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Exploring the Role of Student Stories in the College Admissions Appeals Process

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by

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my family. My journey as a higher education professional began as a necessity to provide for my family and persisted through a desire to contribute to the success of individuals through education. This iteration of my educational journey would not have been possible without the support from my partner and the motivation from my children.

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ABSTRACT

Current college admission criteria in the United States rely primarily on academic criteria, high school grade point average (HSGPA) and standardized test scores, including the ACT and SAT. These standards were identified more than 80 years ago, and little has changed for much of that time (Beale, 2012; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008). One distinct change that took place in 2020 was a large migration of institutions dropping the requirement of a standardized test score from their admission requirements (Fairtest, 2021). This was done in part because of the global Covid-19 pandemic, which shut down many test sites (The Princeton Review, n.d.). These test-optional policy changes prompted an interest in the researcher to better understand what factors, other than HSGPA and test scores, could be used to predict college-level success as part of an admissions process. A review of existing literature identified that studies have been done to identify academic and non-academic factors that may correlate with college-level success. A notable gap in the reviewed literature identified that little had been done to explore how students' narratives play a part in the admission process. Guided by Fisher's (1989) narrative paradigm, this qualitative case study research explores how students choose to present their personal academic and non-academic factors in personal essays and how admission committees use those stories to offer an admission decision.

Keywords: college admissions, test optional, narrative paradigm, admission appeal, student essay

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

College admissions offices throughout the United States are faced with the challenge of identifying and admitting students who are academically prepared to meet the rigor of their institutions. This challenge is magnified by the pressure put forth by campus administrators to bring more students to campus to balance budgets (Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Jaquette et al., 2016). For more than 80 years, many admissions offices have utilized academic predictors to set admission requirements in an effort to identify academically prepared students. These standards include standardized test scores such as the ACT and SAT and high school grade point average (HSGPA) (Beale, 2012; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008). When students do not meet automatic admission criteria, universities typically offer an appeal process that provides an opportunity for the student to deliver a personal narrative. This narrative, along with other documents, is reviewed by a committee who offers a final admission decision. Within the available research, there is a lack of clarity regarding the role of these student narratives, particularly as they relate to admissions appeals processes and admission decisions.

When a student's academic predictors are not strong enough to earn admission to their desired university, some admissions offices turn to a more holistic review process, which can create confusion for students due to a lack of transparency Hossler et al. (2019). For example, Undergraduate Admissions University of Michigan (2022), in a statement to prospective students, noted:

> We look at each student as a whole package, a combination of talents, interests, passions, and skills. In this way, we can look beyond grades and test scores to recruit the most dynamic group of students possible.…we do not admit applicants solely on the basis of any single criterion. We value the whole record — excellent grades in rigorous courses, top ACT/SAT scores if provided, participation in extracurricular activities, professional arts training, and evidence of leadership, awards, and service. (para. 1-2)

The lack of procedural clarity in their statement shows that even in a well-thought-out statement by a nationally known institution, there is still little understanding available as to what process and what criteria are being considered for admission and appeal processes.

Similarly, at this research site, a regionally focused public institution, students are offered the opportunity to share more about themselves if they do not meet automatic admission criteria. However, an explanation of how this information was reviewed was lacking. The institution where this research took place encouraged students to appeal their admission denial to help the admission committee better understand students' life circumstances. In reference to this concern, Hossler et al. (2019) stated:

> To date, few efforts have been made to synthesize research on [non-academic factors] NAFs at the undergraduate level or to study how these criteria are used in decisions. For example, to what extent do four-year colleges consider student contextual factors (family income, parental education, or single-parent household)? (p.835)

This lack of clarity can be problematic for students who must navigate the process and for the admissions professionals tasked with providing guidance. Hossler et al. (2019) introduced NAFs as another term for non-cognitive criteria, as described by Sedlacek (2011). They included variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions. Hossler et al. (2019) pointed out that greater transparency within a holistic review process would shed light on the "black box" of admissions and would decrease scrutiny from prospective students and their families. The use of NAFs within the admissions process has generated controversy. Long (2015) concluded that holistic review is troublesome and could encourage affirmative action lawsuits. However, Beattie et al. (2018), showed that the use of NAFs, such as attitude and performance factors, were successful in predicting first-year college performance. Because of these discrepancies, there remains a need for a better understanding of how students' narratives are being assessed as part of a holistic admission review.

For the last 15 years, the researcher has worked in college admissions offices with increasing levels of responsibility. His experiences cover a variety of institution types, including small private schools, online for-profit institutions, and regional public universities. Each institution had its own process for reviewing applicants for admission. Although they all utilized HSGPA and standardized test scores, the holistic process and usage of NAFs varied from institution to institution. For the past five years, the researcher has served as the director of undergraduate admissions at a regional public university and has chaired the Admissions Appeals Committee at this institution.

As the chair of the Admissions Appeals Committee, the researcher has reviewed hundreds of personal statements submitted by students hoping to gain admission. The goal of this committee and these reviews has been to identify NAFs that assist in identifying students who are able to succeed academically at the university. For example, students planning to be athletes tend to outperform their predicted success based on HSGPA and standardized test scores alone (Scogin, 2007).

Historical Context

Before World War I, most college applicants were interviewed or took an institutional exam in hopes of gaining admission to the college. As interest in college attendance grew, institutions began to implement stricter admission standards. A group of colleges in the Midwest developed what is now known as the high school transcript, while colleges on the East Coast formed the College Entrance Examination Board (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008). These two elements combined laid the groundwork for the standard admission process used by most institutions within the United States. Over the last 80 years, college admissions processes have become more standardized and focused on a few key factors and admission criteria. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (2008), in describing this standardization, stated, “After World War II, the selective college admission mechanism that most Americans recognize—consideration of high school grades,

college preparatory coursework, admission test scores… and other non-academic factors in the admission decision—evolved to its present state" (p. 17). Many of these standardized elements remain present today, but the level of importance of each has ebbed and flowed throughout the decades.

In 1960, most admissions directors surveyed considered standardized test scores essential. However, by 2010, nearly 100 colleges had dropped their requirement of a standardized test score (Beale, 2012; Fairtest, 2021). In more recent years, an increasing number of institutions have moved to a test-optional admission process. This has created greater interest in a more holistic admissions review procedure that puts increased emphasis on NAFs (Hossler et al., 2019).

Research Questions

This research explored personal statements, or stories, submitted by students appealing their admission decision in hopes of gaining entry into a regional public institution. The objectives were to explore what non-academic factors students displayed in their short essay answers and how an appeal committee interpreted those answers and ultimately used the information gathered to issue an admissions decision. To explore these issues, the following research questions were utilized:

RQ 1: How do students use narrative essay responses to explain their academic struggles during an admission appeal process?

RQ 2: How do members of an Admissions Appeals Committee at a regional public university utilize information from a student-written appeal to issue an admission decision?

Theoretical Framework

This research was guided by the narrative paradigm. According to this paradigm, all meaningful communication is presented in the form of storytelling (Fisher, 1989). The narrative paradigm was first put forth by Fisher (1988), who offered a unique definition of narration. He

stated that “narration refers to a conceptual framework for understanding human decisions, discourse, and action” (p. 50). To build on this, Communication Theory (n.d.) posited that peoples’ behaviors are based on experiences, which influence their communication and stories. Furthermore, Fisher (1989) stated that:

> It is only when communication is considered seriously in regard to its advice or fostering of belief, attitude, or action that the narrative paradigm becomes relevant: to ascertain the meaning and merit of the communication as a ground for decision and performance. (p. 57)

According to Communication Theory (n.d.), the narrative paradigm relies on two principles: coherence and fidelity. When students present their stories to the appeal committee, both principles of the narrative paradigm should be present.

Principle one is coherence. Communicated content is only effective if it makes sense to the listener. Coherence is impacted by three factors: the structure of the narrative, the resemblance between stories, and the credibility of characters (Communication Theory, n.d.). With this in mind, the narrative paradigm highlights a student’s desire to be credible and understandable to the committee. This principle can face challenges on both sides of the narration. If the creator of the narration does not present the story in a format understandable by the receiver, then coherence is lost. Likewise, if the receiver is not able to receive the narrative in its delivered format, coherence is lost. One clear example of this is language. If the narration is presented in English and then translated into Spanish for the receiver, errors in translation could negatively impact the coherence of the narrative.

Fidelity is the second principle in the narrative paradigm. This principle builds on the credibility of character referenced in principle one and requires that the listener accept the story as it is presented by the teller. Fisher (1988) noted that the narrative paradigm does insist that discourse will always tell a story and invites an audience to believe it or to act on it. In applying this principle to the present research, students must present their story in a manner that the

committee accepts the story as truthful and is willing to act on it. If a student stated in their essay that they excel in math and would like to study actuarial science but received low grades in their math class, the fidelity of their narrative begins to fall away. In this situation, the reader may question its authenticity.

With the narrative paradigm as a guiding light, the researcher proceeded with an interpretivist qualitative paradigm presented by Scotland (2012). This paradigm aligned with a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. Scotland (2012) pointed out that realities are individually constructed, and each individual person has their own unique reality. These realities are built through the interactions between language and the independent world. Furthermore, the world and all that is in it cannot exist without knowledge of it. For example, “A tree is not a tree without someone to call it a tree” (Scotland, 2012, p.11). This paradigm is part of the framework of this research because it is assumed that each student presented their own true world in their personal statements as part of their attempt to show the Admissions Appeals Committee that they were able to succeed in college according to their presented reality. These individuals’ subjective realities then become part of the reality known to each member of the Admissions Appeals Committee, who must choose whether to accept it as truth.

To explore these multiple truths, the researcher chose to use a case study methodology. Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that “case study research is defined as a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection” (p. 96). This case study research began with the identification of a concrete entity, the group of students who appealed their admission. The researcher chose to conduct an instrumental case study to better understand what students choose to represent and how it is perceived (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Need for the Study

The reliance on HSGPA and standardized test scores leaves a gap in the understanding of who a student is and their ability to achieve. Sedlacek (2011) pointed out that due to grade

inflation and other variances, GPAs have become less reliable as a success indicator and that widely used standard tests are basically general intelligence tests. To counteract the reduction in usefulness of these predominant benchmarking tools, non-cognitive, also known as non-academic factors (NAFs), can be utilized. Furthermore, universities have seen an increase in applicant diversity. Each applicant brings with them differences in abilities, goals, ambitions, and expectations (Beattie et al., 2018).

By virtue of the rapid increase in test-optional admission policies in recent years, more schools are growing in their reliance on NAFs (Fairtest, 2021). Although the use of NAFs is growing, “few efforts have been made to synthesize research on NAFs at the undergraduate level or to study how these criteria are used in decisions” (Hossler et al., 2019, p. 835). Previous research that has focused on NAFs has focused on utilizing NAFs to differentiate applicants who already meet academic admission criteria. In one such study, Hossler et al. (2019) identified five categories of NAFs: (a) basic personality factors, (b) affective competencies, (c) performance factors, (d) attitudinal constructs, and (e) learning skills. They discovered that NAFs are not the most important factor utilized at institutions. Regardless of institutional selectivity, NAFs are used to admit at least some students. Less selective institutions may use NAFs to admit students that are not initially admissible on academic factors alone. This research is focused on these students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the admission decisions made by the appeals committee at a regional public university. More specifically, the study focused on how students chose to tell their stories through their admission appeal, how the committee members utilized these stories, and what factors influenced their admission decision. Because these students were only reviewed after being denied admission on academic factors, this research stands separate from other research previously conducted.

This research produced a better understanding of how students choose to present the non-academic factors (NAFs) present in their lives that will allow them to be successful at the collegiate level. It also offered a deeper understanding of how the appeal committee members received the students' stories and utilized the NAFs presented to issue an admission decision. The NAFs most commonly utilized in college admission reviews are performance factors, attitudinal factors, creativity, and grit (Hossler et al., 2019). This research allowed for comparison in findings to see if similar NAFs stood out for this specific audience and process.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is that it fills a gap in understanding how students choose to represent their education story in a first-person narrative. Previous research has pointed out the value of utilizing NAFs as value-added entities in the college admission decision. However, much of the previous research measured NAFs separately from the students' input. For example, Arnold et al. (2016) found that students' ability to construct mental models predicted grades in college-level psychology and biology courses. They used these findings to state, "This work moves the field beyond relying on past performance to predict future performance, and instead identifies a specific skill associated with academic success" (pp. 457-458). Although valuable in confirming that NAFs can be effective in predicting academic success, these findings did not identify how the students themselves identified or defined their own ability to construct mental models or other NAFs.

Aydin (2017) researched how NAFs may impact college success and did utilize student input in the form of the College Learning Effectiveness Inventory (CLEI). However, the self-reporting aspect of this tool was a limitation of the study's success. Because the CLEI did not leave space for the student to explain or provide narration, a gap was left for further research to be done.

In a similar fashion, Arnold et al. (2016), Brecht and Burnett (2019), and Galla et al. (2019) researched non-academic factors relating to college success but did not utilize student

stories. Galla et al. (2019) utilized computer assessments to measure self-regulation and grit (e.g., “I am diligent. I never give up”). This approach did not allow for student input through narration and self-explanation. Galla et al. (2019) called for additional research regarding how self-regulation and cognitive ability are impacted by both a student’s home environment and school setting. The research done in this study filled the gap addressed by Galla et al. (2019) by reviewing students’ full personal stories presented in the manner of their choosing, which allowed for a better understanding of students’ school and home environments.

Although this research was limited by the specific appeal process at a single university, its findings are nevertheless valuable in helping admissions professionals form a better understanding of how students choose to present themselves through an admission process. Because college admissions offices face intense scrutiny, test-optional admission policies, and increased student and parent interest in how admission decisions are being made (Hossler et al., 2019), a better understanding of the admission appeal process and how students represent themselves will be beneficial to many admission offices.

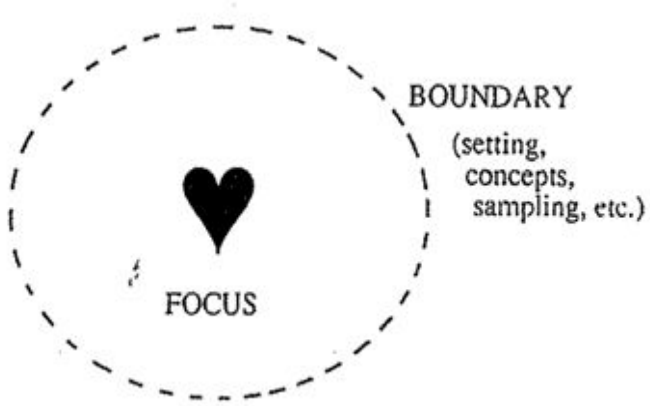
Research Design

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), “Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 8). Furthermore, Bloomberg and Volpe, M. F. (2018) stated that “the purpose [of case study] is to generate understanding and deep insights to inform professional practice, policy development, and community or social action” (p. 49). A qualitative case study methodology and method was utilized because this research aspired to better understand how students choose to tell their story in the admission appeal process and how the appeal committee ascribed meaning to this social process. Additionally, the method was chosen because the research has a direct impact on policy development regarding college admission at a regional institution.

The case utilized was a small group of students who submitted admission appeal statements and the committee members that reviewed admission appeals. To be a case study, the phenomenon being studied must be intrinsically bound (Merriam, 1998). As shown in Figure 1, Miles and Huberman (1994) described the focus of a study as the center of the issue as represented by the heart, while the indeterminant boundary sets the edge of the case, noting that items outside this boundary are not included in the study.

Figure 1

The Case as the Unit of Analysis



Note. Taken from Miles and Huberman, 1994.

In this research, the use of a case as the unit of analysis was effective in setting boundaries for which elements of the admission appeals process were utilized as the case. For example, although letters of recommendation are part of the appeal process, they were left out of this case as they were not a first-hand telling of the student's story. Different from recommendation letters, the students' submitted answers to short essay prompts were the focus as they directly reflected the students' stories.

In this case study research, 20 admission appeal forms submitted by students initially denied admission to a regional public university were analyzed per the method laid out by

Creswell and Poth (2018). They stated that “data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data for analysis; then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally representing the data” (p. 813). Following this analysis, a focus group interview was conducted with the members of the Admissions Appeals Committee. This session was done to gather insight into how committee members analyze individual admission appeal submissions and offer their admission decision.

A final analysis was done to explore how the themes that arose from the student appeals submissions aligned with the elements focused on by the committee members. Although presented here in a linear pattern, these steps were not done entirely linearly. The process of data collection, analysis, and reporting moved in a simultaneous and sometimes iterative process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Huberman & Miles, 1994). The cyclical nature of the method allowed for a deeper codification of themes.

Assumptions and Limitations

Because this study reviewed personal statements written by students without authentication of details, the researcher assumed the statements to be truthful. This same assumption of truth was provided to statements presented in the focus group of committee members. Additionally, because the researcher has been involved with college admission decisions and student reviews for 15 years, he holds bias in what student information should be relevant and utilized by an appeal committee. Furthermore, the researcher is the acting chair of the appeal committee at the university used in this research. To distance from the information, the researcher stepped away from the active decision-making meetings during the 2021-2022 academic year. Additionally, the researcher did not author the essay prompts given to students as they were in use prior to his arrival at the university.

