The Merit - Diversity Paradox in Doctoral Admissions:

Examining Situated Judgment in Faculty Decision Making

by

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To the McNair Scholars and colleagues
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Abstract

The small base of extant research on doctoral admissions suggests a paradox between principles of merit and diversity: Faculty profess diversity, but rely on a conventional notion of merit that undermines diversity's realization. To untangle this paradox and broaden understanding of graduate admissions, I conducted a comparative ethnographic case study focusing on the social construction of merit in Ph.D. admissions. Over two years of data collection in three research universities, I conducted 86 interviews with faculty and observed 22 hours of admissions committee meetings in ten highly ranked Ph.D. programs in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Guided by sociocultural theories of evaluation, decision making, and disciplines, I find that what counts as merit has an important organizational dimension that helps explain contradictions between espoused and enacted values. Merit is not just an individual attribute. It is also a significant organizational challenge that involves apparent contradictions because decision makers compromise across the multiple hierarchies of priorities for the discipline, department, committee, and self.

At the department level, a logic of status maintenance affects decision-making processes, perceptions of risk, meanings associated with common criteria, and profiles of preferred applicants. In debating borderline applicants, diversity is an important consideration, as are research engagement and "fit." However, faculty make broad, initial cuts using a very high standard of conventional achievement that may undermine diversity. Furthermore, participants associate diversity more with obligation and pragmatic benefits than personal commitment or organizational transformation.

The decision-making model, which I call deliberative bureaucracy, maximizes efficiency and collegiality; however, it also reinforces reliance on GRE scores, obscures the basis for ratings and decisions, and sacrifices discussion of criteria and applicants in favor of discussing less-controversial matters of process. I also propose disciplinary logics as a mechanism explaining how disciplines affect faculty judgment, and explore four types of individual-level homophilic preferences that shape ratings and committee deliberations.

Findings have broad implications for access to graduate education. They indicate a need to change the organizational culture of gatekeeping so that principles of equity, quality, and diversity are aligned across the evaluative contexts in which judgments of merit are situated.

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 1902, Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James bemoaned the

academy's professionalization and, with it, the Ph.D.'s degradation from a stimulus for

original scholarship to a credential for college instructors. Faculty and administrators

were complicit in this trend, James charged, more concerned with the patina of

professional and institutional prestige than the mission of the university. To maintain

prestige, Ph.D. programs raised the admissions bar rather than expanding enrollments—

raising with it the competition for admission and producing a mismatch between

published and operational entrance requirements. James (1902) wrote:

> We advertise our 'schools' and send out our degree-requirements, knowing well
> that aspirants of all sorts will be attracted, and at the same time we set a standard
> which intends to pass no man who has not native intellectual distinction. We
> know that there is no test, however absurd, by which, if a title or decoration, a
> public badge or mark, were to be won by it, some weakly suggestible or hauntable
> persons would not feel challenged, and remain unhappy if they went without it.
> We dangle our three magic letters before the eyes of these predestined victims,
> and they swarm to us like moths to an electric light.

The competitive trends James identified over a hundred years ago continue today in an

increasingly global market for doctoral education.[1] Pursuit of the Ph.D. is at an all-time

high in both developing and developed countries, despite lagging growth among doctoral

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[1] To maintain a clear focus, this study excludes professional doctoral degree programs
(e.g., M.D., J.D.) since processes of admissions to such programs are unique in several
ways. Professional staff often review applications, and criteria emphasize experience with
and potential for practice. Notwithstanding the range of careers those with a Ph.D. may
pursue, Ph.D. programs continue to emphasize research training over (or in addition to)
training for professional practice. Different standardized tests are also used for law and
medical school admissions, and scores on those tests are more heavily weighted in
admissions decisions than in most Ph.D. programs.

programs and uncertain job prospects upon graduation (Jones, 2003; Gibney, 2012; Cyranoski, Gilbert, Ledford, Nayar & Yahia, 2011).

On the demand side, application rates have risen because the Ph.D. has become an even stronger prerequisite for faculty careers in the U.S. (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2007; Wulff, Austin, Nyquist, & Sprague, 2004), and credential inflation renders graduate degrees prerequisite for a range of professional opportunities (Collins, 2002; Labaree, 1998; Pappano, 2011). Economic and technological development outside the U.S. also contributes to the growing number of applications from international students to U.S. graduate programs (Schmidt, 2010). Moreover, with expansion in worldwide access to higher education has come the development of new universities that need well-trained faculty (Schofer & Mayer, 2005).

At the same time that application rates are up, there are organizational incentives for doctoral programs to limit the supply of spaces in their programs. For example, fiscal concerns are driving some departments to cut the number of Ph.D. students admitted (Jaschik, 2009). Also, as James (1902) noted, prestige and selectivity go hand-in-hand. In psychology, APA-accredited clinical psychology programs—arguably among the most elite across psychology— offered admission to only 10.5% of the nearly 19,000 applicants in 2002 (Landrum, 2004). Within and across the disciplines, admissions selectivity and overall doctoral program enrollment explain large proportions of reputational scores used to calculate the 1995 National Research Council rankings (Grunig, 1997) and the 2008 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings (Volkwein and

Sweitzer, 2009). Selectivity encourages prestige, so many programs strive to be more selective.[2]

Increasing demand with a stagnant supply of spaces in most graduate programs has raised the competitiveness of the admissions process and created a market wherein "barely perceptible quality margins spell the difference between success and failure" (Frank and Cook, 1995, p. 3)— between being accepted, rejected, or wait-listed. Perceptions of quality in graduate admissions are especially important given America's aspiration to allocate scarce educational opportunities on the basis of merit. Given its implications for social equity and opportunity, what does and should count as "merit" is therefore deeply contested.

Research Focus and Questions

What constitutes merit in the context of doctoral admissions? Why? To whom? How is it collectively determined? Are there substantive differences across disciplines? Although impressions and suppositions abound among applicants and faculty alike, empirical research offers very little in the way of answers. For although graduate education plays an increasingly important role in the professions and academic opportunity structure, we suffer from an impoverished understanding of how faculty select applicants[3], and therefore of access to graduate education. Research on graduate

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[2] The exception to this trend is in education, where average admissions test scores for graduate programs are not significantly associated with program reputation (Volkwein and Sweitzer, 2009). Nevertheless, Vanderbilt University's Peabody College of Education, the #1 ranked college of education nationally in 2010, admitted just 6.5% of its Ph.D. applicants in 2009 (*U.S. News,* K. Tanner, personal communication, August 24, 2010).
[3] The focus of analysis in this research is on evaluation of applicants, but it bears noting that many applicants will never be directly evaluated, only their applications. See

admissions initiated in the mid-20th century and analyzed the validity of standardized tests and other graduate admissions criteria in predicting admitted students' grades and other metrics of success (e.g., Cureton, et al., 1949; Newman, 1968; Marston, 1971; Pfeifer and Sedlacek, 1971). Such research implicitly paints merit as an individual good—a characteristic that inheres in applicants to varying degrees according to their possession of specific academic characteristics.

However, we learn from research on undergraduate admissions that merit is not only an individual characteristic, but also an organizational challenge (Karabel, 2005; Kahlenberg, 1996; Karen, 1990). It is socially constructed and highly contextualized. From this perspective, organizational selection is an opportunity to simultaneously define and maximize multiple organizational interests, not only to identify the applicants most likely to succeed (Birnbaum, 1988; Klitgaard, 1985). For example, admissions review balances individual considerations with collective concerns about prestige, diversity, fiscal viability, and the profile of the cohort that will likely enroll (Stevens, 2008; Killgore, 2009; Nivet, 2011). As such, reviewers do not assess individuals or their characteristics in an absolute sense, but rather comparatively evaluate them against others in the pool, against current students, and even against oneself (Stevens, 2008). These social and organizational dynamics have been a focus of undergraduate admissions research since the 1970's, when Wechsler (1977) argued, "the essence of selective admissions was the subjective judgment of the admissions officer" (p. 244). To my knowledge, however, there is no such research that examines the subjective judgment of faculty in graduate admissions from an organizational or naturalistic perspective.

Heimer (2001) for an interesting discussion of case-based vs. biography-based evaluation.

A deeper understanding of faculty judgment in Ph.D. admissions is especially important given extant research that suggests a paradoxical relationship between the organizational aims of merit and diversity. Diversity is a widely institutionalized goal in American higher education, and many institutions recruit student and faculty applicants from underrepresented groups (Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997; Karabel, 2005; Grodsky, 2007; Stevens, 2008; Lamont, 2009). However, the strongest predictors of admission to graduate programs, GRE scores and attending a selective undergraduate institution, are unequally distributed across race and gender (Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997; Klitgaard, 1985; Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008; Campbell, 2009). Prevailing ideas about merit may therefore be undermining the realization of diversity aims. Examining how faculty construct and relate diversity throughout the admissions review process will help untangle this apparent paradox.

Therefore, the objectives of this dissertation are to understand how professors in highly ranked Ph.D. programs evaluate applicants and construct merit, attending to the consequences of their practice for access to and diversity in doctoral education. The study answers the following research questions:

1. How do faculty in highly ranked graduate programs individually and collectively construct merit in Ph.D. admissions? How do they relate merit and diversity?
2. How is faculty judgment situated at the disciplinary, departmental, and individual levels?
   a. What evaluative scripts do faculty in highly ranked programs use to distinguish among applicants?
   b. How do disciplines and departments shape admissions preferences and processes?
   c. What individual-level preferences influence admissions? In what disciplinary contexts are individual preferences most salient?

Defining the Scope

      Doctoral education's mission. The target of this research is Ph.D. programs as educational organizations. The organizational framework is central to analyzing equity considerations in admissions, for organizational evaluation and reward structures are responsible for the sorting that admissions entails. Therefore, evaluation of students for and within Ph.D. programs is a form of gatekeeping that shapes access to both doctoral education and the professoriate. In the programs I studied, doctoral education is chiefly a matter of producing knowledge producers. From the Ph.D.'s inception, and in spite of shifting supply and demand for individuals with the degree, programs awarding it have shared the goal of developing a corps of experts whose work centers on advancing knowledge (Thelin, 2004).

      Traditionally, Ph.D. programs have been regarded as "the academy's own means of reproduction," ensuring the profession's sustainability (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings, 2008, p. xi). Doctoral programs serve as the "path to the professoriate," (Wulff & Austin, 2004) through three major functions: 1) learning subject matter commensurate with the expertise expected of contemporary professors, 2) awarding a discipline-specific credential required for hiring into faculty positions (Abbott, 2001), and 3) providing a professional socialization process (Austin, 2002) that cultivates identity, functional skills, and affective dispositions such as a sense of "stewardship" for the knowledge of one's discipline (Walker, et al., 2008). From the stewardship perspective, knowledge and the methods for advancing it are resources that senior scholars entrust to the next generation through formal and informal learning.

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However, the professoriate is increasingly only one of many possible career trajectories for those who earn Ph.D.'s. In Nettles & Millett's (2006) study of more than nine thousand doctoral students in the U.S, 46% of engineering students expected to enter industry research rather than academia (p. 101). And in the humanities, where the glut of Ph.D.'s relative to academic jobs regularly makes the news and where nearly half of academic positions are part-time, many graduates end up working in jobs that do not require the Ph.D. at all, much less in the narrow specializations for which they were trained (*New York Times*, 2009; *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2012). The mission and degree requirements of less selective doctoral programs may well shift in the years ahead to accommodate contractions in the academic labor market and a rising population of individuals with the Ph.D. However, nearly all of the elite departments with which I worked in this study retain a focus on preparation of future scholars, regardless of whether those individuals are employed in knowledge advancement inside or outside the academy.

Departmental control tradition. Another matter of scope has to do with specifying levels of analysis, and here history provides a clear justification for emphasizing faculty judgment as negotiated by individuals in committees within academic programs and departments. One narrative in the history of doctoral education is the gradual transfer of authority over graduate education from university presidents to departments (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings, 2008). Early in the 20th century, the shift from "scholar as polymath" to "scholar as specialist" took hold, coincident with the rise of disciplines as areas of research interest and of departments and programs as administrative units (Walker, et al., 2008, p. 22). Respecting the disciplinary

expertise of faculty, presidents first abdicated to departments their authority over curriculum and instruction, then over selection of faculty and doctoral students (Geiger, 1986). Recently, universities have reasserted a coordinating role for graduate admissions in leading research universities, but in most cases centralized oversight simply "rubber stamps the work of departments" or makes organizationally explicit the desired connection between doctoral education and sponsored research (Gumport, 1993, p. 286). Disciplines and universities converge in the activities of departments, whose activities comprise core university work and are thus resistant to environmental pressures (Clark, 1987).

Across departments, some admissions preferences and practices reflect disciplinary trends. The ability of individual faculty to advocate for specific candidates varies across disciplines, for example (Gumport, 1993). In most departments, but not all, a committee comprised mainly of faculty and chaired by the department chair takes responsibility for processing applications and negotiating the admissions process. As in faculty hiring and promotion decisions, these committees mediate the individual and collective wills of a department's faculty (Twombly, 1992; Salthouse, McKeachie, and Lin, 1978), and although they represent a vital locus of power in admissions, to my knowledge their work has been the focus of analysis in just one previous study.[4]

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[4] Landrum, et al. (1994) claim "a wide range of studies have examined the decision-making process within graduate admissions committees" (p. 240), but this claim is quite a semantic stretch. The studies they cite do not study the work of decision-making as their focus or consider the process itself, but rather develop prediction models to approximate the likely *outcome* of decision-making processes. Landrum, et al. (1994) come closest by asking 55 department chairs to describe, in writing, their department's decision-making processes and then conducting a content analysis of the answers.

Defining Core Concepts

In this study, I approach merit and diversity as socially constructed ideas and organizational challenges. In this section, I define each concept and review the extant research on graduate education that is related to each.

Merit. Most simply, merit means desert or worth,[5] but the basis on which individuals deserve admission to selective higher educational institutions is contested. At the graduate level, an individual view of merit often emphasizes beliefs about what makes a "better" student in the short-term and/ or scholar in the long-term. This individual "meritocratic ideal animates the system" (Lamont, 2009, p. 242), but faculty justifications of who should be admitted and why are much more multi-dimensional. Because it is this operational— not idealized— definition of merit that affects opportunity, a major goal of this study is to unpack the operational definition. In practice, merit consists not only in the qualities associated with individual student success, but also preferences for traits that further organizational objectives, personal preferences that may be unrelated to a student's prospects for success, and considerations in crafting a cohort of students. Perceptions of merit are manifested in the considerations that (a) receive the most weight, (b) are most frequently employed, and/or (c) that serve as the basis for a preference when comparing two similar applicants.

Merit as a characteristic of the individual. Most scholarly inquiry on graduate admissions assumes an individual definition of merit, not organizational, and focuses on the GRE's validity in predicting first-year graduate school grades and other outcomes

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[5] According to Google definitions, merit is also an indie rock band, a brand of cigarettes, a currency in Star Trek, a reference to good Karma, and the information Mastercard requires to authorize transactions.

(Cureton, Cureton, & Bishop, 1949; Borg, 1963; Newman, 1968; Madaus and Walsh, 1965; Lannholm, 1968). This research is motivated by a desire to assess the adequacy of scores on GRE as a central indicator of who deserves to be admitted to graduate programs—that is, as a criterion of merit. In both meta-analytic work across disciplines (Kuncel, Hezelett, & Ones, 2001; Morrison & Morrison, 1995) and single-discipline studies (Grove, Dutkowsky, & Grodner, 2007; Ruscigno, 2006; Wilkerson, 2007), results of predictive validity analyses have been mixed at best.[6] A consistent theme in the research, however, is that the test underpredicts the later success of students whose parents have less education and underrepresented minorities compared to White students (Pfeifer and Sedlacek, 1971; Marston, 1971). Many have argued that the obvious policy implication is to discontinue use of the GRE, for if merit is to be defined in terms of who will be successful, and the test does not accurately capture that, then the test is an unacceptable proxy for merit.[7] Others, however, defend the GRE by offering statistical explanations for low validity coefficients (Weitzman, 1972; Dawes, 1975; Kuncel, et al., 2001).[8]

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[6] Through meta-analysis in several disciplines, Kuncel, Hezlett, and Ones (2001) conclude the GRE is a generalizably valid predictor of passing comprehensive examinations, a finding that holds in a separate study of economics students, although the GRE does not predict completion of the Ph.D. itself (Grove, Dutkowsky, & Grodner, 2007). In Morrison and Morrison's (1995) meta-analysis, there is no significant correlation between GRE scores and first year GPA. Recent dissertations in physical therapy and physics analyze relationships of the GRE and other academic criteria with various indicators of success, to mixed results (Ruscingno, 2006; Wilkerson, 2007).
[7] Marston was the first to publish this concern in an academic journal. He wrote, "The author's own concern with using the GRE became exacerbated recently when an intense effort began to recruit minority students, particularly blacks and Chicanos, into the clinical program here at the University of Southern California. The GRE seems to present a particularly difficult obstacle for otherwise qualified black students in their efforts to enter graduate programs in psychology (Marston, 1971, p. 653).
[8] Predictive validity research typically samples admitted students, not the applicant pool, restricting the range of observations to the right tail and therefore producing attenuated

Concern over decision makers' use of "explicit cutoffs or tacit minima" when interpreting GRE scores often frames the case for predictive validity analyses (Sternberg & Williams, 1997, p. 630), yet I have been able to identify just three studies that point to how faculty use test scores or other criteria in graduate admissions decisions. In a 1984 ETS-sponsored study of 333 faculty members, participants claimed their most important admissions criterion is grade point average, followed by letters of recommendation, and then GRE scores. However, as the authors admit, "We are dealing with self-reports and not observed actions" (Oltman & Hartnett, 1984, p. 7). A decade later, Landrum, et al. (1994) find GRE scores the second most important criterion in psychology admissions outcomes. And five years later still, Attiyeh & Attiyeh's (1997) multivariate analysis of observational data in five disciplines identifies GRE scores as the strongest determinant of admission. Taken together, these findings suggest that as graduate studies program continue to grow in the U.S., GRE scores play an increasingly important role in determining access.

Other factors associated with the odds of admission include GPA, stated religion, race/ ethnicity, as well as faculty perceptions of applicants' professional competency, inter- and intrapersonal problems, and undergraduate institutional prestige (Campbell, 2009; Brear, 2008; Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997; Gartner, 1986). Over time, some have sought to "broaden the conception of talent" (Willingham, 1974, p. 278; Hagedorn & Nora, 1996) beyond conventional academic considerations to identify other individual-

correlation coefficients. If samples were to include the outcomes of rejected students who enroll elsewhere, a broader range of GRE scores would be available for analysis and GRE scores would be more likely to predict academic outcomes. Further, the covariance structure of admissions variables consists of negative correlations because admissions decision-making is usually a holistic process in which there are a large number of practical considerations, whose relative importance vary widely from person to person (Dawes, 1971, p. 180).

level characteristics that better predict academic success (Enright and Gitomer, 1989; Hagedorn and Nora, 1996). Selecting applicants on these criteria, the argument goes, would ensure better returns on admission investments because students would be more likely to persist (Willingham, 1974). This research has also strengthened the decades-old argument to contextualize judgments based on applicants' backgrounds (Pfeifer, et al., 1971), and to raise the profile of admissions criteria that do not disadvantage women, people of color, and other underrepresented groups.

To that end, some reform efforts seek not only to broaden ideas about merit, but to reconceptualize it entirely. They seek more inclusive ideas about talent and excellence that would: (a) complement standardized test scores, (b) undermine reliance on standardized tests' practical utility, and/or (c) elevate the value attributed to characteristics more frequently observed among underrepresented students (Guinier, 2000, 2007; Studley, 2004). The movement to assess and prioritize non-cognitive characteristics[9] is one such example (Sedlacek; Tough, 2012; Duckworth, 2012). Table 1.1 displays two sets of non-cognitive skills that some are using in graduate admissions, including the Personal Potential Index, an optional assessment that ETS has released for those writing letters of recommendation (Kyllonen, 2008).

Guinier's vision of democratic merit is another alternative framework. Prioritizing the democratic mission of higher education, she encourages a shift away from what she calls the present "testocracy" and rewards-focused vision of merit that privileges forms of achievement found among those who are least likely to contribute to the public good. Instead, to better align mission and admissions, Guinier argues

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[9] Because these strengths depend upon information processing, "non-cognitive" is a misnomer. The non-cognitive label intends to distinguish such processes from thinking and reasoning abilities (Duckworth, 2012, p. 279).

institutions should operationalize merit in terms of how individuals will contribute to the country's democratic potential (Guinier, forthcoming).

Table 1.1. Non-Cognitive Characteristics Promoted in Graduate Admissions

Sedlacek (2004)	ETS Personal Potential Index
Positive self-concept	Knowledge
Realistic self-appraisal	Creativity
Successfully handling the system (racism)	Communication skills
Preference for long-term goals	Teamwork
Availability of a strong support person	Resilience
Leadership experience	Planning and organization
Community involvement	Ethics and integrity
Knowledge acquired in a field	

To summarize, the vast majority of research on graduate admissions implies that merit, or worthiness for admission, is a quality that individuals possess to varying degrees. This work takes the individual student as the unit of analysis, and, with the exception of Guinier, tends to downplay how notions of merit are embedded in organizational and political contexts. Indeed, with rare exception (e.g., Dawes, 1971, 1975; Klitgaard, 1985; Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997), most empirical analyses until recently were not about admissions at all, but rather about how admitted students are likely to fare given their background traits and previous academic achievement. Further, given their relatively narrow sampling frames, most findings have limited generalizability to inform admissions practice. Therein lies a major difference between the evolution of research on undergraduate and graduate admissions: whereas scholars in the 1970s began treating undergraduate admissions policy, practice, and principles as phenomena to be understood in their own right, this transition has been slow to take place in the research on graduate admissions.

Merit as an organizational challenge. There is a very limited amount of published research that approaches judgments of merit in graduate admissions from an organizational perspective. To the best of my knowledge, this been the subject of just three analyses, in each case as a small part of larger studies.

Klitgaard's (1985) mixed methods analysis of admissions at Harvard University includes one chapter on admissions to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. His conceptualization of selective admissions as a task of choosing individuals in the right tail of the distribution of talent has been widely cited (e.g., Birnbaum, 1988; Frank and Cook, 1995; Espenshade, et al., 2004), and he carefully qualifies "talent" as the composite of desired traits that have meaning in a particular context. Indeed, presenting the first examination of the multiple organizational objectives institutions seek to fulfill through admission, Klitgaard's work reflects core assumptions of the situated judgment framework I employ in this research. Across Harvard's colleges, the criteria upon which applicants are judged are neither fixed across time nor consistent, but rather generated according to each college's unique history, mission, and objectives (Klitgaard, 1985, chapter 2, "How Admissions Works"). For example, each college treats academic excellence as a baseline requirement given the quality of their applicant pools and the Harvard University identity they share, but colleges' unique identities and objectives produce differing conceptions of applicant excellence.

Two other analyses of faculty judgment in graduate admission focus on psychology. Sampling 55 graduate admissions chairs, Landrum, Jeglum, & Cashin (1994) identify qualitative, quantitative, and situational aspects of evaluation and selection, and specific committee practices in each. In a recent qualitative dissertation,

Campbell (2009) considers graduate admission as one of several stages of professional gatekeeping in psychology. Her study identifies an important role that faculty norms play in setting the terms of access to graduate education, and finds that admission to Ph.D. programs is one of the most stringent gatekeeping steps in the process of becoming a psychologist. These three studies point to the importance of factoring disciplinary variation and departmental norms into future research that adopts an organizational perspective on judgments of merit. These studies also leave considerable room for studying the work of evaluation and selection, including committee interactions, what admissions criteria mean to decision makers, and how faculty navigate multiple interests.

Diversity. Given the significant implications that this study has for institutional diversity, I turn now to define diversity and to present current data and scholarship about structural diversity and ideas about inclusive excellence. In a narrow sense, diversity is simply heterogeneity based on individual characteristics including ethnicity, race, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, religion, geography, experience, and viewpoint. At a deeper level, the pursuit of diversity in higher education usually encompasses considerations about the nature of the knowledge that institutions produce, representation of historically marginalized groups, and the place of justice and opportunity among an organization's aims (National Center for Institutional Diversity, 2011). Like merit, diversity therefore also represents an organizational challenge for colleges, universities, and the departments within.

A commitment to social justice motivates me and, thus, my approach to research. As such, I take a particular interest in diversity issues around equitable voice, norms, and opportunities for groups that have been historically oppressed or marginalized. In the

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context of this study, the potential to improve faculty diversity is particularly salient. In the context of admissions, the desire for departments comprised of individuals with diverse identities and intellectual emphases illustrate that a strictly individualistic definition of merit is insufficient to capture what faculty seek in prospective students.

Structural diversity. As mentioned above, this study was motivated by an interest in understanding why faculty selecting graduate students rely on GRE scores and elite college attendance if these criteria systematically disadvantage women and students of color, who are already underrepresented in graduate enrollment and degree attainment. Issues of representation are just one element of meaningful diversity, but as Tables 1.1 and 1.2 and Figure 1.1 demonstrate, they are a starting point and persistent challenge in many disciplines.

Table 1.2. Doctoral Degree Attainment by Gender in Selected Fields, 2009.

Field	% Female
All fields	**47%**
Biological sciences	52%
Physics	18%
Psychology	71%
Economics	34%
Sociology	60%
Philosophy	29%

Source: National Science Foundation, 2009, Doctorate Recipients from US Universities

Table 1.3. Doctoral Degree Attainment by Race, Across Fields, 2009.

Racial/ ethnic group	U.S. population	Doctorate Recipients
Black	**12%**	**7%**
Latino	14%	6%
Native American	1%	<1%
Asian American	4%	9%
White	67%	78%

Source: National Science Foundation, 2009, Doctorate Recipients from US Universities

Figure 1.1. Racial/ Ethnic Composition of Doctorate Earners in the U.S., 2010 (Source: Survey of Earned Doctorates
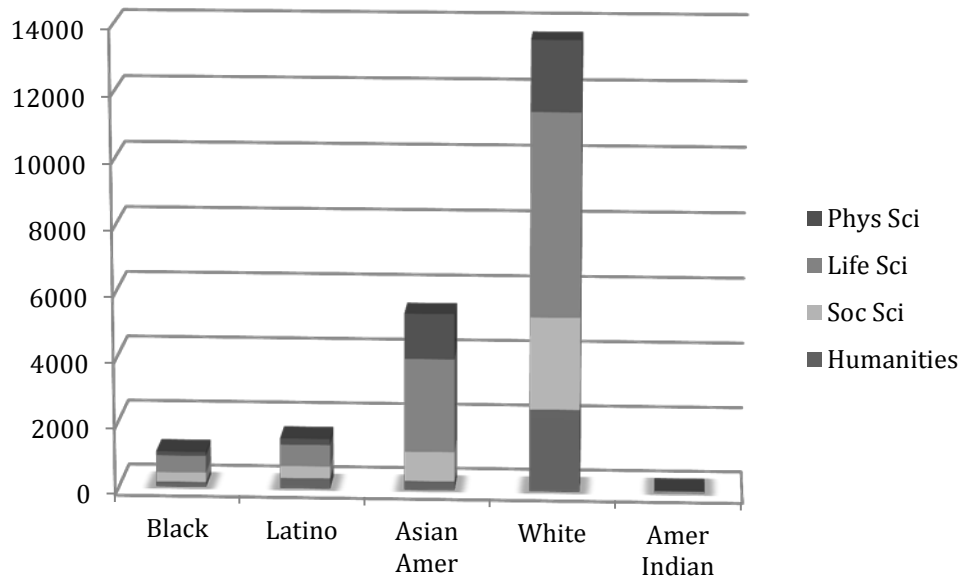
The combination of GRE score reliance and public policy restricting affirmative action helps explain stratification in enrollments (Garces, 2011; Roach, 2005). Using a difference in differences analytic approach that permits causal inference, Garces (2011) concludes that adoption of statewide affirmative action bans significantly reduces graduate school enrollments among students of color in all fields studied except business.

Levels of Latino and African American underrepresentation in graduate school enrollment and doctoral degree conferral are similar to those observed among faculty (Aud, Fox, and Kewal-Ramani, 2010), for equity and diversity in graduate education condition the possibilities of equity and diversity in the professoriate. For example, although African American and Latinos comprise 12% and 15% of the U.S. population,

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respectively, they each comprise only 3% of U.S. life and physical scientists. The problem is especially acute in tenure-track ranks and other high status groups within the academy, as Figure 1.2 vividly illustrates. A recent report on diversity in the Ivy League professoriate, for example, revealed that Black and Latino scholars were more than four times more likely to be hired for non-tenure track positions, "in which it is difficult to make a living, engage in meaningful academic research, or obtain any voice within the university" (GESO, 2005, p. 4). And among tenure-track faculty, White scholars are vastly overrepresented relative to their share of the U.S. population (GESO, 2005).

Figure 1.2: Racial/ Ethnic Composition of Tenure Track Faculty in the U.S., Fall 2007 (Data source: U.S. Department of Education)
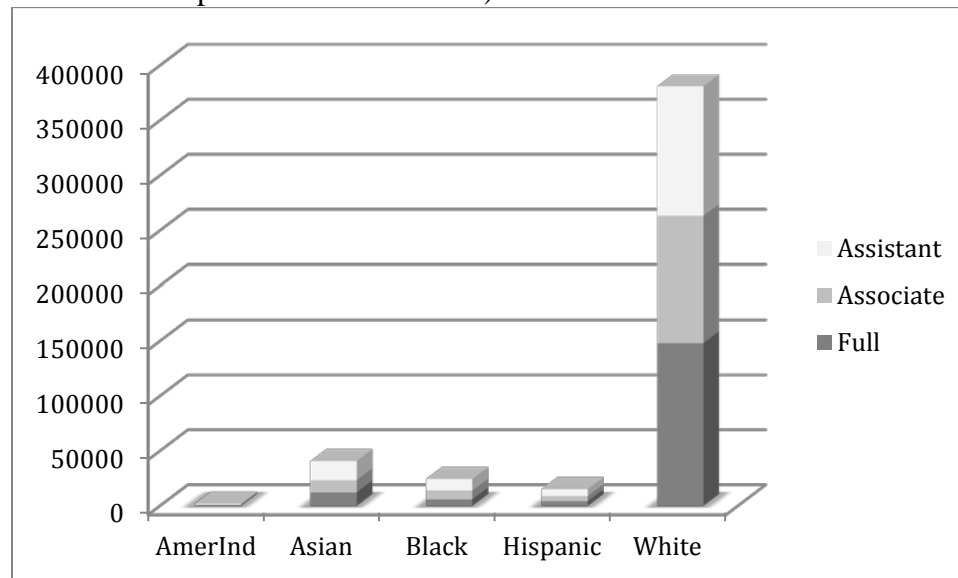
As is the case in so much research about doctoral education, understanding disciplinary dynamics adds nuance to broader claims about diversity in Ph.D. admissions (Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997). Science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) disciplines are often the focus in discussions of race/ethnicity and gender underrepresentation in the professoriate, but the problem is evident in many humanities

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and social science fields as well. For example, women receive only 34% of the Ph.D.'s

in economics and comprise just 21% of the population of employed philosophers

(Crasnow, 2007).

   Inclusive excellence. In a society growing more racially diverse and

economically stratified, there are both principled and pragmatic imperatives for

improving structural diversity and cultivating a more inclusive intellectual culture in

graduate education and the academy. Graduate education provides specialized training

across fields of study that are consequential to the United States' international leadership

and economic competitiveness (Council of Graduate Schools, 2010). Those whom we

train should therefore reflect the nation's diversity, both to provide role models for the

next generation of scholars and professionals and to maximize human capital in the U.S.

   We need to bring to bear a broad range of perspectives on emerging areas of

inquiry, and diverse groups of scholars are likely to push intellectual frontiers by

challenging one another with divergent perspectives and unanticipated questions. In

1844, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that, "Our knowledge is the amassed thought and

experience of innumerable minds," and today, the complexity of social and scientific

problems demands the cognitive complexity proffered by diverse teams of scholars

(Neumann, 1991). Nivet (2011) writes,

> Promoting diversity must be tightly coupled with developing a culture of
> inclusion, one that fully appreciates the differences of perspective. Together,
> diversity and inclusion can become a powerful tool for leveraging those
> differences to build innovative, high-performing organizations (p. 1488).

From this perspective, diversity is not only an end to be sought, but a means to achieving

common goals (Page, 2007). The movement for diversity in higher education is thus

much more than a matter of numbers, even as representation helps condition institutional transformation and social change (Chang, 2002).

Work is ongoing in making the professoriate an inclusive profession for people with caregiving responsibilities, which disproportionately includes women. However, the incorporation of more women into the professoriate provides an example of progress. Pioneering feminist scholars challenged standard theory and methods across the disciplines in association with a broader social movement. As the perspectives they espoused were demarginalized and institutionalized, it both supported the development of a critical mass of female scholars and deepened understandings of gender in ways that stimulated change in and outside of the academy (Gumport, 2002). Particularly as more Ph.D. graduates take positions outside the academy, whom we admit to graduate programs has consequences for both knowledge production and social change.

Contributions of the Research

Graduate admissions provides a window into several important educational and social phenomena, and this study therefore makes methodological, empirical, and theoretical contributions. It is the first naturalistic study of evaluation and decision making in graduate admissions. I have partnered with ten departments, conducted 86 interviews, and observed six admissions committees in action to capture faculty interactions, their espoused and enacted priorities, and what common admissions considerations mean in specific organizational contexts.

Empirically, this is the first research to examine how faculty assess applicants to Ph.D. programs and, although the findings are not generalizable, they inform our knowledge of elite evaluation and selection, graduate admissions, educational access and

equity, and faculty culture. Exclusive programs are the ideal place to consider the construction of merit in relation to questions of inclusive excellence. First, a logic of exclusion is embedded in elite academic organizations to ensure the quality and perpetuity of their work, and it thus structures faculty judgment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1988; Tierney and Bensimon, 1996). Second, and corollary to the first, by drawing many qualified candidates, the cultural priorities and multiple interests shaping selection come into sharper focus as selectivity rises. Finally, there are significant rewards of affiliation with prestigious organizations (Weber, 1978) and their practices and priorities often become standards that less powerful organizations adopt to improve their reputations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). An understanding of elite behavior and of efforts to resist prevailing trends in elite institutions may facilitate better understanding of the direction that the system, as a whole, is headed.

Theoretically, I draw attention to the sociocultural and organizational structure of access to graduate education and the professoriate. More specifically, I propose mechanisms by which disciplines affect faculty judgment and through which faculty navigate complex webs of professional norms and organizational constraints. Also, although most research on admissions focuses on criteria, which indeed has implications for educational access, I also present evidence that the evaluation and selection processes that faculty employ are cultural activity that carry profound consequences for equity and diversity.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

The manifest function of doctoral admissions is to identify students who will train for independent scholarship and work with faculty as research and teaching assistants. Associated with this function is a vision of merit that consists of who seems to have the greatest potential and most impressive achievements to date. However, latent cultural and organizational functions also drive the admissions process, endow it with legitimacy, and frame what counts as merit. Admissions can also be thought of as an annual ritual by which graduate faculty and their programs express their identities, pursue their goals, and protect their reputations through the work of maintaining group boundaries.

From this perspective, collective judgments of merit represent an organizational challenge and an institutionalized political compromise because multiple aims are associated with admissions, and the decision makers are nested within multiple evaluative contexts (e.g., discipline, department, and self) which each carry multiple interests. In the context of this complexity, judgments do not come about through application of a single hierarchy of values, preferences, and priorities, but rather a heterarchy, or multiple hierarchies. Reviewing recent developments in the sociology of evaluation, Lamont (2012) explains that to capture these heterarchies, scholars reveal both the salient criteria of evaluation for a given setting and the institutions that sustain those criteria. She goes on to describe how French sociologists and American organizational theorists have both been pursuing this line of inquiry, although in largely separate literatures due to delays in translation of key texts.

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Situated Judgment

On the French side, Boltanski and Thevenot's seminal text, *On Justification,* published in French 1991 and English in 2006, challenges the Bourdieuian claim that there is a single or unitary hierarchy of cultural values by examining how individuals appeal to a range of principles as they justify what occupations they think are valuable. Among others, they appeal to an industrial logic that privileges occupational productivity and a civic logic that privileges solidarity (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2006). Because individuals tend to seek justifications that support collective interests, judgment of worth is cultural work laden with risk, uncertainty, and tension. It demands compromise.

Building on this work, Boltanski and Thevenot's (2000) theory of situated judgment challenges the view that collective decisions trace mainly to power relations or strategies for maximizing self-interest, proposing that constraints born of sociocultural contexts shape what counts as legitimate in the "pursuit of a justified agreement" (p. 208). Decision makers perceive and try to account for these constraints, but rarely render them explicit, deferring instead to "common higher principles that give meaning to their action" (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2000, p. 211). As such, while individuals may perceive different interests or opinions according to one perceptual framework (e.g., individual identity), they can often still find political compromise through shared interests that trace to another (e.g., professional norms). This process, they claim, plays a central in organizational life: "The pursuit of compromise that allows the tensions between several orders to be overcome is at the heart of the functioning of organizations" (p. 226).

Institutional Logics

Around the same time that Boltanski and Thevenot published their seminal work, U.S. organizational theorists proposed similar ideas. New institutionalism, for example, assumes that organizational preferences are embedded in shared cultural and historical contexts (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p. 10). Alford and Friedland (1985) introduced the term institutional logics to explain contradictions among the values of political democracy, state bureaucracy, and capitalism as institutional orders. Logics may be understood as prevailing belief systems constructed of concatenations of scripts and the norms of which they are composed (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Scott, 2008). For specificity, however, I adopt Thornton and Ocasio's (1999) widely used definition, which draws from both Friedland and Alford (1985, 1991) and Jackall (1988): "the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality" (p. 804).

The very nature of an institution is to constrain action, but central to the institutional logics approach are assumptions of embedded agency (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p. 103; see also Seo and Creed, 2002) and historical contingency (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Lounsbury, 2002). In this way, the institutional logics approach explicates mutually reinforcing relationships among cognition, individual action, and cultural context. Logics provide actors with identity and shared motives for sensible action in ways that promote institutional durability (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, 2008), yet individuals elaborate them over time in ways that may preserve or challenge the status quo.

Like Boltanski and Thevenot's work, which emphasizes negotiation across orders of worth, recent theoretical and empirical work on institutional logics explores multiple logics, contested meanings, framing innovations, and code-breaking (e.g., Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Rao and Giorgi, 2006; Lounsbury, 2002, 2007; Bastedo, 2009). Bastedo (2009) identifies four interdependent institutional logics that operate both as organizing principles and heuristics for policy development, noting that logics may be analyzed both as the ideals compelling actors and "a set of organizational characteristics that have adapted to support the emerging principle" (p. 211). The presence of divergent logics underlying common policy development suggests the presence of a heterarchy of values.

There are other key ideas that underlie both the French and American approaches, and have clear implications for understanding faculty judgment in doctoral admissions. First, judgments of worth or merit are situated in cultural contexts with embedded logics, norms, and organizational constraints. Second, to reach compromise, actors make the most of their multiple contexts by deferring to a range of logics, which may appear to be in contradiction or competition. For example, one explanation for the apparent merit-diversity paradox is that faculty may think of diversity as central to merit when considering what they want for the future of their *discipline*, but efforts to protect *departmental* reputation may be a more immediate goal that encourages ideals of merit that impede diversity. Rooted in shared perceptual frameworks, most insiders feel the process—and thus their collective judgments—have legitimacy, even as outsiders may see things differently. With this broad framework in mind, I briefly review organizational and social theory about norms, a critical foundation for the conceptual

framework. I then move into an analysis of the ways in which judgments of merit are situated in specific contexts relevant to doctoral admissions.

Norms, Institutions, and Scripts

Norms are vital to understanding social preferences in relation to social contexts and decision making, and therefore merit a brief introduction. Judgments that one thing is better or preferable than another spring from culturally embedded norms, which may be experienced by the decision maker in the moment of judgment as a matter of aesthetic, emotional, and/or moral appeal. As "rules of expected behavior that embody the interests and preference of members of a close-knit group or community" (Nee, 1998, p. 8), norms offer a guide for action and decision making.

New institutional theorists exploring cultural influences on decision making assert that institutions are essentially systems of norms that have been collectively recognized (Meyer and Rowan, 2006). As individuals find meaning in norms and begin to take them for granted as normal, institutions can enforce normative behavior through incentives for conformity. Therefore, much attention is paid in new institutional theory to meaning-making processes and the taken-for-granted schemata that shape one's sense of legitimate action in specific social contexts. Barley and Tolbert (1997) write, "Organizations and the individuals who populate them are suspended in a web of values, norms, rules, beliefs, and taken-for-granted assumptions that are at least partially of their own making," (p. 93), and this repertoire is the basis for organized (i.e., scripted) action.

Models of scripted action trace to interactionist research beginning with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory of scripts, which presents action as response to familiar roles and situations. Public (or front stage) behavior can be likened to performance of familiar

roles and scripts, which occurs in response to actors' definition of a given situation and its normative demands. Goffman (1959) initiated this line of thought in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, conceiving of norm conformity as a process of impression management, not personal commitment. More recently, and drawing from Goffman, Lamont (2009) argues faculty on interdisciplinary fellowship review panels employ evaluative scripts in operationalizing excellence.[10] Evaluative scripts consist of criteria and their associated meanings, which derive from professional identities and norms. Evaluative scripts also provide "decision pathways." For example, if a professor associates GRE scores with intelligence, associates intelligence with potential for success, and regards potential for success as a basis for admission, he has just constructed an evaluative script for requiring high GRE scores. In Chapter 5, I examine the evaluative scripts for the standards of merit and diversity that faculty use at different phases of review, linking them to the perceived constraints of elite graduate programs.

Judging Merit in Higher Education Contexts

A wealth of sociocultural[11] scholarship supports the idea that faculty judgment involves deference to norms across multiple contexts, and that broad trends may be mediated by norms and constraints other levels, including the individual. For example,

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[10] Evaluative scripts, are quite distinct from Barley's interaction scripts: "outlines of recurrent patterns of interaction that define in observable and behavioral terms, the essence of actors' roles" (p. 83). Barley's approach to script brings with a very specific set of analytic steps that would have been all but impossible with the access to data I had.
[11] In higher education research, specifically, sociocultural scholars approach selection and promotion in higher education as contextualized and socially constructed (Tierney, 1988; Peterson and Spencer, 1990, p. 13). Beginning with Burton Clark (1960), sociocultural paradigms have been used to study process-based phenomena such as socialization and tenure (Tierney and Bensimon, 1996) and the institutionalization of interdisciplinarity (Lattuca, 2001). Stevens (2007), Birnbaum (1988), Twombly (1992), and Lamont (2009) all bring sociocultural sensibilities to bear on selection in higher education.

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shared norms among counseling faculty about the required competencies of their *profession* create an in-group identity that drives their beliefs about admissions as a form of gatekeeping (Campbell, 2009). Within universities, *departments* "simultaneously organize careers and curriculum" (Abbott, 2002, p. 210) and represent a confluence of normative demands from the discipline and university (Clark, 1987). Cultural functions of *disciplines* include provision of a scholarly identity, a base of legitimate knowledge and methods, and norms for judging academic excellence (Becher, 1987; Abbott, 2002; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Individual identities also provide a fundamental lens through which scholars evaluate one another (Lamont, 2009).

Under the broad framework of situated judgment, I turn now to a deeper analysis of *how* we can expect perceived constraints and norms in three evaluative contexts—elite departments, disciplines, and the self— to affect faculty judgments of applicant merit. These three contexts correspond to the three levels of analysis that follow in the findings chapters.

Elite preferences in higher education. The departments in this study are near the top of their fields according to national rankings, and are situated in highly selective universities. Research that comes closest to exploring judgments of merit in such elite higher educational contexts draws key assumptions from social theory on the cultural preferences (and reproduction) of elites. Bourdieu (1977, 1984, 1988) emphasizes how status struggle shapes elites' preferences, while Lamont's (1992, 2002, 2009) work on social boundaries highlights the important role of identity. I describe these theories and related empirical work on selection in higher education in turn.

Competition for elite status shapes merit. According to Bourdieu, elites maintain their privilege by imposing narrow definitions of legitimate taste (i.e., symbolic violence). Bourdieu writes, "The university field is, like any other field, the locus of a struggle to determine the conditions and the criteria of legitimate membership and legitimate hierarchy" (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 10). Educational success demands a repertoire of cultural behavior including self-presentation and language that privileged children learn from their families and thus display with ease in educational settings. What looks like "distinction" is actually a confluence of their socialization with educational institutions' values, and this social and cultural capital becomes a valuable resource in allocating opportunities and rewards that confer (or, for some, preserve) status. Because so many individuals and institutions seek conformity with the practices of elites, elite values are reproduced and made equivalent with quality. Over time, they become so ingrained that elites will misrecognize these arbitrary characteristics as legitimate standards for allocating opportunity.

Karabel (2005) and Karen (1990) both consider undergraduate admissions at Harvard University from this perspective, arguing the university's historic tendency to "further advantage the already privileged" (Karabel, 2005, p. 407) is inseparable from their power to define the cultural content associated with "merit" in ways that preserve their prestige (Karen, 1990). In particular, Karabel's masterful history argues that, at Harvard, questions around affirmative action and diversity were a function of the university's struggles to maintain its identity and leadership in the Ivy League and to accede to political demands for greater representation of students of color.[12] Failure on

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[12] This trend may be reflective of the national response to pressures for affirmative action. Grodsky's (2007) national study elicited a theory of "compensatory sponsorship."

either front would have put the school at risk, so elite universities shifted their standard of merit to include the diversity rationale. This represented an acceptable compromise, especially as diversity became more widely regarded across the Ivy League as "a critical component of institutional excellence" (Karabel, 2005, p. 405). Taken together, Karen and Karabel's studies of Ivy League admissions leave few conceptual strings loose about status-seeking and judgments of merit, but like Bourdieu, leave unexamined the practical work of judging merit.

Stevens (2007) thus offers a valuable perspective by explaining how admissions officers in a selective liberal arts college come to recognize cultural capital. Holistic admissions considerations require weaving together the many categories to which a student may belong, which is accomplished at the committee level through "evaluative storytelling," a process that "obliges admissions officers to glue attributes together into coherent and aesthetically compelling composites" (Stevens, 2007, p. 186). Evaluative storytelling privileges borderline applicants from wealthy backgrounds because admissions officers are looking for a good story that helps distinguish the applicant from the many others.[13] The stuff of a "good" story usually involves displays of social and cultural capital and comes out in qualitative components of the application for which privileged students often receive support. Students from less privileged backgrounds, on the other hand, are less likely to have the resources to craft an application narrative that is more than the sum of the frequently seen categories to which the student belongs.

He suggests that institutions implemented affirmative action to craft classes that "conform[ed] more closely to their image of a just society"—a goal deriving from both desires to interrupt social stratification and because they "feared the consequences of excluding them" (p. 1694, 1702).

[13] Stevens offers a fine example of making distinctions through evaluative storytelling in detailing how admissions officers handle six Bulgarian applicants who all apply with perfect grades (p. 198).

Karabel's (2005), Karen's (1990) and Stevens' (2007) studies each help clarify the relevance of Bourdieu's theory in the U.S. context and clarify how social forces in elite higher education institutional contexts constrain what counts as merit. Stratification is not the result of a conscious orientation toward discrimination, they argue, but rather a function of senior decision makers' pursuit of organizational interests, such as "visibility, resources, autonomy, and general good fortune" (Karen, 1990, p. 236) or prestige in national rankings (Stevens, 2007). This pursuit involves more than simply an unthinking valuation of applicant criteria that makes institutions more competitive (as Bourdieu and reviews such as Killgore's [2009] suggest), for findings suggest organizational interests become integrated into selection processes in both the bureaucratic and discretionary phases of review (Karen, 1990).

Applied to doctoral admissions, graduate students can bolster or harm a program's status and thus their selection may be caught up in the academic status struggle. A Bourdieuian (1984, 1988) interpretation of doctoral admissions would therefore argue that faculty preferences for specific types of students and applicant qualities originate in elite programs' imperative to seek or preserve prestige, and manifest as preferences for applicants who have connections with or who embody the characteristics of elites within the field. These characteristics might include very high grades and GRE scores, selective college pedigrees, and significant research experience. Such preferences may help programs' status, but given the tendency for overrepresented groups to attend elite undergraduate institutions and earn high GRE scores at higher rates, they may also impede social diversity.

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Organizational identity and boundaries shape merit. Bourdieu's theory, however, may not be uncritically transferred to the pluralist United States context (DiMaggio, 1987; Lamont and Lareau, 1988), where cultural boundaries are fuzzier (Lamont, 1992), elite tastes more omnivorous (Bryson, 1996), and institutionally valued cultural objects defined by intersections of race, class, and gender rather than class alone (Yosso, 2005). Lamont offers an alternative perspective on the dynamics of elite preferences that informs how elite departments— and the admissions committees they appoint—judge merit on the basis of "fit" and "match."

As a group defines its identity and goals, it constructs symbolic boundaries that intersubjectively shape members' preferences for prospective members (Lamont and Molnar, 2002). This perspective also clarifies the link between identity, boundaries, and social reproduction. Highlighting boundaries' practical function of exclusion, Lamont (1992) explains in her cross-national study of upper middle class culture how drawing identity-based boundaries contributes to reproduction:

> Exclusion is often the unintended consequence or latent effect of the definition by the upper middle class of its values and indirectly of its group identity and its nature as a community…. Only when boundaries are widely agreed upon (i.e., only when people agree that some traits are better than others) can symbolic boundaries take on a widely constraining (or structural) character and pattern social interaction in an important way (p. 178).

As fit or match with the organization's status quo becomes a preference, reproduction is encouraged, but change becomes possible as decision makers use selection to encourage diverse perspectives (Danowitz-Sagaria, 2002). Considering interdisciplinary fellowship review panels, for example, Lamont (2009) finds committees of faculty reviewers see their task to be advancement of the full American higher education landscape—not just

prestigious disciplines or research universities—and they therefore privilege institutional and disciplinary diversity in judging borderline proposals.

Similarly, research that views committee selection of deans and college presidents as an opportunity for group (re)definition argues that judgments of merit are situated in organizational identity and goals. Whom the organization prefers is a function of how the organization sees itself and what wants it wants to become—implicit factors that may be unknown to applicants and emerge as explicit only through committee deliberation in the decision making process (Birnbaum, 1988).

