Authentic Student Work in College Admissions

Lessons From the Ross School of Business

Larkin Willis and Monica R. Martinez

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Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

As part of efforts to create more effective and equitable admission systems, a growing number of colleges and universities are developing holistic review practices. Such practices involve "consideration of multiple, intersecting factors—academic, nonacademic, and contextual—that enter the mix and uniquely combine to define each individual applicant." Admission professionals have come to recognize the potential of widening the admission criteria beyond standard academic measures—such as high school transcripts, grade point average, and summative scores on college entrance exams—to understand student contexts, mindsets, and "college-ready" competencies, such as higher-order thinking skills, effective communication, productive collaboration, and intellectual curiosity.

To develop holistic review processes, admission professionals are changing the ways they structure applications for undergraduate admissions. This study examines how the Stephen M. Ross School of Business (Ross School) at the University of Michigan requests, collects, and reviews portfolios of student work along with traditional application materials. The first section presents the rationale for the new holistic review process, the second shares insights it provides the Ross School, and the third details how admission professionals at the Ross School built it. The case illuminates the use of student-generated portfolios as one possible model for other higher education systems seeking to evolve their holistic admission processes.

University of Michigan Ross School of Business

The Ross School is a professional school within the University of Michigan, which *U.S. News & World Report* ranks among the best public state university systems in the nation. In addition to its graduate-level offerings, the Ross School offers a top-ranked Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA).

In fall 2016, the Ross School changed its undergraduate application to include a student-created admissions portfolio. The Ross School developed the admissions portfolio to meet four key objectives for holistic review:

1. To differentiate academically indistinguishable applicants
2. To attract and select applicants who are intentional about business school
3. To assess readiness for an action-based pedagogy
4. To widen the range of experiences students can include in their application to capture multiple forms of excellence

The Ross Admissions Portfolio consists of two components: a Business Case Discussion and an Artifact. The Business Case Discussion is a 500-word essay designed to capture an applicant's understanding of business. Applicants must identify and pose a solution to a business-related issue that is personally meaningful. The Artifact is a 250-word essay that accompanies a multimedia file meant to demonstrate how an applicant has applied prior learning. Submissions include academic projects, extracurricular or community programs, newspaper articles or awards highlighting an achievement, personal blogs or websites, or photographs representing meaningful experiences within or beyond high school. Every first-year applicant to the BBA program is required to create a Ross Admissions Portfolio in addition to the undergraduate application materials required by the University of Michigan.

Building the Class: Insights From Portfolio Review

The admissions portfolio has supported the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team to advance its four key objectives.

The Ross Admissions Portfolio helps the undergraduate admissions team attract and select applicants who are intentional about business school by providing an opportunity to demonstrate in detail their intentions for pursuing a business degree, rather than drafting a general statement of interest. Current students reported that the Ross Admissions Portfolio provided valuable insight into program culture, pedagogy, and community that attracted them to apply.

The Business Case Discussion provides insight that helps the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team understand applicants' business mindsets, defined collaboratively with BBA faculty and students. The best submissions demonstrate cognitive skills including clarity of writing, problem definition, problem-solving, and content knowledge, in addition to intrapersonal skills including self-awareness and the ability to draw personal connections to a topic.

The Artifact captures a range of learning experiences that occur within and beyond the classroom walls—such as bench science, research papers, performing arts, and community service projects—that helps the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team understand the learning habits and mindsets that applicants would bring into the action-based pedagogy of the program. The best submissions describe learning experiences that engage skills needed for college success, such as self-awareness, motivation, goal setting, persistence, problem-solving, collaboration, and leadership.

The Ross Admissions Portfolio adds context to holistic review, which the undergraduate admissions team uses to inform holistic decisions about building a diverse and inclusive class. Application readers noted that transcripts and lists of extracurricular activities often reflect systemic disparities by emphasizing what applicants from under-resourced high schools with limited opportunities lack. The admissions portfolio enables applicants to demonstrate their interests and skills across a broader range of topics and experiences, which helps level the playing field and create a fuller picture of applicants' individual strengths.

Building the System: Processes and Capacity for Portfolio Review

The Ross undergraduate admission process comprises three stages. First, the University of Michigan's Office of Undergraduate Admissions identifies competitive students through the general admission process. Second, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team further differentiates the most competitive applicants in a rubric-centric review. Final admission decisions are based on a culmination of these evaluations.

The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team developed and implemented the admissions portfolio in six steps.

Step 1: Align the portfolio to central admission processes. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team created a process that incorporates additional evaluations without altering the application deadlines, review timeline, decision release, and deadline to accept applicants set by the University of Michigan Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

Step 2: Establish technological capacity. In the first year of implementation of the Ross Admissions Portfolio, the Ross School received nearly 5,000 Artifacts, including documents, images, videos, and audio files. The information and technology team uses SlideRoom to accept these pieces of media and then imports and transfers submissions to the application management system.

Step 3: Develop rubrics. To ensure reliable qualitative review, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team developed rubrics with clear criteria and detailed performance indicators. The rubrics align with skills and mindsets students need to flourish in the Ross program and community—including critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and curiosity.

Step 4: Build reader capacity. The Ross School director of undergraduate admissions hires, trains, and coordinates a team of 20 to 25 short-term contractual professionals who apply rubrics to evaluate applications. Prior to the application reading cycle, all Ross application readers undergo calibration training. During the cycle, the Ross Admissions Review Committee moderates scoring to ensure the rubrics are reliably applied for fair evaluations.

Step 5: Conduct outreach. The Ross School engages prospective applicants through its admission website, public blogs, admission events, and opportunities to connect one-on-one with admission professionals and current students to demystify what makes an admissions portfolio successful.

Step 6: Iterate. During the first year of implementation in 2016, every submission was carefully reviewed by the Ross Admissions Review Committee to determine whether submissions met the goals and to identify adjustments needed to the guidance provided to students.

Summary of Key Findings and Implications

The 2022 Reimagining College Access tool, *Performance Assessments in College Admission: Designing an Effective and Equitable Process*, outlined a set of four recommended practices for those seeking to implement an admissions portfolio system:

1. Know your "why" for requesting different and/or additional information.
2. Determine which artifacts to request, choosing artifacts that will convey the desired information in the most usable format.
3. Craft and refine an "ask" that is clear about expectations and intended use while providing supports for students to be able to understand the goals and expectations of the portfolio.
4. Conduct outreach and communicate the request to guidance and college counselors, students, and families to ensure all students and the adults supporting them know about this opportunity.

The Ross School experience demonstrates how college admission officers can put these practices into action and achieve the goals of capturing additional differentiating information about applicants and building a more diverse class. Through the development and implementation process, the Ross School took several key steps that supported this success:

- **The Ross School intentionally developed its admissions portfolio to solicit targeted information associated with student success in the undergraduate program.** For instance, the Business Case Discussion solicits demonstrations of problem-solving, clarity of writing, problem definition, and content knowledge, which is aligned with the Ross School curriculum.

- **The Ross School implemented the admissions portfolio review within the overall undergraduate admission timeline and processes for the University of Michigan.** Working within the existing structure allowed the school to add components without requiring university-wide change and buy-in, which could have slowed or stopped implementation.

- **The Ross School has invested in building reader capacity to conduct a holistic review of application materials.** Ross application readers exercise the same skill set as essay readers and do not require subject matter expertise. However, the Ross School director of undergraduate admissions hosts annual calibration trainings, monthly meetings, and ongoing moderation reports to ensure each application receives careful, rubric-based holistic review. Investing in reader training allows the Ross School to have confidence in the reliability of the holistic review ratings.

- **The Ross School supports applicants in understanding the purpose and nature of the admissions portfolio.** The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team conducts extensive outreach and provides information, criteria, and examples to demonstrate what makes an admissions portfolio successful and support students to apply. Educating applicants helps level the playing field among applicants and helps students produce portfolios that demonstrate the qualities that the Ross School seeks to evaluate.

- **The Ross School assessed implementation and made changes based on data.** By assessing the admissions portfolios, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team was able to make changes to its guidance for students, which resulted in stronger and better-targeted submissions. Former Ross Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs Lynn Perry Wooten encouraged other large public systems to execute a small change and then iterate. She added, "Once you start, success breeds success."

The Ross Admissions Portfolio shows a promising example of what it takes to move beyond standard application processes that require applicants to represent themselves in a formulaic way. Additionally, the case study shows the vision, careful planning, and continuous improvement required for a higher education institution to successfully adapt existing admission processes to balance the efficiency of a standard review with the depth of a qualitative portfolio review.