Ontologically, the researcher embraced the idea of multiple realities in that each student presented their own reality, and each committee member received and processed each student’s story in their own reality. Because the researcher intended to report on these multiple

realities, the research was qualitative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher's epistemological assumption aligns with qualitative research. This means that "the researcher relies on quotes as evidence from the participant as well as collaborates, spends time in the field with participants, and becomes an 'insider'" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 20). As previously stated, the researcher's years of experience in this work allowed for quick adaptation to insider status but still served as a limitation due to his position within the organization.

Summary

The college admissions process is changing. For more than 80 years, colleges in the United States have primarily focused on a few key academic factors, GPA and test scores, to identify college-ready students. Recent research has shown that these indicators do not accurately represent all students (Sedlacek, 2011). Other research was done to identify non-academic factors (NAFs) that may contribute to identifying college-ready students (Arnold et al., 2016; Aydin, 2017; Brecht & Burnett, 2019; Hossler et al., 2019). However, in the review done for this research, the direct student narrative was missing. This research was designed to explore the NAFs as presented through first-person narratives of the students and how those narratives were used by university employees.

Chapter 1 of this study provided an introduction, historical context, and need for research to explore NAFs used by universities in admitting students. This study furthered the work done by bringing the students' unique, individual stories to the forefront rather than focusing on factors identified separately from the students' self-reflections. Chapter 2 will focus on presenting the details of previous studies that attempted to better understand both academic and non-academic factors used in college admissions and how closely they align, correlate with, or predict college-level success. Chapter 3 will present a detailed outline of the methodology, and Chapters 4 and 5 will present and discuss the findings of this exploratory study and will identify potential future implications and research.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

An important task for a college admissions office is reviewing applications to identify students who can succeed academically within the respective institution. To aid in this decision-making process, the admissions office must utilize some predictors of college success. This literature review was conducted to identify known college success predictors that are already being used and tracked and flaws that exist within those researched elements. A comprehensive search was done through various academic databases and web-based searches. These searches focused on terms that aligned with elements in the college admissions process. They identified multiple studies that had been done to better understand the correlation between high school grade point average (HSGPA), standardized test scores such as the ACT and SAT, and college success. Studies were also conducted to identify non-academic indicators of success. However, there is a gap left in understanding how students identify and represent their own achievements and attributes as part of a holistic admission review process that looks to gather information beyond grade reports and test scores.

Theoretical Orientation of the Study

The self-representation of students is often sought after by a college admissions office in hopes of understanding the potential for college-level success. For many years, a combination of HSGPA and standardized test scores have been the industry standard for college admission requirements. Beyond these standard success predictors, some research has been done to identify non-cognitive factors that may be used as success predictors as well. What is lacking in both categories of previous research is an understanding of how the student perceives their own educational challenges, strengths, and goals.

Narrative Paradigm in College Admissions

Admissions offices continuously attempt to predict a probable action, the academic success of a student, by ascertaining a student's story or narrative. In this research, this is most directly seen when a student submits their personal essay as part of the admission appeal

process. Hagen (2008), when speaking about academic advisors, noted that advisors spend much of their time telling and hearing stories. This can be seen in the format of peer-to-peer storytelling as well as student-to-professional and professional-to-student. This is as equally true for admissions representatives as it is for academic advisors. Admissions professionals can often be heard sharing stories about the students they have met with and helped through the enrollment process. They become entwined with, and at times part of, the student's narrative and are often the first person to advocate for the admission of a student who does not meet automatic admission requirements but has a compelling story.

An admissions professional's desire to hear, understand, and advocate for a student's narrative can be encapsulated in the narrative paradigm as put forth by Fisher (1985). He stated:

> [The narrative paradigm] seeks to account for how people come to adopt stories that guide behavior. It, too, is productive of description, explanation, and even prediction—in the sense that if one's character can be determined and if one's story in regard to a particular issue can be ascertained, it is possible to predict a person's probable actions, which is the best that social scientific theories can offer. (p. 348)

The importance of engaging with a student's narrative to gain understanding of their abilities is why the narrative paradigm was chosen as the framework for this research.

Historical Trends in College Admissions

For over 80 years, standardized college admission tests such as the ACT and SAT have been widely used as admission criteria by colleges and universities. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (2008) identified that since World War II, colleges and universities have primarily used high school report card grades and standardized college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT, as their prominent predictors of first-year academic performance in college. Much debate has occurred about whether these tests accurately predict a student's ability to succeed in college, and if they do offer up some predictability, are they

better than other indicators such as high school GPA (HSGPA) alone or non-academic measures?

Prior to the 1940s, college admission requirements within the United States were specific to each institution, and no standardization was utilized (National Association of College Admission Counseling, 2008). These disconnected requirements date back as far as 1642, when Harvard College first established its admission requirements (Beale, 2012). Continuing through the 18th century, admission requirements throughout higher education were sporadic and included both academic and non-academic benchmarks. Beale (2012) stated that "prospective students at all major American colleges and universities were examined as to their character, background, and demonstrated proficiency in Latin and Greek. Later… a working knowledge of arithmetic, was added" (p. 21).

As the 20th century approached, committees were formed to investigate potential options for unifying college admission processes across the country. At that time, various accrediting bodies were formed (Beale, 2012). As the 1950s and 1960s arrived, many admissions officials were committed to the use of standardized tests. Beale (2012) noted that in a survey done by Berger (1961) more than 75 percent of the admissions directors who responded considered Scholastic Aptitude Test scores as absolutely essential to the admissions process in 1960. The usage of standardized test scores held strong for the next three decades. In the late 1990s, college admission practices evolved, and some colleges and universities chose to drop the requirement of standardized test scores. However, the transition remained slow, and relatively few colleges adopted this change (Fairtest, 2021). Beginning in 2020, the pivot to test-optional admission processes grew exponentially with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was prompted in part by both the ACT and SAT canceling many of their national test offerings due to health and safety concerns (The Princeton Review, n.d.).

Current Trends in College Admissions

As of December 8, 2021, over 1,800 four-year colleges and universities within the United States removed standardized test scores as a requirement for admission (Fairtest, 2021). With the adoption of adjusted admission requirements, admissions officers were left wondering what tools could effectively and equitably be used to predict college success. By exploring research done on both cognitive and non-cognitive measurements, this literature review addresses the question of what academic and non-academic tools can be used to effectively predict college success.

Much of the research reviewed here regarding predictors of college-level success utilized high school grade point average (HSGPA) combined with standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT. In addressing the ability of HSGPA to predict college success in comparison with standardized tests, Al-Hattami (2014), Galla et al. (2019), Sawyer (2013), and Takele (2017) all identified that HSGPA alone was a better indicator for college success than ACT or SAT scores alone and that combining ACT or SAT scores with HSGPA is more predictive than either of them alone. Noting that standardized test scores, when paired with HSGPA, can help predict college success and adding in concerns about such tests being biased (Geiser et al., 2007), the previously stated question can be restated and built upon; what academic and non-academic tools can be used to predict college success effectively and equitably?

Although it is widely noted that HSGPA and ACT combined do correlate with college-level academic success for certain populations, Lotkowski et al. (2004) showed that HSGPA alone is the strongest predictor of retention, followed by ACT score and socioeconomic status (SES). Around the same time, Lotkowski et al. published their study, Richard Atkinson, then president of the University of California, recommended that they stop requiring the SAT 1 for admission. Atkinson had a desire to assess achievement rather than aptitude and asserted that “The SAT was distorting educational priorities” (Epstein, 2009, p.10). Atkinson’s statements set in motion a series of events that led to the redesign of the SAT. This redesign did not assuage

other universities, and Sarah Lawrence College soon became one of the first in the college admissions world to address the continued concerns about standardized testing. They did so by refusing to review SAT scores for their incoming students because the new SAT Reasoning Test missed the mark in displaying a student's ability (Epstein, 2009).

The fact that socioeconomic status (SES) is more predictive of success than standardized test scores indicates that some students may be at a disadvantage in the college admission process. During the same period that Sarah Lawrence College made its decision to admit students without requiring a standardized test score, research was being done by Geiser et al. (2007) on students from the University of California (UC). In their work, they utilized a sample of nearly 80,000 students who were admitted to UC and tracked their college performance and graduation rates. Geiser et al. (2007) stated that "standardized admissions tests tend to have greater adverse impact than HSGPA on underrepresented minority students, who come disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds" (p. 2). They concluded that although HSGPA may have a reputation of unreliability due to inconsistencies throughout school districts, it is still a more equitable tool than the SAT and is the best available indicator to predict college-level success (Geiser et al., 2007).

Sarah Lawrence College primarily stepped away from the SAT requirement because it placed undue stress on students and did not accurately reflect the writing expectations they had for their students. Perhaps more importantly, the work being done by Geiser et al. (2007) began to uncover the inequities created by these exams. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (2008) noted their concern that test scores appeared to differentiate students based on race, ethnicity, and class. Regarding this differentiation, they stated, "Part of the public mission of colleges and universities is to ensure that differences that are not attributable to a student's ability to succeed academically at an institution are mitigated in the admission process" (p. 42).

The purpose of the two main standardized tests geared toward college readiness, ACT and SAT, has morphed slightly over the years, but their overall theme has persisted. ACT (2020) stated that “the ACT is oriented toward the general content areas of college and high school instructional programs” (p. 17). ACT (2020) continued by stating that “the main component of the ACT is a standardized battery of four tests of educational achievement—English, reading, mathematics, and science—along with an optional writing test” (p. 18).

SAT began its life as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, then changed its name to Scholastic Assessment Test, and most recently changed its official name to just SAT (Epstein, 2009). This migration of names reflects a similar migration of goals. The purpose of the first name change was to step away from the notion that the test was one of innate ability. The second name change, leaving only the initials, reflected a desire to avoid the claim that the test measured achievement (Epstein, 2009). Epstein further noted that today, the SAT is criticized for inhibiting access to higher education, furthering the notion that universities desire to find alternative predictors of success.

In 2018, the SAT had three components: (a) evidence-based reading and writing, (b) math, and (c) an essay. Combined, these three elements take up to three hours and 50 minutes to complete (CollegeBoard, 2018). Also in 2018, CollegeBoard delivered scores to students and highlighted benchmarks that represent college readiness. They additionally let students know scores would vary each time the test is taken. Although there was no pass or fail score criteria, CollegeBoard (2018) did state that students who spent more time studying would, on average, score better. This statement supported the assertion made by Geiser et al. (2007) that biases and inequities were present in these tests.

As the admissions offices throughout the United States became more aware of the inequities created by standardized testing, more schools joined Sarah Lawrence College in their test-optional admission process. However, many did not make this leap until the desire for change became a necessity in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 500 colleges and

universities adjusted their admission criteria to be test-optional in the spring of 2020 (Fairtest, 2021). Many schools that temporarily adjusted during the pandemic have extended their test-optional policies or have permanently implemented them. With these changes came a need to better understand how students could be assessed for college admission.

Non-Cognitive Factors

Throughout the review of literature, the phrases non-cognitive factors and non-academic factors (NAFs) were used somewhat interchangeably, although Hossler et al. (2019) pointed out that non-cognitive is sometimes a misnomer as some of the factors studied do involve cognition. Sedlacek (2011) described NAFs, or what he called non-cognitive variables, as "variables relating to adjustment, motivation, and student perceptions, rather than the traditional verbal and quantitative (often called cognitive) areas typically measured by standardized tests" (p. 5). More broadly, non-cognitive factors are those elements that are not related to acquiring knowledge. Some of the most referenced NAFs in current research include contextual factors, identity, attitudinal constructs, performance, and affective factors.

Contextual Factors

As the industry migrated away from utilizing standardized test scores as an admission requirement, a void was left. During this migration, research was done in hopes of identifying alternative indicators of success. One category, as defined by Hossler et al. (2019), was contextual factors. These factors can be categorized as individual learning environment contextual factors. The most referenced individual factor identified in this literature review was socioeconomic status (SES). SES encompasses a variety of data, including educational level, family income, and occupation (American Psychological Association, n.d.).

Lotkowski et al. (2004) noted that combining SES with high school grade point average (HSGPA), ACT, and other non-academic factors created the strongest correlation to college-level success. Both Lewine et al. (2019) and Brecht and Burnett (2019) discussed SES as one element of their research focused on predicting college-level academic success. Lewine et al.

(2019) focused their work on a small group of academically successful students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This disadvantaged background can be an indication of family income, one of the prevailing data elements within SES. These students submitted essays explaining how they would benefit from a specific college support program and how earning a college degree would impact their futures. This research was one of the few examples found in this literature review that focused on first-person stories as written and presented by the students, which helped generate the research questions stated in Chapter 1 of this research.

In their examination of SES and other potential college performance indicators, Lewine et al. (2019) analyzed student statements using a computerized, formal analysis of word usage. This left a void in understanding what stories the students chose to represent themselves and focused on individual words. In the software used, the essays were scanned and reviewed for word count as well as key indicator words that pointed to one of 17 variables that were reported to correlate with academic performance. Lewine et al. (2019) stated that “students from economically impoverished backgrounds come to campus less prepared academically, with less economic and social capital, and experiencing greater stress than their more well-off peers” (p. 1). Because it has been established that hours studied positively correspond with standardized test scores (CollegeBoard, 2018), Lewine et al. (2019) built on the assessment of Geiser et al. (2007) in showing that SES can be a stronger predictor of success than standardized test scores.

Another contextual factor identified was the rigor of course selection in high school. Phelps and Chan (2016) looked beyond college performance and measured career placement as their indicator of success. They sampled 2,294 students and compared their completion of dual credit courses to the achievement of career goals after college. Their focus on dual credit completion delivered one result that overlapped with results from the study done by Lewine et al. (2019). Phelps and Chan (2016) pointed out that when high schools have more students

from a low SES background, they tend to graduate fewer students, and those students have a smaller chance of later attending community college and transferring dual credits.

Contextual factors present in the learning environment were also identified to have both a positive and negative impact on students' ability to succeed. Some of these factors include the percentage of students at the school who receive free or reduced-price lunch, number of advanced placement (AP) courses offered, and the percentage of graduates that pursue postsecondary education. According to Hossler et al. (2008), these elements have been used by universities in their efforts to admit students who are able to succeed in their academic programs.

Identity

Institutions of higher education often put efforts into affirming the cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds of students (Lotkowski, 2004). These elements related to student identity also play a role in college admissions. Lewine et al. (2019) noted that one identity factor, gender, may play a role in the college admission process and that the standard selection criteria may not be as effective for men. For example, when separating participants by gender, Lewine et al. (2019) noted that essay word count had a positive relationship with grade point average for men but found no correlation for women. The authors posited that this may reflect women being pressured to hide their intellectual abilities due to societal pressures and that men are less prepared in non-intellective areas (Lewine et al., 2019). Lewine et al. (2019) failed to address genders other than man and woman.

As noted previously in this chapter, The National Association for College Admission Counseling (2008) expressed concern that standardized tests had a propensity to generate lower average scores for students with certain identity factors such as race and ethnicity. The use of race and ethnicity in college admissions has been at the center of many discussions and several legal cases. Long (2015) discussed the important legal precedent that race and ethnicity could legally be used within the college admission process because there is not a race-neutral

alternative available that would contribute effectively to the educational benefits of diversity. This is important to note since race and ethnicity are, at times, used as correlated indicators of socioeconomic status. To this point, the research began to show how intertwined various non-academic factors (NAFs) can be.

Attitudinal Constructs

Self-concept, self-efficacy, personal interests, social beliefs, cultural awareness, and adaptability are all examples of attitudinal constructs. Hossler et al. (2019) identified this grouping of NAFs as one of the two most impactful clusters. In their work, Hossler et al. (2019) interviewed admissions and enrollment professionals and noted that private schools were the most likely to consider attitudinal constructs within their admissions process. They attributed this to the smaller size of these institutions, which allowed them to deliver more personal attention to their applicants and possibly better identify attitudinal constructs. These attitudinal constructs were also identified by Lotkowski (2004) as having a positive impact on retention. They stated that “academic self-confidence and achievement motivation had the strongest relationship to college GPA” (p. vii).

The research done by Kunkel (2016) differed from that previously mentioned in that it studied attitudinal constructs as success identifiers both while attending school and later into adult life. This study challenged the definition of success. Kunkel (2016) identified the attitudinal constructs of happiness and satisfaction with life, among other items, as indicators of success. To understand which attitudinal constructs held during high school might lead to success later in life, Kunkel (2016) stated, “Only 42% of the participants felt that their [standardized] test scores were any sort of indicator of their school successes…[and] the standardized test scores only really indicated strengths in math or English” (p. 161). Kunkel’s findings showed that even when students identified test scores as important, it was only because they felt that colleges saw them as important.

