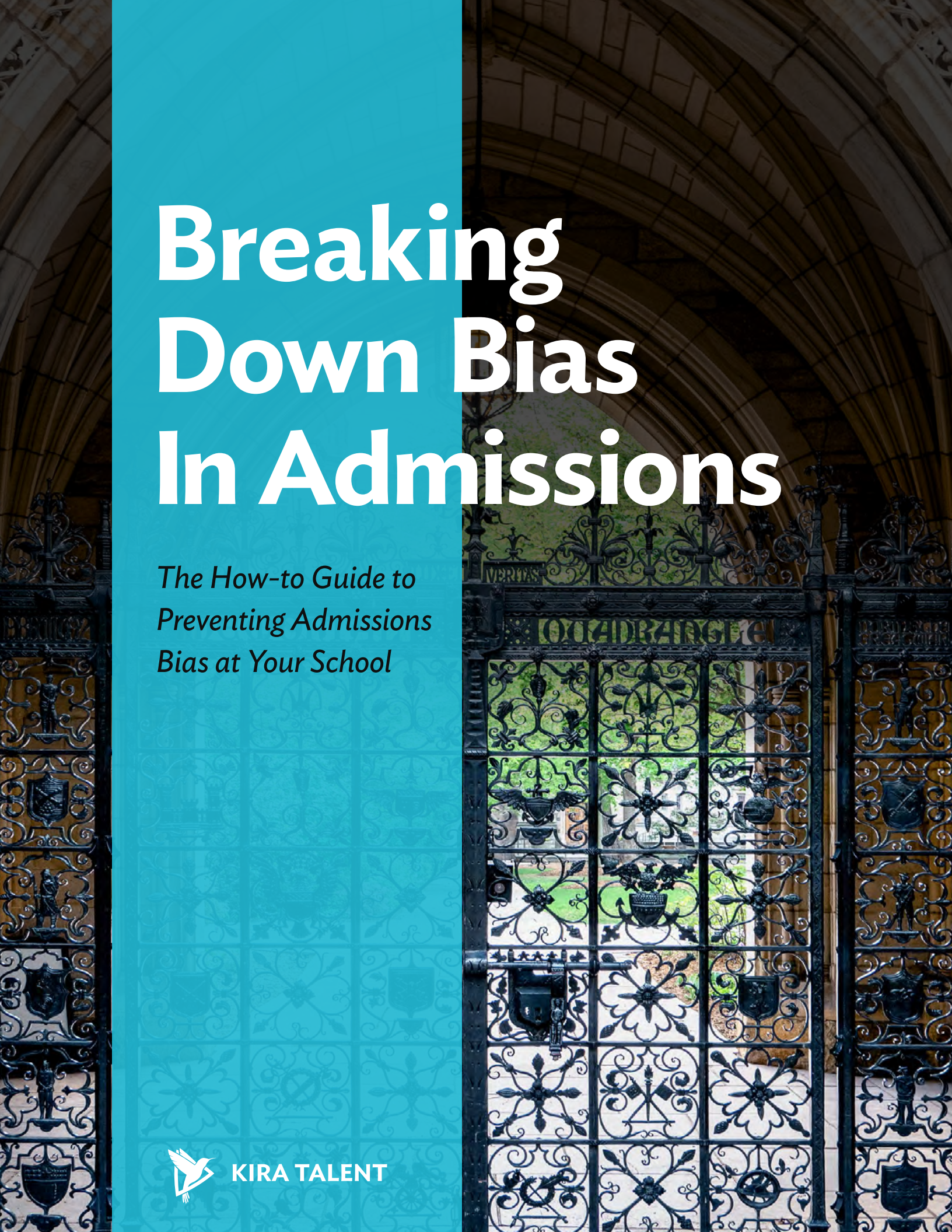
Breaking Down Bias In Admissions

The How-to Guide to Preventing Admissions Bias at Your School



KIRA TALENT

Bias.

No one wants to think about it. No one wants to talk about it.

And if you ask most Admissions Deans: No one on their team has any in their admissions process.

But we all have cognitive biases, and most of us aren't aware of how deeply they impact our choices. Bias is an inevitable part of our decision-making process. It exists in all areas of life, including in your admissions process.

Admissions professionals need to be objective and skilled in their methods of identifying strong prospective students. All schools want to believe they've structured a team committed to fair evaluation and diversity in the classroom. However, a massive barrier to bias reduction is the simple fact that schools everywhere deny bias impacts their admissions process.

