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Reading with Mission: Creating and Implementing a Mission- and Student-Centered Undergraduate Admission Reading Process

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Participant: April Crabtree, Assistant Vice Provost for Undergraduate Admission
ICP Cohort 10

Project Title: Reading with Mission: Creating and Implementing a Mission- and Student-Centered Undergraduate Admission Reading Process

Project Overview: The purpose of this project is to create a comprehensive reading guide that provides context of and guidance in approaching applications centered on Mission and Values. This reading guide reimagines a mission-centered and Jesuit-focused review of the undergraduate admission application. Key components of the new reading guide including an outline of USF's Mission and Enrollment Goals, frameworks on accompaniment and positionality, educational privilege and implicit bias. In addition, this guide rests on a social justice platform of gender affirmation, inclusive sexuality, and anti-racism. Throughout the guide, there is a continued commitment to cura personalis as well our team's keystones of empathy and grace.

Rational for choosing project: Reviewing undergraduate admission applications is a primary responsibility of the admission team. In a given year, we are responsible for reviewing and returning decisions for almost 20,000 students' applications. The purpose of this project is to use Jesuit values a framework for reviewing these applications.

Project details:

1. Introduce Jesuit themes of accompaniment, positionality, privilege, and bias as frameworks for reviewing admission applications.
2. Provide student-centered and Mission-aligned guidance on interpreting areas of the student's application such as extracurricular activities, personal essays, and letters of recommendation within the framework.
3. Reinforce equity and access values by providing rationale and transparency in how pieces of the application are reviewed and rated.
4. Build competency in understanding and engaging with the University's Mission through reader education.
5. Continue to improve ways to evaluate applications for admission to USF that aligns with our Mission and Values.

Indications of success:

1. Deliverable of new reading guide and documentation for review of applications.
2. Trainings conducted and feedback gathered on the revised reading guide.
3. Raised awareness among the team and others on the role of Mission in reviewing applications.

Project Status: Complete

Mission Project: Reading with Mission: Creating and Implementing a Mission- and Student-Centered Undergraduate Admission Reading Process

Contributor: April Crabtree, Assistant Vice Provost for Undergraduate Admission, ICP Cohort 10

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The reading guide (and excerpts included here) are the culmination of the work and passion of many contributors. The depth of this work could not have been accomplished without the dedication of the following staff who ensured we approached each piece of this process with empathy, grace, and a sense of justice.

Candice Adams, Associate Director of Admission for Access and Inclusion

Kaleena Chiddick, Associate Director of Admission

Ariana Pistorino, Senior Associate Director of Admission

We respectfully dedicate ourselves to the work of accompanying students in this pivotal piece of their educational journey. To the Undergraduate Admission team who give many more hours than can be imagined and to our seasonal reading team who assist with this important task, this project is humbly submitted. Without the combined passions, talents, and vision of these individuals, this work could not be accomplished. This guide itself is meaningless without the tens of thousands of students who share their stories with us and consider USF as the next step on their journey. For their bravery, heart, and optimism, we dedicate ourselves as accompanists as we all work to fashion a more just and humane world.

USF Reading Guide Excerpts

USF's Mission and Enrollment Goals

In addition to the [University's Mission Statement](#), Strategic Enrollment Management has also outlined a mission statement to guide our work:

Strategic Enrollment Management leads USF's efforts to recruit, admit, matriculate and graduate an increasingly accomplished and diverse student body through collaborative initiatives with campus colleagues, personalized service, and a shared commitment to helping students fulfill their highest aspirations.

Our enrollment goals are built each year with attention to these statements and visions.

In this guide, you will find guidelines for reviewing an application so that you can assess applications and provide recommendations. We have provided context on our decision-making and position in the student journey as well to help you understand how we see ourselves as part of this through the application review.

Accompaniment and Positionality

Our responsibility to USF through the application review process is twofold:

1. We are committed to bringing the faculty an enthusiastic and capable group of aspiring scholars.
2. We are committed to the student body to bring new peers into this community who are excited by and believe in our mission.

The application review is important to satisfy both of these important commitments. As readers of these students' applications, it is important to couch this in the Jesuit value of accompaniment. As accompanists, we journey together with students, even for this short time in reading their applications. We should remain completely present in this endeavor.

Accompaniment as a Jesuit value is about companionship. We do not serve - to serve is colonizing. We accompany, side by side. As you read applications, I would encourage you to review this [great article](#) to put you in the space of accompaniment as you review applications. The application is an act of bravery for students and allows us an intimate glimpse into their lives - their successes as well as their challenges, their joys and heartbreaks, a special introduction to people or places that are important to them. This should be humbling, inspiring, and may sometimes be devastating. We ask that you accompany students in the review of applications using the following principles:

- Be completely present in your review. Each student deserves your full attention as you accompany them in these moments.
- We all come to this exercise with bias and we all come to this with privilege. Maintain humility as you share this journey.
- Recognize the courage that these students have to reveal some of the most private parts of themselves and their stories to you as you review their applications.
- Realize that though you may have read this essay 100 times, it only happened to the student once.
- Understand and sit with the inherent inequities in our educational system in the United States. Reflect often on how that is influencing the decisions made by or for these students.