Performance

Beyond attitudinal constructs, Kunkel's 2016 study also identified performance factors as non-cognitive indicators of success. These included elements such as service record, project presentations/public speaking, and high quality, daily classwork. Although these behaviors can take place in academic settings, they are not necessarily academic factors. These performance factors are often found within narratives presented by students and the individuals around them. In their quantitative study, Galla et al. (2019) identified another example of a performance factor, self-regulation. They focused on HSGPA as an indicator of self-regulation rather than cognitive ability. Galla et al. (2019) focused on college graduation, one of the success measures stated by Kunkel (2016), as their measure of success. Unlike Kunkel (2016), in addressing the differences between HSGPA and SAT scores, Galla et al. (2019) stated that "the discovery that high report card grades signal strong student self-regulation suggests, at a minimum, that grades be accorded careful consideration in college admissions" (p. 2104). In identifying HSGPA as an item that can be valuable in college admission, Galla et al. (2019) also noted their concern with standardized tests as an admission requirement. These standardized test scores also play a role in many methods used to rank the quality of an institution of higher education. One example of this is U.S. News & World Report, which gives admissions test scores three times more impact than high school class rank when creating their college ranking list (Galla et al., 2019).

Brecht and Burnett (2019) also studied the performance factor, athletic participation, as they focused on college-level student-athletes. This work added to that of Scogin (2007), who discovered that participating in collegiate athletics, a non-cognitive factor, caused students to outperform the prediction model built by a university admissions office to project the first semester GPA of incoming students. This model was built using academic factors. Brecht and Burnett (2019) studied a variety of non-cognitive factors along with cognitive ones to identify items that would be significant predictors of academic success. They identified three items from

the Transition to College Inventory (TCI) that predicted academic success: (a) self-confidence, (b) institutional commitment, and (c) independent activity focus. Like the commitment to a sport, noted by Scogin (2007), these three identified indicators speak to students' college experience beyond the classroom (Brecht & Burnett, 2019).

Affective Factors

Hossler et al. (2019) identified affective factors to be items such as creativity, emotional intelligence, and grit. Grit was also addressed in other studies reviewed (Beattie et al., 2016; Galla et al., 2019). While Beattie et al. (2019) identified grit as "perseverance of effort and consistency of effort" (p. 15), Hossler et al. (2019) identified grit as a challenging term in that it lacks a consistent definition. In their interviews with various enrollment professionals, they recorded a variety of institutional definitions, including a student's ability to succeed and overcome and as an indicator of the rigor of the student's previous coursework. To this point, Hossler et al. (2019) stated, "Students deserve a better sense of the relative importance of academic performance, as well as contextual factors and NAFs used in admissions decisions. NAFs and the role of touted factors like "grit" in admission decisions need more research" (p. 853).

Affective factors were also referenced by Lewine et al. (2019). In their study, they analyzed admission essays submitted by students who come from economically impoverished backgrounds and succeed academically. The computerized linguistic analysis tool, Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), used to analyze these essays, identified a positive correlation between affect and college GPA. Lewine et al. (2019) noted:

> As the LIWC measure Affect includes both positive and negative affect, we examined the relative contributions of each to GPA. Positive affect clearly emerged as the more important contributor (r = .50) than negative affect (r = .18) among the extreme poverty group. (p. 4)

Lewine et al. (2019) summarized affect to mean the emotional tone used by the student at the time the essay was produced. Sample words identified by LIWC that were associated with affect included *happy* and *cried*. Similar to Hossler et al. (2019), Lewine et al. (2019) called for more research to better understand non-cognitive factors as "learning is not just about cognitive strategies or learning styles, but just as importantly about the role of affect" (p. 4).

Divergent Findings

Aydin (2017) also studied non-cognitive factors as predictors of college-level success, but they drew different conclusions from those found by Kunkel (2016) and Galla et al. (2019). Aydin (2017) stated that "contrary to expectations, academic self-efficacy, organization and attention to study, involvement with college activities, and emotional satisfaction were not found as significant predictors" (p. 102). Aydin (2017) continued by sharing that their explained variance was not sufficient to predict academic success. They noted that there might be some problems with their inventory, so it should be discussed with caution. These varied outcomes leave room for additional research into how impactful non-cognitive measures can be in predicting student success.

Cognitive Factors

The most frequently identified cognitive factors identified in this literature review were high school grade point average (HSGPA) and standardized test scores, including the ACT and the SAT. However, there were several studies found that looked beyond these two factors. Arnold et al. (2016), Phelps and Chan (2016), Woods et al. (2018), and Takele (2017) all investigated cognitive factors beyond standardized test scores to predict college-level success. These included such factors as structure building, high school performance, and college entrance exams.

Structure Building

In their quantitative study, Arnold et al. (2016) focused on the structure building framework. They stated that "an assumption of the structure building framework is that

narratives have a structure and that comprehension involves building a coherent mental model that captures this intended structure." (Arnold et al., 2016, p. 454). Their research showed that students who display greater structure building skills are more likely to perform well in two disparate subject areas: psychology and biology. This research suggested that structure building can predict college-level success across an array of academic areas and is a core skill in comprehension. However, Arnold et al. (2016) did acknowledge that there is a lack of clarity in understanding if structure building skills can be taught and if such training would lead to greater academic success. They also noted there is a possibility that a yet-to-be-identified factor may play a part in driving the college-level success identified.

High School Performance

Student academic performance in high school is often represented as HSGPA, but some researchers have identified subsections of this common measurement. Woods et al. (2018) studied performance in higher-level high school courses as a predictor of success in college-level English and math. Their work enforced the notion that "as students add difficult or higher-level courses to their high school experience, they may be better prepared to pass their introductory English course" (Woods et al., 2018, p. 187). Additionally, Woods et al. (2018) noted that college advisors use previous course work as one element, along with other factors, to place students in future courses and that additional research should be done to further understand how to improve the flexibility of placement policies through a better understanding of the impact of previously completed high school coursework. This call for additional research showed that there is continued opportunity for research about how these elements, beyond test scores and GPA, can contribute to predicting college success.

College Entrance Exams

Takele (2017) studied a combination of college entrance exams as well as final high school grades in Ethiopia. This combination is similar to the use of HSGPA combined with ACT or SAT scores within the United States. Their work did identify this combination as a successful

predictor of college-level success, but they also acknowledged that there are many other factors that can impact success during college. The enrollment process, financial aid experience, and social support were some other potential indicators noted by Takele (2017). The acknowledgment of these non-cognitive factors supports the other studies uncovered in this review that identify non-cognitive factors as valid tools for predicting college success.

ACT and SAT were the most referenced college entrance exams in studies that took place in the United States. The scores on these exams highly correlated with each other (Galla et al., 2019). Although ACT scores and HSGPA both measure the academic skills and knowledge of a student, there is a notable difference. Galla et al. (2019) made it clear that grades focus largely on mastery of academic content but can also be impacted by non-academic factors such as effort and participation, while ACT is purely a measure of general intelligence.

Synthesis of Literature

A variety of studies have been done to identify predictors of college success. As discussed above, the results of these studies often found that a combination of cognitive and non-cognitive indicators created stronger predictability than academic factors alone. This literature review identified that high school grade point average (HSGPA) and standardized test scores were the predominant factors used for admission decision making for more than 80 years and that they both are viable, although perhaps limited, predictors of college success. Because HSGPA is built on both cognitive and non-cognitive elements, it has been shown to better predict long-term persistence and more accurately reflect a student's overall ability to perform academically as compared to a standardized test that measures pure cognitive ability.

In research done in the last 20 years, non-academic factors have been identified to be viable indicators of college success. However, little research has been done as to how these factors can be identified and effectively used within the college admission decision process. Many of the studies reviewed identified factors that only became knowable after college

entrance, including sports participation, career success after college, institutional commitment, and activity focus. Furthermore, only one study, by Lewine et al. (2019), was found that assessed first-person narratives submitted directly by the student. The lack of research focused on students' personal statements at the time of admission suggests that there is more research to be done to better identify predictors beyond standardized tests as they become less prevalent in college admission processes.

It was the intention of this researcher to move this field of study forward by addressing the statement posed by Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board: "I hear a lot of people criticize the SAT, I've yet to hear what should be put in its place" (Epstein, 2009, p. 11). Rather than identifying a test to replace the SAT or ACT, this study evaluated the short essay responses submitted by students as part of an admission appeal process at a regional, mid-sized, public university.

CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted to explore the details students choose to present in their personal stories as part of an admission appeal process for students who were initially denied admission to a regional public university. Additionally, this study explored how the admission committee members interpreted the student stories and utilized the presented information to offer their admission decision. An extensive review of previously published literature showed that various studies had been done throughout the past 20 years to better understand what academic and non-academic factors (NAFs) can be utilized to predict college-level success. Nevertheless, there is a gap in understanding how a student's first-hand narrative can be utilized to better understand their individual NAFs as presented in response to short essay prompts and how that information is received and utilized by the Admissions Appeals Committee members.

In conducting this study, the researcher utilized the narrative paradigm as proposed by Fisher (1988). Fisher stated when discussing the narrative paradigm, "I have also proposed that a significant feature of compelling stories is that they provide a rationale for decision and action" (p. 364). This paradigm aligned with the researcher's relativistic ontology and subjectivist epistemology. All these elements aligned with the decision to utilize an exploratory qualitative case study as addressed by (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To explore the students' stories and learn how they were used by the committee members, the researcher gathered admission appeal forms as submitted by students over a five-year span and used a data analysis spiral as presented by Creswell and Poth (2018) to identify codes and themes, and ultimately create a generalization of what was learned. Further data was added to this analysis by conducting a focus group with the Admissions Appeals Committee members. This chapter will review the methodology and paradigms used to develop and execute this qualitative study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to build on previous research that established non-academic factors (NAFs) as value-added tools to be used in the college admission process. Previous research identified that NAFs such as grit, self-regulation, basic personality factors, affective competencies, performance factors, attitudinal constructs, learning skills, and socioeconomic status (Aydin, 2017; Brecht & Burnett, 2019; Galla et al., 2019; Hossler et al., 2019) all had been used in predicting college-level success. Although this previous research was successful in demonstrating that these items do add value to college success predictions, they were lacking in that they did not address the first-person experience as told by a student. This research focused directly on personal stories as written by the students to explore how students presented their narratives. Additionally, this research focused on the committee members who evaluated these stories and how they used the presented stories to issue an admission decision.

As described in the theoretical framework section of Chapter 1, this qualitative research used a case study methodology and method. In this research, the case study focused on two data sources. One was a selection of admission appeal forms submitted by students who were denied admission to a regional public university. The second was built by holding a focus group interview with the Admissions Appeals Committee members.

This case study methodology was set within a narrative paradigm, as presented by Fisher (1985). The oldest form of communication is storytelling. Fisher utilized this basic level of communication as the foundation of his paradigm, which is a strong tool for analyzing the nature of human communication (The Narrative Paradigm, n.d.). When individuals present their stories, it is the burden of the listener to receive the story as the true reality of the teller. To achieve this, it must be accepted that multiple realities exist. Therefore, the researcher embraced a relativist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology.

Research Questions

To explore the case of this research, the following research questions were utilized:

RQ 1: How do students use narrative essay responses to explain their academic struggles during an admission appeal process?

RQ 2: How do members of an Admissions Appeals Committee at a regional public university utilize information from a student-written appeal to issue an admission decision?

Research Design

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2018), “Research is extensive, draws on multiple methods of data collection, and involves multiple data sources” (p. 50). Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) stated, “Relying on one source of data is typically not enough to develop this in-depth understanding” (p. 98). Using this guidance, the researcher utilized a qualitative case study approach to gather data from two sources. These data were then triangulated to obtain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and to address the previously stated research questions. First, methods triangulation was used in that data were gathered using both a focus group interview and field notes taken from student essay submissions. Second, data source triangulation was used by gathering data from a variety of sources, including students and committee members. Third, investigator triangulation was used by validating codes and themes with other enrollment professionals.

Patton (1999) noted that triangulation is valuable as it is based on the concept that no single method can adequately address the problem, and each method can reveal a new reality. This triangulation can be achieved in qualitative methods by combining multiple samples and perspectives. By including multiple data sources built with different sampling methods and addressed through different data collection methods, the researcher was able to bring forth multiple perspectives from both students and committee members to address this phenomenon. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that a case study must place the case as the central focus of

the study and establish an indeterminant boundary around the case. The boundary in this model consisted of concepts, settings, and sampling.

Case study research is enhanced by using multiple data sources so that evidence can be triangulated. This is crucial to identifying differing perspectives and supporting the final findings (Farquhar, 2012). This case study focused on two data sources, a collection of short essay answers submitted by 20 students who appealed their admission denial to a specific public regional university, and a focus group conducted with the Admissions Appeals Committee. These 20 appeals, selected using maximum variation sampling, represent five students from each of the academic years starting in 2018 through 2021. By selecting students from a variety of academic years, the researcher was able to avoid ‘anecdotalism,’ a process of selecting only a few examples that align with a desired outcome. This allowed for a richer and more complex exploration of the human behavior within this phenomenon (Briggs et al., 2012).

In the personal essays submitted in the appeal process, students responded to four questions created by the university that were meant to allow students to share their stories regarding individual academic and non-academic experiences:

1. Why do you wish to attend [name of university]?
2. What challenges did you encounter that may have negatively impacted your academic record?
3. What steps have you taken to prepare for academic success at [name of university]?
4. Please provide any additional information that may be useful in evaluating your appeal.

In establishing the boundaries of this case, the researcher chose to intentionally leave out other elements of the appeal process, such as letters of recommendation, as these items did not represent the first-person narrative of the student. As stated in Chapter 1, this research aligned with the narrative paradigm as defined by Fisher (1988). The exploratory nature of this

first data source was meant to focus on addressing RQ 1: How do students use narrative essay responses to explain their academic struggles during an admission appeal process?

The second data source in this research was built by gathering insights from committee members who reviewed the appeal applications and issued admission decisions. These data were gathered through a focus group. By engaging in dialogue with committee members in a focus group setting, the researcher was able to gather the stories of the decision-makers. Committee members were prompted to share how they interpreted the stories presented by students and how the information presented in the student appeals influenced the admission decision recommended by the committee member. By gathering data from the committee members in addition to the student appeal applications, the researcher was able to expand the research design by including small purposeful samples and established credibility by further comparing multiple data sources to increase the accuracy of information through triangulation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2018; Briggs et al., 2012).

Participant Selection

To identify the participant group for the first data source, the researcher reviewed the total number of appeal application submissions from the academic fall start dates of 2018 to 2021. Students seeking admission for fall 2018 were the first to be reviewed within the currently used admission appeal model. As shown in Table 1, the number of appeal applicants who completed the process and were issued an admission decision ranged from 24 to 83 per year.

Table 1

Count of Completed Admission Appeal Applications

Application Term	Count of Submissions
Fall 2018	83
Fall 2019	47
Fall 2020	65
Fall 2021	24

Note: This table was provided by the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the university where this research took place. *Application term* refers to the desired term of entry for each applicant. The *count of submissions* is a unique count of the appeal forms submitted for each term of interest.

The researcher sought to achieve a point of saturation by following guidelines put forth by Briggs et al. (2012). The guidelines recommend an interview count of between 10 and 25 participants. Although the first data source in this research involved the review of already submitted essay responses rather than interviews, the researcher took guidance from Creswell and Poth (2018) that the selection of 20 participants would be enough to achieve a level of information where no new information could be gathered. By dividing the 20 participants evenly across four years, the researcher assured even representation in this data source. This aligns with the recommendation by Creswell and Poth (2018) to not include more than four or five data sources (cases) in a single study. The population of the second data source in this study consisted of six individuals. These individuals made up the entire population of the appeal committee at the university where the research took place, minus three committee members who were not able to attend the focus group. Because of this, there was no need to reduce the sample size.

The participants in the first data source of this study included first-year applicants seeking admission to a regional public university who had been initially denied admission. To be

denied, the student's GPA and/or standardized test score (i.e., ACT or SAT) had to fall below the automatic admission criteria, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Automatic Admission Criteria

Criteria	Application Term	
	Pre 2020	2020 and Forward
Criterion 1	ACT 21+	GPA 3.0+
Criterion 2	GPA 3.0+ and ACT 17+	ACT 21+
Criterion 3	Top Half of Class and ACT 17+	Top Half of Class

Note: Regardless of ACT or SAT score, score submission was required for admission review prior to March 2020. As of March 2020, standardized test score submission became optional. As indicated in the table, these criteria were modified slightly during the years represented in this study. The most notable adjustment was the movement to a test-optional admission policy halfway through the fall 2020 recruitment cycle. These data were gathered through a review of historical admission publications. Meeting any one of the three criteria constituted automatic admission for a first-year applicant.

Procedures

Because of his role as director of undergraduate admissions, the researcher had direct access to all admission appeal documents from June 2017 to the present. To maintain ethical boundaries and remove bias from the coding process, the researcher pursued and received permission from the Institutional Review Board of his home institution. Through this process, the researcher was granted access to the student appeals, which allowed him to request anonymized data be delivered to him by a data analyst. No permissions were requested due to the anonymous nature of the submitted data.