> 97% of schools believe that applicants should be reviewed in a fair, consistent, and objective manner. However, less than half (47%) believe bias could be a factor in their school's admission process.
> **2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**

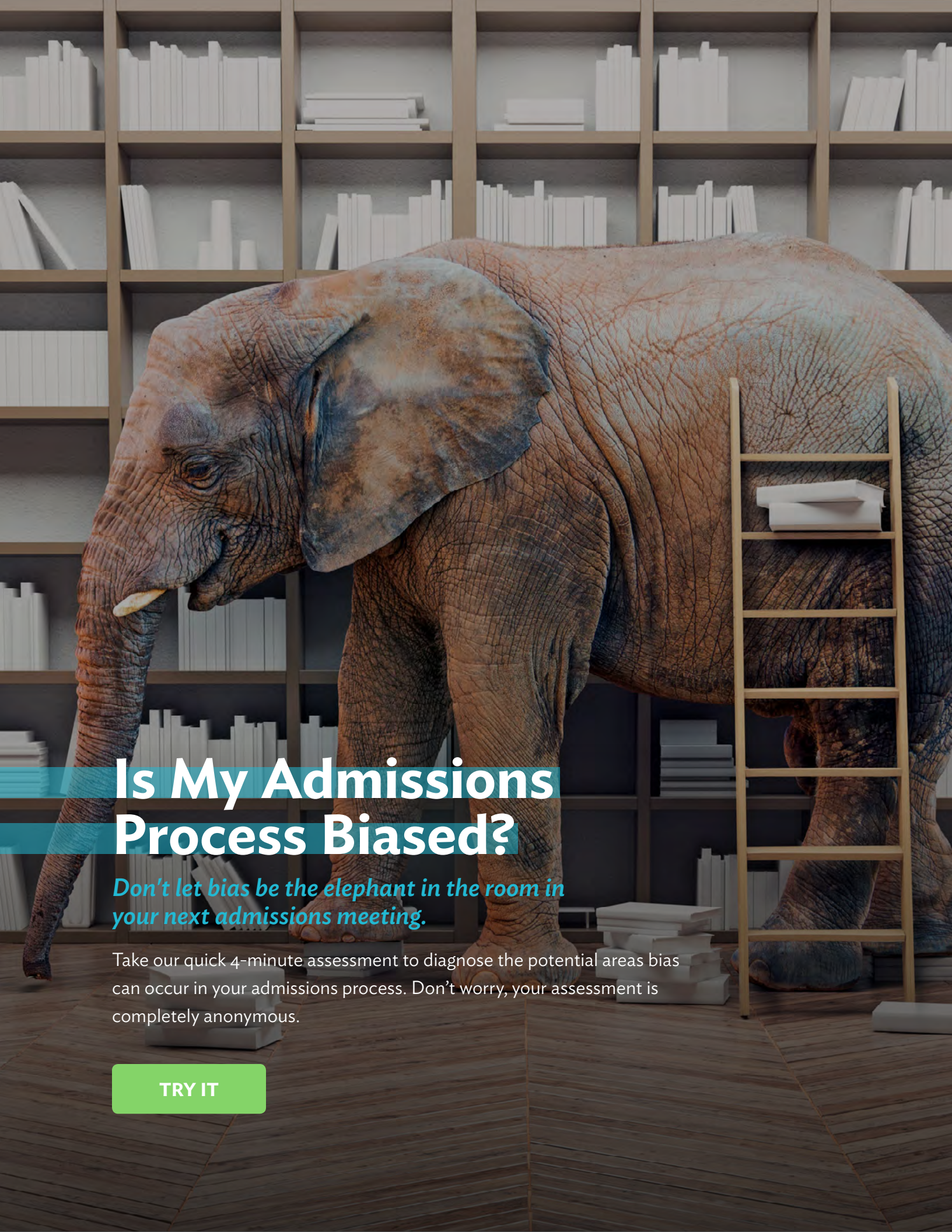
Our goal in this eBook is to educate admissions teams on the most common, influential forms of bias, how these biases present themselves in the decision process, and ways to reduce bias on your team and build an equal-opportunity admissions process.

You'll learn:

- Why admissions bias matters
- Nine common types of cognitive biases that influence admissions decisions
- How to prevent bias in your admissions process

2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment

The team at Kira assessed the admissions process of 145 programs in dozens of faculties at schools around the world to understand how they review their students. The data we collected is used to inform the areas of focus in this report, as well as provide relevant statistics throughout.



Is My Admissions Process Biased?

Don't let bias be the elephant in the room in your next admissions meeting.

Take our quick 4-minute assessment to diagnose the potential areas bias can occur in your admissions process. Don't worry, your assessment is completely anonymous.