- Reflect on your reactions to students' deeds and words and challenge yourself to understand what factors contributed to these choices and actions.
- Recognize that it is ok to experience joy and sadness as you accompany these students. It is ok to be angry at a world that has mistreated the young people in our society.
- Find hope and optimism knowing that the world is going to be a better place with these students at the helm.

Accompaniment is listening, sharing in solidarity, respectful, with not for, as Joe Hampson covers in the above referenced article. We do this together and are grateful for you as you take this journey with USF and the students applying to the university.

Educational Privilege and Implicit Bias

Approximately 6.7% of the people in the world hold a college degree. In comparison, 14% of the world is illiterate, 22% do not have adequate shelter, 11% are undernourished, and 9% do not have clean water to drink. All of us reading applications are within a minority of the world's population who have had access to and success in college education. To be college educated brings with it its own privileges. As we read applications, keep in mind that your perspective is one of educational privilege. We have all experienced higher education classrooms and spaces while the students' whose applications we read have not. For two thirds of students in the United States, no one in their family has had those experiences either. As you accompany students, please keep this in mind.

Our lived experiences and environmental context shape our perceptions of the world. We come to decision making spaces, social spaces, and educational spaces influenced by these contexts. We are all biased. Part of the training you will complete as you prepare to read applications will be exercises in learning about and recognizing your implicit and unconscious biases. This is an essential part of our training for in-house and seasonal reading staff so you are more aware of what you are bringing with you in your review of applications. We will have some required viewing and reading for you as part of your training but also recommend you take time to review the following resources:

[Understanding Implicit Bias](#) (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race & Ethnicity Implicit Bias Module Series)

[Implicit Bias In Action](#) (Center for Urban Education)

[Bias and the Application Process](#) (Inside Higher Education)

[How We Make Decisions and How Unconscious Bias Affects Judgement](#) (Marshall E-Learning Consultancy)

[Implicit Association Test](#) (Project Implicit, Harvard University)

[Consciously Addressing Our Implicit Biases In College Admission](#) (USF Admission Implicit Bias Training Powerpoint, 2020)

Our COVID-19 Response and Philosophy

The COVID-19 Pandemic has prompted universities to re-examine and reevaluate processes and policies for college admission. USF has also spent time listening to counselors, students, and families as they navigate the process during this time. As a response, we highlight the following:

USF adopted a test optional policy in 2019 in response to concerns about equity in the process. Going into 2020, this is not new for us. We understand that low-income families and communities of color are particularly impacted by the pandemic and reaffirm that test optional means test optional. Students are not penalized in this process for choosing not to submit test scores in the admission, scholarship, or financial aid process. Starting this year, we will allow students to change their intent from tests to test optional after submission of the application. Information on our test optional policy can be found [here](#).

With multiple modalities of learning for in-person and remote, we know that students may experience more difficulty than is typical in procuring letters of recommendation. In alignment with our belief that recommendation letters can provide advantage for those already at an advantage in our process and as a response to the current pandemic, we have made letters of recommendation optional for this cycle with the intention to move a conversation to go letter of recommendation optional permanently.

We know that counselors and offices at schools around the country are dealing with challenges for in-person staffing. Our team identified the request for an official high school transcript as a potential barrier to completing the application and will accept unofficial transcripts (in a PDF) from students. Should a student choose to enroll, we will ask for a final official high school transcript.

This year, you will notice that the Common Application has added a short answer question allowing students the space to comment on any hardship they may have faced as it relates to COVID-19. This section of the application is not scored but there is a place for you to put any comments that you would like the committee to see as it relates to a student's situation.

It is our firm stance that students have the right to write about their experience in the pandemic. While many students have experienced, and continue to experience, financial insecurity, housing and food insecurity, lack of technological resources, and many other devastating circumstances, it is our duty to remember that pain need not be unique to hurt. We do not measure or compare pain. Every student should be seen and heard in all parts of the application and this is another place where we can engage in compassionate accompaniment. Remember, you may have heard/read this response 1,000 times, but it only happened to this student once.