Sampling

To build the first data source in this study, the researcher used maximum variation sampling, a process of identifying differentiating criteria in advance and selecting participants that differ on the criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To do this, the researcher first separated the list of students into individual lists based on their term of interest. From that point, the gender of each student was accounted for. The goal was to have two women and two men from each year of interest. The fifth slot for a given year was filled by a student with a gender other than man or woman. If no students met that criterion, the slot was given to whichever gender had more representation in that given year. After identifying the desired gender for each slot, the researcher reviewed the location of high school attended and corresponding class sizes to maximize representation of each of those categories. This approach allowed the researcher to maximize differences amongst the students at the beginning of the study and increased the potential for varying perspectives within the findings, which is ideal in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher used the following differentiators: (a) year of application, (b) gender, (c) location of high school, and (d) range of class size.

For the second data source in this study, the researcher focused on the Admissions Appeals Committee. This data source used total population sampling, a form of purposive sampling, to include the entire population of the admission committee. Because the researcher has chaired the search committee for five years, he believed this subjectively identified population would provide the data needed. Purposive sampling was appropriate for this type of situation (Fraenkel et al., 2019).

Setting

This research was conducted at a four-year public regional university. This public institution serves a mostly White (86%) undergraduate population that has more women than men enrolled. The university is set amid a community that has a metro population of approximately 250,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). This metropolitan area is 87.5%

White. Most students came from within 150 miles of the university. The overall student body was just over 5,000 students at the time of the research. Over 1,000 of those students were pursuing online graduate degrees. The remaining 4,000 students were primarily pursuing undergraduate degrees in a primarily face-to-face format.

Just over 31% of the undergraduate students attending the university in this study received a Pell Grant (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.a). This is just under the national average of 33.6%. To qualify for a Pell Grant from the federal government, a student and their family must have an expected family contribution (EFC) of less than $6,207 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The lower a student's EFC, the more aid is received. EFC can be seen as an indicator of socioeconomic standing, which has also been shown to correlate with substantial average score differences in standardized testing (National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008). This showed the researcher that nearly one-third of the undergraduate students in attendance came from a background where they were less likely to perform well on standardized testing.

Protection of Participants

The researcher assured the protection of the student participants by anonymizing all identifiable data through the data delivery process. Before the data were delivered to the researcher, the data analyst assigned a four-digit identification number to each record and stored that number, along with identifiable data, in her own password-protected cloud storage. This allowed for anonymity but left an opportunity for follow-up research. Only data necessary to implement the maximum variant sampling, along with the student statements, were delivered to the researcher. For the focus group participants, the researcher had all committee members who were willing to participate in the focus group sign a consent form. It was important that participants understood the intended casework. Delivering this information within a few paragraphs will typically suffice, but it is valuable to have more in-depth information available upon request (Stake, 1995). With this in mind, the consent form offered a short description of

the research and invited potential participants to reach out to the researcher should more information be desired.

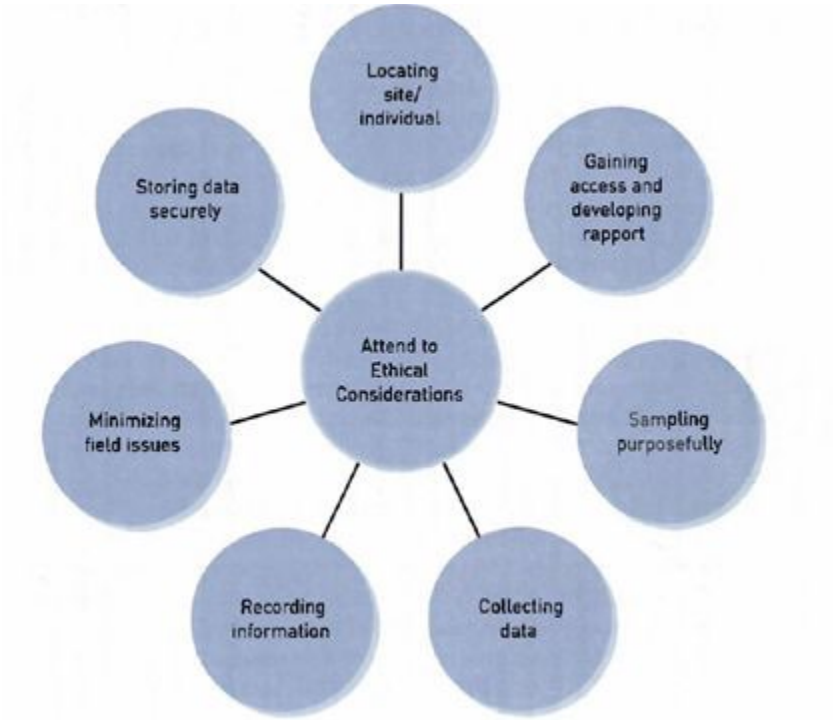
Data Collection

All data gathered for this research followed the process approved by the Institutional Review Board of the institution where the research took place. For the student appeal information, data collection was completed during the summer of 2022. The researcher emailed the associate director of operations in the Admissions Office of the university in which the research was set to formally request the data needed. This email asked for an Excel file that included all listed data elements identified in the email. Attached to the email was a copy of the letter signed by the vice president of enrollment management and student affairs that permitted the researcher to access the requested data. Two weeks after the request was submitted, electronic files containing the anonymized data for each student who submitted an admission appeal for fall semesters 2018 through 2021 were emailed, in the requested format, to the researcher by the associate director of operations. The data files were then moved to a password-protected cloud storage account. All data will be destroyed within three years of publication to allow for additional follow-up research.

Because the researcher in this study had direct access to the data used, it was important to establish a trackable path for the anonymized data being delivered. Therefore, there were multiple steps within the data collection process. Due to the circular nature of data collection, the researcher may begin at various entry points (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As shown in Figure 2, regardless of the starting point in data collection, it was important that the researcher kept a central focus on ethical concerns.

Figure 2

Data Collection Activities



Note. Taken from Creswell and Poth, 2018.

For the focus group portion of this research, the interview took place on Tuesday, November 8, 2022. Three weeks prior, the researcher emailed the committee members to introduce the research and included the informed consent letter as an attachment (see Appendix A). On the day of the interview, the committee members and the researcher met in a face-to-face meeting room. The researcher sat with the Admissions Appeals Committee members and introduced the study verbally, following the interview protocol (see Appendix B). After the introduction, the researcher distributed the consent form. The six committee members who signed and chose to participate stayed in the room. This process of clearly explaining the research was critical to avoid engaging in deception (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For the purposes of note-taking and future coding, the focus group was video and audio recorded and stored in a

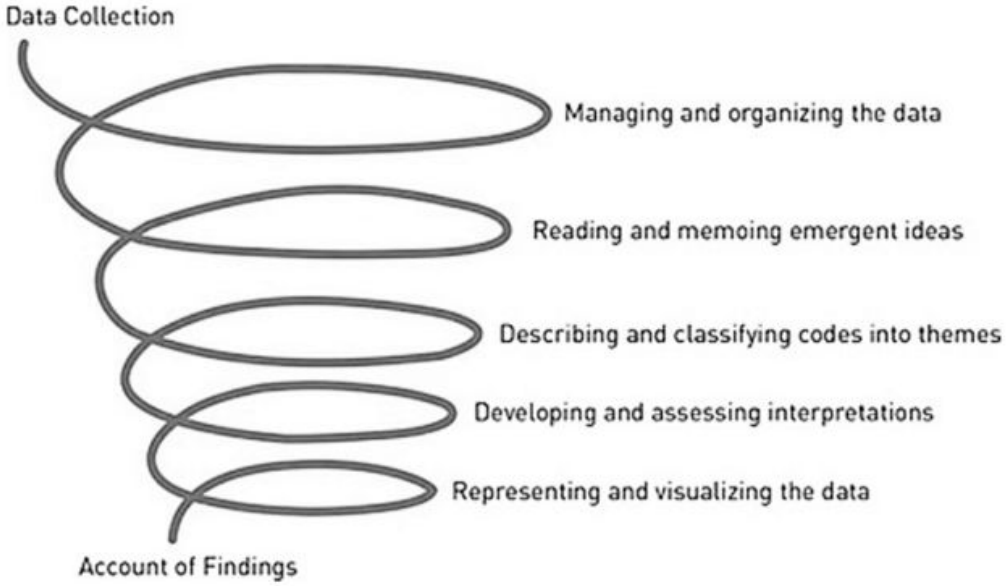
password-protected cloud account. Zoom was used as the recording and storage technology as it provided auto transcription, which was reviewed and corrected after the fact. All recordings will be destroyed within three years of publication.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the submitted student admission appeal forms were analyzed using the data analysis spiral as put forth by Creswell and Poth (2018). Figure 3 shows that this spiral contains five key steps.

Figure 3

The Data Analysis Spiral



Note. Taken from Creswell and Poth, 2018.

Although the data analysis spiral shows a top-to-bottom linear list, it is important to note that these steps are not distinctly linear and can take place simultaneously (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Managing and Organizing the Data

To begin the data analysis spiral, the researcher started with the admission appeal forms and utilized data columns as delivered by the institution to create maximum variation in the 20 appeals selected to be reviewed for codes and themes. The data elements used were the year of application, gender, location, and class size. Once the 20 appeal forms were identified, each set of appeal answers was separated out into 20 separate Word documents, one for each student. This separation of documents, along with the creation of a spreadsheet with a row for each participant, prepared the researcher to appropriately track codes and themes as they emerged and prepared the data for potential future studies. These documents were stored in a password-protected cloud folder. The files were each named “Admission Appeal Form XX” where XX was replaced by the anonymized ID assigned to each record received in the initial file.

To gather data from the single-session focus group interview, the session was video and audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, first by the auto-transcription provided in the software, then it was reviewed and corrected by the researcher. The video portion of the recording was only used to confirm who was speaking to allow for accurate transcription. Both the recording and the transcription were stored in a password-protected cloud folder.

Reading and Memoing Emergent Ideas

After the documents were organized, the researcher began the process of memoing emergent ideas by starting with a full read-through of each student’s appeal form. This was done to immerse the researcher in the details. During the read-throughs, the researcher made notes directly in the margins of the Word documents. This was done to help in the initial exploration of the transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These initial notes were precursors to creating codes and were written to begin to identify the meaning of the words rather than the words themselves, as explained by Miles and Huberman (1994). To prevent a cumbersome memoing process, the researcher focused on two types of memos: (a) segment memos to

capture ideas during the reading and (b) project memos to log concepts that ran throughout the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Classifying Codes

In this step of the spiral, the researcher created codes or categories. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this step represents the heart of qualitative data analysis and is the point where the researchers “build detailed descriptions, apply codes, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views” (p. 189).

The researcher started with the admission appeal forms and utilized the process of lean coding to identify six categories of codes. The codes were expanded only when necessary, resulting in a final list of 31 codes. After the final list was completed, the researcher created a codebook. After coding was complete, the researcher grouped the codes into four general themes, which created broader categories encompassing multiple codes. These themes were formed by analyzing the codes created and reviewing the initial memos generated in the first step of the spiral.

After coding the appeals forms, the researcher completed an initial read-through of the focus group interview transcript. The researcher then implemented the lean coding process, which ultimately developed 15 codes. The iterative process of the data analysis spiral allowed the researcher to move back and forth between coding and memoing. This led to the development of four key findings.

Interpreting the Data

Once the themes were generated, the researcher moved on to “developing and accessing interpretations.” The researcher looked to make sense of the data and identify what lessons could be learned. This process involved careful consideration of the patterns, themes, and categories that emerged from the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To help confirm the themes identified, the research utilized peer feedback on the initial data interpretations to assist in clearly articulating identified themes. Affirming Feedback was given by the Director of

Admissions at a similarly structured public university that utilized similar admission criteria. This feedback solidified the themes identified in this research.

Visual Representation

As recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher utilized direct interpretation of the data to "develop naturalistic generalizations of what was learned" (p. 199). The lessons learned were portrayed through metaphors and narration. Additionally, codes and themes were displayed in categorized lists and color coded within the text. The interpretive summaries developed were used to create summary statements that addressed the research questions and identified what was learned.

Instruments

Admission Appeal Form

The researcher chose to use the online admission appeal form (see Appendix C) completed by students who chose to appeal their admission to the regional public university addressed in this research. This form was readily available to all applicants denied admission and represented the single opportunity the student had to share their direct stories and experiences. After a student was denied admission, they received an automated email from the director of undergraduate admissions that shared with them their opportunity to appeal the admission decision and provided a link to the online form. In the form, students received the following prompt, "Answer the following appeal questions in a thoughtful and thorough manner. These are prompts for you to explain your individual situation so that the Admission Committee can take a holistic view of your application."

1. Why do you wish to attend [name of university]?
2. What challenges did you encounter that may have negatively impacted your academic record?
3. What steps have you taken to prepare for academic success at [name of university]?
4. Please provide any additional information that may be useful in evaluating your appeal.

In the appeal process, students were also prompted to have two letters of recommendation submitted by teachers from core subject areas. These letters were not included in the research case as they did not represent the first-person narrative of the student as previously stated.

The answers from the admission appeal form were loaded into the customer relationship management software used by the admissions office. This allowed for the student answers, along with the other data elements used to build the sample, to be downloaded as an Excel document. The samples were then anonymized by the admissions office's data analyst and delivered to the researcher via email.

Focus Group Interview Protocol

For the distinct purpose of this research, the researcher conducted the focus group in a face-to-face, semi-structured interview setting. The focus group setting was advantageous because the decisions of the committee were not made in isolation, so a focus group discussion resembled real discussions that took place during the appeals process regarding student narratives. Additionally, the use of a protocol (see Appendix B) ensured that there was a focus on getting data that was directly related to the research questions. This format allowed for much more efficient data collection versus a one-on-one interview method and allowed participants to be less hesitant in their sharing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To develop the interview questions, the researcher, guided by previous experience with admission appeal processes, drafted an initial question bank. The researcher then met with two assistant directors of admissions who have both been involved with and have taken turns leading the Admissions Appeals Committee meetings for multiple years. In this meeting, the researcher presented the focus group plan and shared the drafted questions, which triggered open discussion amongst the three of them. Feedback was recorded in the form of written notes. Adjustments to the questions were made

accordingly (see Appendix D). The open-ended question structure allowed for flexibility in that follow-up questions and committee member conversations could flow naturally.

Hardware and Software

A laptop with an external webcam was used in the focus group room to capture both audio and video through Zoom. The recording was stored in the cloud, which allowed for continued access via a webpage login. The Zoom auto transcript feature was utilized to create the first draft of the transcription, which was then reviewed and corrected by the researcher.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher's role was to gather the data, analyze the selected data elements, and report on the findings. This process began by emailing the assistant director for data and operations at the institution of interest and requesting the required data (see Appendix E). The request was accompanied by IRB documentation to let the assistant director know the sharing of data would be appropriate. The researcher then contacted the Admissions Appeals Committee members via email to notify them of the research (see Appendix F). At the beginning of the focus group interview, the researcher gathered consent signatures before conducting the focus group. The researcher, with assistance from auto-transcription technology, transcribed the focus group recording. The knowledge of how to conduct this qualitative research was gained through coursework offered in the Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership program at Minnesota State University Moorhead.