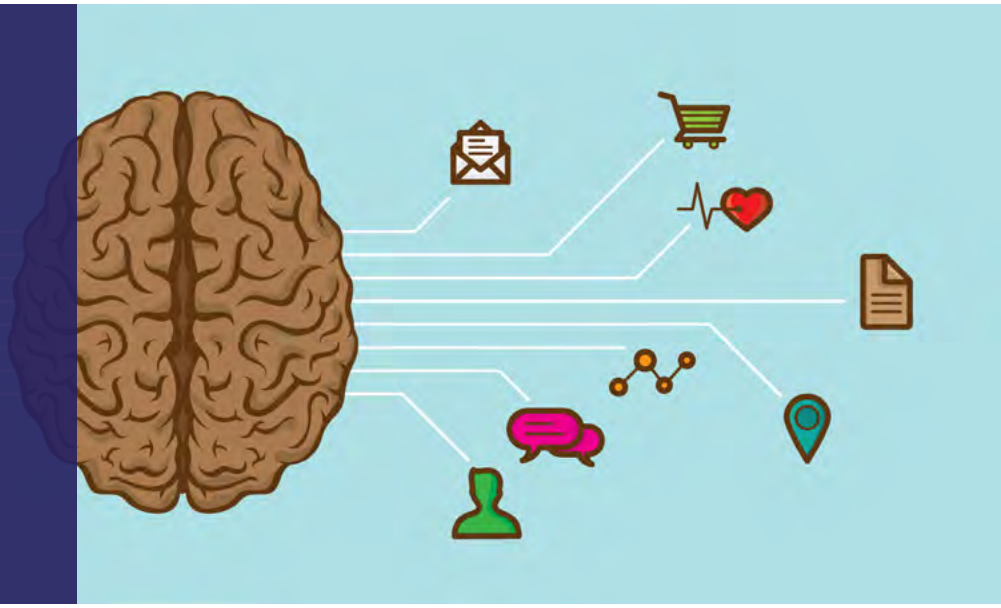
TRY IT

What is Admissions Bias?

When we think of bias in admissions, it commonly translates to “racism, sexism, ageism” and other stereotypes applied to applicants.

However, stereotype biases are only one in a long list of cognitive and behavioral biases that can impact how a professional reviews an applicant in an admissions evaluation.

COGNITIVE BIAS
A characteristic deviation from rational judgment causing a person to make assumptions or inferences about others and situations



Some of most harmful biases affecting admissions have nothing to do with race, religion, or any stereotypes of a person, but actually form situationally out of how the applicant is reviewed. Bias can form as a result of holes in your admissions process that you may never have even considered.

Factors such as an inconsistent number of reviewers, unstandardized interview criteria, or reviewer exhaustion could have deep consequences for the accuracy and fairness of your review.

The best admissions teams take the time to acknowledge and understand their biases and build in safeguards to protect their applicants through the admissions process.

Why does it matter?

Each year hundreds of thousands of students step up to bat in the college admissions game. They compile their transcripts and test scores, prepare for their interviews, meet-and-greet with administrators, and wait, fingers crossed, for decision day.

Most of these applicants, however, will have their evaluation swayed by some form of bias impacting their application or interview.

The future path of these applicants rests in the hands of their reviewers. Finding ways to identify and reduce biases in the admissions process helps ensure fair reviewing and a level playing field.

The more applicants are affected by bias, the more the impact appears in the classroom. Applicants who would have added incredible value to your classroom and gone on to be successful graduates may be missed in your admissions process, simply due to a flaw in your process. Likewise, applicants who may not be as deserving of a seat in your lecture hall, may be enrolled because the odds were in their favour that day.

Here are some basic examples of how bias creeps into the admissions process:

LACK OF CONSISTENCY

Reviewer Criteria – Someone reads the rubric differently from someone else, and evaluates a candidate differently. "Exhibits strong leadership" could mean something totally different to two different people. In many cases, there isn't a documented rubric, meaning reviewers are saying 'yes' or 'no' based on their gut and reviewing experience.

Number of Reviewers – One applicant is interviewed by four reviewers, while another is reviewed by just one. In situation one, there will be discussion and commentary from the group of four, and in the alternative, only one reviewer's opinion to decide the applicant's fate.

INHERENT COGNITIVE BIASES

Ingroup Bias – When a reviewer subconsciously favors applicants who mention they have cats because he or she is a cat owner as well.

Halo Effect – When a reviewer ignores negative qualities of an applicant because of one positive quality, like a superior test score, that overshadows others.

