

## **Admission Officers' Impressions of Homeschooled Applicants in Evangelical and Nonevangelical Colleges and Universities**

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Impressions of admission officers toward homeschooled applicants were examined. Specifically, this study sought to ascertain whether the perceptions of admission officers adhered to the common stereotype that homeschoolers are brighter and yet socially less well-adjusted than average. The responses of 121 admission officers were analyzed across several variables to determine which were associated with the homeschooler stereotype. The variables explored were politically conservative versus liberal, level of religious commitment, working or not working at a Christian college or university, size of institution, and years of employment as an admission officer. Chi-square analyses revealed that admission officers working at member institutions of the Council for Christian College & Universities (CCCU) were found to be more likely to view homeschooled applicants as less socially adjusted than admission officers not working at member institutions of the CCCU. Correlational analyses indicated that the more politically conservative admission officers were, the more likely they were to view homeschooled applicants as academically superior, more likely to consider homeschooling their own children, and more likely to perceive their institution to be homeschooler friendly. Religious attitudes and size of institution were not predictive. Years as admission officer tended to predict not endorsing the homeschooler stereotype. Potential explanations of the findings are discussed, including the possibility of confirmation bias. Some of the findings are counter-intuitive. Practical implications for those working as admission officers in Christian higher education are also presented.

The data on homeschooling in the United States indicate that this phenomenon is a growing trend. Statistical reports from the United States Department of Education for the years 1999, 2003, and 2007 estimated the number of homeschoolers to be 1 million, 1.3 million, and 1.5 million respectively. The latest governmental figure for the number of children being homeschooled, 1.5 million, represents 3% of the total student population for grades K to 12 (NCES, 2008; Snyder, 2011), and is consistent with the 2012 Statistical Abstract recently released by the U.S. Census Bureau (Mack, 2012). The National Home Education Research Institute, using its own rubric, calculates that there were 2.04 million homeschoolers in the United States as of 2010 (Ray, 2011), which translates to about 4% of the total student population. College admission officers may expect to see a similar percentage of applicants in their applicant pool. A casual review of college admission websites reveals specific information targeted toward prospective homeschooled applicants.

Christian institutions such as Wheaton College and Palm Beach Atlantic University have a dedicated tab on the institution's admission website for homeschooled applicants. Admission officers do not usually publicize the percentage of homeschooled applicants they receive, but estimates tend to range from 7 to 20 percent for Christian colleges (<http://www.home-school-inc.com/community/collegecorner.aspx?mode=plan>). Homeschoolers are a small but growing part of the fabric of Christian higher education.

The rapid and recent growth of the homeschool phenomenon has been accompanied by a persistent stereotype not unlike those that have accompanied minority groups. The principal stereotype is that previously homeschooled students are academically above average while being below average on social adjustment. The homeschool stereotype, bright but socially awkward, has been documented among admission officers. Jones and Gloeckner's (2004) study of 55 admission officers culled from four-year institutions in the Western United States and Hawaii found that 78% expected homeschooled graduates to be academically successful in comparison with traditional high school graduates, but only 44% expected homeschooled students to cope socially as well as traditional high school graduates. These findings were again highlighted by Sorey and Duggan (2008), who studied 12 admission officers in the community college setting. Sorey and Duggan found that 90% of the admissions officers expected homeschool students to be as successful academically as students who graduated from an accredited high school, while only 55% felt that homeschooled students were socially prepared. Both of these studies provided a narrative report from an admission officer who questioned the preparedness of homeschooled students for college admission. These studies illuminate the stereotype that matriculating homeschooled students will be academically bright but socially awkward. The purpose of this study is to ascertain to what extent admission officers adhere to this stereotype, and whether there are types of admission officers who are more likely to do so than others.

## RESEARCH AND THE STEREOTYPE

The first aspect of the stereotype is that homeschoolers possess intellectual superiority. This idea most likely stemmed from early notoriety in the popular media. Exceptional homeschoolers were seen as winners of national spelling bees and others who grew up "off the grid" only to be granted admission to Harvard University and other elite institutions. An article titled "How to raise an A+ student" in *Reader's Digest* (Beaman, 1992) that appeared over 20 years ago offered an example of this genre of journalism, describing the successes of a 15-year-old homeschooler in glowing language.