Introduction

As part of efforts to better understand, more equitably admit, and effectively support undergraduate students, a growing number of colleges and universities are developing holistic review practices. Such practices involve "consideration of multiple, intersecting factors—academic, nonacademic, and contextual—that enter the mix and uniquely combine to define each individual applicant."[1] Admission professionals have come to recognize the potential of widening the admission criteria beyond standard academic measures—including high school transcripts, grade point average, and summative scores on college entrance exams—to understand student contexts and capabilities while capturing evidence of "college-ready" competencies, such as higher-order thinking skills, effective communication, productive collaboration, and intellectual curiosity.[2]

To develop holistic review processes, admission professionals are changing the ways they structure applications for undergraduate admissions. This study examines how the Stephen M. Ross School of Business (Ross School) at the University of Michigan requests, collects, and reviews portfolios of student work along with traditional application materials. The case study describes how the evolution of student-centered, strengths-based admissions at the Ross School has become an empowering process for applicants to represent their assets as learners beyond the limitations of a standard college application.

Additionally, the case study shows the vision, careful planning, and continuous improvement required for a higher education institution to successfully adapt existing admission processes to balance the efficiency of a standard review with the depth of a qualitative portfolio review. In this way, the study illuminates the use of student-generated portfolios as one possible model for higher education systems seeking to develop more holistic admission processes.

Changing Landscape of College Admission

Many institutions of higher education—and national organizations representing admission officers, registrars, and presidents—have begun to seek new ways to evaluate undergraduate applications that are effective at eliciting meaningful information and equitably elevating the knowledge, skills, and abilities of applicants with diverse identities and experiences. Holistic review is designed to address a broad constellation of goals, including the need to differentiate academically

indistinguishable applicants; reduce the biases of overreliance on any single measure; and gather additional evidence to support admission decisions that increase the diversity of thought, experience, and identity on college campuses. The proliferation of test-optional college applications and legal actions challenging the use of race and ethnicity in admission practices demonstrate calls for reimagining college access in the national discourse on higher education policy and practice.[3]

As part of their admission review processes, an increasing number of institutions are purposefully shifting the emphasis away from a single assessment of academic content knowledge to a set of holistic measures. In response to concerns that overreliance on standardized metrics reproduces inequities in access to both elite secondary education and to extensive test preparation, one goal of holistic review is to help colleges recruit and better assess applicants from communities that have been historically minoritized in higher education, including students of color and students from low-income families.[4] Some colleges and universities, including those within the University of California system, have removed standardized testing requirements (the SAT and ACT), while others have gone test optional by allowing applicants the choice to submit test scores.[5]

The pandemic accelerated this trend as institutions were forced to adapt admission processes in the absence of college entrance exam scores. For the 2022–23 college admission season, according to the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest), more than 1,800 4-year institutions will not require students to submit ACT or SAT scores to be considered for fall 2023 enrollment—more than two thirds of the 2,330 bachelor-degree institutions in the United States.[6] Emerging research suggests that test-optional undergraduate admissions at selective colleges is associated with modest enrollment gains among students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups, students from low-income families, and women.[7]

The test-optional movement has opened the door for emerging holistic admission practices that draw on indicators of college readiness beyond the mastery of academic content knowledge. Simultaneously, secondary schools are increasingly using performance assessments—such as portfolios, capstone projects, and senior defenses—to assess higher-order thinking and communication skills needed for college success.[8] Numerous secondary schools in large public systems and networks serving diverse populations, including Los Angeles Unified School District and the New York Performance Assessment Consortium, have expanded instruction to include inquiry-oriented teaching and learning. In such schools, students graduate through

well-developed and externally validated performance assessments that demonstrate competence across cumulative coursework in disciplinary areas (e.g., math, science, English language arts, history, and social studies).

The Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan is among several colleges and undergraduate programs incorporating demonstrations of student learning into their admission processes. For instance, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology application includes an optional Maker Portfolio to provide applicants an opportunity to showcase projects that require creative insight, technical skill, and a hands-on approach to learning by doing. Wheaton College created an option for applicants to submit a piece of academic work and reflect on what it means to them as one way to identify applicants with the skills and abilities needed to thrive in its open curricula, and who may be overlooked using traditional measures. Since 2015, the City University of New York system, which comprises 25 2- and 4-year colleges, has collaborated with high schools in the New York Performance Standards Consortium to incorporate portfolios of authentic student work into the college admission process.[9]

Several innovative initiatives are exploring ways to organize such evidence of student learning into easily reviewable formats to support college admission decisions. These initiatives include:

- The Mastery Transcript Consortium, a network of 381 secondary schools that have transitioned to transcripts that report student mastery of specific competencies. Member schools believe this type of transcript better represents what students know and can do, typically aligned with the grade-level competencies required for graduation and measured using performance assessments.[10] Over 100 colleges accept the Mastery Transcript as an alternative to the traditional transcript.

- The Coalition for College planning platform through which, starting as early as 9th grade, students can collect and maintain a portfolio of their work that they may submit as part of their application to college.[11] More than 150 colleges and universities accept the Coalition Application.

- The Common Application, which represents more than 1,000 diverse institutions of higher education and is creating an equity-focused application that gives applicants more agency over what measures are included.[12] In collaboration with the Making Caring Common project, the Common Application will support institutions of higher education to pilot the inclusion of assessments of student character in college admissions for the 2022–23 admission cycle.

Since 2017, the Reimagining College Access (RCA) initiative, led by the Learning Policy Institute in partnership with EducationCounsel, has networked the aforementioned k–12 and higher education organizations to coordinate efforts to advance school-based performance assessments in higher education admissions, placement, and advising decisions.[13] The RCA initiative focuses on the use of school-based performance assessments in higher education decision-making as a promising way for admission staff to understand applicants' strengths, abilities, and educational experiences without placing additional burden on students to compile and present novel demonstrations of their learning.[14]

As institutions of higher education develop more holistic admission processes, there is an opportunity to incorporate performance assessments that demonstrate applicants' achievements and potential. Research is needed to understand both what is gained and what is required to support new admission requirements. Early innovators provide a road map to the intersecting areas of practice involved in changes to admissions, such as ensuring transparency and equitable opportunity for applicants, integrating technological platforms for transfer and review of materials, and building human capacity to conduct qualitative holistic review.

> As institutions of higher education develop more holistic admission processes, there is an opportunity to incorporate performance assessments that demonstrate applicants' achievements and potential.

About the Study

This case study illuminates one possible model for other higher education systems seeking to develop more holistic admission practices. It details why and how the University of Michigan Ross School of Business incorporated admissions portfolios into its undergraduate application. The report answers two questions: (1) What is the added value of a portfolio requirement for the first-year admission process at the Ross School? (2) How does the admissions team structure and conduct their qualitative review of the admissions portfolio? It draws on thematic analysis of institutional documents; semi-structured interviews with four admission staff members, six application readers, and nine students; and descriptive quantitative data to detail how the Ross Admissions Portfolio supports undergraduate admission decision-making.

The report is organized into four main sections that explore the following topics:

1. An overview of the University of Michigan Ross School of Business and its motivation for developing the Ross Admissions Portfolio

2. The value the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team and current students find in the admissions portfolio

3. How the undergraduate admissions team structures and conducts their holistic review

4. Key findings and implications for admission professionals interested in integrating authentic demonstrations of student work into the holistic review process at their college or university

The Ross Admissions Portfolio illuminates a possible model for innovation in holistic admissions that may be useful for higher education systems seeking to enact similar systems change to meet their own institutional values and goals.

The University of Michigan Ross School of Business

In fall 2016, the University of Michigan Stephen M. Ross School of Business (Ross School) changed its undergraduate application to include a student-created admissions portfolio. This section of the report describes the hallmarks of the Ross School and its context for evolving holistic review of high school applicants. This section also details the components of the Ross Admissions Portfolio and its main objective: to differentiate applicants based on their intentionality, readiness, and multiple forms of excellence.

The Ross School is a professional school within the University of Michigan, which *U.S. News & World Report* ranks among the best public state university systems in the nation.[15] The Ross School is known for its focus on social impact and applied learning experiences. The hands-on learning at the business school, called Ross Experiences in Action-Based Learning, engages undergraduate students in authentic business projects, including entrepreneurial challenges, internships, exchange programs, and fellowships.[16] In addition to its graduate-level offerings, the Ross School offers a top-ranked Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA). The BBA program is among only a handful of undergraduate business degree programs nationwide.[17]

Transition to a 4-Year BBA Program

The Ross School expanded its BBA from a 3- to 4-year degree program in the 2017–18 school year, which permitted students to apply and enroll directly from high school. Prior to 2017, applicants transferred into the BBA program after their first or second year at other University of Michigan colleges and schools or external institutions. High school seniors applying to the University of Michigan could request a place in the 3-year BBA program, which would be guaranteed after meeting requirements during the fall and winter terms of their first year.[18]

After expanding the BBA program from 3 to 4 years, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team drew from a pool of mostly high school applicants (80%) to comprise an average class size that increased from 400 to 600 students.[19] By 2021, the Ross School enrolled 2,421 undergraduate students, representing roughly 7% of the University of Michigan's total undergraduate enrollment (see Appendix A).

