 6: Changes in response to ruling

STATEMENT	N	%
<b>WE ARE NOT MAKING ANY CHANGES IN RESPONSE TO THE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION RULING.</b>	51	43.6
<b>CHANGES TO NATURE/WORDING OF ESSAY PROMPTS</b>	28	23.9
<b>CHANGES TO APPLICATION COMPONENTS CONSIDERED</b>	26	22.2
<b>CHANGES TO SCHOLARSHIPS OFFERED OR FUNDING DECISION-MAKING PROCESS</b>	23	19.7
<b>NEW PROCESSES FOR PROSPECTIVE STUDENT RECRUITMENT</b>	15	12.8
<b>OTHER (PLEASE EXPLAIN):</b>	16	13.7
<b>NEW PROCESSES FOR EVALUATION OF ESSAYS/PERSONAL STATEMENTS</b>	15	12.8
<b>CHANGES TO WEIGHTING OF ADMISSIONS MATERIALS (SUCH AS TESTS OR PERSONAL STATEMENTS)</b>	9	7.7
<b>MAY INCREASE COSTS FOR APPLICANTS TO PREPARE THEIR APPLICATION</b>	7	7.1
<b>UNSURE/NO CONCERNs</b>	3	3.1

Note. n = 117.

## *Attitudes and Opinions Around the Affirmative Action Ruling*

We asked the respondents a series of questions about their attitudes toward the SFFA U.S. Supreme Court ruling. Respondents were asked to share if they agreed with each statement on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The statements are presented in Table 7 in descending order of agreement.

Generally, respondents perceived that their institutions prioritized improving racial diversity. We also saw that respondents reported having a clear understanding of their personal responsibilities related to racial equality. Generally, respondents were comfortable with the efforts that their units have made around racial equality and believe these efforts will be effective.

However, respondents were concerned for the effects of affirmative action writ large; the third most-agreed statement was that "the decline of affirmative action represents a challenge for improving campus diversity" (and the notion that it might represent an opportunity for improving campus diversity was the least-agreed statement).

In Table 7, we also note the number of respondents who offered no opinion. This is in part to share some areas of ambivalence around statements such as "the decline of affirmative action might represent an opportunity for improving campus diversity." We noted a high degree of ambivalence around the topic of wealth equality as well, among other areas.

**TABLE 7: Agreement with statements on institutional priorities**

STATEMENT	MEAN	SD	NO OPINION (%)
<b>MY INSTITUTION PRIORITIZES IMPROVING RACIAL DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION.</b>	3.2	0.7	7.1
<b>I HAVE A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT MY UNIT WANTS ME TO DO REGARDING RACIAL EQUALITY AS AN ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONAL.</b>	3.1	0.8	5.4
<b>THE DECLINE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION REPRESENTS A CHALLENGE FOR IMPROVING CAMPUS DIVERSITY.</b>	3.0	0.9	15.2
<b>I AM COMFORTABLE WITH THE LEVEL OF EFFORT MY UNIT IS MAKING REGARDING RACIAL EQUALITY.</b>	3.0	0.7	8.0
<b>I AM CONFIDENT THAT THE EFFORTS MY UNIT IS MAKING TO IMPROVE RACIAL EQUALITY WILL BE EFFECTIVE.</b>	3.0	0.6	18.8
<b>I AM CONFIDENT THAT THE EFFORTS MY UNIT IS MAKING TO IMPROVE WEALTH EQUALITY WILL BE EFFECTIVE.</b>	2.8	0.8	26.8
<b>I AM COMFORTABLE WITH THE LEVEL OF EFFORT MY UNIT IS MAKING REGARDING WEALTH EQUALITY.</b>	2.8	0.7	20.5
<b>MY INSTITUTION PRIORITIZES IMPROVING WEALTH EQUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION.</b>	2.8	0.8	26.8
<b>I HAVE CONCERNs ABOUT THE LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS OF THE AFFIRMATIVE ACTION RULING THAT PREVENT ME FROM TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE STUDENT DIVERSITY AT MY INSTITUTION.</b>	2.6	0.9	13.4
<b>THE DECLINE OF AFFIRMATIVE ACTION REPRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPROVING CAMPUS DIVERSITY.</b>	2.3	0.9	34.8

*Note.* 4-point scale.  $n = 111$ .