The most prodigious researcher of homeschoolers has been Ray (2010), who collected academic achievement test scores and demographic data for 11,739 K–12 homeschooled students from across the United States. He found homeschooled students' test scores to be very high—the average scores were at least in the 84th percentile. This study relied on data collected from four major testing services and several smaller ones throughout the country. The estimated response rate ranged from 19% to 25% for the four major testing centers but smaller centers had an estimated response rate of only 11%, therefore creating the possibility that high academic achievement is overrepresented in the sample. Ray's (2004) earlier review of the literature indicated that homeschoolers are academically above average when compared to public school graduates. Homeschoolers scored in the 65th to 80th percentiles on standardized academic achievement

tests, compared to the public school average of the 50th percentile. In the largest home education student study ever conducted in the U.S. ( $n = 20,760$ ), Rudner (1999) summarized some of his findings as follows:

- Almost 25% of home school students are enrolled one or more grades above their age-level peers in public and private schools.
- Homeschooled student achievement test scores are exceptionally high. The median scores for every subtest at every grade (typically in the 70th to 80th percentile) were well above those of public and Catholic/private school students.
- On average, homeschooled students in grades 1 to 4 performed one grade level above their age-level public/private school peers on achievement tests.

The above findings are consistent with a more recent study by Cogan (2010), who researched the academic outcomes of 70 homeschool students at a medium-sized private university in the Midwest. Cogan found that homeschooled students possessed higher ACT scores and GPAs prior to admission as well as higher graduation rates when compared with traditionally educated students. Martin-Chang, Gould, and Meuse (2011), using a Canadian sample, found that homeschooled students with structured curricula outperformed traditionally educated students. A decade and a half of research thus indicates that the belief that homeschooled students are academically above average is not a myth, but is supported by evidence from test scores.

The second part of the stereotype is that homeschoolers are socially awkward. This myth has been very persistent and is often discussed in homeschool circles as the “S” word. Movies such as the popular *Mean Girls* perpetuated this perception. So, too, has the general countercultural flavor to the homeschool movement, suggesting that homeschoolers are on “the fringe” (Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012). This issue was addressed over a decade ago in Medlin’s (2000) article titled “Home Schooling and the Question of Socialization.” In his summary, Medlin referenced the work of Chatham-Carpenter (1994), who found that rather than being socially isolated, home educated students had an extensive and diverse social network. Medlin also applauded a well-designed study by Shyers (1992) that directly compared homeschooled students with a matched group of traditionally schooled students and found no differences in self-concept and assertiveness. Additionally, Medlin cited a study by Ray (1997) that found homeschooled students to be comparable to traditional students in terms of postsecondary education and employment, interpreting these positive outcomes as indicative of acceptable socialization.

Studies on homeschooling and socialization are not particularly robust, but Ray (2004) pointed out that there have been no studies which support the myth of social awkwardness. Following Ray’s research, there have been two studies that seemed to disavow the myth of social awkwardness. McCulloch et al., (2006) found that increasing years of homeschooling correlated with less cynicism (and conversely more prosocial thinking in students’ outlook) among a sample of homeschoolers. Saunders (2009) examined the social adjustment of a group of previously homeschooled students among a class of first-year college students. Saunders found that being previously homeschooled correlated positively with the social integration variables of communal potential and institutional integrity; additionally, homeschooling was found to be positively correlated with the variable of subsequent institutional commitment. More recently, Drenovsky and Cohen (2012) examined the impact of homeschooling on the adjustment of college students. These researchers compared a group of 185 college students who had been previously

homeschooled with a group of 80 students who had been traditionally educated, using standard measures of self-esteem and depression. These researchers found that homeschoolers had similar levels of self-esteem but lower levels of depression. The previously homeschooled students also had higher levels of grade achievement and greater overall assessment of their college experience. In summary, the research has not supported the second aspect of the stereotype related to poor social adjustment or awkwardness. So who believes in this persistent stereotype?

This study explored the impressions of admission officers regarding applicants who have been homeschooled. Specifically, the study examined characteristics of admission officers who self-reported as accepting the homeschool stereotype. Among the admission officer variables explored in this study were: politically conservative versus liberal, religious versus nonreligious, those who work at Christian colleges versus those who work at secular colleges, those who are veteran officers versus those who are new to admission counseling, and those who would favor homeschooling their own children versus those who would not participate in homeschooling. These particular variables were specifically chosen based on a review of the homeschool research literature.