In preparing for this program expansion, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team—including the associate dean for undergraduate programs, the managing director of the BBA program, and the director of undergraduate admissions—revisited their goals for BBA admissions. They first examined trends in applicant data. A 2015 internal report concluded, "87% of the applicant pool had a high school GPA of 3.7 or higher. Thus, many of the students who were turned down for the undergraduate business program were academically indistinguishable from those admitted, which has become the national norm for selective college admissions."[20]

The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team then reviewed admission processes at peer business schools with first-year admitting programs, samples of coursework and business-oriented experiences commonly received as supplemental materials to the 3-year application, and emerging practices to capture college-ready skills as part of a holistic admission process.[21] From this analysis, Ross School leadership decided to implement an open-ended admissions portfolio in the 2016–17 application cycle to capture more holistic information about high school applicants' academic readiness, learning experiences, and future goals related to business.

Commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

While they prepared to expand undergraduate BBA program enrollment, Ross School leadership also developed a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan of Action that articulates commitments aligned with the University of Michigan's vision for a diverse, equitable, and inclusive community. One objective of this plan is to increase the representation of faculty, staff, and students from historically minoritized communities, including Black and Indigenous people, people from low-income backgrounds, and women.

In 2021, 12% of BBA program applicants were from the state of Michigan; 14% of program applicants indicated their ethnicity as Black, Hawaiian, Hispanic, Native American, or two or more underrepresented minorities; 37% were female; and 29% were from families with reported incomes below $150,000 (see Appendix A). To advance the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Plan of Action, the Ross School coordinates with the University of Michigan on a network of recruitment and outreach initiatives:

- For over 30 years, the Ross School has partnered with businesses in Detroit to provide undergraduate fellowships and internships, increasing the visibility of its programs and students in Southeast Michigan.[22]

- The Ross School runs a Summer Business Academy for African American, Latino/a, and Native American rising high school seniors who are outstanding students; first-generation students; and students who have overcome economic hardship. The purpose of the academy is to expose high school students to business education and inspire them to apply to the Ross School.[23]

- The Ross School of Business Office of Financial Aid coordinates scholarship and financial aid opportunities available through the University of Michigan, including the Go Blue Guarantee, which provides free tuition based on family incomes and assets below a certain threshold to alleviate financial barriers for in-state, full-time undergraduates.[24]

- The Ross School runs an All-Access Weekend that is geared toward, but not limited to, high school junior and senior students from groups historically underrepresented at the University of Michigan.[25] The event is free for students selected to attend and provides an opportunity to experience the action-based curriculum; engage with faculty, staff, and students; and gain a deeper understanding of the application process.

- The Ross School hosts programs dedicated to the success of women in business, including student organizations and clubs, an annual Women in Leadership Conference, and programs and initiatives that offer targeted career support and access to professional networks.[26]

The Ross School credits these outreach and recruitment initiatives, combined with advances in holistic admissions, as supporting its efforts to build increasingly diverse undergraduate classes over time.[27] From fall 2016 to 2021, female enrollment increased from 35% to 44% of the incoming class, and students with racially minoritized identities (Black, Hawaiian, Hispanic, and Native American) increased from 7% to 13% of the incoming class.[28]

Toward a More Holistic Review

The Ross School developed the admissions portfolio to meet four key objectives for holistic review: (1) to differentiate academically indistinguishable applicants, (2) to attract and select applicants who are intentional about business school, (3) to assess readiness for an action-based pedagogy, and (4) to widen the range of experiences students can include in their application to capture multiple forms of excellence.

Differentiation

The Ross Admissions Portfolio was developed, in part, to gather differentiating information about applicants that an internal analysis deemed "academically indistinguishable." The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team also determined that the extracurriculars, essays, and recommendations on the undergraduate application provided limited additional insight to differentiate applicants. Former Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs Lynn Perry Wooten explained, "We were getting these tons of applications, but the applications were looking generic on multiple fronts. Test scores and GPA didn't tell the full story of what we were looking for at the intersection of liberal arts and business education." The next three objectives describe the kind of differentiating information they were seeking.

Intentionality

The Ross Admissions Portfolio was designed to help the undergraduate admissions team identify "intentional" applicants, meaning those genuinely interested in business education. The 4-year expansion occurred during a period of rising application volume: In 2015, the number of BBA program applications climbed to a historic high of roughly 13,000 for a class of 400.[29] Undergraduate applications were rising nationally: Thirty-six percent of enrolled first-time freshmen applied to seven or more colleges in the fall 2015 admission cycle, compared to 17% in 2005.[30]

The undergraduate admissions team came to believe that the ease of submitting similar application materials across multiple colleges and programs was driving an increase in applicants who did not demonstrate a specific interest in business education. After reviewing materials on positive psychology and self-authorship,[31] the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team decided that an open-ended admissions portfolio would best enable applicants to present their motivations for pursuing an undergraduate business degree.

Readiness for action-based learning

The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team sought to evaluate applicants based on their readiness to engage in the action-based learning that defines the BBA program pedagogy. Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs Norm Bishara explained, "At the root of Michigan Ross's long-standing commitment to [action-based learning] is the straightforward idea that if you want to learn business, you need to 'do' business and have experience being a business leader while you're still in school—where you

can safely make mistakes and learn from them as you are guided by Ross faculty."[32] To evaluate readiness for action-based pedagogy, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team sought evidence of applicants' experiences working in groups; their motivations and passions; their ability to self-regulate and persist; and their cognitive skills, such as critical thinking and written communication. For this reason, they created the Ross Admissions Portfolio to demonstrate applicants' learning in action, detailed further in the next section of the report.

Multiple forms of excellence

The commitment to building a more diverse BBA program, defined broadly in terms of the intersectional experiences and identities that students bring to the classroom, was another objective for developing the Ross Admissions Portfolio. The undergraduate admissions team sought a wider aperture to capture and evaluate the unique strengths that applicants would contribute to an incoming class. The intention of the admissions portfolio was additive; to provide, in the words of Wooten, "an evidence-based piece of data about the multiple dimensions of excellence" without removing existing review criteria for academic excellence. The Ross Admissions Portfolio enables applicants to demonstrate their excellence across an even broader range of assets and experiences.

The Ross Admissions Portfolio

Starting in the fall 2016 admission cycle, every first-year applicant to the BBA program was required to create a Ross Admissions Portfolio in addition to the undergraduate application materials required by the University of Michigan (see "The Ross School of Business First-Year Application Requirements"). As part of a coordinated effort detailed in the third section of this report, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team conducts a holistic review that includes the admissions portfolio after the University of Michigan Office of Undergraduate Admissions evaluates the Common Application.

The BBA program admission process is academically competitive (see Appendix A). In 2021, the average high school GPA of program applicants was 3.76. Following COVID-19–related disruptions in 2020, the University of Michigan transitioned to a test-flexible policy that provides applicants the choice to submit SAT and ACT scores as part of their application to undergraduate programs.[33] In 2021, the average composite SAT score was 1420, and the average composite ACT score was 32. Members of the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team report that the open-ended questions in the Ross Admissions Portfolio, described next, have expanded the types of experiences, thinking, and skills that students can include in their application.

> ### The Ross School of Business First-Year Application Requirements
>
> **University of Michigan Common Application:**
>
> - Undergraduate admission essays (3)
> - Extracurricular involvement
> - High school transcript
> - School report or counselor recommendation
> - Teacher evaluation
> - SAT or ACT score, if available and students wish them to be considered, or other test results like PSAT, if available
> - TOEFL, MELAB, or IELTS scores (for non-native speakers of English)
>
> **Ross Admissions Portfolio:**
>
> - Business Case Discussion
> - Artifact
>
> Note: These are requirements for all undergraduate applicants to the University of Michigan.
>
> Source: Stephen M. Ross School of Business. (2022). *How to apply: First-year applicants*. University of Michigan. https://michiganross.umich.edu/undergraduate/bba/admissions/first-year-applicants.