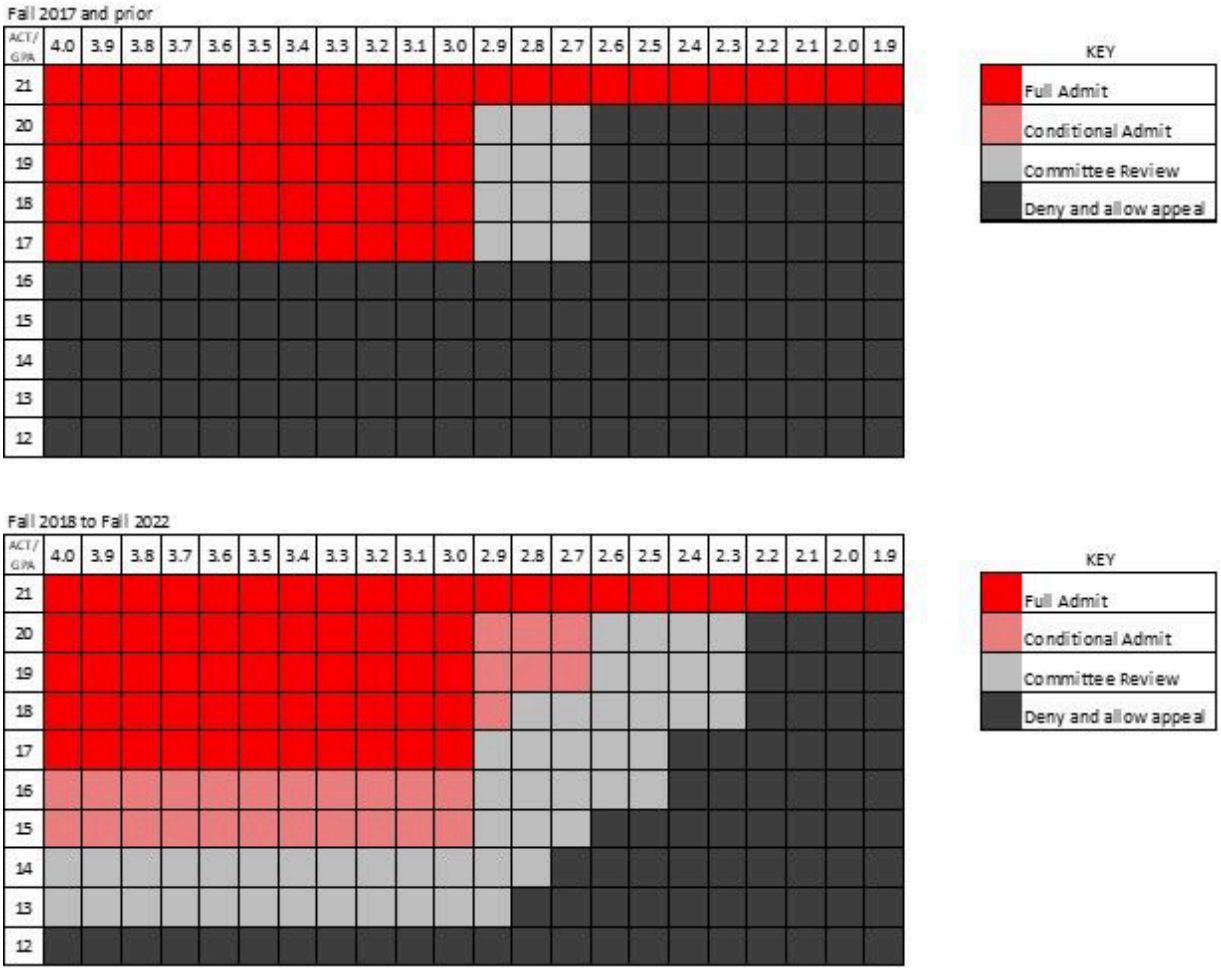
Previous Knowledge and Bias

A deep understanding of the procedural elements of the admission appeal process was known to the researcher due to his position as the director of undergraduate admissions at the university where this research took place. In this role, he served as the chair of the Admissions Appeals Committee. This role did create potential bias during the focus group interview. The researcher took note of the potential power differential between himself and the committee members. The researcher did note during the focus group that all information shared would only

be used for research purposes and would not be discussed again within the future work of the committee. As chair, the researcher guided the conversations and called for votes from the committee on each student under review. Although the researcher guided this process, procedures were in place prior to his arrival at the university. This structure included both the makeup of the committee and the appeal form used. Over the last five years, the questions posed to students have not changed. However, as shown in Figure 4, the process in place that leads to an initial denial of a student has been adjusted. This inherently changed which students ultimately submitted appeals.

Figure 4

Admission Decision Grid



Note: This grid was provided by the Office of Undergraduate Admissions at the university where this research took place. The left column represents ACT composite scores, and the top row represents cumulative high school grade point average. The top chart shows the automatic admissions decision grid for students who applied to attend in fall 2017 and prior. The bottom chart shows the grid for students who applied to attend from fall 2018 through fall 2022.

The efforts demonstrated in this work done by the researcher showed a clear bias to improve admission outcomes and create a process that reduces barriers for potential students.

To create a more holistic and engaging admission appeal process, the researcher, in his role as director of admissions, expanded the criteria, allowing more students to be reviewed by the committee prior to receiving an initial denial letter. After initial review, if the committee was uncertain about a decision, they had the option to invite a student to submit an appeal form without first receiving the formal denial letter. Based on an analysis of the 2017 historical data, the researcher noted that this process would reduce the number of automatic denials by 59% and allow nearly 10% of the previously denied students to receive immediate admission without a formal appeal.

Ethical Considerations

As guided by Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher implemented a framework for ethical considerations in research. It is critical that a researcher considers ethical issues during the planning and designing phases of qualitative research. To accomplish this, the researcher sought approval from the Institutional Review Board at the research site. Additionally, the researcher had multiple conversations with the vice president for enrollment management and student affairs (VP EMSA) to address any concerns and to create an understanding of how the data would be handled and how the research would be kept separate from the researcher's work. This was critical because the VP EMSA was the researcher's direct supervisor and the advisor to the Admissions Appeals Committee. The VP EMSA also had a vested interest in the enrollment efforts that took place through the work of the committee. Because of these intertwined issues and levels of power, there was ethical concern about the potential vested interests the researcher might have in the outcomes of this study. To address this, once the researcher began to explore the potential of researching phenomena related to the admission appeal process, he temporarily stepped away from the active meetings in which appeal decisions were being made and appointed two assistant directors to run these meetings.

Conclusion

These data were collected and analyzed to build on the already existing narrative that non-academic factors (NAFs) do add value to the admission process. More specifically, this research focused on how NAFs are utilized within the admission appeal process for students initially denied admission. This qualitative case study focused on two data sources that stand on either side of the admission appeal process. The first data source focused on the stories told by the students within their appeal statements. The second data source focused on how the members of the appeal committee used the information provided to issue an admission decision.

These data were built using two different data collection methods. The student data were gathered from admission appeal forms submitted between 2018 and 2021. Using maximum variant sampling, 20 student appeals were selected. The second data source was the entire population of the Admissions Appeals Committee. The data were collected through a focus group interview.

After the data were collected, the data analysis spiral, as presented by Creswell and Poth (2018), was used to analyze the data which led to the creation of codes and themes. The process concluded with the development of interpretive summaries, which were built on the themes, codes, and memos, using direct statements from the transcripts. Chapter 4 will explore this in-depth data analysis and address this phenomenon through the narrative paradigm. The stories told by students and the perception of those stories by the appeal committee will be described. Through this exploration, a better understanding of this single-direction exchange will emerge and be identified.

CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how students chose to tell their stories through their admission appeal and how the appeal committee members utilized the student stories to influence their decision to admit or deny the student. Chapter 4 details the information gathering and research methods used as laid out in Chapters 1-3. This process included gathering data from admissions appeal statements previously submitted by students seeking admission into a regional public university and gathering data during a one-hour focus group interview with members of the Admissions Appeals Committee. The analysis of this data was done to explore how students chose to represent their personal stories in responding to the provided prompts and how the committee members chose to use the provided student stories to issue their admission decision.

Initial findings from this analysis identified several common reference points used by students in their personal statements, including references to university attributes, acknowledgment of family and friend recommendations, identification of time management challenges, and concerns regarding mental health conditions. Additionally, common themes were found in analyzing the data gathered from the Admissions Appeals Committee members. These findings include an increased likelihood of offering admission when students presented personal challenges and problems that are accompanied by identified solutions, referenced specific university resources they plan to use, identified mental health conditions, or referenced campus connections through family and friends. These findings are further explained in the results and presentation of data analysis within this chapter and are separated out by each data source.

Researcher's Role

Over the last 15 years, the researcher has played a role in the admission appeal process at a variety of institutions, including public, private, for-profit, and not-for-profit universities. With these experiences in mind, the researcher understood how complex and unclear an admission

appeal process can be for a student. The researcher also had a clear understanding that the process had significant differences from one institution to another. One common aspect that the researcher identified as playing a large role in the admission appeal process was the personal statement submitted by the student. He saw these student statements used in various ways at different institutions. Because of this, the researcher wanted to understand how students chose to represent their personal stories within their admission appeal process and how the committee members chose to use this information for admissions purposes.

In reviewing published research focused on college admissions processes and personal narratives, the researcher discovered that little exploration had been done on how students told their story as part of an admission appeal process and how that information was used to make decisions by an admissions committee. This identified gap inspired the researcher to embark on this qualitative case study, which included both exploring student statements and conducting a focus group interview with the Admissions Appeals Committee.

To embark on this research and explore student statements along with Admissions Appeals Committee member experiences, the researcher first gained permission from the university at which this research took place. Then, he gathered historical admission appeal data as well as conducted a focus group interview with committee members. Once the data were gathered, the researcher conducted an analysis on both data sets. This process is explained in more detail in the research methodology applied to the data analysis section of this chapter.

This project was the first qualitative case study done by the researcher. His time spent in higher education, along with his interest in creating an equitable and inclusive admissions process, inspired him to explore this specific appeal process. He had hopes of discovering opportunities to make impactful improvements at his current institution and inspire additional research and improved processes throughout higher education.

Description of Sample

This research included data from two sources. The first source was student appeal submissions, and the second was a focus group interview with Admissions Appeals Committee members. Both sources were from the same public regional university located in the Midwest region of the United States. The research location has used the same admission appeal process for at least six years. This consistent process allowed for the data gathered to represent undergraduate, domestic, degree-seeking students and their experiences navigating an appeal to their admission denial spanning multiple years.

Student Data

The first portion of this research focused on student stories as presented in their personal statements that were submitted as part of the admission appeal. Student appeal submissions were identified using maximum variation sampling. The researcher first received a data file from the admissions data analyst that included data elements from all appeal submissions from 2018 to 2021. From that list, the researcher selected five participants from each year and focused on variations in gender, ethnicity, school, and class size. Because the data were given to the researcher in an anonymized format, and all admission files for the students identified were no longer active, informed consent was not needed.

The initial file contained information on 397 admission appeals submitted between 2018 and 2021. Table 3 displays the breakdown of the 20 selected student records.

Table 3

Baseline Characteristics of Full Sample and Selected Participants

Baseline characteristic	Selected Participants		Full sample	
	n	%	*n*	%
Gender				
Female	9	45	195	49
Male	9	45	200	50
Unknown	2	10	2	1
Race and Ethnicity				
Two or More	1	5	34	9
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	5	5	1
Asian	1	5	5	1
Black or African American	5	25	98	25
Hispanic or Latino	1	5	10	3
White	10	50	241	61
Unknown	1	5	4	1
Class Size				
Not Reported	1	5	91	23
1-100	6	30	92	23
101-200	1	5	32	8
201-300	3	15	59	15
301-400	3	15	64	16
401-500	4	20	45	11
501-600	0	0	7	2
601-700	2	10	6	2
701-800	0	0	1	0
Year of Application				
2018	5	25	134	34
2019	5	25	88	22
2020	6	30	119	30
2021	4	20	56	14

Note: N = 397 (*n* = 20 for selected participants). Gender and race and ethnicity data were self-reported by applicants and were provided in the initial data set. Class size was retrieved from student transcripts and was provided in the initial data set. Term of application refers to the desired term of entry for each applicant. The count of submissions is a unique count of the appeal forms selected for each term of interest.

Committee Members

The second sample used for data collection was identified using total population sampling, which is a form of purposive sampling. In this research, the total population used was the complete membership of the Admissions Appeals Committee at the university at which this research took place. As the chair of the Admissions Appeals Committee at the research site, the researcher had a prior working relationship with all members of the committee. To reduce the potential influence on committee members' opinions, the researcher stepped away from the active decision-making meetings during the 2021-2022 academic year. Additionally, the focus group took place in a different location and at a different time than the regularly scheduled committee meetings. Although all members of the committee were invited to take part in the research, six agreed and were able to participate. Participation was affirmed through gathering signed informed consent letters (see Appendix A). Data from this sample were gathered during a one-hour semi-structured focus group interview.

The committee members who chose to participate in the research represented the Office of Undergraduate Admissions, Office of the Registrar, Academic Success Center, and Inter Faculty Organization. All participants were White. Five participants identified as women, and one identified as a man.

Research Methodology Applied to the Data Analysis

The researcher used data gathered from two sources. The first source was a data file provided by the university, which contained personal statements submitted by students seeking college admission through an appeal process. Maximum variant sampling was used to identify the student appeal submissions used in this research. To gather the initial data, the researcher gained permission from a university administrator and from the institutional review board. With this granted permission, the researcher emailed the university data analyst to request the data for all appeal submissions for the years covering 2018 to 2021 (see Appendix E). The student appeal statements were delivered in a Microsoft Excel file. The following data fields were

included for each student submission: (a) unique identifier, (b) iteration name, (c) appeal question one response, (d) appeal question two response, (e) appeal question three response, (f) appeal question four response, (g) appeal status, (h) contact city, (i) contact state, (j) ethnicity, (k) ethnicity count, (l) gender, (m) high school class size. The researcher used these data to separate the submissions by gender, ethnicity, city, and class size to allow for maximum variation in the 20 selected appeals.

Once identified, the personal statements given by each of the 20 students for each of the four appeal questions were compiled in a Word document and printed. To immerse himself in the data, the researcher read through the complete document from top to bottom. Then he combined the four statements submitted by each individual and read those compilations as 20 separate documents. Through this immersive process, the researcher was able to develop a cohesive view of the individuals to see them each as a full person.

After the initial immersion process, the researcher read through the statements grouped by question and highlighted common phrases while writing out potential codes. After fully reading through each of the statements for each question prompt, the researcher moved back to the Word document on the computer and color coded the identified codes along with the corresponding statements. He then compiled a list of students under each code to allow for a better understanding of the overall presence of each. Codes were then grouped into themes using an iterative process that followed the data analysis spiral as presented by Creswell and Poth (2018). Additionally, final codes were shared with the director of admissions from a similar university. The researcher scheduled a phone call with that director. On the call, the researcher gave an overview of the appeals process and shared the questions asked to applicants. After sharing this information, the researcher asked the director if he had worked with a similar process. Upon confirmation from the director, the researcher then shared the final codes and themes along with sample phrases. The researcher also shared the frequency at which these

codes came up within the data. The director confirmed they had encountered similar statements and experienced similar patterns within their process of reviewing admission appeals.

The second data source was the information gathered during the focus group interview with members of the Admissions Appeals Committee. The committee member sample group was identified using total population sampling, a form of purposive sampling. Nine individuals who had served as members of the Admissions Appeals Committee were invited via email to take part in a one-hour focus group interview (see Appendix F). Due to conflicts, six committee members participated in the focus group. The focus group interview was conducted in-person with one member attending via Zoom. The Zoom meeting was recorded and stored securely in cloud storage. Both the video recording and the automatic meeting transcription built into the Zoom software were used to generate the initial transcript. The researcher then listened to the live recording while following along on the computer-generated transcript, pausing, and making corrections when errors were discovered. The researcher also anonymized participants in the process by replacing names with participant numbers one through six. Upon completion of transcription, the researcher sent the transcript to three committee members who participated in the focus group to confirm accuracy.

After the transcript was confirmed, the researcher watched the full recording without note-taking to become immersed in the conversation. He then listened to the recording again, pausing along the way to highlight common statements and phrases within the transcript. After two rounds of listening and highlighting, the researcher wrote an initial list of codes and color-coordinated those codes with the highlighted statements. Statements and codes were then reviewed, modified, and grouped into themes. Through each step of this process, previous steps were revisited and adjusted as a deeper understanding of the data were gathered. After an initial draft of findings was written, the researcher rewatched the video recording and made field notes of committee members' interactions, non-verbal body language, and overall room

presence. This iterative process follows the guidelines in the data analysis spiral as presented by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Results and Presentation of Data Analysis

The data analysis done in the research identified four key findings within the appeal submissions and four key findings within the Admissions Appeals Committee member focus group. A summary of these findings is presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4

Appeal Submissions Key Findings

Key Finding	Frequency	Sample Statement
To convey their interest in attending the university, students complimented extracurricular and academic features of the university	13 of 20	“I wish to attend [the university] because of the outstanding Biology department” (Student 1).
Students identified recommendations and experiences had by family and friends as drivers for their desire to enroll	6 of 20	“I have also heard from friends and family that [the university] is a great school to attend” (Student 15).
Students identified time management as a challenge	7 of 20	“I had to make a time management for myself to get my work done on time” (Student 3).
Mental health was identified as a challenge	8 of 20	“I have depression and it took hold of me causing me not to care about my grade as much when I was in 10th and 11th grade. It caused me not to do well in Math class. Also, I have a learning disability. When I read something, my brain doesn't process it correctly so I have to reread it or have to have some read to me so I can get what the meaning behind what I am reading” (Student 17).

Note: Sample statements were taken directly from student appeals submissions.

Table 5

Admissions Appeals Committee Member Focus Group Key Findings

Key Finding	Frequency	Sample Statement
Committee members were more likely to offer admission when a student identified their personal challenges and problems and presented solutions	4 of 6	"If I can see that in a personal statement… that a student is asking for the help from folks as they need it, that is a positive trait that I think will, or I assume, will transfer to the collegiate level" (Committee Member 1).
Committee members were more inclined to offer admission when students were able to identify university specific resources that would help them in their education	4 of 6	"I always liked when a student was able to identify those solutions within our community as well, so that, clearly showing they had taken the time to identify at [University]" (Committee Member 4).
Statements regarding mental health can positively impact committee members' admission decisions	6 of 6	"I try to look at the entire picture of what I'm seeing…. I try to take it all in um. But if they do mention mental health, I probably do tend to lean towards more um favoring admission" (Committee Member 5)
References to family and friends attending the university creates mixed sentiments from committee members	6 of 6[a]	"It's never something where I'm like oh, well, I am glad that they have a friend or family member that's gone here. So, you know, I would say it's like almost like a completely neutral thing to me" (Committee Member 1).

Note: Sample statements were taken directly from student appeals submissions.

[a]Four of the six committee members stated a neutral impact while two of the six noted a negative impact on their decision to admit when family and friend connections were given by students.

Appeal Submissions

The purpose of the review of the admissions appeal statements was to address the first research question in this study: How do students use narrative essay responses to explain their academic struggles during an admission appeal process? The admission appeal statements consisted of the student responses to four prompts.

