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Introduction

Gatekeeping Reconsidered

For three hours the philosophy admissions committee had been working in a cramped storage room that doubled as their meeting space. They had been discussing applicants on their short list, one by one, but had reached a point of deadlock over who should ultimately receive offers. Breaking a long silence that betrayed the group's exhaustion, their administrative assistant, Leon,[1] spoke up for the first time. He noted that agreeing to admit everyone who received an average rating of 1.8 or higher would give them their desired cohort size: the lucky 13. Their work would be done. No one jumped at the idea, but the committee chair, Liana, and a senior professor, Olivia, expressed their support. Another senior professor, Gerald, wasn't so sure.

"People seem to be very confident about the line where admissible leaves off and inadmissible picks up," he said. "I have a hard time drawing lines because wherever we draw it, it's going to look arbitrary."

Olivia emphatically responded, "Well, it *is* an artificial line!"

Continuing to push, Leon noted that drawing the line at a rating of 2.4 would finish the job even more quickly by giving them the optimal number of admitted *and* wait-listed students. A long pause and a few sighs and shoulder shrugs later, they agreed to use this threshold and started packing up.[2]

There is a story behind every statistic—including the lucky 13, the 2.4 rating, and the 18 percent of applicants admitted to research doctoral

programs nationally.[3] This book tells the story of how faculty in ten top-ranked doctoral programs draw the almost imperceptibly fine line between those whom they admit and those whom they reject. Two years of observing and interviewing graduate admissions committees in core academic disciplines—astrophysics, biology, classics, economics, linguistics, philosophy, physics, political science, sociology—gave me a unique window into the evaluation and selection processes that go into graduate admissions. My research revealed faculty members' nebulous, shifting ideals about student quality; how departmental, disciplinary, and personal priorities are woven into judgments of admissibility; and the implications of it all for equity and the health of the academy.

Changes in society, the applicant pool, and the labor market have fundamentally altered the markets for graduate education and for people with graduate degrees, yet the criteria associated with admission to degree programs have changed little. Of the three strongest determinants of access to graduate education—college grades, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, and the reputation of a student's undergraduate institution—the latter two are part of a conventional notion of student quality that fails on at least two counts.[4] GRE scores and college prestige fail to reliably predict whether a student will complete the PhD, and disproportionately exclude some of the very groups whom our mission statements and websites claim we wish to attract. What is more, the structure of the academy in the twenty-first century will not sustain many of the positions that admissions decision makers themselves hold. If faculty do not adapt their mindsets to meet changes in the academy, labor market, and society, they will select and train students for jobs that do not exist. For graduate education to fulfill its promise of developing leaders for today's knowledge economy and diverse democracy, many faculty will need to rethink how they evaluate prospective students and draw the line in admissions. Let's consider these dynamics in greater detail.

Doctoral Students and Their Professional Pathways

Worldwide, pursuit of the PhD continues to grow. The PhD is not only the central prerequisite for faculty careers; credential inflation has also rendered graduate degrees necessary for access and promotion in many professions that once required only a bachelor's degree.[5] Economic and technological development outside the United States has also sparked interest in graduate education from international students, whose share of doctorates awarded in the United States has more than doubled in the last forty years.[6]

Overall, the proportion of adult women (thirty to sixty years old) in the United States with graduate degrees grew almost tenfold from 1965 to 2005, from 1.1 percent to 9.68 percent.[7] And from 2000 to 2010 alone, the number of master's degrees earned by African American and Latino/a students more than doubled.[8]

Yet aggregate statistics like these conceal considerable complexity about the state of equity in graduate education. Gender and racial inequities are persistent and pervasive in doctoral education, for example, despite the progress in closing gaps in master's degrees awarded. Women and U.S. residents of color remain less likely than men and whites to attend research universities, and they continue to receive fewer doctorates than we would expect given their shares of both the overall population and the population of baccalaureates awarded.[9] African Americans and Latinos comprised 13 percent and 16 percent, respectively, of the U.S. population in the 2010 Census, but received just 6 percent and 7 percent of the doctorates awarded that year—numbers that reflect little change from the previous decade. Meanwhile, Native American doctoral attainment has fallen to its lowest point in twenty years.[10]