Thus, while broad principles such as merit and diversity may guide faculty interactions with applications, the specific criteria on which the committee judges applicants are emergent. They are contingent on committee relations, members' own idiosyncrasies and experiences, and the characteristics of the applicant pool and recent hires. Birnbaum's (1988) study of presidential hiring describes an intermediate stage of sensemaking that committees use to filter the plausible candidates, among whom little practical variability may exist. Through "careful examination of the presented credentials" and "defin[ing] the heuristic criteria used in the previous stage" the committee retrospectively defines the basis they used for selecting the plausibles (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 497). For example, by clarifying what they mean by a criterion like administrative experience, they may disqualify additional candidates, see others' strengths, and build up the group by identifying shared norms. Twombly (1992) claims that her comparative case study of three searches for professional school deans supports Birnbaum's results, noting "values of diverse groups are clarified only in reference to and in the process of selecting among alternatives" (p. 675). These two studies suggest that

early screenings' greatest contribution, then, is not in its sorting outcomes, but rather as ritual and group-ethic building. The committee better understands one another and their organizational needs, and this understanding becomes the basis for value premises that guide later evaluation (Twombly, 1992, p. 675). Rather than implicit criteria driving the process, as Bourdieu describes, implicit criteria for distinguishing among candidates become explicit through deliberation, and decisions come down to how one individual "represents the optimization of one or another institutional goal" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 498).

Doctoral admissions committees may differ in composition from year to year; thus, it is reasonable to believe that they use sensemaking to establish shared meanings of various criteria and, by extension, that these meanings help narrow the pool of plausible candidates. In some cases, admissions may be thought of as a chance to help realize new departmental goals or identities, and applicants may thus be evaluated against that standard. And, finally, given the important role of research training in doctoral programs, clarity on a department's intellectual agenda and individual faculty members' research goals may help determine which applicants represent an optimal fit with the program's direction.

Disciplines as contexts for faculty judgment. Disciplines mediate many of the general trends that are claimed for doctoral education and faculty life; therefore, my conceptual framework attends to how disciplinary dynamics may mediate faculty judgment in elite programs. Prevailing theories, methods, and practical priorities of disciplinary contexts constrain what faculty will think of as justifiable admissions criteria and practices.

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Structurally, disciplines are organizations responsive to the same reputational and power struggles as other social groups (e.g., Whitley, 2000; Abbott, 2001), and are constituted by common cultural tools including discourse, networks, and instruction (King and Brownell, 1976; Clark, 1987; Lattuca, 2002). To examine how disciplinary contexts constrain what may be justifiable to faculty in admissions, I begin with the assumption that disciplines shape the work of faculty by shaping their lives, values, and norms. Clifford Geertz (1976) wrote:

> To be a Shakespearean scholar, to absorb oneself in black holes, or to attempt to measure the effect of schooling on academic achievement—is not just to take up a technical task, but to place oneself inside a cultural frame that defines and even determines a very great part of one's life.

Endowing their members with worldviews, disciplines become a critical sub-context for all types of academic work.

Inquiry into the research norms and practices in twelve disciplines led Becher and Trowler (1989) to conclude in *Academic Tribes and Territories* that, at least operationally, academic cultures and disciplinary epistemologies are inextricably linked, an argument that a range of other scholars have taken up as an assumption of their own work (e.g., Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Ziman, 2002; Swales, 2004; Lamont, 2009). How scholars engage subject matter and their narratives about this engagement "lend coherence and relative permanence to academics' social practices, values, and attitudes across time and places (Becher and Trowler, 1989, p. 23).

Disciplinary differences may also affect selection of Ph.D. students because, as Lamont (2009) and Abbott (2001) note, disciplines and professions both construct shared conceptions of worth (i.e., merit). I propose that these shared conceptions of worth trace

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to the intellectual core of the discipline (e.g., theories and methods) and the depth of consensus about what constitutes the core.[14]

Judgment and the disciplinary core. Mechanisms proposed through inductive research by Knorr-Cetina (1999) and Lamont (2009) provide further warrant for studying the evaluative preferences of disciplinary communities. Continuing Becher's line of inquiry, Knorr-Cetina (1999) introduces the concept of epistemic cultures to denote the intertwining of disciplinary practice and signification/ symbols rooted therein. Ten years later, citing Goffman's theory of scripts and Knorr-Cetina's work as inspiration, Lamont (2009) proposes that scholars absorb common beliefs and practices from their discipline and recognize differences across disciplinary cultures through intellectual activities. Through this process they adopt one of four epistemological styles (i.e., comprehensive, constructivist, positivist, and utilitarian), which serve multiple functions, including the provision of grounds for self-definition and evaluating prospective members.

However, while it is clear that faculty are socialized into disciplinary norms and values that affect their judgment of others, Lamont employs four different names to describe how this plays out, each of which suggests different theoretical assumptions (i.e., epistemic culture, epistemological style, disciplinary habitus, and disciplinary culture). Therefore, it remains unclear just how they structure judgment of prospective members and of work, and whether/ how individuals can resist prevailing tendencies in their fields.

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[14] The presence of a centralized prestige hierarchy in a discipline, as in economics, versus salient heterarchies by sub-field, as in psychology or biology, may also influence faculty beliefs in the reliability of national rankings of undergraduate institutions, generally, and the preparation undergraduate received therein. Conventional wisdom in physics, for example, suggests that its standing in the sciences produces a great concern for the reputation of university in which an applicant earned their bachelors degree.

Judgment and disciplinary consensus. Scholars of disciplines often hold loosely to or critique the assumption of internal coherence within disciplines (e.g., Abbott, 2001), recognizing one of the earliest distinctions noted among disciplines: that of paradigm strength (Kuhn, 1962, 1977). Fields may be distinguished from one another on the degree of consensus about what constitutes the core of the discipline and the extent to which perceived progress in the field derives from use of common methods and theories. Following Braxton and Hargens (1996), Hearn and Anderson (2002), and other higher education scholars, I use the phrase high and low consensus to refer to strong and weak paradigm. Standardization in techniques and monolithic evaluation systems are found in fields controlled by single reputational system (Whitley, 2000); therefore, the strength of a discipline as a coherent epistemological paradigm may condition how strongly it affects faculty preferences at the program level.

A hallmark of interdisciplinarity[15] is low intellectual consensus, and it is manifested in interdisciplinary and applied fields as well as in fractal distinctions within disciplines that mirror broader disciplinary distinctions (Abbott, 2001). "It is no longer safe to assume," Lattuca (2002) notes, "that faculty within particular disciplines share areas of interest, methods, or even epistemological perspectives" (p. 3). As such, we need research that examines what these forms of diversity mean for the ways faculty within disciplines, interdisciplines, and departments approach evaluation and selection.

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[15] Lattuca (2002) cites the OECD's widely used definition of interdisciplinary: "an adjective describing the interaction among two or more different disciplines. This interaction may range from simple communication of ideas to the mutual integration of organizing concepts, methodology, procedures, epistemology, terminology, data, and organization of research and education in a fairly large field. An interdisciplinary group consists of persons trained in different fields of knowledge (disciplines) with different concepts, methods, and data and terms into a common effort on a common problem with continuous intercommunication among the participants from the different disciplines" (OECD, 1972, p. 25-26).

Moreover, additional refinement is needed to apprehend how disciplines specifically shape tastes and selection. To that end, I integrate theories about disciplines and institutional logics in Chapter 6 to explain how disciplines serve as perceptual frameworks for faculty judgment.

In doctoral admissions, we are likely to find more consensus about what should count as merit in fields with more consensus about what constitutes appropriate theory and method, and in these fields. For example, where positivism is stronger, scholars may share the belief that standardized test scores can signal something that meaningfully distinguishes applicants from one another. This belief may constrain perceptions of whether to require the GRE and/or how to interpret the scores. Likewise, in low consensus disciplines it is reasonable to expect divergent disciplinary logics and for individual tastes to play a stronger role in decision making.

Individual-level identities in evaluation. Identities are a powerful framework through which our perceptions and evaluations of others are filtered. Like disciplines, individual identities also mediate elite graduate programs' general tendencies toward constructing merit in terms of what is highly valued in the field and in terms of fit with organizational identity and goals. Continuing from broad to narrow contexts for judgment, here I describe three perspectives on how judgment is situated in the identities of individuals who are nested in organizations—perspectives that are of particular importance to the findings in Chapter 7.

First, organizational context can trigger multiple identities as salient (March, 1994; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998), and judgment is not limited to one identity in action at a time, but rather can involve multiple identities (Zerubavel,

1991). Therefore, in admissions, we can expect the multiple organizational contexts described in this review to trigger multiple identities as faculty evaluate prospective students, discuss evaluations with other their colleagues (whose own identities may have been triggered), and seek agreement about appropriate action in light of this complexity.

Second, a deep literature from social and organizational psychology finds situationally relevant identities motivate counternormative behavior including breaking with and revising scripts (e.g., Grant and Brown, 1995; Howard, 2000). While research on scripts emerged to explain isomorphism, recent work in this area finds that individuals may break with scripted behavior in resistance (Rao and Giorgi, 2006) and, as these acts of resistance aggregate across time and space, the script itself may be revised. In the context of graduate admissions, the use of counterscripts born of individual identities that are not well represented may aggregate at the committee level to challenge prevailing norms.

Finally, script breaking often occurs in ways that appear homophilic (Duguid, Lloyd, and Tolbert, 2012); therefore, a clear conception of the self in relation to judgment is therefore also central to understanding how homophily plays out in evaluative contexts like admissions committees. Homophily involves preference for individuals whom one subjectively perceives to be like oneself (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Yet given what we know about the sensitivity of identity to context and the possibility for multiple identities to be salient at a given time, we can expect "different levels of homophily on different dimensions," and "multiplex relations among individuals may create systematic, important patterns of cross-cutting social circles" (McPherson, et al., 2001, p. 437).

Conclusion

This conceptual framework was designed with an eye to the multiple evaluative contexts in which judgments of merit are situated and the associated constraints on what reasonably counts as merit in each context. Admissions in prestigious doctoral programs is not only about selecting the students most likely to thrive academically, but also protecting their reputations, expressing their identities, and upholding core professional norms. It represents an institutionalized compromise in which decision makers work across multiple orders of worth, and operationalizing merit, therefore, is a significant organizational challenge. They must balance multiple criteria and the interests of fellow faculty, the department, the university, and the discipline, not to mention their own standards of what sort of student who should be offered admission. What is more, they undertake this balancing act in a context of incomplete information, limited time, and according to both individual and collective standards of judgment.

Evaluative scripts, disciplinary logics, and individual identities are tools that enable faculty to navigate the professionally, cognitively, and politically difficult task that evaluating applicants represents. To legitimate their judgments and come to compromise with their colleagues, faculty thus defer to multiple scripts and logics. The result? Operational definitions of merit reflect a heterarchy, not a single hierarchy, of values. This operational definition of merit may seem opaque, exclusionary, and/or contradictory to outsiders, but to insiders, it gets the job done and conforms to important norms.

The ideas presented in this chapter will be used as follows: In Chapter 4, I examine how faculty structure their decision-making process to account for constraints

that arise from large numbers of applications. Bureaucratization is the name of the game, yet it is implemented with an eye to upholding professional norms, such as deliberation, that ensure the legitimacy of the process and, thus, of their choices. Chapter 5 outlines the evaluative scripts that faculty members in these highly-ranked programs use to justify and relate their conceptions of merit and diversity at different stages of admissions review. Justifications for an initial filter of conventional achievement and for diversity considerations later in the review process cannot be separated from their values as elite organizations. In Chapter 6, I integrate theories of disciplines and institutional logics to analyze how judgments of merit and of appropriate admissions practice are positioned in the normative theories, methods, and practical priorities of disciplines. This perspective adds to the literature on disciplines as cultural entities by specifying processes by which disciplines shape faculty tastes. Finally, individual tastes that hold sway in low-consensus disciplines are the focus of Chapter 7. Four forms of homophily are revealed, and their prevalence reveals individual identity as a vital perceptual framework in which judgments of merit are situated. Together, these chapters offer several explanations for the merit-diversity paradox that motivated this research.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The choice of methodology follows from choice of research questions (listed on page 5) and, in this case, the case for comparative case study was straightforward. "How" questions (which characterize Research Questions 1, 2, and 2a) address complex social processes, the details of which are most deeply assessed through naturalistic inquiry (Stake, 2005). Limited prior research on this topic elevated the importance of participant voices and professional knowledge in this work, suggesting inductive analysis was warranted. These factors narrowed the scope of appropriate methods to qualitative inquiry.

Among models of qualitative research, a comparative case study presented several advantages in answering these research questions. Research Question (RQ) 1 appraises trends across the sample, and RQ 2 encourages comparison of disciplinary and individual-level preferences. Also, ethnographic interviewing was well suited to answer questions related to individual meaning making (Ortiz, 2003), which was central to capturing the meanings that faculty attach to various criteria (i.e., evaluative scripts, per RQ 2a). Third, observational, micro-level data of faculty deliberation was critical for ascertaining the enacted definition of merit and individual preferences of which faculty may be marginally aware or choose not to discuss in an interview setting (RQ 2c). Observations also helped triangulate what the evaluative scripts in use are, per methods used in Goffman's (1959) initial work on scripts, Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodological tradition, and more recent organizational and institutional

scholarship (Lamont, 2009). Observational data was also useful in drawing out the taken-for-granted bases of decision making that disciplines and departments structure, per RQ 2b. Finally, collecting and analyzing data at multiple levels of analysis facilitated theory elaboration (Vaughan, 1992), which is often an implicit aim in inductive, comparative case studies such as this (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). A sampling design that took the individual program/ department as my primary sampling unit enabled me to analyze down to the individual, up to the overall sample, and laterally to the disciplines as units of analysis.

In summary, I conducted comparative ethnographic case studies of the Ph.D. admissions cycle in ten departments representing the humanities, social sciences, and natural/physical sciences. They were located in three research universities with very high research activity, and data collection took place over two admissions cycles (2010-11 and 2011-2012). I designed the study to stand alone, but envision it also to serve as the first stage of a sequential mixed-methods research initiative on graduate admissions.

Case Study as a Methodology

Drawing from conceptualizations of the method used by a generation of case study scholars, Merriam (2009) defines case study as "in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (p. 39). Before proceeding, it is worth highlighting four critical elements of this definition: in-depth, description, analysis, and bounded system. Case study methodologists strive to illuminate a particular phenomenon by learning as much as possible about the particulars of one or a handful of cases rather than learning a few things about a very large sample (Stake, 2005, p. 448). Cases are thus carefully selected

for how they reveal the phenomenon of interest, and the means of revelation are description and analysis.

"Thick description" uses details of what is immediately observable to take readers *beyond* the immediately observable into the realm of deeper social meanings. In his famous article on the topic, Clifford Geertz (1973) illustrates thick description by considering the difference between an eye twitching and winking. Thin description would note muscle contraction in one eye, but miss whether it was involuntary (a twitch) or conspiratorial (a wink) because this distinction may also require detail about the actors, setting, other communication, and circumstances. Description along these dimensions ensures that the meaning of a socially important moment is not lost. Small matters—the lighting in a conference room, the order in which applicants are reviewed, the topics of side conversations preceding the "real" conversation—may matter much, and through describing such details I have tried to capture the social and organizational complexity of faculty evaluation.

Although case study methodology does not prescribe a specific analytic method (Charmaz, Denzin, & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 2005; Yin, 1994), weaving together a narrative that can account for the details and sorting out participants' signification structures is both empirical and inherently interpretive (Cronbach, 1975; Geertz, 1973). Indeed, in approaching both the voluminous data typically collected for case studies and the theoretical framework that will be brought to bear on that data, researcher meaning making is a key intellectual activity of analysis.

Finally, to complete my summary of the core characteristics of case study methodology, there is the case itself— the object of study. The case may be an instance

of a population or of a conceptual class, depending on the researcher's orientation (Abbott, 1992), but either way it may be thought of as the phenomenon in context (Miles and Huberman, 1994), consisting of a bounded system (Merriam, 2009; Smith, 1978). Case selection often takes place by selecting on the dependent variable, the practice of identifying a case or cases that maximizes the phenomenon of interest. This selection process produces suspect causal inferences in regression due to selection bias, but has received strong defenses from comparative case study analysts for the study of necessary (vs. sufficient) conditions (Dion, 1998). With an interest in capturing both individual and collective faculty judgment *in situ*, the case boundaries for my study are both organizational—highly selective Ph.D. granting programs—and temporal—the admissions cycle from recruitment to yield. I turn next to further describe the logical implications of these boundaries for my sampling design.

Sampling

Purposive sampling procedures strive to gather a set of cases that may be both feasibly studied and that, in some meaningful way, represent a broader population of interest (Patton, 2002). In case study, scholars rarely claim their small n's manifest the population, or are generalizable, but rather hope that the theoretical leverage earned through thick description and in-depth analysis will generate understanding that can illuminate similar cases. There are at least two levels of sampling decisions that must be made: (1) selection of the case, which serves as the primary unit of analysis, and (2) selection of subjects within the case whose perspectives help the researcher craft a holistic depiction of the case (Merriam, 2009). At both levels, I used criterion sampling,

in which the researcher chooses cases that meet a predetermined criterion or set of criteria (Patton, 2002), as follows:

Since the majority of doctoral degrees are awarded in research-focused universities, I focused on programs within three universities that have Carnegie classifications of Research Universities-Very high research activity (RU/VH). Two are public and one is private, and they are located in two regions of the United States. Both for the sake of participant and program confidentiality and because details about the university are less salient to my analysis than details of the departments and disciplines, I do not discuss in the results the names or other identifying details of the universities in which data were collected.

Table 4.1 summarizes the sampling design. Within each university, I sampled Ph.D. granting programs representing disciplines in humanities, social sciences, and physical/natural sciences. I expected such programs would evince disciplinary influences more clearly than applied or interdisciplinary programs.[16] I also narrowed my choice of institutions to those in which the fields of interest maintain programs ranked in the top 15 in their field (National Research Council, 2010; *U.S. News and World Report*, 2010). In these contexts, many qualified individuals apply; therefore, the competing demands of selection come into sharper focus. Although I initially hoped to study the same departments at multiple universities, there was only one instance in which I could gain access from a second department that was also ranked in the top 15 in the discipline. The exception to this is philosophy, in which I collected data at two of the three universities. However, within the humanities, social sciences, and natural/physical sciences, I sampled

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[16] Particularly because applied and interdisciplinary programs represent an increasing proportion of Ph.D.'s awarded in the U.S., I hope in future research to explore the dynamics and criteria of evaluation in such programs.

at least one high-consensus discipline (e.g., classics, economics, and physics) and one

low-consensus discipline (e.g., linguistics, political science, and biology), which has lent

structure and intellectual focus to my cross-case comparison about the role of disciplines.

Table 3.1. Structure of Sample and Types of Data Collection

Discipline Type	Departments & Data Collection Types		Individuals
	Year 1	Year 2	
Humanities	Philosophy (I&O)	Philosophy (I&O) Linguistics (I&O) Classics (I&O)	• Admissions committee chair & members • Faculty with few & many years of admissions experience • Emeritus faculty
Social Sciences	Economics (I) Sociology (I)	Political science (I&O)	
Natural Sciences	Astrophysics (I&O)	Physics (I&O) Biology (I)	

Note: I= Interviews, O= Observations of committee meetings

Within the ten departments selected through this process, my sample in each

department consists of the department and/or admissions chair, faculty members on the

admissions committee, and one emeritus professor. Where this group totaled fewer than

six people due to a small committee size or a small proportion of the committee who

consented to be interviewed, I also interviewed members of the faculty with many and

few years of experience in graduate admissions. In addition, the astrophysics, linguistics,

and political sciences departments each involved 1-3 graduate students on the admissions

committee for a total of six graduate student participants. The sample has a total of 78

participants: 68 individuals across the ten case studies, as well as 10 additional

admissions committee or department chairs in programs that did not ultimately consent to

full participation, but with whom I conducted informational interviews that informed the findings.

With an interest in the sample reflecting admissions and the views on it as currently practiced in these departments, I did not stratify my sample by race/ethnicity or gender. However, as a result, my sample reflects the same problems of underrepresentation by female and domestic faculty of color that the U.S. professoriate does. Only 18% of the sample is female and 3% are domestic faculty of color.

Table 3.2. Sample Demographic Characteristics

Departments	N	% Female	% Born Outside of U.S.	% Scholars of Color	% Domestic Scholars of Color	# Grad. students
Classics	5	40	40	0	0	0
Linguistics	7	29	29	14	0	2
Philosophy1	6	33	33	0	0	0
Philosophy2	7	29	14	14	14	0
Humanities Total/ Avg%	*25*	*33%*	*26%*	*7%*	*4%*	*2*
Economics	6	0	33	0	0	0
Political Science	8	25	38	13	0	3
Sociology	10	20	33	34	10	0
Soc Sci Total/Avg%	*24*	*15%*	*35%*	*16%*	*4%*	*3*
Astrophysics	6	0	33	33	0	1
Biology	6	17	33	17	0	0
Physics	7	0	71	14	0	0
Nat Sci Total/Avg%	*19*	*6%*	*46%*	*21%*	*0%*	*1*
Grand Total/Average%	***68***	***18%***	***36%***	***15%***	***3%***	***6***

Recruitment

Geertz (1973) suggests a combination of researchers' personal attributes and the nature of their research design is what facilitates the trust and rapport by which prospective participants become willing, forthcoming co-constructors of a qualitative

study. Participant recruitment is the point at which this relationship begins. Sensitive to

ethical and reputational implications of this research for the programs and individuals that

chose to participate, I tried to make it as easy as possible for prospective participants to

feel comfortable. In initial contacts, I framed my work as a matter of decision making,

not judgment, and as a matter of maximizing competing goods, not inclusion and

exclusion. Although I have analyzed and probed for issues around diversity throughout

data collection, I saved the protocol questions about diversity for the end of interviews,

after a sense of common interests and the beginnings of trust had been established.

Further, in the informed consent document, I outlined the measures I took to ensure

confidentiality (see Appendix E). In summary, while my positionality and/or the nature

of the research undoubtedly deterred some from participating, I made a concerted effort

to minimize the risks to participants and maximize their anonymity.

  With a target sample of four to six programs per year, I recruited 17 programs in

the first year of data collection, and 18 programs in the second year. To gain entrée, my

first contact was an email message in September to department chairs/ program directors

in qualifying programs at prospective universities (See Appendix F). In this message, I

requested a 30-minute informational interview before November to discuss their

approach to admissions and how the process works in their program. Frequently, the

department chair would refer me directly to the admissions committee chair for this

interview, but a total of ten and nine programs agreed to informational interviews in the

first and second years, respectively. Toward the end of these informal, informational

interviews, I continued the recruitment process by explaining the research study design,

encouraged the chair to consider participation and consult others in the department whose

permission might be needed before a decision could be made. I also provided a copy of the IRB-approved informed consent document (See Appendix E for document, including list of confidentiality procedures implemented). In a few cases, general consent to conduct the departmental case study was immediately provided or declined at the informational interview, but more often this occurred via subsequent email communication. We agreed in all cases that each individual would have the opportunity to consent or decline participation, and that if any faculty on the admissions committee preferred for me not to observe that I would not observe that department's committee.

Once general consent to conduct the case studies was provided, I requested an official approval letter to file with the IRB, printed on department letterhead and signed by the department chair. I also requested from the admissions chair a list of admissions committee members for the year and the names of 1-2 emeritus faculty whom I might recruit for an oral history of the department and its admissions practices. Then, using an email template similar to that used with department chairs, I emailed each committee member an invitation to be interviewed for the study. As described above, in departments with small committees or where fewer than six committee members and emeriti agreed to be interviewed, I used snowball sampling within each department to develop a list of individuals with few and many years of admissions experience whom I could recruit to participate.

Data Collection

Before proceeding into the details of data collection and analysis, it bears noting what case study does and does not imply about methodology. Stake (2005) explains, "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. By

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whatever methods, we choose to study the case" (p. 443). However, to achieve deep and

holistic understanding of a case, leaders in case study research advise using all three of

the common qualitative data collection techniques—interviews, observation, and artifact

analysis (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994). In this study, data collection consisted of

interviews, observations, and content/ archival analysis and occurred sequentially over

two admissions cycles, in two universities the first year and in one university the second

year.

      Interviews. I conducted a total of 86 interviews ranging from 23 to 85 minutes in

length with four groups: program and/or admissions committee chairs, non-chair

committee members, non-committee faculty members, and faculty emeriti. I will discuss

each in turn.

      As described above, recruitment for the study involved 30-60 minute semi-

structured informational interviews with program and/or admissions committee chairs in

prospective programs. These unrecorded interviews in faculty offices inquired into

details of the department's admissions process and assessed interest in further

participation in the study. Of the 17 informational interviews I conducted, 11 resulted in

approval for me to interview other department faculty; however, in one of those

departments, just one other committee member was willing to be interviewed and consent

to observe the committee was not provided. The final sample therefore includes ten

departments. Among these, eight of the ten chairs also agreed to an unstructured follow-

up interview after final offers were made. In some of the most candid interviews of the

study, we discussed their reflections on how the admissions process went and what its

strengths and weaknesses are, as well as the challenges of admissions generally and of

deliberations about applicants on whom committee members' opinions seemed to be divided.

The initial research design proposed two, thirty-minute interviews with each committee member—one before and one after file review. However, in the first year of data collection only seven non-chair committee members consented to this arrangement, citing scheduling difficulties. I therefore proposed as an alternative a single, longer interview, either during or after file review. This option proved much more appealing, and resulted in complete participation from two committees and more than 50% participation in the other two. In the second year, I opted to make the single, longer interview the norm for non-chair committee members, and had almost 100% participation from all six committees. Consistent with a semi-structured approach, these interviews varied somewhat depending when in the admissions process the interview was conducted, and if the interviewee was a graduate student committee member or non-committee faculty member.[17] In all cases, faculty began by providing a brief history of their route to the professoriate, emphasizing their personal experience with graduate admissions so that I might ascertain any personal factors that might affect their judgment of others. We also discussed important criteria and what they are perceived to signal; perceptions and challenges of committee deliberations; profiles of easily admitted, easily rejected, and borderline cases; and how traits of highly valued faculty candidate compare to those of compelling Ph.D. program applicants. These interviews averaged approximately 50

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[17] Among the eight non-committee faculty members I interviewed, all had previous research experience on admissions committees to discuss. These participants, included as a contingency so that as many departments as possible would have at least six participants, helped contextualize the current year's admissions practice and priorities. Among the five graduate student members on admissions committees I interviewed, two had previous experience on admissions committees to discuss in addition to the current year.

minutes each, and all but one took place in faculty/student offices, at the participant's designation. Upon my request in the informed consent document, all but three consented to have the interviews audiotaped and transcribed.

Finally, to contextualize current practice, I interview an emeritus professor in each of the ten programs to gain an oral history of developments in the department and discipline, and to probe for connections between the discipline's epistemology and selection criteria. These audiotaped interviews averaged just over 60 minutes each, and took place in either their homes or campus offices, per the participant's preference.

See Appendices A-C for protocols, which were developed using principles advocated by Robert Weiss (1995) in *Learning from Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies* and Herbert and Irene Rubin (2009) in *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data.* Asking main questions was intended to "elicit the overall experiences and understandings" of participants, while follow-up questions clarify responses and probes encouraged the participant to provide detail that can produce a more complete narrative (Rubin and Rubin, 2009, p. 152-153). A number of the questions had been used in and/or revised from a small-scale study I conducted in Winter-Spring 2009 on merit and diversity in graduate admissions. Using interview strategies employed in studies by Tierney and Bensimon (1996), Barley (1990, 1996) and Lamont (1992, 2009), a set of important questions inquires into "ideal types" of applicants. First advocated by Weber as a research technique, understanding ideal (and less than ideal) types of applicants is useful not because they represent typical applicants or individuals who are admitted, but because they clarify symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 2009) and serve as models or heuristics to guide our thinking about social phenomena

(Barley, 1996). And, per Barley (1990), data from these questions were combined with detailed, behavioral, observational information (described in the subsequent section) about the frequencies, sequences, and patterns of criteria and other factors that faculty discuss in admissions deliberations. Through integrating the observational and interview data, I have tried to outline common scripts of merit and the common decision pathways that faculty employ.[18]

Consistent with principles of emergent design in qualitative research, I adapted the original interview protocol in response to unexpected themes that emerged in early interviewing. Most importantly, after just five interviews in the first year of data collection, it became apparent that a common quality the participants seek in applicants is intelligence, but that their beliefs about what this means vary widely. In response, I added a question to the interview asking them to reflect on what intelligence means in their discipline and how they try to recognize it in applicants. Responses to this set of questions has turned out to be a very rich source of information about underlying assumptions within disciplines. Furthermore, the importance of intelligence to faculty judgments was corroborated by both carefully worded and off-the-cuff comments from participants during the admissions committee meetings.

Audio recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. I personally transcribed 25% of the interviews as a means of reflecting on the quality of my interviewing and the

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[18] I take as an example here Barley's (1990) successful study of radiology technicians, in which he relied primarily on observational data to analyze "turn taking structures and distribution of speech acts (requests, demands, questions, etc.) among role incumbents" (p. 236) to identify the scripts undergirding radiologists' interactions. He encourages researchers to capture chronological, behavioral, repetitious detail to identify scripts, and forewarns that researchers should expect to find multiple patterns and cases that evince multiple scripts and emphasizes that the goal is not a set of mutually exclusive categories, but more refined explanations of social processes.

interview protocol. Personal transcription also enabled me to remain mindful that "a transcript is a text that 're'-presents an event…What is re-presented is data constructed by a researcher for a particular purpose, not just talk written down" (Green, Franquiz, and Dixon, 1997, p. 172). Postmodern qualitative scholars like Scheurich (1995) note the social construction of meaning from interview transcripts as well. Wishing to analyze my transcripts for what is not said as well as what is said, transcripts included the relative length of pauses, verbal pauses, events that interrupt the flow of conversation, laughter, and the like. I augmented select transcripts with researcher memos as a forum for reflexivity, or self-critique about my work and self as researcher and instrument of research (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

History, place, and the data demands of thick description. While the data from participant narratives comprises the foundation of my data, understanding contemporary social phenomena and processes in higher education requires us to consider how they are situated spatially and temporally (Gieryn, 2000; Clark, 1987). Present events and prevailing institutional logics constitute "the signature of history" (Gould, 1990, p. 283), and reveal, in William Faulkner's famous words, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." Details of space and setting similarly shape social phenomena. What appear to be background details are more than local color, for the dimensions of time and space create dependencies and contingencies that help explain how and why a case plays out as it does under our analysis. Howard Becker describes such detail as "the *environing conditions* under which the things we stud[y]—the relationships we uncover, the general social processes whose discovery we want to brag about—exist" (Becker, 1998, p. 54, emphasis in original). Therefore, while rigorously

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adhering to the standards of confidentiality that human subjects policy and informed consent agreements demand, my analysis involved careful observation, investigation, chronicling, and sifting of details about the settings and histories of the programs, disciplines, and universities to draw out institutional logics and provide rich case descriptions. For this work, observational and documentary/ archival data best complement the perspective that interview data provide.

Observation. While insider status presents decided advantages in interview settings, when it comes to observation there are clear advantages to being an outsider, assuming access to the group is granted and group members do not make extreme adaptations to their language and behavior in the presence of an outsider. Chief among the benefits is that outsiders are able to notice what has become routine to or taken-for-granted by participants (Merriam, 2009). Given my broader goal of unpacking the assumptions and values faculty hold as evaluators, observational data has played a key role in helping me capture evaluative scripts and understand how committees negotiate individuals' evaluations of prospective students. I feel privileged to have had access to this invaluable source of backstage knowledge about faculty and institutional values at multiple levels, and about similarities and differences across disciplines in how admissions decisions are ultimately made.

I conducted just over 21 hours of observations over the two years of data collection. I observed four types of events: admissions committee meetings, faculty training workshops, Skype interviews of applicants, and campus visit weekend events. First, every member of the admissions committee in six of the ten departments kindly consented for me to attend their admissions committee meetings, for a total of ten

meetings observed overall. The shortest meeting was 80 minutes and longest was three

hours and 15 minutes (both in the political science department). I took structured field

notes longhand to document the following:

1. The frequency various criteria and applicant traits are mentioned
2. Patterns of participation and interaction among faculty
3. Discourses of merit and diversity
4. Which members of the committee appear to have power, authority, and be marginalized
5. How applicant traits are commensurated (with or without the use of numbers)
6. Examples of consensus and conflict and how these are reached/ handled
7. The physical setting and participants' non-verbal communication in the setting

Two of the seven departments—astrophysics and physics—also added me to their email

list for the committee, so that I could observe all email interactions. This was particularly

important in the physics department, which did not conduct synchronous, face-to-face

meetings of the whole committee.

In addition, I received permission from administrators in two of the three

universities to attend trainings conducted by the graduate school for admissions

committee chairs and members throughout the university. These trainings were one and

two hours long, respectively. The astrophysics and physics departments also offered to

have me sit in the room during select Skype interviews that they planned with prospective

students. Over two hours, I sat in on a total of four such interviews--two with domestic

and two with Chinese students—as well as the subsequent debriefing faculty had with

one another following the interviews. Finally, the astrophysics department invited me to

sit in on the two-hour introductory session of their campus visit weekend hosted for

admitted students. I took open-ended field notes in each of these settings.

For all observations, I sat in the back and/or corner of the room to minimize my obtrusiveness, and within 24 hours, transcribed the field notes into electronic format and composed memos/ reflections. According to Gold's (1958) classic typology of observers' stances toward the observed, I was an "observer as participant," wherein the group knew my activities and research aims, but I was not counted as a member of the group and did not participate in the activities I observed.

It is worth briefly discussing what we can anticipate learning from the anonymous profiles of various applicants whom faculty discuss. By analyzing the individual and collective traits of the cases for individuals whom faculty clearly want to admit or reject, and the ways that faculty discuss these individuals, we can infer shared values, ideal types of applicants and criteria which may be able to trump others. By studying borderline cases and how they are discussed, on the other hand, we gain knowledge about negotiation processes, tastes and logics in contention, and inter-departmental power dynamics. For example, the socialization basis of habitus means that if it is indeed a basis for taste, we would anticipate faculty in interdisciplinary programs to disagree more about whom should be admitted.

Data Management

Case studies are notorious for the amount of data they generate, and I knew my ability to craft a meaningful narrative from the data on ten departments would depend partly on its overall organization and the accessibility of individual bits of data. My first step in managing the data was creating an inventory, for which I maintained a comprehensive Excel workbook with separate pages for data generated in each year. In order to organize the fieldnotes, interview transcripts, documents, and memos, I utilized

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NVivo 9.2. NVivo was also a critical tool for me in data analysis, which I turn to

describing next.

Data Analysis

Case study research recommends specific data collection but not analytical

methods (Charmaz, et al., 2000). As Stake (2000) puts it, "By whatever methods, we

choose to study the case." However, the aims of case study provide a guide to selecting

appropriate analytic methods. "The ultimate goal of case study," according to Patton and

Applebaum (2003), "is to uncover patterns, determine meanings, construct conclusions,

and build theory" (p. 67). Techniques from the grounded theory tradition provided a

systematic means of capturing patterns and meanings, and of developing conclusions and

theoretical contributions. Grounded theory's "constant comparative method of analysis"

is prevalent across various qualitative research traditions, including case studies (Glaser

& Strauss, 1967, pp. 22, 25, 101-116). I drew, in particular, from Strauss and Corbin's

(1998) approach to constant comparison involving three stages of coding, which can be

defined simply as seeking patterns in the data. My process of using grounded theory

techniques for an ethnographic comparative case study merits description in both broad

strokes and fine detail.

Broadly, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously to facilitate

ongoing reflection on the data and adjustments to my interviewing and/or observations.

However, analysis continued long after data collection concluded. I initially analyzed the

data one department at a time and used those analyses to write cases on each department.

Then, I conducted a cross-case analysis in which I compiled all of the cases into a new

NVivo project and interpreted case similarities and differences by disciplinary type and

paradigm strength using the same micro-level analytic steps described below. The overall analytic process was iterative alternating between the aggregated data from specific cases, the cases themselves, and the sample as a whole. The findings chapters reflect this, in that I discuss both the sample as a whole and variations at the discipline and individual levels.

Analysis at the micro-level proceeded according to the three stages of coding recommended in grounded theory. In the first stage, I read each interview transcript, memo, and field note line-by-line: (1) assigning relevant text to a few predetermined categories (i.e., codes) that correspond to expected admissions considerations and social identities of interest and (2) inductively identifying recurrent themes about additional admissions considerations, the dynamics of evaluation, and the meanings of what participants expressed. I added to the initial list of categories when the data offered multiple instances of its occurrence, mentally comparing the instances for the underlying regularity. This process corresponds to what Strauss and Corbin (1998) call open coding.

The next phase of analysis involved finer-grained interpretation of the material I had assigned to specific codes (also called "nodes" in NVivo), with a goal of determining conceptual relationships within the data. This level of data abstraction is also known as axial coding in grounded theory, and helps ensure that any theoretical propositions are "grounded" in the data. In some cases, this work resulted in assigning an overarching category to several extant codes (e.g., Low-Risk Achievers includes elements of the application that participants associate with an applicant's risk of attrition: GRE scores, Curriculum rigor, Grades, Institutional Prestige). In other cases, it meant developing sub-

codes to capture nuances (e.g., Under the code Homophily, identifying and naming four types of homophily observed).

Finally, through what is known in grounded theory analysis as selective coding, I developed a narrative that accounts for the relationship of the codes to one another and to critical details of the case. As an ethnographic case study, I think of axial coding as data-driven theory generation and selective coding as an opportunity that case study presents to intersect theory generation with thick description. Interrelating the data and themes across levels of analysis and abstraction, findings include description and interpretation at both the individual and case level.

Case Development and Cross-Case Analysis

In the months following each admissions cycle and my initial analysis of data from programs studied that year, I composed 5-15 page cases of those programs.[19] Analyzing data one department at a time assisted in keeping my focus on one program, as did NVivo's analytic features. NVivo allows the researcher to quickly retrieve data coded to specific themes for a single data file or group of data files. This capability, paired with my system for naming data files according to individual, department, and university, allowed me to easily separate out for targeted analysis the data in which, for example, I had coded sociologists discussing letters of recommendation or physicists discussing the program's history.

My goal in composing cases was to represent what the results of the study might be if I were only to have sampled that case. Therefore, the case template I used is organized predominantly around answering the research questions (See Appendix E) and

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[19] Cases were shorter in the programs where I conducted only interviews, and longer in the departments where I also observed admissions meetings and other events.

highlighting specific episodes in which faculty discussed the intersections of merit and diversity. Also, for reference, Appendix F provides an example of one case, from the linguistics department.

The goal of cross-case analysis, in conjunction with conclusions from answers to the first three research questions, was to answer the research questions in such a way as broader theoretical propositions could be made (Rubin and Rubin, 2009, p. 201). Specifically, the cases and answers to the first three research questions provided a basis for reflection upon how departments and disciplines shape faculty judgment through the taken for granted assumptions about merit that individuals in those contexts hold (This is, more than coincidentally, also Research Question 4).

Protecting Participant Confidentiality

Protecting participant confidentiality ranked high on my list of concerns in this study, as well as protecting the anonymity of any student applicants whom the committees discussed. A full description of the steps taken to this end are provided in Appendix E, the informed consent document that each participant received, read, and signed before interviewing commenced.

In writing up the results, I have masked and/or given pseudonyms to all information that might be personally identifiable. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms and where gender does not seem to be salient to the discussion, I may or may not change the gender of participants or applicants to further ensure their anonymity. In referring to specific institutions, I seek to balance the need to ensure anonymity with the need to convey a real-world sense of the institutional strata in which these programs are located. Therefore, when the need arises to name specific universities including the

data collection sites, I randomly draw from a list of 15 institutions in the same tier of program rankings for that discipline. This means that the actual university in which data was collected could potentially be named in the paper due to chance, yet ensures that readers should be no more able to recognize it as being the data collection site than any other, similar institution.

Trustworthiness and Reliability

I engaged in a number of practices to increase the trustworthiness and reliability of the findings. These include data triangulation across interviews and observations, thick description, reflexive researcher memos, member checking, and searching for disconfirming evidence.

Member checking can take a variety of forms, but is rooted in the interpretive ideal that the qualitative researcher's role is not to impose one's own voice on those of participants, but rather to get inside of participants' perspectives and give voice to their concerns. Therefore, member checking practically consists of consulting (or "checking" with) research participants to learn "whether the data analysis is congruent with the participants' experiences" (Curtin & Fossey, 2007, p. 92). In this case, my objective was to discuss whether and how preliminary findings about each department resonated with the respective admissions committee chairs, who ostensibly have considerable practical knowledge of the processes I was trying to capture. I circulated a draft of each program's case to its respective admissions chair and offered to exchange feedback in person or via email. Most opted for face to face conversations, and I did not receive any negative responses to the clarity and credibility of the findings; however, not everyone *liked* what they read about their colleagues and their own practice. Through these interactions, one

department chair provided me with some additional organizational history that helped me make sense of a gap in the data. Another explained how their interpretation of test scores has changed in the transition to the new version of the GRE, an adaptation that takes their practice out of the realm of extreme and closer to the modal interpretation of test scores in the sample. In several cases, the admissions chairs with whom I met also asked for my recommendations about specific changes they might make to improve the department's admissions process.

In *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* Popper (1959) advocates an approach to knowledge production in which progress is measured not only by the volume of evidence that can be amassed in support of a theory, but by its falsifiability, or ability to withstand a search for disconfirming evidence. Lareau (2010) supports this view. In the name of presenting apparently clean, clear results, she argues contemporary qualitative researchers in sociology and education too frequently sacrifice the rigor of searching and responding to disconfirming evidence. Therefore, a late stage of data analysis in my study involved searching for disconfirming evidence of the prevailing themes and propositions. Patterns in disconfirming evidence and/or alternative interpretations are presented before the conclusion section of each chapter of findings.

Limitations

The principal limitations of this study concern who the data is coming from and data imbalances across departments and demographic groups. As mentioned above, this study includes the perspectives of few female, African American, and Latino faculty. Consistent with the motivation for this research, these groups are underrepresented in the highly ranked departments I partnered with and the committees I studied; they therefore

are underrepresented in my sample. Although this means that my results faithfully capture the prevailing viewpoints in these departments (and thus, I hope, the cultural dynamics that help sustain structural inequality), the results do downplay the alternative viewpoints that individuals from these backgrounds may contribute.

Another limitation of this study is that the balance of interview and observational data is not consistent across departments. Seven of the ten permitted observation, and one of these (physics) does not convene for traditional admissions committee meetings. Therefore, I am unable to provide concrete examples about the nature of deliberation or alignment of espoused and enacted values in four departments: biology, economics, physics, and sociology.

Also, the committee sizes and response rates for consent to be interviewed varied widely across departments. In an extreme case, although the admissions chair was eager for my involvement with his committee, only one other member consented to be interviewed; therefore, I withdrew this case from the set of cases (for a final total of ten). On the other end, in astrophysics, each member of the five-person committee was willing to be interviewed multiple times. In several departments the committee consisted of fewer than six individuals and/or not every member of the committee consented to be interviewed; in these departments, I recruited faculty to interview from outside the committee, using snowball sampling starting with the admissions chair.

IRB requirements constrain me from discussing key aspects of the institutional and geographic contexts in which applicants in these programs are evaluated. For example, differences in public-private control increasingly affect the availability of funding to support international students and the autonomy that graduate and

undergraduate admissions decision makers have to consider race/ethnicity and gender.

Therefore, variation in control across the programs in the study may be affecting how

diversity is considered in ways that I cannot explicitly analyze. Differences in research

universities' prestige and geographic desirability affect how yield concerns become part

of the operational definitions of merit that departments employ.[20]

Researcher's Role and Establishing Rapport

      Origins of this research. My scholarly interest in graduate admissions began in

the course of working with the McNair Scholars Program at the University of Northern

Colorado. An important part of my role from 2003-2007 was to support low income, first

generation, and underrepresented minority students from a range of majors through post-

baccalaureate planning. I also supported those who elected to continue their education

through the graduate school admissions process. Each summer, program staff facilitated

GRE preparation workshops and invited the nation's foremost consultant on graduate

admissions, Donald Asher, for a two-day seminar. Then, each fall, I worked one-on-one

with McNair Scholars as they selected prospective programs, initiated contact with

prospective advisors, wrote their personal statements, solicited letters of

recommendation, and managed the myriad of details, deadlines, and emotions that the

process requires and creates.

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[20] For example, one department is in the top five for its field, but the institution—
although a research intensive university—does not have a strong international reputation.
Faculty in this program worry that the top recruits will be detracted from enrolling as
pursuit of careers outside of academia becomes more common. For those on the short
list, the committee therefore explicitly debates each applicant's likelihood of enrollment
in making their final admissions selections, sacrificing a few of their most desirable
students in the name of enrolling those most likely to accept the admission offer.

Through this work, I became interested in several aspects of graduate admissions. I found it curious that there was very little cross-disciplinary, empirical research that I could refer my students to read to learn what admissions decision makers would be looking for, and thus, how they might apply to programs of appropriate selectivity and position themselves for admissions success. The similarities between doctoral admissions and faculty hiring processes also became striking to me, including the key role that research potential and establishing institutional fit play in faculty perceptions of student merit and the range of ways that institutions define and relate ideals of merit and diversity (i.e., in some cases treating them as competing goods, in others regarding diversity as one of their preferences).

It bears noting that the seemingly "meta" nature of a doctoral student studying doctoral admissions is not lost on me, but my academic interest in faculty evaluation has very little to do with my experience with Ph.D. admissions. By way of full disclosure, my own process of application and admission involved a national search for faculty with complementary research interests in institutions or cities where my partner might find a faculty and/or research job. In brief, I applied to five selective education and higher education programs, was admitted to four, wait-listed at one, and enrolled in the one that best met the criteria we used to initially select the programs where I would apply. Since enrolling at the University of Michigan, I have enjoyed informal conversations with faculty in range of fields about their experiences with admissions, and was fortunate to serve as a student representative on the CSHPE Ph.D. admissions committee in 2009-2010. These recent experiences confirmed and further stimulated my interest in conducting original research that gets inside of admissions processes and decisions.

Positionality and building rapport. However, I began the research as an outsider to these departments, disciplines, and professoriate itself. According to Jorgensen (1989), a major strength of the ethnographic approach is that long-term involvement renders insider perspective and, with it, trust in the researchers. Conversely, where trust is low, the risks are higher that participants will withhold or distort information, act out their roles differently than usual, or provide socially desirable answers to interview questions (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). Thus, it came as no surprise that I encountered a wide range of comfort and candor levels from participants upon my entering their offices and homes for interviews. Five participants of the 86 who consented to be interview, all but one of whom were untenured professors or graduate students (who have both less power and admissions experience), projected a keen sense of guardedness throughout the interviews. These interviews were also relatively short. The other respondents thawed over the first 15 minutes of the interview and opened up as I reached the heart of the interview protocol or, from the beginning, displayed ease from the beginning and an interest in co-constructing bridges of rapport. This rapport was demonstrated in ways including but not limited to: socially undesirable and politically incorrect responses (which I probed), an offer to provide me with an in-department office for my work (which never panned out due to space limits), an invitation to have our families meet for a playdate (which I declined), requests for additional conversations about the department's admissions reform efforts (which I agreed to), and expressions of emotion such as tears, exclamations, and laughter (which I noted with gratitude).

Although it was impossible to know how forthcoming any research participant was being, the faculty I interviewed seemed to be especially direct with me when

interviews took place after I had already observed an admissions meeting in that department. As would be expected, I developed the strongest relationships with the admissions chairs, with whom I was in regular email contact and met at least three times. The interviews with emeritus faculty were also extremely rich, and often entertaining as they passionately recounted to me the tides of change and currents of stability in their careers and in the lives of their departments and disciplines. Faculty emeriti, I learned, have not only a wealth of knowledge about the politics and "dirty laundry" of their departments and disciplines, but (unlike graduate students and untenured professors) little to lose in disclosing it. I also learned they have a deep, emotional appreciation for their work and the academic communities that have supported them over decades.

Reflecting on this rapport, I brought a few characteristics to the research relationships that may have unexpectedly worked in my favor in cultivating trust and/or candor. Being a graduate student may have led tenured professors to view opening up to me as less threatening than if I were an tenured professor (Lamont, 2010, personal communication), for example. Furthermore, although almost as many programs declined to participate in the research as those that consented, informational interviews suggested that the University of Michigan brand lent credibility, and that my ability and interest in establishing yearlong relationships with the departments rather than swooping in for a one-time interview may have helped build rapport.

Finally, the social similarities and differences that affect interaction in everyday social life also affect interviewing (Erickson and Schultz, 1982). And with a sample that was 82% male and 85% White,[21] my identity as a White female undoubtedly affected the

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[21] Proportions that are, themselves, evidence of the need to diversify the professoriate's gender and racial/ethnic diversity in highly ranked departments.

majority of participants' comfort and candor during interviews. I came to realize in the course of interviewing that when I presented in stereotypically female ways– especially wearing pink—male interviewees were more frank with me about their beliefs and opinions. In an interesting moment that I also believe was gendered, a male participant whose age is similar to mine went so far as to reach over and pull a short string from a seam on my shoulder. Yet as Robert Weiss (1995) proposes, the interviewing relationship is fundamentally a research partnership aimed at producing analytically useful material (p. 119). Regardless of social identities and power dynamics, a skilled interviewer and cooperative respondent can find rapport, mutual trust, and engagement that generates perspective to enlarge understanding of the topic at hand.

Structure of the Findings

To conclude this chapter, I explain the structure and logic underlying the findings included in the dissertation. In qualitative research, some themes stand out for their pervasiveness across the sample. Other findings are notable for illuminating important nuances that would be missed if one only studied the central tendencies. I have tried to capture both. The first two chapters of findings explain the decision-making model and preferences that are widely present throughout the sample, with a focus on organizational dynamics in which judgment is situated (Chapter 4) and the evaluative scripts of merit (i.e., criteria and associated meanings) that faculty employ (Chapter 5). These chapters also establish the context for the third and fourth findings chapters, which resulted from the comparative case study analysis. Narrowing from the sample as a whole to the disciplinary and individual levels of analysis, I describe in these chapters how judgment is situated in disciplinary logics (Chapter 6) and individual identities (Chapter 7).

Chapter 4: Faculty Decision Making as Deliberative Bureaucracy

Growing demand for graduate education and rising application rates are trends that touch just about every corner of U.S. graduate education, spanning fields of study, institutional types, and both masters and doctoral level programs. International students have helped drive this trend through seven consecutive years of growth in applications, with Chinese applicants leading the way. In 2011, for example, international applications were up 9% over 2010, and Chinese applications grew 19% (Bell, 2012). Applications to graduate programs in research universities with very high research activity—the Carnegie classification for universities where I collected data—increased at an average annual rate of 5.3% (Allum, Bell, & Sowell, 2012). For the average admissions committee, this steady growth amounts to a daunting 72% more applications to review in 2011 compared to 2001.

I argue in this chapter that one reason faculty rely so heavily on GRE scores in spite of the negative consequences for diversity is that quantitative metrics enable faculty to cope with this increasing workload and the attendant ambiguities presented when comparing large numbers of applicants. Dependence on GRE scores must be understood as situated in faculty members' ambiguity and conflict aversion and the organizational task of needing to reject a large majority of applicants. To accomplish this task, faculty employ a decision-making model that I call deliberative bureaucracy.