1. Why do you wish to attend [name of university]?
2. What challenges did you encounter that may have negatively impacted your academic record?
3. What steps have you taken to prepare for academic success at [name of university]?
4. Please provide any additional information that may be useful in evaluating your appeal.

Finding 1: To convey their interest in attending the university, students complimented extracurricular and academic features of the university

Thirteen of the 20 student statements reviewed included highlights of their interest in various features of the school. These highlights included academic programs, university size, and campus environment. When articulating why they wanted to attend the university, Student 16 stated, “[The university] cultivates a far more relaxed learning environment. This alleviates much of the previous pressure schooling has had on me, as well as conforming more to my accommodations.” Student 14 echoed these remarks when stating, “I wish to attend [the university] because the environment of the campus and the overall atmosphere. I believe [the university] has the characteristics to help me succeed in my academic goals as well as many others.” Because the purpose of the admission appeal was to gain a positive admission decision, the researcher surmised that the students felt compelled to compliment the university to gain favor from the committee. To this end, the students’ statements focused on flattery rather than personal interests and goals.

Other students wrote more directly about the academic offerings and features. Student 9 stated, “I wish to attend [the university] because they offer great programs and learning

opportunities." Similarly, Student 1 noted, "I wish to attend [the university] because of the outstanding Biology Department."

Another feature referenced by students was the size of the university. Student 3 wrote, "I want to attend [the university] because it is a small university." Student 4 similarly stated:

> After taking a tour through a few universities, [the university] stood out to me. The campus wasn't too big or too small. I know the campus will be a good fit for me to start pushing through my own comfort zone at a comfortable pace. Sounds ideal to my own learning capabilities and learning style.

Finding 2: Students identified recommendations and experiences had by family and friends as drivers for their desire to enroll

Students referenced family and friends as motivators to enroll in the university. Some students explicitly noted a recommendation while others inferred it by stating they knew family and friends who had attended. "My family friends and some of my family have [sic] went to [the university]. It is a dream of mine to go there and play club baseball there" (Student 11). Similarly, Student 17 stated, "I believe I would thrive at [the university] because I have a dear friend who attends and I know she can keep me grounded at all times." Additionally, Student 20 noted, "I wish to attend [the university] because my sister recently graduated and loved her time and the education she gained as a [member of campus]."

More direct recommendation statements were shared by other students. "I've had friends and family that went here and I [sic] heard so many good and positive comments about the school" (Student 6). Student 15 stated, "I have also heard from friends and family that [the university] is a great school to attend."

Finding 3: Students identified time management as a challenge

When identifying academic challenges, lack of necessary time to perform school tasks, along with overall time management, was referenced by eight of the 20 students. These

statements came in the form of referencing school activities, family commitments, and jobs. In identifying these challenges, Student 12 wrote:

> I think the biggest endeavor that I have faced in my academic career is the fact that I have always needed to work full time, this leaves very little time for studying and staying healthy…. Finally, time management was also a difficult factor to balance between work, school, and family.

One school activity referenced by multiple students was athletics. “I was a three-sport athlete of four years in high school” (Student 5). Similarly, Student 11 wrote, “I also was a three-sport athlete and I couldn't handle not having enough time or help when I got done with my sports.” Student 15 also identified athletic participation as a time constraint. They stated, “I have also been a two-sport athlete my entire high school career. This has brought time constraints into my academics.”

Separate from identifying specific time commitments, Student 6 summarized their overall journey of developing time management through course selection while navigating school. They stated:

> I encouraged myself to take as many classes as I could thinking it wouldn’t be as hard. However, this had a bit of an effect on my grades due to so much work, so I’ve learned from my mistakes and took the right amount of classes and worked my way through out and reached my goal.

Finding 4: Mental health was identified as a challenge

Self-disclosed mental health conditions were also identified as a challenge in achieving academic goals. Eight of the 20 students identified either mental health in general or a specific mental health condition when describing their academic challenges. Student 4 identified this challenge by stating, “Having a family history of mental illness and addiction happened to impact my day-to-day life for long period of time.”

Student 16 self-disclosed mental health concerns by both stating a specific mental health condition and identifying general mental stress concerns. They stated:

> On top of my diagnosed [attention deficit hyperactive disorder] (ADHD) and anxiety, my final year at [my previous institution] was rife with emotional and mental stress. There was also a rather toxic situation in my social life. Coupled together, I was completely preoccupied with these issues to the point it affected my ability to focus on schooling. However, these problems were extremely circumstantial with the school I was at, and no longer affect me. (Student 16)

Student 8 addressed their mental health by identifying a specific mental health condition. They stated:

> I was also falling behind in school, so I was held back in first grade where I was diagnosed with ADHD and a learning disability. I have worked very hard over the past 12 years since those diagnoses to better myself and my academic achievements.

Different from the previous given examples, Student 19 described their situation in broad terms without specifically stating mental health. They wrote:

> I started to change who I was so I wouldn't lose the people around me, but I ended up finding myself more and more unhappy and more and more left out. It got to the point where to [sic] stuff that used to make me happy didn't any more. I would isolate myself from everyone. I didn't want to do anything but lay in bed, so I stopped doing my homework and stopped trying in school.

Focus Group

The purpose of the focus group was to focus on the second research question. "How do members of an Admissions Appeals Committee at a regional public university utilize information from a student-written appeal to issue an admission decision?" Committee members gathered on both sides of a long boardroom style table with seating for eight on either side. They spaced themselves out with chairs in between them. Four members sat on one side, and the fifth in-room

participant joined the researcher on the other. The sixth participant, joining virtually, was shown on a large projection screen at the head of the table.

Finding 1: Committee members were more likely to offer admission when a student identified their personal challenges and problems and presented solutions

A significant finding was how many committee members were more inclined to admit a student when the student was able to articulate their challenges and present tools and methods to overcome those challenges. Four of the six participants made direct statements on this point. These statements focused on their perceptions that a student represented an honest experience and clearly identified solutions to how they plan to overcome their challenges. Committee Member 2 spoke first on this topic. The researcher noted the committee member was comfortably reclined in their chair with their legs crossed. Clearing their throat, Committee Member 2 stated:

> I think it's really good when a student really has that honesty, and really um can own up to like where they have challenges or where they could improve, because you can't really do better if you don't really know where you need to do better…. So like a really clear action plan … of how they're [going to] improve or what they're [going to] do better is really helpful.

Committee Member 3, positioned forward in their chair, elbows on the table, and in a tone of agreement, added to this by stating, “I think when a student shows that they clearly see what was negatively affecting their schoolwork and then they were trying to rectify it, those really stand out.” Committee Member 4 expanded on this finding in noting that they were even more inclined to admit a student when the solutions identified by the student specifically aligned with resources offered at the university. To this point, Committee Member 4 spoke in a clear tone. In noting their agreement, they stated:

> I always liked when a student was able to identify those solutions within our community as well, so that, clearly showing they had taken the time to identify at [University]. [For

> Example,] you know writing is not my strong suit, so I plan on using the writing support center.

Committee Member 2 also showed a positive inclination to admit when a student identified their challenges and connected their solutions to resources available at the university. Returning to the initial statements 15 minutes into the conversation, Committee Member 2 recapped their thoughts and stated:

> I think one of the biggest things I honestly look for in just all of the whole letter is this student motivated…. I think things like identifying challenges and identifying strategies to um to turn things around and succeed or identifying resources available at [University] or any sort of thing where they're like doing just a little bit of work when they're writing their answers instead of just writing them. I think that shows that there is potential for motivation and potential for success. So that's something that always makes me lean towards positive.

Committee Member 3 shared multiple detailed stories they recalled from specific admissions appeals and noted the value of this first finding when discussing the alignment of a student's stated experiences with their academic performance. While Committee Member 3 shared these stories, the researcher recorded that multiple other committee members focused intently, showed agreement by nodding along, and offered auditory support by saying "mm-hmm". After sharing these stories, Committee Member 3 summarized their thoughts and stated:

> I think it's really helpful if you see these weird grade patterns, and you don't know what's going on. And then [the student is] able to explicitly show like this is exactly what caused it…. And in some of the situations you know that them being away from that is gonna really help them.

Committee Member 5, as noted by the researcher, spoke hesitantly and with an apologetic tone, and gave several student examples where they thought the student was experiencing a negative situation and would benefit from leaving that situation behind and joining the

community at the university. These examples included students experiencing homelessness and students carrying heavy home life obligations, such as caring for siblings.

Committee Member 1 echoed this sentiment and acknowledged the difficulty a student might face in articulating their challenges in life. To this point, Committee Member 1 stated:

> They were willing to explain that situation, and maybe that was difficult for them to commit to paper. I have a lot of respect for that, and I think I do feel that emotional, empathetic part, like that emotional or empathetic side of me feels a little bit more inclined to admitting.

Finding 2: Committee members were more inclined to offer admission when students were able to identify university specific resources that would help them in their education

When discussing the initial prompt of what factors that you see in a student appeals essay stand out to you, four of the six participants referenced students identifying university specific features as a factor. Committee Member 5, leaning forward but showing nervousness by rubbing their neck, stated:

> I'm impressed when students have done research on the University, and they know where to seek out the information like the Writing Support Center [or] Academic Success Center. When they note that in their letter, it [shows me] the student really wants to be here and has done their research.

Hesitantly and with pause in their voice, Committee Member 2 added to that and pointed out a positive inclination to admit when a student connects with the academic offerings of the university. Committee Member 2 stated it is positive when students state, “I know I want to pursue this degree, and I know [the university] has these services [or] these opportunities within this degree, and not just because my parents or friends of mine went there.”

In response to these topics, the researcher asked, “If a student is stating features of [the university], does that make you more or less inclined [to admit]?” Four of the six participants

stated they were more likely to admit when students make statements about university features. Speaking hurriedly and almost on top of each other, three committee members blurted out "more." Committee Member 1 then stated, "They've done some homework. They know what services that we have or learning options that we have. That shows more investment overall." Committee Member 3 then added, "It shows to me that they want to go to [the university]. As opposed to somewhere else."

Finding 3: Statements regarding mental health can positively impact committee members' admission decision

Aspects of mental health arose throughout the focus group interview and were presented in a variety of terms, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and depression. Prior to any specific prompts regarding mental health, Committee Member 1 referenced both ADHD and mental illness in general. Because of those statements, the researcher asked the group "does the existence or discussion of mental health as a factor make you more or less inclined to offer admission?" From that prompt, all six participants said mental health was a factor that, when identified by the student, can have a positive impact on an admission decision. Five of the six participants noted that they preferred to not only know about the mental health concern but also see that the student identified tools to address the stated concern. Committee Member 3, when referencing mental health concerns, spoke emphatically and with hand gestures. "It makes me more willing [to admit a student] when [they] are able to acknowledge something that big" (Committee Member 3). The researcher noted a slight contrarian tone from Committee Member 4 as they followed up by stating their concern when a mental health concern was identified but solutions were not addressed. Committee Member 4 stated:

> I struggled with this, and then they don't address how they're going to follow up with all these resources on our campus…. If they haven't identified the action plan to follow that,

> or if it's something where you know it’s beyond the scope of our professionals on campus, [the student] might not be well suited [for admission].

These statements were met by multiple head nods. Committee Member 1 then joined the conversation again and noted when speaking about students:

> I want you to be able to address how that affected you and how you can kind of stem the tide and turn it around. So, if [your statement is] merely just stating it, and then moving on, that's not sufficient to me. But if the statement provides a context for it, how they plan to improve, that's what I want to see.

Continued discussion on mental health also led to a comparison of mental health factors before and during the global COVID-19 pandemic. Committee Member 4 noted that students may have identified a challenge as a symptom of the pandemic but not explicitly referenced a mental health concern, which may have led students to identify mental health issues less frequently. Committee Member 6 agreed and stated, “Online learning was [the students’] struggle point and maybe not addressing things that were still a factor, [such as mental health].”

In agreement with other participants, Committee Member 2 stated their desire to have students not only recognize a mental health concern but also identify tools and solutions. In referring to a hypothetical appeal applicant, Committee Member 2 stated:

> If they just say, oh, I have anxiety like, Okay? Well, tell me more like, how is that a barrier like is just saying that you have it the barrier, or is it a barrier because I have ADHD and I can't focus when I'm taking tests. So, I got not great grades, because when I would take tests, I wouldn't focus, and I'd run out of time. like that sort of thing if they can address like where the barrier is, and the barrier is something like, Okay, well this student just might need some extended time on tests here at [University], [Center Director] can help them um with accommodations through accessibility resources, we can remove that barrier…. I think that's something … I'm more apt to admit them versus

> you know I have this, and it. They might just say it as like a not necessarily crutch, but they might just say it just the sake of saying it versus like explaining why it's a barrier.

Finding 4: References to family and friends attending the university creates mixed sentiments from committee members

The researcher prompted the focus group with an initial question, “What factors that you see in a student appeals essay stand out to you?” Committee Member 1 showed concern with students using friend or family member attendance at the university as their motivation. Committee Member 1 stated:

> When students describe their educational goals, or why they want to attend and it's not “I have friends that went there” it's more so, putting themselves in that position. It's them saying, well, I know I want to pursue this degree, and I know [the university] has these services or … opportunities within this degree, and not just because my parents or friends of mine went there.

This concern was echoed by Committee Member 2, who stated, “Do they want to be here because they want to be here, or do they want to be here because their friends are here, or someone told them they should be here?”

Because the participants introduced family and friend recommendations in their initial discussion, the researcher posed a follow-up question. “Does the existence of that factor make you more or less inclined to offer admission?” To this explicit prompt, four of the six participants spoke to the fact that they would not be more inclined to admit. Rather, they found it to be a neutral statement unless the student expanded on more concrete reasons. To that message, Committee Member 1 stated:

> If there is larger context for that ushering from a parent or friend, that’s great. Um! Because I guess I do understand where the logic might be. Well, I have friends that go here, so I know it’s a place I could be supported, or my parents are going to feel good

about me attending the school, and they'll give support. So, I guess if they were to present it that way, I might be a little bit more inclined [to admit.]

One participant countered the argument of family and friend attendance being neutral or positive. Committee Member 2 stated:

In a couple of very rare cases, I feel like it has been like a negative for me…. [If a student] is saying, like all my friends are going there, so I want to go there as the reason for coming. But it's like all your friends went to high school with you, and you didn't do well there, so you can do well here?

Synthesis

The purpose of this research was to explore how students chose to tell their stories within the admission appeal process and how the committee members utilized those stories when issuing an admission decision. To guide the exploration of the data, the researcher posed two research questions:

RQ 1: How do students use narrative essay responses to explain their academic struggles during an admission appeal process?

RQ 2: How do members of an Admissions Appeals Committee at a regional public university utilize information from a student-written appeal to issue an admission decision?

Data analysis of student-submitted personal statements was used to explore research question one, and key findings were identified in this process. When asked to explain why they wanted to attend a specific university, students commonly responded by identifying features of the university and its programs. Additionally, students acknowledged that either family members or friends had previous experiences with the university. When responding to the question, what challenges did you encounter that may have negatively impacted your academic record, students commonly identified two categories of challenges: time management and mental health.

To explore research question two, data were gathered from a focus group interview conducted with six members of the Admissions Appeals Committee. Four key findings were identified in analyzing these data. Committee members were more inclined to offer admission when a student identified their personal challenges and problems and presented solutions and were able to identify university specific resources that would help them in their education. Additionally, statements of self-disclosed mental health conditions and references to recommendations from family and friends created a variety of responses from committee members regarding their empathy towards students.

Although the two research questions posed do not directly relate to analyzing the two datasets together, some commonalities were identified. One notable intersection of data was how students felt compelled to call out recommendations and experiences shared by their family and friends. Although this was found to be a common factor in helping students decide to attend the university, it had little to no impact on the committee members, and two of the committee members were, at times, less inclined to offer admission when this information was shared by a student.

A second commonality between the findings in the two datasets was the discussion of mental health conditions. Eight of the 20 student appeals identified mental health conditions either explicitly or implicitly. A student noting mental health conditions as a challenge was seen as a positive influencer regarding admission decision by all six of the committee members in the focus group.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 findings show that trends and themes emerged from previously submitted data at this institution through common statements made by students when telling their personal story through short essay responses. There are similar themes used by higher education professionals who review student appeals as part of the admission appeal process. Although

themes such as family and friend recommendations and mental health conditions stand out in both data sets used, there are intricacies within the themes that create a mixed response.

Chapter 5 explores these intricacies, provides further analysis of the findings put forth in Chapter 4, and offers suggestions for adjustments to the admission appeal process are presented. Additionally, the findings will be positioned within the already existing research reviewed in chapter 3. Finally, limitations to this research are addressed, and future research suggestions are presented.

CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In fall of 2021, more than 12 million applications for admission were submitted to U.S. based institutions of higher education by first-time, degree-seeking undergraduate students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.b). These applicants were expected to share details regarding their educational background and extracurricular experiences. Institutions often state the academic requirements needed to earn automatic admission, but when students do not meet those requirements, they may be required to submit more information including personal statements and testimony. According to Hossler et al. (2019), these holistic review processes can create confusion for students due to their lack of transparency.