Gender and racial/ethnic representation also varies by academic field of study.[11] The well-known disparities in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines are evident in many humanities and social science fields as well. In the humanities, for example, only 3 percent of PhDs in 2009 were awarded to African American students and only 5 percent were awarded to Latino students.[12] Table 1 displays data from the Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) about the number of PhDs awarded in 2012, by gender and race, for a selection of fields. Philosophy, which is not represented in SED data, awarded only 29 percent of their PhDs to women in 2009. It is notable that fields of study with continued racial and gender inequities also have some of the lowest admission rates, nationally.[13]

Like the population of graduate students, the range of careers pursued by persons who have earned a PhD has diversified.[14] As a result, most graduate programs are preparing, ad hoc, a much broader group of professionals than the next generation of faculty researchers. For example, applied intellectual and technical expertise is instrumental in today's economy, and the diffusion of public research into industry has created a whole sector of PhD-level researchers outside the academy. Less than half of engineering doctoral students now expect to enter academia.[15] Specialized intellectual inquiry is the heart of doctoral education, but viable alternatives to the academic track are necessary because there are far fewer tenure-track faculty positions than PhDs looking for jobs. Just one academic track faculty position is posted for every twelve PhDs produced in science, technology,

Table 1   Doctoral Degree Attainment by Gender and Race in Selected Disciplines, 2012

Academic Discipline	Gender	African Amer./ Black	Amer. Indian/ Alaska Native	Hispanic/ Latino	White	Asian Amer.	Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Island.	Other	Total
Astronomy	Male	***	***	***	137	***	***	10	190
	Female	***	***	***	52	***	***	8	85
	Subtotal	***	***	***	189	53	***	18	275
Physics	Male	***	***	***	805	464	***	132	1,504
	Female	***	***	***	163	134	***	45	363
	No answer	***	***	***	***	***	***	4	4
	Subtotal	35	***	87	968	598	***	181	1,871
Biological Sciences	Male	119	***	231	2,171	1,083	***	324	3,936
	Female	195	***	269	2,385	1,268	***	353	4,494
	No answer	***	***	***	***	2	***	8	10
	Subtotal	314	15	500	4,556	2,353	17	685	8,440
Economics	Male	***	***	86	416	276	***	90	897
	Female	***	***	26	179	184	***	29	433
	No answer	***	***	***	***	***	***	1	1
	Subtotal	***	***	112	595	460	***	120	1,331
Political Science/ Public Admin.	Male	***	***	45	443	90	***	65	696
	Female	***	***	39	330	81	***	57	549
	No answer	***	***	***	***	***	***	1	1
	Subtotal	90	***	84	773	171	***	123	1,246
Sociology	Male	***	***	21	147	26	***	26	235
	Female	40	***	45	244	55	***	28	412
	No answer	***	***	***	***	***	***	1	1
	Subtotal	***	***	66	391	81	***	55	648
Linguistics	Male	***	***	9	64	21	***	18	117
	Female	***	***	10	77	39	***	13	143
	Subtotal	***	***	19	141	60	***	31	260

Note: *** =suppressed to avoid disclosure of confidential information.
Source: NSF/NIH/USED/USDA/NEH/NASA 2012 Survey of Earned Doctorates.

engineering, and mathematics. And in the humanities, where the glut of PhDs relative to academic jobs regularly makes the news, many graduates end up working in positions that do not require the PhD at all, much less in the narrow specializations for which they received training.[16]

The professoriate itself is changing in ways that compel a fresh look at recruitment, selection, and broader ideals of what makes an excellent scholar. Adjunct, clinical, and other nontenured appointments, not tenure-track positions, now constitute the majority of faculty positions listed. In response to these trends, a few PhD programs are shifting or broadening their focus and degree requirements. Some institutions are scaling back the size of their doctoral cohorts, while others are reevaluating their qualifying exams and the structure of the dissertation.[17] Largely absent, however, has been a conversation about what the changes inside and outside the gates of graduate school mean for who gets in.

Gatekeeping Reconsidered

Reform in doctoral education today must better align notions of student quality with the diverse students and varied career pathways that doctoral students pursue. Tenured faculty have both the influence and the responsibility to respond to changes in student trajectories. Some, though, are uncomfortable with students' increasingly diverse identities and career paths or feel stymied by political dimensions of the change process. Most professors in research universities, after all, are products of a system that gauges program excellence by placing graduate students in faculty positions at research universities, and that privileges theory over applied research. Rising demand from a diversified population is leading some within academia to circle the wagons around the PhD, striving to preserve its purity as a badge of honor that signifies individuals with special aptitude to advance theory.