Deliberation in Organizational Decision Making

In 1987, philosopher and now president of the University of Pennsylvania Amy Gutmann introduced the idea of deliberative democracy in her watershed book, *Democratic Education*. She further developed the theory with Dennis Thompson, defining deliberative democracy as a model of governance in which,

> …free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, p. 7).

Deliberation about the reasons individuals hold for the decisions they would make for themselves and others is central to the theory, as is the corollary requirement that the reasons individuals give must be accessible to all involved—available for reference, understandable, and based in evidence.

Discussion among equals upholds the legitimacy of shared decisions, encourages mutual respect and collegiality, and is an essentially educative process in which individuals learn to look beyond their own perspectives through discussion's give-and-take (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996). As such, principles of deliberative democracy have not only been used to explain and improve political decision making, but also serve as the foundation for models of high school classroom discussion, college intergroup relations dialogues, public study circles on race, and political polling (Hess and Posselt, 2002; Schoem and Hurtado, 2001; Ryfe, 2002; Fishkin, 2009).

I find that faculty decision making in Ph.D. admissions may aspire to the ideal of deliberative democracy, but the model in practice is better characterized as deliberative bureaucracy. Deliberative bureaucracy is an organizational adaptation to rising numbers

of applications and time demands that seeks to simultaneously maximize efficiency and uphold deliberative, democratic norms that lend legitimacy to faculty work. Collegiality, shared governance, peer review, and consensus-seeking are norms that have long been reflected in processes used for other academic personnel decision such as faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion (Salthouse, McKeachie, and Lin, 1978; Twombly, 1992; Jackson, 2006). However, as the volume of graduate applications has risen, faculty in my sample feel there is simply no longer time to approach admissions as they do faculty hiring.

Bureaucracy in Organizational Decision Making

In contrast to deliberative democracy, bureaucratic decision making delegates individuals from a body to serve as representatives on the group's behalf. However, because the delegates are not personally invested in outcomes, they are free to optimize efficiency and technical expertise (Weber, 1922; Wilson, 1989). Weber (1922) argued for the technical superiority of bureaucratic administration. He compared it with collegiate administration, in which the need to find compromises among conflicting individual interests delays progress toward decisions and makes the process both less reliable and precise. By contrast, bureaucracy uniformly imposes procedural rules and standard operating procedures that downplay personal interests so that "official business is discharged precisely and efficiently with as much speed as possible" (Weber, 1922, p. 974). Under a logic of formal rationality, bureaucracy operates through a "straightforward, unambiguous application of numerical, calculable standards" (Morrison, 2006, p. 226). Quantitative reasoning helps ensure that outcomes are predictable and consistent, and suppresses the complicating role that individual values play in decision making.

Implementing bureaucratic practices such as delegating work and quantifying judgment facilitates a more efficient process by reducing the time required for evaluation and discussion and by refocusing the discussion that does occur from reasons to less-controversial procedural matters. However, as I will discuss, this efficiency comes at a cost. Most importantly, bureaucratic processes obscure the operational considerations on which ratings and, ultimately, decisions depend. Sacrificing the reason-giving dimension of decision making appears to insiders to facilitate a more orderly, legitimate process because disagreements are fewer. However, it also masks the use of unseemly considerations, and allows misperceptions about common criteria to continue unchecked. As a result, the bases for admission or rejection are opaque to insiders and outsiders alike.

This chapter provides context for other findings chapters by outlining common decision-making practices, and is organized as follows. I begin by highlighting three bureaucratic processes of contemporary admissions in the programs that I studied: delegating work, quantifying judgment, and redirecting discussion from content to process. Faculty seek to protect the place of deliberation within the trend toward bureaucratization by refocusing the discussion that does occur, and in so doing, minimize conflict while protecting core values such as collegiality and consensus-seeking. Finally, I conclude with a brief analysis of the costs of deliberative bureaucracy for equity and diversity.

"Send it out to the experts": Committee Formation and Work Delegation

Departments delegate admissions work from the entire faculty and staff to a committee, and from the committee to an administrative assistant, the chair, the members and, occasionally, outside readers. Members of admissions committees have first access

to prospective advisees, and their decisions affect the entire department, so who serves on the committee and how they are formed is not apolitical work. In a natural sciences program, the graduate program coordinator leads the admissions committee by default, but in all other cases, the department chair appoints an admissions chair who has at least a few years experience serving on the committee and who likes the work (which not everyone does). Under a belief that extended experience produces better leadership, two programs—one social science and one natural science—have appointed the same person as admissions chair for 25 and nine years, respectively. One jokingly called himself the department's "admissions czar" in describing the power he wields to shape the profile of the department.

The department and admissions chair then work together to appoint or request involvement from other department faculty. Most committees included one or two senior members, one or two associate professors, and one or two assistant professors. Rarely did committees represent the full range of concentrations or sub-fields. On the characteristics that make a good admissions committee member, admissions chairs expressed their desire for members who would be thoughtful, thorough, able to meet deadlines, and committed to the good of the entire department—not only the sub-field or concentration they represent. During our interviews, only two of the ten chairs mentioned diversity considerations in regards to committee formation. Admissions is a labor-intensive committee appointment. In most cases, committee membership rotates year to year, except when an individual requests to continue their involvement, or to participate more frequently than would occur if they cycled through all of the department faculty.

In one department, the committee informally commits to admissions involvement for several years, and the year I observed them was the last of their four working together. By this point, they had come to agreement about what the most important criteria should be in the early sorting of applicants, which was apparent both from the admissions deliberations that led to making the first cut and from my interviews with them. All participants immediately named the same four criteria on my asking what they are looking for in prospective students. This department's goal was to delegate the work to a committee that represents a range of the concentrations, but for those individuals to work toward consensus about what the preferred criteria should be.

In some cases, leaders delegate work with an eye to downplaying internal conflicts. Leaders craft committees whose members will protect what s/he sees to be the organization's interests, hoping to moderate the unwelcome influence that constituent professors with outlying perspectives hold. In a department that had just developed a new strategic plan, the admissions and department chairs appointed members whom they believed were supportive of the department's new direction.

Consistent with previous scholarship, I find that academic departments delegate activities "for absorbing uncertainty while preserving the formal structure of the organization" (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, p. 358; March and Simon, 1958). Patterns of delegation reveal that work is delegated in the name of distributing effort and the need for specific types of perspective and expertise. However, this expertise and work may be decoupled from decision-making autonomy in ways that privilege the already powerful members of departments.

Delegating administrative work. In all ten departments, administrative

support is delegated to an administrative assistant who organizes files for review, schedules meetings, and providing institutional memory about previous admissions committees' conduct. S/he is often familiar with all of the files and may be the only person in the room to have had in-person contact with an applicant before file review. In the programs I studied, this individual is a professional who commits large numbers of hours to admissions work, yet is the only member of the committee without a vote. By contrast, graduate students on committees had full voting rights regardless of prior experience with application file review or decision making.

Complete responsibility for the first cut of applicants to these programs is often delegated to the admissions chair. In a department with 200 applicants, for example, the chair explained that her goal in the first round of review is to, "Select out the top quarter," before the committee "takes a serious, collective look at fifty in the second round." In one program that draws about 800 applicants, the chair uses GRE and TOEFL scores to cut the pool in half before distributing files to the committee for holistic review. Next, in all but the two departments with the smallest pools, each applicant's file is randomly assigned to two or three committee readers for review. (Table 4.1 summarizes this and other aspects of the selection process.) This delegation reduces committee members' time commitment and enables them to devote more time to each application and focus on the information that March (1994) says successful organizations find most relevant: extended personal detail. However, it also means that each applicant's initial chances depend upon the rating of a small subset of the committee. Only in cases where there is a large discrepancy in their ratings do other committee members review the application and weigh in on whether s/he should advance to full committee review.

Table 4.1. Comparison of Admissions Process Across Departments

Department	Committee Size	Meetings	Applied/ Admitted/ Enroll	Rounds of Review	Key Criteria	Admissions Chair	Interview (of whom & how)	Notes
Biology	5	~8	150-200/ 20-35/ 14	2-3	Research experience	Male, Domestic	Short list, via Skype	-3 admissions processes: regular admission, interdisciplinary program, & (rarely) direct admits. *(Numbers listed are for regular admissions process.)* -Initial review of applications by a subset of the committee; then full committee reads apps on short list. -2/3 of admitted are int'l students
Astrophysics	5	4	150/ 20/ 7	3	Physics GRE, Research exp, Courses/ Grades	Male, International	Short list, via Skype	-Initial review of applications by full committee. -All male committee -1 graduate student on committee -Extensive consultation among committee members via email
Physics	10	1, before file review begins	450/ 90/ 26	1-4	Physics GRE, Research exp, Courses	Male, International	Non-native English speakers on the short list, via Skype	-Rolling review; Initial review of apps by chair & 2 committee members. -Number of rounds of review depends on initial ratings. -Committee members provide narrative w/their ratings. -Sub-sets of committee meet to discuss a few specific cases. -Chair has strong managerial role.
Classics	5	1	80/ 9/ 4	2	Language training, Grades, Verbal GRE	Male, International	Very short list, during recruitment weekend	-Dept administrator conducts initial review of applications, then full committee reads apps on short list. -Interview during recruitment weekend primarily an intellectual exchange. -Committee includes department chair

Department	Committee Size	Meetings	Applied/ Admitted/ Enroll	Rounds of Review	Key Criteria	Admissions Chair	Interview (of whom & how)	Notes
Philosophy1	5	3	200/ 7 + wait list/ 7	2	Writing sample, Letters of recommendation, GRE	Female, Domestic	No interviews	-Initial review of each application by two committee members; then, full committee reads apps on short list. -Wait list used extensively to ensure the desired size of cohort. -Chair has strong facilitator role -Committee appoints diversity officer. -Five point rating scale used
Philosophy2	5	2	225/ 20/ 5	1-2	Writing sample, Letters of recommendation	Male, Domestic	No interviews	-Initial review by admissions chair; any applicant accepted or put on waitlist will have application read by at least 4 people. -Four point rating scale used.
Linguistics	6	5	105/ 8/ 4	4	Grades & Courses, College reputation, Alignment of research interests with department vision	Male, International	Very short list, via recruitment weekend	-Initial review of each app by two committee members; then, full committee reads apps on short list. -3 meetings with committee; 2 with full faculty deliberation of short list (~30) & very short list (~12). -Last round of review after the recruitment weekend. -2 graduate students on committee -Committee includes department chair -Each applicant given an up or down vote; number of yes/ no votes used as proxy for energy behind the applicant.
Sociology	5	2	225/ 22/ 10	1-3	Committee welcome to use their own criteria	Male, Domestic	No interviews	-Number of rounds of review determined by initial ratings. -Initial review of each complete application by two committee members. -Minimal deliberation about files -Strong reliance on average ratings -Chair has a strong manager role.

Department	Commi-ttee Size	Meetings	Applied/ Admitted/ Enroll	Rounds of Review	Key Criteria	Admissions Chair	Interview (of whom & how)	Notes
Political Science	8	2	350/ 25/ 16	2-4	Committee discouraged from using GRE as a 'litmus test.'	Male, International	Rarely, usually intl. students via Skype	-1 meeting to set process; 1 to discuss files. -Initial review by 2 committee members; then full committee reads all apps on short list (~80).
Economics	6	2	800/ 65/ 25	3 or more	Quant GRE, Math courses	Male, Domestic	No interviews	-Additional consultation occurs outside of committee meetings. -10 point rating scale -Dept chair adjudicates final decisions. -Admissions chair cuts 50% before committee review & has a strong manager role

Delegation by expertise. Another form of delegation takes advantage of unique knowledge some faculty members hold, such as by research expertise and/or familiarity with a geographic region. In eight of the ten programs, the chair delegates applications from Chinese students to specific faculty for review. Often Chinese-born, these individuals are expected to have better knowledge of China's standards for academic preparation and college/university quality (for which several claim they use rankings as a proxy), knowledge that better equips them to comparatively evaluate such applicants. In one example, a Chinese-born faculty member who is not on the committee cross-checks ratings of Chinese applicants when there are specific ambiguities in an applicant's file or when two non-Chinese readers have widely divergent ratings. Another department has informally dubbed one of their faculty members their "China specialist," and this person has served on the admissions committee for several years. And in an extreme example, the committee conducts what amounts to a separate evaluative process of the 100 or so applications they receive each year from Chinese students. Recognizing that differences in the modal Chinese vs. American applicant's credentials and interests translate to ambiguity in review, delegating by expertise is aimed at improving the efficiency and consistency of Chinese applications' evaluations. Unfortunately, this work tends to fall primarily on one or two individuals in each department and does not appear to be voluntary or consistently accompanied by the authority to make admissions recommendations.

Similarly, to approximate the advantages of peer review, some departments — particularly in the humanities— delegate review of writing samples according to subject area expertise. The writing sample is very important to overall judgments of applications

in these fields, and faculty recognize there are idiosyncrasies and tastes between, for example, how a Kantian ethicist vs. a philosopher of language would judge what counts as quality philosophy. One relayed the process to me:

> In many cases, we send it out to the experts and then we get the reports. But sometimes, there is disagreement with the experts too. The experts who read the paper haven't seen the whole pool so there has to be some balance too… Unless the experts totally, you know, dismissed it and couldn't find any value in the paper.

"Experts" on the administrative work of admissions and on applicants from specific geographic regions and subject areas ultimately serve as consultants, not always decision makers.

Department chairs also serve as consultants in all but two programs.[22] In five programs, the department chair or entire faculty formally approves the list of admitted students; however, this step is largely symbolic, and a means of checking on how key student constituencies (e.g., women, international students, and students of color) are represented among the students the committee has chosen. Within broad departmental preferences for a specific type of cohort, then, the trend is for a committee to take up the work and responsibility for decisions that will affect all on the faculty.

Understanding delegation. In his classic study of bureaucracy, James Wilson (1989) interprets the impetus for bureaucracy in terms of desire for professional autonomy, and its practices as means of controlling subordinates whom leaders distrust. Delegation helps to accomplish this in several of the departments I studied, for work is delegated to individuals *whom* the leader(s) trusts or as a means of building trust in the *process* among individuals who express skepticism. As I mentioned, one department has

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[22] In the other two programs, the department chair is a voting member of the admissions committee.

recently adopted a new vision that lacks the full faculty's hearty endorsement, but the chair appoints the admissions committee to include those who are on board with the vision.

In two departments, I observed challenges to this system, with non-committee faculty actively challenging the admissions decisions the committee made. One challenge came after offers were made, with faculty in a political sciences sub-field collectively frustrated that their sub-field seemed underrepresented in the incoming cohort. In the other case, a senior scholar in a natural sciences department, Will, felt frustrated that he had not "received any good students in several years," which he believed to be in part because admissions committee members were "cherry picking the best students." Will therefore petitioned the admissions committee to admit an applicant whom he learned of through a colleague at another university. This student had not made the department's short list, but through Will's hard advocacy via email and then at one of the admissions committee meetings, the committee assented to admit him. However, they did so only on the condition that Will's grant funds pay for the student, so that the committee's desired cohort would be kept intact. And, to quell Will's worries about cherry picking, the admissions chair invited him to participate in the admissions committee the following year. Delegation thus saves time, but by excluding many stakeholders from the process, it can also produce frustration among those negatively affected by decisions in which they were not involved.[23] Across all six of the committees

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[23] Through follow up interviews, I gathered that the faculty and administrative committee members' biggest concern with this episode was not about the charge of cherry picking, which they dismissed as unfounded to begin with, but with how Will's inserting himself into "their" process seemed to violate the bureaucratic procedures that lend legitimacy and efficiency to their work. Strong feelings motivated Will's challenge, and they also provoked strong feelings among other participants. Participants saw the challenges and

I observed, overt admission by and for a single faculty member occurred only twice—in this case and once in a philosophy program. Although its rarity in this study cannot be generalized beyond the sample, data here indicate that cherry-picking may be more myth than reality.

"Just a numbers game": Quantifying Judgment

A second major bureaucratic practice—one that is embedded throughout the evaluation and selection processes— is quantifying judgment to simplify comparisons of applicants. Quantification in admissions is a foundation of American meritocracy. The movement began with the optimistic, democratic intention that standardized aptitude tests might ensure talented college applicants from less privileged backgrounds would be judged by the same standard as their wealthy peers. Henry Chauncey, who founded the Educational Testing Service, reacted in amazement to the congruence between his first aptitude test and a student's grades. Lemann (1999) writes,

> Chauncey was bowled over. It was magical…Testing touched upon the deepest mythic themes: the ability to see the invisible (what was inside people's heads), the oracular ability to predict the future (what someone's grades would be in courses he hadn't even chosen yet). (p. 18)

Since then, both in admissions and elsewhere in education and social life, quantifying quality has been institutionalized (Espeland and Stevens, 2009), which Porter (1995) argues is part of deeper American trends toward bureaucratization and positivism. He writes, "bureaucratic imposition of uniform standards and measures has been indispensible for the metamorphosis of local skills into generally valid scientific

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the associated feelings as corrupting influences on an otherwise orderly and objective process.

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knowledge" (Porter, 1995, p. 21). As a result, when we want legitimate knowledge about student achievement, college quality, or teaching effectiveness, we turn to numbers.

In graduate admissions, quantification occurs in several ways and in spite of doubts that many hold about the reliability and validity of numbers to meaningfully signify such complex constructs as achievement and admissibility. Yet numbers' apparent ability to quickly cut through ambiguities about the comparability of students who are different on countless dimensions renders them a vital decision making tool, particularly as the size of the applicant pool grows. I observed faculty quantifying their judgments in several ways, including (a) interpreting small increments in test scores as significant differences in students' intelligence, ability, and/or preparation, (b) commensurating individual readers' holistic evaluations of applicant files into numerical ratings, and (c) averaging and tabulating ratings into a rank-ordered list that drives decision making.

Test score increments. Early in the review process, some faculty attribute significance to small increments in test scores or grade point averages, treating them as quick proxies for marginal advantages in intelligence, preparation, or general admissibility.[24] Describing the motivation for this practice to me, a sociologist explained in an interview:

> If you've got a stack from here to the ceiling, you've got to try in a small amount of time to get them down to a small list. The grades, the GREs, the letters do a big work [pause] in trying to decide who is on the short list.

A biologist expressed a similar perspective on the clarity of the GRE for comparing students versus using letters of recommendation and research experiences. Individually-

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[24] Educational Testing Services (ETS), who administers the GRE, recommends against this practice.

composed aspects of the application like the writing sample or personal statement are not only more time consuming to review, but ultimately are incommensurable.

> It's just too easy given quantitative data like that, it's just too easy to just rank, you know, to use that to differentiate… Not only is it obviously a time savings but … trying to judge and tease apart these factors and distinguish applications— sometimes it's not too bad but a lot of times it is, and so to be able to just say, 'Okay, oh, this person clearly had a better GRE set of scores than this person clearly. We should rank them in.'… It's something that common. You know all applicants took the same test, presumably under the same conditions, [laughs] you know, they were watched over. But anyway it's one thing that we can standardize in the sea of variability in these applications.

As the applicant pool increases, so does the burden of holistic review and the difficulty of sorting out who is more or less worthy of the close review that applicants on the short list receive. The GRE's standardization is the substratum for justifications about its utility and appropriateness for comparing applicants.

Applicant ratings. A second form of quantification involves rating individual applicants. Faculty in nine of ten programs commensurate their holistic evaluations of individuals on the short list into overall ratings (usually on a 1-3 or 1-5 scale).[25] As one participant described it, ratings offer "the most efficient way to focus in on the people that really need to be thought about"—that is, the individuals about whose admissibility committee members may disagree.

The most frequently mentioned difficulty in rating applicants involves how to allocate the precious "ones," the rating for those whom readers are most enthusiastic about, impressed by, or otherwise deem best or most admissible. Framing their implicit task as rejecting a large proportion of the applicants, faculty recognize that no matter how many applicants seem worth admitting, that giving more applicants a rating of one only

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[25] In linguistics, the only program that does not assign numerical ratings, individual faculty members commensurate their judgment into a yes/no vote for each applicant.

delays the rejection task. Yet allocating the ones grows more difficult in later rounds of

evaluation because so many applicants seem like promising prospects. An economist

explained,

> It's really hard. Once you get down to the final forty, you could conceivably
> admit all of these people…. They probably would come here and do quite well.
> It's just you can't admit everyone who is actually above a certain bar. You've got
> to keep raising the bar just to accommodate the numbers that you want.

Above a general threshold of admissibility, faculty must still make difficult choices.

One reason they give for making those hard choices sooner rather than later is that

awarding too many ones in the first round of evaluation creates more work for one's

colleagues. As I tried to understand what was behind the teasing that a junior member of

the astrophysics committee received from his colleagues for being "a softie," another

member of the committee laid it out for me in a follow-up interview:

> If you put forward thirty out of the sixty that you want everybody else to read—
> you're not doing your job to whittle it down to the best of the best. You're just
> making more work for the four other people on the committee who have to read
> your thirty—instead of them all having to read your twenty. I think that's really
> the only reason why being harsh would be valued. You're trying to pick out the
> best people. You want to cut the fat away.

Another member of this committee affirmed,

> The list needs to be cut down. We have 180 applications and we had to cut it
> down to eighteen admissions or something like that. We had to make cuts. You
> know so—you actually need to distinguish them between the merely good and the
> very good, and being a harsh critic is helpful for making that distinction. In some
> sense the committee can't function if we're all softies. There needs to be some
> who are more harsh and demanding. Otherwise it's impossible to cut it down.

This trend is not limited to the hard sciences. In one of the philosophy departments, for

example, the admissions chair apologized vociferously for the number of ones she had

awarded, which sparked a longer conversation about what constitutes the "boundary

between a one and two" and how each of them had approached the ratings:

Prof 1: Sorry about all of my ones!… My one might be another person's two… We are all intelligent, competent people trying to do our best.

Prof 2: Ones are the crème de la crème… I was very disciplined. I made a list of all the ones, and then I was ruthless to get to ten ones. Comparison was the basis at the end.

Underlying the bureaucratic practice of rating applicants is a sustained commitment to collegiality, which they use to justify being "hard" vs. "soft" on the initial pool of applicants. As in so much of organizational life, a commitment to efficiency and to one another cannot be separated from what counts as doing one's admissions work well.

These individual ratings, which many slipped into calling rankings, arguably have a stronger influence on admissions outcomes than the committee's deliberations, as one sociologist clearly articulated:

There was very much a sense that we all went off in our little corners and read and submitted our rankings. That's where the decision really got made. It wasn't like the decision got made in the committee. It was really the sum of it. The decisions that got made about who to admit were really the sum of the individual parts and not the committee deciding as a whole.

Individual ratings are indeed the ingredients of collective decisions, whose quantitative basis I turn to next.

Rank-ordering applicants. The quantification of judgment continues as individual readers' ratings are averaged across readers to develop a rank-ordered list of applicants that guides subsequent discussion and decisions. Treating the list as what one philosopher called the "collective assessment" of the committee plays an absolutely vital role in these programs by linking individual judgment and collective selection.

Several participants thus recognized the ratings as a sort of decision-making technology. In *Trust in Numbers*, Porter (1996) notes of quantified decision making that, "Once numbers are in hand, results can be generated by mechanical methods" (p. 6).

And, indeed, with just a few keystrokes in spreadsheet software, the computer transforms

individual judgments of hundreds of unique applicants into a facially clean distribution of

their admissibility. Several participants wondered at this substantial feat, with one

humanities professor describing the computer's work with a flourish of his arm that

resembled waving a magic wand.

Letting the computer generate the committee's collective assessment of each

applicant may be functionally important by saving considerable time over consensus-

oriented discussions, but its social importance lies in the reason that it saves time: by

clarifying where agreement already exists and by inhibiting debate over disagreements.

"Consensus at the top tells you that the process is working," one social sciences professor

summarized. To save time, committees feel they do not need to devote time to discussing

what they may already agree upon, and with the spreadsheet of individual and average

rankings before them, faculty feel they can assess this at a glance. And a senior

sociology professor illustrated:

> Years ago they didn't score these things. It's become more bureaucratic. I think
> they want to move things along, so once you put a score on it, you just tabulate
> and rank order…. When I was at Wisconsin,[26] we didn't use this kind of system.
> We spent the whole morning deciding the admit list, and in this one it took us less
> than an hour after we had already rank ordered. So we had done our homework
> before the meeting. Once we see the list then we could discuss, so it becomes
> very clear. There's not much debate… I think it's a good one, because otherwise
> you can debate for a long time. They know how to debate and they know how to
> engage all these rhetorics… If we can keep debating about who is a better student
> all morning, we still can't convince each other… In the end the group you are
> talking about are really- It's personal taste. Everyone has good scores on different
> aspects. You know, 'I like this person's experience, that person's background,
> this person has better quantitative skills.'

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[26] As described more fully in the methodology, when referring to specific institutions I
randomly draw from a list of 15 institutions in the same tier of program rankings for that
discipline.

And as one philosopher reflected back on the process, "There was always a consensus

that way or another… but we didn't have to agree on why." These two quotations

illustrate that less time is required because less negotiation is required. Given the small

scale on which ratings were assigned, average ratings disguise disagreements about

individuals' relative ratings as minor differences of opinion about appropriate standards,

criteria, and applicant strengths and weaknesses.[27]

The degree to which faculty lean on the rank-ordered list varies across

departments. Some use it as a jumping off point for identifying and discussing borderline

cases. In astrophysics:

> The first two-thirds of the list went immediately. There were some people it was
> clear we were going to make offers to and some people it was clear we weren't
> going to make offers to and I think two-thirds of the people fell into that category.
> Those two-thirds took ten minutes and the rest of the time was, 'Let's worry about
> the boundary cases.'

Others use it to determine sets of applicants who should be interviewed or whose files the

committee should review more closely. Still others simply take the list and admit as

many from the top of the list as their projected enrollments and yield allow. In sociology,

one participant explained that with the exception of one case:

> There wasn't a whole lot of discussion at the meetings about moving people
> around…. We kind of went with the rankings. We felt like we could discuss all
> these people and certain cases but, you know, we had confidence that everyone
> had read everything pretty carefully. And we had thoughtful rankings. I thought
> it went really well.

In all cases, allowing each person to have a different rating and implementing the average

means that faculty can continue to disagree while still getting the job done.

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[27] Judgment is quantified in other ways as well, but not as consistently across programs.
For example, in biology, the faculty have developed a system of rating the applicants
whom they interview along several dimensions. Summary scores from those evaluations
are averaged and tabulated to develop a rank-ordered list that drives the final level of
decision making.

However, this practice has significant consequences for the transparency of admissions decisions. In highly competitive programs like these, a single reader's classification of an application as a 1 vs. 2 or 2 vs. 3 can spell the difference between admission and rejection, yet with only "the numbers" before them, not even the faculty would be able to pin down the factors that produced this outcome.[28]

To summarize, faculty quantify judgment by (a) reading small increments in test scores as substantive differences between applicants and (b) constructing rank-ordered lists of applicants using averages of reader ratings. Faculty also play "the numbers game" in other ways. For example, some readers project numerical identities onto applicants based on the ratings they assign (i.e., "She's definitely a one"), and all programs gamble on their yield rate in determining how many admissions offers to make.

"We definitely try to make people happy": Refocusing Deliberations

Expressions of mutual trust such as that described by the sociologist above points to the non-bureaucratic functions of deliberative bureaucracy—committee efforts to preserve core professional values in their approach to selection. Deliberation and collegiality are intertwined, with discussions frequently downplaying fundamental disagreements about the appropriate bases of evaluation. About the tacit agreement to disagree, a sociologist remarked:

> Invariably, we wind up having conversations about norms and priorities but there's no effort to put people on the same page. I would resist that as an individual faculty member… People weigh pieces of the application packet differently and I respect that. I would never try to create that kind of consensus.

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[28] Only in political science and physics were faculty asked to provide a brief narrative of the justification for their ratings.

Another sociology professor related these differences of opinion to the diverse

viewpoints that, together, he believes are central to research and faculty culture:

> I absolutely believe that the best work I've ever done is a pathetic, groping
> approximation to some very complicated truth out there. And the more methods,
> the more angles of vision I can bring to bear on that complicated truth, I feel the
> better, the closer I get to it, without ever getting there. I think we're in the same
> business when we're doing admissions. The complicated truth is this person's
> ultimate ability as a sociologist. And I've got different metrics. I've got different
> items of information that are supposed to be giving me a handle on that. And
> when I've got a faculty member that says, 'Oh, GREs will predict that'… You've
> got to be kidding, right? We know there's almost no predictive power there but
> it's a piece of information. I agree. So, I'd rather have members of the
> committee, not saying, 'It's GREs.' If everybody went, 'It's GREs,' we'd have
> an easy process…and a deeply flawed process. To me it would be very, very far
> away from that complicated truth. So I want people coming to it, hopefully from
> different angles.

Whether it is to avoid conflict over, or out of acceptance of, their colleagues' approaches

to evaluation, the importance of collegiality to perceptions of legitimate selection is clear.

Although functionally and officially a matter of choosing students who may become

leaders in the field, the selection process itself is an institutionalized compromise that

balances and reflects faculty values.

Collegiality is also enacted in several ways. Faculty may not discuss the thorny

details of many cases relative to the number of total applicants, but they do devote

discussion time to less controversial issues: the rules of the process, what the numerical

ratings mean, and where to "draw the line" on the rank-ordered list, for example. It is in

part because they have acknowledged flaws in the process with one another that they feel

comfortable moving forward using that process. They debate the merits of delegation

and quantification, philosophically and in practice, reminding one another of the value of

deliberation and making appeals to shared values such as fairness and peer review.

Discussing this level of detail and philosophy about procedure permits the appearance of

a deliberative process without broaching disagreements that stem from disciplinary or ideological worldviews.

Procedure is natural to discuss because most faculty share a sense of ambivalence about their decision making process. In both individual interviews and committee meetings, participants freely acknowledged imperfections in the system. A major concern about process is the false precision that quantification generates. A political scientist compares the challenge of admissions to that of selecting faculty for awards:

> Partly for reasons of expediency, we need some kind of scoring system. It's easy. I've been on lots of committees on campus this semester deciding award winners. When the pool is twenty-five and you have time to think about your top fifteen who should get this teaching award, the numbers and the myth of precision is readily acknowledged because you have time to talk about all of this. But if you have a hundred good people, then … [we] say that the confidence interval around these numbers are thirty spots plus or minus, but we still have to go by them.

One philosophy department similarly has a consensus of concern about the false precision generated by the rank-ordered list. Several others worry about the implications of lacking a shared understanding of what the numbers on their scale represent.[29]

Another frequently debated set of procedural questions is whether, how, and where to impose numerical thresholds for GRE percentiles, TOEFL scores, and average applicant ratings. These debates provided clear examples of admissions decision making as improvisation, with faculty constructing the process as they go along. A linguist summarized the process, and the focus of his committee's discussion:

> They were ranked and some of the candidates were already on top of the rankings, so that simplified a lot of the conversations. More disagreement was on the edges. We cannot admit everybody. You need to put a line somewhere, and it's

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[29] Indeed, not only did their discussion reveal differences in interpretation about what a rating of 1, 2, or 3 means, but there was one committee member who had used the three point scale as three categories vs. others on the committee who regarded it as ordinal.

where do you put the line? And then, the people close to the line? That's where it starts. And so that's where the disagreement emerges.

The hard truth for decision makers in programs such as these is that admissions involves many more rejections than admissions. Drawing a line to separate the two groups is uncomfortable both because it makes the scope of the rejections so plain to see and because it provokes the sort of disagreements that they try to avoid.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, philosophy faculty seem to agonize together the most over their perceived need for numerical thresholds to get the job done. Late in the final meeting of one philosophy committee, Rafael, who is an administrative assistant, spoke up for the first time in over an hour. Breaking a long silence in the group that betrayed their palpable exhaustion, he noted that if they admitted everyone up to a 1.8 rating, they would have 13 on the admit list. It would be a quick way to finish their task, he suggested. The committee chair, Liana, and a senior member, Gerald, expressed their support for taking this approach, but another senior faculty member introduced skepticism that, "People seem to be very confident about the line where admissible leaves off and inadmissible picks up." Gerald admitted, "I have a hard time drawing lines because wherever we draw it it's going to look arbitrary," and Olivia emphatically followed, "Well, it is an artificial line." Continuing to push forward, Rafael noted that drawing the line at 2.4 would give them the optimal number of admitted and wait-listed students. They agreed to go with this grouping of students, but continued the discussion of process by recalling how previous admissions committees have used the wait list, the relative responsibility of the chair vs. other committee members in allocating spaces from the wait list, and the considerations that should guide allocation of those spaces. Providing further evidence that efforts to guard collegiality underlie their work, the

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committee chair closed their meeting not only by outlining next steps in the process, but with an affirmation that the committee could "feel good" about how they had worked together.

Substituting discussion of non-controversial procedural matters for questions of who and what should be valued works for another reason. Not only do faculty feel ambivalent about how work is delegated and numbers are used, but faculty feel that most admissions decisions are not worth arguing over, especially relative to longer-term departmental investments like faculty hiring, tenure, and promotion. They see their collegiality as a bigger priority in most cases than their individual preferences. A natural scientist explains, "I think everyone on the committee wants to have an opinion. That's the nature of scientists: they always want to make an opinion. But I don't know if a lot of people feel very strongly." A first-time admissions committee member in the physics department expressed surprise at the relative ease with which decisions were made.

> I think on the whole there were relatively, few, quote disagreements. Nobody was--that I could see—no one was particularly adamant that this person must be admitted. I didn't see any of that. I was expecting a little bit of that where students might have contacted directly a professor to say, 'I would very much like to work in your group and your group exclusively'… But I didn't see any of that. I didn't see anybody pushing internal candidates. I thought it was all very, congenial and, 'Let's talk this over. What did I miss?'

Indeed, across the six committees I observed, committee members limited hard advocacy to one or two cases per committee member.

Deferring to one another's judgment—not challenging it—was the norm. On the whole, they find it more important to ration their confrontations, for relationships are more important to preserve, they feel, than nitpicking over the marginal differences in the quality among those on the short list. Instead, and somewhat ironically, although they

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agonize about the integrity of the process, it is only through deliberation about its imperfections that they are able to move forward together.

Costs of Deliberative Bureaucracy

The intended consequences of deliberative bureaucracy are to make admissions decision making more efficient while preserving core norms such as deliberation and collegiality. The process clearly accomplishes these aims. However, to close this chapter, I will highlight three unintended consequences that also bear discussion.

Compromising recruitment networks. First, bureaucratic practices make it more difficult to develop and sustain institutional pipelines and to admit individuals with non-traditional backgrounds. With decision making both decentralized and formalized, it can be harder to sustain relationships with feeder programs outside the network of high-prestige universities that everyone recognizes. Comparing current practice to that of thirty years ago, an emeritus physics professor argued that pipelines "could be implemented today if they really wanted to do. But everybody is sort of backing off and they want to look at everything and go through the [pause] go through the more formalized process."

The more bureaucratic process thus can minimize the effect of early recruitment on outcomes unless an individual from the recruitment program sits on the committee to advocate for such individuals throughout the process. This is especially a concern for programs that strive to use early recruitment to diversify their student communities. Often such programs identify talented applicants with non-traditional academic profiles, and my data suggest that committee members experience the same risk aversion

interpreting special recruits' non-traditional trajectories that they feel toward non-traditional applicants more generally.

Decontextualizing applicant characteristics. Another consequence of deliberative bureaucracy is to decontextualize key applicant characteristics during the initial screening, amplifying the depersonalizing effect that the admissions process, as a whole, encourages. Students present as application files, not people, but quantifying judgment and refocusing discussion on procedure fosters what Heimer (2001) describes as a case-based— not biographical— approach to analysis of those files. Case analysis emphasizes the value of standardized categories and classifications over narratives and individual uniqueness. This trend is especially salient in the initial sorting of applicants, as one humanities professor articulated:

> Another thing we talk quite a bit about is that the way that students are first sort of presented to us and to other search committees—to our competitors— in a spread sheet kind of format. There are some that light up. Basically, these things are scores or numerical numbers like GPA, undergraduate institutions, test scores. There are some that will stand out as being [pause] that look promising even without really looking at the application.

Identifying applicants early in the process not as composites or life stories but by such standardized categories as their test scores, institutional affiliations, research interests, or diversity contributions has several implications. First, the categories that *are* used are highlighted as priority considerations. It also facilitates comparison across applicants by removing the very nuance, context, and intersectionality about applicants' backgrounds that faculty seek later in the evaluation process. And, if committees want to reduce initial evaluation to standard categories, it also elevates the importance of ensuring that the categories used are meaningful and appropriate standards.

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For the relatively few borderline cases that faculty do discuss, and in choosing from among those who make the short list, committee members repersonalize applicants, developing narratives about the person behind the numbers, achievements, and standard categories. Here the process resembles Heimer's (2001) model of biographical analysis and what Stevens (2008) calls "evaluative storytelling."[30]

Obscuring the basis for ratings and decisions. Finally, in addition to making pipelines difficult to sustain and further depersonalizing applicants in the admissions process, a third cost of deliberative bureaucracy is that it obscures the considerations on which ratings and, ultimately, admissions decisions depend. As Klitgaard (1985) also finds, vague admissions objectives and year-to-year changes in admissions policy create a veil of secrecy that protects decisions' legitimacy (p. 13). This obscuring also occurs through group deliberation and individual ratings. The nature of deliberation about borderline cases is so holistic—rich with detail, impressions, and weighing of pro's and con's— that it is impossible most of the time to pin down why, exactly, a student is ultimately admitted, rejected, or wait-listed. As the chair of the political science department aptly put it, "Everything matters, and nothing matters the most."

Providing ratings without rationales is a missed opportunity for organizational learning. A common critique of quantification across the disciplines is that "reliance on numbers simply evades the deep and important issues" (Porter, 1996, p. 5). In only two of the ten programs were faculty instructed to compose notes explaining the ratings they assigned to applicants and to share those notes with their colleagues. From the

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[30] The narrative constructed about individuals is a source of feelings about their desirability. Reviewers only rarely betray emotion about standard categories, but it becomes nearly impossible for borderline applicants to be selected without a majority feeling compelled, impressed, or excited about them.

perspective of deliberative democracy, this is a missed opportunity because the transparency produced by reason-giving raises the legitimacy of collective decisions. And, as Jurgen Habermas wrote, "The fundamental source of legitimacy is the collective judgment of the people."

Through discussing areas of disagreement, committee members can learn from each other by correcting misperceptions, broadening their analytic frames, and challenging embedded assumptions. This possibility was exemplified to me in two programs— linguistics and astrophysics— where debate was vigorous and friendliness still high. These departments' meetings had several markers of collegiality that I believe are associated with a high debate-high friendliness dynamic. Interestingly, of the six committees I observed, these were two of the three that served food during their meetings. Also, they were the only two I observed in which small talk preceding the meeting included recounting time they had spent together the previous weekend. In one department, two male professors laughed about the play date they had arranged for their children. In the other, half of the committee chatted about the mountains they had seen from the air while traveling together back from a conference.

Another important characteristic of their deliberations was the use of humor to bring the group together around a shared cultural preference. Sometimes one committee member would tease another, and other times the joke would be at the applicant's expense. In astrophysics, for example, when the group seemed to have reached a point of deadlock over a particular applicant and a junior professor noted one of his letters seemed "weird and brief," another joked, to therapeutic laughter all around, "That's what happens when engineers write."

Humor was similarly a means of keeping the tone light in the midst of debating a delicate case in linguistics. Their discussion also demonstrates how deliberation enables committee members to provide information to others that assists in evaluation, and how, ultimately, the process is a compromise that reflects shared values and cultural preferences. Initiating the discussion of a woman who had attended a very small religious college, a committee member admitted, "I didn't know anything about it. I had to look it up." Those who had heard of the institution spent a little time sharing what they know of it with the rest of the group. One said, "Right wing religious fundamentalists. You know, they refused all federal monies so that they can resist the socialists." After a long laugh around the table, another added, "Supported by the Koch brothers." They started to discuss other specifics of her case, noting for example that she had been homeschooled and that she had scored at the 99% for the Verbal section of the GRE and 82% for the Quantitative. Although she was the 30th of the 40 cases on the short list that they were slated to discuss, this was the first time they discussed in more than passing terms an applicant's GRE scores. It was clear that her institutional affiliation had them skeptical and they were subjecting her to a more stringent review.

The opinion on whether to move her forward to the next round of evaluation seemed to be split by sides of the table. A male committee member broke a long pause with, "I feel like a jackass for saying this, but she doesn't seem interested in research to me." Others marshaled evidence from her file to the contrary, and the committee chair confessed, "I would like to beat that college out of her," to which a senior member of the faculty suggested, "I think it already has been." Then, the department chair asked, "You don't think she's a nutcase?" to considerable laughter around the table. With the three

most powerful people in the room having joked on this topic, no one tried to top them. They agreed to move her forward to the next round, but in the end, did not admit her.

Sometimes, shared preferences and aversions that have nothing to do with qualifications are not something to guard against or mitigate, but rather serve as a source of camaraderie and laughter for the group in the middle of otherwise serious, difficult work. Evaluative deliberations thus affirm a department's identity through both admission of those believed to fit, as well as rejection of those who do not. Noting the uniqueness of the interactional style in these programs, I asked their admissions chairs about it in follow-up and member checking interviews. The linguistics chair affirmed his belief in the value of their deliberation-rich process:

> I think the experience of doing this together is good for us even if we weren't admitting anybody. I mean just to read these applications and talk about them, you find out, you know, about how your colleagues think or find out more about how they think the graduate students… Their perspective is often useful and sometimes they know things about such-and-such an institution that the rest of us wouldn't know about.

Built on strong pre-existing relationships, the linguistics and astrophysics committees frame critique and disagreement as natural to social and academic life. More importantly, they *value* disagreement as an opportunity to build understanding. And although the political science committee did not seem unanimous in the sentiment, its chair encouraged the members to remember that "disagreement is not a sign that something is awry." This perspective stands in contrast to those committees who perceive disagreement as a precursor to conflict and conflict as a problem to be avoided. Better, those scholars would say, to conceal disagreements behind numbers and celebrate the average as a compromise achieved without conflict.

Together, the costs of deliberative bureaucracy—compromising relationships with feeder programs, decontextualizing key applicant information, and obscuring salient criteria behind holistic deliberation and narrative-free ratings—are especially costly for underrepresented populations. Whereas subsequent chapters will illustrate how admissions *criteria* can impede diversity, findings in this chapter suggest that the admissions *process*—how those criteria are used—indirectly impedes diversity as well.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced deliberative bureaucracy as a model describing faculty decision making. In selective doctoral programs, the rising volume of applications renders democratic deliberative decision making about every applicant a near impossibility. Through the research, I developed real sympathy for the enormity of the task that admissions chairs face in leading their colleagues to selection among many qualified applicants, especially when the colleagues have profound disagreements about how scarce spaces should be allocated. Deliberative bureaucracy is an organizational adaptation to these challenges through which faculty enact a decision-making process that they feel has legitimacy while also 1) minimizing the divisiveness of admissions and 2) getting the job done with a reasonable time commitment. Delegating work, quantifying judgment, and refocusing discussion from the substance to process of evaluation to the process each encourages bureaucratic efficiency, but the way in which they implement these practices also safeguards important professional norms.

However, deliberative bureaucracy also helps explain the persistence of an admissions standard that undermines diversity aims. Committees rely on the GRE for its efficiency and convenience, often decontextualizing scores from the demographic

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characteristics and cultural meanings with which they are associated. Many committees also do not discuss the basis for applicant ratings, which allows narrow framing (e.g., associating GRE scores with intelligence) and misperceptions (e.g., that grades in Ivy League universities are less subject to inflation) to continue. Most research on the role of taste in educational and social reproduction emphasizes the role of selection *criteria* in reinforcing existing patterns of privilege. The next chapter will describe that this trend also holds in doctoral admissions through the evaluative scripts of merit and diversity that faculty use. However, findings in this chapter make an important contribution by clarifying that preference for an efficient, collegial, decision-making *process* is also implicated in reproduction because it helps explain continued use of those criteria.

Wilson's (1989) analysis of bureaucracy argues that the key to understanding organizations is understanding how they coordinate their values and beliefs with their practices and personnel. Faculty value deliberation and consensus, but feel daunted by the prospect of finding it amid the range of disagreements they hold across what counts as acceptable criteria and how applications should be interpreted. For several programs, finding consensus would require a level of conflict that they would rather not encourage. Moreover, they recognize that any process they adopt will be seemingly unfair because it denies enrollment opportunities to scores or even hundreds of qualified candidates. Absent the feasibility of *consensus* or *fairness* as bases for a legitimate admissions process, they build a case for the legitimacy of their practice on other organizational priorities—namely, efficiency and collegiality— while also encouraging deliberation on less controversial matters of process.

The core ideas of deliberative democracy extend to Athenian democracy, whose leaders, according to Pericles, regarded dialogue not as a "stumbling block to wise action," but rather an "indispensible preliminary to any wise action at all" (quoted in Gutmann and Thompson, 1996, p. 7). Using numbers as proxies for collective judgment and refocusing discussion away from controversial matters may get the job done, but is ultimately a missed opportunity for organizational learning. The discussions that lead to selecting personnel in higher education are about more than selection. They are an essentially educational opportunity for sensemaking about what the organization has been and is becoming (Birnbaum, 1988; Twombly, 1992). Through gatekeeping deliberations, faculty come to understand and appreciate others' perspectives and more thoughtfully align their organizational identities and goals with the people initiated to help fulfill them.

Chapter 5: Evaluative Scripts of Merit and Diversity in Ph.D. Admissions

Turning from the process of constructing merit to the cultural content of merit in highly ranked graduate programs, in this chapter I use Lamont's (2009) idea of evaluative scripts to examine the cultural meanings that faculty in this sample associate with common criteria. I distinguish between the conceptions of merit that faculty employ at two phases of the admissions process, and describe the relationship with and implications for diversity that each one has.

In the first phase of review, faculty think of merit in terms of conventional achievement, which is signaled through high GRE scores and grades that are contextualized by perceived institutional prestige and curricular rigor. They rationalize their reliance on these criteria with three evaluative scripts: (a) belonging in elite intellectual communities, (b) risk aversion, and (c) desire for convenient metrics to compare students. Then, to judge among the many conventional achievers who apply, faculty employ a new conception of merit that focuses on what they want for the future of the discipline. Whereas the majority of participants hesitate to consider diversity from the outset of the process, diversity is a critical consideration in later phases of review. Participants use three evaluative scripts to justify their consideration of diversity: (a) obligation, (b) intellectual and financial opportunity, and (c) competition with other highly ranked programs. Findings in this chapter help to both reconcile apparently contradictory findings about diversity's importance in graduate admissions and to identify key challenges in efforts to strengthen diversity in graduate education.

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Conceptions of who deserves admission are as numerous as the participants themselves, but there are very clear patterns across the sample. Perhaps the clearest trend is that what faculty are looking for in applicants varies between the initial and later rounds of application review, and that conceptions of merit at each stage—conventional achievers and stewards of the discipline-- have different implicit relationships with diversity (See Table 5.1). To describe these findings in more detail, I explain the evaluative scripts associated with key criteria at each stage in the process. Then, to highlight the multiple ways in which faculty employ these scripts and to highlight prospects for cultural change in what counts as merit, I discuss disconfirming evidence showing how faculty break with prevailing scripts.

Table 5.1. Summary of Evaluation in Initial and Later Phases of Admissions Review

	Phase of Review	
	Initial	**Later**
Conceptualization of merit	Conventional achievers; Test scores and grades in context of prestige of undergraduate institution and rigor of curriculum	Stewards of the discipline; Scholarly dispositions and potential for contribution to the program and/or discipline
Bottom line questions faculty ask	Can the student succeed in our program? Does he seem to present a risk?	What will she add? Do his interests fit our expertise?
Relationship of merit & diversity	Standard of merit may be in tension with diversity aims	Diversity is integrated into ideal of merit
Evaluative scripts in play	Scripts of merit: -Appropriateness -Risk aversion -Convenience	Scripts of diversity: -Obligation -Competition -Opportunity

Initial Conceptualization of Merit: Numbers in Context

Across programs, numerical indicators that can be used to quickly compare students play a critical role in early phases of review. These indicators include GRE and TOEFL scores and grade point averages, which are often contextualized by institutional prestige and curricular rigor. An astrophysicist admitted, "The objective metrics are certainly grades and GRE's. I would say—and you will see it in our discussions—it's very unlikely that we would consider anyone who has a low subject GRE." One of his colleagues concurred, "If you don't score high—you're probably not going to make the cut." In physics and astrophysics, scores on the Physics Subject GRE are most important to faculty, while the analytical writing score commands considerable attention by philosophers, linguists, and classics.

In the most extreme example among the programs, one social sciences admissions chair is solely responsible for winnowing the 800 applications received to a still-daunting 400 that a committee reads. About this initial screening, he admitted to me, "Personal statements have almost no role. I don't read them. I look at the transcript and glance at the GRE. If the quantitative score is not perfect, don't bother applying."[31] However, in the course of member checking, he made a point of mentioning that he pulls applications from Black and Latino students for further review. This step is critical, but not practiced widely. Mean GRE scores are lower among women, students of color, and low income students (ETS, 2001), and there is evidence of grade inflation in the highly selective

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[31] In the course of member checking my findings with this participant a year later, he noted that, "The ETS revised the quantitative GRE last November, so part of our applicant group got the new test, which distinguishes nicely among highly qualified people. So it's no longer the case that a 'perfect' quantitative GRE is essential. In fact, only a handful of those we admitted this year had perfect scores on the new exam."

universities where the same populations remain underrepresented (Posselt, et al., 2012; Bastedo, et al., 2011; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2011; Bielby, et al., forthcoming). Therefore, applying a high quantitative threshold as a proxy for merit without contextualizing scores by these key demographic traits may pit the aims of merit and diversity against one another.

Findings here are broadly consistent with Klitgaard's (1985) conclusion that test scores and grades form the "backbone of the evaluative process," with test scores especially attractive due to their "magic simplicity" (p. 32). Using Lamont's (2009) idea of evaluative scripts, the next section presents an in-depth analysis of why faculty rely on these criteria. Then, I introduce why participants associate test scores, grades, and institutional prestige with convenience[32] before moving into a discussion of the cultural meanings associated with diversity.

Understanding Reliance on Conventional Achievement

The criteria used to signal conventional achievement pass as human capital credentials, but have cultural meanings in these elite departments that help explain their enduring influence. Together, the combination of evaluative criteria and associated meanings constitute evaluative scripts, and are used by decision makers to help rationalize their judgments (Lamont, 2009).[33] Lamont therefore describes these scripts as decision pathways, and following them is a bit like peeling back the layers of an onion. The surface-level criterion means something, but there are reasons—often implicit—that

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[32] See also Chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion of quantitative metrics promoting efficiency in decision making.