Recency Bias – When a reviewer favors an applicant who interviewed later in the review cycle, rather than earlier, because the interview happened more recently.

NEXT

Nine Forms of Bias in Admissions

After speaking with hundreds of admissions teams about their challenges, we've identified a number of biases that appear within typical applicant review cycles. In the next section, we'll highlight the nine most common forms of bias in admissions, and how they impact decision making.

1. Groupthink
2. Halo Effect
3. Confirmation Bias
4. Ingroup Bias
5. Conservatism
6. Bizarreness Effect
7. Stereotype Bias
8. Status Quo Bias
9. Recency Bias

GROUPTHINK

(Sometimes called The Bandwagon Effect)

When reviewing applicants in a group setting, groupthink, or the bandwagon effect, can be an extremely influential bias on a school's decision. Groupthink occurs when members of a group set aside their own opinions, beliefs, or ideas to achieve harmony.

Once an applicant has completed her interview, or all reviewers have reviewed an essay, and they begin discussing, the team inherently wants to come a consensus with the minimal conflict. They tend to buy into each other's opinions or may stay quiet and not share their personal thoughts, but rather agree with the opinions of others in the group.

Think about it, when discussing a candidate's potential in a small group, how often does one member of the team align with the others to achieve consensus? How often do you opt out of raising an opposing viewpoint to keep things moving on a busy day?

HALO EFFECT

The halo effect is particularly present in admissions, because it's so easy for one excellent quality to deflect other flaws in an application. One very high test score, a compelling experience, or strong reference can make the applicant appear more positively through the rest of their application or interview.

We see this happen all the time with applicants who have one remarkable quality, which creates a direct contrast to most school's mission for "well-balanced" students.

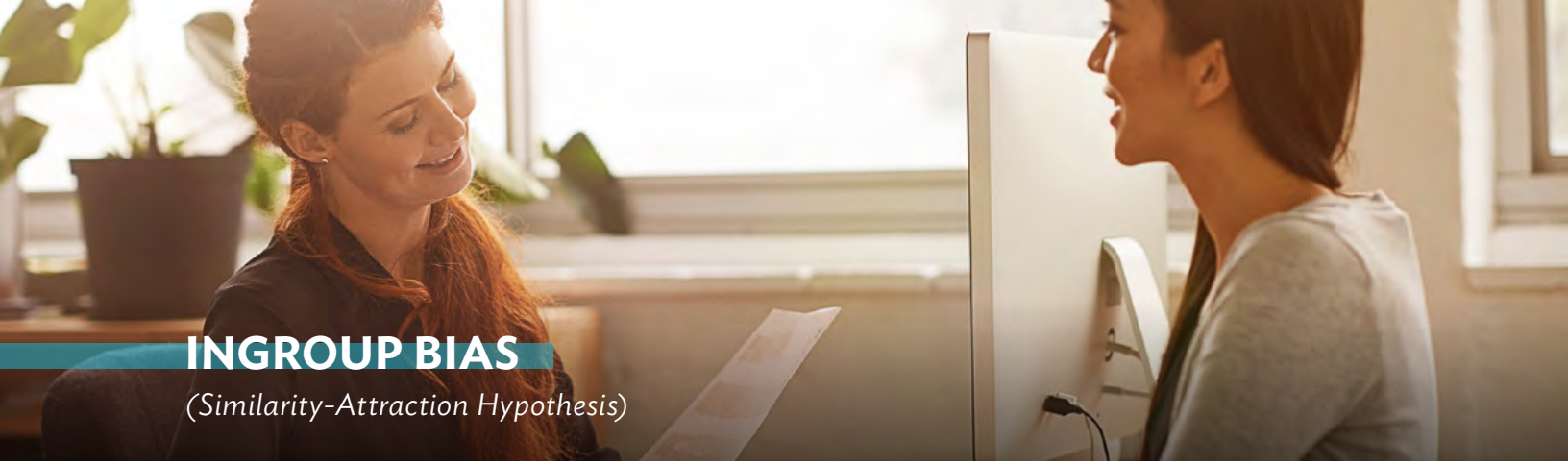
CONFIRMATION BIAS

Confirmation bias occurs when an individual seeks, interprets, selects, or remembers information in a way that confirms his or her own beliefs or ideas. In an admissions interview or essay setting, as you can imagine, confirmation bias can severely work in the favor of some applicants without them even realizing.

If a reviewer considers an applicant to be a shoe-in before an interview occurs, he or she is already attuned to think that the applicant will do well. The reviewer will look for signs during the interview to confirm his or her hypothesis. As humans, we want to be correct and our opinions to be validated.

