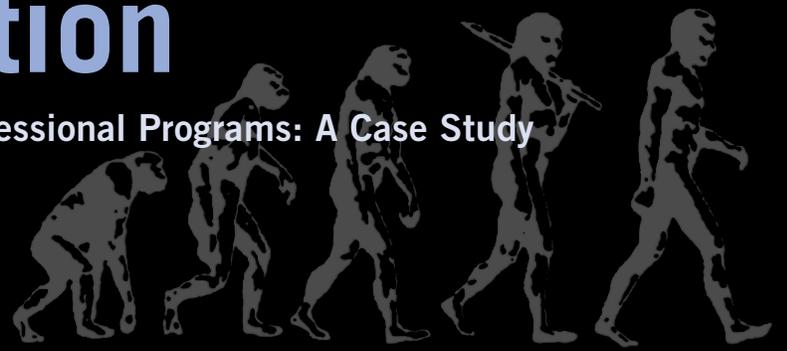


By Paul W. Holley



Admission Policy Evolution

in Emerging Professional Programs: A Case Study



Professional program admission at U.S. universities has become increasingly competitive in the last 20 years, due to enrollment caps, core class requirements, transfer course acceptance, industry draw, and the appeal of starting salaries. As the competition steadily increases, students often find methods to exploit traditional policy, resulting in the exclusion of desirable candidates. Construction management program admission is consistent with this relatively new heightened interest, which now requires advisors and administrators to reconsider current policies to ensure that students being admitted into professional programs are not only academically adept, but also have the highest propensity to be successful after graduation. This paper considers admission policy improvements for emerging professional programs through a case study of a reputable construction program.

Keywords: admission policy, enrollment cap, professional program, construction, GPA



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Admission Concerns

“Assigning meaning to differences in ability is likely to persist as long as human beings differ from one another. The allocation of opportunity, especially educational opportunity, will, most likely, continue to present dilemmas of efficiency and fairness wherever mental ability is identified, educated, and utilized” (Brown-Miller 1995). “Allocation of opportunity” through admission has been scrutinized in the United States for some time. Financial need, diversity, articulation agreements between state schools, and many other criteria have prompted much debate and legislation concerning college admission over the last two decades. For example, in *Education Week*, Cavanagh sites that the recent University of Michigan controversy called attention to universities’ admission point systems saying, “Beginning with the freshmen class that will enter in fall 2004, [The University of] Michigan will discard its much scrutinized system of awarding points to minority undergraduate applicants on the basis of race” (2003). “Percent plans,” which accept some fixed top percentile from each college preparatory program within a particular state, have also found limited success. Blum and Clegg note that, “The percent plans don’t help many students or institutions. But, of course, they weren’t designed to. They were designed to get around the court decisions, laws, and political pressures that oppose admitting students in order to achieve a predetermined racial and ethical mix” (2003).

Beyond the issues of initial admission into universities lies professional program admission policy, the scrutiny of which is increasing. Many universities, offering professional degrees in pharmacy, nursing, architecture, and similar programs, find their admission policies often contested by students and parents. This commotion is beginning to prompt administrators and advisors to reconsider current academic qualifications, as well as students’ potential for professional success. While many professional programs have been in existence for a long time, the significant competition for admission is relatively new. Across the U.S., professional programs utilize a variety of admission criteria and are subject to differing mandates at the respective universities. These programs rely on admission policies that range from “GPA only” to very complex formulas that include GPA, interviews and standardized tests. Enrollment caps at certain institutions often contribute to positive admission results, but on occasion can be a source of conflict. Enrollment caps frequently offer little flexibility in discretionary admission, which can be problematic, as it relates to extenuating circumstances for particular students. Many schools that utilize interviews and writing components believe that these items help effectuate good policy, but also admit that it is often an arduous and time-consuming process. Further, they may have difficulty in avoiding the human emotion factor, particularly if interviewers or essay reviewers are familiar with applicants or their families, directly or indirectly.

With the array of variation in professional program admission policy, emerging professional programs that now find themselves subject to heightened competition for admission, enrollment caps or both may find it difficult to determine the best protocol.

Rationale of the Case Study for Emerging Professional Programs

By studying construction management admission protocol at Auburn University (AL), this case study proposes to address the current evolution of emerging professional programs admission programs across the U.S. that are considering implementation or refinements to dated simplistic policy. Construction management curriculums have evolved in the U.S. only over the last 50 to 60 years. As competition for admission into construction programs rises quickly at many institutions, “allocation of opportunity” must consider what is appropriate and fair. The growth of the management role in the construction industry, coupled with the appeal of lucrative salaries and the relatively small number of reputable programs has substantially increased the number of applicants in construction management departments across the country. Graduates from many of these programs currently find themselves with multiple job opportunities, offering starting salaries upwards of 50 thousand dollars. Programs that once took in the masses now find themselves having to select from a pool of applicants that is far bigger than resources allow.