[33] Evaluative scripts are quite distinct from interaction scripts *qua* Barley: "outlines of recurrent patterns of interaction that define in observable and behavioral terms, the essence of actors' roles" (p. 83). Barley's approach to scripts has a very specific set of analytic steps that would have been all but impossible with the access to data I had.

those meanings are themselves important (i.e., the meanings have meaning). Drawing out and tracing the trail of implicit meanings in the interviews and triangulating them with observational data elicited evaluative scripts for requiring a conventional notion of merit despite the consequences for diversity. Both of these evaluative scripts are linked to the programs' prestige within the discipline: the conventional standard's perceived appropriateness given the intertwining of program status and identity, and faculty members' risk aversion.

The influence of these evaluative scripts is further clarified in their correspondence to new institutionalist decision-making logics (March, 1994). March's logics of appropriateness and consequences also enable a tracing of the pathways to decisions—albeit without the cultural content of meanings embedded in criteria that evaluative scripts emphasize. Together, evaluative scripts and decision-making logics provide a systematic understanding of the criteria that matter early in review, and how faculty think about and use those criteria in specific cultural contexts.

The cultural context, in this case, is highly ranked graduate programs. Status must be conferred by an outside party (Weber, 1978), and to legitimize and maintain their identity as high-status programs in their discipline, faculty frame and order their organizational behavior for maximum consistency with norms of the organizational field (March, 1994; Karen, 1990). In admissions, this includes aligning their own selection criteria with those that carry the greatest cachet in the organizational field (Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Bourdieu and Nice, 1984). And in graduate education, those criteria include the two strongest predictors of graduate schools admission generally: high GRE scores and selectivity of one's undergraduate institution (Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997).

A logic of appropriateness. Admissions represents a key process for the formation of organizational identity, and one way of understanding the use of quantitative metrics is for how they enable faculty to craft the communities they see themselves as and/or want to be. Under a logic of appropriateness, James March (1994) suggests, "Decision-makers are imagined to ask (explicitly or tacitly) three questions:

1) The question of *recognition*: What kind of situation is this?
2) The question of *identity*: What kind of person am I? Or what kind of organization is this?
3) The question of *rules*: What does a person such as I, or an organization such as this, do in a situation such as this?" (p. 58)

From this perspective, faculty advance to full committee review those with the highest academic credentials because they interpret the situation (i.e., evaluation for admission in a supposedly meritocratic society) in light of their organizational identity as an elite intellectual community and admissions a means of building that community. As the chair of the linguistics committee put it, they use admissions to "reflect the view the department has of itself" because the department's character is "so determined by graduate admissions."

"Fit" is an almost unassailable criterion, so impressions of belonging in their community can be a bottom-line consideration. For example, on my asking an assistant professor of biology to describe the profile of a borderline applicant and how the deliberation about that student went, he talked about an individual who barely made the short list but to whom they decided to "give a chance" in a Skype interview. He said the applicant was, "from a different planet and we were confident that this person was not going to be one of us. He's not going to be a full member of the scientific community."

This directly relates to the selection criteria because their identities as intellectual communities constrain what counts as appropriate criteria. Specifically, use of a script that associates "the numbers" with intelligence, and intelligence with belonging in the community, helps explain their enduring influence. In my interviews, more than 50% volunteered comments about GRE scores signaling innate ability (e.g., "sheer intellectual horsepower," "native intelligence"). Similarly, in admissions meetings, references to general impressions of intelligence were associated more than half of the time with high grades and/or Graduate Record Exam (GRE) scores. Of the programs whose admissions meetings I attended, I heard such comments most frequently in linguistics. For example, one professor commented, "Those are astronomical scores!" with another responding, "And check out the stellar grades. There's no question she's smart." Following up on that in an interview with the department chair, he reiterated, "Somebody who does that well on the GREs is unlikely to be lame-brained. They are likely to be smart."

Thus, faculty employ an evaluative script that associates high test scores with intelligence, and intelligence with belonging in the sort of elite intellectual communities they strive to maintain. With intelligence central to both academic culture and the self-concepts of professors (Bourdieu, 1988; Lamont, 2009), there is a personal quality to valuing these supposedly objective criteria. Kierkegaard wrote, "We create ourselves by our choices" and, on some level, the legitimacy of departments' identities as intellectual communities hinges on the perceived intelligence of those whom they admit and hire. The general belief that intelligence can make or break a scholar's success lends further legitimacy to these criteria.

Risk aversion. A second evaluative script for requiring high GRE scores and grades concerns the imperative and luxury of risk aversion in these programs. Mindful of the financial and status consequences of student attrition, faculty view their applicants in relation to the program they have created, desiring students not to struggle too hard with a curriculum that demands prerequisite skills for which there are few to no remedial learning opportunities. As an associate professor of classics put it,

> Graduate admissions is one of the things I think you have to be very humble about. And there's always a tension here because we're always under pressure to have good numbers for completing a program, completing it in a reasonable amount of time, and so on. The effect of that is to make you risk averse because it's not that hard just to go for the students you're pretty confident can get through.

A senior professor of physics illustrated the reasons for risk aversion in terms of investment of time and teaching energy:

> *I: You've mentioned a couple of times: 'Can they be successful? Do I think they'll be successful?' It sounds like that's a really key question you're asking.*
> R: Yes, because it's a big investment for the faculty member who takes on a student. And so if you work with the student so closely and then he walks away or doesn't make it, then it's a waste of his time and in a way, I mean, it's our mission to teach but I'd rather spend my time teaching somebody who actually can continue my mission and then teach other students than somebody who realizes, 'It's just too difficult. I can't do it.' Because they have to take very difficult courses the first two years, and then have to pass exams. If they don't pass these exams after whatever many times as prescribed by the department, then you have to go.

Across fields, there is a widespread perception that undergraduate training and test scores are the best available predictors of academic success. A weaker record of upper-level coursework in the discipline thus is often interpreted as a lack of readiness and, as specifically cited in a majority of the programs, a concern that the applicant "may not know what she's getting into." Particularly when cohorts are small and/or programs provide full financial support, each enrolled student represents a significant financial

investment. The language of "risk-taking," "risk aversion," and "gambling" becomes central to how borderline cases are negotiated.

However, the perception of risk is just that—a perception. Only one of the programs I studied described efforts to conduct an empirical analysis of incoming student qualifications and their academic or professional outcomes. To the extent that admitting any given student might be a risk, it is therefore not a calculated risk; yet it deters action because while the probability may be low, the consequences are high. More frequently, respondents described the tendency to "feel spooked" when reading the application of a person whose profile reminded them of an unsuccessful student. Judging a person by their impressions of another with some similar traits is a cognitive heuristic and a natural propensity, yet one would have a difficult time arguing that it constitutes best or fair practice. Fundamentally, this practice is an attribution bias, and more severely so when one makes the comparison on the basis of a small sample of cases.

Credential inflation in the pool may also be deluding some faculty into confusing variation in the pool with risk of attrition. Under a logic of consequences, successful organizations are already more likely to attribute their members' outcomes to motivation and skill rather than conditions in the organizational environment, and thus seek to eliminate risk rather than estimate it (March, 1994, p. 38). Findings here corroborate this perspective. One of the members of a philosophy program worried that her colleagues were too risk averse. They had come to expect pre-professional philosophers in their applicants rather than students of philosophy, and not because the early coursework was so challenging, but because the average quality of applicant credentials has been rising. "He's holding them to a ridiculously high standard!" she exclaimed about one colleague's

expectations, in particular. Similarly, in an interesting integration of the logics of

appropriateness and consequences, three of the five admissions chairs discussed without

my asking the "luxury of risk aversion" that their large, highly qualified pools permit. In

economics, one added:

> Because we run the program to be highly ranked, basically we have a good
> chance of getting people if we accept them. We have the luxury of getting to look
> at the pool and saying let's just take the people we think have the best prospects
> as an economist.

Unconcerned about yield, some programs admit students with high GRE scores and high

grades in elite institutions simply because they can.

Merit, Diversity, and Risk Aversion in Linguistics

In linguistics, discussions of two borderline cases who attended a local college

illustrate how faculty negotiate their conceptions of merit in light of the tendency toward

risk aversion and desire to increase diversity. As in the political science, astronomy, and

one of the philosophy departments, the two students in linguistics who generated the most

discussion are so-called "diversity fellowship students." Both attended a local college

from which the department is striving to develop a pipeline. Pieter explained to me:

> We decided that as a department … and we got from the graduate school a
> diversity grant. We decided to interpret diversity broadly not just race and gender
> and all those things. We have very few students from local colleges so we
> contacted a local college and told them that if they have good undergraduates to
> apply here because there's this image that we are snobby so there is no point to
> apply here. So we had several applications from the local college and two made
> the short list.

And, indeed, last year they did admit one student from the college. This year, although a

majority of the committee logged yes votes for both applicants in their private meetings,

a majority also raised concerns over whether one student's research interests were clearly articulated and whether the other constituted too much of a risk, academically.

After reviewing some basic credentials, Nancy, the department chair, commented, "If we're serious about diversity, these are the students we need to take seriously…" A professor who had not yet spoken in the meeting then interrupted, "Can I please speak up? We want diversity, but we want excellence in diversity. And when I read that statement, it was all over the place." Another person affirmed, "We need evidence of research skill, which we had with both of the last two applicants we discussed." A third added, "I tried to talk with her when she visited campus and couldn't get a line." After a pause, a senior member of the committee raised the diversity-risk relationship: "In most cases, diversity will involve some degree of risk on our part. We have to not be so risk averse that we miss opportunities." "That's true," added one of the people who had expressed a concern just a moment earlier. "And students from her ethnicity are very unlikely to apply to graduate school," she continued, not advocating for the student on this basis, but implying that the opportunity to enroll a student from this group is rare.

As for the other student from the local college, one of the committee members began by reading an extended portion of a letter of recommendation, which closed with the line. "I hope you get to meet her." The committee member followed his reading with, "And we will. She's coming to campus this Friday for a visit." As with the other student from this college, it became clear as they dug into her application that no one felt strongly about moving her forward in the process. Pieter, the committee chair, sounded unsure about her, but Nancy highlighted the extreme personal struggles the student had faced, concluding that, "She might be a bet, but it could be a good bet." She also

reiterated an earlier point that, "If we are going to increase diversity, these are the

students we need to take seriously." This perspective reflects a view I heard frequently:

that some bets are safer than others, and improving diversity requires decision makers to

identify applicants who contribute to diversity and have acceptable risk profiles.

Tentatively, a quiet member of the committee asked, "What's the diversity?"

Denise and Nancy, who by now were unified in advocating for this applicant, responded

with "family financial hardship." The committee agreed at that point to leave her on the

list, but discussion about her and about building diversity continued. Nancy said, "It will

be good for the whole faculty to take a look at her file. It seems pretty clear that she's a

risk, but if we're going to increase diversity, we have to take risks." Concurring, Denise

added, "And she seems like a good bet. Increasing diversity will also require these

pipelines."

Two weeks later, after the full faculty meeting, both students in question were

invited to campus for the recruitment weekend. However, in the final selection meeting

following the recruitment weekend, they needed to eliminate four individuals and "in the

first five minutes, with very little discussion" decided not to admit either of them. Pieter

explained the reasons to me in our follow-up interview (reasons in bold):

> R: There was universal agreement about two of them. There were just two
> students that **no one thought were up to the bar**. So that got us down to ten.
> We liked them both, [but] we thought **they didn't have the intellectual capacity
> to excel in graduate school**.
> *I: And what was it during the campus visit that gave you the sense of that?*
> R: … In the end **they just didn't have the right preparation**. They were just,
> **there were others from universities with great, active linguistics departments
> where they probably had taken two years worth of graduate courses already**,
> things like that. The local students just didn't have that preparation. So they
> might have been perfectly capable, but **in comparison**… We felt horrible. We
> really wanted them, but it just wasn't going to happen… I'm still wondering what
> necessarily the right thing to do is. Both of them may have had the intellectual

ability, but **they didn't have as much background** as the other students. So maybe if there were a way to guarantee them a sixth year of funding so that they can take an extra year to catch up, but that's not something we have.

Comments from another member of the committee corroborate how they felt about these two applicants and the final decision, as well as the factors that precipitated the outcome.

There were applicants that we were hoping to be able to take a chance on that we invited to campus. Sadly, once they got here **we decided it would not be a good gamble**. Um, and in fact, I mean we really were *disappointed* because we did personally *like* the people involved and a lot about them but again you have to think about what you're doing to their lives as well. [Pause] but so some of the sort of last stage of discussion was which of the people that sort of might fit in that category are likely to be a good enough risk?

It is unclear from these comments whether the faculty assume course preparation (regardless of course availability at one's college) can signal "intellectual capacity," whether there may have been some on the committee concerned about preparation and others capacity, or whether Pieter was just uncomfortable describing their rationale for eliminating these two individuals and so spoke in apparent contradictions. Young (2004) however, suggests that we should not read contradictions and incongruencies in individuals' narratives about their thinking as signs of untrustworthiness, but rather reflective of complexity and of individuals' difficulty expressing such complexity since they are rarely asked to do so verbally.

Convenience. Reading to this point, one might assume simple elitism and outdated views of intelligence are all there is to faculty reliance on GRE scores, grades, and institutional prestige. And, indeed, one sociologist in the sample quipped,

This is an elite university and a lot of the people at the university are elitists. *(He laughs).* Simply said. So they make a lot of inferences about the quality of someone's work and their ability based on where they come from.

However, I find there is more to the story.

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A third evaluative script for relying on quantitative metrics and institutional prestige is not in their signaling effects, but in their convenience in facilitating comparison. Challenges of time demands and incomplete information were the most frequently cited answer to my interview question about what makes admissions evaluations difficult. Although ETS recommends against the practice, some committees take advantage of the apparent comparability of student test scores to sort students by scores and grades with the click of a mouse on a spreadsheet. One committee chair in the physical sciences requested, "In reports to me, just summarize the test scores and GPA because I'm fully capable of reading a spreadsheet but I prefer not to have to read the entire file." In programs that received more than 200 applications, some faculty expressed regret that their colleagues did not give every file a full, detailed reading in the first round of evaluation. In sociology, an associate professor explained:

> We receive so many applications, and we are always in a crunch with time—
> always. And I have impressions that some of my faculty—senior members—
> were simply looking at the GRE. They have a threshold such as, 'If it's not over
> 700, I won't read anything.' And that cuts usually two-thirds of the applicants.

As discussed in Chapter 4, both the time demands required to interpret qualitative aspects of an application as well as the ambiguity of interpretation drive such use of numeric thresholds and the broader reliance on quantitative metrics early in the process.

Cultures of gatekeeping are not just about judgments of quality; they also entail a strong commitment to judging quality quickly and efficiently. To interpret letters of recommendation, participants claim one needs to read between the lines and sift through the superlatives. As Klitgaard (1985) also found, rather than highlighting promising applicants, letters of recommendation serve a filtering function by highlighting applicants who are *not* described in superlatives. Faculty members worry that personal statements

are subject to gaming, and it is not only time-consuming to read writing samples, but impossible to determine how much of a role faculty mentors played in crafting the ideas or narrative. On the other hand, faced with hundreds of applications and little time, numbers have an apparent — if illusory— clarity, simplicity, and precision. Even if faculty do not believe they are perfect measures, test scores and grades seem to distill constructs as complex as ability, preparation, and achievement to a single number on which all can be quickly compared. A sociologist explained to me, "The people with the sky high GREs have a big advantage because there's not a vast amount of other stuff to go on. The GRE is something they all have in common. The fact that it is common to everybody is really useful." Valuing scores and grades, then, is not only a matter of risk aversion, but also of ambiguity aversion. In the absence of clarity, faculty settle for the convenience of the entrenched standard.

However, like grade point averages, rising GRE scores among applicants to such programs as these is reducing the utility even of GRE scores. Faculty, in essence, are finding ceiling effects in these metrics. I asked an economist what he believes test scores signal, and he responded:

> For us, essentially nothing, because everybody who applies—the last year I did admissions, we look at the Mathematics and Analytical sections of the GRE and a huge fraction had perfect scores on the Mathematics GRE. There is sort of no information. That's not that useful.

And in astrophysics:

> Grade point--most people said it doesn't really affect them very much because basically everybody in the pool—everybody in the final pool has such high GPAs that it's not meaningful. I actually said that about the GRE scores because there isn't a lot of variance.

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Therefore, consistent with Lamont's (2009) finding that faculty contextualize judgments of proposal quality by the contexts in which the applicant works, I find that faculty try to extract additional meaning from college grades by contextualizing the grade point average by perceptions of the prestige of the institution in which they were earned and the rigor of the student's curriculum. In astrophysics, an assistant professor with several years of admissions experience explained how he interprets grades:

> When I look at a candidate—as soon as I see their file—there are four categories… One is grades and then we try to standardize it to the program. So for example, if they're MIT, we know that the grades are not inflated. Some sort of a mean average of knowledge of how good a student is that particular place.

Comparing graduate admissions to faculty hiring, a sociologist also explains the dilemma, and how it leads to judging applicants on the basis of test scores *and* institutional prestige. I quote him at length:

> R: What's great about hiring professors is we have direct evidence of exactly what they did… It's not easy, but it is information rich. Whereas I would say graduate admissions is information poor. So then one tends, or we tend, a lot to rely on signals that are low quality like, one of the frequently used ones is the quality or prestige of the undergraduate school. Lousy signal, I think.
> *I: Why is it valued so much do you think?*
> R: Because you have so little else to go on. You have grades, which I think are a good signal. But the people we admit are always going to be right around 4.0. Then you have the ones at the margins coming with a 3.9 or 4.1. So grades are increasingly a lousy signal, especially at these elite places that just hand out the A's. So you don't even have that anymore. I think if you don't get a straight A average or close to it then it's something you attend to. Then you have test scores, which are lousy for all the reasons we know…. But what else do you *have*? So you have the tests, and yeah, we definitely sort of have an expectation of high scores on the test even though no one *likes* to use them. But increasingly, you have plenty of people who are really high on the test scores and really high on grades. Tons of those people. So *now* what do you use?
> *I: It sounds like you're looking for variance.*
> R: Right, right. So you use the prestige of the school.

This perspective is consistent with social and economic theory. Market uncertainty drives up the quality attributed to elite organizations (Spence, 1973; Podolny, 1994). Specifically, "Status serves as an informational cue that can be used to differentiate a focus set of actors when underlying quality differences are not transparent" (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny, 2012, p. 14.6). Whether or not faculty trust the numbers or believe that institutional prestige signals quality, perceived prestige becomes a way to broaden the effective range in the high grades and test scores so many of their applicants receive.

Scripts of appropriateness, consequences, and convenience provide faculty with rationales for a conceptualization of merit—numbers in context—that they know has the potential to thwart their diversity aims. Yet despite the ambiguities of interpreting student backgrounds, faculty still believe holistic evaluation results in better judgments than relying simply on signals such as test scores, grades, and institutional prestige. As evaluation proceeds, faculty accept the additional noise introduced by a host of additional information in the letters of recommendation, statements of purpose, and writing samples. In spite of the complexity, these criteria allow reviewers to engage the human behind the numbers. With a richer set of information to draw from and a sense of security that comes from believing that they have filtered out students who will not succeed in coursework, faculty employ a broader conceptualization of merit in later rounds of evaluation.

Making Sense of Merit on the Short List

Conventional achievement is not enough. Faculty in each program I studied rely upon quantitative indictors to narrow their pool of applicants in the first round of review, but in later phases are looking for applicants with a different relationship with

knowledge. It is not enough at this point for applicants to have mastered course material

and standardized tests or earned the favor of scholars in top colleges and universities, for

these programs have large numbers of such "conventional achievers," as one participant

put it to me. Rather, in holistically reviewing the files of applicants on their short lists,

faculty also try to divine which individuals could grow to become leaders in their

respective fields. Depending on the information available in the application and variation

in students' research and other scholarly experiences, this task is hard work.

Respondents from disciplines that are far afield intellectually expressed remarkably

similar perspectives. An astrophysicist said,

> [Y]ou're really basing it on their potential to be great scientists. But it is much
> harder---much harder. What you look at for a particular person varies from
> person to person. Some people just haven't had a good research experience and
> you're basing it on more numerical factors or letters from people you don't know.

And an economist explained,

> That's so hard because at one level what you're looking for is so easy. You're
> basically looking for people who are going to be first-rate researchers and leaders
> in the field… who are going to be great economists. But figuring out in a twenty-
> one-year-old, what traits are predictive of becoming great intellectual leaders is
> incredibly hard.
>
> You have to look for proxies at some level. One of the proxies you look
> for is the person sufficiently quantitative and mathematically sophisticated that
> they're just going to be able to get through the course work successfully. That's
> relatively easy to see because you'll look at their transcript and see if they took
> certain math classes or advanced economics classes. That would be pretty
> predictive of them being able to handle the course work. They're going to get
> through the comprehensive exams and get onto the research phase successfully
> and not sort of freak out when they find out how statistical and mathematical
> graduate economics is.
>
> The things that are harder are that you want to find someone who is
> creative and asks great questions. That is so hard to tell. You might look at their
> theses or maybe they worked as a research assistant or their recommendations.
> It's very hard to assess if someone is-- [pause] it takes a certain type of person to
> be a researcher.

In classics, where extensive language training and travel experience are as important as

mathematical training in economics or research experience in astrophysics, professors

still struggle with the "guesswork," as one called it, of knowing who has the potential to

become a leader in the field. A junior professor described how she sees the challenge:

> From the department's perspective, we want to have somebody who is going to
> finish the program and thrive. Thrive here and go on and be a successful faculty
> member somewhere. So we want to be careful about who we pick…. They're
> really pretty young, just finishing college and a lot of students really still are quite
> unformed in a lot of ways, still taking a lot of other classes on top of their class
> courses. What will that person be like in one or two years? You know where will
> they go? That's where the guesswork comes in. I think the more experienced--
> the more you teach, the more you know students, the more you choose them and
> see how they turn out, the better feeling you have for it. But there's something.
> It's not quantity. It's not, you know, score doesn't tell you, answer that question.

Across the disciplines, faculty value displays of potential to become what Walker, et al.

(2007) call a steward of the discipline, one who "considers the applications, uses, and

purposes of the field and favors wise and responsible application… Stewards are

concerned with how to foster renewal and creativity" (p. 11). Across the disciplines, the

potential that faculty are looking for involves more than human capital considerations.

They also assess personal characteristics that will condition how that human capital is

deployed, such as affective dispositions and other non-cognitive traits that they associate

with exemplary scholarship. A professor in a physical sciences department explained

(emphasis mine):

> I look for people who have had research *experience* and show a great deal of
> *enthusiasm* for it. I look for *creativity*. I look for *energy*. I look for
> possibilities—potential for *innovation*… a *passion* for research.

And in a social sciences department:

> If the person is intellectually *creative*, I think he or she *will grow to be a really,*
> *good scholar*. To me that is the most important trait I look for… He or she is
> *really thinking*. It's not like—I know this language. I have that skill. I have

learned these courses, all this typical knowledge. I'm *curious* about all of the new, interesting phenomenon in society or this or that. And I *want to explore*. I want to find what's going on… That would make a good scholar. (Social sciences)

Such characteristics as curiosity, passion, and creativity connote a relationship to knowledge that cannot be measured quantitatively, but which may be inferred from elements of the application that many claim are too onerous to read carefully in the first round.

Faculty are particularly keen to glean these qualities through student or recommender descriptions of experience with original research so that, like hiring prospective faculty, the potential for future scholarship can be evaluated as a function of what has already been done.

I wanted to see some independent research because I think if you haven't done independent research then you don't really know whether you have a passion for it. And you kind of don't know what you're getting yourself into. This is what it is all about. (Social sciences)

However, as was clearly the case in a physical science program, it is not enough for the applicant to receive letters of recommendation testifying to the applicant's potential as a scholar. The student must also be able to communicate their experience with research, to "sell your ideas."

Here, we judge them about how well they can explain things. So the selling component of being an astronomer and selling your ideas is very important. In theory it's actually, even more important because we discuss ideas all the time to get new ideas. It's all about the discourse and why are you doing what you're doing. Challenging the fundamental, physical concepts behind it—a student has to be well versed as to how to defend their own ideas and how to express them. I do feel that—and you kind of see that [those in our discipline] in general tend to be very good communicators. (Physical sciences)

When pro-research dispositions, scholarly potential, and fit with department expertise all converge in an applicant, faculty respond very favorably. In one of the few places where

my respondents repeatedly admitted in the interviews that their feelings about a file affect how they judge it, faculty admitted that they feel "excitement" and "enthusiasm" about applicants with this combination of characteristics.

The potential to become a steward of the discipline is especially attractive if an applicant's expressed research experience and/or interests align well with departmental strengths. In fact, in asking my participants about red flags they see in applications, the issue of fit/ match was the most frequently cited response (followed closely by low grades and/or GRE scores).

> If somebody who—you know their file otherwise looks exemplary but their areas of interest really don't match—it's just not a good fit. And so, we talked about that issue—how important is that? And there was a little bit of disagreement but I think most people felt like, yes, of course, we don't want clones. But on the other hand, we do want people who really do match reasonably well to what we're good at. (Humanities)

Moreover, some choose not to admit individuals on the basis of a lack of fit because they believe it signals that the applicant might not enroll even if an admission offer is extended.

> You'll also be able to dismiss people on some kind of fit here. It might be that someone is saying that they want to do something which is not a strength of the department. And that could indicate that they really hadn't put much time in deciding which, er, they could have submitted very similar applications to lots of different places. So there are two things. They're not serious about this place and they're just applying as a safety.

Faculty know that students are also thinking about fit as they consider their options, and in three programs, concerns about yield are a salient criterion in late stage admissions and financial aid deliberations.

Diversity considerations. After initial review and culling on the basis of "the numbers," faculty invariably prefer individuals who will add to the program's and/or

discipline's diversity. Thus, if merit is defined as a sense of who deserves admission, then in later phases of review diversity is not in tension with, but rather an important part of, merit. Faculty may not agree which student characteristics should "count" in gauging diversity or how diversity should be conceptualized, but they create multiple ways to achieve diversity and justify its consideration.

Should any personal background factor that may lead a person to bring a unique perspective be considered diversity? Or should valuing diversity primarily be an effort to interrupt historical patterns of inequality? In this section, I discuss the dimensions of diversity with which participants are most concerned, and continue on to describe the meanings that faculty associate with diversity. These meanings—obligation, opportunity, and competition—reflect the history of the diversity movement from an effort to mitigate the present effects of past injustice into a discourse about the educational and organizational advantages diversity offers (Chang, 2002; Nivet, 2011).

Consistent with a stratification mindset, the default mode in faculty thinking about diversity concerns race and gender and, for a few people, class. In my observations of committee interactions, programs in all three institutions adopted the language of "diversity candidates" only to refer to those who would qualify for university fellowships with underrepresentation-based definitions of diversity. Also, I asked each participant how diversity is conceptualized in their programs. In linguistics, the department chair seemed proud to share that, "We got from the graduate school a diversity grant. We decided to interpret diversity broadly not just race and gender. And all those things." Across the sample, however, race/ethnicity and gender were, unsurprisingly, the two most frequently cited dimensions of diversity.

For example, in philosophy and physics, the concern is squarely on gender parity. Some tried to explain the long struggle by painting philosophy a "macho profession," and evocatively describing current levels of representation as "abysmal," "atrocious," and "awful," among others.[34] Several physicists feel progress that has been made in recent decades with regard to gender,

> I think the drive for broadening gender representation has been quite successful. And not without its problems but we have… we have very strong representation of women. You can see that in the profession now. [Laughs] You look at university presidents for example. I think the highest paid president in the United States is a woman Ph.D. physicist, Shirley Jackson… Anyway, we now see in our research groups, a very strong representation of women and they're doing well. So whatever risk we took there we haven't had to worry there. With African Americans, it's often a different story.

Consistent with Klitgaard's finding in 1985, racial/ethnic underrepresentation, indeed, remains the biggest diversity challenge that participants perceive. Only a few mentioned socioeconomic status in response to my question about how diversity is conceptualized, each time in concert with race. A White, female graduate student on the political science committee is one such individual*:*

> [Sighs] I guess I'm like with [pause] diversity meaning like class, race and gender. It's a plus. I'm going with like Supreme Court language here because I just talked about this with my students.

And, in sociology, a male faculty member of color expressed that, throughout higher education:

> Socioeconomic diversity is something I think we don't talk enough about. It's not mutually exclusive with ethnic and racial diversity, but there have been enough privileged minority kids out there that schools like Harvard and Princeton can feel like they have a fairly diverse student body if all these kids are like children of doctors and lawyers and second generation Harvard students.

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[34] Two participants noted that there is more equal gender representation in ethics and history of philosophy than in sub-disciplines that are core to (and most privileged) within the field.

In practice, however, SES diversity is clearly a consideration that is on par with race/ethnicity and gender as a matter of stratification. In each department whose deliberations I observed, there was at least one applicant whom the committee discussed as a "diversity candidate" on the basis of class, socioeconomic status, or family financial hardship.

National origin and disciplinary concentration also came up frequently, often in the context of efforts to argue that the program is constituted of diverse perspectives despite the persistent underrepresentation of women and people of color. Diversity has been thoroughly institutionalized as a value in higher education settings, but some forms of diversity are easier to achieve than others. Faculty in the least socioeconomically and racially diverse programs were also the ones to most vigorously defend the value of other types of diversity, especially national origin and disciplinary concentration.

In some departments, such as economics, international students are held up as evidence of achieving diversity, in spite of persistence gender and racial stratification.[35] One professor of economics described his department's international character in relation to domestic ethnic diversity:

> It is incredibly diverse. There are people from every continent… we have South America and Asian students, European students and Eastern European students, US students and Canadian students. We get Mexican students every year. We're spanning the globe with our students. We're amazingly diverse in people's backgrounds. Everyone, of course, has had a lot of higher education. But people do have diverse backgrounds and perspectives. And in that sense, there is a lot of diversity. But in other dimensions of diversity, particularly the ones you would

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[35] In an interesting example of the ways in which one's own identity may frame conceptualizations of diversity, I found that the majority of people who counted national origin among salient dimensions of diversity had, themselves, been born outside of the U.S. Similarly, individuals in two programs who had grown up in Appalachian states defended the importance of regional diversity. Further discussion of this trend is discussed in the context of homophilic judgment in Chapter 8.

traditionally measure in US institutions…like how many African Americans do we have? How many Hispanic Americans do we have? How many women do we have? The situation is dismal. They're a distressingly small number at every level.

A philosopher defended his department's strong focus on international students as a way to realize greater diversity of viewpoint. He argued, "New kinds of diversity matter" in an increasingly global graduate education market with its changing knowledge production system. Similarly, in biology, the admissions chair argued that international students should play an important role in diversity discussions, but that because the numbers of international applicants has risen so much and undergraduate training can be uneven, that they should focus on those applications from known institutions. He said, "The way international application works is that [pauses] there is a cloud of random applications, but good applications come in pipelines."

East Asian students occupy a tenuous position in discourses about diversity. In some departments, Chinese applicants are not thought of as contributing to diversity precisely because of their large numbers in the pool and solid representation in the departments. In political science, this trend intersects with disciplinary concentration because a substantial proportion of Chinese applicants all target the same concentration in Comparative Politics. A senior scholar explained their practice of comparing Chinese applicants to one another:

> From practically everybody's viewpoint, getting talented, motivated people is the top priority. But when we've done that… we need someone for World Politics, and this is an explicit thing where we went down the list and pulled up two people from World Politics because we were stacked with Comparativists at the time. Over half of our candidates- top candidates- were in Comparative. And it's a criterion. We want to have some balance. I would say [pause] my guess is-- no-no. And it was explicit. We had a whole bunch of top Chinese. And [pause] we decided we don't want to admit a class consisting of one-third Chinese and so we

didn't.   And it was clearly not because of bias against Chinese it was just… we want balance.

The concern for balance is both practical, in considering the assignment of advisees, and political, in ensuring the department's students represent the full range of faculty expertise. Meeting the goal of balance requires breaking procedural rules, however, that most faculty seem unwilling to break in the name of diversity. Discourse of balance thus replaces discourses of diversity, and disciplinary concentration become an acceptable basis for diversifying the perspectives that students and faculty bring.

Evaluative Scripts of Diversity

In the presence of divergent ideas about how diversity should be defined, there are nonetheless clear patterns in what diversity means to faculty, and these meanings provide vital grounds for privileging diversity in deliberations about applicants on the short list. In this section I discuss the evaluative scripts of obligation, opportunity, and competition that motivate deliberations about and justifications of diversity.

Obligation. First, faculty approach evaluation and selection with a sense of obligation to encourage inclusiveness of a wide range of perspectives, especially those from students who are members of historically underrepresented identity categories. According to professors of philosophy in both programs I worked with, this perception of obligation has grown over time as more attention is paid to women's underrepresentation and because other "macho professions" have seemed to make better progress than they have. A male philosopher described it this way: "It's not just that we weren't improving [the way] that Chemical Engineering and Astrophysics were improving. We were sort of going backwards while the fields that you think of as the most paradigmatically male fields were inching towards something."

However, as implied above, they also feel obligated to factor diversity into their ratings in ways that do not compromise the entrenched standard of academic excellence. I entered my data collection expecting to observe some debate about when it would be appropriate to consider diversity. Such debate only occurred in one program, in philosophy.

In their first clear disagreement as a group, the committee deliberated when it would be acceptable to introduce applicants' diversity contributions into their evaluations. "We aren't supposed to consider diversity in the first round," a senior scholar asserted, without clarifying this rule's origins. "We're supposed to select out the top students and seek in the second round to weight the students who meet diversity criteria." These criteria, the chair was careful to note, should be with regard to which populations are underrepresented in their discipline. Two of the five committee members questioned this standard practice, both of whom had served as the "diversity officer" on previous admissions committees. They believed that someone on the committee should be responsible for reading for diversity from the start, so as to serve as an advocate for unconventional students with exceptional promise. Their position was eventually overruled on the basis of a belief that, if diversity were defined broadly enough in the second reading, that they could achieve the diversity they sought without using multiple standards of evaluation in the first reading. Coming together around the notion of "diversity with excellence," they, like all but one of the other committees I observed, eventually decided to consider diversity only after making the initial cut. Even a sociologist who was one of the strongest diversity advocates in the sample argued: "You

have to be above a bar and then we can ask the diversity question." Another person put it

this way:

> That's one of the difficult issues. Because I would say this—I try not to pay too much attention. I try to admit students that are the best in my intellect with no regards for gender or race. And so I understand—I perfectly understand— that because the world out there is not equal, this simply reproduces inequalities. I understand that. But at the same time—so I will say this—if there are two students that are, in my view, equal on intellectual merit, then I will prefer a minority. And I think it is the same—at least from what I observed—it probably was the same for my other colleagues on the committee. Although it's something that everybody pays attention to—the minority race, gender. People pay a lot of attention to it for good reasons.

Obligations to diversity are contingent on maintaining a standard that few seem willing to

revise.

There seem to be conditions under which the obligation to prioritize diversity is

more easily realized, despite nagging uncertainties about an applicant's odds of success

relative to others on the short list. Specifically, along with the overall obligation to

diversity, I observed a sense of obligation to take advantage of rare opportunities to enroll

students with especially compelling personal stories, and to ensure that borderline cases

receive careful mentoring. The following example from a physical sciences program

exemplifies both:

> *Professor 1:* He grew up in a yurt in the Himalayas, was raised by his mom and grandma after his father died at an early age, and the next neighbors were two mountains over. He then went to a major U.S. public research university and has since started the *only* organization for the discipline in the Himalayan region.
> *Professor 2:* But do we think he can succeed? [pause]
> *Professor 1:* He's the most amazing case we've ever seen.
> *Professor 3:* He would bring some personality to the department. I commit to look after him and fund him through the prelims…. He presents himself as quite intelligent.
> *Graduate student:* Excellent idea to give him a chance.

This student was admitted and did eventually enroll. Here, and in half of the committees I observed, there were advocacy efforts rooted in appeals to compelling personal backgrounds and the possibility that strong mentoring could sufficiently jumpstart a student's learning trajectories to offset perceived risks. Admissions work involves political compromise, and one form of compromise is to admit students about whom you are unsure, under the condition that someone else will ultimately be responsible for their success or failure.

Competition. One reason faculty feel obligated to consider diversity conditional on merit is because they know other top programs in the discipline are applying the same standard. The ability to attract academically accomplished students from underrepresented backgrounds has thus become a way that programs evaluate themselves against one another, such that diversity itself is associated with status competition.

As a result, when the traditional standard of merit is fulfilled, applicant contributions to diversity become highly valued, especially if the student is from an underrepresented gender or race/ethnicity. Of an underrepresented minority student who attended an Ivy League institution, a philosophy professor made the off-handed comment, "Sounds like he'll get in everywhere. Everyone will love him." Faculty in three programs agonized over their yield in both interviews and observations, viewing the ability to attract top students as a hallmark of the program's positioning relative to others. But just as students with high test scores have been for decades, high achieving students of color and females are now objectified as a highly valued resource. Admissions deliberations included repeated comments such as, "Can we get her?" "Who are we going to get? It's a gamble," and "We'll lose him to Princeton and Caltech."

I inquired into such comments in the follow-up interviews. Participants expressed

a belief that underrepresentation is not only a function of who is in the initial pool of

applicants or the ways in which prevailing criteria filter out potentially talented students

of color, but also that talented applicants of color tend to have many admissions offers.

In the same program, another professor discussed the value of intellectual diversity in

relation to their struggles to attract Black students:

> I think people care most about intellectual diversity—that people arrive with
> different interests, different preparations and are likely to write very different
> theses on different topics. I think that's the type of diversity we would value
> most. I mean gender is an issue in that we get good—we get top-notch women as
> well top-notch men. Black—we get fewer Blacks. It's true. But we do try—in
> the past we've tried to attract them. But then they receive the same attractive
> offers from Columbia and Yale and Stanford and Berkeley and so forth. So it's a
> small group typically who get a lot of attention. We look at a big pool of the
> world.

From this perspective, one challenge in achieving diversity lies not with faculty

decision making, but rather student decision making. This is not only a challenge with

students of color, for in all but the top few programs of a discipline admissions

committees are attending to questions about yield when making their final selections. A

sociologist notes:

> We all kind of admit the same pool of applicants—the top ten departments.
> Harvard's going to admit them, Princeton's going to admit them, Stanford,
> Columbia, Michigan, Wisconsin and Chicago. And so we're all fighting for the
> same applicants and there's a lot to compete with and you know there are a couple
> programs right now that are just kind of doing phenomenally well in terms of
> placement and training- just dominating sociology right now.

Stepping up recruitment efforts before applications are submitted would surely help, but

some are hesitant to do so because they feel it would implicitly introduce diversity earlier

in the process than they feel comfortable. The ability of a program to successfully entice

a student away from a peer institution both affirms the program's legitimacy and furthers its own institutional diversity.

Opportunity. Finally, faculty also use the decision-making scripts of intellectual and financial opportunity to structure their diversity considerations. Diversity is part of merit not because student identities contributing to diversity are associated with individual academic success, but because they have benefits for the department.

Intellectual opportunity. Websites for all three universities' graduate schools discuss diversity's centrality to the mission of graduate education and its ideas of excellence. And, indeed, at the department level, some faculty associate diversity with intellectual opportunity. Responding to the question about how their department conceptualizes diversity, a professor of classics said:

> We welcome it. We want it. It's so much. I think everybody is committed to it on principle. And we know from past experience how much it enhances our classrooms and our life in our department. And the university really supports it, I think… Students who come from other backgrounds will have other- will just focus on other um moments or ideas in the text. Also, students who have different backgrounds will have studied different things. There's a kind of, um, desire- there's a [pause] more of a drive in some of the students who come from different backgrounds.

And, indeed, diversity considerations often go deeper than whether a student fits into a specified racial, gender, or other social category.   Faculty compare students within categories against one another, using information conveyed in the personal statement to distinguish between the identity-related perspectives they might offer.

A deliberation in astrophysics exemplifies this tendency, although I also observed similar conversations in classics, philosophy, linguistics, and political science. Discussing one female applicant, a professor posed the question, "Is it enough to be a woman in science?" This all-male committee went on to discuss how women in the pool

had used the personal statement to disclose gender-related experiences in science, and the sort of experiences they thought might positively contribute to the community they were trying to build. For example, they noted that one applicant wanted to be a role model for younger women because she had never personally received explicit encouragement. Another expressed a need to develop self-confidence and overcome self-doubt.

The committee went on to comparatively evaluative these applicants' narratives against one another, speculating what the implications might be of having such individuals in the department. In reference to one who said she faced "teasing and bigotry" from her teachers and peers, a male committee member remarked, "I'm less persuaded by that story," defending the teacher and suggesting the student might come to the department with an axe to grind. His opinion was overruled, however, after another male committee member noted that, "Now she's taking action, organizing a lecture series" on women in science.

In summary, I find the identities and experiences of so-called "diversity candidates" are subjected to a level of scrutiny and comparison that applicants from majority backgrounds are not. This finding is consistent with prior research. Eighty percent of subjects judging a Latino and 75% of those judging a White female for positions in higher education administration cite the doctoral institution as very important, but only 55% of those evaluating a White male cite it very important (Haro, 1995, p. 196). Similarly, Danowitz-Sagaria (2002) finds equal outcomes of selection across race and gender, but finds that African American women applying for administrative positions in universities are subjected to "filters" (i.e., sets of criteria) that White men and women are not.

Committee members sometimes compare students in underrepresented categories with one another, interpreting disclosures about identity as opportunities or red flags—and this sometimes serves as the basis for selection or exclusion. The conversations I observed conformed to what Chang (2002) calls a diversity discourse of preservation (vs. one of transformation), in that participants may regard diversity as an intellectual opportunity, but they want it on terms that do not disrupt the status quo.

Knowing that faculty judge applicants' diversity contributions differently by whether the applicant clicks a box, shares a narrative, and/or mentions relevant activities, it is important to consider how applications and publicly available information structure opportunities for disclosure. What information is requested? Are there apparent (dis)incentives for disclosing particular aspects of one's background? In only one of the three universities' graduate school applications did the prompt for the personal statement encourage students to discuss explicitly their identity, obstacles, or opportunities, and all three applications make racial/ethnic identification optional. Yet two of the three graduate schools' websites prominently feature the considerations for diversity fellowships, and all three websites have pages devoted to discussing their commitment to diversity and how it intersects with their ideas of excellence. Although the message from the institutional level is one of unequivocal support for the intellectual opportunity that diversity represent, at the level of file review I find faculty seem to value some identity-related perspectives more than others.

Financial opportunity. Faculty also consider financial opportunity in relation to student diversity. Both universities, under umbrella definitions about diversity's role in enhancing the institution, make available a number of four-year, incremental and

matching fellowships to programs who admit students who contribute to diversity by race/ ethnicity, gender, and SES. Faculty reiterated over and over again what a powerful incentive this is. An assistant professor in natural sciences explained:

> We are incentivized to want them. In rare cases, we want them because we actually believe it will be better for our department, but come on. Ninety percent of us are just doing it to check a box and say that we're doing it. And when we do bring in that minority candidate, we want a safe minority candidate. We don't want them to rock the boat too much. We want the department photo to look like we're a diverse department. And I think in the best case, it's because people realize that if your department appears more diverse, it will be more comfortable for diversity and you're on board with that and you want that. But realistically, it's all about gaining currency in the currency of the university…. Eventually you want currency in the discipline, but to do that you need resources, and resources are doled out by the university.

In some cases, the financial lure is so strong that departments adopt the university's conceptualization of diversity to ensure they were maximizing the opportunity. In sociology, when I asked one associate professor how the department conceptualizes diversity, he admitted:

> I think roughly in whatever way the university will pay for. Our conceptualization is the university's conceptualization, and that's putting it a little harsh. But because the university's commitment is quite good and there are lots of incentives, we don't need to add any interests that are beyond what are well established through straightforward incentives. So we'll just do whatever. We define diversity as the university defines it. If this person's going to be eligible for some sort of special resources, then we're all for it. I don't see much for it beyond the university's commitment as implemented through a variety of programs that give us resources we need to be more diverse.

Although he admits he is putting it "a little harsh," the fellowships clearly serve as a strong incentive across the departments in the study.

Taking advantage of diversity fellowships involves a sub-selection process within the broader admissions process, and it almost always includes some deliberation about which applicants should be nominated and what counts as diversity. In astrophysics, the

committee chair encouraged his colleagues to very carefully read applications for evidence of both background factors and contributions to diversity. "We need to read between the lines on these things," he said, to nodding around the room. Once discussion began, their comments and the type of advocacy I saw suggested a strong interest in nominating underrepresented racial minorities; however, one member attending via teleconference reminded them that the fellowship's selection criteria is as much about a person's contribution to social justice as their background. They are walking a fine line, wanting to be inclusive in their conception of diversity, yet caring very much about the serious issues of underrepresentation in their field. Especially difficult for them was the recognition that when fellowship designers pick criteria that *may* map onto race/ ethnicity (e.g., service, coming from an urban college) instead of selecting on race directly, they end up missing some who would have qualified as "minorities" and picking up others who will not help remediate stratification.

They also discussed how laws in some states constrain how diversity can be operationalized, in spite of the forms of diversity that decision makers may wish to privilege. It becomes a question of what the diversity you want is really about: Is it about characteristics like race and gender that are visible (which they want, but that is not what diversity is only supposed to involve) or about advancing the principle of diversity regardless of an individual's phenotype or background (which such state laws require)? This rich discussion ended without clear answers, but it bears mentioning that the person whom they nominated had created a prison outreach program related to astronomy and had letters of recommendation from people whom they recognized. The students' race/ethnicity was never mentioned.

To summarize, when faculty evaluate students who have made it to the short list they invariably consider both qualitative and quantitative elements of the application. Substantively, they privilege those students who seem to have the research experience and non-cognitive dispositions to become leaders and innovators in their field. At this stage, diversity becomes a vital factor in conceiving of merit, and they justify it through evaluative scripts about obligation, competition, and opportunity. Sometimes principled, sometimes pragmatic, these norms serve a wide range of faculty interests and are deployed time and again as internally legitimate foundations of evaluation and selection.

Discussion

In this chapter, I have examined the operational definitions of merit that faculty use in evaluating Ph.D. applicants, distinguishing between the conceptualizations applied in early and later phases of graduate admissions evaluations, and exploring diversity considerations in relation to merit. I have also outlined several scripts, or decision-making pathways, that faculty use to give meaning to their ideas about merit and diversity and how they should be factored into admissions.

Making the decision to admit an applicant begins with a positive evaluation of her/his worth; therefore, evaluation is a core process of professional gatekeeping and organizational boundary maintenance. The boundaries of these departments' graduate student communities are established quantitatively, first, and then qualitatively. Many faculty express a sense of general distrust in or disdain for test scores, but this does not stop most them from using these scores and, for more than half of the sample, associating them with intellect. In concert with grades, which are contextualized by institutional prestige and coursework rigor, test scores are central to departments' efforts to narrow

their applicant list to a size for which holistic evaluation seems manageable. If applicants can surmount the informal, albeit high, numeric thresholds required in early phases of review, they can expect their applications to be subjected to an entirely different, more holistic, reading in later rounds. Rather than assessment by numerical proxy, faculty interact with a person behind the application and the numbers—including their potential for innovation in the discipline, the fit of their research interests with departmental strengths, and the ways (including through diversity) that they will contribute to the future of the department and discipline.

In both phases, faculty see graduate students as key members of their intellectual community, so their boundaries in selecting students reflect a desire for those who "fit." These are culturally embedded preferences, or tastes, defined not only by organizational power plays as would be expected according to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of taste and selection, but also by doctoral education's mission of collective knowledge advancement and stewardship (Walker, et al., 2008).

Through a qualitative analysis of the entire cycle of admissions evaluation, this research helps inform the emerging literature about the role of diversity in academic opportunities. Grodsky (2009) finds that unequal distributions of SAT/ ACT test scores inhibit undergraduate admissions opportunities for students of color, and Garces (2011) finds that affirmative action bans result in lower graduate school enrollments among student of color. On the other hand, Lamont (2009) reports that diversity is a strong preference in selection for interdisciplinary postdoctoral fellowships. I find evidence that helps reconcile these views. In the later, more holistic rounds of admission, diversity contributions indeed surface as an important value. However, the script of obligation

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(not to consider diversity from the outset), combined with the three scripts justifying the prioritizing of high GRE scores and high grades from elite colleges and universities, means that many of the students whose diversity contributions might be considered an asset have already been filtered from the pool.

My data corroborate Stevens' (2008) conclusion that, "'Diversity,' as measured by the number of students in sharply defined categories is now an index of prestige," (p. 182). Faculty seek applicants from specific categories, but not in an absolute sense. Rather, they comparatively evaluate students in these categories against one another, making value judgments about the relative worth of possible diversity contributions. As discussed in the example about how female applicants are evaluated in astrophysics, faculty are not just reflexively giving preference to individuals from specific categories. Rather, they dig into the personal statements and letters of recommendation for evidence that the student will bring unique, positive, resilient perspective as a result of their membership in particular groups.

Finally, it bears noting that I did not discuss diversity in the informed consent document and saved my questions about diversity for late in the interview protocol—after rapport and the beginnings of trust had in most cases been established— yet most participants seemed to assume that I must be interested in opportunities for diverse students. Diversity-related comments surfaced frequently and somewhat unpredictably in connection to tangentially related topics such as financial aid, yield, and applicant research experience. The theme lies just beneath the surface in much of the data. In the context of easygoing interviews, many tried to make it clear through unsolicited comments and carefully timed, direct eye contact that they wanted me to know they are

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thinking about diversity—especially the challenge to remedy racial and gender underrepresentation. The complexities of achieving diversity and upholding generations-old standards of academic excellence are central to how faculty think about admissions.

Conclusion

Recall, scripts can be thought of as the stories we tell ourselves and others in order to justify routine behavior. In this case, faculty want to see greater equity and believe in the value of diversity, but they feel it is inappropriate to give up an extraordinarily high standard of academic and test score performance given the centrality of prestige to their organizational and personal identities. They also worry about the consequences of broadening this standard given its perceived associations with later success, and they argue it is simply inconvenient given the volume of applications they receive and ambiguity of holistic, comparative evaluation.

By framing these justifications as constraints, however, they are less inclined to recognize that these structures and filters reflect choices they have made for their program —and that they continue to tacitly make through the inertia born of unexamined practice. They have chosen to structure their required coursework in certain ways, for example, and neglect to empirically assess the risk hypothesis through their analyses of which admissions characteristics are associated with success in their program or discipline.