Perhaps, the reviewer is reading an applicant's credentials and assumes that because the applicant graduated from a certain undergrad program, or worked at a certain company, he or she will be a good admit. The reviewer will then seek signs throughout the application that back up their theory that the applicant must be a good admit to the program.

Through the lense of confirmation bias, reviewers can develop an opinion early based on previous knowledge and only seek information that backs that idea up, endangering applicants who may be unable to make that initial strong first impression.



INGROUP BIAS

(Similarity-Attraction Hypothesis)

Ingroup bias occurs in admissions when a reviewer gives a candidate preference because they perceive the candidate to be within the same 'group' as them. On the more obvious front, this could fall in line with racial or gender bias, but often it manifests itself in different ways.

> For example, if a reviewer is a single mother and learns the applicant is single mother too, or they were both were alumni of the same undergraduate university, or grew up in the same town.

Although it may not become obvious in the applicant file, a reviewer is likely to feel an imaginary relationship with an applicant based on their shared group, and might lean more positively toward the applicant because of it.

CONSERVATISM

(Belief Revision)

Despite what you may expect, conservatism bias has nothing to do with how you vote in the next election. This bias occurs in admissions when reviewers maintain a prior view without properly adjusting for new information.

Humans, as a whole, struggle to treat new information equally to what they already know. For example: an applicant's video interview is below average, but the reviewer reads a glowing employer reference afterwards. Even if both categories should be weighed equally in the applicant's file, the reviewer is likely to subconsciously weigh the video interview higher in your decision as it helped the reviewer establish his or her initial opinion of the applicant.

BIZARRENESS EFFECT

Giraffes have blue tongues.

Our memory recalls unusual facts more than it does mundane facts.

The statements above are both facts, but you're more likely to remember the first one because it's more *bizarre*. This situation reflects the bizarreness effect, a form of bias that can make a candidate stand out above others due to a unique experience or hobby.

When two candidates apply with essentially identical resumes, qualifications, and competencies, but one gave their time and business skills to support an Elephant Sanctuary in the Thai rainforest for a summer, that applicant is more likely to stand out. Admissions reviewers might think "wow, what a unique experience to add to our classroom." The problem with this is that, in many cases, the bizarreness effect will favor applicants with higher income or, in general, more privileges.

> Candidate A, Danielle, was able to spend a summer in the rainforest, because she was financially stable enough to not work and had family support to pay for her flights and accommodations. Candidate B, Sheila, worked a "normal, boring" office internship in her hometown and paid off her student debt. On paper, Candidate A is more interesting and memorable, but does that make her a better candidate?

STEREOTYPE BIAS

Stereotypes are often the most obvious form of application bias. From headlines about Asian students losing points in admissions at Ivy league schools to lawsuits from applicants who felt their religion negatively influenced a school's decision, stereotypes can have a dangerous impact on how we see the world, especially if we are responsible to review hundreds or even thousands of applicants.

Even though the applicants could have similar grades and experiences, if the reviewer grew up influenced by this stereotype, he or she may have no idea that he or she favored one applicant over the other subconsciously.

STATUS QUO BIAS

Status quo bias isn't easy to identify, but it affects admissions teams and universities as a whole. Status quo bias is an emotional attachment to the current state of being; it's an aversion to change. It occurs when we fear the possible risk of the unknown, the change, and discount the benefits because of this fear.

When it comes to admissions, status quo bias transfers to admissions teams favoring the no change option. This could manifest as sticking to "traditional" review methods, such as not updating admissions principles out of fear their, or as schools refusing to change their "traditional" standards of intelligence and ability in their candidates.

RECENCY BIAS

In our minds, when coming to a conclusion about events over a period of time, we assign more weight to events that happen recently than we do to events further back in time.

When reviewing several applicants back to back, he or she is more likely to have the most detailed memory of the 4 p.m. applicant over candidates she saw earlier in the day. In the time you spend with an individual candidate, a reviewer may remember the candidate explaining his work experience at 3 p.m., but when looking back at the interview, the reviewer will likely give that candidate's awkward handshake at 4 p.m. more emphasis.

When meeting with a candidate, if the school has a solid rubric and the reviewer has the time and direction to take detailed notes, recency bias can generally be avoided, but this often isn't the case.

As we all know, review season is hectic. Without a consistent, quality way to keep a record of a student's interview details, recency bias can be unavoidable.

NEXT

Making Changes to Reduce Bias at Your School

Reading about the ways you are subconsciously giving advantages to some applicants and disadvatanges to others is pretty bleak. But it doesn't have to be.