Advisors and administrators increasingly find themselves in the center of controversy in the admission process of these professional programs, particularly those whose programs admit students based on overall GPA alone. This approach is flawed from an academic perspective in many ways. GPA-only policy provides no emphasis on construction coursework, and effectively promotes non-related but arguably easier coursework. Whether the admission policy GPA includes classes taken elsewhere can also foster “gaming” a policy, and can effectively penalize those taking non-related but difficult courses at the admitting institution. Further, solely using an overall GPA also gives no recognition to less objective criteria, such as relevant work experience, communication skills, work ethic, and other traits. However, these criteria are subjective and were not addressed as part of this research.

When reviewing this case study, educators in emerging professional programs across the U.S. may find similarities in admission needs from which they can gain insight on how to best address these policy concerns.

Case Study Methodology and Findings

The methodology for this study included four primary components: identification of goals, generation of new policy to meet those goals, ratification by faculty, and implementation. Based on quality of coursework and faculty capacity, the construction management program at Auburn has an enrollment cap of 30 students per semester for a total of 90 students per year.

Admission concerns were first defined, which precipitated goals for a new policy. Admission policy of other accredited construction programs, as well as other professional programs at Auburn were researched for comparative purposes, as well as to promote positive suggestions for policy updates. The primary purpose of comparing construction admission to other professional program policy on campus was to take advantage of historical information and improvements to policy of curricula that had been in existence much longer. The information gathered was then used to study policy iterations to analyze

trends in admission results. These results were then presented to the construction program faculty as a group, prompting the generation of a final policy proposal that was ratified and was implemented in 2005.

Definition of Perceived Current Admission Policy Problems

Like many admission policies at professional programs in the U.S., admission into the construction program at Auburn had historically been solely based on overall GPA achieved while on Auburn's campus. This type of system has several shortcomings for professional programs. It favors those taking coursework elsewhere, as grades for these courses do not count toward the required GPA. These courses are typically physics, calculus or other required core courses that often result in grades that, if they are included in the GPA, will not be favorable for admission. Ironically, these courses are usually the better indicators of academic success in many professional programs, as their curriculums are often heavy in science and math. On-campus overall GPA policy also penalizes those taking other coursework on their respective campus, whether or not it was required as part of the desired curriculum into which they would like to be admitted. Construction management applicants who wished to transfer from engineering, pre-med and similar curricula found that grades from courses such as chemistry, biology or others not required in the construction curriculum resulted in a negative impact on their GPA. Perhaps the most undesirable effect of this type of policy is that it promotes students' improvement of their GPA by taking non-related coursework. Students with marginal grades could take multiple physical education or other less challenging courses to improve their GPAs.

Current Policy of Counterpart Programs

A review of admission policy at notable construction management programs revealed significant differences. Four programs' policies were researched, which, along with Auburn, represent five of the top construction programs in the U.S. These results are presented in anonymity:

Each of the first two programs had an enrollment cap, and students were admitted based on a review of GPA (minimum overall) and a résumé by the department head and admission counselors. However, no formal published admission criteria were published related to the résumé review for either program. For the third program reviewed, there was no formal admission process into the department; any student admitted to the university could enroll in professional coursework based on prerequisites and as the class size allowed. In the last program investigated, students were admitted based only on a minimum overall GPA, and there was no enrollment cap. Any student who applied and met the GPA requirement was accepted.

Goals Developed

Based on these findings, goals for new construction management admission policies were developed:

- Admission based on probable future success in the curriculum and industry

“University policy on retaking required coursework for which a passing grade has already been received states that a student must have special permission from the dean of the college in which the course is offered.”

- Policy that cannot reasonably be considered unfair (by students and parents)
- Policy that is succinct and can be easily administered each semester
- Policy that facilitates the GPAs required for admission being raised by improving grades in relevant coursework in lieu of electives.

Academic Admission Proposals

New admission GPA-based proposals were generated for consideration at Auburn's construction program intending to satisfy each enumerated goal. Primary objectives of the proposals included consideration of grades in certain coursework regardless of where it was taken, the weighting of certain coursework such that course hours did not determine the importance of the material, and the inclusion of courses believed to be particularly successful indicators.

Three iterations of new admission GPA calculations were formulated to analyze students already admitted under the overall GPA policy. Grades of students applying over five semesters and their actual admission rankings were compared with would-be rankings based on the three proposed GPA calculations. The top 40 students applying each term were included to consider if admission rankings would have been significantly altered.