The urgency to reconsider gatekeeping is greater than ever, but these issues have been building for more than a century. In his famous essay "The Ph.D. Octopus," Harvard philosopher and psychologist William James called his colleagues to task. Worried that rising demand for the PhD as a college teaching credential was degrading its character as a stimulus for scholarship, James denounced "the increasing hold of the Ph.D. Octopus upon American life" and graduate education's development into "a tyrannical Machine with unforeseen powers of exclusion and corruption." He wrote:

> America is thus as a nation rapidly drifting towards a state of things in which no man of science or letters will be accounted respectable unless some kind of

badge or diploma is stamped upon him, and in which bare personality will be
a mark of outcast estate. It seems to me high time to rouse ourselves to con-
sciousness, and to cast a critical eye upon this decidedly grotesque tendency.

He charged that faculty and universities had been complicit in these trends,
allowing the patina of prestige and the vanity of titles to distract them from
the university's educational mission. Elite doctoral programs had responded
to rising student demand by raising standards rather than expanding
enrollments, he concluded, which preserved their status but heightened
competition and created a mismatch between the degree requirements they
publicized and those they put into practice. James 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 dangle our three magic letters before the eyes of these pre-
> destined victims, and they swarm to us like moths to an electric light.[18]

The competitive trends James identified—among doctoral programs for
status and among prospective students for admission to top programs—
continue in the twenty-first century.[19]

Among the barriers to expanding access are the strong incentives doc-
toral programs have to limit their size. Selectivity goes hand-in-hand
with prestige.[20] Today, "proportion of applicants admitted" is one factor
used to calculate program rankings, such as those published by the Na-
tional Research Council and *U.S. News and World Report*. And as has already
been mentioned, fiscal concerns and uncertain employment prospects after
graduation are driving some departments to cut the number of students
they admit.[21]

Together, increasing demand and a stagnant supply of spaces have raised
the competitiveness of admissions to many doctoral programs. Access has
become what economists Robert Frank and Philip Cook call a "winner-
take-all" market—a type in which "barely perceptible quality margins
spell the difference between success and failure."[22] This type of market frus-
trates both those trying to break into it and those who want to understand
it, because the margins between acceptance, rejection, and the wait-list are
difficult to perceive. Further, what counts as quality is a moving target.
Necessary credentials for admission to graduate programs are just as sub-
ject to inflation as those required for jobs, and faculty judge applicants
not according to a fixed standard but relative to others in the applicant
pool that year.[23] Therefore, like undergraduate admissions and other forms
of faculty decision making, doctoral admissions is a process cloaked in
secrecy.

Defining Merit

People are also anxious about how admission is carried out because it is thought to provide a barometer for how selective educational institutions are fulfilling the ideal of allocating opportunities equitably and on the basis of "merit." In the United Kingdom, these twin standards constitute what is known as fair access to higher education. Merit is always a conditional, not an absolute, assessment. No one inherently merits admission. They do so because they are judged to possess attributes that decision makers have deemed legitimate grounds for drawing the line between the many who would like to enroll and the few who should be given the opportunity. In the United States, potential for strong academic performance is one such attribute, but as this book will show, it is hardly the only one.

As in other academic competitions, the conditions under which someone is judged to merit admission to graduate school are bound up with ideals of individual or organizational quality. What does and should count as merit is therefore deeply contested. Is there a single, proper standard we should be working to define and defend? Is it legitimate if different academic disciplines use different standards? Why should we elevate individual academic performance over qualities that may contribute to the common good? Is merit open to reinterpretation as times and conditions change?[24] Personal opinions and conventional wisdom about these and other questions abound, but the current research record offers little in the way of clear answers. Graduate education may play an increasingly important role in shaping professional opportunities, but we suffer from a relatively one-dimensional research literature about graduate admissions, especially compared to the well-developed literature on selective undergraduate admissions.