You have an opportunity to make changes in your review process to protect your applicants from bias while improving the way your team looks at each individual student. Next, we'll look at some techniques schools can be using.

The How-to Guide to Preventing Bias in Your Admissions Process

In a scathing commentary on where college admissions has gone wrong by Alia Wong in *The Atlantic*, Jonathan Cole, professor and former provost at Columbia University, explains that a candidate's success in the admissions process can depend on essentially unlimited factors, including:

> "Which person in the admissions committee reads your application; what their biases are, their presuppositions; whether they've had a bad egg-salad sandwich that day or read too many applications. These are all things that enter our decision-making process as human beings."

While you might have cracked a smile at Cole's mention of the influence of an "egg-salad sandwich", it is a great reminder of just how touchy and sensitive we can be.

Bias is part of our psychological makeup, it is not something we can simply eliminate. We aren't robots (not yet, anyway), but we can (re)design the admissions process to safeguard applicants from our biases.

We can't predict and control our moods, but we can implement systems to try to manage exhaustion and burnout, and a balance in reviewer responsibility and power.

Identify Where Bias Occurs

With the variety of cognitive and behavioral biases fresh on your mind, think about your process, your reviewers, and the group of students you accept.

Ask yourself these questions when considering how your school reviews applicants:

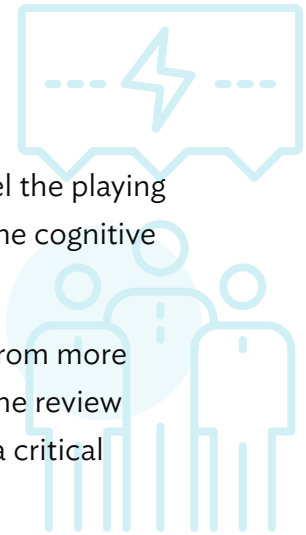
- [ ] Do you have multiple reviewers for each applicant?
- [ ] Do your team members evaluate individually and share feedback after evaluation is complete?
- [ ] Do you have a set rubric for interviews or other non-cognitive evaluations?
- [ ] Do you have a clear understanding of what each "level" or "rating" on your rubric contains?
- [ ] Do you have considerations in place to level the playing field for students from diverse backgrounds?

When you analyze your last review season, consider the following:

- [ ] Did you have a diverse panel of reviewers?
- [ ] Are there trends in how the evaluations of any particular single reviewer align?
- [ ] Are there trends in acceptance or rejection for any one group, such as a race, religion, or gender?
- [ ] Are there trends in applicants performing better at different dates or times?
- [ ] Are there trends in how one reviewer is evaluating certain stereotypes or groups?

With the lofty task of reducing the impact of bias in your admissions process ahead of you, it is vital that you make changes in manageable iterations. It can be tempting to try to make a sweeping change, but it's important to build a roadmap for success and test and try what works specifically in your program for your team.

1. Ensure you have a consistent number of reviewers



Having multiple reviewers sharing their opinions helps to combat biases and level the playing field. Multiple opinions mean that an applicant's opportunity isn't tarnished by the cognitive biases of one person.

A lack of consistency can be problematic, however, as some applicants benefit from more reviewers, and some applicants benefit from fewer reviewers. If you change up the review process too much, you have a smorgasbord of different variables all influencing a critical decision for this person.

> 40% of schools have a variable number of reviewers.
> **2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**

With one reviewer, while you know applicants have been compared on similar criteria and with the same objective in mind, you also subject applicants to that reviewer's own cognitive biases, not to mention the potential for human error in reviewing.

Three or more reviewers is ideal: Having a minimum of three reviewers is ideal because they bring a wealth of experience, opinions, and ideas to the table, and one reviewer may catch something in an application that another has missed.

> Only 32% of schools have three or more individuals reviewing applicants.
> **2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**

2. Review Applicants Independently

Admissions reviewers need space, free from their colleagues' influences, to evaluate a candidate. Finding out that a fellow reviewer likes or dislikes an applicant prior to assessing the candidate file can completely derail a fair and defensible evaluation.

> 42% of reviewers share their feedback openly with other reviewers, creating potential for bias before an applicant's file has been evaluated.
> **2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**

By gathering feedback independently and sharing the overall evaluations, before making a decision, you can avoid the biases caused by groupthink. Once ideas are shared, encourage your team to remain critical and challenge the status quo to come up with the best solution for the applicant and for the school.