Trend Analysis

The results of the admission analysis were consistent across all iterations. In each case, approximately 20 percent of the students who were actually admitted would not have been admitted under any of the proposed GPA calculations. Similarly, the students who replaced them were consistently far above the typical cut-off of 30 students admitted each term. There are specific cases in which students who were not admitted under the overall GPA policy would have been ranked in the top 10 places had proposed policies been utilized. This confirmed that indeed there were many students whose overall GPA penalized them because of non-indicator coursework taken at Auburn.

Further, studies of the students who would not have been admitted based on proposed policy confirm that many of these students were admitted based on a GPA calculated with many courses taken elsewhere. Had the indicator coursework taken elsewhere been included, their GPAs would have diminished substantially. The growing number of 4.0s under the former policy demonstrated that this was indeed the case, in that the majority

of these students had transferred over half of the required coursework from other schools.

These trends maintained this pattern every term over the last two and a half years, and confirmed that the efficacy of using the overall GPA from Auburn only was not appropriate. The students as a group were adapting to the overall-GPA policy to exploit the inherent weaknesses and limitations.

Proposal to Faculty and Post Ratification Concerns

The comparison data from all five semesters was analyzed and then presented to the Auburn construction management faculty. Based on faculty discussion, a hybrid formula-based policy was produced which utilized all required core coursework taken to date, but also weighting the construction coursework to more appropriately predict student success. Additionally, it removed all non-required coursework from the calculation to level the admission competition based on the problems with admission policy. The final proposed policy was that a weighted GPA of 15 required courses, regardless of where they were taken, would be used for admission. The formula was fashioned such that the best indicator courses, as determined by both faculty and students, were weighted more heavily.

Similar would-be rankings for this proposal were then reviewed over the four most recent admission terms. The results were consistent with the trends previously noted; the proposal was unanimously accepted by faculty, ratified by the dean's office, and approved to be implemented 18 months later so students could be appropriately apprised of the new policy.

Since that ratification, two issues of note surfaced based on positions of the provost's office. The first was the university's perspective on retaking required coursework, and the second was no provision of second chance of admission.

University policy on retaking required coursework for which a passing grade has already been received states that a student must have special permission from the dean of the college in which the course is offered. Historically, this policy has not been strictly enforced, but current demands to matriculate students through curricula more expeditiously has prompted more rigid compliance university-wide. This presented more than one problem related to professional program admission. First, restricted relief in retaking required coursework prompted the concern for a second chance of admission, as once a student has taken and passed required coursework, there is little that can be done to improve the formula GPA. Further, some students might drop classes in which they have marginal grades at mid-semester, or worse would "prefer" a failing grade over a marginal passing grade, allowing them to retake the class. A policy review committee concluded that while this could be a source of problems, any change that would mitigate this problem would grossly undermine the ratified policy.

Provision of a second chance of admission was then evaluated. The policy review committee concluded that the policy should fill 28 of the 30 available seats in a given semester. The remaining two would be filled by students who had also completed the six remain-

ing required courses based on the highest 21-course formula GPA. This approach would allow students who had marginal grades in the 15 required courses to have an additional semester to improve their GPAs. Students not admitted by either method could then elect to apply in a future semester, but unless coursework was retaken under official university policy, the only way for admission likelihood to improve would be dependant on the GPA threshold to drop. While this is much more rigid than past policy that allowed infinite improvement opportunities by taking non-required coursework, the committee believed that it best upholds the goals of new policy established in this process. The amended policy was again ratified by faculty, and became effective during 2005 after an 18-month advertisement to students.

Future Considerations

Generally, the new policy is considered to be a significant improvement for the professional program. However, it is likely that there will continue to be students denied admission who would arguably be good candidates in the profession supported by the desired degree. This will likely produce future considerations of relevant work experience and communication skills, both of which are considered to be of significant importance in careers associated with professional programs. These criteria are more difficult to administer in the admission process and should be thoughtfully approached. Major concerns for implementing these subjective criteria include lack of consistency, human emotion and resources available to administer and evaluate admission materials.

Author's Opinion

For this type of policy change, a true measurement of admission impact is difficult for any professional program, primarily because those students not admitted based on any policy will likely pursue a different degree and/or profession. While it would certainly be possible to monitor the performance in industry of those admitted and who were awarded a construction degree, it is almost impossible to measure the "would-be" success of those were never admitted, whether they pursued a career in construction or not.

While the new policy will be successful in meeting department goals for admission, it is likely that the actual implementation will produce certain situations that will require interpretation or perhaps additional refinement. This is consistent with the nuances of education as a practice, as no policy will appease all students and parents. However, the onus is clearly upon advisors and educators to continuously challenge and improve the academic environment. To this end, emerging professional programs can have a significant and positive impact on admission and quality of students by replacing overall GPA policy.

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