By examining graduate admissions in practice, from the perspective of those who make the decisions, I see merit differently than most previous scholars of graduate admissions. The vast majority of previous research has tried to statistically model whether applicant characteristics, especially scores on the GRE and TOEFL, predict various indicators of student success.[25] Some scholars have been motivated by concern about decision makers' use of "explicit cutoffs or tacit minima" when weighing standardized test scores.[26] They want to understand just how risky that practice may be in excluding students with lower mean test scores, who nonetheless might be academically successful. Others want to determine whether test scores can be counted upon to deliver satisfactory returns on the investment that admission represents.[27]

Whether focused on a single field or a range of disciplines, results of predictive validity analyses have been mixed. Maria Pennock-Roman

described the assumptions of this body of research and a fundamental problem with it:

> There is one unidimensional [variable] Y, such as college grade-point average, that measures "success" . . . A predictor X exists, which can be a linear combination of variables that has demonstrable validity for estimating Y in advance . . . Since the relationship between predictors and Y is far from perfect, some selection decisions will turn out to be correct pre-classifications of candidates, and others will turn out to be errors.[28]

The difficulty of reliably predicting long-term outcomes from any information in an application is understandable, for "success" and "failure" are complex concepts with multiple dimensions and debatable definitions. Further, most existing research has limited generalizability due to their samples, the restricted range of observed GRE scores in most studies, and significant changes to the GRE in 2011.[29] The most recent study, published by psychologist Nathan Kuncel and colleagues in 2007, found correlations between GRE scores and first-year graduate school grades at levels that testing proponents could hold up as statistically significant, but that skeptics could dismiss as practically insignificant.[30] Neither a student's application nor a model developed from information in the application will work very well as a crystal ball in predicting the probability of a given student's success. Even the Educational Testing Service, which administers the GRE, recommends that the test be used as just one factor among many in a holistic review process.[31]

My observations of admissions committees support previous research in demonstrating that for better or worse, a few key criteria, including GRE scores, go a long way in shaping a student's odds of making the short list. Very high GRE scores and attending a prestigious college or university were clearly among the revealed preferences of faculty in the programs that I studied. However, my research also suggests that previous research has misrepresented merit as overly narrow, monolithic, and stable across disciplines.

As I show in the chapters to follow, what faculty construct as merit in highly selective graduate programs is complex and dynamic. Faculty use academic achievements to narrow the pool, so those criteria pattern the outcomes, but they bring a host of other factors into the conversation to make their final choices. They do this in part because many students meet the bar of conventional academic achievement,[32] and in part because they see admissions as an opportunity to enact a variety of values and create the futures of their departments and disciplines. What counts as a quality applicant varies by reviewer, committee, department, discipline, and university,

and involves layers of inferences made from seemingly minor details in the application. Although statistical methods would be unlikely to pick up on these details because they are idiosyncratic to individual cases, they are crucial to evaluative cultures of the disciplines and specific academic programs.

Whether in research or in practice, conflating the quality of an applicant with a narrow set of academic achievements thus misses some of the most interesting parts of the story about graduate admissions. However, this definition of merit has other important limitations that also bear mentioning. For example, assuming the most accomplished applicants are the best candidates reduces doctoral education from a developmental process to a scholarly finishing school, and implies that mentoring relationships and learning environments matter little to students' success.[33] Focusing attention solely on student qualities also misses the broader context of who is defining what is desirable in applicants, how and why they determine this, and what the consequences are of those choices. Finally, the tendency to focus on the validity of common admissions criteria ignores important reviewer effects that also affect the fairness of the admissions process, such as susceptibility to fatigue and to cognitive and implicit biases.

Reconsidering merit may seem like a radical proposal. By glimpsing the deliberations of the committees in this book, however, it will become clear that, already, faculty operate on a more expansive notion of merit than that of simple academic achievement and academic potential. I found that admissions may start with the official goal of identifying applicants who are likely to succeed, but organizational interests such as prestige, diversity, collegiality, efficiency, and fiscal responsibility also drive the process and endow it with legitimacy in the eyes of important stakeholders.[34] Revealed preferences therefore vary across time and place in response to changes in applicant pools, the political environment, the mission of the program, and who is making the decisions. Program and disciplinary priorities, the balance of student characteristics in an emerging cohort, as well as other preferences that are idiosyncratic to specific committees and reviewers, all frame judgments of who the "best" or "most qualified" student prospects are.[35]

For example, under a purely student-centered view of merit and academic view of quality, one might admit the students who rate highest on criteria that best predict first-year grades in graduate school. Under this standard, however, the proportion of students from China in many American doctoral programs would skyrocket to levels that, to some, would appear unacceptable. Cohorts that contain very large or small numbers of any one population are often seen as undesirable by faculty and students alike because they send the message that the program has skewed interests. Diverse student bodies, on the other hand, are thought to reflect balanced interests

and the richness of our society. A political scientist nicely summarized the tension between assessing quality in terms of student characteristics versus cohort characteristics:

> I think from practically everybody's viewpoint getting talented, motivated people is the top priority . . . But we want to have some balance. I would say *{Pause}* my guess is—no, no 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 wanted balance.