3. Create a comprehensive rubric, then stick to it

Establishing a rubric allows your team to come to a consensus before evaluating a student on what qualities and examples exhibit great leadership, communication skills, reasoning abilities, and a long list of other non-cognitive skills and traits you're looking for in your ideal applicant. You probably have one, but do you use it consistently?

> 40% of schools do not have their reviewers submit rubrics to justify their evaluations.
> **2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**

Without rubrics or similar documentation, it's hard for a school to go back and reflect on an applicant's evaluation, or for an outside decision-maker to evaluate a student in the grey area.

What does poor "leadership" look like?
What does good "leadership" look like?
What does great "leadership" look like?

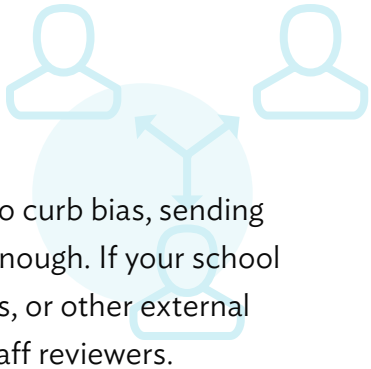
By establishing the criteria of a "poor" vs. "good" vs. "great" candidate, fewer bias-oriented allowances can be made once the applicant is reviewed. Rubrics must be rigid enough that there is a clear differentiation from one level to the next, but fluid enough reviewers do not struggle to place the candidate.

POOR 1	FAIR 2	GOOD 3	GREAT 4	EXCEPTIONAL 5
Shows no involvement with their communities beyond school or work. Answer is dispassionate, shows a lack of unique skills, passions or even interests.	Shows potential for involvement beyond school or work. Answer shows some passion and at least one interest or skill that the applicant has.	Is involved beyond their day-to-day duties and roles. Answer is passionate and discusses unique skills, passions or interests.	Is involved and committed to an activity, focused on making positive impact for others. Answer is passionate and shows that applicant has honed a variety of unique skills, passions or interests.	Highly involved and committed to multiple activities, focused on making positive impact for others. Answer is passionate and shows that applicant has honed a variety of unique skills, passions or interests.

Although developing a rubric can be a daunting task, working within education you have access to bright faculty members, teaching assistants, and deans who can help you specify the qualities you're looking for in your best students.

Once you have developed a new rubric, it must be tested to ensure it results in accurate evaluations of candidates. Re-evaluate your admissions rubric every cycle to ensure it's up-to-date and reflects the new class you're building.

> While 93% of schools have a standardized criteria for assessing applicants, only 70% of schools are confident that every member of their admissions team follows it.
> **2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**



4. Create a training program for all reviewers, not just direct admissions staff

As we've learned, training for reviewers varies from school to school. To curb bias, sending a few emails about what to ask in an admissions interview will not be enough. If your school outsources a portion of applicant reviewing to faculty, alumni, students, or other external staff, ensure they have the same access to training materials as your staff reviewers.

Some easy ways for directors or managers to get all of your reviewers on the same page

Create a student persona outlining the possible attributes of an ideal student and how reviewers can identify these competencies. Be realistic, not all students will have every positive trait, but establish a baseline for the students you want to admit and make that standard clear.

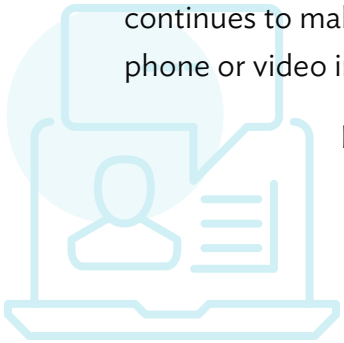
Offer approved questions that align with the competencies you're assessing in your comprehensive rubric. A question bank will help reviewers customize interviews within a standardized window of topics.

Give examples of how a proper evaluation should be completed through case studies, video, or interview transcripts.

Host a lunch and learn or webinar to outline the goals of the admissions season, the proper way to conduct an interview, and engage and excite reviewers about the importance of their role in building this cohort. Buying lunch for your review team also helps boost morale before a busy period.

5. Level the playing field for access to interviews

If your program has an interview component, expecting students to fly in for interviews can cause undue anxiety and add heavy costs to the application process. As technology continues to make the world smaller, provide a reliable way for candidates to conduct a phone or video interview without breaking the bank.



Possible options for candidates include:

- Phone interview
- Video conferencing (Skype, Google Hangouts)
- Asynchronous video interviews (Kira)

With a solid rubric already developed, you should be able to evaluate competencies in any of these interview formats through the tone and energy in applicants' voices and the quality of their responses. Just be cognizant not to put more weight on the enthusiasm and attitude of an in-person candidate in your evaluations.