Five years before COVID-19 sparked widespread interest in more customizable undergraduate applications, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team drew on research indicating that open-ended guidelines encourage applicants to reflect on their attributes rather than focus on those the admission counselor designates as important.[34] Ross Director of Undergraduate Admissions Blaire Moody Rideout explained the philosophy behind these self-driven prompts, which build on the assets of today's learners: "We need to allow applicants to submit what they have created to showcase their best self, and then we find a way to standardize that [rather than] standardization on the front end." Guidance on the Ross admission webpage emphasizes that there is no one "right" way to craft a successful portfolio.[35]

Ross BBA Program Managing Director Paul Kirsch explained what he hoped the portfolio would do: "I really want students to use the portfolio to tell us those important things about themselves that we haven't asked." He continued, "It originates with the student; it doesn't originate with answering a specific question in 500 words. This is an invitation to tell us what you think about something, and you can [decide] what that something is."

The Ross Admissions Portfolio consists of two components: a Business Case Discussion and an Artifact. The Business Case Discussion is a 500-word essay designed to capture an applicant's understanding of business. Applicants must identify and pose a solution to a business-related issue that is personally meaningful. The Artifact is a 250-word essay that accompanies a text, image, video file, or unique hyperlink representing a student's original work. Submissions include academic projects, extracurricular or community programs, newspaper articles or awards highlighting an achievement, personal blogs or websites, or photographs representing meaningful experiences within or beyond high school. The Artifact is meant to demonstrate how an applicant has applied their learning.

Guidance for the Ross Admissions Portfolio

The following text has been taken directly from the Ross School website.

Business Case Discussion. Choose a current event or issue in your community and discuss the business implications. Propose a solution that incorporates business principles or practices. The review panel will look for creativity, drawing connections, and originality. Your response should be limited to approximately 500 words.

This case discussion helps us learn more about your understanding of business. The topic should be unique to your interests, experiences, and knowledge. There is no "right" or "wrong" business situation to choose—it's truly up to you. We encourage you to select a topic that you are passionate about and not a global topic that you are disconnected from.

Artifact. Upload an artifact that represents something significant about your life and shows how you've put learning into action. This could be related to something inside or outside of the classroom (like an extracurricular accomplishment you're particularly proud of). The goal is to give you the chance to showcase a unique aspect of yourself. The options for artifacts are endless. Note that your artifact does not need to be business related. Ask yourself: "What are you most proud of from your four years in high school?"

We also ask that you submit a short description that explains how your artifact demonstrates your learning in action. Essentially, what did you learn from this experience? Please limit this response to approximately 250 words.

Source: Stephen M. Ross School of Business. (2022). *Share your passion: The admissions portfolio*. University of Michigan. https://michiganross.umich.edu/undergraduate/bba/admissions/first-year-applicants/admissions-portfolio.

Building the Class: Insights From Portfolio Review

This section discusses the added value of a portfolio requirement for the first-year admission process at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business (Ross School), drawn from a review of institutional documents (admission policies, training materials, blogs) and interviews with four members of the undergraduate admissions team, six application readers, and nine current students. Findings are organized into the key objectives for holistic review: First, the Ross Admissions Portfolio provides a glimpse into the program's culture and pedagogy, which encourages students to be more intentional in their application. Next, the Business Case Discussion gives a snapshot of applicants' business mindsets, and the Artifact offers insight into their prior learning experiences. Finally, the Ross Admissions Portfolio captures valuable information about student context that is often not represented in other components of the holistic review.

The Portfolio Attracts More Intentional Applicants

The Ross Admissions Portfolio helps the undergraduate admissions team attract and select applicants who are intentional about business school. Prior to the implementation of the admissions portfolio in 2015, the BBA program received roughly 13,000 applications. The undergraduate admissions team noticed that many applications in this large pool did not demonstrate a specific interest or desire to pursue a career in business. The Ross Admissions Portfolio enables applicants to demonstrate in detail their intentions for pursuing a business degree, rather than drafting a more general statement of interest. For example, the following vignette was drawn from a sample of application reader comments:

> For her Artifact, an applicant submitted a photograph of a 101st birthday party she organized at the medical care facility where she has worked for four years as a part-time patient care coordinator. The applicant described her caretaking responsibilities and relationship with the patient. In her Business Case Discussion, the applicant analyzed eldercare challenges she witnessed firsthand in this position. She connected concrete recommendations to her goal of working to ensure access to safe and quality health care for all.[36]

Application readers noted that the submission clearly demonstrated the applicant's desire to pursue business education to address problems in the health care industry and an understanding of how the BBA program might jump-start her career in this field. Application readers also commented that this admissions portfolio enabled the applicant to demonstrate her passion, rather than just describing it.

Current students reported that the Ross Admissions Portfolio provided valuable insight into program culture, pedagogy, and community that attracted them to apply. Reflecting on her college application process, a current student said that she looked closely at application questions for a sense of what the school

> The admissions portfolio made the applicant feel valued for what she brought into her application, rather than prompting her to cater to what the school valued.

or program is like: "In 80% of the cases, you don't know a current student, so you are really basing [your impressions] on the essay questions." She described most college essay questions as "generic," whereas "Ross asked questions that made [the BBA program] stand out." The admissions portfolio made the applicant feel valued for what she brought into her application, rather than prompting her to cater to what the school valued.
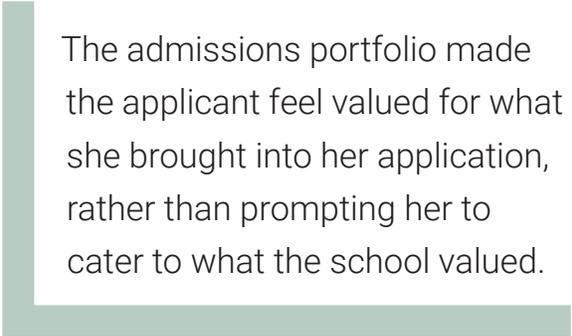
The admissions portfolio also previews the action-based learning that is a hallmark of the BBA. One current student said she felt ready to take on the challenge of a competitive business program, explaining that, based on her successful Business Case Discussion, "I knew I could do the work." Another reported feeling confident accepting his admissions offer because of the Ross Admissions Portfolio, saying, "[It] gave me two more [opportunities] to show my creativity and who I am. That part of me is why I got into Ross, not because of my background or GPA." These remarks from current students indicate that completing the Ross Admissions Portfolio often solidifies applicants' interest in pursuing business education at the Ross School.

Implementing the Ross Admissions Portfolio did coincide with a decrease in applicants to the BBA program. Compared to the 13,000 applications in 2015, the Ross School received under 6,500 applications in 2018. This may be because it tested applicants' level of interest in the BBA program.

One current student said, "No other school had it, which made it intimidating." Another reported that when she learned the BBA program required an admissions portfolio, her first thought was, "I am just going to have to just sit that one out, I guess. I'm not going to the business school." She explained, "You have to take that extra step and find time to do another part of an application, which can be a lot. Especially when you're applying to eight schools at the same time." Current students estimated spending between 1 and 2 weeks on their admissions portfolio, comparable to the time spent on supplemental essays for the University of Michigan first-year undergraduate application. They characterized the admissions portfolio as a trade-off between the benefit of a more personalized application and the cost of extra time spent preparing that application.

The undergraduate admissions team wanted to ensure it attracted students truly interested in pursuing a business career; however, they did not want to create a barrier to students who were truly interested in a business career, particularly those from underrepresented groups. As a result, they watched the data closely in the first years of implementation, particularly the share of applicants from low-income backgrounds, female applicants, and applicants with racially minoritized identities. Moody Rideout reported that her team found that "everything dropped in proportion. There wasn't a specific group that was singled out." With continued outreach efforts since the first year of implementing the Ross Admissions Portfolio, the volume of applicants to the BBA program has increased. In 2022, the program is back up from 6,500 applications to over 8,000 for a class size of 500.

The Business Case Discussion Demonstrates Business Mindsets

> The Business Case Discussion allows us to learn more about your understanding of business and how you solve problems. It is an exercise in both critical thinking and business exploration. And it gives our admissions team a view into your thought process, and also your interest in business education.[37]

The preceding excerpt from the Ross Undergraduate Admissions blog describes the range of skills that the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team evaluates through Business Case Discussions, which it refers to collectively as "business mindsets." Defined collaboratively with BBA faculty and students, business mindsets encompass cognitive skills including clarity of writing, problem definition, problem-solving, and content knowledge. Business mindsets also involve intrapersonal skills such as

self-awareness and the ability to draw personal connections to a topic. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions blog transparently communicates what application readers look for in their review of the Business Case Discussion, including a list of target skills drawn "straight from the rubric." See "What Are We Looking For? Straight From the Rubric" for an excerpt from an admissions blog post featuring student-friendly language about how the Business Case Discussion is evaluated.