In practice, merit in graduate admissions is not an absolute assessment of achievements to date and perceived potential for good grades or a great dissertation. It is an assessment of admissibility relative to a specific applicant pool, by a set of specific decision makers with specific personal preferences. These preferences include potential and achievements, but an applicant might also be judged preferable if her admission will appease a difficult colleague or if it improves the balance of students across departmental concentrations. A solid student from Malaysia or Mongolia, countries that produce few applicants to U.S. doctoral programs, might be judged more admissible than a very strong one from China, India, or Korea, which produce many. A student who grew up in foster care and overcame extraordinary personal challenges might be judged more admissible than a student with a similar academic record who grew up in a well-known college town. There is not a single hierarchy of admissions priorities as can be implied by tables of coefficients in quantitative studies. Rather, because faculty use admissions to pursue a variety of interests, multiple hierarchies of priorities (which sociologists call a heterarchy) simultaneously and interactively shape an applicant's odds of being admitted.[36]

What is more, because quality takes many forms in graduate admissions, no single applicant could possibly personify all that the institution and its various stakeholders value. Rather, collective cultural priorities are more likely to be reflected in groups of students than in individual applicants. In this context, the best that decision makers can hope for is to cobble together a cohort that, together, represents what is important to them.

FOR THESE REASONS, I argue that we need to rethink how we talk about merit in graduate admissions. Discussions about merit can't be one-sided. How we understand and recognize merit makes sense only in light of the larger organizational challenges, goals, and missions that faculty face. Therefore, we can't talk about student achievement and potential unless we also talk about the organizational context that determines how achievement and potential will be defined. Further, we shouldn't treat "merit" as

if it is merely the sum total of an applicant's "deservingness" based on what the applicant has done already or how easily he or she will thrive in our graduate programs as they are currently designed. What it means to warrant access to graduate education is more complicated than that, and more programs would do well to embrace it as such. Professors can use admissions and other student review situations as an opportunity to think critically about their own professional practice and how their departments and graduate programs might better realize their educational mission for a changing labor market and population. In short, those of us with a stake in graduate education need to broaden the conversation about merit to encourage collective responsibility for student learning.[37]

A conversation about what we value in admissions, and why, thus provides a natural entry point into questions at the crux of the current debate over graduate education's future, or as Leonard Cassuto calls it with regard to the humanities, "the graduate school mess." This conversation beckons faculty to align admissions work with program mission and, in so doing, to consider the professional system and social contexts of which graduate education is part. For example, Harvard Law professor Lani Guinier has urged admissions policymakers and decision makers to ask themselves whether privileging test scores *or* the first-year grades with which they are modestly associated will help higher education fulfill its democratic mission. Her idea of democratic merit advises admissions be conducted with an eye to selecting students who demonstrate capacity for leadership in a racially and ethnically diverse democracy.[38]

To summarize, merit and quality are subjectively assessed and socially constructed. Although students' GRE scores and college reputations undeniably shape the profile of short list, and therefore of admitted cohorts, what counts as merit is complex and dynamic, and varies by context. Where faculty draw the line between admitted and rejected students, it turns out, is as much a reflection of who is doing the evaluating as who is being evaluated. Although this insight is new for analysis of graduate admissions, it has propelled research on undergraduate admissions research since the 1970s, when historian Howard Wechsler declared, "The essence of selective admissions is the subjective judgment of the admissions officer."[39]

Untangling a Paradox of Admissions

I designed this research to untangle an apparent paradox in the research literature on higher education. On the one hand, diversity[40] is a well-institutionalized value in higher education today, and recruiting applicants

from underrepresented groups is common practice in areas from undergraduate admissions to faculty hiring.[41] However, two of the three strongest predictors of admission to graduate programs, GRE scores and attending a selective undergraduate institution, privilege populations that already enjoy an enrollment advantage.[42] Male, white, and Asian American students remain overrepresented in the most selective colleges and universities and, on average, earn higher scores on the GRE.[43]

Therein is the paradox. If diversity is valued and concerns about inequality are widely known, why do faculty continue to rely upon criteria that undermine equity and diversity? One can imagine a range of possible explanations. Perhaps professors actively resist admissions reform they way they tend to resist change in general. It could be that they are deeply invested in the entrenched standard and, thus, unwilling to rethink their reliance on specific criteria or vision of ideal applicants. Maybe this paradox is simply a product of myopia to the implications of current practice. Or maybe the reasons are more sinister. Are there informal efforts to limit diversity beneath public images of inclusiveness? Are they overtly racist or sexist behind closed doors?