The research indicates that homeschooling families tend to be significantly religious and politically conservative. The U.S. Department of Education's (2008) *Issue Brief* documented that 83% of the parents reported that a primary reason for homeschooling was to provide religious or moral instruction. Mackey, Reese, and Mackey (2011) reported similar results, with 90% of a regional sample of parents of homeschoolers reporting "moral reasons" as the primary reason for homeschooling. Nearly a decade ago, Ray (2005) documented a trend of increasing religious and racial ethnic diversity among homeschooled students in general. Ray's research confirmed that 75% regularly attended church and placed an emphasis on orthodox or conservative beliefs. Milton (2008), in his book *Homeschool: An American History*, pointed out that the homeschool movement has long been associated with White politically conservative Protestant Christianity. Therefore, this study hypothesized that the homeschool stereotype of students being bright but awkward would be most closely followed by admission officers who reported themselves to be less religious, more politically liberal, worked at secular institutions, and perhaps more experienced admission officers for whom homeschooling would be a "newer" phenomenon.

## METHOD

### Participants

One of the issues in researching the homeschooling community has been the lack of large group studies, except for those mentioned above, that relate to homeschooling demographics. To address this problem and to increase the power of any results, this study utilized new media networks that do not fit traditional research design models. All survey data were collected via SurveyMonkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). The calculation of response rates, which relates to the randomness or nonbiased nature of the data, is problematic. Half the data were collected by sending e-mails (with an embedded link to the survey) to admission officers whose colleges and universities are members of the Council of Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU). The principal researchers did not know who was actually responding to the survey given that no personal identifying information was retained. The response rate for the CCCU group was close to 50%. The other

TABLE 1  
Response Distribution Related to Political Views ( $n = 122$ )

<i>Answer options</i>	<i>Response percent</i>	<i>Response count</i>
Very liberal	14.0%	17
Somewhat liberal	19.0%	23
Moderate	24.8%	30
Somewhat conservative	28.9%	35
Very conservative	14.0%	17

source of responders came via a listserv utilized by a national organization of admission officers. The response rate is difficult to calculate with such nontraditional methodology. Ultimately, the survey was completed by 121 respondents, 71 of whom identified themselves as full-time admission officers, and 45 identified themselves as Admission Directors. Two responders identified themselves as part-time admission assistants and three responders did not select a category. This response rate is the largest survey to date related to the perceptions of admission officers relative to homeschooling applicants.

Examination of the IP addresses of responders allowed the researchers to determine the geographic composition of the sample. The 121 responders were primarily distributed over the East and Midwest regions of the United States. The exceptions included 6 in Texas, 3 in California, 3 in Colorado, 2 in Oregon, 2 in Alaska, 1 in Arizona, 1 in Hawaii, and 1 in an American school outside of the United States. The total geographical distribution was quite broad. Small private colleges/universities (less than 4,000 students) represented 77.5% of the sample; large private colleges/universities (more than 4,000 students) represented 10.8% of the sample. Overall, 88.3% of the responders were admission officers in private colleges/universities. Public universities and community colleges comprised the remaining 12.8% of the sample. Sixty responders identified their home institution as a member of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU); 59 stated that they were from nonmember schools. The political views of the responders were normally distributed. For instance, 14% of the respondents described themselves as very politically liberal and 14% of the respondents described themselves as very politically conservative. Twenty-five percent of the responding described themselves as politically moderate (Table 1). The sample skewed toward greater, rather than less, religious commitment. For instance, 67.5% of responders reported attending church once a week or more, while 27.5% of responders reported attending church once a year or never attending. The sample was in terms of responses to the question, "I try hard to carry my religion into my everyday life." Fourteen percent of respondents felt this statement was definitely not true, while 45.5% felt the statement was definitely true.

## Procedure

Admissions officers completed Likert-type questions related to their impressions of the academic preparedness and social adjustment of homeschool applicants. Likert-type questions were also completed for the variables identified above. A comparison was made between the responses of admission officers in CCCC member institutions and non-CCCC institutions. Participants' data

TABLE 2  
Response Distribution of the Impression of Admission Officers Regarding the Social Adjustment  
of Homeschooled Applicants ( $n = 122$ )

<i>Answer options</i>	<i>Response percent</i>	<i>Response count</i>
Very poorly adjusted socially	3.3%	4
Somewhat poorly adjusted socially	44.6%	54
On average similar to other students	46.3%	56
Somewhat better adjusted socially	4.1%	5
Much better adjusted socially	2.5%	3

analysis included descriptive statistics, Pearson chi-squared tests of association where appropriate, and calculation of Pearson  $r$  or Spearman's rho ( $r_s$ ) as determined by evaluation of the data. Statistical analyses were conducted using Predictive Analytics Software (PASW Statistics 18.0, formerly SPSS).