Yet while this somewhat stereotypical idea of merit is a standard against which everyone is evaluated, the evidence makes clear that it is not the only hierarchy of merit to which faculty ascribe. The coexistence of a conventional notion of merit with one that emphasizes stewardship for the discipline—including one's affective dispositions, non-

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cognitive strengths, and diversity contributions—indicates that multiple hierarchies of value, or heterarchies, guide evaluations in admission. That even in the most exclusive department represented in this study's sample the chair has begun to pull Black and Latino students' applications for holistic review from the outset indicates that the general trend of reliance on conventional criteria may be softening. Further, evaluations of applicant qualities are flexible to other organizational interests, such as faculty collegiality and preserving a balance of students across department concentrations. Some meanings of diversity are principled, such as regarding it as a social obligation or opportunity to enrich the department's intellectual climate. However, consistent with Boltanski and Thevenot's (2006) discussion of pragmatic compromise over heterarchies, participants in this study deferred in many cases of disagreement to pragmatic organizational interests over personal principles. This pragmatism is represented in the scripts for valuing diversity that faculty employ, especially the tendency to associate diversity with financial opportunity and competition with other top-ranked programs in the discipline.

Juxtaposing the scripts of merit and diversity produces a list of premises for admissions practice and outcomes. Appropriateness, consequences, convenience, obligation, competition, and opportunity each help to rationalize current practice, but they can also serve as raw material for future research and a starting point for more reflective practice. Knowing the logics that motivate decision making means that we know some core community values; these can be retained as axes around which further research is conducted and practices are revised. Indeed, the challenge of encouraging inclusive

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excellence in graduate education is not only a matter of what is valued, but also how to

identify those with the traits that are valued.

Chapter 6: Disciplinary Logics: The Influence of Academic Disciplines on Faculty Judgment

Reasonable people may disagree about how merit should be defined, and in comparing cases across disciplines I find that they do. In this chapter, I present findings from the comparative case study and propose disciplinary logics as an explanation for how disciplines shape faculty judgments. My objectives in this work are twofold: (a) To explicate the ways in which graduate admissions criteria and processes differ by discipline and (b) To outline an explanation for these differences that links context, cognition, and action.

As described in the conceptual framework, this research builds on Knorr-Cetina's (1999) and Lamont's (2009) research into disciplinary cultures. However, I examine them not from the standpoint of everyday life as a scientist (as Knorr-Cetina does) nor that of disciplinary experts evaluating scholarship from a range of disciplines (as Lamont does), but rather scholars working with their immediate colleagues to construct gatekeeping criteria and processes. In particular, this work contributes theoretical specificity to the idea of disciplinary evaluative cultures that Lamont (2009) presents variously as epistemic cultures, epistemological styles, and disciplinary habitus.

A few words about developing organizational theory from qualitative research is in order. Theory building from case studies requires "using one or more cases to create theoretical constructs, propositions, and/or mid-range theory from case-based, empirical evidence" (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 25). Ethnographic and other participant

observation is particularly important for building organizational theory using the mechanisms approach (Bastedo, 2012). Building on Coleman's macro-micro-macro framework for understanding collective social action, Hedstrom and Swedberg (1998) propose situational mechanisms as explanations for individual behaviors that "link a social structure or other macro-sociological event or states to the beliefs, desires, and opportunities of some individual actor" (p. 23). Like all mechanisms, they argue that mechanism-based explanations should be marked by four principles: (a) action, (b) precision, (c) abstraction, and (d) reduction. Toward the goal of proposing disciplinary logics as a mechanism meeting these criteria, I begin by articulating three dimensions on which theories of disciplines and institutional logics are analytically congruent.

Analytic Congruence of Disciplines and Institutional Logics

Linking theoretical perspectives demands congruence in their underlying assumptions. Institutional logics are a mid-level theoretical mechanism that help explain organizational phenomena by linking individual actors' cognition with broader social, political, economic, and temporal contexts. They are socially constructed belief systems comprised of linked norms, values, and practices that provide actors with identity and shared motives for action, typically in ways that promote institutional durability (Friedland and Alford, 1991; Scott, 2008; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). Disciplines and institutional logics are analytically congruent for three reasons.

First, disciplines and logics share a cultural function of limiting what individuals in particular fields are expected to do and know. As a cultural system, disciplines "provide a core element of the identity of many intellectuals" and "legitimate our necessarily partial knowledge" (Abbott, 2001, p. 209). Socialization into a discipline

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provides a set of priorities, rationales, and accepted theories and research techniques, to which individuals conform to varying degrees. This narrowing encourages expertise in relatively focused areas of specialization, but it also builds identity, consensus, and a shared academic worldview (Geertz, 1973; Pfeffer, 1993). Similarly, logics supply organizational actors with rules of the game and a narrower set of priorities than the otherwise open-ended range of issues to which they might seek to attend to in making decisions (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). This cultural function of institutional logics is especially important given the inherent ambiguities and other cognitive limitations that come with organizational decision making (DiMaggio, 1997).

Second, disciplines and institutional logics share a structural function, namely, the capacity to structure material practices such as reward, recruitment, and organizational structures. Thornton (2004) convincingly presents historical, qualitative, and quantitative evidence to describe how editorial and market logics guided executives' succession and the reward structure in the U.S. higher education publication industry over a period of thirty years. Similarly, in *Chaos of the Disciplines,* Abbott (2001) explains that colleges' and universities' internal organization by departments resulted from the rise and formation of disciplines.[36] In both the cases of higher education's publishing industry and the internal structure of its colleges and universities, logics/disciplines were deployed as ideas to justify and fulfill practical organizational demands involving resource allocation.

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[36] Resisting the anti-democratic hierarchy in European universities, American universities "compromised by creating departments of equals" identified by members' shared credential of a Ph.D. in that subject. Ever since, "This specific disciplinary degree provided a medium of exchange between particular subunits of different universities" (Abbott, 2001, p. 125).

A third way in which disciplines and institutional logics are analytically congruent is that they both set boundaries on what counts as valued knowledge and practice. Intellectual values and priorities central to a discipline delimit the scope of approaches to scholarship that mainstream members of the discipline deem appropriate (Abbott, 2001; Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Similarly, "the values, beliefs, and rules that comprise institutional logics determine what answers and solutions are available and appropriate in controlling economic and political activity in organizations" (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p. 806). Similar to the cultural function in their attention to values, the focus here is on what is appropriate and optimal, not minimum performance expectations. And, like the structural function, these values motivate the professional practice of those who are both being evaluated and doing the evaluation. Disciplines' underlying logic(s) may thus yield considerable influence in shaping faculty evaluations of scholars and scholarship, whether in the context of peer review, hiring, or admissions.[37]

Disciplinary Logics and Paradigm Strength

Disciplinary logics thus shape faculty cognition and, by extension, their practice in evaluative and selective contexts such as graduate admissions, hiring, and tenure and promotion. Constituted by a discipline's prevailing theories and methods and conditioned by the strength of consensus about these theories and methods, disciplinary logics constrain attention to and provide evaluative lenses for assessing worth on particular elements of an application or individual's profile. They also impose norms of

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[37] One inconsistency between institutional logics and disciplines pertains to the role of environmental pressures. Broad economic and social structural changes shape logics (Fligstein, 1985, 1987; Barley, 1992), whereas disciplines tend to change through a combination of external pressures (e.g., globalization, marketization) (Becher and Trowler, 2001), interaction with other disciplines (Abbott, 2002), and transformation from the inside out (Abbott, 2001).

appropriateness for the conduct of evaluation. For example, prevailing *methods* of a discipline and the epistemologies that underlie those methods, may structure attitudes toward judging applicants according to intuition vs. algorithm (Kahneman, 2011), and influence how faculty value quantifiable measures of preparation. Widely accepted *theories* provide common, guiding principles for the rationales that faculty employ, both for individual applicants and for the criteria used to evaluate them. They may also help explain why some departments are more inclined than others toward admissions practices such as conducting interviews with applicants or using a revolving vs. year-to-year admissions committee chair.

However, disciplines vary widely in the degree of consensus about appropriate methods and theories, and where consensus is weaker, so too may be a discipline's logic. Kuhn (1962) cites this shared commitment — or paradigm—as prerequisite to "the genesis and continuation of a particular research tradition" (p. 11). Scholars continue to debate whether any discipline's knowledge progresses in the linear, cumulative fashion Kuhn proposed, or whether, as Abbott (2001) and scholars of interdisciplinarity propose, the history of research is better portrayed as a long process of the disciplines dividing internally along methodological and theoretical dimensions (e.g., quantitative/qualitative methods and culture/structure theories).

Apart from the debate about how knowledge systems *change*, a generation of scholarship compares the relative paradigm *strength* of various disciplines at specific points in time (Lodahl and Gordon, 1972; Pfeffer, 1993). Lacking consensus about theory, methods, and problems, some scholars argue that low-consensus disciplines with competing schools of thought struggle to achieve collective intellectual progress. They

are unable to leverage each other's findings, are more likely to have turnover among department chairs, and are less likely to obtain significant research grants, among a host of other organizational barriers (Pfeffer, 1993). Paradigm strength is likely to condition disciplinary logics' strength and, with it, the prevalence of conflict in decision making. Underlying epistemological debates among the faculty, for example, would manifest in disagreement about legitimate criteria and difficulty achieving consensus on borderline cases. It is not difficult to imagine that faculty members in economics operate with a more unified common sense than in fields like political science or biology, where individuals are socialized into academe from a wide-ranging set of intellectual traditions.

Comparative Analysis of Disciplinary Cases

This framework of ideas about disciplines, paradigm strength, and institutional logics has helped to inform the comparative case study by disciplines that I have conducted, and whose findings are the focus of this chapter. As displayed in Table 6.1, I compared the cases in two ways: by subject area and paradigm strength (i.e., degree of consensus about what constitutes appropriate theory and method). Assignments of disciplines to high, moderate, and low-consensus is admittedly a rough categorization, yet merits careful thought as a basis for case comparison.

To do so, first I separated out the disciplines by broad subject area (i.e., natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities). If one accepts the conventional view that hard sciences have the strongest paradigms overall, followed by social sciences, and then humanities (e.g., Biglan, 1973), this first step is prerequisite to considerations of differences based on disciplinary consensus *within* subject area. It would have been convenient to simply defer to the classifications schemes developed through Hagstrom's

(1964) or Biglan's (1973) analyses based on disciplinary consensus or that of Lodahl and Gordon's (1972) based on paradigm development. However, their classifications are forty or more years old, and disciplinary changes during this time period make adoption of previous scholars' assessments of paradigm strength a spurious task (Pfeffer, 1993).

Table 6.1. Cross-Case Comparisons for Analysis of Disciplinary Logics

	Paradigm strength		
	High-consensus	Moderate	Low-consensus
Natural Sciences	**Physics**	Astrophysics	Biology
Social Sciences	***Economics***	*Sociology*	*Political Science*
Humanities	**Philosophy**	Classics	Linguistics

Note: Disciplines in **bold** were compared for influences by subject matter; Disciplines in *italics* were compared for influences by paradigm strength/ intellectual consensus.

Therefore, I adopted an historical approach to categorizing each discipline as high, moderate, or low consensus within the subject area, with rationales explained in Appendix H. To do so, I used (a) surveys of the history of the disciplines from secondary sources, (b) interviews with emeritus members of each department, and (c) member-checking with admissions committee chairs. Given what we know about the dynamics of change in disciplines, these classifications should not be interpreted as static, enduring, or absolute, but rather a reflection of assessment in the context of the fields' historical trajectories. Brief summaries from what I have classified as low and high-consensus disciplines in the humanities (i.e., linguistics and philosophy) help illustrate what I define as more or less paradigmatic.

Consistent with Abbott's (2001) theory of fractal change in disciplines, linguistics has declined in consensus over time. It started in the 19th century as a fairly coherent field of study (also known at that time as philology) that involved comparative and historical analysis of language development (Robins, 1997). Over time, however, other disciplinary lenses have been brought to bear on the study of languages, and quantitative research has made important inroads into the knowledge system. Especially since the mid 1980's, statistics has become a fundamental analytic method in sub-fields ranging from social and psycholinguistics to syntax to even the comparative and historical analyses that once defined the field (Johnson, 2008). Two different approaches to quantitative work in linguistics have emerged: hypothesis testing and pattern discovery. Although there remains an old guard attempting to hang on to a more humanistic vision of the discipline, a strong contingent of younger generations of linguists derive credibility for their work from the incorporation of social science into the discipline.

Philosophy is a much older discipline than linguistics, having survived thousands of years. Over its history, the topics philosophers have taken up reflect the diversity of interests of their societies and their cultures (Russell, 1972). Today there are five primary strands of work within the field: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language & mind, philosophy of science, and aesthetics. Yet across time, culture, and content, the core of the field has been defined and preserved as an ongoing conversation about the nature of knowledge and reality (Durant, 2012). And the most well-known series of teachers and students in early western philosophy— Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle —initiated modes of discourse that continue to guide western philosophers'

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communication with one another about a very wide range of topics. Their influence is

arguably paradigmatic from the standpoint of disciplinary socialization in U.S.

universities. The Socratic method, for example, in which hypotheses are eliminated

discursively through identification of ideas that produce contradictions, remains central to

philosophical discourse.[38] Similarly, Aristotelian logic and its syllogisms are another

enduring branch and method of philosophical discourse, and training in the use of

syllogisms to argue one's point is fundamental to the preparation of philosophers. A long

tradition of synthetic interpretation of a diversity of topics using methods that have been

institutionalized over millennia cements philosophy's leadership within the humanities

(Durant, 2012).

We know that the more centralized knowledge systems in philosophy, economics,

and physics help position them as "power disciplines" within the humanities, social

sciences, and natural sciences, respectively. These disciplines make inroads into other

fields by asserting their well-established paradigms on fields with less consensus and that

are typically less resourced. For example, astronomy is gradually being taken over by the

physicists, respondents in both physics and astrophysics explained to me. They note that

many astronomy departments have been renamed as astrophysics, and that Physics

Subject GRE scores play an important role in admission to both astronomy and

astrophysics programs. Within the social sciences, econometric methods have begun to

wield similar influence, with sociologists, political scientists, and educational researchers

increasingly finding that the gold standard for their quantitative methodologies is

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[38] The feel of argumentation that the Socratic method can produce has been named by
some as a deterrent to women and indirect cause of the enduring underrepresentation of
women in the field.

equivalent with the latest methodological norms in economics.[39] Similarly, philosophers

have developed a presence in a very wide range of disciplines by applying their methods

to examine the philosophy of science, language, history, and so forth.

This chapter discusses disciplinary trends and logics from three perspectives.

First, to introduce the evidence for disciplinary differences in evaluation, I compare how

faculty approach one aspect of the admissions process—the practice of interviewing

applicants. Next, because disciplinary logics are strongest in high-consensus fields, I

provide an in-depth discussion of how they operate in two high-consensus fields rooted in

very different epistemologies: economics and philosophy. I then proceed to describe and

examine how weaker intellectual consensus in fields like linguistics, biology, and

political science manifests in deliberation. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the

disconfirming evidence about disciplinary logics, which emphasizes their contingency on

three specific factors other than paradigm strength.

Disciplinary Logic Profiles

Disciplinary logics are strongest in fields with greater consensus about theory and

method. Individuals in lower-consensus fields may indeed be compelled by or make use

of their own theoretical and methodological principles when they approach evaluation.

Due to the range of theories and methods that others in the field use, however, it is harder

to identify a singular or even common logic. By juxtaposing descriptions of the logics

used in two higher-consensus fields — one employing an interpretivist framework,

another positivist— we learn how disciplines create logics for approaching evaluation

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[39] One quantitative researcher of higher education wryly noted that he and his colleagues
should "prepare to be assimilated" by the economists (Porter, personal communication,
2011).

and how their members defend that approach as logical. See also Table 6.2 for a

summary of the indicators of disciplinary logics in high-consensus disciplines studied.

Table 6.2. Indicators of Disciplinary Logics in High-Consensus Fields

Discipline	Theory	Epistemology/ Methodology	Practical Priorities
Economics	Emphasis on utility→ Risk aversion → Reliance on GRE Belief in human capital→ Preference for applicants with strongest academic preparation	Positivism & Deep methodological frontier for new knowledge → Expectation of "Mathematical sophistication" → Preference for applicants with math degrees and near-perfect GRE scores	Seeking prestige in social sciences → Privileging criteria with widespread legitimacy (e.g., institutional prestige & high GRE scores)
Philosophy	Valuing prudence → Risk aversion→ Demonstrated skill in writing sample Valuing prudence → Careful deliberation about as many applicants as possible	Interpretation → Emphasis on letters, personal statement & writing sample Scrutinizing knowledge→ Extensive deliberation about content and process	Desire for "distinguished" scholars → Preference for applicants with standard trajectories and pedigrees from institutions with strong reputations
Physics	Goal of Discovery → Interest in "spark" and "diamonds in the rough"→ Interviews to go beyond credentials	Very technical research → Desire for applicants with significant, relevant research experience	International collaborations with English communication → Valuing international applicants with strong English skills

Economics. Economists' decision-making tactics and priorities very clearly

correspond to the theoretical and methodological foundations of their field. In a

discipline that prizes its prestige within the social sciences and a department that prizes

its prestige in the discipline, they organize the doctoral program around a selection

process, curriculum, and funding model that is characterized by relative risk aversion. As

one committee member illustrated,

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Because we run the program to be highly ranked… basically we have a good chance of getting people if we accept them. We have the luxury of getting to look at the pool and saying, 'Let's just take the people we think have the best prospects as an economist.'

And, indeed, what they perceive to represent "the best prospects as an economist" cannot be understood apart from the quantitative foundation of the field.

In both theoretical economics (mathematical modeling) and empirical research (statistical analysis), "Mathematics is the language in which to explain your argument or your story." Upon my asking what intelligence in economics looks like, an associate professor responded, "Many people who become successful… first of all, they all have some basic level of mathematical sophistication." Another associate professor affirmed this, explaining that this trend seems only to be increasing with the field's methodological evolution. "At some point in the middle of the last century, the nature of discourse among economics became based around models and using mathematics for precision and to precisely state hypotheses." What counts as high quality economic research must be cutting edge, he continued, and cutting edge economic research involves cutting edge statistical methodologies. As the statistics advance, so do the mathematical prerequisites. A junior faculty member also volunteered this position, explaining that, "Over the decades the field ages, and there's more and more work you have to know in getting to the frontier. The frontier is more technical and deeper."

As a result, the department that I studied is not unlike the top 25 in the field for (a) Requiring perfect or near-perfect quantitative scores, (b) Taking a student's score as signal of competence with the skills required for it, and (c) Inferring competence as a signal of how the student is likely to experience the first year of coursework. A junior professor, new to admissions, laid it out for me this way:

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> [T]hey do look for whether the student is going to struggle. Technical expertise is a fact. The trouble is, if a student doesn't have enough mathematics, they don't see the economics the first year. They just see it as mathematics, and it's a real problem. What you want is somebody who has enough—not a lot necessarily—but enough to distinguish the math from the economics. I do believe the admission committee does try to determine whether a student is going to struggle and is prepared. And a master's program is not necessary but it helps.

Their priorities of perfect GRE scores and advanced academic preparation in mathematics ("ideally a double major in math and econ") are defended as a matter of human capital. These priorities also reveal both the rational choice theoretical and quantitative methodological foundations of their field, and the type of work they are being trained to execute. There is a cultural coherence around numerical evidence and algorithmic epistemologies that is, on average, deeper than the rest of the social sciences and, arguably, is the most paradigmatic.

Philosophy. "Good philosophy," according to an associate professor in one of the two philosophy programs I studied, consists of "charitable conversation with controversy." At the heart of philosophical scholarship is analytically dissecting ideas about fundamental questions, and reconstructing them in strong arguments. In most cases, the questions have been studied, in some form, by generations of other philosophers. It makes sense then, that philosophy programs would engage in some of the most prolonged and intense deliberations of the programs I studied (covering both their judgments of applicants and how they came to those judgments), and that their top priority in evaluating an applicant file would be the writing sample. They feel the writing sample provides evidence of the substance, skill, and style of what an individual will bring to the conversation of philosophy if admitted.

Faculty revealed the centrality of the writing sample to their assessments in several ways. Most simply, all members volunteered to me that it is "very important" or "the most important" component of the application. Moreover, when they started their discussions of applicants in the meetings, committee members first identified individuals by their writing sample topic. Their deliberations felt, at least in this regard, much more like a faculty job search than in other departments, particularly because the perceived quality of the writing sample is such a key criterion.[40] Finally, in the interviews and observations alike, participants simply devoted much more time to discussing writing samples than any other component of the application, and a positive assessment of it was a bottom line requirement for admission. A senior professor explains the advice he gives his own students about the writing sample:

> The most important page in your writing sample is the first page. And the most important paragraph on the first page is the first paragraph. Because when you have eighty of these things to read and you come in the evening, some evening and you don't—you know, you want to get home and watch TV and go to bed. You know you're looking for a reason to stop reading. And so I tell them what they have to do in their writing sample especially—they have to try to counteract that tendency. You know they have to give me something to make me keep reading.

A few faculty expressed concern with weighting writing quality so heavily, however, worrying that the high expectations are encouraging a level of "professionalization" or "careerism" in young philosophers that both interferes with creativity and may put talented applicants with strong potential but less training at a competitive disadvantage.

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[40] An exception to this in one of the two departments is what they called "diversity candidates," who are identified first and foremost in discussion by that status. These key means of distinguishing applicants— writing sample topic and diversity fellowship eligibility— provides a glimpse into what is core for them.

Most philosophers share the same methodological approach,[41] but there are stylistic differences among philosophical traditions that shape their intellectual tastes, and thus, their interpretation of writing samples. An associate professor in one department regarded one student's writing as "murky" and "complexified," only to learn from a senior member of the committee that this "comes with the territory" in expressivist writing of the last 15 years. Admitting that she did not like the work because it was not like "her own sort of philosophy," she deferred to the judgment and expertise that another member of the committee could bring. Her admission of homophily is not perceived by the rest of the committee as a weakness on her part, but recognized and accepted as a natural tendency. Indeed, to guard against uncharitable assessments of writing samples based on such matters of style, they have structured the review process to ensure that each applicant's writing sample is read by individuals with expertise in that subject area—frequently bringing in readers from outside the committee as needed.

Their conduct as committees also reveals a philosophical logic characterized by sensitivity to the many influences on human judgment, and to extended, collective analysis of epistemological issues. Not only do they structure the writing sample review to guard against undue influence of taste on student opportunities, but they agonize over the quantification of judgment and the role that emotional responses to applications play in their ratings. They actively seek defensible arguments for the judgments they give; indeed, they expect this of one another, and freely challenge each other when the grounds for an outlying rating seem weak. For example, two female members of the committee challenged the low rating of a female applicant with a 740 score on the quantitative section of the GRE, a 690 on the verbal section and a 4.5 in the analytic writing. These

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[41] Logicians are an exception to this general rule.

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scores, one male committee member asserted, "present a risk for her not succeeding…[since] she didn't attend a top-rated university." Suggesting she may have "undershot" in selecting her college, a female member of the committee reminded the group, "This is an area that can be gendered. Women may make choices based on relationships. We have to be very careful here." He responded, "All in all, it gives me doubt." Yet they almost always craft these challenges in an exceedingly respectful manner—as a matter of inquiry rather than attack or skepticism. As in their scholarship, they practice "charitable conversation with controversy" in admissions meetings. An associate professor explained the difference between persuading his colleagues and crafting arguments that reflect the work of philosophy:

> Rhetoric is not a craft. It's an empirical knack that enables you to please people. But philosophy is [a craft], right? And I think Plato is right. There is such a thing as learning to give good arguments for what you think. And it's different from the skill—such as it is-- of persuading people. You know, just persuading them.

As committees, they work to balance their ideals and desires with what they believe is prudent. Prudence is key in a field oriented around what is justifiable, and they defer to prudence rather than taking risks.[42]

As noted, the two philosophy programs in the study were also the only two to grapple with aspects of judgment that nearly all other programs also employ, but seem to take for granted: its quantification and the role of emotional responses in their judgment. Every department plays what participants in several programs called "the numbers game," which consists of collecting individual ratings of applicants and using aggregates of those ratings to simplify selection. However, the philosophy committees were the only ones to debate the merits and execution of the numbers game. Whereas other

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[42] This approach to risk aversion, it is clear, is very different from that of economists.

departments used numerical ratings for the file without ever really discussing what the scales mean, the two philosophy committees explicitly articulated what the numbers meant to them.

In both cases, however, these were *post hoc* conversations following the first round of review, conducted more for sensemaking and justifying the judgments that had already been made than for developing shared norms to guide their evaluation in later rounds of review. In one committee, they came to agreement that 1-4 ratings essentially correspond to "admit, maybe, wait-list, and bit of a risk." In the other committee, however, they admitted that "different degrees of enthusiasm" are really what distinguishes a 1 and 2 on their five-point scale, while a score of three indicates " I don't know," and 4-5 indicates "Presumptive exclusion."[43] In this committee, members also professed their trust in one another's judgment, and acknowledged this trust was prerequisite to their comfort with explicitly associating ratings with enthusiasm.

As Stevens (2007) found in his study of undergraduate admissions, enthusiasm for applicants also affects committee deliberations. If the applicant has a rating that makes them borderline for admission, one committee member's enthusiasm can determine whether and how hard they advocate for the individual to have an outlying low rating adjusted or to be admitted, period. Indeed, when I asked what helps the philosophy committee decide among relatively qualified applicants, one professor admitted,

> Well it's very hard. Let me try to answer your question in a way that may make the whole process seem a little less credible—but that's the way it is. What happens is that one or more members of an admissions committee will catch some enthusiasm for some applicants but not others. If you go back over, if you are forced—practically, they'd have to grab you by the scruff of the neck and force

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[43] In classics, the department chair says that ratings are a "guide to the feelings that people have about candidates," but this was not established as normative for the entire committee.

you to look again at a recommendation that you have consigned to oblivion—there are probably some of them where if you were to say, 'Why weren't you enthusiastic about the person?' I'm not sure I could answer. And I'm sure every year there are… people who could easily have been among the top ones but nobody picked up on them. They just didn't light a fire under anyone.

Individual enthusiasm and taste are inextricably linked, and are manifested in the committee members' ratings—arguably, in most departments. The difference in philosophy is that people talk about these taken-for-granted aspects of judgment.

As the rank-ordered list of applicant ratings was distributed at the second committee meeting of one department, a senior professor member gazed over it and offhandedly remarked, "Ah, our collective assessment." Indeed, the ratings, while not linked to a scale that means the same thing to everyone, become a central decision making tool. The chair suggests that she is "not wedded to translating everything we say into numbers." Unfortunately, without the numbers, their already prolonged discussions would surely take much longer because, "Somebody can come up with some principle for any side of anything." Though they may agonize over the meaning of the numbers, use of the numbers forces decisiveness and offers a conclusion to deliberation. They acknowledge it is a false decisiveness, implemented in spite of ongoing doubts, but one that is necessary to their getting the job done. In a field whose logic is characterized by "charitable conversation with controversy," philosophers begrudgingly depend on the quantitative metrics most of the other departments take for granted. Within such broad subject areas as the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, disciplines with greater consensus about appropriate theory and method, such as economics and philosophy, have more convergent disciplinary logics. In this context, convergent logics are constituted by shared conceptions of worth about the nature of academic work, and

manifest not only in research and teaching, but also in how faculty conduct admissions and review files.

Attitudes on Interviewing as Windows into Disciplinary Logics

Disciplinary logics can also be captured by comparing how faculty in different subject areas think about admissions practices that are not widely used. Interviewing students on a short list, for example, goes above and beyond standard practice and requires some forethought. Moreover, the explicitly subjective nature of interviewing provides a natural opportunity for disciplinary logics to reveal themselves. Kuhn (1962) argued that common methods, theories, and problems are the substance of disciplinary paradigms, and indeed, I find a place for each of these in the disciplines I studied. In their defenses of whether or not to interview, applicants, social scientists use theory, humanists are sensitive to interpretation and intuition as ways of knowing, and physical scientists emphasize the practical challenge of translating technical subject matter.

Ever the stewards of utility, for example, economists in my sample reject the practice of interviewing because they question the value of information gained from it. As the chair of the admissions committee put it, "The science of interviewing is very negative. It's the last thing you want to do. The characteristics that dazzle interviewers are not the ones correlated with success." Skeptical that selection interviews will usefully distinguish applicants from each other, this department saves face-to-face contact for what one described as a "two-day recruitment show," in which admitted students attend seminars, meet with professors, and eat very well.

Sociologists use principles of their own to rationalize their position on interviewing. Long concerned with such interests as social equity and organizational

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efficiency, the faculty in the sociology department I studied use these interests to build

their argument against holding informal interviews before applications are submitted.

They are sensitive to the ways in which early contact with faculty can strengthen an

applicant's chances, and therefore discourage individual department visits because, "We

don't want to just favor the people who were close or have the money." Interviews, they

feel, compromise the ideal of equal opportunity, and create an especially "awkward

dynamic" if the student is not admitted. More pragmatically, they recognize that early

faculty-student contact in a program that draws hundreds of applicants may not be the

most efficient use of faculty time. As one put it,

> Ninety-percent of them are going to get rejected. It's more than ninety-percent.
> If the person doesn't have the grades and the GREs, we don't really want to spend
> a lot of time meeting with them to talk about, you know, how happy we'd be to
> work with them.

In sociology and economics, then, beliefs in the *value* and *convenience* of grades and

GRE scores provide principles for rationales that call into question whether interviews

are worth the effort.

In the humanities disciplines, conclusions about interviewing graduate school

applicants are more mixed, but collectively reflect a shared sensitivity to interpretation as

a way of knowing. Those who approached expert intuition as a legitimate epistemology

could hardly imagine admissions without interviews. An emeritus professor of classics is

convinced of the value of a brief interview in revealing personality. When I asked him

what purposes they serve, he laughingly recounted to me,

> R: I've interviewed a lot of people in my day. Uh [pause] [laughs] This is cruel.
> It is to eliminate the jerk factor. [Laughs] No, there are certain applicants who
> turn out to be jerks…. We look for the personality traits that are going to be good
> in filling up our classes, I mean, as when they become teaching assistants. [pause]
> We sort of rate their enthusiasm [pause]. When I ran an interdisciplinary program

for 25 years I would choose teaching assistants from all the humanities
departments and sometimes from physics or botany [pause] on the basis of an
interview. And I could tell within five minutes whether this person was right for
the program. And fundamentally it has to do with whether they can convey
interest in their own subject, however obscure to me…. It really is pretty obvious
very quickly…. That's pretty much it, well, and charm.
I: Charm.
R: [Laughs]
I: What are some markers of charm? How do you know charm when you see it?
R: Um, well I'm not sure I can answer that [laughs]. You just I could be flippant
and say you just know, you can tell. Um, humor. [pause] I don't want to say
comfort in the interview because there's no comfort in an interview, but you know
there is a way of [pause] handling it which is adept. [pause] I'm not answering
this very well because it is very elusive but it's there, it's there.

A senior scholar of ancient literature deferred to Malcolm Gladwell in his case to me that

the full application review process could be replaced with a five-minute *Blink*-style

interview, in which an experienced faculty member might quickly and accurately discern

prospective students' personality and intellect:

You can pick up things very quickly. We have evolved to be very quick at reading
people. And um… what you pick up, I would say the most salient thing is
intelligence but also benevolence and hostility and things like that.

However, Gladwell himself hedges on the value of intuition in hiring situations, citing the

election of Warren Harding as an example of confusing a presidential look with

presidential leadership.

On the other end of the spectrum, the chair of another humanities department said

they would never use in-person interviews because it might result in judgments that were

unduly swayed by sub-conscious assessments of applicants' physiognomy and

attractiveness—the spacing of their eyes and shape of their hairlines, for example. They

distrust that applicants' temperament or personality traits can be accurately inferred from

an individual's appearance, but are sensitive to our natural tendency to absorb such

impressions in interview settings.

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In yet a third humanities program, the department invites students on both the admit and wait lists for a campus visit to check into red flags about personality and preparation that are raised in the paper applications. Speaking hypothetically about personality assessment through interviews, the admissions chair told me, "Arrogance itself would not disqualify somebody but if the person is really difficult or doesn't get along with the graduate students or the other applicants and so forth, then you know that is a bad sign." Concerned with building collegiality in the graduate student community, three of the five faculty members I interviewed in this program volunteered their hope to use the campus visit partly to gauge what they, too, called "the jerk factor" among those on the wait list. In the year I collected data, however, it was not concerns about personality, but rather preparation and authenticity of interest that led to the committee rejecting two individuals after interviewing them during their visitation weekend. A senior professor outlined what is learned through the visit weekend:

> Well you just have you have a chance to have a dialog with that person instead of just looking at the file so you can see how they react and, you know, so it's not just what's on paper. So you get a… I mean you can get an idea as to how excited somebody is about what they hope to do. You can get some judgment as to how much they already know and how broad their interests are. Of course, some of the applicants will say I'm just very interested in working with and then they'll list all of the faculty in the department basically. So they just obviously just went to the web page and they just [laughs] you know.

Faculty members in these three humanities programs ultimately come up with different conclusions on whether or not to interview, but share sensitivity to the fact that their readings of applications are a matter of interpretation, and that interviews add another layer of subjectivity to the process.

A common concern in the physics and astrophysics programs I studied is translating their highly technical subject matter and research to the public and to

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undergraduates in introductory-level courses. Although it is not necessarily inherent to the discipline's way of knowing, the ability to communicate is thus an important basis for choosing among applicants who make their short lists— all of whom already have research experience of some sort. In both programs, admissions committee members share the responsibility of conducting Skype interviews with applicants around the world. They argue it serves as a time and cost-efficient means of assessing applicants' facility with English expression generally and, more specifically, the technical details and big-picture implications of their research.

Through my observations of applicant interviews and their debriefing in these departments, however, it became quite clear that committee members not only assess students' ability to articulate science. Rather, as is common in other programs that conduct interviews, they also seek impressions of personality (e.g., "glowing"), cultural capital (e.g., "Not our most articulate, but she seemed quite poised"), and student interest in their program (e.g., "I don't think he is serious about us"). When I broached this latent function of interviewing with the physics admissions committee chair, he agreed, explaining that he tells committee members:

> If in doubt on [language skills], you know, do the interview. That will help us recruit and that will help us get a better impression. Plus, there will be awfully many Chinese students that look very, very similar. They have similar scores from similar universities, similar everything. They all get stellar recommendations because that's the style of the Chinese recommenders. And how exactly do we tell the difference? Well, we interview. And that gives you much, much, better sense, certainly. Each of these people that were just numbers and looked exactly the same, suddenly, they have different personalities and different interests and they become alive. So that's great. It really works very well and we're not restricting really strictly just to language screening. That's what you're going to tell them, that you're going to screen them for language. But frankly, we think a little broader.

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Given perceptions of minimal variance in Chinese applicants' test scores, letters of recommendation, and other formal credentials, this committee welcomes the opportunity to glean personality, interests, and other unique identifiers of the person behind the application. A similar perspective about the need to interview all serious prospects was expressed in another natural science program:

> People are more than their facts. You've just seen the tip of the iceberg. You don't really know them. They might be stunning underneath and could do breakthrough science, but it's also important that you get along with them and won't have to push them too hard.

The formal rationale about communication skills on science subject matter, which is defensible from the standpoint of the group's priorities, provides cover for consideration of additional criteria that may conflict with an underlying logic rooted in objectivity.

Among the three interviews I observed in these programs, the combination of communication skills, personality, ease with research, and interest in the in program that faculty inferred seemed to reinforce early impressions of the applicant in one case, call them into question in another, and completely upended the initial judgment in the third. He went from being borderline to the most highly recruited applicant in the pool.

In the case of the latter, the entire committee sat around a conference table in a tiny room, huddled around a laptop running Skype. During the course of the interview, I could feel the five men on the committee being persuaded as the applicant took charge of the interview. He eloquently and enthusiastically discussed his recent research experience and the rare skills he developed through the work. He graciously spoke about the Midwestern state research university he had attended. He weaved a compelling narrative about his non-traditional professional background in the arts that transformed their perceptions of it from a risk to a diversity contribution. Then, after answering the

committee's questions for him, he posed a series of thoughtful questions that revealed his confidence and close reading of the department website (which the committee interpreted as genuine interest in the program). The person facilitating the interview seemed to be a little taken aback by the applicant asking whether they were concerned about his age, which he knew was older than their typical students. One committee member responded, "Maturity is worth something," to which another added, "It's worth a lot." By the time they hung up, he had clearly won them over. The debriefing discussion was enthusiastic, filled with descriptions like "superb." The applicant presented himself as proficient in research, socially secure, personally interesting, and mature. Thus, he passed both the formal communication skills test *and* the informal test of personality and cultural capital.

Disciplinary theories, methods, and priorities for knowledge advancement do not only manifest in research and teaching. The evidence presented here reveals that ideas as broad as objectivity and efficiency are realized in evaluative activities such as admissions that may seem far removed from teaching and research. In their study of managers, Sevon and Valikangas (2012) challenge the notion that "ideas are passive instruments for choice," arguing that ideas animate actors and, by extension, the activities and choices in which they are engaged. Indeed, economists in the study seem to serve as spokespeople for the discipline's organizing principles of rational choice, utility, and risk aversion, and they use these very ideas to justify their practice of not interviewing applicants. Sociologists also decline to interview applicants before admission, but their rationales rest on values of equity and efficiency that are central to a range of sociological theories. In the humanities, decisions both to interview and not to interview trace back to awareness of subjectivity as underlying their shared interpretive research paradigm. And

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in physics and astrophysics, the importance of translating research to undergraduate students and the public heightens the importance they attach to communication skills, providing an official rationale for interviewing applicants, especially those whose first language is not English.

Particularistic Judgment in Low-Consensus Disciplines

Dynamics of faculty judgment are also revealed in fields with divergent disciplinary logics, which have weaker consensus about the methodological and theoretical core of the discipline. In interdisciplinary and low-consensus disciplines such as political science, committees may be composed of faculty whose Ph.D.'s (and, thus, their socialization) can range from mathematics to philosophy, each with their own preferred subject matter, theories, and methods for knowledge advancement. Absent consensus, judgment and allocation decisions are by definition more particularistic (Lindsey, 1976), a clear trend that I observed in admissions evaluations. Add to this the multiple forms of diversity on these committees, a chair's typical desire to serve as a facilitator of multiple interests rather than an agenda-setter, and the very large number of very academically qualified applicants to these departments, and these committees becomes ideal contexts in which to observe the role of individual tastes. I learned through observing admissions meetings in several low-consensus fields that particularistic, taste-based judgment plays out in three ways: the use of language to describe evaluations of applicants, longer debates over criteria and non-traditional applicants, and practice of homophily along multiple dimensions.[44] I will cover the first

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[44] Each of these findings is subject to the possibility that, because there is less consensus, that they are deliberating more and challenged to be explicit about how their individual

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two of these in the remainder of this chapter, and devote the next chapter specifically to the patterns and mechanisms of homophily that I observed.

Serial impressions and patterns of deliberation. In fields with weaker disciplinary logics, faculty employ what I call serial impressions to justify their ratings of applicants to other committee members. Drawing on an apparently bottomless arsenal of adjectives, some faculty develop lists of adjectives that summarize their judgment of a student based on the file. That faculty use adjectives to describe applicants sounds like a mundane matter, but what is less mundane is how explicitly these lists are laden with the tastes of those who compile them, and how these wide-ranging impressions are often admitted into the deliberations with the same weight of more universalistic criteria.

In political science, for example, the committee maintains a shared Google Doc with columns listing applicants' names, sub-fields, the first reader's scores, the first reader's notes, two more of such columns each for the other two readers, the average ratings, their standard deviations, and the final decisions on each person. During file review, the spreadsheet is available online for committee members to enter their ratings and comments. Then, at the meeting, it is projected on a screen at the front of the room.

The comment fields were filled with non-specific, opinionated adjectives. For example, the notes from two readers about two of the applicants contained: mature, sophisticated, honest, stunning, stellar, worry about fit, lukewarm, passionate, committed, thoughtful, moving, and able. A few rows down, the comments about an applicant include, 'Killer backstory,' 'quirky, which I like,' and the one that became a standing joke for the rest of the meeting, 'freaking genius.'

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tastes resulted in specific ratings. The causal arrow cannot be clearly established through the current research design.

In his introductory comments to the group, the committee chair noted that one of the functions of their discussion is to, "help calibrate one another's comments." This calibration is critical, because it quickly becomes clear that some committee members are more effusive with their written praise and harsher in their judgments than others, and at least one did not include any notes at all. Moreover, some committee members were more likely to accept others' serial impressions— devoid as they are of reference to the qualities that inspired them—as valid or trustworthy depictions of the applicants.

In other low-consensus programs I observed, a similar use of serial impressions took place through discussion, rather than a shared document. In classics and linguistics, most discussions of applicants took a predictable structure. Faculty would open the discussion of a new individual with one or two expressions of their overall impressions (e.g., "He wasn't the most exciting"), which would be followed by an attempt to jog others' memory about who the person is using institutional affiliation or research interests, then offer another round of adjectives to summarize the profile (e.g., "naïve," "creepy suck-up," "amazing"). Next, they would move into a discussion of the writing sample, letters of recommendation, and/or personal statements, which would then be summarized with several more judgments (e.g., "not entirely lucid," "brilliant," "misguided," "pretentious").[45] Discussion would continue, often comparing the applicant to others in the pool until, at some point, the admissions chair would gauge the energy and emotion around the table to make the final call about what action to take (e.g., "There doesn't seem to be much enthusiasm around the table," "So we're not very enthusiastic,"

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[45] Interestingly, in the two high-consensus committees I observed (philosophy and astrophysics), committee members almost never expressed impression-based judgments about the applicants, themselves, but rather only about the content of elements of the application deemed most important: the writing sample and letters of recommendation.

"Let's wait and see if anyone more interesting comes along.").[46] By iterating between individuals' *impressions* of the case and the *details* of the case that inspire those impressions, differences of opinion are worked out and, ultimately, enthusiasm for or against the applicant builds. Building serial impressions is, in essence, a mechanism for translating individual judgment into collective consensus.

Worldview moments on merit and diversity. In the departments I studied, differences among faculty in the research methods and theories they use do not prevent them from getting along on a day-to-day basis, or even becoming friends. A quantitative linguist buys a large coffee for a qualitative linguist on the committee so they will both make it through the three-hour admissions meeting ahead. An experimental and a theoretical astrophysicist plan a play date over the weekend for their children. Within the departments I studied, it is not so much a "gulf of mutual incomprehension" (Snow, 1952) that separates scholars from different intellectual traditions as a difference in worldviews despite their residence in the same organizational space.[47] Yet a generation of research has found that by endowing their members with worldviews and epistemologies, disciplinary cultures and evaluation are inextricably linked (Becher and Trowler, 1989; Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Lamont, 2009; Swales, 2004). The work of collective evaluation, especially defending one's ratings and advocating for particular individuals, primes scholars to recognize and engage the worldview differences that most of the time remain comfortably latent.

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[46] Applicants whom the committee reads as enthusiastic are more likely to be perceived with enthusiasm.

[47] Indeed, if we accept Abbott's (2001) argument about the fractal nature of knowledge within disciplines, even high-consensus fields are characterized by a modicum of intellectual heterogeneity (e.g., the rise of behavioral economics to explain apparent deviations from rational choice).

Weaker underlying intellectual consensus manifests as what I call worldview moments, when scholars realize that the differences in how they evaluate an individual stem from different assumptions on intellectual, theoretical, and metaphysical matters. As the lack of underlying consensus crystallizes and they recognize that agreeing to disagree will not move them any closer to a decision, the basis for deliberations often shifts to power relations within the committee and department. For example, advocacy by individuals who lean on a minority epistemology or methodology for their rationale may not be able to withstand the strength of collective will from a critical mass of individuals whose methods have greater power in the department. Worldview moments provoked some of the strongest disagreements that I observed and, in some cases, led committees to settle for decision by majority vote in lieu of consensus.

The clearest worldview moments occurred as faculty with competing disciplinary logics debated how to assess merit in light of and in relation to the department's goal of encouraging diversity. I offer an extended illustration of one such episode in political science. It clearly depicts committee members managing their competing disciplinary logics, and reveals how these logics produce differences of opinion in how merit and diversity should be conceptualized and related.

Worldview moments on merit and diversity in political science. Political science includes a range of sub-field concentrations running the gamut from political theory/philosophy to mathematical modeling. In this way, the discipline can be thought of as low-consensus (Kuhn, 1962, 1977). However, one might say this is a fairly high-consensus department in a low-consensus field. Historically, the department has been known for its strength in statistics, with one participant remarking to me, "We are a hard-

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line quantitative program." Indeed, all doctoral students except those admitted to study theory are very strongly encouraged to take a statistics sequence in their first year.

Admissions committees in this department typically look to quantitative GRE scores as an indicator of students' likelihood of success with the statistics sequence. On this year's committee of eight, a full professor pseudonymed David[48] explained how scores are typically interpreted. "Lots of eyebrows are raised if both are around the fiftieth percentile. But if you're above sixty and one is high, I think you're totally solid and no one is going to bat an eye." However, if it were up to Thomas, this year's admissions chair and a political theorist, the department would not even collect applicants' GRE scores. He has taken seriously the messages conveyed in the university's training for those involved with graduate admissions. These messages are substantively akin to those in the two other universities in which I collected data, discussing the barrier to diversity that heavily weighting the GRE can pose, and the importance of holistic, individualized evaluation.

Committee disagreement over whether/how GRE scores should be interpreted and weighted revealed the challenge of competing norms. In the group's initial meeting, Thomas presented his plan for the admissions process, and suggested how committee members might weigh various criteria. He "discouraged" them from using the GRE, noting research from a study at Yale University that concluded the only thing they predict is first year grades. He also remarked that the graduate college is only collecting the scores because some departments still want to use them. At this, Roger, a full professor on the committee who conducts quantitative work, interrupted, "I want to respectfully

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[48] I assign pseudonyms to members of the committee when relaying episodes from admissions meetings in order to better represent the exchanges.

disagree. Evidence from the research on the GRE can't give advice to committees like ours because those studies use censored samples consisting only of those students who were admitted." This was the first time that someone other than the chair had spoken since the official beginning of the meeting. David, who is also a statistician, affirmed this interpretation of the research, adding, "I myself am going to use the GREs." After an uncomfortable silence, Linda, an associate professor, inquires, "What about people who are in, say, the 40th percentile?" Thomas notes that traditionally there "has been sort of an informal 50th percentile threshold," but a junior faculty member, Emilia, chimes in that she agrees with the two senior statisticians. Recognizing her expertise in these matters, Thomas affirms, "And you're the methodologist here. However, I do strongly discourage you from using it as the first and/or only threshold, as some sort of a litmus test." After another period of silence, he moves on to another topic, the question unresolved in an apparent agreement to disagree.

Apart from the question of the GRE's validity, this discussion is a prime example of a worldview moment intersecting with power dynamics born of methodological majority-minority viewpoints and seniority in the department. According to my observations and participant reflections on it in follow-up interviews, when a senior scholar with deep expertise in quantitative research reported a critical interpretation of the GRE study in a way that boosted the apparent reliability and validity of a criterion in which several already believed, it empowered other quantitatively minded people to speak up too. I noted that there was no discussion of the particular study by Sternberg and Williams (1997), and thus no discussion of how the authors had anticipated and

discussed the very critique that these committee members had raised.[49] One of the two

senior scholars described to me his impressions of Thomas and this debate over how

research should inform criteria.

> He's a brilliant guy. Also, his heart is in the right place, so when he hears
> evidence from Yale, he believes it. This is just what he's waiting to hear, and so
> he believes it and he doesn't approach it in a critical way. Roger on the other
> hand has done this stuff. This is his bread and butter. He knows instantly that
> this is a flawed study. Why did it even get published? Is it just because a lot of
> people want to believe it?

His comments suggest skepticism not only of the research study discussed in the meeting,

but also of the motives of those who marshal its findings in striving to downplay GRE

scores.

In conversation with me, Thomas recognized others' decades of experience with

quantitative research surely informed how they approached admissions and GRE scores.

He also acknowledged they had "a perfectly reasonable argument" in regards to the study

from Yale, but more discussion was merited of the study's nuances than actually

occurred. Finally, as I had also perceived, Thomas felt that this was a moment in which

worldview and power dynamics in the group both became salient through some

committee members taking their cues from David. Although chair, Thomas was the only

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[49] The study in question, published by Robert Sternberg and Wendy Williams in 1997, analyzed GRE scores in relation to a number of academic outcomes and other admissions criteria for 167 psychology current and recently graduated psychology students at Yale University. The median correlation coefficient of GRE scores in four areas (Verbal, Quantitative, Analytical, and Subject) in predicting first year grades was .17, with the subject test (not the quantitative) bearing the strongest relationship. GRE scores only weakly predicted "other aspects of graduate performance: ratings of analytical, creative, practical, research, and teaching abilities by primary advisers and ratings of dissertation quality by faculty readers" (p. 637). The authors note "substantial" standard deviations and score ranges of 550, 520, 400, and 360 points (Sternberg and Williams, 1997, pp. 636-637).) They also note that the censored range of GRE scores observed would attenuate the odds of finding significant relationships.

faculty member on the committee firmly committed to downplaying GRE scores, and felt his minority viewpoint was essentially overruled. In the course of member checking, two other committee members shared this interpretation of the incident, one remarking that it was the clearest indication of a worldview moment in their work together.

Somewhat surprisingly to me, the issue of test score interpretation did not resurface until the very end of a very long meeting in which the committee created the lists of applicants who would be admitted and wait-listed. They frequently cited GRE scores in their rationales for high and low ratings, to little challenge. Without disagreement about an individual's admission that stemmed *primarily* from their disagreement about how GRE scores should be treated, it seemed they could agree to disagree about how those scores should be used. Score use could be treated as a theoretical issue.

However, like the other two universities I studied, this one has an early deadline for nominating admitted students for diversity fellowships. With an eye on the urgency of the deadline, the committee wanted to make a decision on an unconventional applicant who would be eligible for the fellowship. They did not explicitly discuss the details about what made him eligible for the fellowship, except for attending a local college that rarely enrolls students in their program. He had a generally strong file and the earnest endorsement of 1-2 non-committee faculty in the department who had met with him; however, his quantitative GRE scores were under the 20th percentile. "How to think about his scores" was, in Thomas's reflections on this episode, "the closest we came to conflict" in the course of working together. Their worldview differences of course unresolved, and with the issue of how test scores should (not) be used in determining

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admission, the committee struggled for over 20 minutes with whether or not to admit this individual.

Emilia was participating in the meeting via Skype and initiated the conversation, arguing in a harsh tone that there was no basis for admitting a student with such low GRE scores. She reminded the group that all students except those in the theory concentration are essentially required to take a statistics sequence, and that his expressed research interests do not clearly situate him as a theorist. She worried that, "When I see him in the intro stats class, I see him failing." Picking up on her risk aversion, Thomas countered, "All students are gambles in lots of ways. The point is to get local knowledge. Yes, he is problematic on conventional measures, but those are unreliable in this circumstance." David proposed a compromise, that "putting him on the wait list would be a gesture." Linda interrupted him, and David piped up, "Let me finish. Some indicators are unreliable, but less than 20th percentile is scary. Less than the 20th percentile is not good."