At the site of this research, students who did not meet automatic admissions criteria based on their academic records were offered the option to appeal their admission decision. One part of this process asked the students to submit a personal statement as a response to four short essay prompts. This personal statement, along with academic records and letters of recommendation, were reviewed by a committee who voted to either uphold or overturn the initial admission decision.

This research explored how students chose to represent their personal stories in their essay responses and how the admissions committee members utilized the student statements to offer an admission decision. The researcher discerned four key findings when analyzing the personal statements of 20 students submitted over a four-year period. In these findings, it was identified that students were prone to compliment the extracurricular and academic features of the university when attempting to express their interest in enrolling. Additionally, students conveyed that their desire to enroll was influenced by recommendations received from family members and friends. Beyond motivations to attend, students also wrote about the challenges they faced and how they planned to overcome said challenges. To this point, students wrote about both time management and mental health conditions as challenges they have faced.

Four additional key findings emerged when the researcher reviewed data gathered during a one-hour focus group interview with six members of the Admissions Appeals Committee. First, it was noted that committee members were more likely to offer admission when students identified personal challenges along with solutions. Second, committee members were more likely to offer admission when students identified university-specific resources they planned to use. Third, when students identified mental health conditions as part of the barrier to success, committee members were more inclined to offer admission. The fourth finding noted that committee members presented a mixture of positive, neutral, and negative responses when students referenced recommendations from family members and friends as their motivator to attend the university.

Chapter 5 will discuss the findings of the qualitative case study. This will be done through a summary of the study, a summary of the results, and an interpretation of the findings as positioned within the narrative paradigm. Additionally, the researcher will present limitations, discuss implications, and offer future recommendations.

Summary of the Study

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, institutions of higher education across the United States faced enrollment challenges. According to the National Student Clearing House Research Center (2022), undergraduate student enrollment dropped by nearly 1.4 million students from the beginning of the pandemic, spring of 2020, to the end of May 2022. This enrollment challenge added to the already strong pressures placed on admissions offices by administrators to increase new enrollment to achieve a balanced budget (Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Jaquette et al., 2016). In their work to achieve these enrollment goals, and identify academically prepared students, admissions offices have widely used two main academic predictors that became the industry standard over 80 years ago; standardized test scores such as the ACT and SAT, and high school grade point average (HSGPA) (Beale, 2012; National Association for College Admission Counseling, 2008).

Some admissions offices have gone beyond the use of HSGPA and standardized test scores to identify admissible students, particularly when students' academic records do not initially meet the academic admission standards. Undergraduate Admissions University of Michigan (2022) was one example of an institution using an expanded admission. They stated, "We do not admit applicants solely on the basis of any single criterion. We value the whole record — excellent grades in rigorous courses, top ACT/SAT scores if provided, participation in extracurricular activities" (paras.1-2). Their statement identified a holistic approach to admission but lacked clarity in showing students the procedure and how they would be reviewed for admission.

The lack of clarity presented in the college admissions process was exacerbated in recent years when over 1,500 colleges and universities removed the standardized test score component of their admission requirements (Fairtest, 2021). These policy changes were due in part to the Covid-19 pandemic, which closed many testing sites. Through the loss of academic factors, such as the ACT, non-academic factors (NAFs) have become more elevated in the student review process (Hossler et al., 2019).

As the use of NAFs grew, so did the lack of clarity in their use which became the impetus for this research. The site of this research utilized NAFs as part of its admission appeals process. When students were denied admission, they were offered the opportunity to appeal that decision by submitting short essay responses to four questions. The purpose of this study was to explore those essays to better understand how students presented their personal narratives and how the appeals committee used that information to issue an admissions decision.

Summary of Results

A relativist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology guided this research. The researcher believes that each student's reality is individually constructed, leaving each person to have their own unique reality and acknowledges that multiple realities exist (Scotland, 2012).

These multiple truths were approached by the researcher with a qualitative study that used a case study methodology and method. Case study research is a qualitative approach used to explore real-life, bounded cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

As guided by Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2018), multiple data sources were used to develop an in-depth understanding of the case. The bounded case used included the admission appeal short essay responses submitted by 20 students from 2018 to 2021 who were selected using maximum variation sampling and a focus group interview conducted with six members of the Admissions Appeals Committee. This case study was guided by two research questions:

RQ 1: How do students use narrative essay responses to explain their academic struggles during an admission appeal process?

RQ 2: How do members of an Admissions Appeals Committee at a regional public university utilize information from a student written appeal to issue an admission decision?

Research Question 1 Findings

In addressing research question one, four key findings were identified through an analysis done on 20 student appeal submissions. The first finding noted that students conveyed their interest in attending the university by complimenting extracurricular and academic features of the university. These statements were primarily made when students wrote to answer the specific question of why they wished to attend the university. The statements given by students often addressed university features in flattering ways.

Like key finding one, the second key finding drew primarily from student responses to the question of why they wanted to attend the university. Key finding two noted that students felt compelled to identify family and friends who previously attended the university and offered recommendations to the student. These statements seemed to imply that if the people the

student knows and trusts enjoyed their time at the university, then the student would also enjoy their experience.

Findings three and four were similar in that they addressed academic challenges shared by students in their attempts to answer what challenges they have encountered that may have negatively impacted their academic record. The two challenges frequently identified were mental health conditions and time management. With both challenges, student responses varied in the level of detail provided and how much information was shared in how they may have overcome these challenges or hoped to overcome them in college.

Research Question 2 Findings

Analysis of the data produced from conducting a focus group interview with six Admissions Appeals Committee members produced four key findings that addressed research question two. The first of these findings stated that committee members were more likely to offer admission when a student identified their personal challenges and problems and presented solutions. The committee members were compelled to offer admission if a student showed honesty in stating their own challenges and giving concrete examples of the tools they have used or will use to overcome their challenges.

The second key finding identified from analysis of the focus group data was that committee members were more inclined to offer admission when students were able to identify university-specific resources that would help them in their education. The committee members believed that when the students identified specific tools and resources, they planned to use to be successful, they genuinely wanted to be a part of the university community.

Key finding number three acknowledged that committee members were more inclined to offer admission when students identified or referenced mental health concerns. All six committee members in the focus group stated that they were more likely to offer admission when a student identified mental health conditions as a challenge in achieving their academic

goals. They were even more likely to admit when a student identified which tools and resources they had used to overcome their mental health conditions.

Different from the first three findings in this section, finding four identified a set of statements that either had no influence or a negative influence on committee members' desire to admit. When students spoke about their family or friends attending the university as a reason for their desire to attend, the committee was either not impacted or negatively impacted. Committee members were concerned that students were only interested in the school because of the opinion of others rather than by internal motivation.

Comparison of Findings

The key findings from these two research questions found some commonalities as well as some conflicts between how students chose to represent their stories and how committee members used that information to issue an admission decision. Committee members found value in learning more about a student's educational journey and were more compelled to offer admission when students addressed mental health conditions and offered up plans and strategies to cope with their stated conditions. In line with this desire of the committee, students were inclined to identify their mental health conditions and offer up their plans to improve their academic performance by overcoming their identified barriers.

Similarly, committee members were more compelled to admit a student when the student identified university specific features they were drawn to as a motivation to enroll. Students spoke to these elements when stating their desire to attend. Feature focused statements were often identified by the researcher as statements of flattery, which were received well by the committee and often seen in the form of students noting a positive perception of a specific academic area of interest. Committee members felt identification of features was proof that the student had actual interest in the university, which may make them more self-motivated to achieve.

Although committee members were positively influenced by students' ability to identify university specific resources, there was a disconnect from a positive influence when students listed friends, family, or recommenders as a driving reason for their desire to enroll. Some committee members thought family and friend recommendations showed a lack of individual motivation and feared that the student simply relied on the motivation of others. When students didn't align their statements with the viewpoint of the committee, they potentially set themselves up for denial when they mistakenly thought receiving a recommendation was a helpful fact to share in their appeal essay.

Interpretation of the Findings

Previously reviewed research, as discussed in Chapter 3, identified that there are a variety of both cognitive and non-cognitive factors that can contribute to college-level success. Commonly used academic factors include high school grade point average and standardized test scores. When a student's academic record does not meet the academic admission criteria at a university, that university may consider non-cognitive factors in its process of offering or denying admission. At the institution where this research was conducted, students denied due to their academic record were offered the opportunity to appeal that decision by submitting short essay responses to four question prompts, along with two letters of recommendation. These questions implied that the committee would like to know more about the students' interest in the university, their previous academic challenges, and how students planned to overcome those challenges to be successful in college.

Through analyses of the data gathered, the researcher learned that although each student offers their own personal truth through their individual narrative, there are trends and commonalities presented, including an inclination to compliment the school, identify recommendations they have received to attend the university, and a desire to disclose time management challenges and mental health conditions. The researcher's belief that each student has their own truth to be told stands firm after completing this study. However, he now

believes there are more commonalities within these narratives. Students who submitted these appeals were presumably more inclined to identify these specific features and challenges because they wanted to gain admission to the university and believed these messages would sway the decision of the committee members.

Additionally, through review of the data gathered from the focus group interview, the researcher was surprised to learn that committee members had mixed responses to how they perceived the information that students received recommendations from family members and friends. The identification of these recommendations was common amongst the student appeals reviewed. The fact that this did not always solicit a positive response as desired by the students showed the researcher that there is work to be done in preparing and training committee members. This preparation could include how committee members should interpret student statements and how certain non-cognitive factors correlate with college-level success as identified in the research review done in Chapter 3.

In the process of conducting this case study, it became clear to the researcher that the committee members were implementing their own mini case study on each admissions appeal submission. According to three of the committee members, the personal statements reviewed in this study typically were weighted 50% in their decision-making process. The other portion of their decision-making process, which was not included in this case, was the use of letters of recommendation and academic records. In discussion of these other elements, standardized test scores, such as the ACT, were only mentioned once. Committee member 1 noted they were positively influenced when a student had a high reading sub-score on the ACT. This told the researcher that overall high school performance as presented by grades and teacher recommendations had more influence on the committee than standardized test scores.

Additional documents collected beyond the student narratives were used to triangulate and validate student statements made in their personal narratives. For example, a student may have stated that they have made strong improvements in their math grades. The committee

would then look for improved math grades or a letter of recommendation to corroborate the student's story. This aligns with one of the two narrative paradigm principles, fidelity.

Although the initial intent of this research was not to compare the findings of research question one and research question two, the researcher identified notable similarities and differences between the sets of findings and was compelled to address them. These commonalities and discrepancies were primarily between how students chose to tell their stories and how the committee members used that information for admission purposes.

Rather than using research-based data elements, the committee members each had their individual views and beliefs regarding what factors contributed to student success. For example, the committee was unanimously more inclined to offer admission to students who identified as having a mental health condition and explained how they plan to overcome their stated challenge. However, the committee was not basing this inclination on any data showing that these students were more likely to succeed over students without a stated mental health condition.

Additionally, the committee members were not positively swayed to admit a student when the student noted family and friendship ties to the university. Their lack of motivation to admit was also not connected to any student data or recorded outcomes at the university. Rather, it was purely based on the opinion of the individual committee member and their anecdotal experiences as a higher education professional.

Furthermore, this research was guided by the narrative paradigm which relies on two principles, coherence, and fidelity (Communication Theory, n.d.). In comparing findings, the researcher noted a loss in coherence in that students hoped to create a story of excitement in their desire to attend the university by presenting their connections through family members and friends. Their excitement was misunderstood by the committee members and did not positively influence an admission decision.

Fisher (1989) noted that along with coherence, fidelity is a required principle of communication, meaning a listener must accept the story presented by the teller. Committee members were the listeners in the appeals process, and when they did not believe the narrative presented by the student, then communication did not occur. Lack of communication was identified by the researcher when students presented family and friend recommendations as their motivation to pursue enrollment. Committee members did not believe this to be a successful motivator, therefore fidelity did not occur.

Communication Theory (n.d.) expanded on fidelity in the narrative paradigm by addressing credibility as one element of coherence. Coherence is impacted by structure, resemblance between stories, and credibility of character (Communication Theory, n.d.). In the admission appeal process reviewed, the structure was set by the institution. The findings in Chapter 4 identified themes that created a resemblance between the student narratives. The credibility of character was the piece that created the most inconsistent response from the committee members. For example, committee members found student statements regarding mental health conditions and time management to be credible but did not apply that same level of credibility to family and friend recommendations.

Fisher (1985) explained that the narrative paradigm “seeks to account for how people come to adopt stories that guide behavior…. And if one’s story in regard to a particular issue can be ascertained, it is possible to predict a person’s probable actions…” (p. 348). The findings identified in reviewing both the student statements as well as the committee members’ use of the statements aligned with the narrative paradigm in that the committee felt they were able to ascertain a student’s academic and personal challenges and desires and were able to predict students’ probable actions of either succeeding or failing at a collegiate level. The committee members then used their predictions to issue an admission decision.

The narrative paradigm does not provide a specific method of analysis, rather, it proposes a precise perspective for critically reading text. According to the narrative paradigm,

text is composed of good reasons or elements that give the reader cause to believe. Good reasons can be shown in the form of arguments, metaphors, gestures, and more (Fisher, 1985). The narrative paradigm was shown to successfully play out in the committee review process in that the committee did indeed use student statements to "[determine] whether or not a given instance of discourse provided a reliable, trustworthy, and desirable guide to thought and action in the world" (Fisher, 1985, p. 351).

Limitations

In this qualitative case study, the researcher explored stories as told by students in their admission appeal statements and how these stories were used by members of the Admissions Appeals Committee to make their decision. Although the boundaries of the case focused specifically on 20 student essays, the researcher's previous work experience with the admissions process exposed him to all admission appeals received at the research site since 2017. Previous knowledge may have unknowingly impacted his data analysis and findings as presented in Chapter 4.

Because of his previous knowledge and assumptions on the appeals process, the researcher chose to use inductive, rather than deductive, coding. The inductive coding process allowed the researcher to start with the data and add minimum codes only as they revealed themselves, then finally group those codes into themes. If deductive coding were used, the researcher would have started with a code list then searched out those codes within the data. Deductive coding would have left more room for the researcher to insert previous knowledge then look for confirmation rather than let the codes naturally develop from the specific data gathered for this case.

Although proper sampling as guided by Briggs et al. (2012) was used to achieve saturation, more student appeal data was available. There are hundreds of admission appeals submissions at this single institution which reach back to 2015. With more time and a larger team of researchers, a more comprehensive review of student statements could be done to

further explore the already identified themes and potentially identify more. A more thorough review would also allow for exploration of potential changes in student stories from before and after the Covid-19 pandemic and changes made in the admission process during that time. Although more student appeal data was available, the scarcity of new information emerging after reviewing the initial 20 showed the researcher that saturation of the data was achieved (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A regional public institution was the single data source used. For these findings to be generalizable, further evaluation of student statements submitted to multiple institutions would need to be reviewed. Because this process was uniquely built by the institution, it is unlikely that these same essay prompts and review process are used elsewhere. To broaden the scope of this research, the same questions and prompts would have to be implemented at multiple institutions.

How the questions were chosen, how the committee felt about the questions, and how these questions tied to student success metrics were not explored in this research. These items, which fell outside the boundaries of the case, would add context and understanding of the complete appeal process.

Implications

Previous research, as reviewed in Chapter 3, has been done to identify both academic and non-academic factors that correlate with college-level success. However, the literature review done by the researcher found no previous research exploring how students choose to represent their academic and non-academic factors within their personal stories. For example, the review of literature identified grit as a positive impact. Beattie et al. (2019) identified grit as “perseverance of effort and consistency of effort” (p. 15). Lewine et al. (2019) identified that positive impacts, like grit, had a positive correlation on college GPA. However, Lewine et al. (2019) did not address how grit, and other positive impacts, were presented by students and evaluated by a committee. Instead, Lewine et al. (2019) evaluated student essays using a

linguistic analysis tool. This research provided additional information by identifying how students chose to self-identify factors that have impacted their educational journey and how they planned to overcome their challenges through short essay responses to given prompts as part of an admission appeal process.

Furthermore, Hossler et al. (2019) identified a group of non-academic factors (NAFs) that were categorized as attitudinal constructs, which included self-concept, self-efficacy, personal interests, social beliefs, cultural awareness, and adaptability. Hossler et al. (2019) noted that some admissions offices used attitudinal constructs in their admission process but did not explore how knowledge of these attitudinal constructs was gained by the admissions office. The findings of this research, as addressed in Chapter 4, built on the work of Hossler et al. (2019) by identifying how committee members interpreted student statements to ascertain attitudinal constructs. This was shown in finding three of the committee focus group data when committee members were more likely to admit students who identified personal challenges and presented solutions, which can be described as self-efficacy and adaptability.

With these new findings in mind, universities, including the site of this research, can explore their own admission appeal process to better understand how their decision-making process aligns with the goals of the institutions and the success of their students. Detailed recommendations can be found in the following section of this chapter.

Recommendations

The key findings presented in Chapter 4 identified both commonalities and differences in how students shared their educational experiences and how committee members used that information to make an admission decision. Because some differences were identified and because this case study did not cover every element of the admission appeal process at the site of this research, the researcher proposes the following recommendations:

1. Further research should be done to understand which non-academic factors as presented by students in personal essays correlate with college-level success as

defined by the university. By understanding which students succeed in their educational experience at the university, the committee may better understand which factors to look for within the appeal process.