## RESULTS

### Impressions of Homeschoolers

Admission officers who completed this survey tended to view homeschooled applicants as below average socially and above average academically. Almost half the respondents ( $n = 54$ ) felt that homeschooled applicants were "somewhat poorly adjusted socially"; conversely, only five respondents felt they were somewhat better adjusted socially. The percentages related to the impressions of social adjustment are provided in Table 2. In terms of academic preparedness, almost half the respondents ( $n = 55$ ) rated homeschooled applicants as either "somewhat better prepared academically" or "much better prepared academically." Only 15 respondents rated homeschooled applicants as below average in academic preparedness (see Table 3).

### Impressions of Homeschoolers by Variable

This study analyzed the relationship between impressions of academic and social adjustment of homeschooled applicants and several variables. In response to the question related to the

TABLE 3  
Response Distribution of the Impression of Admission Officers Regarding the Academic Preparedness  
of Homeschooled Applicants ( $n = 124$ )

<i>Answer options</i>	<i>Response percent</i>	<i>Response count</i>
Very poorly prepared academically	0.8%	1
Somewhat less prepared academically	11.6%	14
On average similar to other students	44.6%	54
Somewhat better prepared academically	31.4%	38
Much better prepared academically	14.0%	17

TABLE 4  
 Impressions of Homeschooled Applicants' Social Adjustment Contrasted by Membership (Yes) or Nonmembership (No) in the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU) ( $n = 119$ )

<i>Social adjustment</i>	<i>Is your school a member of the CCCU?</i>			
	<i>YES</i>		<i>NO</i>	
	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Count</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Count</i>
Very poorly adjusted socially	1.7	1	5.1	3
Somewhat poorly adjusted socially	63.3	38	27.1	16
On average similar to others	31.7	19	57.6	34
Somewhat better adjusted socially	1.7	1	6.8	4
Much better adjusted socially	1.7	1	3.8	2

social adjustment of homeschooled students, admission officers who work at CCCU member institutions tended to perceive homeschooled applicants as being less socially adjusted than did admission officers working at non-CCCU schools. A majority of admission officers working at CCCU schools selected the option that homeschooled applicants are “somewhat poorly adjusted socially,” while a majority of admission officers working at non-CCCU schools selected the option that homeschooled applicants are “on average similar to other students” (see Table 4). Although the Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Test is an appropriate strategy when an ordered variable is considered (see Rosner [2011] or Howell [2013] for a discussion), the exploratory nature of the investigation, the determination of whether a relationship was present, and the ability to examine the proportions, led us to use a Pearson chi-squared analysis. Analysis of the data indicated that respondent membership associated with a CCCU institution was related to the perceived level of social adjustment of home-schooled students,  $\chi^2(4,119) = 13.33, p < .01$ .

The political views of admission officers in relationship to their impression of homeschooled applicants were analyzed via a Spearman's rho correlation coefficient. The political views of admission officers were not significant as they related to the question of social adjustment; however, the political views of admission officers were significantly related to their ratings of the academic preparedness of homeschooled applicants. The more conservative the political view of the admission officer, the greater the belief in the academic preparedness of the homeschooled applicant (Spearman's rho .304,  $p = 0.001$ ). Consistently, it was found that the more liberal the political views of the admission officer, the less likely they would be to potentially homeschool their own children (Spearman's rho  $-.323, p < .001$ ). Conversely, it was found that the more conservative the political views of the admissions officer, the more likely they would be to potentially homeschool their own children (Spearman's rho .353,  $p < .001$ ). Additionally, the more conservative the political views of the admission officer, the more “homeschool friendly” they feel their institution is toward homeschooled applicants (Spearman's rho .391,  $p < .001$ ).

A Spearman correlation was conducted to determine the relationship between the religious attitudes of admission officers and their impressions of homeschooled applicants. There were no statistically significant correlations between the religious questions on the survey and the acceptance of the two myths of homeschooled applicants. There was also no significant relationship between the size of the institution and impression of admission officers toward homeschooled applicants (Spearman's rho .140,  $p < .263$ ).

The relationship between years as an admission officer and adherence to the homeschool stereotype was explored. There was a significant relationship between years as an admission officer and *disavowal* of the socially awkward stereotype ( $r = .280, p < .01$ ). Years as an admission officer did not predict any particular attitude related to the academic preparedness of homeschooled applicants, however. In summary, the longer an individual had been an admission officer, the less they endorsed the homeschooled stereotype.

## DISCUSSION

It was hypothesized that admission officers who reported themselves to be less religious, more politically liberal, worked at secular colleges, and were more experienced would be most likely to adhere to the homeschool stereotype (academically brilliant but socially awkward). These predictions were only partially substantiated. In general, the homeschool stereotype appeared to be accepted by the majority of the admission officers who completed this survey. These results are consistent with the previous studies of admission officer attitudes toward homeschooled applicants (Jones & Gloeckner, 2004; Sorey & Duggan, 2008).