Recent experiments have found evidence that we should not discount these last possibilities—that faculty judgment in selection situations is marked by informal discrimination and unconscious (that is, implicit) biases. A randomized double-blind study by Corinne Moss-Racusin and colleagues focused on hiring for a laboratory manager position, found that faculty rated applications headlined by male names as significantly more competent and hireable than identical applications headlined by a female name.[44] And in a field experiment with a large sample of 6,500 faculty, Katherine Milkman, Modupe Akinola, and Dolly Chugh found that participants ignored email inquiries from prospective students with female, Indian, Chinese, black, and Latino-sounding names at higher rates than they ignored those with traditionally Caucasian male names. These findings held across institutional types and disciplines, but were particularly acute in higher-paying disciplines and private universities.[45] If faculty are discriminating against women and people of color in the informal interactions that precede application and admission, it is important to take a closer look at how they are interpreting and evaluating the applications they do receive.

My research into the admissions process did not find evidence of overt discrimination,[46] but it did find that a "colorblind" approach to admissions—the dominant model in all ten of these programs—also creates conditions that sustain inequalities. We have reached a point where policy need not formally exclude or segregate on the basis of race or

gender, because inequalities can also become locked in (or institutionalized) as organizations operate according to shared understandings and informal rules that may look neutral but have a disproportionate, or disparate, impact on some groups.[47] For example, I found that through their use of shared, discipline-based assumptions to define which applicants were better, more competent, or deserving, faculty members often accepted inequitable admissions outcomes as logical or necessary. What disciplinary outsiders might have challenged as discriminatory, unjust, or simply wrong could be deemed perfectly legitimate from an insider's perspective.

By getting inside the faculty perspective, this book thus uncovers the common mental pathways scholars use to legitimize a system whose rules look neutral and by some standards fair, but that nonetheless is marked by what Charles Tilly called durable inequalities.[48] In a society where overtly racist and sexist behaviors are socially unacceptable and where diversity is something to celebrate, the institutionalization perspective makes it clear that durable inequalities are neither inevitable nor natural, but instead are the result of a process *we* have created.[49] This perspective is also useful in identifying common perceptions that are out of step with current research, and in bringing to the surface assumptions that are so deeply held as to be taken for granted.

I therefore portray the current system of admissions from professors' own point of view while making clear that the system has cracks—ones through which students from already underrepresented groups continue disproportionately to fall. Working with faculty throughout an entire admissions cycle, I gained real sympathy for the magnitude and difficulty of reviewing files and selecting applicants in these programs. I came to see that there are unintended consequences for equity from the organizational apparatus that programs establish to deal with a pile of 800 applications in total, or 250 from China alone. I observed how ambiguities inherent in the review process prime faculty to defer to stereotypes, such as when they judge applicants from China. These findings help reveal why it is so difficult and complex to make diversity, as one participant put it, "more than a platitude."

However, I also found racism and sexism subtly institutionalized in misguided perceptions about what common admissions criteria signal, in deference to "fit" with the status quo as a core determinant of admissibility, and in reluctance to take on students from underrepresented backgrounds whose profiles suggest they may benefit from more intensive mentoring. Orienting toward traditional ideas of prestige also set up these graduate programs to reproduce inequalities as they recreate themselves—as William James noted more than a hundred years ago.

Notes on the Research Design

In this section I provide a general overview of my research design; readers interested in greater detail may be interested in the methodological appendix. I conducted 86 interviews with 62 faculty and 6 graduate students, the vast majority of whom were sitting on admissions committees at the time. The heart of my study, though, was the time I spent observing admissions committee meetings and recruitment events in six of the ten programs. My perspective in these meetings as an outsider-turned-insider enabled me to capture routine details of the review process that committee members may take for granted and to compare the principles and preferences that faculty espoused with those that they put into practice.