2. Factors identified as correlating with the institution's definition of success should be used to rewrite the essay prompts used in the appeal process, and a more detailed explanation of the desired outcome should be provided to prospective students. When students understand the purpose of the prompts, they may feel that there is more clarity in the process, reducing confusion and anxiety.
3. Onboarding and training materials and processes should be developed for Admissions Appeals Committee Members to help them understand which factors align with success for their students how to look for those factors within the appeal process. Training should also include knowledge about the Americans with Disabilities Act and be provided by the campus Director for Accessibility Resources. Although this information is outside of the boundaries of this case study, the researcher, through his position, is aware that no official onboarding existed at the time of this research.
4. Additional research should be done to identify the value of other elements of the admission appeal process, including the use of letters of recommendation and the weight of academic factors along with non-academic factors. Further research may lead to the development of a rubric to balance the subjectivity brought forth by having multiple committee members voting on each student.

Due to his role at the institution where this research took place, the researcher has the unique opportunity to follow his own recommendations as presented above. Even though these findings are specific to a single university, the recommendations made are not limited to this single site. The researcher recommends that any university interested in engaging with student stories to better identify non-academic factors for the purposes of admission implement a review

of their own internal process to assure that the employees reviewing admission appeals have received adequate training and a clear understanding of what information is desirable in a student appeal. Additionally, institutions should review their process for clarity from the perspective of the students. To create a common lens for reviewers, and to create clarity for students, institutions should develop a rubric that aligns with their institution's goals and metrics regarding student success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research project was to explore how students denied admission to a four-year, regional public university chose to present their personal stories in response to short essay prompts as part of the admissions appeals process and how committee members used these student statements to offer their admission decision. The qualitative case study was driven by Fisher's (1989) narrative theory. The case used data from 20 student appeal submissions as well as data gathered from a focus group interview which took place over the course of one hour with six participants who were all members of the Admissions Appeals Committee at the site of this research.

Data analysis was done using the analysis spiral as presented by Creswell and Poth (2018). Through this iterative analysis process, the researcher identified codes, then themes, and eight key findings. Four of these findings came from analysis of the student appeals data, and four findings came from analysis of the focus group data. Comparison of these findings identified both commonalities and differences between how students presented their stories and how committee members received the student narratives.

The results of this research show that there were indeed common themes presented by students who appealed their admission at the site of this research. Additionally, there were common themes in how committee members used information gathered through student statements to offer an admission decision. The researcher is motivated to use these findings to continue exploration of the admission appeal process, develop a better understanding of the

process for students, and create a more equitable and transparent pathway to enrollment at the university.

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Appendix A: Informed Consent Letter

Please read this consent agreement carefully before agreeing to participate in this study.

Title of Study: Understanding the Reasons and Motivations for Student to Appeal their Denial of Admission to a Regional Public University

Purpose of the study: To study the personal stories as written by prospective students within the admission appeals process at a regional public university

What you will do in this study: I am formally requesting to gather insight from the members of the Admissions Appeals Committee at [name of university]. This will be done through a one-hour focus group held in the fall of 2022. My intentions are to learn how the members use the personal stories provided by the students to issue an admission decision.

Time required: 1 hour

Risks: There are limited risks to this study. One inherent risk may be the public disclosure of personal thoughts on what elements may make a student worthy of admission.

Benefits: By participating in the focus group, committee members will gain a deeper knowledge of the views of the fellow committee members and may be able to offer more insightful admission decisions for future applicants.

Confidentiality: Outside of the focus group, and the private notes of the researcher, committee members will not be personally identified and will not be associated with any individual quotes that may be used in the publication of findings.

Participation and withdrawal:

PLEASE NOTE: For research involving more than minimal risk, an explanation as to whether any compensation and an explanation as to whether any medical treatments are available if injury occurs and, if so, what they consist of, or where further information may be obtained.

Contact:

Principal Investigator:
Co-Investigator:

Whom to contact about your rights in this experiment:

Agreement:
The purpose and nature of this research have been sufficiently explained and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time and my withdrawal will not affect any future relationship with Thomas Reburn.

In signing this agreement, I also affirm that I am at least 18 years of age or older.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Name (print): _____

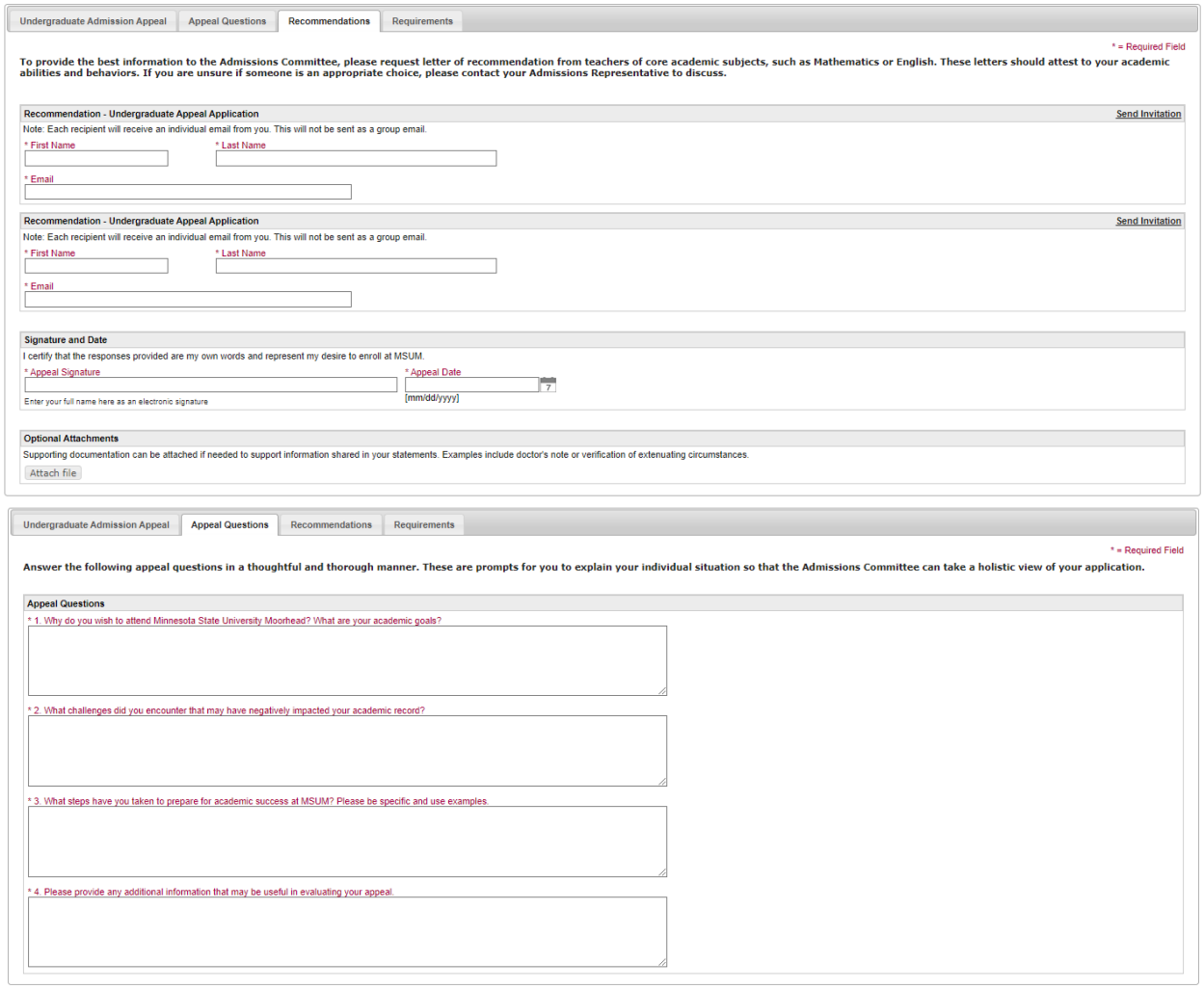
Appendix B: Focus Group Protocol

1. Begin with introductory statements
    a. Welcome and thank you
    b. Explain recording process for notes only
    c. Distribute Informed Consent Letter
2. Review and gather consent
    a. Ask potential participants if they have questions
    b. Gather signed copies of consent form
    c. Distribute extra blank copies to any participants who desire a copy
3. Overview
    a. Describe the elements of the research project
    b. Explain timeline (1 hour conversation)
    c. Explain semi-structured format (encourage conversation and open communication
    d. Offer up guidelines
        i. If at any point, you no longer feel comfortable, you have the right to abstain from conversation or to leave. There are no repercussions for leaving as your presence here is completely voluntary.
        ii. Anonymity – Please keep all private information in the room and do not share the identity of those speaking today with others outside of this meeting.
        iii. Respect – please respect the opinions of others and their opportunities to speak. All here have the right to talk. The researcher may call on individuals to expand the conversation
        iv. Does anybody have questions?
4. Begin interview questions

   a. Start with first scripted question. Continue with script but diverge as the conversation flows. The semi-structured format allows for follow-up unscripted questions based on participant statements.
   b. Manage time and notify participant when ten minutes remain.

5. Thank participants for their time.

Appendix C: Admission Appeal Form



Undergraduate Admission Appeal | Appeal Questions | Recommendations | Requirements

* = Required Field

To provide the best information to the Admissions Committee, please request letter of recommendation from teachers of core academic subjects, such as Mathematics or English. These letters should attest to your academic abilities and behaviors. If you are unsure if someone is an appropriate choice, please contact your Admissions Representative to discuss.

Recommendation - Undergraduate Appeal Application — Send Invitation

Note: Each recipient will receive an individual email from you. This will not be sent as a group email.

* First Name * Last Name

* Email

Recommendation - Undergraduate Appeal Application — Send Invitation

Note: Each recipient will receive an individual email from you. This will not be sent as a group email.

* First Name * Last Name

* Email

Signature and Date

I certify that the responses provided are my own words and represent my desire to enroll at MSUM.

* Appeal Signature — Enter your full name here as an electronic signature

* Appeal Date — [mm/dd/yyyy]

Optional Attachments

Supporting documentation can be attached if needed to support information shared in your statements. Examples include doctor's note or verification of extenuating circumstances.

Attach file

Undergraduate Admission Appeal | Appeal Questions | Recommendations | Requirements

* = Required Field

Answer the following appeal questions in a thoughtful and thorough manner. These are prompts for you to explain your individual situation so that the Admissions Committee can take a holistic view of your application.

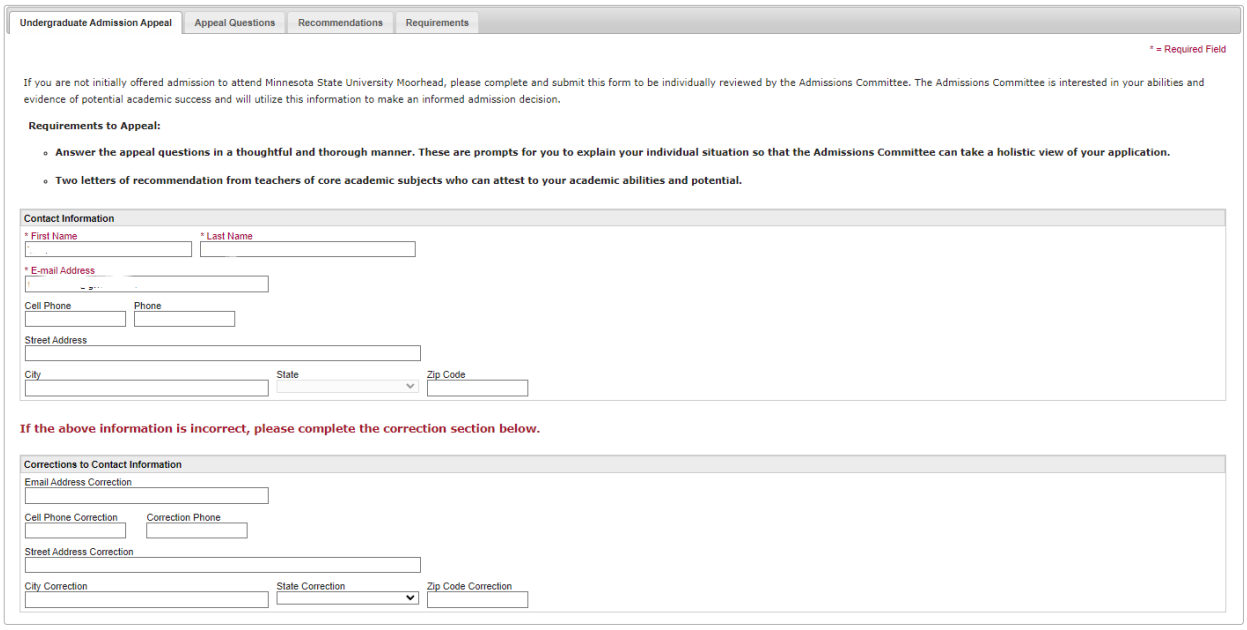
Appeal Questions

* 1. Why do you wish to attend Minnesota State University Moorhead? What are your academic goals?

* 2. What challenges did you encounter that may have negatively impacted your academic record?

* 3. What steps have you taken to prepare for academic success at MSUM? Please be specific and use examples.

* 4. Please provide any additional information that may be useful in evaluating your appeal.



Undergraduate Admission Appeal | Appeal Questions | Recommendations | Requirements

* = Required Field

If you are not initially offered admission to attend Minnesota State University Moorhead, please complete and submit this form to be individually reviewed by the Admissions Committee. The Admissions Committee is interested in your abilities and evidence of potential academic success and will utilize this information to make an informed admission decision.

Requirements to Appeal:

- **Answer the appeal questions in a thoughtful and thorough manner. These are prompts for you to explain your individual situation so that the Admissions Committee can take a holistic view of your application.**
- **Two letters of recommendation from teachers of core academic subjects who can attest to your academic abilities and potential.**

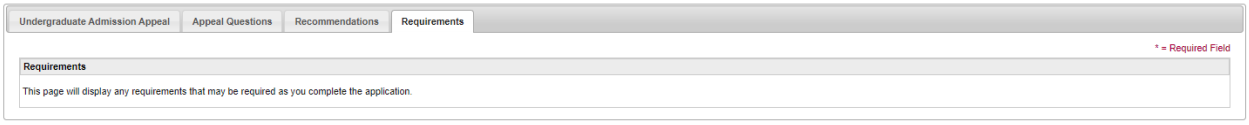
Contact Information

* First Name
* Last Name
* E-mail Address
Cell Phone
Phone
Street Address
City
State
Zip Code

If the above information is incorrect, please complete the correction section below.

Corrections to Contact Information

Email Address Correction
Cell Phone Correction
Correction Phone
Street Address Correction
City Correction
State Correction
Zip Code Correction



Undergraduate Admission Appeal | Appeal Questions | Recommendations | Requirements

* = Required Field

Requirements

This page will display any requirements that may be required as you complete the application.

Appendix D: Focus Group Interview Questions

Initial Questions

1. In reference to the letters of recommendation submitted on behalf of the student, what weight do they carry in your final decision?
2. What factors of a students' appeal essays stand out to you?
    a. Do those elements make you more or less inclined to offer admission?
3. How do you evaluate the essays in conjunction with academic records?
    a. How does a student's academic record impact the way you evaluate their appeal essay?
4. What factors do you feel are important in identifying a student's admissibility?

Amended Questions

1. What factors of a students' appeal essays stand out to you?
    a. Do those elements make you more or less inclined to offer admission?
2. Seek clarity on identified factors (commonalities / differences amongst members)
3. How do you evaluate the essays in conjunction with academic records?
    a. How does a student's academic record impact the way you evaluate their appeal essay?
4. What factors do you feel are important in identifying a student's admissibility?

Appendix E: Request for Admission Appeal Data

To: Assistant Director of Operations

Subject: Research Project Data Request

Hello,

I hope your week is going well. As partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, I am researching elements of the admissions appeals process. To conduct this research, I have received permission to obtain data for students who have submitted admission appeal applications for the years 2018 to 2021. Please see attached letter of permission.

To assist me with this process, can you please send me an excel file containing the following data elements for all students who submitted admission appeals from 2018 to 2021.

Fields Requested: year of application, gender, student city and state, class size, and answers to all four appeal application questions.

Thank you for your assistance,

Tom Reburn

Appendix F: Email Introduction to Appeals Committee

To: Admissions Appeals Committee Members

Subject: Admissions Appeals Research Project

Hello,

I hope your week is going well. As partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, I am researching elements of the admissions appeals process. One element of this project will be addressing the research question “How do members of an Admissions Appeals Committee at a regional public university utilize information from a student-written appeal to issue an admission decision?”

To gather data on this topic, I would like to conduct a focus group interview with you and the other members of the admissions appeals committee. This focus group is scheduled to take place on September 21, 2022, during the regularly scheduled admissions appeals meeting.

Please take a moment to review the attached informed consent letter. I will have a printed copy available on September 21 should you choose to participate.

Thank you,

Tom Reburn