6. Be open to a wide realm of student experiences

With reports like Making Caring Common's *Turning the Tide: Inspiring Concern for Others and the Common Good through College Admissions*, a movement is brewing to expand admissions criteria from "traditional" measures of achievement that universities have used and focus more on contributions to an applicant's community, family, and society in general.

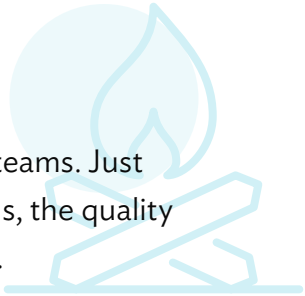
Turning the Tide recommends a shift in the traditional admissions process in three key ways:

- Give a more weighted value to applicants' authentic and meaningful contributions to others and society.
- Find ways to assess ethical engagement that consider and reduce biases between race, culture, and class.
- Rethink 'achievement' to reduce excessive achievement pressure on students and level the playing field for students with varying levels of opportunity.

This shift is critical in reducing class and racial biases, because it opens up opportunities for success to students who may have not been born into the same opportunities as others.

For example, considering leadership aptitude from student jobs and family roles, in addition to volunteer opportunities like student council and extracurricular sports, can make more lower-income applicants competitive in the grand scheme.

7. Allocate resources better to avoid burn out



Behavioral biases often form, unfortunately, from the exhaustion of admissions teams. Just as Jonathan Cole told *The Atlantic*, and as directors and coordinators have told us, the quality of applicant evaluations can negatively correlate with burned out staff members.

The faster you move, the more exhausted you become, and the easier it is to make a mistake.

> 41% of interviewers express that they are fatigued during review season.
> **—2016 Kira Admissions Bias Assessment**

While cutting corners is likely unintentional, it's often the reality of admissions to need to ramp up quickly during specific seasons, but not have the year-round demand for additional positions to support these high volume times. When admissions professionals are overworked and under-supported, it creates a myriad of possible oversights born out of either exhaustion or lack of time to focus on details.

Sourcing the time, human resources, and technological supports to keep afloat during this busy time of year can be a challenge. But there are ways to make it better.

Set limits and realistic timelines: Don't overload on applications to read or interviews to conduct in a day. Interviews are exhausting. Everyone has a different capacity for how many interviews they can conduct in a day. Once you know your limit, don't push it. Schedule lunch breaks, walk breaks, screen breaks, whatever you need to stay sharp through the day.

Use asynchronous video interviews: Asynchronous interviews give flexible options for admissions teams.

(Shameless Kira plug): With Kira, you and your team can review applicants when time permits. If you've reached your limit for interviews in a day, you can take a break and come back on your schedule, rather than forcing yourself through too many live interviews in a day.

Expand your human resources: Introduce additional reviewers outside of your staff. With a solid training program and rubric built around established competencies, you can bring faculty, external staff, and alumni in as reviewers to get more eyes on more applicants faster.

Striving toward a bias-free world

Bias is not something we can expect to eliminate completely, but it's something we can all strive to reduce. If you are part of a progressive, forward-thinking admissions team, you will take time to review your process, look for the holes that can lead to bias, and create systems to protect your applicants.

Keep these recommendations in mind as you start examining the changes you need to make:

1. Enlist a consistent number of reviewers for each applicant
2. Have reviewers gather feedback independently
3. Create a comprehensive rubric and stick to it
4. Develop a training program for reviewers
5. Even the playing field for students both near and far
6. Be open to more student experiences to include students from all backgrounds
7. Allocate resources better to avoid burnout

No school can (or should) make these changes overnight, but starting down the path towards reducing bias is the first step to a fairer, more defensible admissions process.

We hope you enjoyed reading **Breaking Down Bias in Admissions.**

We believe every student deserves a level playing field on the road to college. We designed our platform to help schools create a fairer, more defensible applicant experience to reduce the impact of bias in their review process.

By integrating Kira into your admissions platform, you will be able to:

Establish Core Competencies and a Rubric from the Start.	Have Multiple Reviewers. Only One Interview.	Review your Reviewers.
Kira clients work with our Success team to select and define core competencies for their program, then have reviewers evaluate based on this criteria within the platform.	Admissions teams can assign one applicant's interview to multiple reviewers to gather several, independent opinions, for an overall average score for each individual applicant.	At the end of the season, see your reviewers' overall average scores to identify potential biases and opportunities to further refine your standardized criteria.

Do you want to reduce bias in your admissions process?

GET STARTED

KIRA TALENT