Due to my agreements with the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) and participants, I refrain from naming or describing the universities where I collected data. What is important for readers to know, and which I can share, is that two universities were public and one was private, that they were in two different regions of the country, and that all three are well-known research institutions. Also of note: Each university had a graduate school that coordinated the admissions process and offered resources to help increase the enrollment of women and students of color, such as diversity-focused fellowships and trainings for faculty engaged in admissions work.

My sample of highly ranked doctoral programs in pure disciplines is not intended to be representative of American doctoral education or the full range of fields of study, but it provides insight into the intellectual core of the academy. It covers the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences and, within each, intentionally includes fields known for being relatively centralized, hierarchical, and paradigmatic (such as economics, physics, and philosophy) and others with less intellectual consensus (such as political science, biology, and linguistics). This variety allows for comparisons on multiple dimensions.

Focusing on programs ranked in the top fifteen for their discipline also has benefits. Most importantly, in highly selective programs like these, the many demands and sociocultural dynamics of selection come into sharper focus. Dynamics of elite organizations are also important to understand because, as sociologists have noted, their practices and priorities often set a standard that others adopt to improve their standing. A better understanding of elite organizations—and of efforts within those organizations to resist prevailing trends—offers a glimpse into the direction that the system, as a whole, may be headed.[50]

I have masked and/or changed information about applicants and faculty that might be personally identifiable, starting with their names. In referring to colleges and universities, I tried to balance ensuring anonymity with conveying a real-world sense of the institutional strata in which these programs are located. Therefore, when quoting participants who named specific universities, including their own, I replaced those names with the results of random draws from fifteen universities in the same tier of program rankings for the speaker's discipline. This approach means that the actual universities in which data were collected could be named due to chance, but it ensures that readers should be no more able to recognize the data collection sites than other, similarly ranked institutions.

People commonly ask me how I gained access to the programs, and although I will never be certain about the answer, my typical response is that it was likely a combination of factors. As a white female student from a respected university, the faculty with whom I interacted may have seen me as a member of their community and as relatively nonthreatening. I also attribute my unusual access to making clear in early communications what the study's confidentiality protections were, the genuine desire many faculty have to improve admissions, and a dose of divine intervention. There was also a respondent who agreed to participate out of "karmic obligation to the many who had participated in [his] own research over the years."

Most participants were current members of the admissions committees, and their demographic characteristics are summarized in Table 2. Just 18 percent of the sample were women and only 3 percent were U.S.-born scholars of color—a decidedly skewed composition that can be thought of as a limitation and a strength of the book. On the one hand, the sample is broadly representative of tenured faculty in elite universities, making my research findings a more trustworthy picture of admissions in highly ranked graduate programs. On the other hand, my data lacks the voices of women and scholars of color. The imbalanced sample makes plain the need for research on inequity in graduate education and, more importantly, for recruiting and retaining more diverse cohorts of doctoral students.

Reading This Book

I wrote this book with three audiences in mind: faculty across the disciplines who are engaged in graduate admissions work, scholars of higher education and sociology, and administrators with whom faculty coordinate to facilitate admissions. Prospective graduate school applicants will also no doubt be curious to learn how faculty evaluate files and deliberate behind

Table 2 Sample Demographic Characteristics by Program and Subject Area

Programs	N	% Female	% International	% Scholars of Color	% Domestic Scholars of Color	# Graduate students on Committee
Humanities						
Classics	5	40	40	0	0	0
Linguistics	7	29	29	14	0	2
Philosophy (University 1)	6	33	33	0	0	0
Philosophy (University 2)	7	29	14	14	14	0
Subtotal	*25*	*33*	*26*	*7*	*4*	*2*
Social Sciences						
Economics	6	0	33	0	0	0
Political Science	8	25	38	13	0	3
Sociology	10	20	33	34	10	0
Subtotal	*24*	*15*	*35*	*16*	*4*	*3*
Natural Sciences						
Astrophysics	6	0	33	33	0	1
Biology	6	17	33	17	0	0
Physics	7	0	71	14	0	0
Subtotal	*19*	*6*	*46*	*21*	*0*	*1*
Total/Average	*68*	*1*	*36*	*15*	*3*	*6*

closed doors. They may be encouraged or dismayed, for example, to learn that credentials, connections, and effort can propel an application to the short list, but beyond that, outcomes are almost impossible to predict and subject to myriad factors that are outside the applicant's control.