What Are We Looking For? Straight From the Rubric

Writing Style – We are looking for a well-written piece that clearly communicates your ideas. Essentially, we are assessing your ability to write with clarity.

Content – Showcase content that is personal! The trick with any college admission writing assignment is to add elements of who you are as a person. That content should be relevant (nothing from middle school), concrete (show us through examples), and mature (stay away from humor).

Topic Choice – The problem you choose to solve should be unique to YOUR interests, experiences, and knowledge. I emphasize "your" because there is no "right" or "wrong" problem to solve—it's truly up to you. Ask yourself, did you pick a topic you are passionate about? And remember not to choose a global topic you are disconnected from.

Definition of the Problem/Explanation of the Issue – Right out of the gate, state the problem or issue you intend to solve. No need to provide background information, or a lengthy introduction. Remember, it's only 500 words. This will ensure that the problem being considered is clearly stated.

Business Implications – This is where the problem statement is further defined. What are the issues this problem is causing? Then, more specifically, what are the business issues? Use two or three sentences to make connections to areas of business.

Problem-Solving – Details! Provide a concrete example or two that describes your solution in detail. (And remember that a mobile app for your phone does not solve every issue in this world.) Not only are we looking for a logical plan, but we are looking for you to recognize and articulate the reason(s) for your solution.

Existing Knowledge – Reviewers are looking for what existing knowledge of business you may already have. Ask yourself, are there business principles or practices you have learned about through coursework, a business club or activity, or your own exploration? Ideally, you are presenting business implications and solutions that you clearly understand.

Personal Connections and Reflections – All of the writing exercises you complete for your college admission applications should be reflective in nature. We are looking for an awareness of your own personal views and/or experience regarding your chosen topic. Can you articulate a personal connection to the chosen topic? The best Business Case Discussion submissions show one's experience with, or knowledge of, the chosen topic. Because at the end of the day, we are reading applications to understand more about you as a person and your unique interest in business.

Source: Moody Rideout, B. (2019, October 11). Business Case Discussion: Let's get transparent [Blog post]. https://michiganross.umich.edu/undergraduate/bba/admissions/admissions-blog/2019/10/11/business-case-discussion-let-s-get

Moody Rideout explained that most students "don't identify in high school that they are interested in marketing or accounting." Instead, students enter the BBA program to build their business knowledge and skill, so prior business experience is not a prerequisite for the program. Admission staff reported that the use of technical jargon or detailed descriptions of elite internships may even distract from demonstrating the critical thinking and inquiry skills at the heart of the question. Rather than expertise, they evaluate the extent to which applicants apply developmentally appropriate business mindsets to their immediate context.

An application reader expanded, "It's a business question, but it's not really about business knowledge." Another described reading the Business Case Discussion for an "in-depth idea of what applicants are passionate about, and if they can critically think about a problem and solve it." Applicants use the Business Case Discussion to explore a range of issues, including small problems affecting their immediate communities, localized instantiations of national or global issues, and creative solutions to common problems. (See "Examples of Successful Business Case Discussions.")

Examples of Successful Business Case Discussions

The Business Case Discussion prompts students to choose a current event or issue in their communities and discuss the business implications. Applicants are asked to propose a solution that incorporates business principles or practices in approximately 500 words. The review panel will look for creativity, drawing connections, and originality.

A focused community problem

One applicant discussed community divisions over a local orchard preparing to sell 181 acres, including the loss of a valuable community space and concerns regarding the future stewardship of the land. The proposed solution engaged the rural community to assess local needs and map the feasibility of opening a farm-to-table restaurant.

Reader comment: "Although these are just suggestions, the applicant's ability to look at the situation and create a plan that accommodates the needs of the various sides is impressive. … This essay is well thought out with an eye for creating a plan that keeps all happy without putting excessive strain on the infrastructure."

A large problem that is localized

An applicant from southeastern Michigan evaluated business implications of food insecurity impacting the local community in their hometown. The applicant described access barriers to groceries in urban areas, acknowledged the disproportional impact of this issue on Black residents, and tied the problem to a lack of financial means in low-income areas. As a solution, the applicant proposed a nonprofit that coordinates food services to targeted populations, including low-income individuals and people experiencing homelessness. Their proposal involved hosting community events and fundraising with Black-owned businesses and restaurants.

Reader comment: "The topic of food insecurity is not really unique (as a topic in these discussions), but the applicant provides a well thought-out and multifaceted solution that goes beyond providing food itself and looks to create empowerment within the community by education on healthy food choices and cooking."

A creative solution to a common problem

One applicant defined the problem of costly textbooks as placing a financial burden on students and families. Working with a peer and adults in his school, the applicant designed and created a textbook exchange program that connects students through an app to access used textbooks at drastically reduced prices. The applicant clearly described his motivating values, process to create the program, and collaboration with others.

Reader comment: "Applicant worked on an issue in his community, using his business knowledge [to create] a successful working [solution]. His thought process, review of values, and communication with all parties is impressive. His creativity, skillset, and values will be a great addition to the Ross community."

The Artifact Demonstrates Learning in Action

> [The traditional application] doesn't assess reflective learning, contributing to groups, and community. As a business school, we don't have many multiple-choice tests. We have a lot of group projects and presentations. It became very apparent to us that we needed to change our admissions process.
>
> —Blaire Moody Rideout, Ross Director of Undergraduate Admissions

In the preceding quote, Moody Rideout explains the reflective and collaborative learning habits that the undergraduate admissions team evaluates to indicate readiness for the action-based curriculum at the Ross School. Similarly, an application reader noted, "Ross is such a project-based school, so students have to be able to thrive in a collaborative environment. Students have to be very driven, have to be creative, have to have leadership skills, and [have to] be analytical." The Artifact component of the Ross Admissions Portfolio presents evidence of these mindsets and skills in students' past learning experiences.

By asking applicants to reflect in 250 words on their learning in action, the Artifact captures a range of learning experiences that occur within and beyond the classroom walls, such as bench science, research papers, performing arts, and community service

projects. In some instances, the learning experience may also be listed on transcripts and summaries of extracurricular activities, but application readers reported that the students' reflections on why that learning is significant is what makes the Artifact a valuable addition to the application. They said the best submissions describe learning experiences that engage skills needed for college success, such as self-awareness, motivation, goal setting, persistence, problem-solving, collaboration, and leadership.

Application readers also valued when the accompanying 250-word reflections described an applicant receiving feedback, responding to challenges, and monitoring their growth. One reader said, "It's about the stories that [applicants] tell—I don't like when they just generically say 'I persevered,' or 'I was a hard worker.' I want to see an example." A current student reported that she wanted her Artifact to show her commitment to new experiences that push her out of her comfort zone. Rather than select a "super polished" Artifact, she chose to include ongoing work in a development program. She characterized this decision as "vulnerable," explaining her reasoning:

> Your applications, they're so structured. You put all your extracurriculars, your GPA, your scores, and you want to be super polished and good. But I feel the portfolio just shows that I still have room to grow. I recognize that I'm not going to be the best at everything. I felt like my Michigan application was good at showcasing what a good candidate I was for the school, but I still wanted to show that I'm still human, [and] I still have room to grow.

This student used the Artifact to demonstrate her growth mindset, a learning disposition that was harder for her to communicate in the main undergraduate application. (See more examples in "Examples of Successful Artifacts.")

Examples of Successful Artifacts

The Artifact prompts students to upload a document or artifact that represents something significant about their lives or shows their learning in action. Students are then asked to describe how their artifacts demonstrate their learning in action, using approximately 250 words.

School-based project

An applicant submitted a video they recorded as part of a project on hair braiding. The student wrote about their Nigerian heritage and the importance of braided hair within their culture. The applicant shared that their mother never learned how to braid,

so the applicant taught themselves to both express their culture and to feel closer to their relatives. This experience led the applicant to write a mini-book for the Personal Project International Baccalaureate course.

Reader comment: "A really nice and unique reflection on self-discovery, persistence, and initiative. Love that the applicant translated this to a class project where they were able to reflect further on their culture and family heritage. A well-written and unique artifact selection."

Extracurricular activity

One applicant submitted a video of herself preparing for a mock trial. The video showed her practice examining a witness through a self-generated line of questioning. In her description, the applicant explained that the mock trial experience represents just 1 hour out of months of dedicated work and feedback. She wanted to show her practice reel to capture the real, behind-the-scenes work.