The impacts of COVID-19 are disproportionately impacting low-income students and communities of color. Those impacts include but are not limited to:

- Financial insecurity
- Housing insecurity
- Food insecurity
- Lack of access to high speed internet, computers, and other technologies as well as limited technology for a household (i.e. three learners for remote learning with one device)
- Personal experiences of loved ones who died from COVID-19
- Households where one or both parents/guardians are essential workers
- Responsibility for caring for siblings or other family members during a typical school day
- Increased part-time work to support the family
- Dealing with mental health, intense stress, and anxiety

Our position in response to COVID-19 is to approach this year with **grace and empathy** knowing that this trauma is still being lived. Students will not be penalized for a change in extracurricular commitments, a school's decision about classes or grades, lack of access to AP or IB tests, the inability to visit campus, or any other changes that were caused by the pandemic. Also, demonstrated interest is a metric of the oppressor and a corruptive influence on the integrity of this process. We have not and will not track demonstrated interest as an indicator for admission purposes.

[Our Gender Affirmation and Inclusive Sexuality Work](#)

Social justice is at the heart of our University and our team. The Undergraduate Admission team has recently completed a four session series "Let's Talk PRIDE: Understanding Gender, Intersectionality, and Critical Allyship" where we spent time as a team unpacking the dominant understandings of sex and gender, discussed foundational concepts related to gender and intersectionality, learned about misgendering and critical allyship, and to quote one team member, practicing "leaning on your dopeness." After these conversations and workshops, we identified these commitments:

Our team commits to the following:

1. Use pronouns when introducing ourselves.
2. Use gender-affirming language to create a safe and inclusive community.
3. Continue the conversation with a session on gender-inclusive/gender-affirming language.
4. Become more knowledgeable about LGBTQIA+ on-campus resources.
5. Support our student clubs/organizations by attending open events per semester.
6. Invite PRISM (USF's Gay Straight Alliance) for our continuing PRIDE diversity series and hold a Trans 101 training.

7. Create an affirming, inclusive statement that supports LGBTQIA+ students on our admission website.
8. Proactively research and attend LGBTQIA+ college fairs.
9. Reflect on our commitment by ordering PRIDE pins for staff/ambassador use
10. Work with the Office of Financial Aid to include more LGBTQIA+ scholarship information on their website.

Our Anti-Racism Work

The University prides itself on our diverse student body but recognizes the systemic inequities that significantly impact many underrepresented and marginalized students. Through our Diversity Series training "Let's Talk About Anti-Racism," we examined race, types of racism, white supremacy, white fragility, types of microaggressions, and being anti-racist. The Undergraduate Admission office created a safe space to have these difficult conversations, learned from each other's backgrounds/personal experiences, and committed to doing the work to be anti-racist. After these conversations and workshops, we identified these commitments:

Our team commits to the following:

1. Acknowledge and continue having the conversation about dismantling institutional racism that impacts historically underrepresented and marginalized students from pursuing higher education.
2. Evaluate how racism manifests in our admissions policies and practices, including recruitment, application review, and enrollment.
3. Develop anti-racist and equitable practices to create a more inclusive admission process for all students.
4. Raise awareness, educate ourselves, and continue having conversations regarding anti-racism.
5. Continue to affirm and support underrepresented and marginalized students through the application process and provide them with the necessary information to make an informed college decision.

Zero -Tolerance Policy

The Zero-Tolerance policy adheres to our admission reading criteria when contextually reviewing students' applications. The Office of Undergraduate Admission will not tolerate any form of racism (racial or ethnic slurs) or discrimination reflected in a student application that negatively describes or discriminate against a marginalized group or aspects of a student's identity. Students' identities include race, color, gender, religion, nationality, cognitive or physical abilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and socioeconomic background. We respect and value students' differences, ideas, opinions, and experiences, and we are committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive community for all students at USF.

Reference A: What to look for in an Application

As you review applications, you are making a contextual assessment of a student's academic path as well as personal characteristics. We have rewritten our website for students to provide more information on [what we look for](#) in the application review process. Please take some time to review this.

Beyond this, we are trying to understand how the student's academic performance is contextualized within their lived experience as both a student in a school and a person in this world. A few things to keep in mind:

Extracurricular activities should be viewed in the context of availability. There is also a bias in the review of activities often as we tend to look for clubs, sports, leadership, etc without taking the step back to ask important questions about access. The ability to participate in many activities is about resources - financial, time, transportation, etc. USF students often have significant extracurricular commitments working part-time jobs, taking care of siblings, caregivers, grandparents, that are part of their responsibility to their families - by choice or by necessity. These are equally important in your assessment as you understand a student's application. We also believe that it is important for students to continue pursuits that don't easily fit into the application as activities - meditation, painting, short story writing, etc. We have a natural bias for organized, group activities but these personal pursuits are an equally important part of who the individual is and all of who they will bring to USF. Students should not and will not be penalized for lack of participation due to circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

USF has made letters of recommendation optional for students applying for spring and fall 2021. Letters of recommendation are complicated factors and you will notice that you will receive applications for review where no letter is present. The quality of the letter is often tangled up with the quality of the letter writer more than the qualities of the student. There is a particular subset of students who will have access to strong letter writers but many, many others who will not. Always remember your context when reading these letters. Students should never be penalized because a teacher or counselor provides an average or below average letter. At the same time, sometimes the letter of rec can provide important information on circumstances surrounding the student's performance. This is important for us to know as we review an application.