## DISCUSSION

In the survey, we asked both about equity, which GEM professionals identified as a common institutional priority in a previous iteration of this survey (Haviland et al., 2023), and about the related concepts of equality and diversity. Equity is a term whose definition can be contentious in popular and political discourse (see Minow, 2021), and looking at types of equity (racial vs. wealth) and at equality and diversity separately allowed us to gain a more nuanced view of GEM professionals' perspectives.

### Racial Equity

Survey respondents supported prioritizing the improvement of racial equity in graduate admissions. At a practical level, this sentiment was reflected in respondents' satisfaction with the efforts their programs were making around improving racial equality and racial diversity. Somewhat paradoxically, while respondents felt that the SFFA ruling represents a challenge for improving campus diversity in a global sense, they tended not to see a need for change at the local level to address such a challenge. In addition to generally feeling that their institutions were putting adequate emphasis on racial diversity and racial equality on campus, respondents were satisfied that the efforts their programs were already making around racial equality would be effective (although nearly 19% of respondents chose not to express an opinion on this point).

Many respondents (43.6%) anticipated that their institutions would make no changes in their admissions processes following the affirmative action ruling. Some respondents' institutions (38.5%) already gave no consideration to race or ethnicity in the admissions process, indicating not only that these institutions see themselves as legally compliant with the U.S. Supreme

Court decision but also that they did not feel it necessary to make any additional changes to current outreach practices to attract more diverse qualified applicants. Among institutions that have made changes to their admissions processes since the ruling, the most common changes were around the nature or wording of essay prompts and adding or removing application components.

In all, trends from this survey suggest that respondents felt relatively satisfied with their institutions' practices to date for promoting racial equity. Concerns over the U.S. Supreme Court ruling seemed to be directed more outwardly at the field as a whole and less at localized practices. It is worth noting that a sizable portion of institutions did not formally weigh race as a factor in admissions even prior to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling (e.g., institutions in states that had previously barred affirmative action and nonselective institutions). In the time since the survey was administered, a new presidential administration has come into office that is taking an expansive view of the implications of the SFFA ruling. It will be worth tracking how institutional practices and GEM attitudes toward those practices and their effects on racial equity evolve under the new administration.

## Wealth Equity

On the topic of wealth equity, respondents appeared to have mixed feelings, despite supporting wealth equity as an appropriate priority for admissions in general. For example, respondents largely agreed that their institutions prioritize improving wealth equality in higher education, but more than one-fourth of respondents reported having no opinion on the topic. More than 20% of respondents also reported having no opinion on the effectiveness of their institutions' efforts to improve wealth equality or on their comfort with the level of effort their institutions are making to improve wealth equality.

## Holistic Admissions

Holistic admissions are considered standard practice among respondents and are seen as a key tool for promoting equity. In particular, holistic admissions practices are seen as ways to bring students into entering classes who might have been missed otherwise. They are also seen as a way to remove barriers to admissions. At the same time, concerns remain around the subjectivity inherent in holistic admissions and around inconsistency in judgments made through holistic admissions processes. From a logistical standpoint, respondents also had concerns over a perceived lack of efficiency in holistic admissions practices.

## LOOKING AHEAD

As the effects of the 2023 SFFA U.S. Supreme Court rulings on affirmative action on incoming classes become clearer, it will be important for GEM professionals to continually evaluate their own practices and adjust policies as needed to align with program goals.

Holistic admissions are widely used and generally meet the needs of graduate programs, but those practices should still be improved to address a number of shortcomings, for example, by implementing measures to improve consistency in how applicants are evaluated. In future surveys, we will continue to track how decisions are made across various implementations of holistic admissions, particularly as AI continues to become a larger part of the admissions process on both the institution and applicant sides. We will also track how institutions' priorities in admissions evolve in terms of the skills and profiles of students they are seeking. Likewise, it will be important to track how attitudes toward holistic admissions practices, widely accepted and appreciated in this 2024 survey, may be affected as institutions come under increasing legal pressure for their admissions practices and priorities related to promoting racial or socioeconomic equity, given the priorities and regulatory guidance of the second Trump administration.

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## Notes

1 This response rate is calculated based on the total number of responses and the total number of invitations sent; we are unable to ascertain if these emails were all received or opened by their target recipients.

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