After a long silence, Thomas offered, "I would read it slightly differently. He is less prepared than the rest of the cohort, which is his biggest risk." Citing Claude Steele's research on stereotype threat, he noted that mentoring would be very important if they chose to admit him. At this, David also registered his concern about whether he will "make it through the quant sequence," to which Thomas emphatically responded, "But remember he doesn't *need* to do the quant sequence if he goes the theory route." Still, Thomas admitted both that the student's scores suggested underpreparation and that he didn't like the idea of "throwing him into a deep pond" with students whose average preparation seemed to be much greater. One of the three graduate students on the

committee then spoke up, affirming the possibility that mentoring could help address the applicant's level of preparation, but also questioning whether there was an individual who might clearly serve as his mentor. Thomas noted that a faculty member with similar interests had already volunteered to serve in this capacity, which produced another long silence.

They were, very understandably, tired and a little edgy at this point. They had been working intently together for almost three hours after the end of the workday. The sun had gone down and the only light in the room for nearly an hour had been the unnatural glare produced by their laptop screens and projected image of the applicant rating spreadsheet. Empty pizza boxes, paper plates, and red Solo cups littered their large table. Perhaps fitting for these political scientists, the space had come to feel more like a war room than a conference room. Clearly it was time for everyone to go home.

"So, what do we think?" asked Emilia, who had started the conversation. Thomas proposed a roll call and, to the group's surprise, the student was admitted by a margin of one vote. In the end, although they did not achieve consensus, they achieved a decision on a challenging borderline case—their intellectual worldview differences subordinated to their desires for collegiality, diversity, and getting the job done. Further emblematic of the group's ambivalence, however, the meeting ended with one individual commenting, "I'm really worried about what happens if he sinks."

The conversation revealed disagreement about whether to admit this student, about what the appropriate grounds for admitting a student with low GRE scores would be, and about what it would mean for a student to sink. However, all but one expressed the concern that a student with such an outlying score would not be set up for success

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among his peers, suggesting one goal of the selection process in this program is to

produce a class that performs at a similarly high level from the outset. Another point of

agreement concerned the importance of faculty mentoring to his prospects.

I asked several of the committee members in my sample about the question of

mentoring. Reflecting back on the committee discussion, David explained this concern:

> I think it is a moral obligation to tell him not to take the quantitative sequence… I think that if his advisor spends night and day tutoring him, he might overcome this… Anything could happen, but I'd say it's highly improbable…. The summer bridge program offsetting twenty years is kind of unlikely, but it undoubtedly will help…. It might raise you to the fiftieth percentile conceivably. From the nineteenth to the fiftieth percentile is a huge increase, but the students in this program are in the ninety-eighth percentile. It's going to be a very tough competition.

Linda explained that she would not have voted for him if a faculty member had not

committed to serve as mentor:

> I think in the end I felt okay with it… If over five were in favor, I was at like a 4.5 or slightly under. And I decided not to make sort of any problem with it just because I was very respectful of the committee and I felt [pause] the fact that there was this professor here already who was willing to sort of work with this student. I mean if there hadn't been that it would have been like, absolutely not. Because this person is likely to get lost and then somebody is going to be, in some sense, stuck, on top of everything else we're doing. Then it takes our time away from our research, our other students and all this kinds of stuff. But given that there was somebody who was really saying, 'You know I'm going to work with this person,' in the end I felt okay with the decision.

David and Linda both identify a role for mentoring in admitting students whose formal

credentials seem like outliers. Yet whereas David worried that mentoring would be

insufficient to offset the applicant's competitive disadvantage among his peers, and might

recreate within their department the same inequalities observed in society, Linda worried

about how that mentoring would burden faculty. Her comments suggest a base posture of

ambivalence— one that I heard widely expressed— toward working with students who

have less preparation than their peers. With so many well-prepared students, faculty in these programs indeed seem to prefer students whose success is less dependent upon their efforts.

In conclusion, one of the graduate students on the political science committee described support of diversity to me as "a platitude, a non-controversial stance." In both this committee and in others, his comments ring true. It is easy to *claim* support for diversity or any other institutionalized value when it is the socially appropriate position, when there are no competing interests, and when it requires nothing of you. And they want to support diversity. In the context of a discussion about racial diversity and belief in GRE scores as a predictor of success, David laid out for me the dilemma he and his colleagues perceive:

> We all voted for Obama. I doubt if there's anyone in the department that did not vote for Obama. And we want to believe sort of, 'You can pick them [i.e., applicants] at random and they'll all do well' and it just isn't true. I mean there's very strong evidence.

In spite of their commitment to all that Barack Obama represented to the country in 2008, David and other quantitatively oriented scholars on the committee believe the GRE is a trustworthy indicator of success, and this belief complicates the department's espoused commitment to "diversity candidates" (with all that I argued in Chapter 5 that such students represent). Indeed, this episode highlights that it is much more controversial to support diversity when conventional metrics of excellence are not fulfilled and conflicting intellectual worldviews are involved. Yet I would argue this is not just a matter of ideas that are out there about students. To quantitative researchers, the legitimacy of their own work rests on the validity of statistical inference, so it is no

surprise that they are more inclined to think of GRE scores are "very strong evidence,"

and to think of quantitative preparation as more central to academic success.

At the heart of Bourdieu's theory of taste is the claim that elites misrecognize

arbitrary characteristics as legitimate bases for allocating power, opportunity, and status.

In this case, under a disciplinary logic that privileges quantitative evidence and ways of

knowing, faculty tend to magnify the legitimacy and import of GRE scores, and call into

question the research that suggests they predict little more than first year grades (Kuncel,

et al., 2001; Sternberg and Williams, 1997). However, the case of a low-consensus

discipline like political science reveals that disciplinary logics are not the only decision-

making logic to which committee members defer. Where divergent logics are present,

the overall disciplinary paradigm is weaker and the lack of consensus compels reliance

on fundamental academic norms like collegiality and democratic governance. However,

status comes to play an important role too, in the form of majority-minority and seniority

politics. Group disagreement in the course of weighing the merits of an opinion brings

with it uncertainty that motivates reliance on members' status characteristics (Melamed

& Savage, 2013).

Disconfirming Evidence for Disciplinary Effects on Judgment

To conclude this chapter, I discuss themes in the disconfirming evidence as well

as other nuances to the findings about disciplinary differences and taste. Although

intellectual differences were behind many of the strongest disagreements I observed, I

would be remiss not to note that these differences are not salient to most interactions. In

many cases, scholars from different backgrounds come to similar judgments of

applicants— albeit not necessarily for the same reasons. An associate professor in the social sciences relayed her experience with this:

> I've been on other committees where we're judging work, whether it's internal promotions or candidates that we're looking to interview or something like that. Graduate admissions is the most work, and I feel most comfortable with my other committee members decisions. I feel most trusting of them. John and I have very, very different backgrounds, for example, and yet I was always surprised at how often we agreed, even on the people that I thought, 'Okay, they're going to be like what was she thinking?' That was how I felt about this guy who came from the Army last year. I was ready to come in and fight for him and then it turns out John really liked him too.

An open approach to holistic evaluation, one that does not specify a shared set of criteria, norms, or standards by which faculty rate individuals, can result in more conflict over specific cases. However, it also ensures that there are many ways for faculty to conclude a students is a "1" or a "2."

In addition to paradigm strength, other factors condition the influence of a disciplinary logic on individuals, departments, and committees. The first pertains to the focus of a department relative to its discipline. Burton Clark (1987) wrote eloquently about the organizational elements of departments, noting that departments take their cues from a range of constituencies, not only the discipline, while remaining "the local rock on which the power of voice is based in academia" (pp. 64-65). I find departments are a locus for the expression of their members' idiosyncratic intellectual tastes and agendas, sometimes irrespective of the broader discipline's direction. Indeed, several departments I studied are self-described "boutique programs" that intentionally position themselves outside the mainstream of their discipline to engage in specific intellectual projects (and thus draw faculty and students with specific interests). And, as mentioned earlier, the majority of scholars in the political science program that I studied conduct quantitative

research despite the discipline's relatively broad paradigm. In such boutique programs or others departments whose focus is not representative of the broader discipline, we can expect a weaker role of disciplinary logics in admissions evaluations.

Disciplinary logics also strengthen over the course of one's career. We know that over time, academic leaders approach their work with increasing cognitive complexity, to which team or committee-based work only adds (Neumann, 1991, 2012). Yet when it comes to evaluating prospective scholars and their work, a current of stability underlies this complexity. The academic discipline is a source of socialization early in the career and simultaneously an outlet and basis for knowledge construction through teaching and research. Over the years, it becomes a stronger lens for assessing graduate students and faculty. Senior scholars stand firm on their use of discipline-relevant criteria and practices that younger scholars treat flexibly. Full and emeritus philosophers, for example, regard a writing sample of pre-professional quality as a bottom line for admission, whereas younger scholars do not expect the same level of polish, but rather try to infer signals of potential or "spark" from the writing sample. In biology, physics, and astrophysics, senior scholars expect excellent grades in advanced coursework in the discipline. Younger scholars in the sciences, on the other hand, seem more accepting of scholars with non-traditional trajectories who have experience with undergraduate research. Establishment in the discipline reinforces its principles as common sense and subject matter as a prerequisite common core that merits protection in an intellectual world marked by rapid change on other fronts (e.g., technological, demographic).

Of course, the disciplines themselves are also dynamic. On admissions committees, senior scholars are often *de facto* torchbearers for the interests of the

discipline as it has been, whereas younger scholars promote the discipline as it is becoming or wishes to become. This is revealed in privileging (a) high GRE scores and grades in disciplinary coursework versus demonstrated experience with original research; (b) research interests that are "central" to the field versus "innovative"; and (c) individuals with standard academic trajectories through a major in the field versus non-traditional trajectories lending themselves to unique perspective on the discipline.

I do not mean to suggest that more experienced faculty are out of touch or regressive, but simply that their approach to evaluation may serve a different disciplinary stewardship function than that of less experienced committee members and junior faculty. They are just as welcoming of fresh talent, but they are more conservative, in the best sense of the word, of the discipline's core methods and theories. As exemplified in political science, when senior scholars' authority on committees intersects with their fealty for disciplinary logics, the power of disciplinary foundations in admissions evaluations is reinforced.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced the idea of disciplinary logics to describe how faculty members use the prevailing theories and methods of their discipline to defend their admissions criteria and practices as well as their tastes for particular applicants. I began by outlining how disciplines and institutional logics are analytically congruent in organizing faculty activity and cognition. Their shared cultural function limits what individuals are expected to know, helping actors to narrow priorities. Structurally, they guide organizational demands with material consequences such as hiring, restructuring, and resource allocation. Further, and most fundamentally for faculty evaluation, they

accomplish the cultural and structural functions by setting boundaries on what will count as valued knowledge and practice among an organization's members.

Theory on institutional logics thus provides a mechanism for explaining how and why tastes for particular criteria and applicants may be contingent on disciplines' prevailing methods, theories, and problems. Table 6.2 summarized key evaluative scripts associated with the disciplinary logics in three high-consensus fields. Confronted with a wide range of information about applicants and, usually, little guidance about how information should be commensurated into broader judgments, disciplines subconsciously focus committee members' attention in ways that carry legitimacy in the field as currently constituted.

By comparing case studies across subject field areas, I learned that faculty attend to applicant characteristics relevant to their epistemologies, justify their judgments using scripts that consist of the language of prevailing theories, and privilege applicants whose interests and achievements align with what success in the discipline demands. Disciplinary logics shape tastes by imposing norms of appropriateness that set boundaries on the current and emerging priorities of the field. As such, they help explain the almost unassailable influence of appeals to "fit."

Similarly, faculty work in a context absent of much formal policy about the admissions process,[50] and disciplinary logics provide cultural frames for ad hoc policy. In outlining disciplinary variation in the cases for whether or not to interview applicants,

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[50] Klitgaard (1985) cogently describes admissions policy in graduate-level departments as, "subjective appraisal by faculty members with little help from empirical studies or from clear departmental guidelines. The essence of a 'policy,' insofar as one exists, is not the delineation of desired attributes and appropriate weights for imperfect measures, but a process designed to involve a variety of faculty members in choosing their future admits" (p. 32).

I offered just one example of a structural aspect of admission that faculty rationalize using disciplinary logics. I also provided an extended example of how ad hoc policy development occurred in one committee, as faculty in a low-consensus discipline struggled to (a) achieve a common set of evaluation criteria and (b) process their individual judgments into a list of admitted students.

Whether in reference to the criteria or process of evaluation, however, I argued that what may seem restrictive, exclusive, or downright discriminatory to outsiders may be perfectly logical to insiders because it traces to norms and values that have been institutionalized as common sense. This points back to the fundamentally cultural foundation of disciplines for, "Any notion of logic is valid only within a particular cultural milieu" (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 65). For professionals whose work and identity is defined by intellectual endeavor, disciplinary logics are central to faculty judgment.

My analysis of the cases in strong, moderate, and low-consensus social science disciplines also clarified that disciplinary logics are stronger in higher-consensus disciplines. Consensus is at the heart of disciplinary paradigms and, consistent with prior research, I observed that intellectual diversity is associated with more particularistic tastes among individuals and more disagreement within committees. It could be that faculty in higher-consensus fields are more likely to take the disciplinary logic for granted, and thus employ it sub-consciously, or that consensus around the content of the logic and acceptance of its effect obviates the need to discuss it. Either way, we see less deliberation in high-consensus programs, generally, and certainly less deliberation about appropriate criteria and process specifically.

In low-consensus disciplines, individual taste is not something to bracket (as in philosophy, economics, and physics), but rather to accept and expect. I propose serial impressions and worldview moments as two mechanisms of collective evaluation in lower consensus disciplines. Serial impressions—linked sets of adjectives about applicants that may be divorced from evidence in the file—are a discursive means of translating individual judgment into collective assessments. They are employed in low-consensus departments to help reviewers connect their judgment of a file with others' judgments, yet serial impressions bear the same weight as universalistic criteria.

I also provided an extended example from political science that exemplifies how professors' intellectual differences become salient to evaluation in worldview moments and are negotiated in the context of borderline cases. Negotiation occurs not through an effort to resolve the differences of opinion but rather through traditional power channels such as deference to seniority and majority. Particularly given the stronger reliance of senior scholars on disciplinary logics, such power dynamics may encourage a tendency toward the status quo. However, as I will discuss in the next chapter, the particularistic tastes that are accepted in low-consensus disciplines may also aggregate in patterns by which new interests gain a foothold.

Chapter 7: Four Homophilies: Individual-Level Preferences in Low Consensus Disciplines

Having discussed decision making as well as merit and diversity across disciplines, and then analyzed how disciplines structure judgment, the final chapter of findings compares individual-level preferences within admissions committees. In mixed and lower-consensus disciplines that engage in more particularistic evaluation, I observed four specific types of homophily (defined here as preference for individuals whom one subjectively perceives to be like oneself [Tajfel and Turner, 1986]). Pedigreed, cool, international and socially mobile faculty display preferences for applicants with similar qualities as themselves. These homophilic preferences inform evaluation through specific channels:

1)   Providing grounds for claims of fit and match with disciplinary focus and department expertise;
2)   Generating enthusiasm or sympathy for applicants that motivates both individual ratings and advocacy in committee deliberations;
3)   Persuading a committee member of her/his unique ability to judge an applicant's potential;
4)   Stimulating discussion about what constitute appropriate criteria for evaluation.

Across all four types of homophily I observed, faculty members indirectly validate themselves and their own experiences by validating prospective students with similar profiles.

Some homophily I observed involves identities and preferences that would reproduce the academic establishment, as we have known it, such as possession of an elite academic pedigree and/or self-presentation aligned with a cultural archetype of cool

or hip. Individual-level preference for fellow scholars with these characteristics has a clear cultural basis, conforming to DiMaggio's (1992) characterization of organizational recruitment as cultural matching. However, a more diverse professoriate is very slowly taking shape in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2003), and the male, White, and wealthy establishment eroding as the dominant academic demographic. Concomitant to these broader trends, international and socially mobile scholars also display homophilic preferences for applicants with similar characteristics. Furthermore, they encourage their colleagues toward broader interpretations of such considerations as institutional affiliation, nation of origin, and diversity. They advocate both for applicants and for aspects of admissions review.

Revisiting March's logic of appropriateness (i.e., in which decisions proceed from assessments of what is appropriate for an individual with a particular identity in a particular context) in relationship to what we know about social identity and social boundaries helps to frame these findings. Individuals both construct identities and have identities imposed upon them (March, 1994; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). The plural language I use is intentional, for faculty approach applicant evaluation from multiple identity standpoints. Depending upon the situation and the group with whom he finds himself, different aspects of this identity will become salient, for identity is not uniform or static, but rather multidimensional and dynamic (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Defining identity is an act of classification, as Zerubavel (1991) explains:

> [It] involves a form of mental differentiation that entails a fundamental distinction between us and the rest of the world… Whenever we classify things, we always attend some of their distinctive features in order to note similarities and contrasts among them while ignoring all the rest as irrelevant... What to stress among what

is typically a 'plethora of viable alternatives' is largely a social decision, and being socialized entails knowing which features are salient (Zerubavel, 1991, p. 13, 77).

Thus, in the context of admissions, multiple aspects of one's identity may emerge as salient as s/he evaluates prospective students, discusses those evaluations with other their colleagues (whose own identities have also likely been triggered through evaluation), and seeks agreement about an appropriate action in light of this complexity.

This chapter is organized in four sections. First, I present evidence *that* participants practice and recognize the tendency for personal similarities to shape professional judgment. Then, the majority of the chapter is devoted to detailed descriptions of the four types of homophily that I observed in at least four of the five moderate or low-consensus disciplines. Next, I describe efforts by international and socially mobile faculty to rewrite prevailing scripts of merit through their advocacy of applicants who share these aspects of their background. Finally, I present disconfirming evidence of heterophily (i.e., valuing cultural difference, rather than similarity). I did not set out to study homophily, but as reflected in the research questions, I did hope to apprehend how faculty judge applicants, how individual-level preferences affect admissions outcomes, and in which disciplinary contexts individual preferences are most salient. This chapter therefore helps fulfill the broader aims of this study by highlighting individual-level preferences and their tendency to have a stronger effect on deliberations and outcomes in lower-consensus disciplines. The findings here also point to ways that cultural similarity can not only encourage the negative effects of social reproduction (see for example DiMaggio & Garip, 2012), but may also challenge it. Cultural similarity is a microfoundation for counter-scripts that broaden how colleagues interpret criteria that reproduce the *status quo.*

Faculty Awareness and Practice of Homophily

Homophily occurs subconsciously or reflexively at the level of individual judgment, yet faculty are consciously concerned *about* it in their colleagues. In political science, astrophysics, classics, linguistics, similarities even became an explicit topic of deliberations. For example, one astrophysicist recalled the advocacy of his colleagues in the admissions meeting, "That's how people subconsciously would be attracted to someone—if they see similar interests, or if they see similar sets of skills or similar emphasis or a similar way of thinking." Later in the interview, he raised the topic again:

> Another interesting thing was the divergence. Different people had very different ways of assessing someone's worth. In particular, the people's whose background was in theoretical physics or theoretical astrophysics were more likely to rate a theoretical astrophysicist higher than an observational, experimental astrophysicist. Where I thought they had similar overall qualifications.
>
> There was someone who—his background sounded very impressive. And he listed the projects that he had done. But ultimately, it came down to the fact that he was capable of integrating on a computer, differential equations, and that ultimately was the basis of all his projects. As an undergraduate that's a great thing to be able to do. It's a skill you could have and you could do a lot of very interesting things with it. But ultimately, that's what his ability was. And this was a person who theorists on the committee thought was the greatest person ever. We had this guy who was working on building some instrumentation for telescope—who I thought in the terms of the skills he had—the skills he had were certainly equivalent to the skills this other guy had… Some of the theorists in the committee looked down upon this person who was an instrumentalist. They were subconsciously thinking that people who worked in their particular sub-field were somehow more talented than this other person.

Participants were nearly always better able to describe their colleagues' reliance on similarities as a basis for judgment than their own. When asked directly about how their experience and identities inform their judgment, however, most respondents could

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immediately point to specific examples, which they sought to justify through a variety of rationales.

The two philosophy committees that I observed explicitly discussed— and even joked about— the need to downplay their own experiences, identities, and self-interest as justifications for their preferences.

> There are people who write original papers and they show that they're… interested in a topic you're interested in. That has something to do with what makes people catch fire about an applicant. If they write a good paper about a topic I know something about and I'm interested, I can then appreciate the virtues of this paper. This person is on to a subject. They obviously show they're smart because they're interested in the same thing that I am. [laughing].

Expertise and attraction therefore intersect but, in their opinion, so do expertise and capacity to judge quality.

Both philosophy committees try to maximize the intersection of expertise and quality of judgment by ensuring each applicant's writing sample is read by a faculty member with knowledge of the subject area. They accept preference for self-similarity as an inescapable dynamic of human professional judgment, but worry that a student's work might be discounted because of a reviewer's inability to bracket their personal biases. They thus structure the process to minimize that risk and instead try to engage the expertise to judge that intellectual similarity offers.

Participants in other programs also resign themselves to homophily's occurrence in graduate admissions, but believe that the best way to mitigate its effect is to construct committees that are diverse along several dimensions. One scientist elaborated, "It's valuable for our committee to have a diversity of backgrounds of people from—you know— from the types of schools that they went to school at. I think that helps. People tend to view things through their own experience." On a committee of five, for example,

what may look like an outlier rating from one individual can seem plausible when coming

from two or three people. Similarly, one person may struggle to build enthusiasm for

borderline applicants in deliberation, but two or three can shift the tenor or direction of a

discussion.

Having made the case that homophily is practiced, I transition now into

describing the four forms of homophily that were most prevalent in the departments I

studied. Although I coded for these forms of homophily across all programs studied and

I observed an appreciation of academic pedigree across all programs, it was only in

moderate or low-consensus fields that there was clear evidence in the interviews and

observations of the three other forms (See Table 7.1).

Table 7.1. Moderate or Low-consensus Departments and Evidence of Homophily

	Pedigree	Cool	Socially Mobile	International
Astrophysics	x	x	x	x
Biology	x		x	x
Classics	x	x		x
Linguistics	x	x		x
Political Sci	x	x	x	x
Sociology	x		x	x

Homophily of the Pedigreed

Unsurprisingly for these highly ranked programs, there is a strong draw to admit

students who bear traditional markers of academic prestige and belonging, such as Phi

Beta Kappa membership, recommendation letters from superstars in the field, and

especially degrees from elite institutions. Faculty members with well-pedigreed

backgrounds of their own downplay the associations these credentials have with

socioeconomic status, perceiving such students are worthy of close consideration for

several reasons. Some project their own professional success onto the potential of such

applicants, believing their own early honors set them on a path to later accomplishments.

Others make cultural associations between prestigious undergraduate institutions and

their own programs, believing applicants from top-tier colleges and universities have, as

one humanities professor put it, "been pre-adapted to a program like ours." A third group

recalls the difficulty of their own admission into elite undergraduate institutions— and

the perceived intelligence of their peers there— as evidence that today's graduates from

such institutions must truly be "better." Brian illustrates:

> I was the best at math and physics in my high school, probably the best in five or ten years. That may be a big fish in a very small pond. Then you get into a bigger pond. I got to college and was an undergraduate at MIT. The guy sitting next to me in my intro physics class had been on the American Physics Olympiad Team and was clearly better than I was. I'm good but there's always someone better… A letter that says, 'This is the best person graduating from Stanford or Princeton' means a lot more than, 'This is the best person graduating from Ohio State or University of Texas…' We certainly know the caliber of people in there. There was one guy who we admitted that a professor from Princeton said—this is the best undergrad I've ever worked with. That means a whole lot more coming from MIT than coming from a lesser school. MIT and Harvard are the places where, frankly, the real genius-type people wind up.

Finally, a small group employs human capital logic to argue that applicants with degrees

from their peer institutions have a superior credential because they received higher

quality training. Brian also mentioned, "Coming from the places that are our

competition, we know what kind of background they'll be getting." The consistent trend

across these rationales, however, is the tendency to prefer applicants who fit a profile that

is, at least in part, represented in committee members' own academically distinguished biographies.

The preference for applicants with elite academic pedigrees was particularly pronounced in the classics program I observed, and framed in essentially human capital arguments about training for scholarship in the field. This year's committee members all came up through the American or British scholarly establishment—some from birth— and all but one received an early start in learning ancient languages. Upon my asking in interviews about how they came to be a professor in classics, several also mentioned the important socializing effect that travel to and study in Athens, Rome, and England had on them. Observations of the committees confirmed they actively sought this experience in students. Commensurate with their own backgrounds, they not only weighted the undergraduate institution attended, honors or awards earned, and frame of reference providers, but also years of training in Greek and Latin, travel to and study in the ancient world they study, and connections to the British universities that have been at the forefront of classics scholarship for centuries. The discipline's history, its geographic and institutional loci, as well as which schools and postsecondary institutions provide early training in Greek and Latin thus encourage a system that, in a classic Bourdieuian sense, defines cultural capital in a way that privileges the socioeconomically advantaged. Moreover, two faculty acknowledged the structural reality that relatively few colleges and universities even grant bachelor's degrees in Greek or Latin, and that this work is isolated in very selective institutions.

Committee members assert the evaluative script of risk aversion to argue that students need to have deep, formal training in both ancient and modern languages to be

successful at the graduate level. As in so many other disciplines in the sample (e.g.,

political science, economics, sociology, physics, astrophysics, and linguistics) a lack of

training is specifically associated with risks that accompany not starting out on equal

footing with one's peers. Equal footing in coursework is associated with success in core

competencies, which many perceive as the foundation for independent scholarship.[51] An

associate professor of classics illustrates this in her field:

> We definitely want to know how many years have they studied the ancient
> languages and how many modern languages do they have, because if they don't
> have that, they're not going to be starting out at a certain level here. They won't
> be able to read any of the scholarship, the foreign language scholarship. They'll
> struggle in their classes.

In these elite departments, the desire is for effort without too much struggle and for

similarly shaped learning curves. Paula, an associate professor of classics, commented

about students who attended less prestigious institutions that, "I mean you can see how

torn we are because, um, we want those people. We want them encouraged. We would

like to support them. [Pause] On the other hand, they're nearly always less of a sure

thing." Distinguishing herself from such applicants in these comments through language

like "those people," Paula later made a point to deny "bias" in the department, but also

admitted the benefits she personally experienced from her family and well-resourced

undergraduate institution:

> We don't have any kind of bias. We're not, you know, 'We only take people'
> [trails off]. We don't say that and we would never say that we only take people
> from Ivy League schools or from universities as compared to colleges. Because
> that's not, you just never know who the exciting student is going to be. And it's
> in no way a guarantee of where they went to college. The only thing that can
> help, that can be an issue, is students who've gone to really good, um, sort of,
> who have had certain advantages either, um, either support from family or support

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[51] Given the small range in grades typically assigned for graduate courses, small
increments may have greater social meaning.

out of a department, have a kind of a confidence that I just myself feel you really need to get through graduate school.

There may not be an explicit bias against less renowned colleges and universities, but there is a preference for the training and confidence of students coming out of selective undergraduate institutions. These perceived outcomes become meanings associated with the criterion (i.e., undergraduate institution attended) and the warrants for its consideration.

Self-taught students in ancient languages and those who attended less prestigious institutions (which included numerous state flagships in the year that I studied the program) need to earn a post-baccalaureate or masters degree to be competitive in the admissions pool. These programs, according to one respondent,

> …started to help students in Art History or in Archeology who decided too late that they wanted to do Ancient Studies and didn't have the languages. But what happened was that actually it was classics students who decided they wanted to be even stronger in their languages before they applied.

Now a means to preserving classics students' competitive edge relative to newcomers in the field, these post-baccalaureate programs also come with high tuition and fees expenses that lend access issues of their own. In short, it is all but impossible to break into classics at the Ph.D. level without an undergraduate degree from an elite institution. Pedigree matters. A female junior faculty member describes the situation to me:

> [There is] a structure of privilege which is morally uncomfortable. I was doing an external review at an Ivy League university and we had a meeting with some of their graduate students, not all. And I was really struck that of the eight or so people who actually talked, probably half were Brits. And it came up in the conversation that three or four of the others were from one Ivy as undergraduates. Now, I did ask them and they had told me they had admitted somebody from a rural flagship university a couple of years before. You know if you get classics department students who have been trained in the British system and students from elite Ivy League schools, you can probably have very successful completion numbers. But it doesn't feel right.

In this year's pool, two individuals with self-taught Greek and Latin language skills made it to the short list, but their lack of formal training remained a major concern for the committee, and the committee opted not to send either through to the interview stage. By contrast, a senior scholar noted it has been "very rare not to have a senior thesis" among those admitted in recent years. Unlike fields like biology or sociology, which have multiple access points and in which non-traditional trajectories are acceptable or even valued, this classics program is more like a typical mathematics program, requiring an early start and years of experience in well-respected programs to be perceived as a credible applicant.

Homophily of the Cool

In addition to the old-school culture of the academy that homophily of the pedigreed reproduces, another form of cultural matching I observed in four programs encourages cultural characteristics recognized as cool, or hip, in the academy and/or in society. As I will explain more fully, this archetype involves self-presentation, technology use, manners of speaking, and novel research and personal profiles.

Faculty who displayed such preferences had carefully managed images, including a specific sense of style that set them apart from the mode. On one committee, for example, there were two individuals whom I came to think of as Euro cool. One attended the meeting wearing a fresh, short haircut, cherry red lipstick, and black scoop tank, vest, and blazer. From the table, she looked professional and polished, but when she got up for a drink, you could see she was also wearing leather pants. (By contrast, most of the other committee members wore jeans.) Others present as preppy cool. One young scholar's

apparel for both the meeting and our interview could have come straight off of a J.Crew model, including trendy tortoise shell glasses and a perfectly rumpled and untucked Oxford shirt under a camel wool sweater—all from expensive brands. Playing with the pedigreed, Ivy League style enables preppy cool individuals to navigate generational tastes in their departments, earning favor from senior scholars and graduate students alike.

Self-presentation is thus central to coolness, and it comes out not only in how they dress, but also how they speak and relate to one another. Cool faculty are savvy, with sophisticated social skills. They frequently describe people and things they like as "cool" rather than good, great, etc., providing a signal that they feel positively, but do not want to come across as too eager or passionate (which would not be cool). A certain detachment from the matters that others emotionally engage marks the cool scholars on these committees.

Technology can also be cool. Part of the way that cool scholars in 2011 and 2012 present is through technology use patterns, namely having multiple Apple products out on the table and casual talk of blogs and blogging. In one humanities committee, the gadgets on the table included one Dell and two Mac laptops, one iPad, and one iPod, in addition to an assortment of mobile phones. The strong presence of technology in the admissions process was not lost on the political science committee, which had the largest proportion of cool committee members. In that setting, a Google spreadsheet was projected on a screen throughout the meeting, and committee members Googled applicants and letter writers in the course of the meeting to gather additional information. In that meeting, a senior member observed, "Technology marches on. Everyone in here

has a laptop, some iPads, and some with laptops and iPads." Later in that meeting, three

people on the committee had a side conversation about the blogs they contribute to or

maintain.

But what makes an applicant cool to scholars who are, themselves, cool? For one,

some research interests and experiences are more compelling than others. In linguistics, a

student who intended to study emoticons (i.e., symbols, such as smiling faces, inserted in

text and email messages to add meaning to the syntax) was regarded as "really cool."

This committee was similarly taken by an applicant interested in conducting experimental

research on bilingual twins separated at birth. Field research or extended study in

unusual places might also be deemed cool, but not necessarily having been born in an

unusual place. As one cool graduate student committee member explained his order of

preference,

> If you grew up in a troubled part of the world or came from somewhere that you
> had to overcome some kind of hardship, that would matter. But I think in terms
> of going out in the field and doing research, if you already have experience in
> such a place that would be cool.

In astrophysics, new instruments generate money, energy, and fertile ground for the sort

of breakthroughs that "follow or even impose a fashion" as one committee member

summarized:

> Astrophysics has become such a large field that you have to be broad in order to
> understand what's interesting—what areas you may move your research [in order]
> to follow or even impose a fashion… For example if a new instrument is going to
> be built—you know exactly that it's going to revolutionize a certain number of
> fields. Why are the reasons for that? These projects are so large. It's not like
> someone can say, I'm going to understand this question in the lab. I'm going to
> set up my own lab to do this. This is a billion dollar project that usually the whole
> U.S. or international community will use. Students tend to understand where the
> landscape is--where they have to go--where are the sexy questions that people
> want answered.

Perhaps the only praise of research interests that can trump "cool" is "sexy," language reserved for topics that are timely, cutting-edge, and somewhat provocative. In contrast, a member of the classics committee audibly groaned about an applicant's research interests as he read from the personal statement, concluding, "He's really interested in something that others have done and done and done." The applicant was ultimately rejected.

Values associated with technology and research sometimes intersect. In a humanities department, a non-traditional student with "crummy grades" from Princeton admitted against the wishes of a majority of the committee, largely due to a cool member of the committee advocating for the writing skills he had demonstrated through a popular blog for the discipline that he had started. And in another case, a preppy cool committee member discussed his rating of a borderline applicant, explaining: "I would be willing to go up. I read this app right after another app in this concentration and wanted to be stingy with my 1's. Plus, she writes articles for Slate. Really cool." A Euro cool professor added, "She seems like an interesting person."

As these quotes indicate, applicants who are cool are easily distinguished from the scores or hundreds of other strong, solid applicants. This trend is not confined to cool committee members, but they do lead their colleagues in valuing people with unique experiences that provide a lens on the field. A preppy cool graduate student who has served on admissions before elaborated this point:

> I am attracted both to people who have been out there and have had a lot of experience and those who realize … something costly like, 'I'm leaving a lucrative job because I've been doing this and this and I realize I'm not really getting to the essence of the issue and I need to know more' or something like that, right? So there's something in the research statement that explains, 'I actually have a lot of knowledge in this, and I'm smart enough to know that I

don't know this, and this and I need this kind of environment.' So that kind of thing in a research statement means a lot to me.

This desire for unique professional experiences is desirable in both the humanities and social sciences.

Further illustrating the importance of holding a unique profile and perspective, one of the more insulting comments I heard also served as an opportunity for two committee members to affirm the superiority of their cultural preferences to one another. A junior scholar summarized: "He was strong in a conventional way. He was everything you look for, and nothing you weren't expecting," to which an associate professor added, with a chuckle, "Like a Ford." Perhaps unsurprisingly, this applicant was not admitted. To inspire enthusiasm, applicants must be perceived to be distinctive, with experiences and interests that others will not only affirm as intellectually substantive, but which they also *like*.

However, cool committee members expressed skepticism of applicants who seemed to be trying too hard to be unique or hip. To one of the cool graduate students on one committee, an application seemed "very buzzwordy—not much that was interesting, no research question identified. Not that impressive, but maybe I was in a bad mood. I think he's really smart, but really young with how he is throwing around –ism's." Here, too, we see the use of serial impressions to justify a low rating (i.e., buzzwordy, not interesting, not impressive, smart, young), with the only reference to observable properties of the application being the lack of research question identified and apparently rampant use of -ism's. I argued in Chapter 6 that disciplinary logics are characterized by the use of a common paradigm for evaluating applicants, and that low-consensus disciplines are more prone to particularistic, taste-based judgment. It seems that the

preferences of the cool within low-consensus disciplines are some of the *most* sensitive to the style of how an applicant presents herself.

In many cases, valuing an elite academic pedigree or the markers of being cool is also a taste for signals of wealth. Although the cultural content is different—Anglophilia vs. Apple-philia and aversions to self-training vs. conventional training— these two forms of homophily both reinforce the socioeconomic structure of privilege in advanced educational attainment and the dominance of American and western European values. By contrast, geographic and social mobility homophily are indicative of broadening these values and provide alternative interpretive frames on student credentials.

Geographic Homophily

All faculty and graduate students in the U.S. arguably participate in a global market for higher education and could strive to maximize the opportunities for international ties (e.g., travel, networks, investments and more) that our globalized society offers. Yet some scholars in my sample maintain greater engagement with higher education as an explicitly global enterprise than others, and those who do demonstrate an attraction toward others with that tendency. This group primarily consists of scholars born outside the U.S. who now work and learn in U.S. research universities (or, in the case of applicants, are applying to work and learn). However, I also observed similar concerns from a small handful of scholars born in the U.S. who have made international or comparative research a core part of their professional agendas or identities, or who have spent extended time abroad.

The preference for applicants with international ties manifests in three ways: (a) in individual ratings, (b) advocacy for those applicants in admissions deliberations, and

(c) encouragement of a conceptualization of diversity that places national origin on par with race and gender. I discuss each of these in turn.

First, international scholars discussed their tendency to feel compelled by the applications of international applicants trying to make their way to the U.S. or domestic students whose research takes them to other countries. Scholars find themselves relating to the applicant on a personal level and thus feel persuaded of the individual's desirability. A social scientist born in Italy recounted his experience of reading one international student's application:

> I did read some statements and some of them impressed me—less about intellectual at this point but more about their life experiences. I remember I read an applicant from India talking about he's now actually studying in Germany, and looking out and seeing all these things. And it reminded him of his father's journey to the States and experiencing how that turned into his own curiosity about social science. To me that actually makes it very interesting and impressive. I remember that vividly. So that's one case I can remember. And other people, some of them spend a long time talking about why they're interested in the field but that one somehow stuck in my mind… In general, people do tell their stories. Just, sometimes, they relate to you and sometimes they don't relate.

In some cases, positive judgment also translates into advocacy for the applicant in admissions deliberations. Interestingly, I noticed that on half of the committees, international scholars spoke infrequently compared to their domestic colleagues, making their advocacy for other international scholars particularly notable. Recalling his excitement about an applicant, a senior humanities professor who has spent many years conducting fieldwork in developing countries explained:

> It's been a while since I've been that impressed and so I really wanted him to succeed… He's interesting. He's coming from Australia but he's actually Malaysian, himself. And um, he seems to be a native English speaker but he also probably speaks Chinese or something else. And one of the other faculty pointed out that we've never had anybody from a place like Malaysia. You know we've had really, as far as Asia goes, Japan is it. We've had a few Japanese students and

that's it. She liked that we were getting somebody Asian but it's kind of rare —
and not Japanese.

His reflection highlights two important dimensions of international student attraction.

First, not all countries of origin are created equal in participants' minds. Applicants to

programs like these come from around the globe, but among the relatively few discussed

in committee, applicants from Mongolia, Russia, Malaysia, Turkey, Australia, and Poland

were spoken of with particular enthusiasm— faraway countries that do not send large

populations of graduate students to the United States. It seems that holding credentials

and undergraduate prestige equal, the more rare or exotic-seeming the applicant's nation

of origin, the more desirable a prospect s/he represents.

The quote above also illustrates that strong English skills are a vital prerequisite

for international scholars' advocacy for international applicants. In a social science

department, the chair— who was born outside the U.S.— provided the following

instructions to the committee:

> We are interested in international students because the department believes in
> serving the worldwide community for our discipline, and internationals are
> usually very good students. So be open to them, and not just with an eye to
> admitting 1-2. It may be hard to tell, but you have to care about their English
> skills.

In "caring about their English skills," international scholars use their own experience as a

guide, including interpretation of scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language

(TOEFL). A member of this committee, who conducts quantitative research, piped up in

response to the chair's instructions above that he would not personally consider TOEFL

scores because he had once earned perfect scores in spite of having "poor English skills."

The committee chair acknowledged that had been his experience as well, and encouraged

the committee to initiate informal interviews with international applicants whose English was of concern.

In addition to individual-level preference and committee-level advocacy for specific applicants, some globalized faculty encourage colleagues toward a conceptualization of diversity— for the discipline, department, and United States— that includes nation of origin. Should international students "count" toward institutional diversity, and toward racial/ethnic diversity in particular? This topic is a matter of substantive debate throughout higher education and in the departments I studied. Recognizing the value attributed to diversity in principle, many international faculty want to ensure that national origin will be on par with and/or included among apparent preferences for individuals from groups underrepresented by race and gender. In a humanities discipline, Yuri, a senior scholar who emigrated to the United States as an adult, pressed his colleagues to consider Dinh as "a minority candidate":

> *Yuri:* He would have no chance with this committee.
> *Admissions Chair:* Why is that?
> *Yuri:* Studying here for his bachelors, zero disciplinary background. Among his letters, one is from me, one is not so strong, and one is from a person at a no-name institution who is not a professor.
> *He continues, offering brief descriptions of other applicants in his concentration, then returns to Dinh.*
> *Yuri:* I would like to propose him as a minority candidate… I have no doubt he will do well in classes, no problem catching up. He's very industrious.
> *Admissions Chair:* It's hard to see how fairness-wise we could, based on the paper application.
> *A third professor describes another student with non-traditional background, from a top public research university, mentioning him as a possibility for the MA program.*
> *Yuri:* But do we have anyone who is Vietnamese in the field?
> *Admissions Chair:* I don't think we're supposed to be thinking that way.
> *Yuri:* I just mean among faculty.
> *Others mutter:* "No," and "I don't think so."

Although Yuri's interest was in improving diversity and representation in the discipline, other international scholars discussed with me the important role that American graduate education serves in enhancing the nation's diversity.

Jimmy, a senior professor in the natural sciences who is originally from an East Asian country, argues that the case for admitting more international students rests on two principles: that the market for U.S. doctoral education is the world, not the U.S., and that immigration is central to American multiculturalism. Unlike the example of a humanities professor who wished to admit a Chinese student under the hopes that she might eventually return and "bring the classics to China," Jimmy firmly believes that discourses about diversity in the academy and nation should not be limited to domestically born individuals. Others in the sample pragmatically wish to privilege applicants from underrepresented groups that are eligible for institutional diversity fellowships— which international students are not, unless they already hold a green card. Still others feel that it is inappropriate to "import diversity" in a country that will soon have more people of color than White people.[52] Diverging views about how international students fit into discourses and goals of diversity in graduate education are, I believe, indicative of the need for a broader conversation on this topic.

Social Mobility Homophily

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[52] Zhang (2009) finds no evidence in the sciences and engineering that international students are crowding domestic students out of doctoral program. In non-Science and Engineering fields, each extra international doctoral recipient is associated with 1.17 fewer domestic doctoral recipients. However, this relationship appears to be primarily a function of "the negative relationship between foreign female doctoral recipients and US male recipients in non-science education" (p. 221).

In eight of the ten committees I worked with, there was at least one individual who actively advocated for individuals from more modest personal backgrounds and/or who attended less prestigious undergraduate institutions (e.g., moderately selective state flagship and land grant universities). In most cases, such individuals believe in and promote the possibility of social mobility through education because they have lived that experience. Mindful of how far they have come, they are compelled by applicants whose path reminds them of their own. Socially mobile faculty may also feel their experience uniquely enables them to interpret applications from individuals from less privileged backgrounds, and offer alternative frames for understanding institutional prestige and the academic preparation received there. Whereas the norm for admissions in these programs is to be risk averse and focused on achievements, these individuals demonstrate greater willingness to take a chance on students who seem to have potential, apart from demonstrated achievements to date.

Among these small sub-groups in my sample, those from lower income backgrounds, rural areas, and/or who did not attend elite institutions do not prize prestige as much. One such individual remarked,

> It's not like we're plucking people from only Princeton, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, but I think it's probably a little more important to my colleagues and maybe they've internalized more than I have… Some of my colleagues, in fact people I know are on the committee, really care a lot more about prestige and think of this university as a much more special place than other institutions, probably more than I do.

To highlight the unique perspective these individuals share across disciplines, I present profiles from Linda in the social sciences and James and Ryan in natural sciences. Linda discusses how her experience leads her to interpret applications differently than her colleagues do.

I: Do you see your own experiences coming into play in the way that you look at applications?
R: Most definitely, in that I will look at somebody who is first-generation [pause]— I think I understand the learning curve that they sort of had to go through a little bit more. So I don't think I [pause] *favor* them. I mean I've certainly had people I ranked a number one, the highest score, that had gone to the very best schools all along. But if there's somebody like—I believe there was somebody we admitted who got maybe a 4.0 from Washington State—and had I not had my experience and realized that if you're coming from a first-generation family, nobody is telling you how to apply to college, that you should try to go to the best one. You may be thinking that, 'If I go here I can help out my family. I won't have huge loans or whatever.'… I think I'm just much more open to looking a lot at: 'They got a 4.0. They did everything they could there… The letters of recommendation are really terrific.' Whereas somebody who just went to Princeton you might think, 'Even if they have a little bit lower GPA, they might have a better education.'

Earlier in the interview, Linda spoke at length about her own college choice process. To save money and stay geographically close to hear family, she enrolled in a college that was less selective than what she was academically qualified to attend (i.e., She undermatched.). As a result, Linda now frames grades and institutional prestige more broadly than the typical script of associating them with intelligence, likelihood of success, and quality of training received. She believes her experience inclines her toward more "generous" or "gracious" interpretations of institutional affiliations than her colleagues.

Linda also considers "distance traveled," a non-cognitive criterion that many in undergraduate admissions are beginning to consider. Based on firm belief in the effect of effort on success, she assesses not only how accomplished a person seems, but how far they have come and hard they have had to work to get to where they are now. Explaining this in more detail, Linda continues:

So one applicant, I don't think it's somebody we admitted, but he said from his high school like fifty percent wind up incarcerated… some remote town in Montana. He had to Google how to apply to college. And so somebody like that,

> I'm going to sort of look at the file and try to understand *[using hands to show relative distance]* if you started here and already got there vs. somebody who started here and just got a little bit higher than you. I'm very likely to look at sort of where did you start and where have you been as a very good indicator of where you'll be.

Linda sets her expectations not in an absolute sense or by comparing this applicant with others in the pool, but relative to the salient contexts in which she sees the applicant situated. Her own experience as a first generation college student from a rural area also informs her reading of the application and his likely trajectory.

James and Ryan, two junior scholars in a natural sciences department who both attended Midwestern land grant universities, adopt a similar approach when evaluating institutional pedigrees. In the committee's initial meeting to develop a short list, they discussed Wilson, a student with a near-perfect GPA in the discipline and considerable undergraduate research experience.

> *James:* He went to the University of Nebraska. He's a lot like me.
> *Matthew:* Defend your alma mater!
> *James:* I trust Janine, his letter writer. If she says he's one of the best in 40 years… [trails off]
> *Ryan:* I like him. I think he'd be a good fit.
> *Matthew:* Let's move him up and then do death match against the others.

For context, their colleague, Matthew, earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University, and "death match" is a term he used several times to refer to comparing a small group of applicants with one another to identifying weaknesses that justify exclusion.[53] In a follow-up interview, James spoke at length with me about how he felt Wilson and institutional affiliations were evaluated.

> There was a student from Nebraska who ended up getting in our top thirty. There was an interview and I couldn't make the interview. Apparently, the interview

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[53] "Death match" can be thought of as the opposite of the undergraduate admissions model of "building" that Bastedo (2012) describes, in which reviewers assess and collect applicants' strengths as grounds for moving an individual forward in the process.

didn't go very well and so he didn't make the top twenty-two. But that guy, personally, had a research record that looked very much like mine. He had a very high GPA. If you want to stand out going to a big, state school, you have to have a really high GPA. Someone from Columbia doesn't have to have a 3.9 but if you're from Nebraska you do. So anyway, we're advocating for other people. I try to generally take a second look at people from big, state universities. I know there are a lot of fantastic students there who for very good reasons decided not to spend fifty-thousand dollars a year on their undergraduate education.

James continued, discussing how both his own judgment and that of his colleagues are situated in personal experience:

> The people on the committee who have an Ivy League background thought about things a little differently. That's why my colleague was trying to criticize someone who went to Nebraska for going to Nebraska…. I think people understand what their [own] experience was, and maybe don't think the others on the committee may value the experience that they personally went through.

Recognizing that the achievements and cultural capital that their colleagues value can be associated with class, wealth, and distinctive educational opportunities received to date, socially mobile faculty make a particular effort to disentangle potential from achievements. Xi and Roger, are two such faculty from sociology. Xi looks to the personal statement for signals of dispositions associated with "grow[ing] to be a really good scholar." I asked him to expand on that, and he replied,

> He or she is, I guess, is really thinking. It's not like, 'I know this language. I have that skill. I have learned these courses,' all this typical knowledge. Rather, 'I'm curious about all of the new, interesting phenomenon in society or this or that. And I want to explore. I want to find what's going on.' That curiosity about scholarly problems, to me that's some good traits that would make a good scholar. To me that's important.

Roger also expresses skepticism about conventional achievements and pedigree as a signal of long-term success in the field. In discussing how he makes sense of the differences among applicants on the short list, he laid out his thinking about achievements vs. potential:

To be honest, achievements to date for me are not terribly meaningful because their achievements to date reflect the experience of traditional students. The one thing we know about really, really, strong, undergraduates is that they are tremendous grade gatherers, and that's what they've learned to do well. Figure out what a teacher wants and deliver. That will serve them well in their first two years in grad school when they have a heavy course load…. And at that point we go, 'Great. We admit you to candidacy and good luck making the transition to an independent scholar.' That's a different animal…. I tend to look for things in letters, personal statements much more than past achievement. And even that obviously is a real thin predictor, but I'd much, I virtually discount past achievement because again, they're trying to achieve as conventional students and that's not what makes a good scholar in the long run.

In part due to their own experiences, socially mobile faculty express skepticism about (1) the relevance of conventional achievements to long-term scholarly success and (2) the marginal differences between Ivy League and state flagship institutional quality. Their skepticism manifests both in different ratings of unconventional applicants, the type of students whom they advocate for in committee, and the nature of their advocacy. The nature of their advocacy involves challenges to prevailing scripts, the topic to which I turn next.

Socially Mobile and International Faculty Rewriting Scripts

The value of pedigree is a powerful force in elite corporate hiring at the undergraduate level (Rivera, 2011, 2012), and earning an MBA (but not an undergraduate degree) from an elite business school is associated with leadership of a 2010 Forbes 500 corporation (Ott, 2011). Data from this study suggest pedigree is also the most prevalent form of homophily in graduate admissions. However, through observing committee deliberations and following up with select individuals, I learned that when cool, socially mobile, or international faculty attain a critical mass (Moss-Kanter, 1977)[54] on

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[54] Moss-Kanter's (1977) breakthrough research identified "that groups with varying proportions of people of different social types differ qualitatively in dynamics and

admissions committees, faculty can successfully challenge or rewrite the scripts of who is valued in doctoral education and why.

