

Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping, by Julie R. Posselt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016, 272 pp., \$35.00 hardbound.

Discrimination at Work

Mark Bauerlein

Published online: 18 November 2016
© Springer Science+Business Media New York
2016

Early in this study of graduate school gatekeeping, University of Michigan assistant professor of education Julie Posselt indicates why such a study is needed. The problem is demographic. We have disproportionate enrollments in post-baccalaureate schools:

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.¹

This is a familiar citation. It has a topical firmness. We find disproportions like this one repeated whenever higher education is paired with equity and “social justice.” The bare fact that the black and brown portion of earned doctorates is half of the black and brown portion of the general population is submitted as a far-reaching datum, one that stands on its own.

In *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping*, Posselt presents it as patent evidence of inequity. She then draws a conclusion that attributes blame for that inequity to the procedure by which students are admitted to programs. Many schools are at work at the current time reconsidering their acceptance criteria, she notes, because they recognize that the standards themselves may be responsible for the disparities.

This argument, though, is irresponsible. To present a disproportion at the high level and late moment that graduate admissions occupies in the educational system without saying anything about

Mark Bauerlein is professor of English at Emory University, Atlanta, GA 30322; engmb@emory.edu. From 2003 to 2005 he served as director of the Office of Research and Analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts. His latest books are *The State of the American Mind: 16 Leading Critics on the New Anti-Intellectualism*, co-edited with Adam Bellow (Templeton, 2015), and *The Digital Divide: Arguments for and Against Facebook, Google, Texting, and the Age of Social Networking* (Jeremy P. Tarcher, 2011).

¹Julie R. Posselt, *Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 3. All further references to this work will be cited parenthetically within the text.

disproportions in primary, secondary, and undergraduate education is misleading. When we look at scores on standardized tests from fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress exams to the SAT to the GRE, we find vast gaps between whites and Asians, on one side, and blacks and Latinos on the other. Posselt includes partial data on the number of minorities who earned a Ph.D. in seven different fields, but not corresponding figures for undergraduate degrees. Do the first mean much without the second? If we wish to examine bias in graduate admissions, we need data not just on the entering graduate classes and doctorates earned; we must have demographic breakdowns of the entire applicant pool. If only 10 percent of a school's graduate students are non-Asian minorities, but overall applications to the school have the same proportion, what can we conclude?

Posselt presents only Ph.D.s awarded and raises a sinister implication: The reason so few minorities get degrees is that admissions gatekeepers apply criteria that discriminate against them. She doesn't accuse the gatekeepers themselves—the people who serve on admissions committees—of bigotry. She does intimate that some tenured professors “are uncomfortable with students' increasingly diverse identities” (5), but overall accepts that they want more minorities in

the programs. Instead, something buried in the system of grades, tests, letters of recommendation, and tacit faculty judgment screens minorities and women (in some fields) out. Or, it subtly or not so subtly discourages them.

Hence the necessity of this book. However tendentious the opening pages, it's a valuable contribution. Graduate admissions is, indeed, a key threshold, and the research on it is miniscule. Furthermore, anyone who has served on admissions committees knows how arbitrary and inscrutable the process is once the basic benchmarks have been applied. Arbitrariness is aggravated by secrecy. Stakes are high—lives are set by the deliberations—but the decisions don't always seem rational. Any window upon it is welcome.

Posselt gained access to it. For more than two years she sat in on admissions meetings and interviewed participants in ten different fields from three research universities, two public and one private. Each department is ranked in the top fifteen nationally in the field. The selectivity of the programs is high, averaging around 10 percent, and decisions rest almost entirely in a faculty committee. Posselt observed group deliberations and spoke privately with individuals, treating each site as a case study and producing a “thick description” that, she hopes, “can uncover social mechanisms and concepts that are

present or may apply outside of the samples from which they were derived” (17).

The results of her observations are illuminating. Professors are intelligent, conscientious, and experienced, but they fail to run a consistent and objective system. “A common thread in the findings,” Posselt writes, “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” (18). People make choices without recognizing their own assumptions and without knowing how other programs operate. They want to please colleagues and reproduce themselves. They let graduate students serve on committees and vote despite their inexperience.

Some of the pressures to compromise come from familiar exigencies. People rely on GRE scores not because they have inordinate faith in those numbers, but because they need a quick and handy way to trim the pile of applications. “It’s become more bureaucratic,” one interviewee says. “I think they want to move things along, so once you put a score on it, you just tabulate and rank-order” (34). And they don’t spend much time discussing the benchmark because, another says, “that’s where the disagreement emerges” (38). That conflict can be resolved by letting the preferred size of the entering class determine where to draw the line. If

we want to admit fifteen people, what minimum requirements of scores and grades will enable us to reject the rest?

The human element lingers, too. A student gets admitted to a program even though he doesn’t have the qualifications. Why? Because a senior professor not on the committee got a call from an old friend at another school who told him the student was great. So the senior professor pushed hard and promised to take responsibility for the progress of the student, and the committee agreed to take him. They did so not because he convinced them that the student was, indeed, a hidden gem; they just didn’t want to refuse a colleague. Given the fuzziness of admissions—they’ve seen too many students with sterling undergraduate records disappoint—they think that one professor’s zeal for a particular candidate may be as reliable as a ninety-sixth percentile GRE score.

Indeed, enthusiasm plays an important role. Not only does it matter that a committee member likes an applicant. The intensity of that judgment is crucial. As one respondent in philosophy tells Posselt, “I’m sure every year there are...people who could easily have been among the top ones but nobody picked them. They just didn’t light a fire under anyone” (81). Posselt comments: “So influential is emotional ‘buzz’...that it can trump additional metrics such as

achievement, performance, or ability” (81).