As adults, we bring a mature perspective to reading essays. There is an unspoken expectation that writing is flawless and poetic. It is our responsibility to ensure that we understand that the essay review is biased by this maturity and experience. Remember that students have had, throughout their lives, different access to educational opportunities that influences their writing ability. Some students have had the resources to engage tutors, counselors, etc and those results manifest themselves in the essay product. While we want an essay to be cohesive, we are

more interested in the ideas, reflections, and thoughts of students than their ability to bring Pulitzer level writing to college. We have ample resources to help students grow as writers as they continue growing into scholars. Reading the essay, what words come to mind to describe the student? This should be your focus.

Context remains paramount and we hope you take the necessary time to feel connected to the student's story. We also want you to keep these things in mind as well as they bring their own privileges and disadvantages to students:

- Is this a first generation applicant?
- Is the student's first language English? What language is spoken in the home?
- Student attending a private or public high school?
- What's the % of 4-year college going students at their high school?
- Has the student taken any college courses?
- Are APs/Honors/IB curriculum available at their school?
- What does the student's activities page reflect?/What seems to occupy the student's time?

This year's Common Application gives students the space to provide information on how they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic. Interruptions to their education and home circumstances are critical components in our understanding of a student's journey. Students are not to be measured or rated based on these responses. The only exception is use of racist language or ethnic slurs in describing the pandemic such as Kung Flu, China Flu, Chinese Virus, etc. We have a zero tolerance policy for racism in the application in any form (See [Zero Tolerance Policy](#)). This section of the application should give you context. Please use the comment section on the review form to highlight any information you want the committee to be aware of.

Reference G: Mission Alignment

USF Mission: The core mission of the university is to promote learning in the Jesuit Catholic tradition. The university offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional students the knowledge and skills needed to succeed as persons and professionals, and the values and sensitivity necessary to be men and women for others.

The university will distinguish itself as a diverse, socially responsible learning community of high quality scholarship and academic rigor sustained by a faith that does justice. The university will draw from the cultural, intellectual, and economic resources of the San Francisco Bay Area and its location on the Pacific Rim to enrich and strengthen its educational programs.

USF's [Mission's and Values webpage](#) is a great place to build competency in understanding our mission.

What is mission alignment?

The mission at USF is vital and drives every conversation, all decision-making. This year, we are piloting an assessment to look at mission alignment in our incoming students as part of our application review process. This year, we have instead asked

one required question of all applicants. This supplemental response should form the basis for your mission alignment scoring/rating.

Question: The University of San Francisco's Jesuit tradition emphasizes community engagement and education for social justice, inspiring our students to become passionate agents for others. How do you see yourself becoming a part of this mission?

Definitions

Key Terms in the USF Supplemental Question

Community Engagement - As defined by the [Berkeley Public Health Practice and Leadership program](#), community engagement is “the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.” The individual in community engagement is a partner, an accompanist, someone with not for.

Social Justice - Justice is a difficult concept to define and has been argued by philosophers for hundreds of years. We think of social justice in the Jesuit tradition as a concept of fairness and justice between people and society. This covers topics of human rights, racial (in)justice, economic (in)justice, gender (in)justice, access to healthcare, social inequities, structural racism, structural poverty, access to education, and more.

Good resources for understanding the Jesuit usage of social justice:

[Ignatian Spirituality.com](#)
[Loyola Press on Social Justice](#)

Agents for others - an agent is typically defined as someone who has the authority to act or make decisions on another's behalf. Being an agent for others is a process of recognizing one's privilege and position and using that power to create change with others. Agents for others are not merely servants in the Jesuit tradition. While service to and engagement in community is a part of this, becoming an agent for others is an act of humanizing and accompanying, working with not for others to create changes related to social justice. This is often defined in Jesuit values as being “men and women for others.” While this is central to our values, the phraseology is gender binary and does not represent the lived experience of all individuals. We have chosen to use “agents for others” in place of this. You can read a short briefing on the core Jesuit values through this Creighton University produced [resource](#).

Final Thoughts

Approach this year with grace and empathy. Do whatever you need to do to create the mental space to be present as you review applications. These are students' hopes and dreams, pains and traumas they are sharing with us. It is an awesome responsibility we share to welcome the men, women, and them for others into our community.