Reader comment: "[The applicant] submitted a video of a practice session, instead of a polished, final performance. It showed us that she puts in the time necessary to get better at the things she's passionate about."

Work experience

An applicant from a remote, rural community submitted a screenshot of online customer reviews for a coffee shop that she started managing after school at age 16. Her description summarized how she reviewed and responded to feedback from customers.

Reader comment: "Applicant lives in a rural place where there are not a lot of activities. You know what great care she takes of her customers and how she gets to know them. This is an important context for bringing a different perspective into the program."

Sources: Interview with Ross School application reader (2021, November 12); Moody Rideout, B. (2017, November 27). Here are our favorite portfolio Artifacts Ross applicants have submitted recently [Blog post]. https://michiganross. umich.edu/undergraduate/bba/admissions/admissions-blog/2017/11/27/here-are-our-favorite-portfolio-artifacts; Moody Rideout, B. (2022, July 29). More than numbers. Your personal experiences and reflections count in admissions decisions, too [Blog post]. https://michiganross.umich.edu/undergraduate/bba/admissions/ admissions-blog/2022/07/29/more-numbers-your-personal-experiences-and

The Portfolio Adds Context to Holistic Review

Application readers and members of the undergraduate admissions team report that the Ross Admissions Portfolio adds context to holistic review that is not available through academic reviews of the main undergraduate application. The BBA program Managing Director Paul Kirsch said, "We have found a way, through this portfolio, to scratch at the understanding that our students are full people, and not just classwork, grades, and test scores."

Ross application readers reported gleaning a more comprehensive understanding of applicants' interests, backgrounds, and potential from the admissions portfolio than from essay questions and extracurriculars on the main application. One expanded, "You get another side of the student. It's more holistic, more in depth than you see in the main application." Current students reported being able to communicate more deeply about their experiences in the portfolio, compared to the other undergraduate applications they prepared. One current student reflected, "I don't think I talked about [the volunteer experience in my Artifact] in any other school's application. That showed that Ross made this space for me, and I used it."

The added context captured in the Ross Admissions Portfolio includes descriptive information about applicants' backgrounds and lived experiences, which the undergraduate admissions team uses to inform holistic decisions about building a diverse and inclusive class. Application readers noted that transcripts and lists of extracurricular activities often reflect systemic disparities by emphasizing what applicants from under-resourced high schools with limited opportunities lack.

The admissions portfolio enables such applicants to demonstrate their interests and skills across a broader range of topics and experiences, which application readers say helps level the playing field and create a fuller picture of applicants' individual strengths. Moody Rideout said the purpose of this approach is "to hear power in their voices." She gave an example:

> Leading a workshop at the University of Michigan Detroit Center, a high school student said to Ross staff, "Everyone is telling me that I need to submit a sob story about being from Detroit on my college applications, but that's not me." That student—like most students—was proud of where he grew up. Through that conversation, he was able to identify an Artifact: his bicycle. Due to a lack of available transit options, he biked everywhere, and he used

the admissions portfolio to describe the routes in his routine and tools he used to maintain his bike, which demonstrated his resourcefulness and problem-solving skills.

Current students also reported a difference between the Ross Admissions Portfolio and attempts to gather context on other undergraduate applications, including supplemental essays about adversity or hardship. As the quote above illustrates, such essays can create an uncomfortable expectation to emphasize struggle. Instead, the Ross Admissions Portfolio invites applicants to demonstrate their strengths. One current student said that this approach showed the Ross School is interested in the strengths each student can bring to the classroom "more than a number or set of circumstances."

Building the System: Processes and Capacity for Portfolio Review

For any change, you need to have a vision, and then you need to have how you want to do it. [We believed the admissions portfolio would] benefit all stakeholders. It was really a massive change model, and we wanted it to be an exemplar for the University of Michigan and other schools that are thinking about it.

— Lynn Perry Wooten, former Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs

Wooten described the Ross Admissions Portfolio as a "massive change model." The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team had to adjust their existing processes and capacity to realize their vision of building a strong class from first-year applicants. The new process comprises three stages (see Figure 1), in which the University of Michigan's Office of Undergraduate Admissions (OUA) first identifies competitive students through the general admission process, then the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team further differentiates the most competitive applicants, and then final admission decisions are based on a culmination of these evaluations.

Figure 1
Ross School of Business Undergraduate Admissions Process Diagram
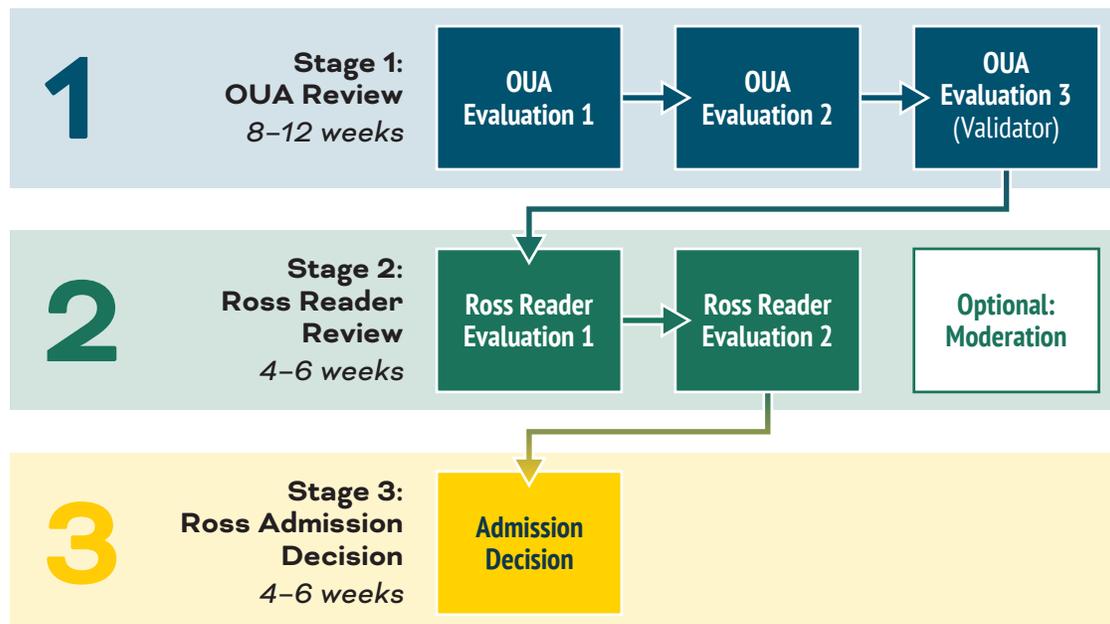
Note: OUA stands for Office of Undergraduate Admissions.

Source: Stephen M. Ross School of Business. (2018). *Ross admissions overview*. University of Michigan.

The first stage involves standard evaluations conducted by OUA readers that take 8–12 weeks. OUA readers holistically consider the transcript and school report, test scores, essays, extracurricular activities, and letters of recommendation to determine whether the application meets the academic threshold for admission that is set by the OUA in conjunction with the Stephen M. Ross School of Business (Ross School). In this stage, each application gets two OUA reader evaluations that are validated by a third evaluation. Applications identified as competitive in this general admission process are then selected by the processing team at the Ross Undergraduate Admissions Office and move on to further review at the Ross School.

The second stage, which takes 4–6 weeks, includes rubric-centric evaluations by two randomly assigned Ross application readers. They independently evaluate the Ross Admissions Portfolio (comprising the Business Case Discussion and Artifact), standard application essays, and extracurricular involvement, using rubrics to synthesize and summarize evaluations. Because all applicants at this stage have met the academic threshold for OUA admission, evaluations in the second stage are fully qualitative and do not consider transcripts or test scores.

The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team runs weekly variance reports, and the director of Ross Undergraduate Admissions moderates if reports show any review varies significantly from another review of the same applicant. If there is significant variance, the Ross Admissions Review Committee moderates by reviewing all scores and remarks to decide if the application needs an additional independent evaluation. This moderation process ensures that the rubrics are reliably applied to provide comparable qualitative evaluations across applications.

In the third stage, the Ross Admissions Review Committee, including the director of Ross undergraduate admissions and the Ross managing director of the BBA program, makes final admission decisions based on a holistic review of academic and rubric-centric evaluations. These final decisions are then confirmed by the associate dean for undergraduate education and the dean of the Ross School. Undergraduate admission decisions for the Ross School are shared on scheduled release dates between February and April, and all first-year applicants admitted to the University of Michigan have until May 1 to accept their offer.