My hope in writing this text was to encourage reflection and dialogue among those with a stake in graduate education, especially about aspects of admissions that persist mainly because they are the way things have always been done. The data do not generalize to admissions everywhere, but readers who have participated in the process are likely to see some of their own assumptions and tensions reflected back to them in participants' narratives and deliberations.[51] Reading how others struggle with admissions—the tough calls they make, the questionable assumptions they hold, the displays of inertia or courage—can validate one's own struggles. It can also provide positive and negative examples from which to learn. And as cultural sociologists have demonstrated, "thick description" of cases and episodes can uncover social mechanisms and concepts that are present or may apply outside of the samples from which they were derived.[52] Concepts emerging from this study include deliberative bureaucracy, disciplinary logics, and counterscripts.

To build upon the existing sociocultural literature on academic evaluation, I set out to analyze three major issues: the decision-making process in graduate admissions, the meanings faculty attributed to common evaluation criteria, and disciplinary variation in faculty approaches to admissions. Those themes are the anchors of Chapters 1 through 3, respectively, and are helpful in documenting central elements of graduate admissions practice. However, because I took an inductive approach to analysis and remained open to learning what was important to faculty participants, other important findings emerged from the data, including several that relate to the social psychology of faculty identity and judgment. For example, I had expected that faculty would prefer applicants who shared their elite academic pedigrees, but I did not expect to see some other dimensions of preference for students like themselves (such as experiences overcoming poverty and presenting oneself as cool or hip) (Chapter 4). I had not anticipated that faculty would circle around to intelligence over and over again as one of their central concerns (Chapter 5). Finally, committees very rarely mentioned the race or ethnicity of domestic students, but they were vocal with their assumptions about Asian international students, especially those from China (Chapter 6).

Consistent with constructivist qualitative research, each chapter begins by presenting faculty participants' perspectives without supportive or critical commentary so that readers can immerse themselves in the ways

participants think and deliberate. Each chapter takes up the consequences of current practice, and examines the extent to which the prevailing mindsets of faculty participants are consistent with current research. Some chapters also include results of my searches for disconfirming evidence or alternative explanations. I will admit: knowing the risk of confirmation bias—the tendency for people to listen mainly to ideas that support their preconceptions—there are perspectives I hesitated to put in print out of concern that it would lead readers to become entrenched in ruts they are already in. I think, for example, about some faculty narratives around intelligence and belonging within academe. But I have included it all, both to provide the most honest portrayal of admissions' good, bad, and ugly, and in trust that readers will engage participants' comments and interactions with the same critical thinking they bring to their own scholarship.

Conclusion

This is, in part, a story about the impact of a system motivated by good intentions. A common thread in the findings is that faculty enter the admissions process intending to hold firm on their ideals, but that they compromise again and again to get the job done. Faculty experience admissions work as politically, cognitively, and procedurally difficult because it positions them between impulses, principles, and pragmatism. At the level of *process,* they are caught between attractions to a collegial ideal of deliberative democracy and the efficiencies of bureaucratic decision making. At the level of *evaluative criteria,* they feel that conventional achievements and pedigree are critical, even as many feel obligated to and see opportunities afforded by holistic review and a more inclusive notion of excellence. They struggle with the prospect of rejecting African American, Native American, and Latino students whose applications receive full committee review, but they worry about considering diversity as one of their initial criteria. In the end they exclude many who could be successful and admit some about whom they feel ambivalent.

   More fundamentally, faculty feel caught between satisfying their own consciences, respecting their colleagues' values and priorities, and the aims of the program and discipline whose futures they are trying to shape. Determining who should be admitted often becomes an elaborate, ad hoc compromise rather than an application of specific values and priorities. In that compromise, good intentions and principles often fall prey to pragmatic interests, and faculty frequently default to the safety of self-

reproduction. In this political pressure cooker, it is no wonder that change comes slowly, if it comes at all.

I wrote this book because faculty often draw the fine line between admitted and rejected students without a sense of how their program's approach compares to others', without consciousness of the many tacit values that drive the process, and without clarity on viable alternatives to the status quo. My hope is to encourage greater awareness on all of these dimensions by documenting how they play out in departments representing a range of disciplines. I hope this book puts graduate admissions work into perspective, encourages mindfulness about the premises and consequences of gatekeeping at this level, and builds decision makers' capacity to bring about change where it is needed.