Under the script of appropriateness as I commonly observed it, when an individual or program identifies itself as elite, prestigious, or otherwise high status, they typically seek and enroll other students with institutional affiliations that the field constructs as elite. This preference and practice ultimately reinforces their own identity and status, and the effect is what appears to be homophily of the pedigreed. However, participants who come from lower income or rural backgrounds and those born outside the U.S. frequently interpret the elite organizational identity differently, and thus read the script of appropriateness differently.

Socially-mobile faculty see their elite institutions as resource-rich and therefore having the most to give— not just the most to lose. Contrary to those who see status associated with "the luxury of risk aversion," these professors feel the program's status gives them an obligation and opportunity to invest in underdeveloped potential. They advocate for students whose credentials may seem less impressive, but who seem to possess "spark" or potential to be "a diamond in the rough." They name the faculty who once took a chance on them, and they want to pay it forward.

Similarly, several international faculty described their vision of the United States as a country of immigrants and discussed their interpretation of the department's elite identity as meaning a unique positioning to serve a global student clientele. They therefore pushed to ensure that international student status was included in conversations about diversity and that applications from international students received careful review.

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process… reflect[ing] the effects of contact across categories as a function of their proportional representation in the system" (p. 965-966).

Breaking the standard script of appropriateness, both groups feel the resources that status confers should be used to expand opportunity, not protect it. Their practical responses—higher ratings, advocacy in deliberation, and challenging their colleagues' rationales--complicate deliberations of borderline applicants and weaken the rhetorical power of the risk aversion script.

In deliberations about borderline applicants, the way that socially mobile and international scholars engage similarity provides counter-scripts to the risk aversion with which committees typically approach non-traditional applicants. To an observer, advocacy for borderline applicants with similar backgrounds may appear strictly self-interested, but participants claim their advocacy is multilayered. It involves connecting personally with some aspect of an applicant file, many admit, but also the capacity to offer broad or alternative framings of the trajectories and motives of applicants with similar personal backgrounds as themselves. That is, they acknowledge the appearance of homophily, but argue that it has a legitimate basis in their unique ability to make sense of applicant profiles that resemble their own. To the extent a committee signs on with an alternative interpretation, such faculty may feel as if their own experiences have been validated.

Disconfirming Evidence: Heterophilic Preferences

In a clear example of *noblesse oblige*, a sub-set of well-pedigreed faculty discussed with me or demonstrated in committee their efforts to counteract the preference for students with credentials associated with wealth. They do so by advocating for a small number of students (usually no more than 1 per person) whose credentials do not dazzle, but whose personal narrative, research experience, and/or writing sample hint at

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the presence of unusual talent. This practice of heterophily, or valuing the different, is

essentially tokenist— a gesture toward a few individuals rather than a reorientation

toward the pool or to credentials in a broad sense. A senior professor of philosophy

illustrates:

> As things go on the privileged get more privileges. One thing I like to do when I can is to include in any class a kind of long shot. That is a person from a smaller college or something—someone who has written a writing sample that really grabs you. Even though, you don't know the recommenders so therefore you don't really trust the recommendations. You don't know what it means that they got a high GPA at this school because it's not much of a school. But you know— it looks like this is the sort of person that needs to be plucked out of mediocrity and given a chance. And I like to do that.

And the chair of a philosophy admissions committee advocated for a self-trained

philosopher who lived in the rural South.

> *Chair:* This guy is a special case. He's in a class by himself.
> *She read from a letter of recommendation, including lines about* "the astonishing speed with which he picked up the work of philosophy."
> *Chair:* He doesn't fit in our normal box but he wrote a better paper than one of the other ethicists in the pool, and without help.
> *Others aren't so sure, and mutter things like* "I'm not so sure…"
> *Chair:* Well, I put my two cents in.
> *Prof 2:* You think he's a diamond in the rough
> *Chair:* Yes, I even have a category on my notesheet for that. But I could be wrong.

Resulting in opportunities for a very small minority of both the overall applicant pool and

of admitted students, their extension of heterophily is unlikely to shift the overall profile

of doctoral students away from the power of pedigree and wealth. Yet it serves an

important psychosocial function in allowing faculty to feel like they have fulfilled their

responsibility to encourage opportunity and mobility in a system fraught with obstacles to

realizing those principles. With the other forms of homophily I identified, the token

heterophily of those from the academic establishment also suggests a culture of

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evaluation that is more complex than may be captured by measures of central tendency in statistical analysis.

Discussion

When faculty engage similarities with applicants as a basis for judgment, the outcomes of deliberations are unpredictable, because outcomes are conditional on the type of similarity that becomes salient, whether it is salient to others on the committee, and whether there is consensus that the characteristic is an acceptable consideration in admissions. As I have discussed in this chapter, there is an overall trend in which preference for academically well-pedigreed students serves to encourage extant patterns of privilege. The prevalence of this tendency can hardly be overstated. Yet in two of the six committees, a critical mass of socially mobile scholars promoted the potential of low-income applicants and challenged the validity of pedigree as a criterion by relating their own experiences. In these programs, a number of borderline applicants from low-income backgrounds were admitted. A similar pattern was observed with international scholars, who advocated for careful review of international students' applications and encouraged a framing of diversity that prioritizes nation of origin. By advancing counter-scripts about what institutional prestige and diversity mean, these groups opened the plausibility of a more inclusive conception of merit. While usually presented as a mechanism of social reproduction, this study shows how homophily in combination with critical mass can support the reconstruction of merit in ways that challenge the tendency toward reproduction.

Findings presented in this chapter support two of Lamont's (2009) conclusions about the role of personal taste in academic evaluation and, in particular, that personal

experience becomes a sub-conscious framework for merit. As in her study, I find that faculty use aspects of their own identity and experience to justify seemingly idiosyncratic preferences and their general approach to evaluation. For example, James promotes students from public universities because he attended one himself, and has come to believe their training in core content is underrated. In classics, Paula likes to see extensive travel and study in Greece, Rome, and British universities in applicants because her own travel experiences were formative to her socialization. Jimmy encourages his colleagues to closely consider every East Asian applicant because he, too, immigrated to attend graduate school, has since become a U.S. Citizen and professor, and thinks America's multicultural strength derives from its history of immigration. The examples are numerous.

However, I find that what manifests as homophily is a complex set of processes by which similarity affects *how* faculty judge applicants. Collectively, they represent a richer picture of cultural preferences in action than "birds of a feather sticking together" (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Cook, 2001). First, I find that similarity with applicants provides committee members with grounds for claims of organizational fit with the department or discipline, a critical consideration in late stages of admissions review. Also, both early and late in review, scholars' personal connections with application content generate an emotional response that: (1) affects individual-level ratings of applicants by subjectively distinguishing a few from the many who are merely "qualified" and (2) leads reviewers to advocate for those individuals in committee deliberations. Third, scholars regard their own identities, cultural preferences, and life experiences as knowledge that positions them to better interpret narratives and future

trajectories of applicants with similar experiences—better, that is, than their colleagues who lack such experience or perspective. Similarity with applicants is thus not only a source of attraction, but also of subjective ability to judge and tacit means of validating themselves and their experiences.

These findings add support to emerging understandings of the mechanisms of homophily in elite selection. Most notably, they align with the organizational, affective, and cognitive mechanisms that Rivera (2012) finds beneath cultural matching in elite investment firms' hiring. Extending her results, however, this work clarifies how similarity with applicants plays out in the context of more heterogeneous selection committees. In the committees I observed, evaluators possess diverse preferences and experiences as a group, and individuals themselves express the salience of multiple identities and experiences. The fragmentation in academic culture illustrated through the four forms of homophily in these committees may better represent the increasing diversity of elite American cultural interests than the narrow cultural preferences held among those with hiring authority in top investment firms.[55]

Also, although I extend Rivera's process-level findings about how what manifests as homophily plays out in practice, some findings from this analysis diverge from her study. One is simply a matter of timing. Rivera (2012b) concludes that cultural similarity is most important late in the process, at the interview stage, as decision makers engage with the person behind a resume. I find that homophily influences who makes the first cut and who is ultimately selected. During initial screening, similarity generates

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[55] A diversity of cultural preferences in education seems especially important considering that one aim of educational institutions is to encourage the social mobility of its participants (Labaree, 1999).

enthusiasm for some candidates among the many generally qualified and, in making final choices, it becomes as a proxy for the elusive, yet vital, "fit" and "match" faculty seek.

Also, in contrast to Rivera's (2011) context-specific finding that elite firms privilege only degrees from "super-elite" universities, I find that faculty in these doctoral programs are mindful of a heterarchy— that is, multiple hierarchies— of prestige across the disciplines. The Ivy League retains a collective cultural mystique and remains shorthand for institutional prestige, but faculty in these doctoral programs are less compelled by an Ivy League institutional affiliation if that institution does not maintain a high status program in their field. The corollary is that faculty are often impressed by affiliation with a land grant, state flagship, or other college or university when it is the site of a leading program in the discipline. Engagement with the organizational field in a specific discipline—not in American society or postsecondary education, generally— thus structures how individual faculty conceive of prestige and pedigree, and how they come to recognize it in their applicants. Therefore, while findings are broadly consistent with Bourdieu's (1977, 1984) proposition that preferences of and for the well-pedigreed represent the prevailing form of taste in elite selection, the power of disciplines as organizational fields and the attendant decentralization in U.S. doctoral education by disciplines limits the transferability of Bourdieu's framework and Rivera's finding in describing access to graduate education at the national level.

Another factor that limits Bourdieu's theory as an explanation for selection into U.S. graduate education is the effort to ensure multiple identities and cultural preferences are represented on admissions committees. I find the presence and influence of multiple forms of homophily— not only of and for the disciplinary or academic establishment.

Homophily of the cool reflects some scholars' personal engagement with broader contemporary American trends, and homophily of the socially mobile and international reflect some scholars' self-positioning in American narratives of opportunity. Collectively, the personal tastes associated with these three forms constitute a broader, indeed more inclusive, conception of merit than classic Bourdieuian theory would suggest, one better aligned with American omnivorism than with France's narrow elite preferences.

Conclusion

The multiplicity of individual identities and preferences identified in this chapter reflects fragmentation in academic organizational culture. That is, academic culture is neither unitary nor integrated, but rather composed of multiple, fluid perspectives and values. Joanne Martin (1992) articulates this viewpoint:

> Organizations, environments, and group boundaries are constantly changing. Individuals have fragmented, fluctuating self-concepts. One moment a person thinks of himself or herself as belonging to one subculture, and a minute later another subcultural membership becomes salient. People fluctuate in this way because they are faced wtih inescapable contradictions, as well as things they do not understand (p. 9).

Increasing diversity in the upper levels of the American labor market, Martin also argues, is only likely to heighten the complexity of individual identities (p. 10) and, by extension, the fragmentation of organizational culture. Although the results of this research cannot be generalized, they suggest that the emerging complexities of personal tastes in elite organizations and social circles may help explain what statistical research concludes to be weak preferences or cultural omnivorism.

Will this emerging complexity — as represented by the intersection of multiple identities and homophilies— erode the bedrock of pedigree in doctoral admissions? Will the new frames toward prestige held by many socially mobile and international faculty introduce fundamental revisions to standard scripts of risk aversion and elite organizational identity? Or will those frames simply be folded into the noblesse oblige of token heterophily I observed? My observations of preppy and Euro cool scholars also suggests the possibility that the prevalence of pedigree will be preserved in doctoral admissions, but its cultural content diversified. What is clear from data in this study is that the individual preferences of faculty will continue trending toward homophily, but where committees have a critical mass of alternative perspectives, the decision-making process may also be more complicated and the outcomes of negotiations over borderline cases may be more difficult to predict.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

In this chapter, I summarize and synthesize findings; discuss the empirical, methodological, and theoretical contributions this study makes; outline implications for admissions policy and practice; and propose avenues for future research. This study has been motivated by the goal of understanding how faculty construct merit in Ph.D. admissions and what the consequences may be for equity and diversity. Faculty profess the importance of improving diversity in graduate education and the professoriate, and diversity has been institutionalized as a value throughout higher education (Lamont, 2009; Karabel, 2005; Chang, 2002). According to the relatively small base of quantitative research, however, current conceptualizations of merit in graduate admissions do not suggest diversity is a major goal and value. Rather, the two criteria that best predict admission are attending a selective college and getting high GRE scores— both of which are unequally distributed across race/ ethnicity and gender (Attiyeh & Attiyeh, 1997). I sought to explain why faculty in highly selective doctoral programs continue to prioritize criteria that undermine espoused diversity goals. Four assumptions guided the design of this study:

1) Admissions involves individual evaluation and collective selection
2) Departments may aspire to an individual idea of merit, but assessing it involves sensitivity to organizational, social, and political constraints
3) Judgments of merit are situated in the department and discipline
4) Elite status affects judgments of merit

The design therefore uses a combination of interview and observational data, analyzes themes across highly ranked programs, and compares case studies of admissions by

discipline and at the individual level. Findings chapters have emphasized these analyses

as discrete inquiries. I briefly summarize, then synthesize, findings across levels of

analysis.

Summary

Integrating the research questions,[56] theory of situated judgment, and findings, I

conclude that when we talk about constructing merit, what we are actually talking about

is the hard work of compromise across a heterarchy of norms and values that derive from

the evaluative contexts of the self, department, discipline, and profession (RQ 1 & RQ 2).

At the individual level (RQ 1), committee members are not just thinking about

themselves and their own preferences as they assign ratings about who deserves to be

admitted. They are also thinking about the reputation of the department and the future of

the discipline, and each of those is likely to entail complexity within it as well (RQ 2).

Individual judgment is rooted in one's identity, and in every department I observed

faculty that tended toward homophily for well pedigreed students (RQ 1). In lower

consensus departments, preferences by and for cool, socially mobile, and international

scholars (RQ 2c) also contributed to individual judgments. Given the importance of

status within the discipline to the way these departments organize their work, faculty

interpret conventional achievement in terms of risk aversion and what seems appropriate

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[56] Correspondence of key findings to research questions (RQ) is noted:
1. How do faculty individually and collectively construct merit in Ph.D. admissions?
How do they relate merit and diversity?
2. How is faculty judgment situated at the disciplinary, departmental, and individual
levels?
2a. What evaluative scripts do faculty use to distinguish among applicants?
2b. How do disciplines and departments shape admissions preferences and processes?
2c. What individual-level preferences influence admissions? In what disciplinary contexts
are individual preferences most salient?

for an elite department (RQ 2a and 2b). They interpret diversity using evaluative scripts like competition for the most academically accomplished underrepresented students, but also in terms of collective obligation and intellectual and financial opportunity for the department and discipline (RQ 2a). At maybe the most subconscious level of the three, prevailing theories, methods, and priorities of the discipline generate disciplinary logics (RQ 2b) that focus faculty attention on specific aspects of the files and filter how they interpret it. As such, disciplinary logics mediate what are thought of as appropriate criteria. Individual judgments of merit are thus framed by values and perceptions at multiple levels.

Then, the task is sitting everyone down to collectively select students in a way that will simultaneously fulfill as many norms and values of multiple evaluative contexts as possible. From this perspective, the process is understandably messy and there are going to be compromises and apparent contradictions between espoused and enacted values. The process through which they collectively define merit is a deliberative bureaucratic model (RQ 1) specifically designed to downplay disagreements and minimize the amount of deliberation across difference while also protecting professional norms. Bureaucratic procedures such as delegating work, quantifying judgment and replacing discussion of students and criteria with discussion of process enable faculty to get the job done efficiently while also upholding their commitment to collegiality and deliberation.

Disagreement is uncomfortable and time-consuming, and often traces to intellectual and ideological tenets on which they have agreed to disagree. But sometimes—namely in debating important borderline cases where principles of merit and

diversity seem in tension—these differences cannot be ignored if a decision is to be made. In these moments, committees experience worldview moments, and the decisions that result are informed by traditional status signals like seniority and majority rule (RQ 1).

In summary, what counts as merit in Ph.D. admissions has an underacknowledged organizational dimension that is critical to understanding contradictions between espoused and enacted values. Boltanski and Thevenot's (2000) theory of situated judgment allows us to see that constructing merit constitutes a significant organizational challenge because decision makers must find compromise across the hierarchies of cultural priorities offered by the discipline, department and self. Elite educational institutions organize and construct merit under a logic of status maintenance (Bourdieu and Nice, 1984; Bourdieu, 1988), whose priorities are mediated by prevailing disciplinary logics in high-consensus disciplines and by individual identities in low-consensus disciplines. As such, while deeply affected by elite interests, operational notions of merit are complex and unpredictable, emerging through the committee's deliberation (Birnbaum, 1988; Twombly, 1992) and subject to both principled and pragmatic interests.

Understanding the relationship of merit and diversity. This explanation should not be interpreted as defense of the present system, but rather explanation from participants' point of view. Analysis of the findings suggests several reasons that diversity considerations are often made secondary to conventional notions of merit, and privileging diversity is thought of as an exception to the rule (RQ 1).

First, for the vast majority of the sample, diversity is not substantively integrated into conceptions of excellence in more than a rhetorical way. They think of it more in

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terms of obligation and pragmatic benefits than as a commitment or for the sake of organizational improvement. Furthermore, many regard diversity considerations as a corrupting influence on the initial standards of meritocratic selection—GRE scores and grades, contextualized by institutional prestige and curricular rigor. They seek diversity as part of merit when considering the future of their discipline, but worry about considering diversity from the outset of review.

Second, and related to the first, status is a powerful filter that makes faculty in elite programs risk averse. Risk aversion is defended as an organizational luxury and matter of financial prudence, and leads them to privilege students with traditional profiles. Yet in prestigious programs like this, traditional is a proxy for privilege, and entails a focus on characteristics that encourage reproduction.

Third, findings on homophily in committees suggest that one reason faculty rarely advocate for the two populations whose underrepresentation is their greatest concern (e.g., women and scholars of color) may trace to committee members' own identities. There are allies on these committees to be sure, but only three committees seemed to operate with the effect of a critical mass of women and only one with a critical mass of scholars of color. And, indeed, in that one case, ethnicity intersected with international status, such that their advocacy was primarily international students.

Finally, for the majority who do not represent the identities that departments claim they want to encourage, embedded privilege as individuals and departments makes it uncomfortable to discuss diversity, equity and struggles on these fronts. Such conversations are thus usually avoided. Organizationally, their departments are doing well by the standards of the field, so they seek diversity primarily as a sociodemographic

add-on to present systems, not as a source of organizational change from the inside out. There is a deep impulse for innovation and structural diversity, yet while also preserving the theoretical and methodological frameworks that have lent legitimacy to their own work and their department's status. Evolving diversity from a platitude to a shared commitment—one that that can be sensed by all involved, including prospective students— will require self-examination about forms of privilege and perceptual biases as part of a multifaceted strategy for change.

Synthesis

Structural inequality in graduate education and the professoriate is rooted in the cultures of organizational gatekeeping in elite doctoral programs. Access to these programs is important to understand because they are prime training and credentialing grounds for tomorrow's professoriate. In political science, for example, more than 50% of the tenure-track faculty jobs posted in 2009 went to graduates of the top 11 doctoral programs, which Oprisko (2012) calls the academic superpowers. Any improvements to the longstanding stratification order in the professoriate are therefore conditional on improving enrollment in and completion of Ph.D. programs such as those with which I partnered for this study.

Access to graduate school has typically been studied at the individual student level, such as by comparing attributes of those who enroll and those who do not (Mullen, et al., 2003), evaluating whether participation in undergraduate research affects graduate school enrollment among underrepresented populations (Hathaway, Nagda, and Gregerman, 2002), and the effect of debt on enrollment (Millett, 2003). This study is part of an emerging body of research that also considers the role of admissions and other

institutional processes in shaping access to graduate programs (e.g., Garces, 2012; Griffin and Muñiz, 2012). Shifting the focus to admissions policy and practice reveals the way in which tendencies toward inequality have been institutionalized.

As a qualitative study, my aim was to understand the institutionalization of tendencies toward inequality as a matter of faculty judgment. Examining how admissions judgments are organizationally and culturally situated highlights the multiple, interlocking perceptual frameworks with which faculty approach admissions. They use admissions not only to choose students but to serve a variety of organizational interests. They also tacitly defer to a constellation of discipline-specific ideas and ways of knowing, and filter their interpretations of applicants through their own identities. The model of decision making they use tries to safeguard core professional norms while also increasing the likelihood of getting the job done quickly, fairly, and efficiently.

This study offers solid evidence that elite academic tastes are institutionalized in selection criteria ala Bourdieu and Lamont. More than half the sample believe test scores and/or attending elite undergraduate institutions signal intelligence, and because they think intelligence is central to their own success in the organizational field and to belonging in intellectual communities like theirs, they look for these characteristics in their applicants. This evaluative script is deeply embedded and prevalent across disciplines.

However, elitism is just the beginning of the story. Decision-making aversions also play a critical role in influencing faculty judgment. The complexity of comparing hundreds of applicants makes them *ambiguity averse*. One of the cultural meanings of test scores and grades is therefore not about what they signal, but how they facilitate

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comparison. They are associated with convenience because their apparent (if illusory) standardization, precision and clarity seem to cut through all of the ambiguities that comparatively evaluating letters of recommendation, essays, and writing samples require. Disciplines in the humanities, whose day-to-day work involves interpretive ways of knowing, are more both more sensitive and less averse to the dynamics of subjectivity inherent in judging and comparing applicants. Yet they too ultimately rely on quantifying their judgments as a means of bringing closure to deliberations, standing on numbers out of pragmatism rather than principle. Though fallible, "the numbers" provide something on which they feel they can stand. It is purely instrumental. By contrast, in the physical sciences, greater trust in numbers engenders trust in the validity of distributions of test scores and average ratings. In both cases, quantifying differences in perceived admissibility is a hallmark of deliberative bureaucracy, one that increases efficiency by reducing ambiguity.

Quantification also suppresses conflict among faculty. Conflict aversion is the flip side of the deeply rooted professional norm of faculty collegiality. Admissions committee members feel that quantifying judgment— whether through test scores, ratings, or average ratings—provides more uniform interpretation than the many understandings that the committee may generate about individuals and their relative admissibility.[57] Numbers can be sorted, and so they do the negotiation about who is deemed more or less admissible. Across disciplines, a modicum of deliberation is prerequisite to legitimate admissions decisions, but they would prefer not to argue with each other, especially over matters that are rooted in deeply-held epistemological

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[57] This is particularly the case when each of those understandings can be communicated and defended using a variety of rhetorics.

differences, such as the validity of statistical inferences about GRE scores. As such, a key element of deliberative bureaucracy is displacing discussion of applicants with discussion of admissions procedure, which is relatively uncontroversial. The task of admissions may be to identify applicants with the most impressive achievements and greatest potential within the discipline, but the process of collective selection is one of political compromise.

Finally, there is overwhelming evidence that faculty in these prestigious programs approach admissions using a script of risk aversion. Many attribute attending less selective undergraduate institutions and earning low test scores and grades to being less intelligent or prepared, and less intelligence and preparation to a higher risk of struggling in coursework and/or failure. The script of risk aversion is the closest that faculty in these programs come to adopting a framework of rational choice, and it infiltrates individual ratings and deliberations at all stages of review. Risk aversion both explains the enduring power of criteria that favor advantaged populations, and becomes a bottom-line basis for rejecting well-pedigreed individuals with personality red flags, research interests that marginally align with faculty expertise, or lines in letters of letters of recommendation that raise the eyebrows of committee members.

Status and risk aversion go hand-in-hand. Many feel they can afford to be risk averse because their highly ranked programs attract far more qualified candidates than they have spaces to fill, but also feel they must be risk averse because of the significant financial investment each new student represents. They have the luxury of setting a high bar, but also feel that risk aversion is also part of responsible decision-making. However, high status organizations are also more prone to fundamental attribution error. They are

likely to attribute the outcomes of its members to their intentions and skill than to the conditions in the organizational environment, and thus seek to exclude prospects perceived as risky rather than estimate the risk (March, 1994). Moreover, "When it comes to rare probabilities, our mind is not designed to get things quite right" (Kahneman, 2011, p. 333). And indeed, availability bias may help explain why applicants from underrepresented backgrounds may be associated with risk. Several participants admitted they felt "spooked" when reading the application of a student whose profile reminded them of one who struggled or did not graduate. With so few underrepresented students in their programs, memory of just one or two who struggle can loom large. The success of a few individuals becomes the grounds on which future applicants are likely to be regarded as risks.

Dawes (1971) and others proposed policy capturing in the early 1970s to replace human judgment in admissions with models of it in equation form, recognizing the "dehumanizing effect of a regression equation" (p. 186). None of the departments in this sample go so far as to develop an algorithm for admission decisions, yet they accept bureaucratizing a community-building process and imperfect quantitative metrics as the trade-off for eliminating difficulties of human judgment that Dawes also recognized – including inefficiency, ambiguity, and conflict. Distilling specific, common characteristics from applicants' complex biographies facilitates less controversial comparison, and where those characteristics can be numerized, they serve as especially efficient metrics that conceal underlying disagreements.

Contributions

    Methodological Contributions. To my knowledge, this research is the first study of graduate admissions that focuses on both what criteria are considered in admissions *and* how faculty use those criteria. It is also the first examination of decision-making processes that faculty use in doctoral admissions. Therefore, it is unsurprising that this is also the first research design to combine data from individual interviews with observations of admissions committee deliberations. To examine how faculty construct merit, I have conceived of participants as individuals nested in departments and disciplines, and placed their situated judgment at the center of analysis. Additional analysis of interaction patterns would have been made possible with full transcripts of admissions committee meetings.

    Quantitative research on admissions is suitable for clarifying the relative importance of standard criteria that explain the average odds of admission and enrollment for given populations. However, these approaches treat admissions as a much more predictable process than it is in practice. Analyzing holistic review processes brings to light the reasons that important criteria are deemed important and the seemingly idiosyncratic reasons some students are ultimately admitted and others rejected. Qualitative research also can capture a range of admissions considerations above and beyond the human capital considerations that consume most of the variance. That studies of admissions explain a small proportion of the total variance indicates serious problems of omitted variable bias and that admissions outcomes are more complex than a regression equation can capture. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is ideally suited

to draw out idiosyncrasies of process, decision-makers' judgment, and applicant files that produce unexpected outcomes.

Theoretical and empirical contributions. This research contributes to theory and our knowledge about the social construction of merit in graduate education, processes of faculty evaluation and decision-making, taste in pluralistic organizations, and the disciplinary logics that faculty hold.

Faculty evaluation and decision making. As mentioned above, this study has emphasized decision making as a matter of situated judgment, and thus has been well suited to capture how and why faculty use the criteria they do. Building on a deep body of social theory, Lamont's (2009) idea of evaluative scripts offers a framework for capturing the embedded rationales that decision-makers hold, but may not actively espouse. Peeling back the layers of culturally-embedded meanings associated with selection criteria clarifies insiders' logic, providing a window into the seemingly paradoxical decisions that individuals and organizations make.

Findings also shed light on the limits of using student characteristics as a basis for predicting admissions outcomes. The overall admissions process has an official function of selecting students that is complemented by a latent function of community definition. Applicants may be able to bump themselves into the top quartile through effort, test scores, and elite connections. At that point, though, it often ceases to be a credentials exercise, and the process and bases of selection become difficult to predict—subject to the characteristics of the pool, the department's goals, the committee's composition, and so forth. This unpredictability is only heightened as programs try to use a combination of what Kahneman (2011) calls "algorithmic precision" and "expert intuition" in estimating

applicants' future in the discipline (and thus assessing whether they should be admitted). As such, non-parametric statistics may be well suited to future quantitative studies of admissions.

   Disciplinary logics. I proposed disciplinary logics as a mechanism that helps explain how disciplines shape faculty tastes. Integrating theories of disciplines and institutional logics reveals that the legitimated knowledge systems embedded in disciplinary contexts mediate academic work, and that this is not limited to research and teaching activities, but also extends to evaluative work such as admissions. Disciplinary logics consist of prevailing theories, methods, and practical priorities and therefore are stronger in disciplines with high intellectual consensus. For example, that many economists are steeped in rational choice theory and quantitative methods and, further, surrounded by others who approach economic problems from that perspective, may help explain the unusually strong risk averse frame that economists in my sample employ. Whether convergent or divergent, however, disciplinary logics present faculty in admissions contexts with organizing principles, focus their attention on specific information in an applicant's profile, and provide material for rationales about both their judgments and the way they feel admissions should be run.

   Disciplines have traditionally been examined as contexts for knowledge production, and almost 25 years of research has identified links between disciplinary cultures and evaluation that trace to scholars' epistemologies and worldviews (Becher and Trowler, 1989; Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Swales, 2004; Lamont, 2009). Through my comparative case study approach and consideration of institutional logics embedded in disciplines, I am able to more specifically explain the ways in which disciplinary

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evaluative cultures manifest. I am also able to clarify the central roles played by theory, method, and everyday priorities within the broad "worldview" language that previous research typically uses. Specifically, defending one's ratings and advocating for particular individuals primes scholars to recognize and engage the worldview differences that most of the time remain comfortably latent.

An important contribution of this study is also to show that disciplines not only affect research and teaching—the primary focus of previous scholarship on disciplines— but also have organizational implications. Assumptions about appropriate methods and theories underlie how faculty think as individual evaluators and as colleagues engaged in collectively selecting prospective members. For example, I find the degree of consensus about intellectual matters manifests in how faculty deal with disagreement with one another. Within the same university and profession, there are divergent logics about what should count as best practice in admissions that trace clearly to prevailing norms and practical priorities of the field. Often there are divergent logics within the same discipline, and deliberation is more important to admissions in lower-consensus fields. Yet even where consensus is weak, disciplinary logics thus divergent, and individual tastes thus more influential, shared professional norms like collegiality can provide a countervailing tendency to conflicts. It is worth studying what other aspects of departmental life may also be infused with assumptions of shared worth deriving from disciplinary logics.

Taste in pluralistic organizations. An underlying goal of this research has been to make explicit the implicit criteria that faculty value. One of the major ways that these implicit criteria can be described is in terms of decision makers' tastes, or culturally

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embedded preferences. Personal taste is largely an acceptable basis of selection and, especially in high-consensus fields, strong disciplinary logics produce preferences that are so embedded as to not be recognized as preferences unless drawn out by an interlocutor. Not once in the meetings that I observed did anyone challenge the appropriateness of judging another applicant on the basis of whether you "like" him. "I like him," and "I like her" were phrases heard time and again, and "like" was the most frequently used word in all of my field notes. So the question is, what do professors in highly-ranked doctoral programs "like?"

Consistent with Bourdieuian logic, the prevailing tendency is to prefer applicants whose characteristics will legitimize, protect, or even increase the program's status. In these programs, the most salient organizational field is the discipline, so overall institutional prestige means less than the reputation of a department within the discipline. Findings also support Lamont's claims that cultural similarities are especially important in selecting elites and where differences in applicant quality are small or difficult to compare (Lamont, 1992, 2009). Given the academic and personal backgrounds of most faculty members in top-tier research universities, it is thus unsurprising to have found a trend toward homophily among well-pedigreed scholars. Yet in lower-consensus disciplines, where taste is more particularistic, I also observed patterns of homophily by cool, international, and socially mobile scholars. In many cases, these four forms would intersect for individuals, affecting both their feelings about certain applicants, and their advocacy for applicants and the process of evaluation itself. Where a critical mass of individuals with a particular identity aggregated within a committee, they could shift the collective interpretive frame on one or more borderline applicants. These patterns

suggest fragmented organizational cultures within departments and also help explain the unpredictability of some admissions decisions, a trend that is only likely to continue if institutions are successful in increasing diversity.

Decision-making aversions. Sociological research on taste has traditionally focused on the culturally embedded criteria underlying selection. The idea of preferences implies the presence of aversions, however, and I find doctoral admissions defined as much by whom and what departments do not want as what they want, and what they try to avoid as much as what they seek. This research also deepens understandings of taste by highlighting both the embedded values associated with the applicants, as well as tastes and aversions for specific *approaches to evaluation* that are embedded in the culture of graduate admissions. The aversions relate to both characteristics of students that affect the department's well being as well as characteristics of the decision-making process itself. Decision makers are often averse to risk, ambiguity, and conflict, and they structure their admissions criteria and processes to manage these aversions. Each of these aversions links criteria and process, helping to explain the persisting role that quantitative metrics play in initial sorting and their formative role in shaping outcomes, despite the negative consequences for encouraging diversity.

Faculty members therefore save time and avoid conflict by downplaying or altogether withholding from one another the basis for their ratings. For when discussing borderline cases, faculty find themselves not only debating the applicants' merits, but also one another's interpretation of those merits and the ratings those interpretations produce. And with the longest discussions taking place over applicants with unconventional profiles who might contribute to diversity, discussion plays an important

role in helping faculty make sense of their ideas about merit in relation to diversity aims. Bureaucratic practices such as relying on numbers are intended to minimize barriers to efficient, collegial decision making, yet they also highlight the need to improve evaluation at the level of individual file reading.

Rewriting evaluative scripts. This research has primarily been a study of the thinking about admissions and practices of admissions that impede realization of one of the many goals (i.e., diversity) that departments are seeking to fulfill. It is an unintended but notable contribution of this research, then, to have uncovered layers of cultural meanings associated with selection criteria that tend to serve *other* goals—namely status and efficiency. In academic environments where the concern for distinction has become more than a distraction—where it is central to how they organize themselves and their work—understanding these evaluative scripts provides a window into the organizational identity.

However, I also find a sort of entrepreneurialism on the margins, with people resisting or rewriting standard evaluative scripts and engaging in forms of homophily that do not favor the establishment. They are a small minority, but a benefit of qualitative research design is that we can learn from outlying examples rather than having them absorbed into the central tendency. Zerubavel (1991) writes,

> We normally regard those who transgress boundaries as deviants, yet they might also be seen as innovators who could us how to break away from the ossified mental cages in which we often lock ourselves and realize our creative potential (p. 117).

Any cultural change comes slowly and requires simultaneous action on multiple fronts, but one dimension of change involves the diffusion of new mental models.

One interactional process through which scripts are rewritten is the conversational act of interruption. For example, in one of the philosophy programs, female members of the committee advocated for women applicants by intervening when men on the committee employed rationales that would unfairly harm female applicants' chances. Twice, they questioned whether GRE scores and institutional prestige could reasonably be used to justify very low ratings of female applicants by challenging their colleagues about the fairness of associating these characteristics with intelligence and risk. And once, they intervened when a member of the committee began comparing the merits of three female applicants with one another simply because they were female.[58]

Interruption has long been used in critical theorists' discourse to describe raising alternative perspectives to dominant social norms, processes, agendas, and paradigms.[59] This was not my intended use, but it does apply to situations where conversational interruption also interrupts typical scripts of conventional achievement. Using Lamont's (2009) image of evaluative scripts as decision-making pathways, interruption temporarily blocks the pathway, and once the alternative perspective has been introduced, may make it a stonier road for a committee to tread. These small interventions could not have happened if the committee did not engage in substantive discussion about their ratings and rationales for them. A cost of deliberative bureaucracy, in which deliberation about

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[58] In their paper, "Reconceptualizing Organizational Routines as a Source of Flexibility and Change," Feldman and Pentman (2003) encourage managers and management scholars to be, "Mindful of the momentary interactions between schemas and contexts that we may create and/or manage in organizational contexts. By paying attention to what happens in these momentary interactions, we may better understand and recreate conditions that lead to effective and desired cognitive processes such as creativity, innovation, decision processes, learning, and strategic thinking' (p. 432).

[59] Among the large number of possible examples, see, for example, Apple's (2009) "Can critical education interrupt the right?", Lewis's (1990) "Interrupting patriarchy: Politics, resistance, and transformation in the feminist classroom", and Sumara & Davis's (1999) "Interrupting heteronormativity: Toward a queer curriculum theory."

applicants is replaced with deliberation about process, is to limit possibilities to refine how faculty think about merit and diversity.

Implications

Diversity is one of the most common commitments listed in college and university mission statements (Morphew and Hartley, 2006). "Institutional missions are rhetorical devices that are ostensibly statements of purpose that guide practices" (Cantwell, Canche, Milem, and Sutton, 2010, p. 8), and a clear implication of this research is the need to better align 1) graduate admissions practice and 2) conceptions of merit with the rhetorical commitment to diversity. In this section, I describe implications along each of these lines in greater detail.

Implications for improving admissions practice. In most places, current admissions policy, such as it is, consists of little more than the annual recycling of a more or less deliberative, bureaucratic process that draws on the judgment of faculty who receive much more autonomy than guidance in judging files. Yet among participants in this study, there was a widespread interest in learning what they could do to improve admissions practice in their program, and several department chairs wanted to participate in this study simply to learn more about how admissions is being done elsewhere.

Graduate schools can support this interest in improving practice by sponsoring workshops on graduate admissions for faculty and providing incentives for attendance. These workshops should/ can have several objectives. First, faculty should be encouraged to think more specifically about the nuances of human judgment and the influence that sub-conscious perceptions and cognitive biases may have for realizing more equitable, diverse departments. Workshops should also equip professors with three

types of knowledge: (a) national, disciplinary, and/or institutional data about admission, enrollment, and degree attainment for populations of interest, (b) the latest findings from research about the GRE, letters of recommendation, and other aspects of graduate admissions, so as to enable faculty to make more data-driven decisions about which criteria to use and how to use them appropriately,[60] and (c) information from ETS about how to properly interpret GRE scores, if they are used. Finally, workshops should provide time and a structure for colleagues to connect across departments to share challenges, strategies, and success stories for encouraging diversity, refining admissions judgments, and managing common organizational demands in selective programs (e.g., coping with the growing volume of applications, generally, and from East and South Asia, specifically).

As a follow-up to such events, graduate schools should also make the professional knowledge of graduate diversity officers (GDO) available to admissions committees, and departments might consider including them as committee members. From GDOs' perspective, their lack of decision-making authority inhibits the effectiveness of their early recruitment efforts with specific students (Griffin and Muñiz, 2012). Faculty may not be comfortable speaking openly with such institutional agents in the room, but it would lend greater transparency to the decision-making process. As with so much about admissions, there are trade-offs; challenges on one front can open opportunities on another, and solutions to one problem can unintentionally create others. Finally, graduate schools can also encourage enrollment of desired populations by partnering with faculty early recruitment, organizing undergraduate research opportunities that connect

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[60] Recognizing that most studies of graduate admissions are not generalizable across departments and disciplines.

prospective students with academic units, and making available the institutional

fellowships that serve as such a powerful incentive to faculty decision makers.

At the department level, one of the most fundamental implications of this study is

for faculty to develop skill in talking across their differences, and to talk to each other

more about admissions. If faculty do not talk about and across their intellectual

differences, it probably means they are also not talking about embedded perceptual biases

associated with race and gender. With regards to admissions, faculty should ask

themselves: What sort of Ph.D. students do we want to produce? What are suitable

qualifications? Is the field changing and should we expect something different for people

not pursuing faculty jobs? Have we been getting the admissions pool we want? These

are the kinds of questions to be asking if a department wants to move beyond a default

mode of admissions in which one year's approach is simply recycled year-to-year. They

should also talk about what criteria are appropriate to use when, and what they personally

associate with those criteria. Such conversations will surely generate disagreements, but

if those disagreements occur on a bedrock of trust and collegiality with a dose of humor,

as I observed in linguistics and political science, they can be lively discussions that build

intellectual community, not break it down.[61] And the need for agreement on such matters

is not absolute. In sociology, for example, the committee respects and accepts the

differences of opinion they hold about which standards for what is appropriate to

consider, and utilize a very bureaucratic decision making model to avoid most

disagreements.

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[61] If that trust and collegiality is not there, it is worth addressing as a means to developing
a positive climate for faculty, staff, and students alike.

Discussion of what holistic review means and entails is also worthy of discussion. Nivet (2011) recommends a framework for institutions to develop mindful approaches to holistic review that are rooted in an institution's mission and needs, grounded in evidence from the application and, of course, legally viable. Toward that end, bureaucracy is ironically part of the problem and solution. Bureaucratic practices have created a system that obscures the basis for ratings and, by extension, decisions. One avenue for refining admissions is taking the time to deliberate through differences and arrive at a set of shared norms and criteria for evaluation. Development of a rubric might be thought of a bureaucratic step, but assuming reviewers actually use the rubric, it would make admissions review more transparent and allow for later meetings to focus on applicants rather than process.

Committees might also make explicit the weaknesses of human judgment and consider ways to correct for them. For example, some committee members in political science and astrophysics read applications in random order. They want to prevent fatigue that could lead to less careful review or more severe judgments of applicants whose names are near the end of the alphabet.

Implications for merit and diversity. Good intentions to improve diversity abound among administrators, faculty, and students. The challenge remains to advance from good intentions to practical action. A combination of changes at multiple levels is needed to change the culture of gatekeeping, including rethinking merit, implementing new practices, and addressing the underlying organizational challenges.

At a fundamental level, programs seeking to improve the representation of women, people of color, and low-income students may need to reconstruct what counts as

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merit during the initial screening. Given inequalities in who earns very high GRE scores and attends elite colleges and universities, attending to diversity contributions only among those on the short list will get departments only so far in increasing their diversity. Pools need to be as broad as possible from the beginning, suggesting the importance of early recruitment programs—such as by sponsoring summer undergraduate research experiences in the department and cultivating relationships with faculty from targeted colleges who can recommended talented students. Yet, as I observed in two committees, such programs need to be tied closely to the admissions process and admissions committee. Applicants with non-traditional profiles who are attracted to the department through recruitment programs need to be flagged – and not discounted for their non-traditional backgrounds—when the committee reviews their files.

The two tiered admissions process I have described reflects a structure of merit that defines admissions first and foremost as a reward for past achievements—namely, earning high GRE scores and attending a prestigious college or university—that reflect and reproduce social inequality. Grades and GRE scores have shown inconsistent predictive validity across analyses and sub-groups, which is understandable considering that so much of work required in doctoral programs involves research skill, not classroom skills. Research skill and experience should therefore be counted among the academic criteria considered from the beginning of the process. However, the concerns with past achievements generally need to be tempered with a future orientation, attention to principles of the public good, and mindfulness of doctoral education's inherently educational mission.

How admissions committees are constructed also matters. Homophily, like bureaucracy, is part of the problem and part of the solution in this regard. The current absence of a critical mass of female scholars and scholars of color is likely implicated in the tendency for diversity considerations not to hold up as faculty negotiate across orders of worth. Changing the committee composition to better reflect the diversity the department seeks would likely produce homophily that challenges the tendency toward reproduction. One cannot assume that belonging to a social identity group automatically translates into advocacy for people with the same background, so like each step that can be taken, committee composition has to be part of a broader set of efforts.

There are several movements afoot to develop more equitable visions of merit, two of which have particular relevance for doctoral education. The movement for non-cognitive assessment holds promise as a means of capturing personal qualities that are both distributed more evenly across social identities than traditional standardized test scores, and which are central to success in graduate education and beyond. ETS recently released the Personal Potential Index for this very purpose, although adoption and diffusion seem to be occurring slowly (Schlegel, 2011). Also, reform efforts in some medical schools have led to the adoption of competency-based admissions frameworks and structured interviews in the context of holistic review (Cantwell, Canche, Milem, & Sutton, 2010). In practice, this means "reexamin[ing] prevailing assumptions about the competencies necessary" for future practice, and more tightly coupling admissions criteria with those competencies (Nivet, 2011, p. 1488). Competency-based approaches acknowledge what we know about the diversity of individual strengths that contribute to

professional success; in doctoral education, this must surely include research-based competencies.

Rethinking merit with an eye to diversity works best in the context of a broader shift in how diversity is framed—thinking of it as a means of solving broader problems, not only a problem to be solved or an end in itself. Research by Page (2007) and Nivet (2011) identifies ways in which diversity serves as a tool for leveraging human differences to improve organizational performance. Although this study was motivated by the structural inequality in doctoral education and the professoriate, it is equally important to strengthen diversity because the intellectual challenges that today's scholars face demand cognitive complexity that only diverse teams possess (Neumann, 1992).[62]

Implications for future research. Findings from this study open an array of avenues for possible research. I focus here on possible research into faculty evaluation and graduate admissions. Judgments of quality are part of day-to-day faculty life, yet what faculty value and how they recognize what they value have been the subject of relatively little analysis (Lamont, 2009). Ironically, the very prevalence of evaluative work in faculty life may help explain why criteria of evaluation and the meanings with which they are associated are often tacit or taken-for-granted. If it is not admissions, it may be hiring faculty or postdoctoral fellows, grading student work, reviewing dissertation work, peer reviewing manuscripts, proposals, etc. Evaluation, for the seasoned professor, is so ubiquitous as to be routinized, and judgments of what count as good or bad rendered as much by instinct as careful analysis. Although I did not ask about this specifically, it came up frequently enough to indicate this is a worthwhile avenue for future research.

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[62] I heard this perspective from only two of the individuals whom I interviewed.

Disciplinary logics offers a lens for such research on faculty evaluation in other settings, and could also guide future research on graduate admissions. Attiyeh & Attiyeh's (1997) study is now fifteen years old, and used only a single-level regression equation. Multi-level modeling that examines variance across disciplines in the strength of relationships between given applicant characteristics and admissions outcomes would be a valuable contribution to literature on graduate admissions.

Another line of research could quantitatively examine the relationship between changes in program prestige and selectivity. At the undergraduate level, it has long been the case that the two go hand-in-hand, yet it remains unclear whether, at the graduate level, university or program prestige is more important to application and admission rates. The release of National Research Council rankings of graduate programs permits a deeper analysis of disciplinary differences in the relationship of selectivity and reputation.

This research also highlights the need to continue research about where international students fit in discourses about merit and institutional diversity in graduate education. Zhang (2009) does not find evidence in most fields that admitting more international students effectively "crowds out" domestic students, yet this may be the result of loosely-applied quotas whose legal viability could be challenged. Only two of the seventy-three people I interviewed explicitly used the phrase "too many Asians," but the worry it expresses about the demand from Chinese students for elite American doctoral programs is pervasive, and described in more subtle terms in a majority of programs. Thanks to a centuries-old culture of test preparation in China, high modal GRE scores from Chinese applicants complicate faculty commitment in many programs

to use of a conventional notion of achievement for initial sorting. However, in economics and physics, where standardized test scores and advanced curriculum are key criteria, they are perfectly comfortable thinking of their market as a global one and making national origin a centerpiece of their diversity conceptualizations.

A related study could, more generally, analyze the hypothesis that rare is precious in admissions. Students are essentially commodified in admissions—treated as investments and assets—and I hypothesize that there is an inverse relationship between the size of an applicant pool from a particular demographic group and the interest that faculty take in a typical applicant from that group. When there are many of what are perceived to be "the same kind of applicant," faculty only get excited about the ones that break the stereotype or who otherwise distinguish themselves from the pack. For example, domestic Black and Latino students with very high GRE scores are highly recruited. Applicants from Asia whose personal narrative clearly defies the East Asian model minority stereotype are more likely to capture the interest of reviewers (e.g., a physical scientist raised in the Himalayas, a Vietnamese student in the humanities). In sociology, because there are so many who are interested in stratification, those with other interests immediately stand out. There are some distributions of applicants in which one wants to be modal, such as having high grades, but there are other distributions in which being an outlier is advantageous.

Finally, this study has focused on standard models of graduate admissions, but we also need research that investigates diversity-minded admissions interventions. What are the characteristics of successful recruitment programs, for example? And how are such programs then linked with file review and committee deliberation? Do university-level

trainings for faculty affect how attendees approach admissions and interact with their colleagues' approaches? Experimental research could test whether presenting GRE scores at the end of a file reading changes the strength of its association with admission decisions.

Conclusion

Academia is, at its core, a knowledge-producing organization, and doctoral programs its entry point and the training ground for the next generation of scholars and other knowledge professionals. Now, as it has for more than one hundred years, striving for prestige distracts students, administrators, and faculty alike from their educational mission. Reducing education to a status competition transforms learning into a rat race (Labaree, 1999), and skill and knowledge into currency for gaining an edge over one's peers in whatever educational or professional transition comes next (Bourdieu and Nice, 1984).

The striving is understandable. The United States is a credential society and winner-take-all system where the payoffs for institutional prestige are high (Collins, 2002; Frank and Cook, 1995), generating for institutions such concrete outcomes as enrollments and revenues (Jaquette, 2012), and for students better labor market outcomes (Brewer, Eide, & Ehrenberg, 1999; Monks, 2000; Rivera, 2012). For prestigious educational institutions and their aspirants, status has become "the main business of higher education" (Stevens, 2007, p. 32).

But accepting competitive dynamics as the way of things has negative consequences for equity, and ultimately favors those who currently hold power. In a society that fancies itself a meritocracy, it is a form of power to set the terms of access to

institutions whose credentials confer status, as is, of course, having resources to gain access on those ever-increasing terms. Inequality is thus institutionalized— produced by systems not only of disadvantage, but also of privilege. We need to connect the dots about the self-perpetuation of privilege through access to elite education, and understand how some individuals and institutions resist these tendencies or opt out of status seeking.

Investigating a similar state of affairs in France, Bourdieu (1977, 1984) concluded that education ultimately serves as a tool of cultural and social reproduction because elites misrecognize arbitrary characteristics as legitimate bases for allocating opportunity and status. Their perceptions of what should be valued in contexts like selective admissions have been filtered by a subconscious yearning to legitimize—and thus protect—their own status. Lamont (1992, 2009) builds on this by identifying a link between self and status. Organizations define their boundaries according to core values that uphold the self-concepts of their members. For elite organizations, that tacitly involves status. Together, these perspectives suggest that a latent function of organizational gatekeeping in elite educational institutions is to reinforce the legitimacy of their status by defining merit in terms that hold value in the organizational field. Their own legitimacy hangs in the balance by the strength of the students whom they admit.

Findings here add to the discussion by analyzing how perceptual frameworks – elite departments' evaluative scripts, disciplinary logics, and individual identities— structure how merit is constructed at different levels of analysis, and how faculty work together across the hierarchies constructed at each level. Findings also inform discussions about how taste operates in pluralistic organizations. In the highly ranked programs I studied, the prevailing tendency is to prioritize pedigree and characteristics

associated with status within the discipline, often on the basis of risk aversion. However, this is mediated for individuals by disciplinary logics rooted in the prevailing theories, methods, and priorities of their respective fields. We see divergent logics—and thus more deliberation about what counts as merit—in lower-consensus disciplines, where individuals' identities seem to prove stronger filters and the tastes those identities produce carry the weight of more universalistic criteria. When aggregated within committees, identity-based cultural preferences can pose a challenge to standard interpretations of applications.

I set out to study the social construction of merit, and learned that it has important organizational foundations. To manage the volume of applications received, faculty turn from an ideal of deliberative democracy to bureaucratic practices that lend efficiency. The resulting organizational adaptation, deliberative bureaucracy, reflects an effort to uphold core professional norms while getting admissions work done efficiently. Ambiguity aversion leads committees to quantify judgment in a variety of ways, and conflict aversion leads them to displace discussion of applicants with discussion of less controversial matters of process. These aversions, and the norms they are trying to protect, powerfully filter faculty judgment of what criteria and processes should be used in admissions.