In this way, the holistic review considers all components of the BBA application to evaluate applicants' accomplishments and potential. Successful launch of a new admission process requires careful implementation planning. The review process balances the efficiency of the OUA general admission process with the depth of rubric-centric review conducted separately by Ross application readers.

Planning and Implementing a Portfolio Process

The following sections describe each of the six steps taken at the Ross School to plan and implement the new Ross Admissions Portfolio admission process in fall 2016: (1) align the portfolio to central admission processes, (2) establish technological capacity, (3) develop rubrics, (4) build reader capacity, (5) conduct outreach, and (6) iterate. The resulting process involves full-time staff on the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team (including the associate dean for undergraduate programs, the managing director of the BBA program, and the director of undergraduate admissions), part-time application readers, and student ambassadors.

Step 1: Align the Portfolio to Central Admission Processes

Ensuring that the OUA did not have to alter any part of its undergraduate application and review processes helped secure institutional approval to implement the Ross Admissions Portfolio. BBA Program Managing Director Paul Kirsch explained:

> We've proven that [the portfolio review] fits with the established [admission] process, and that's important for implementation. … We didn't turn the university upside down. We didn't even turn our process upside down. [We were able to adjust] our timeline, our students' timeline, [and] our skillset in our readers. With some good work, it fit.

Moody Rideout calls the admissions portfolio "a really good complement to the academic reviews" that they obtain from the OUA. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team created a process that incorporates additional evaluations without altering the application deadlines, review timeline, decision release, and deadline to accept applicants set by the OUA.

Step 2: Establish Technological Capacity

The next step was to establish technological capacity. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team examined the infrastructure in the existing admission process to determine if they had the tools to receive and review an admissions portfolio. As a

member of the Common Application, the University of Michigan was eligible to adopt SlideRoom, a web-based platform that specializes in receiving, sorting, and displaying portfolios of student work. When a first-year applicant selects the Ross School in their Common Application, they are directed to create an account on a branded SlideRoom portal by using their Common Application ID and paying a $5 fee. The Ross School accepts applications for SlideRoom fee waivers in a process that is separate from fee waivers for the Common Application.

In its first year of implementation, the Ross School received nearly 5,000 Artifacts, including documents, images, videos, and audio files.[38] The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team uses SlideRoom to accept these pieces of media in a uniform manner. Then, the information and technology team imports and transfers submissions to the application management system by matching the identification numbers on SlideRoom and the Common Application. Although not fully integrated with the existing application management system, SlideRoom enabled the Ross School to implement the admissions portfolio without overhauling existing platforms used by the University of Michigan.

Step 3: Develop Rubrics

To ensure reliable qualitative review, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team developed rubrics with clear criteria and detailed performance indicators for each application component under review: the Ross Admissions Portfolio, standard application essays, and extracurriculars. Kirsch said that designing thorough rubrics was important because detailed performance indicators ensure that each application reader "looks at and values the same things in roughly the same way." To develop the rubrics, Moody Rideout drew from the American Association of Colleges and Universities VALUE rubrics, which Ross faculty use to assess the skills, abilities, and dispositions undergraduates develop through action-based learning.[39] The content of the rubrics is protected as proprietary; however, publicly available applicant guidance names important review criteria. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions blog provides a list of target skills drawn "straight from the rubric" for the Business Case Discussion, including writing style, content, topic choice, problem definition, business implications, problem-solving, existing knowledge, and personal connections and reflections.[40]

With the process, technological capacity, and rubrics established, the foundation for the portfolio review was in place. First implemented as part of the new process, the remaining three steps (build reader capacity, conduct outreach, and iterate) are now completed on an ongoing basis.

Step 4: Build Reader Capacity

To build capacity, the Ross director of undergraduate admissions trains and coordinates 20 to 25 application readers, who are short-term contractual professionals hired to conduct rubric-centric evaluations of the Ross Admissions Portfolio (comprising the Business Case Discussion and Artifact), standard application essays, and extracurricular involvement. Kirsch said one benefit of the new process was that the program did not need to develop application readers with a brand-new set of skills; experienced readers who review college essays already have the qualitative skills and understanding of the admission process and can be efficiently trained to review Ross Admissions Portfolios. The Ross School recruits readers, tapping the capacity of higher education professionals who have exited the workforce for retirement or caretaking responsibilities.

At the close of the hiring cycle, both new and experienced Ross application readers participate in comprehensive training on evaluating applications with the proprietary rubrics to support effective and efficient review. Prior to the application reading cycle, all Ross application readers also undergo calibration training using submissions and evaluations from prior years. An application reader explained the importance of these group trainings: "If you hear others talk, it recalibrates you. The best training is looking at real applications together." During the application reading cycle, Moody Rideout holds monthly 2-hour meetings for readers to discuss questions pertaining to the review of the current application pool. A reader explained, "A good admissions team will spend the time to ensure that their readers are able to talk about what they're seeing so that we're all on the same page."

The Ross Admissions Portfolio has increased the time and capacity it takes to review applications. Ross application readers reported spending a total of 30 minutes per application: roughly 20 minutes reviewing the portfolio and 10 minutes reviewing essays and extracurriculars in the undergraduate application. However, they feel the time spent on the admissions portfolio is worthwhile for the holistic review; one called the portfolio a "make-or-break" application component, and another explained, "The portfolio is, to me, the most important. I try to spend most of my time there because I think that's where you learn more about the students." Readers who have supported the BBA program for multiple cycles also reported getting faster at evaluating applications over time, as they internalized the submission requirements and aligned rubrics. What takes the most time, according to readers, is clicking between the PDFs

of portfolio submissions and the application management software. Fuller integration between the technological platforms could better streamline receiving, sorting, and reporting evaluations of the Ross Admissions Portfolio.

Step 5: Conduct Outreach

For most prospective students, the Ross Admissions Portfolio is an unfamiliar application requirement. Therefore, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team conducts outreach and provides information, criteria, and examples to demystify what makes an admissions portfolio successful. Current students named publicly available resources from the Ross School that helped them prepare their portfolios, including samples of successful portfolios, step-by-step guides to developing a portfolio, and outreach opportunities to connect directly with members of the undergraduate admissions team and student ambassadors for clarity and encouragement.

Moody Rideout penned and linked public blog articles to the admission website that explain the components of the Ross Admissions Portfolio in depth.[41] Written in student-friendly language, these blog posts emphasize the purpose of the Ross Admissions Portfolio, which is so the admissions team can "get to know you better" and applicants can "showcase a unique aspect of yourself." One blog post, titled "Business Case Discussion: Let's Get Transparent," walks through criteria "straight from the rubric" to give applicants a sense of what the admissions team is looking for in that section of the portfolio.[42] Another, titled "Here Are Our Favorite Portfolio Artifacts Applicants Have Recently Submitted," acknowledges that the term "artifact" is "not a word that gets thrown around a lot in the college application process," before providing example artifacts accompanied by short videos of current Ross students explaining their choices.[43]

The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team knows that students who have been through the process are some of the best sources of guidance for prospective applicants. The main page on the admission website has a button to "connect with a student." The Ross School supports a team of 15 to 25 student ambassadors who connect one-on-one with prospective applicants to offer insight. These one-on-one meetings often revolve around the Ross Admissions Portfolio, which student ambassadors describe as both intimidating *and* rewarding. Student ambassadors also direct prospective applicants toward guidance on the blog, upcoming admission events, and opportunities to connect directly with members of the undergraduate admissions team.

Step 6: Iterate

During the first year of implementation in 2016, every submission was carefully reviewed by the Ross Admissions Review Committee to determine whether submissions met the goals and to identify adjustments needed to the guidance provided to students. Moody Rideout explained the concerns heading into that first review cycle: "Because application review is a very controlled environment, our readers were very worried about [reviewing] a research paper against a photograph against a blog. Everyone was worried about the Artifact and thought the business case was going to be the easiest [to review]." She explained that, as the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team homed in on the reflection that accompanied the Artifact, they found it to be "the most uncontrolled aspect of what we asked for" and best for showcasing student voice and interests. On the other hand, the undergraduate admissions team noticed that applicants more often struggled with the Business Case Discussion. Many submissions treated the business case like a research report, summarizing existing information on a topic without detailing implications and solutions. As a result, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team developed stronger guidance for identifying, scoping, and analyzing an issue in a successful Business Case Discussion and published that information on the admission page, blogs, and social media.

Overall, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team found that portfolio submissions in this first year enabled them to consider multiple forms of excellence that were not often represented in the main application. What genuinely surprised the undergraduate admissions team most, Moody Rideout said, was the "richness and uniqueness of students' lives," and how "all it took was a very open-ended prompt" to capture that depth of information for holistic review. In this way, the Ross Admissions Portfolio widened the aperture for information the admissions team could collect regarding applicants' interest in and readiness for the BBA program.