One sign of the “buzz” factor in deliberations is the rise of *cool* in the idiom of evaluation. Posselt describes a male prof with shaved head and earring, a female with “fresh pixie haircut” and cherry-red lipstick, and a junior member in “rumped preppy” style right out of J. Crew. *Cool* is their word for a strong, interesting candidate. One of them praises a borderline applicant with “she writes for *Slate*. Really cool” (105). It’s an all-purpose endorsement giving way, Posselt suggests, to only one other term: “sexy.” The millennials have arrived.

Which brings us to diversity. Here, the problem troubles everyone. How do we admit more minorities without lowering standards? Some state, “It seems pretty clear that she’s a risk, but if we’re going to increase diversity, we have to take risks” (69). Others say, “We want diversity, but we want excellence in diversity” (68). Posselt shares the ambivalence, though she falls clearly on the progressive side. She cites Claude Steele’s work on “stereotype threat”² and makes the common error of assuming that if we removed it then test scores would even

up (132). This misrepresents the results of the study—Steele himself has acknowledged that threat doesn’t fully explain the gap (see the exchange in *American Psychologist*, January 2004)³—but it certainly pleases people who seek any explanation for racial gaps besides aptitude. Posselt highlights confirmation bias several times, but here she exhibits some of her own.

But Posselt deserves credit for reproducing a meeting in which an applicant from a religious college comes up for evaluation and the professors in the room show forth in all their smug elitism. It’s a long passage, but worth quoting in full:

Starting the discussion about Maria, a woman who had attended a small religious college, a committee member admitted, “I didn’t know anything about the college. I had to look it up.” Those with some familiarity spent a little time sharing their

²Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson, “Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Text Performance of African Americans,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797–811, available at http://www.xavier.edu/mfi/documents/Steele_Claude_M.Stere.Thrt.inAfrican.Am.Tst.Perfm.1995.pdf.

³The forum in *American Psychologist* demonstrated how far stereotype threat research was misinterpreted as explaining test gaps. The last sentence of the lead essay by Paul R. Sackett, Chaitra M. Hardison, and Michael J. Cullen stated: “What we do here is caution against interpreting the findings as a complete explanation for the African American-White differences observed in Steele and Aronson’s research and against prematurely generalizing the laboratory findings to high stakes testing environments.” “On Interpreting Stereotype Threat as Accounting for African American-White Differences on Cognitive Tests,” *American Psychologist* 59, no. 1 (January 2004): 11–12, available at <http://n.ereserve.fiu.edu/ba98220.pdf>.

impressions and knowledge with the rest of the group.

“Right-wing religious fundamentalists,” one said. “You know, they refused all federal monies so that they can resist the socialists.”

“Supported by the Koch brothers,” another added after a long laugh from the rest of the committee.

“In all seriousness, it’s actually supposed to be pretty good in the humanities,” one quipped. They started to discuss other specifics of Maria’s case, noting among other details that she had been homeschooled and that she had scored at the 99th percentile for the Verbal section of the GRE and the 82nd percentile for the Quantitative section....Her educational background had clearly induced skepticism, and they subjected her file to a more stringent review. Those seated on one side of the table wanted to move her application forward into the next round of evaluation, while those on the other side were unconvinced.

“I feel like a jackass for saying this,” a male committee member said, breaking a long pause, “but she doesn’t seem interested in research to me.” Others marshaled evidence from her file to the contrary, and the committee chair smiled and confessed, “I’d

like to beat that college out of her.”

“I think it already has been,” a senior member of the faculty suggested, reading an excerpt from Maria’s personal statement that signaled independence and critical thinking.

“You don’t think she’s a nutcase?” the department chair asked, to laughter from most members of the committee. With the three most powerful people around the table having joked about this case, no one tried to top them. They agreed to move her forward to the next round, but a few weeks later, when making their final decisions, chose not to extend her an admissions offer. (pp. 41–42)

It is almost pointless to discuss this conversation. The laughter, the ignorance (the Koch brothers have little in common with religious fundamentalists), the insults (“a nutcase”), and the hostility (“beat that college out of her”) speak for themselves. Posselt finds it “amusing,” but is grounded enough to ask if Maria “had received a fair hearing” (42). She wonders “what their meetings must usually be like if this was how they spoke to each other with a researcher in the room” (42). That they would expose their narrow-mindedness in front of a stranger reveals just how unaware they

are of the attitude or, at least, that someone in the room might not share it.

It is only one of many conversations recounted in *Inside Graduate Admissions*, but it is the most authentic one. Whenever diversity comes up—and it comes up all the time—the dialogue grows stilted and clichéd. The very formulation “we need more diversity” has a dishonest ring to it. Whenever I hear it I think to myself, “C’mon, say what you really mean: ‘Let’s get more minorities in here.’” In Maria’s case, however, we have no discomfort, no complication. A religious background, probably a conservative one, disqualifies her for advanced academic work. For several people in the room, Maria is an occasion for smirking, not consideration. Part of that response I attribute to the drudgery of committee work. After digging through thirty files and disagreeing here and there over the merits of candidates, members

welcome moments of comic relief. A black applicant won’t provide it, nor will a female from the Ivies. But one from a minor religious college will—no matter how strong her numbers.

The great frustration is that if their biases were revealed to these professionals, it probably wouldn’t alter their conduct much except to make them tone down the ridicule. They would find another word for “nutcase,” but one no less discrediting. Tenured professors have been at their job for years, while untenured professors take cues from them quickly. None of the committee members have reason to alter their outlook. They just want to complete their service duties quietly and swiftly. To review the process is only to make more work for everybody. Changing the conduct of professors behind closed doors is crucial to higher education reform, but it is also practically impossible to do.