Everything we think we know has been processed through a powerful filter—our perceptions. Social constructionism teaches us that the social world is as we interpret it and respond to those interpretations. Although there are always aspects of context and circumstance that are given to faculty in decision-making contexts, their identities, disciplinary logics, and evaluative scripts play a vital role in shaping perceptions, which

shape preferences and resulting choices. In so doing, they also shape what will be counted as "given" in the future, for the more deeply held a belief is, the more likely it is to keep a person from seeing things any other way. The associated strength of qualitative research that puts participant interpretations at the center of analysis is in uncovering these taken-for-granted filters, for it is only in stepping outside of and analyzing them that we can understand their power. Like the prisoners in Plato's cave, scholars may not even realize that the way they have been conditioned to see excellence in themselves and others is not natural, but socially situated and carefully constructed to serve specific ends. Yet unlike the prisoners, scholars have the opportunity to shape the contexts in which their judgment is situated and, in so doing, refine the lenses through which their perceptions—and those of their colleagues and students—will be filtered.

Appendices

Appendix A:

Informational Interview with Program Chairs/ Directors

1. Thank participant for their time.
2. Ensure consent forms are signed. Remind of freedom to decline a question or end interview.
3. Request to audiotape.
4. To start, could you tell me a little about how you originally came to be a professor of _____? Probe for critical experiences in undergrad and graduate school.
5. Could you outline for me what the key steps are in your program's PhD admissions process?
   i. Is there an admissions committee? For what are they responsible? How is it formed? When do they begin meeting?
   ii. Do you recruit students? From what sources?
6. Approximately what proportion of applicants do you admit? How do you determine how many students will be admitted each year?
7. Do you rank applicants or use point systems? If so, how do you do so? How does it affect who is admitted?
8. What makes the students in your program stand out compared to other PhD students in your field, nationally? What makes your department stand out compared to others in your field?
9. How do your means of narrowing the pool in the beginning differ from the ways you choose in the end whom to admit?
10. What makes admissions decisions difficult? How do the faculty in your program negotiate those difficulties?
    i. How do faculty on the committee negotiate disagreements about which students should move forward in the process or be admitted?
11. What have you learned about admissions through your responsibilities as chair? How does your work evaluating research/ scholarship and evaluating prospective faculty hires affect your approach to evaluating doctoral applicants?
12. When was the last time the department evaluated its admissions procedures?
13. **For faculty in interdisciplinary programs only:** Faculty in this program are affiliated with and have been trained up in a wide range of disciplines. How do you think this affects admissions?
14. Is there anything else you think would be helpful at this point for me to know about how faculty juggle competing demands?
15. If all is going well, explain study I am proposing. Discuss possibility of interviews with faculty on committee and observation of other events that would help me get to know the department and its admissions processes better.

Appendix B:

Initial Interview Protocol with Faculty Participants

1. Thank participant for their time.
2. Ensure consent forms are signed. Remind of freedom to decline a question or end interview.
3. Request to audiotape.
4. To start, could you tell me a little about how you originally came to be a professor of _____? Probe for critical experiences in undergrad and graduate school
5. What are some of the traits you are looking for in prospective students?
    i. Probe: Let's talk through why each of those things are important and how you learn these things about applicants.
    ii. Probe: What are some of the red flags that pop up in applications?
    iii. Probe: Are there factors you think may be very important to other faculty that don't matter so much to you? Describe. Why are these important to others? Not important to you?
    iv. Probe: There are many factors to weigh in making the decision about whom to admit. Are there any non-negotiables?
6. There is always a balance of admitting on the basis of prior achievement and on potential. How do you balance that?
    i. What prior achievements are most attractive to you? Why?
    ii. How important is it that applicants have a background in this field?
    iii. What do an applicant's institutional affiliations tell you?
    iv. What does potential mean to you? What are you thinking about their potential for?
7. What makes the students in your program stand out compared to other PhD students in your discipline, nationally? What makes your department stand out compared to others in your field?
8. How important is establishing "fit" between a prospective student and advisor and/or student and program? Why? What does fit mean to you?
    i. On what dimensions is fit most important? Why?
    ii. Can you describe an example of an advisee with whom you had particularly good fit? How did this affect your relationship? Your work? Her/ his development?
    iii. Do you know of any cases that turned out to have a poor fit?
9. Let's talk a little about test scores. How do you think about test scores in a file? How important are they compared to other aspects of a file?
    iv. Probe: What do they signal about the applicant, if anything, in your experience?

10. What do you learn from letters of recommendation? How do they get factored into the evaluation?
11. What about statement of purpose? How do you make sense of the information applicants convey in them?
12. What else are you looking for in PhD students that we haven't discussed?

Appendix C:

Follow-up Interview Protocol with Faculty Participants

1. Thank participant for their time.
2. Remind them that I will be creating pseudonyms for all faculty, departments, and universities participating in the study, and that any identifying information that comes up in the interview will be deleted from transcript. Participant may decline to answer any question or end the interview at any time.
3. Request to audiotape.
4. Information about their perceptions of the discipline (I will compare their answers to these with answers questions 7-8, 10, 13-16 and integrate this with observations to get at tacit assumptions deriving from the discipline)
   a. In _____, do scholars tend more toward quantitative or qualitative data in their research? What does this type of data buy the researcher?
   b. Do scholars tend more toward research for its own sake or applied research? How did this trend originate?
   c. What are some other traits of highly valued research? Of highly sought after faculty candidates?
5. How do deliberations over admission compare to deliberations over faculty hiring?
6. How did the admissions process go this year compared to previous years?
   a. How did the pool compare?
   b. How did the committee deliberations compare with previous years?
7. Thinking back through the people who were admitted, please describe the applicant who was the clearest admit for you this year? What made this person an obvious admit? Did others agree?
8. Thinking back through people who were eliminated from the pool early on, what kinds of students might have been surprised to be rejected? What are their characteristics?
9. What seem to be the things the committee could easily agree on as bases for admitting an applicant? Rejecting an applicant?
10. Now I'd like us to talk about a few of the borderline cases.
    a. First can you tell me a little about a particular profile of a student who was on the bubble?
    b. How consistent were committee members' perceptions of that person?
    c. What concerns did the committee have?
    d. What did the applicant have going for him/ her?
    e. What were some of the competing demands that needed sorting out?
    f. What made this case a difficult decision?
    g. How do you feel about the outcome?
    h. Let's compare this case with another borderline case…

11. What are some of the trade-offs you have to make when choosing among relatively qualified applicants?
12. Were there any particularly contentious cases this year? What made them difficult to resolve? How was it handled, and were you satisfied with the outcome?
13. In admissions decisions, how important are quantitative indicators like grades and test scores compared to qualitative information like letters of rec, personal statements, and interviews?
14. How important is research experience compared to other professional experiences?
15. Have you ever worked for another _____ department? If so, have you noticed anything that faculty in this program are looking for that faculty in other _____ programs in the field may not be? Is there anything unique about the way faculty in this department approach admissions? Please explain.
16. **For faculty who are cross-appointed only:** What differences in admissions criteria have you noticed between the multiple programs in which you're appointed? Differences in decision making? To what do you attribute those differences?
17. **For faculty in interdisciplinary programs only:** Faculty in this program are affiliated with and have been trained up in a wide range of disciplines. How do you think this affects admissions in this program?
18. Is there anything else you would like to add, or that I should ask of the other faculty I interview?

Appendix D:

Case Template

1. How do faculty judge and collectively select Ph.D. applicants?

    A. Individually judge?

    B. Collectively select?

2. What meanings do faculty attribute to common applicant characteristics and admissions criteria?

    A. GRE scores

    B. Letters of recommendation

    C. Research experience

    D. Transcripts/ Grades

    E. Interview

3. What are the most salient criteria in this department?

4. How does the discipline seem to shape faculty judgment? Preferences?

5. Notable episodes that illustrate underlying dynamics.

Informed Consent Document

Study ID: HUM00045232   IRB: Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences   Date Approved:12/2/2010

Research participation consent form
Decision making in doctoral admissions

Researcher
Julie Renee Posselt, Doctoral candidate, University of Michigan, Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education

Description of the research
This research is concerned with faculty decision-making in admissions to selective Ph.D. programs. In addition to studying how faculty interpret the range of information they have about applicants, the project examines how they juggle competing demands in determining whom to admit. The study will provide the first empirical evidence in 25 years about graduate admissions processes in multiple disciplines. Findings will highlight best practices and enable faculty and administrators to evaluate their own Ph.D. admissions processes and decision-making.

Description of involvement
You may consent to participation in one or both components of this research effort:

Individual interviews: Individuals will be asked to participate in 1-2 interviews of no more than 45 minutes each, ideally one before committee deliberations and one after admissions decisions have been made. Participants will be asked to share their academic backgrounds, the criteria they use in evaluating PhD applicants, and the issues they believe contribute to high and low rankings of applicants. With the participant's consent, these interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed.

Group observation: The researcher will be present at one or more meetings in which department faculty decide whom to admit. Meetings will *not* be audiotaped or transcribed. Hand written notes will be taken about how faculty work together to negotiate competing demands, how frequently various criteria are mentioned, and the combinations in which admissions criteria are discussed.

Risks of involvement
With rigorous efforts to preserve participant confidentiality, foreseeable social, reputational, and legal risks to participation in this project are minimal. Steps for protecting privacy and confidentiality are described in the following section.

Measures to Minimize Risks
1. Participants will have the chance to agree to the terms of consent before participation.
2. Individuals may voluntarily discontinue participation in the study at any time, and may interrupt the interview or decline to answer individual interview questions.
3. Interviews will take place in a private location of your designation (e.g., your campus office)
4. I will not ask to review applicant files.
5. I will not participate in discussion at meetings, and will try to be as unobtrusive as possible.
6. With the exception of private consultation with the dissertation committee, participant names, university names, and other identifying characteristics will not be discussed. Your confidentiality is among my very top concerns.
7. Pseudonyms will thus be generated for individual participants, colleges/ schools, universities and (in cases where there are less than 10 such programs nationally) the department/ discipline name. In the dissertation, presentations, and conversations, I may refer to your program as "a biology department."
8. The researcher will transcribe 25% of interviews and the other 75% will be transcribed by a transcriptionist with a reputation for discretion and accuracy. Transcription protects participants by ensuring accuracy in analysis.
9. All personally identifying information will be deleted from transcripts.
10. Audio files and transcripts will be stored in password-protected files in accordance with University of Michigan policy. Audio files will be destroyed once all transcription is completed.

Expected benefits
It is my hope that findings from this research will benefit faculty, administrators, and prospective PhD students. PhD admissions proceeds by departmental tradition, and faculty rarely have clear understanding of ways that other programs admit students. In-depth study of eight departments will clarify a range of practices that are used and how other faculty interpret information about applicants; as a result, departments may be able to reflect upon their own practices and bases for selection.

Each program that participates will receive a report of salient findings from their case study, and participants will have the opportunity to (a) receive a report that compares their practices with similar programs and (b) review the findings of the study, writ large. No monetary compensation is provided.

Confidentiality of Records/ Data
You, your applicants, and your university will not be identified in any reports or presentations deriving from this research. We may discuss with you what we learned

from you, but your identity and other identifiable information will never be made available to others; see Measures to Minimize Risks for a list of protections. Records will be kept confidential to the extent governed by local, state, and federal law. The University of Michigan's Institutional Review Board, which is responsible for the conduct of this study, may inspect records.

Availability of Further Information
If significant new knowledge is obtained during the course of data collection or analysis that may influence your willingness to continue as a participant, the researcher will inform you.

Voluntary Nature of Participation
Your participation in this project is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question, interrupt the interview, or withdraw your participation at any time. Doing so will not jeopardize yourself or this research effort. You may contact the researcher with any questions at any time.

Documentation of Consent
One, signed copy of this document will be retained with this study's research records. You will be given a second copy to keep for your own records.

Contact Information
Principal investigator:	Julie R. Posselt, Ph.D. Candidate
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Dissertation advisor:	Dr. Michael Bastedo, Associate Professor
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Institutional affiliation:	Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary
Education	
	School of Education, University of Michigan
	610 E. University Ave, Room 2117 SEB
	Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1259

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the University of Michigan Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board, 540 E Liberty St., Ste 202, Ann Arbor, MI 48104-2210, (734) 936-0933 [or toll free, (866) 936-0933], irbhsbs@umich.edu.

I have read or been informed of the information included in this consent form. The researcher has offered to answer any questions I hold regarding this research effort.

I voluntarily consent to be interviewed for this study.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

I voluntarily consent for the interview(s) to be audio-recorded.

_____   _____
Signature

I voluntarily consent to Julie Posselt's attendance at the Ph.D. admissions meeting(s) for the purpose of observing collective decision-making.

_____   _____
Signature   Date

Appendix F:

Initial Email to Prospective Departments

On Thu, Oct 07, 2010 at 09:46:42AM -0700, Julie R. Posselt wrote:

Dear Dr. ***:

Hello. I am doctoral candidate in the University of Michigan's Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, and am conducting my dissertation research on admission to selective PhD programs.

In my research, I am trying to understand how faculty make difficult decisions and balance competing demands, and how this compares across disciplines. Despite growing demand for graduate degrees, knowledge of what matters in admissions to faculty and why is mostly limited to conventional wisdom. There is strong research on selection for publication and fellowships, and on hiring faculty and upper administrators. However, just one study examines selection in graduate admissions across disciplines, and it was conducted 25 years ago in the context of a larger study of admissions at Harvard.

I am in residence in **** this academic year, and would be grateful for the opportunity to meet with you for a brief informational interview to learn more about how admissions works in your Ph.D. program and how, as chair of the admissions committee, you approach the process. It should require no more than 30 minutes.

I plan to be at **** on 10/** if there happens to be a good time for you, but am generally available on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays after 10/17 if you are willing to talk and would like to suggest a day/ time.

Sincere thanks for your time and consideration.

     With my best regards,
     Julie Posselt

_____
Julie Renee Posselt
Doctoral candidate
Center for the Study of Higher and Post-secondary Education
University of Michigan School of Education
610 E. University Ave., Ann Arbor, MI 48109

Appendix G:

Case Summary in Linguistics

1. How does the committee collectively select applicants?

There are four formal rounds of review, two by the admissions committee that cut the pool from 100 to 50 and then to 25, and then two more rounds by the full faculty, which narrow the pool to 12 who are invited to an interviewing/recruitment weekend and then the final 8 who are offered admission. It is the most collaborative, deliberative process of the ones I observed.

The committee includes three male professors (Pieter, who is an associate professor, and John and Zhou, who are full professors), two female professors (Nancy, who is the department chair, and Denise), and two graduate students, both male. The department chair crafts the committee and admitted to me that she has, in her words, "stacked it" with people who are committed to approaching admissions with an eye to the vision the department has of itself, rather than admitting students to satisfy individual faculty members. The department's identity and vision, as we will see, structures admissions from the beginning—the committee's formation—to the very final choices among applicants. Although fit is a consideration to some degree in all of the programs I studied, it appears most prominent in this department.

Each of the approximately 100 files they receive each year are read by at least two people on the committee. The goal at this point, according to Pieter, who has chaired admissions for a few years, is a "50% culling." He feels this task tends to be "easy" because so many applicants don't really know what the field is, thinking for example that it involves studies of ESL. Such individuals are easy to cut, Pieter says, because "Thematically, there is not a fit." Nancy, the department chair, also agrees that cutting the bottom fifty percent of applicants is, "actually not that hard. I mean like all populations, it falls on a curve. You're just finding the midpoint and taking everything [above it]." From a collective standpoint, this round of cuts is also relatively easy because there are only two people's opinions to align and the standard is lower than later in the review process. As the applicant pool narrows, so too does the variance in applicants' relative qualifications, yet more voices are brought to bear on each of the files; therefore, more disagreements need to be negotiated.

The second level of review whittles the fifty down again by half to about 25, a round of cuts that Nancy feels is "a little bit harder because those top fifty are all possible in a sense, right? So they're a little bit harder. Then, it really is about who's the best? Who's the better fit? Where the first one is who is a fit?" Now, the entire committee reads all of the applications and gives to the chair their assessment of Yes+, Yes, Maybe, or No. Pieter collects the total number of Yes's, No's, and Maybe's from each committee

member to get a "rough count that determines who are the standouts in either direction." This expedites their evening meeting since, as he put it to the committee, "We don't want to be here until 10pm." They start with discussing "the easy cases"—those on whom there is complete committee consensus. Four people received 6 out of 6 yesses, to which Nancy commented, "You almost want to admit them now." John, a senior professor replied, "The motivation being they're more likely to come?" Nancy responded, "No, the motivation being, who cares what the rest of the faculty think?'" They share a good laugh at this. Similarly, four people received 0 out of 6 possible yes votes. Pieter barely had time to report this before being interrupted by a few people raising their voices to say "Out!" and "Absolutely!" Nancy suggests that, of the 41 remaining, "There might be some other semi-no brainers," and they move on to discussing those applicants to whom five out of six gave a yes. This discussion, they joke, is really a matter of "Getting someone to change their mind" or, more seriously, ensuring that the dissenting voter "hadn't missed something" in the file.

They continue the discussion, progressively devoting more time to each applicant. They conclude the discussion with those for whom three committee members gave a yes and three a no. By the time they reached this group, they had narrowed the pool to the target number to bring to the full faculty discussion, so there is some talk about whether they even need to talk about these. However, one committee member noted, "I think our colleagues will appreciate it if we don't make them do the work we could do," suggesting that they can make the other faculty's work easier by cutting a few more people from the pool at this point. Anticipating that discussion of this set might involve more disagreement among the committee, Pieter suggests, "There are eleven we haven't talked about yet. If there is anyone about whom we're divided, we can still move them on."

Before wrapping up the meeting, the committee discusses how they will manage the new voices that are entering the discussion. Nancy encourages Pieter to "make a pitch for the vision" in his instructions to the full faculty. He agrees, and notes that he will also instruct each faculty member to assign each applicant a yes or no vote, aiming for half of each faculty member's files to receive a yes vote and remembering that, "We're not looking for the 12 best phonologists, but the 12 best students." Nancy adds, as if speaking to a faculty member outside the committee, "And we're not looking for students to work with you." The meeting closes with discussion of some concern that the others may try to "resurrect candidates whom we've decided to exclude" as a result of having full access to all of the files online, but they agree to take a hard line should anyone make such an attempt.

The context for these comments merits some clarification. Although most colleagues support the practice of seeking students who help the department fulfill the vision it has set, a few either disagree either with the principle or are unsure what it means. For example, one individual who felt her/his sub-discipline was underrepresented among those recommended for admission sought to bring back an applicant from the larger pool. The practice impeded evaluation since the whole faculty had not read this individual's file. This year, there were no such problems in the linguistics program (unlike political science and astrophysics), which Pieter attributes to both the sub-disciplinary balance they unintentionally achieved and his colleagues' growing acceptance of the new admissions model.

Returning to the final stages of selection, the full faculty meeting involved an emergent selection process in which the department and committee chairs led the meeting, but also solicited advice from the faculty along the way about how they should select the twelve people to invite to the recruitment weekend. Referring to a handout distributed informally called the "voting results" and "results of the primary," several non-committee members whispered to each other before the meeting things like, "This is EASY!" and "Looking at this list, I have nothing to say." Such comments are understandable because there were ten people for whom a majority of the group voted yes to invite to the recruitment weekend.

Pieter opened the official conversation by noting his pleasure at seeing "the large number on whom there was agreement." He explains that they treated the maybes as no's and that this wasn't meant to be a final decision, but rather to "structure our discussion" since, "There isn't time to discuss all of the applicants in detail." He also explains to the group how the committee had arrived at the list of 24, mentioning that, "It was really hard. We looked for candidates who fit with the broad vision we have as a department." He drew their attention to the way that applicants seemed to be grouped by the degree of yes-vote consensus from the whole faculty; six candidates received 77% or more yes votes, seven received 33% or fewer yes, and there was a third group in the middle whose top end received earned yes votes from 64% of the faculty. Noting the more than 10% difference separating the top and middle groups, he suggested, "It seems there is a break at 77%. For the time being let's not discuss the others…. If you were a yes vote for one of the ones under 33% and you wish to speak up, please do." No one takes him up on the offer. Next, he encouraged them to start discussion by "Going through the list of the candidates, we'll start at the top. Who wants to say something about him? Who wants to defend him?" This is a real aberration from, say, the philosophy and sociology departments, where there is almost as much discussion of process as applicants. Also, it's interesting to see how discussion of each applicant—these are the yeses, remember—is framed in terms of defending them.

Unlike the last meeting, they are now devoting more time to the people they think they want than to the borderline cases. For example, the discussion of one borderline case involved a short conversation mentioning only a student's country of origin, research interests, and faculty's general impressions (e.g., "Interesting, but not very excited" and "Nothing that sparkled."). In response, one person changes his yes vote to a maybe and Pieter says, "This is one we can take off of the list." Suddenly, cheering erupts around the room and it becomes clear they are eager to identify people who can be rejected. What's not clear is whether they would have so quickly cut this person if he had been one of the first to be discussed? They did not get to any of the typical details they have been discussing with others.

After they have made it through the top 12 on the list, Pieter gives the faculty one more chance to speak up: "If there is anyone toward the bottom of the list that you strongly want to bring to campus, this is the time to speak up." There is laughter around the room as the obvious "or forever hold your peace" line seems to follow, which one person sitting near me in the corner compares to "keeping the peace." After brief comments by a quiet member of the committee who had two of his yeses in the bottom group, another asked whether he "wants to argue strongly for either." He said no, and another notes, "If we take this person off the list, hey, that's 12!" "Meeting adjourned!"

There is more laughter. I can't help but wonder if this person, whose tastes seem to be different from the rest of the group, is feeling as much like laughing. Here, the tone of the group (as in the committee meeting, perhaps due to Nancy's influence?) is friendly banter, such that raising concerns in a serious manner would feel like going against the grain. Despite the frequent invitations to speak up, there is a jocular tone in the group in which it wouldn't be easy for an introvert to participate, or a person holding a minority vote to change others' minds.

They list everyone on the board and are now adding the specializations beside each name. "If we wanted to consider subfields, we're balanced," Pieter observes, "but that wasn't our task. It's just what arose through our organic process. We might have to revisit next year how we implement the seeking of a vision." Referring to the list on the board, Pieter asks once more whether everyone is satisfied with the list.

After the recruitment weekend, they seek input from the graduate student community and have another full faculty meeting. Although invited, I was unable to attend this meeting due to presenting at a conference. According to the reports of the committee chair and two members, in this one, there was almost immediate consensus that two students brought to campus as part of a special diversity outreach program for students from a local, urban college should not be admitted. See episode explanation at the end of the case for more detail. It took a little bit longer to choose the last two who should be excluded. It's notable that consensus in their ratings/ votes allow for admission by selection, but that their deliberations seem to employ an admission by exclusion model.

I have to note, and did mention this to the committee and department chair as I left the first full-faculty meeting, that the alignment of this committee's espoused and enacted values is really impressive to me. They are devoted to a vision for the department and use it to assess applicant fit at each and every stage of review. And, as a group, it seems they really do downplay the GRE scores (which so many faculty in other departments claim, but is clearly not the case in their committee meetings). The average scores aren't nearly as high as some of the other programs I'm studying; they don't debate how important a factor it should be; and when GRE scores are mentioned, they note that they don't want to consider it too strongly and it ends there. The graduate school would be proud.

2. What meanings do faculty attribute to applicant traits and admissions criteria?

A. GRE scores

There are different meanings and levels of importance attributed to low and high scores, and to verbal and quantitative. In linguistics, you can get along without much quant skill in several sub-fields, but you need strong verbal skills in all of them.

> a low test score doesn't necessarily mean anything. It can mean somebody had a bad day or whatever. It's pretty hard to I mean unless you're in this sort of unless you've got a really structured test preparation system it's pretty hard to just luck into a very high GRE score so that shows some promise usually.

I wouldn't see GREs as a red flag unless they're very low.

I: What's very low?

R: Very low relative to what I'm seeing basically so relative to the pool. I don't have an absolute number… I mean if I see something that's you know that's below the seventieth or sixtieth percentile. That can give me pause. Again, it's a flag; it's not a sort of do or die.

In linguistics of course generally you're looking for somebody who's got, who is good at verbal skills. For some kinds of linguistics it's important to have good well in general for linguistics it helps to be on the quantitative side too I mean that sort of indicates a kind of an ability to do some kind of analysis. But you can be a perfectly good linguist in many sorts of subfields without knowing a lot of math or having a lot of aptitude there so a lower score on the quantitative usually doesn't bother us.

Probably most commonly cited meaning is that of English skill, both for the sake of being a linguist and because they believe English skills translate into ability to teach undergraduates (as many graduate students do) and write a quality dissertation.

I've been in situations where we have a student like that who was really absolutely brilliant but who got here and wasn't successful because they didn't… their English was not good enough. So with that kind of student then my primary concern is to make sure that their English is good enough so that when they come to write their dissertation they don't have to have somebody go over every sentence with them

If a native speaker of English has a GRE in the 400's verbal, something's wrong. One thing that is really soul-destroying for a faculty member is having to work on every sentence of somebody's dissertation. It's just, it's not just grueling, it's very, very frustrating.

Low TOEFL scores are also a critical way that some students are sifted out. In an interview:

I think seeing low TOEFL scores, I think more about how are these—how would this applicant be in the classroom? That's not so much about them as linguists as it is about how do you get a student like that? What happens to a student like that faced with **** undergraduates?

And in practice: I heard scores of 100 and below met with a disapproving, "Oooooh" in the meetings I observed. In one case, it went like this:

"This was an unequivocal no to me with the TOEFL of 82"

"Oooooooh."

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"She might be good, but with a TOEFL like that….."

For at least two members of the committee, English skill is wrapped up with intelligence. In one of the meetings a student with "astronomical scores" was, after some question about fit, was spoken of as "there's no question she's smart." The conversation trailed off from here, providing clear evidence that they WANT smart people, but that this is not enough to get you admitted.

> Somebody who does that well on the GREs is unlikely to be lame-brained. They are likely to be smart. Um, I never know how to interpret the analytic score because for linguistics that matters more than quantitative, more than verbal too really. But I'm never sure how to interpret it.

It can also be associated with simple test preparation, especially when evaluating Chinese applicants.

> I'm most familiar with the Chinese student who will have astronomical test scores. I think you know the Chinese um test preparation industry is second to none in the world…. And they've been doing it for over a thousand years uh you know the about the Chinese civil service examination system. So you know back fifteen hundred years ago you would have to… you know it was theoretically possibly for somebody you know without any connections but with a good education to take. There was a local level examination, a written examination that would take like three days and then the next provincial level and the capital level and if you came out on top in that you would get a government job. You didn't have to have a… I mean of course you [pause] it takes normally it takes some resources to get a good enough education to be able to do that. But in principle anybody can do that… any male could do that. Um but [pause] so there's that definitely this um [pause] absolutely great sort of long standing skill at taking tests.

In summary, they believe the GRE predicts a student's success. As one applicant was summed up in the meeting: "With GREs like that, we know she can do it." Scores are associated with intelligence for two, the ability to teach and write for a majority. Yet, it's important to note that there is disagreement about how much they should be weighted and whether one should infer as much from a low score as a high.

B. Letters of rec

They are looking for "rave" letters that are purely positive, especially from individuals whom they know and trust. Letters that come from within these prestige and trust networks carry greater weight both by virtue of a halo effect, but also because "if you

know the person and that the person doesn't shower praise you can use that as a way of evaluating or the other way around, but I'm always uncomfortable with that."

Yet there is a general uselessness of letters because (1) they see too much praise for too many applicants from the same person and (2) too little detail:

> R: They're not usually that informative. Um, every once in a while, a few years ago, we admitted someone on the strength of a particularly impressive letter. She just made the student sound wonderful.
> *I: And…?*
> R: Not bad. But some letter writers do a really good job. There are some people who are very famous and well-known, Noam Chomsky is one of them, who would write letters for a lot of people, more on job applications, but who writes spectacular letters for everybody. So you tend to discount them because you know they're not all … the best person in 120 years.
>
> Letters of recommendation I don't generally find all that useful at all. Um, I mean it depends. It depends, I suppose. They so rarely have specific information that you know.
>
> Letters are also a little tough because so many of them are over the top. It's hard to like really use them anymore.

Letters are most helpful for comparative evaluation:

> "Letter from person whose lab she's working in is not terribly strong."
> "How did her letter compare with another student in that lab?"
> "Competent, didn't impress me much."

> Letters also affirm relationships within and outside the committee. Formally, this happens as one or more faculty on a committee help interpret letters for others who may not know the letter writer. Faculty help each other get to know others in the field by helping them make sense of the letters they write. Informally, faculty may gossip about letter writers that ultimately reinforces the relationships committee members have with one another… at the expense of the person being gossiped about. For example, in talking about his reading of a LOR from a well-known scholar in the field, one committee member mentions that the letter writer complained to him about not citing him in a recent article. The committee member promised to cite him in the future, to which the group responded with comments like, "What a wimp!" "What a whiner!"

There are a few specific lines, seemingly reserved for special applicants, that have swaying power: "The best I've had in 20 years," for example, or "I hope you get to meet her."

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C. Research experience

Research experience is not expected because few undergraduates have this experience. However, some research experience is expected of applicants with a masters degree, and evaluated via the writing sample as evidence of ambition, skillfulness in and general understanding of the discipline, and fit with their departmental vision. Also, because it's rare, research experience and writing sample quality becomes a tool of comparative evaluation. Consider this example:

> "I liked her better than him, though they're both students of the same advisor"
> "They're both from Michigan, both have bachelors degrees, and are applying to the same schools. Both are in phonology and interested in the same theories."
> "But he showed us a good student. She showed us she can do research."

Not unlike faculty hiring, publications from one's masters thesis are especially valued as evidence of potential for future scholarship. Additionally, applicants' previous research topics also become a space in which faculty tastes come out and affect a student's prospects. Students with unconventional research interests catch faculty attention, and are marked in discussion by such exclamations as "Cool!", "Fascinating!"

D. Transcripts/ grades

As discussed further in the episode below, they consider not only what the student's grades are, but in which classes and universities the grades were earned. They take notice when these metrics are impressive, as exemplified by this quote in an interview: "Good grades in linguistics courses I'll note, and from a good university, I'll notice." And they also take notice when the student seems to fall short, as shown in the incredulous committee responses to one applicant during a meeting:

> "C's in linguistics? In grad school?"
> "From *there*?!"

There are two common meanings attributed to these contextualized grades.
(1) potential for academic achievement

> In an interview: "I mean you don't again… you can like somebody just fine but it's not doing them a favor to admit them to the program if um… if you don't think they're going to succeed."

> In a meeting: "I doubt she would do phenomenally because her syntax grades are not strong."

(2) awareness of the field and academic demands of graduate school

> Prof 1: "I have some concern about her grades in Marine Bio." They note a D and a couple C's, but her GPA is not bad overall.
> Prof 2: "And we're not admitting him for a marine bio!"
> Prof 1: "I don't think he knows what he's getting into."

Whether and how to compare grades across institutional and/or program prestige was a significant concern for those I interviewed. Grad student committee member's reflection on the validity of such comparisons, and how his own experiences have shaped his judgment.

> There're some tough issues. I remember two years ago there was a student who had a relatively low grade in a crucial class from MIT. And we were comparing him to another student who had a much better grade from a much lesser university. And that was tough. I remember thinking he was really smart but the low grade was unfortunate. On the other hand I felt it was not really right to compare these two universities the same. Especially since having gone to Arizona which is not an elite school by any means, there really are differences between universities. So grades are also really hard to—to compare…. None of it is hard data [laughing]. One thing, my experience in Arizona, in the Classics department, there was. It was pretty…people were pretty strict in that department, I feel like. It was also a very small department. But the overall quality of students there was much less than for example here.

In the end, it is fit with the departmental vision and the rigor of a student's preparation—as measured by the courses they have taken and the prestige of the program in which those courses are taken—on which applicants are excluded to create the set who will receive admissions offers. There isn't a particular bar or threshold the have in mind, but rather they are seeking the most prepared students possible. See episode about diversity described below.

E. Interview

No student is admitted without the faculty meeting them—in most cases, on campus during a visitation weekend, but in a few cases for international students, via skype interviews. They structure the weekend to serve as both recruitment and gathering information before offering admission. For example, in the meeting immediately preceding the visit weekend, faculty commented that they should strive for the weekend to "make them feel as though they'd be part of an intellectually exciting endeavor" and "offer material evidence of our collegiality" through coffee hours.

"We've always said it's not an interview, but you sit a student across a table and it's an interview!" Regardless of whether it is formally an interview or not, they are trying to glean the same sorts of information from these meetings as departments that officially conduct meetings. One professor summed it up:

> You have a chance to have a dialog with that person instead of just looking at the file so you can see how they react and how you know so it's not just what's on paper. So you get a… I mean you can get an idea as to how excited somebody is about what they hope to do. You can get some judgment as to how much they already know and how broad their interests are.

He continued, "It's just a clearer picture and less subject to gaming like that. You can get a more realistic picture of what the person's really like." However, "what the person's really like" has much to do with personal and personality traits. For example, one professor explained to me that, "Arrogance itself would not disqualify somebody but if the person is really difficult or doesn't get along with the graduate students or the other applicants and so forth, then you know that is a bad sign." Faculty also want to confirm the impressions they have of applicants from the application record. Put bluntly by one professor, "A paper record is just not adequate. It's never adequate. Somebody can look absolutely spectacular on paper and be a dope."

However, in this department it is not only faculty impressions that matter for final selections. "Reactions of the graduate students" was cited by others as well as an important component of the interview assessment, since the graduate student community is small and every new class of four students has the potential to significantly affect the community's character. According to the committee chair, "You should never choose a graduate program without talking to graduate students in the absence of faculty."

However, there are costs to conducting the recruitment *cum* interview weekend. Those who do visit are aware that they are all on a short list, and that some of them will be cut. And this year, due to the housing arrangements, some visiting applicants reported to graduate students a sense of competition with others visiting. The committee is discussing possible preventative solutions that would still allow all faculty to meet the applicants before making the admissions decision.

III. What are the salient criteria?

Academic achievement (grades and courses taken, contexualized by institutional prestige), followed by fit between the applicant's research interests and the vision the department has of itself.

IV. How do disciplines and departments shape faculty tastes?

This department is the classic case of Lamont's boundaries theory of social taste. This perspective suggests "taste" is largely unconscious and a function of individual and academic ingroup identities and boundaries (e.g., department, university, discipline, professoriate) (Lamont, 1992, 2009; Zerubavel, 1991; DiMaggio, 1987). These boundaries make apparent which applicants represent the best "fit" or "match" as advisees and/or program participants. (Re)articulation of faculty decision makers' own identities and values in the cultural contexts of the discipline, department, and profession also determine the symbolic boundaries they draw (Zerubavel, 1991; Lamont, 2009). As a department defines what they are about, those criteria become the basis on which they assess others. This summary quite clearly describes preferences in the linguistics department, except that the committee is of one mind about and very consciously admitting students on the basis of fit with the department's vision for the intellectual niche they wish to fill. It's also important to note that not only did they help to craft that vision (and the two broad areas of research it entails) two years ago, but Nancy admits

that she has "stacked the committee" with people who support the vision and the use of admissions to help fulfill it.

> I think a lot of people will tell you that we want broad students. I'm not sure if that's actually the case though in my personal opinion. I don't know how successful those students actually are. I think people want to and do say that. I don't know to what extent, um, that's actually the case.

> There were definitely people who we thought would be great students somewhere but not… but we didn't necessarily have anybody to work with then here. Or they had imagined that we did a lot of work in some area that we actually don't do that much in and so it probably would not be a good fit. So in the later stages, a lot of it has to do with assessing the fit between the faculty and our resources and their interests.

> When they say, "I'm applying to this program. I would like to work with these two faculty (members) and be part of their research program." That, I think to me is the most important thing. That really signals this person is serious.

> They speak positively of someone whose "Interests intersect between two parts of the field," which they refer to with other applicants as "bridging"

> Only one person in the department does this kind of work and we want to avoid people who only fit one individual.

> "The only question I have is whether he would fit into our vision categories."

> I say it's a small department. It's an inherently interdisciplinary field. I mean there is stuff that's just linguistics, but it's got tentacles.

The tacit part of taste for this department, as revealed in how the two students from the local college were evaluated, is that they want the most prepared they can get. Like so many other programs, they want minimal variane in the preparation of their students, and they don't want the students with less preparation to be from historically marginalized demographic groups. There is a fear of reproducing social inequalities in their own department.

5. What was a notable episode that reflects competing interests?

As in the political science, astronomy, and one of the philosophy departments, the two students in linguistics who generate the most discussion are so-called "diversity fellowship students." Both attend a local college from which the department is striving to develop a pipeline. Pieter explained to me:

We decided as a department that… and we got from the graduate school a diversity grant. We decided to interpret diversity broadly not just race and gender and all those things. We have very few students from local colleges so we contacted a local college and told them that if they have good undergraduates to apply here because there's this image that we are snobby so there is no point to apply here. So we had several applications from the local college and two made the short list.

And, indeed, last year they did admit one student from the college. This year, although a majority of the committee logged yes votes for both applicants in their private meetings, a majority also raised concerns over whether one student's research interests were clearly articulated enough and whether the other constituted too much of a risk, academically.

After reviewing some basic credentials, the department chair commented, "If we're serious about diversity, these are the students we need to take seriously…" A professor who hadn't yet spoken in the meeting then interrupted, "Can I please speak up? We want diversity, but we want excellence in diversity. And when I read that statement, it was all over the place." Another person affirms, "We need evidence of research skill, which we had with both of the last two applicants we discussed." A third added, "I tried to talk with her when she visited campus and couldn't get a line." After a pause, a senior member of the committee raised the diversity-risk relationship: "In most cases, diversity will involve some degree of risk on our part. We have to not be so risk averse that we miss opportunities." "That's true," added one of the people who had expressed a concern just a moment earlier. "And students from her ethnicity are very unlikely to apply to graduate school," she continued, not advocating for the student on this basis, but implying that the opportunity to enroll a student from this group does not come along often.

As for the other student from the local college, one of the committee members began by reading an extended portion of a letter of recommendation, which closed with the line. "I hope you get to meet her." The committee member followed his reading with, "And we will. She's coming to campus this Friday for a visit." As with the other student from this college, it became clear as they dug into her application that no one felt strongly about moving her forward in the process. Pieter, the committee chair, sounded unsure about her, but Nancy, the department chair, highlighted the extreme personal struggles the student had faced, concluding that, "She might be a bet, but it could be a good bet." She also reiterated an earlier point that, "If we are going to increase diversity, these are the students we need to take seriously." Tentatively, a quiet member of the committee asks, "What's the diversity?" Denise and Nancy, who by now are uniformly advocating for her, respond with "family financial hardship." The committee agreed at that point to leave her on the list, but discussion about her and about building diversity continued. Nancy said, "It will be good for the whole faculty to take a look at her file. It seems pretty clear that she's a risk, but if we're going to increase diversity, we have to take risks." Concurring, Denise added, "And she seems like a good bet. Increasing diversity will also require these pipelines."

After the full faculty meeting, both students in question were invited to campus for the recruitment weekend. However, in the final selection meeting following the recruitment weekend, they needed to eliminate four individuals and "in the first five minutes with very little discussion" decided not to admit either of them. Pieter explained the reasons to me in our follow-up interview:

> R: There was universal agreement about two of them. There were just two students that no one thought were up to the bar. So that got us down to ten. We liked them both, [but] we thought they didn't have the intellectual capacity to excel in graduate school.
> *I: And what was it during the campus visit that gave you the sense of that?*
> R: … In the end they just didn't have the right preparation. They were just, there were others from universities with great, active linguistics departments where they probably had taken two years worth of graduate courses already, things like that. The local students just didn't have that preparation. So they might have been perfectly capable, but in comparison…We felt horrible. We really wanted them, but it just wasn't going to happen… I'm still wondering what necessarily the right thing to do is. Both of them may have had the intellectual ability, but they didn't have as much background as the other students. So maybe if there were a way to guarantee them a sixth year of funding so that they can take an extra year to catch up, but that's not something we have.

It is unclear whether the faculty hold assumptions about whether the coursework one has taken can serve as a signal for "intellectual capacity," whether there may have been people on the faculty who ascribed to each viewpoint, or whether Pieter was just uncomfortable with describing their rationale for eliminating these two indviduals and so spoke in apparent contradictions. Young (2004) however, suggests that we should not read contradictions and incongruencies in individuals' narratives about their thinking as signs of untrustworthiness but rather reflective of complexity and of individuals' difficulty expressing such complexity since they are rarely asked to do so verbally.

Speaking with another member of the committee helped triangulate how they felt about the applicants and the final decision, as well as the factors that led to it:

> There were applicant s that we were hoping to be able to take a chance on that we invited to campus. Sadly, once they got here we decided it would not be a good gamble. Um and in fact I mean we really were *disappointed* because we did personally *like* the people involved and a lot about them but again you have to think about what you're doing to their lives as well. [Pause] but so some of the sort of last stage of discussion was which of the people that sort of might fit in that category are likely to be a good enough risk?

Appendix H:

Rationales for Classification of Disciplines

HUMANITIES

- **High consensus: Philosophy**
  Philosophy is a much older discipline, having survived thousands of years. Over its history, the topics philosophers have taken up reflect the diversity of interests of their societies and cultures (Russell, 1972). Today there are five primary strands of work within the field: ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of language & mind, philosophy of science, and aesthetics. Yet across time, culture, and content, the core of the field has been defined and preserved as an ongoing conversation about the nature of knowledge and reality (Durant, 2012). And the most well-known series of teachers and students in early western philosophy—Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle —initiated modes of discourse that continue to guide western philosophers' communication with one another about a very wide range of topics. Their influence is arguably paradigmatic from the standpoint of disciplinary socialization in U.S. universities. The Socratic method, for example, in which hypotheses are eliminated discursively through identification of ideas that produce contradictions, remains central to philosophical discourse.[63] Similarly, Aristotelian logic and its syllogisms are another enduring branch and method of philosophical discourse, and training in the use of syllogisms to argue one's point is a fundamental to the preparation of philosophers. A long tradition of "synthetic interpretation" of a diversity of topics using methods that have been institutionalized over millennia cements philosophy's leadership within the humanities (Durant, 2012).

- **Low consensus: Linguistics**
  Consistent with Abbott's (2001) theory of fractal change in disciplines, linguistics has declined in consensus over time. It started in the 19th century as a fairly coherent field of study (also known at that time as philology) that involved comparative and historical analysis of language development (Robins, 1997). Over time, however, other disciplinary lenses have been brought to bear on the study of languages, and quantitative research has made important inroads into the knowledge system. Especially since the mid 1980's, statistics has become a fundamental analytic method in sub-fields ranging from social and psycholinguistics to syntax to even the comparative and historical analyses that once defined the field (Johnson, 2008). Two different approaches to quantitative work in linguistics have emerged: hypothesis testing and pattern

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[63] The feel of argumentation that the Socratic method can produce has been named by some as a deterrent to women and indirect cause of the enduring underrepresentation of women in the field.

discovery. Although there remains an old guard attempting to hang on to a more humanistic vision of the discipline, a strong contingent of younger generations of linguists derive credibility for their work from the incorporation of social science into the discipline.

- **Moderate consensus: Classics**
  Classics is a multidisciplinary field of study tightly bound by its emphases on (1) the ancient Mediterranean world and (2) preservation of and work in the languages of that region, especially Greek and Latin. Initiating with a focus on interpreting literature of the ancient Mediterranean, the field has diversified to include archaeology, art, and history. Yet there are important intellectual ties across these sub-disciplines that promote common discourse. First, classicists share a commitment to Philo's Rule, the goal of precision and continuity of original ideas across time through preservation of the original languages. Second, classicists acknowledge the substantive gaps between the realities of ancient language, literature, life, etc. and today's understanding and representation of the same (Beard, 2000). To try and minimize these gaps, they cultivate interpretive and language skills through the practice of close reading, in which scholars simultaneously translate and interpret a given text (Haynes, 2010). Across interests in the archaeology, literature, or ideas of ancient cultures, the focus on language preservation and close reading have rendered the classics a relatively coherent field for thousands of years.

  Classics has less consensus than philosophy because scholars approach the work from different disciplinary interests (e.g., archaeology, history). Yet it arguably has more consensus than linguistics because there is no question as to the dominance of an intepretivist epistemology, and because of the shared focus on original languages.

SOCIAL SCIENCES
- **High consensus: Economics**
  Across macro- and micro- levels of analysis, economics possesses a cultural coherence around numerical evidence and algorithmic epistemologies that is greater than any other social science discipline. In both the theoretical (i.e., mathematical modeling) and empirical (i.e., statistical analysis) approaches to economics research, scholars communicate as much in mathematics as verbally. This trend has only been on the rise in the last several decades, as belief in the precision offered by mathematics not only entered to the field's mainstream but seemed to take it over. This valuing of precision also has served as a justification for economists to use their theories and methods to make inroads into other disciplines—simultaneously weakening the intellectual consensus in the target fields and consolidating the power of economics. further strengthening the. The thrust of economic theory is the principle of *ceteris paribus*—all else equal—in which one tries to isolate the effect of a single, independent variable on an outcome by holding constant the other variables. This approach has value because it is believed not only that new economic theory should generate new research,

but also that it should offer more precise predictions than previous theories and have simple informational constraints (Friedman, 1953).

- **Low consensus: Political Science**
  As described on p. 154, political science includes a range of sub-field concentrations running the gamut from political theory/philosophy to mathematical modeling. It is not uncommon for faculty with primary appointments in political science to have degrees in other disciplines. In this way, the discipline can be thought of as low-consensus (Kuhn, 1962, 1977). However, the department that I studied may be thought of as a fairly high-consensus department in a low-consensus field. Historically, the department has been known for its strength in statistics, with one participant remarking to me, "We are a hard-line quantitative program." Indeed, all doctoral students except those admitted to study theory are very strongly encouraged to take a statistics sequence in their first year.

- **Moderate consensus: Sociology**
  In the study of society, there are a number of salient distinctions that suggest a relatively low consensus field. As elsewhere, one distinction in sociological knowledge is applied (e.g., relevant to policy) vs. theoretical (e.g., emphasis on understanding social processes). Theoretically, the field tends toward an interest in social forces that drive behavior and relationships, but this tendency vs. explanations favoring individual agency is another classic distinction, one that brings with it a rough correspondence toward a macro or micro level of analysis, respectively. Topically, over the last sixty years, scholars have broadened from a set of core concerns (e.g., stratification, deviance, religion, mobility) to analyze the organizations and institutions (e.g., medical, legal, economic, educational) in which those issues are situated.

  And whereas economics has methodologically converged during this period on a quantitative approach, sociologists have come to use both more sophisticated statistical techniques and more qualitative techniques (in part due to the cultural-linguistic turn of the late 20th century). Although the topics of study have broadened, unlike economics, it is not that sociological methods have come to permeate or displace those of other disciplines, but rather that the topics that sociologists themselves are willing to undertake have broadened. Also, another way of assessing the degree of consensus in disciplines is in terms of the exchangeable credentials that its members hold (Abbott, 2001). Across these various fractures in sociology, primary faculty appointments in the field go, with rare exception, to people whose educational credential is a sociology Ph.D., suggesting disciplinary consensus that may be greater than that within political science.

NATURAL SCIENCES

- **High consensus: Physics**
Physics competes with philosophy in trying to ask and answer "fundamental questions" (Holt, 2012; Krauss, 2012); however, physics emphasizes a smaller scope of questions, namely those about matter and its motion, force, and energy. Inquiry proceeds through two, interdependent, intellectual approaches: mathematical modeling (i.e., theory) and experimentation (i.e., observation). There is a strong interdependence between these, however, as intellectual progress is believed to occur then experimentalists make discoveries that fall outside the scope of current theory, or when new theories generate hypotheses that motivate experimentation (Brewer, 1998). Physicists across sub-disciplinary emphases also share ontological assumptions (i.e., that there is a physical universe we perceive sensorily, and that the universe obeys the same rules everywhere at all times), and use exclusively quantitative methodologies. Interdependence and the shared assumptions and methodologies lend a deep consensus that is arguably unmatched across the disciplines.

- **Low consensus: Biology**
Among the broad fields in the natural sciences, perhaps none is as fractured as biology. Broadly oriented around the study of living matter and the principles of cell theory, genetics, evolution, homeostasis, and thermodynamics (Avila, 1995), the discipline has a number of deep intellectual divides that have led, over time, to most individuals identifying by specialty. In 1965, Director of the National Science Foundation's Register of Scientific and Technical Personnel wrote, "Scientists concerned with human anatomy find it difficult to conceive of themselves as members of the same scientific community as those individuals concerned with forestry or agriculture. That all these specialists are concerned with living organisms does not necessarily bring them to a common ground" (Levine, 1965, p. 346). However, the important distinctions that have emerged in recent decades include not only the type of life one studies (e.g., agriculture, medicine), but also the scale (e.g., molecular, cellular, organism, ecology), settings (e.g., wet vs. dry labs), and methods of analysis in those labs (e.g., biochemistry, physiology). Recognizing the tendency toward early specialization, the university where I studied a biology department is like many others in offering two pathways to admission: (1) traditional, direct admission to the department, (2) an interdepartmental biology admissions program, in which a committee representing more than ten biological science departments selects a small group who have the opportunity to explore multiple labs and departments in the first years of their program before committing to the lab and department from which they will earn the Ph.D.

- **Moderate consensus: Astrophysics**
Astrophysicists study the physics of the universe—its origins and structures, and its processes of formation, evolution, and change. It can be thought of as a branch of either astronomy or of physics, but developed in the modern era as theoretical physicists began to apply the theories of methods of physics to astronomical

questions. The values of physics made fundamental inroads into astronomy with acceptance of the heliocentric (i.e., sun-centered) solar system. Physics' foci on theory and observation have since been reproduced as sub-disciplines in astrophysics. However, due to the additional aims of astronomy and the equipment required to meet those goals, astrophysics has an additional sub-discipline whose focus in on the development of instruments for observationalists' use. As in physics proper, theoretical astrophysics has the greatest prestige, and the highly applied work of instrument development struggles for the legitimacy that comes with theory and observation. Moreover, the credentials expected of individuals in each of the three areas vary widely. However, scholars recognize that knowledge advancement in the field depends upon the interdependency of the three strands of research. Large grants in astrophysics usually have scientific goals of testing current *theory* through new *observations* gathered through new *instruments*.

Astrophysics has less consensus than physics because of the deep axiological divide between theoretical and applied (i.e., instrumental) work. Although it is not uncommon for physicists or astrophysicists to meander back and forth between theoretical and observational work over a career, astrophysicists I spoke with indicated that instrumentalists are usually exclusively instrumentalists. Instrumentation development is as much engineering as it is science and, therefore, requires a specific and separate set of skills. Nevertheless, astrophysics has more consensus than biology with its focus on physics (vs. biology's myriad interdisciplines).

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