Summary of Key Findings and Implications

In 2022, the Reimagining College Access (RCA) initiative released a tool, *Performance Assessments in College Admission: Designing an Effective and Equitable Process*, which outlined a set of four recommended practices for those seeking to implement an admissions portfolio system: [44]

1. Know your "why" for requesting different and/or additional information.

2. Determine which artifacts to request, choosing artifacts that will convey the desired information in the most usable format.

3. Craft and refine an "ask" that is clear about expectations and intended use while providing supports for students to be able to understand the goals and expectations of the portfolio.

4. Conduct outreach and communicate the request to guidance and college counselors, students, and families to ensure all students and the adults supporting them know about this opportunity.

The University of Michigan Stephen M. Ross School of Business (Ross School) experience demonstrates how college admission professionals can put these practices into action. This case study described the motivation and process for implementing the Ross Admissions Portfolio, highlighting key steps the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team took to implement a successful admissions portfolio system.

Key Findings

The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team identified four key objectives for holistic review: (1) differentiate academically indistinguishable applicants, (2) attract and select applicants who are intentional about business school, (3) assess readiness for an action-based pedagogy, and (4) widen the range of experiences students can include in their application to capture multiple forms of excellence. In addition, the team wanted the new review process to help build a diverse undergraduate class. The Ross Admissions Portfolio has enabled the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team to meet these goals. Through the portfolio, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team is able to evaluate new, differentiating information about applicants' business mindsets, critical thinking skills, and prior experiences that are aligned with success in the business program. In addition, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team credits

the new holistic admissions process, in combination with outreach and recruitment activities, as helping build increasingly diverse undergraduate classes over time. From fall 2016 to 2021, female enrollment increased from 35% to 44% of the incoming class, and students with racially minoritized identities (Black, Hawaiian, Hispanic, and Native American) increased from 7% to 13% of the incoming class.[45]

Through the development and implementation process, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team took several important steps that supported the successful implementation of the admissions portfolio.

The Ross School intentionally developed its admissions portfolio to solicit targeted information associated with student success in the undergraduate program. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team consulted program faculty and research-based frameworks to determine the skills and abilities that support student success. Then, the team designed the portfolio to solicit information about targeted skills and abilities. For instance, the Business Case Discussion solicits demonstrations of problem-solving, clarity of writing, problem definition, and content knowledge, which are aligned with the Ross School curriculum.

The Ross School implemented the admissions portfolio review within the overall undergraduate admission timeline and processes for the University of Michigan. Because the BBA program is within a university system, staff at the Ross School designed its holistic review to fit into the processes and technologies supported by the larger institutional network. Working within the existing structure allowed the school to add components without requiring university-wide change and buy-in, which could have slowed or stopped implementation.

The Ross School has invested in building reader capacity to conduct a holistic review of application materials. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team trains and supports a group of 20 to 25 short-term contractual professionals to review the Ross Admissions Portfolio, standard application essays, and extracurricular involvement, using rubrics to synthesize and summarize evaluations. These application readers exercise the same skill set as essay readers and do not require technical expertise on subjects covered in the Ross School undergraduate application. However, the Ross School director of undergraduate admissions hosts annual calibration trainings, monthly meetings, and ongoing moderation reports to ensure

each application receives careful, rubric-based holistic review. Investing in reader training allows the Ross School to have confidence in the reliability of the holistic review ratings.

The Ross School supports applicants in understanding the purpose and nature of the admissions portfolio. The Ross Undergraduate Admissions team conducts extensive outreach and provides information, criteria, and examples to demonstrate what makes an admissions portfolio successful. Samples of effective portfolio submissions, step-by-step guides to developing portfolios, and opportunities to connect with faculty and current students are publicly available to prospective BBA program applicants. In this way, the Ross School demystifies the admissions portfolio and supports interested students to apply. Educating applicants helps level the playing field among applicants and helps students produce portfolios that demonstrate the qualities that the Ross School seeks to evaluate.

The Ross School assessed implementation and made changes based on data. By assessing the admissions portfolios, the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team was able to make changes to their guidance for students, which resulted in stronger and better-targeted submissions. When asked for insights about implementing the Ross Admissions Portfolio in a large public higher education system, former Ross Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs Lynn Perry Wooten encouraged other large public systems to execute a small change and then iterate. She added, "Once you start, success breeds success."

Implications

The Ross Admissions Portfolio demonstrates the RCA recommended practices in action and is a promising innovation in the evolution of holistic review to better capture the skills and mindsets students need to flourish in an academic program and community—such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and curiosity. It demonstrates what is possible in admissions and is a proof point that admissions portfolios can obtain differentiating information about candidates that is aligned with program success and also supports efforts to build more diverse incoming classes.

Other first-year admitting colleges and programs considering an approach to holistic admissions that integrates authentic student work and experiences can look to the Ross Admissions Portfolio as an example. The Ross School experience provides a road map that demonstrates the intentionality and capacity it takes to conduct a holistic review, including:

- investing in creating a portfolio that solicits information aligned with student success in the program;

- working to align the new portfolio system with the institutional admissions process;

- making continual investments in portfolio reader training;

- conducting multifaceted outreach to candidates so candidates understand the purpose and nature of the admissions portfolio and a pool of diverse candidates is maintained; and

- engaging in continuous improvement.

The Ross Admissions Portfolio required a clear vision, a committed undergraduate admissions team, and investments in technology and staffing. To the Ross Undergraduate Admissions team, the reward has been well worth the effort to build stronger and more diverse undergraduate classes.

Appendix A: University of Michigan Ross School of Business by the Numbers

Table A1: University of Michigan and Ross School of Business Undergraduate Enrollment, 2021

Demographic	University of Michigan [a]	Ross School of Business
Undergraduate enrollment	32,282	2,421
First-year applicants	79,743	8,328
Admitted	16,071	935
Class size	7,290	625
Average high school GPA	3.9	3.92
Average SAT composite	1380−1550	1480
Average ACT composite	32−35	33

[a] Figures reported for the University of Michigan−Ann Arbor campus.

Data sources: Jordan, D. (2021, October 21). U−M's 2021 fall enrollment tops 50,000 for the first time. *The University Record*. https://record.umich.edu/articles/u-m-enrollment-this-fall-tops-50000-for-first-time/; Stephen M. Ross School of Business. (2021). *Bachelor of Business Administration*. University of Michigan. https://michiganross.umich.edu/undergraduate/bba/first-year-applicant-brochure; University of Michigan Office of the Registrar. (2021). *Enrollment reports*. https://ro.umich.edu/reports/enrollment

Table A2: Ross School of Business BBA Applicant Demographics, 2021

Gender	Male	62.6%	**Parent Education**	Professional doctorate	16.5%
	Female	37.4%		Doctoral degree	7.2%
Race/ Ethnicity	Asian	33.6%		Master's degree	39.8%
	Black	3.8%		Bachelor's degree	25.7%
	Hawaiian	0.1%		Associate degree	1.6%
	Hispanic	9.0%		Some college	1.8%
	Native American	0.1%		High school diploma	5.3%
	Two or more	4.6%		Less than high school	1.3%
	Two or more URM [a]	1.4%		Elementary	0.6%
	Not indicated	7.2%		Don't know	0.0%
	White	41.8%		Not indicated	0.2%
Residency	Out of state	88%	**Family Income**	Above $200K	36.1%
	In state	12%		$150K–$200K	10.3%
				$100K–$150K	10.5%
				$75K–$100K	4.6%
				$50K–$75K	4.6%
				$25K–$50K	5.8%
				Below $25K	3.5%
				Don't know	5.0%
				Not indicated	19.6%

[a] URM stands for two or more underrepresented minorities and is a subset of two or more.

Data source: Stephen M. Ross School of Business. (2021). University of Michigan.

Table A3: Ross School of Business BBA Applicant Academic Performance, 2021

Average High School GPA	3.76
Average SAT Composite	1420
Average ACT Composite	32

Data source: Stephen M. Ross School of Business. (2021). University of Michigan.

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The Learning Policy Institute conducts and communicates independent, high-quality research to improve education policy and practice. Working with policymakers, researchers, educators, community groups, and others, the Institute seeks to advance evidence-based policies that support empowering and equitable learning for each and every child. Nonprofit and nonpartisan, the Institute connects policymakers and stakeholders at the local, state, and federal levels with the evidence, ideas, and actions needed to strengthen the education system from preschool through college and career readiness.