Perhaps the most striking finding was that the homeschool stereotype was more strongly accepted among admission officers working at CCCU institutions than among those who were not. Thus, admission officers in evangelical colleges and universities were more likely to rate homeschooled applicants as being less socially adjusted than were admission officers working at non-CCCU institutions. The reason for this finding is unclear. Evangelical institutions have direct ties with the conservative Christian community, and their admission officers likely have the most contact or awareness of the homeschooled population. The admission officers of such schools may personally know homeschoolers, or their institution may receive a larger percentage of homeschooled applicants than non-CCCU institutions. As a result, they are also likely to be aware of the homeschool stereotype. It may be that familiarity with this group may work to solidify the stereotype—they may see what they expect to see in this group. Wason (1960) first described this as “a failure to eliminate hypotheses,” better known as confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is defined by Myers (2013) as “the tendency to search for information that confirms one’s preconceptions” (p. 118). In this sense, admission officers who are more familiar with the stereotype may look for homeschooled applicants to be bright but socially awkward and then find the confirmation they seek. Having a greater number of contacts with any bright but socially awkward homeschoolers could further strengthen the stereotype, while at the same time those who do not fit the stereotype go unnoticed. As a result, these admission officers do not eliminate the stereotype in the many instances when homeschoolers are neither bright nor socially awkward. Admission officers at non-CCCU schools may not have as much contact with the homeschooled population either personally or in terms of significant number of applicants. Additionally, if non-CCCU admission officers are not aware of the stereotype, they will consider other explanations for whatever behaviors they observe.

One finding that supported our hypotheses was the correlation between conservative political views and an overall positive view of the academic preparedness of homeschooled applicants. Those with conservative views were more likely to endorse the academic success of homeschool applicants. They were also more likely to potentially want to homeschool their own children and viewed their own institution as homeschool friendly. This perception seems to be one that buys



into the above-average academic prowess myth of homeschooled applicants and then generalizes that concept to other aspects of the homeschool phenomenon.

Although religious practice was expected to be the most salient predictor subscribing to the homeschooled myths, politics was the greater predictor. The reason politically conservative beliefs may have the greatest impact on admission officers' impressions of homeschoolers needs further exploration. This group may potentially be the most critical of public or progressive education and thus most likely to subscribe to the perception that homeschooling is protection against a government-sponsored educational agenda. This group would then be most accepting of homeschooler academic success but would not be expected to significantly differ from other admission officers in terms of the social awkwardness part of the myth. Why religious practice was not a more salient variable is unclear, especially since religion is a primary motivation in the decision to pursue homeschooling (Mackey, Reese, & Mackey, 2011).

One practical application of this study would be to discuss these findings with admission officers working at evangelical Christian institutions. These admission officers could be challenged to evaluate whether they possess a negative social bias toward homeschooled applicants, and additionally, if they are politically conservative, to consider whether they possess a positive academic bias toward homeschooled applicants. There does appear to be a halo effect on the part of politically conservative admissions counselors who may judge homeschooled applicants as being in their same political group given the conservative associations in the recent history of homeschooling (Drenovsky & Cohen, 2012; Gaither, 2008; McCulloch et al., 2006). This halo effect may also explain why conservative admission officers would consider their institutions to be "homeschooler friendly."

What may be the most interesting finding of this study is that the longer individuals work as an admission officer, the less likely they are to accept the myths. For example, questions could be raised regarding whether admission officers evaluate each student in terms of his or her individual objective strengths and weaknesses and not on the basis of any particular label. Given that the number of homeschoolers applying to colleges and universities is growing each year, equipping new admission officers with accurate data about homeschoolers could assist in counteracting myths that are not supported by evidence.

Christian higher education has a strong mandate to avoid biases and discrimination. It may be that Christian college admission officers need to be most on guard regarding how they judge fellow Christians who present as homeschooled applicants. As the number of homeschoolers grows and continues to expand the ranks of applicants at Christian colleges and universities, practical knowledge of the research related to academic preparedness and social adjustment becomes paramount. Finally, although the data on the academic success of homeschoolers seem favorable, little research has been conducted on the question of socialization. What studies have been done are small and methodologically flawed, particularly in how socialization is measured. Christian colleges and universities would be best positioned to support further research on homeschooling to address the pervasive stereotype that has the potential to affect how institutions respond to homeschooled students.

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