

Author's Commentary on "The Admissions Committee"

Commentary On
The Admissions Committee

This case provides a framework for discussion about affirmative action, graduate education and graduate research. Indirectly, the case raises questions about the responsibilities of university research in society and issues surrounding student-mentor relationships. It is intended to open up communication on a topic that is rarely discussed in technical research and thought to pertain only to "policy."

Affirmative action in graduate education is important because science and the generation of knowledge are embedded in a larger context of values, norms and priorities. Historians have recognized that the growth of knowledge in science cannot be understood simply as a mastery of nature through the use of a set of tools. Rather, the interests and priorities of science are structured by circumstances in society. As scientists, we should be able to reflect on our work and determine how it relates to a broader context. The debate over affirmative action is only one aspect of the complex interaction between science and society.

In using this case for instruction, it could be useful to assign the characters to different students/participants and have them develop arguments in support of their positions. Such a role-playing exercise could unveil additional issues of importance to the case. It also allows students to determine what "ought to be done" for a given situation as well as the compelling pressures for not following through.

The commentary is organized in three sections. First, the parties involved are identified and a discussion of their roles and responsibilities is provided. Second, four points of conflict are presented. These topics will bound the discussion. (The reader must realize that the topic of affirmative action is controversial and quite broad.) Finally, the third section contains additional questions for discussion.

Parties Roles, and Responsibilities

Each of the multiple parties involved in the case provides a different perspective on the issues at stake and the points of conflict. The essence of the case is the student member's participation on the admissions committee and his or her role on it.

The faculty members, as agents of the university and as implementors of the admissions policy, are the second group involved. Each committee member -- the student and the faculty -- is expected to "ensure a fair and transparent admissions process." These terms are vague for the student serving on the committee, not to mention the faculty members, who might have personal interests to promote. The third group consists of the two students under consideration for admission (and the fellowship). These individuals embodied in the university are a micro-representation of a public education system that has specific goals and objectives.

As a public university, the school has a public mission to fulfill. That mission could be to provide quality education to the state's population, or to develop a strong research agenda that supports the state's or the nation's priorities. In achieving their missions, institutions as complex as schools often find contradictions in the implementation of policies. For example, is academic excellence exclusive of racial diversity under the current historical context? As with many hierarchical institutions, Major State University is supporting a controversial policy by having language written in a vague way. Vague policy directives, however, are not surprising. The school might be attempting to avoid future lawsuits, or has simply delegated to departmental administrators the nuts and bolts of policy implementation. This vagueness of the school's intent resembles many real-life situations.

In addition to the responsibilities of each group, it is important to focus on how accountability is distributed among the actors. Accountability is important because it helps determine how individuals view their responsibilities and the need to act upon them. The faculty members are accountable to other faculty members, to the university at large and, in an indirect way, to the society. Accountability of the student on the committee is less clear, however. The student may be accountable to other current students, to future students or to the faculty members on the committee.

Points of Conflict

A first point of conflict is the appropriateness of student participation in a program's admission decisions. Student representation is often justified by appealing to a democratic and consensus-based character of decision making where stakeholders are heard and have some influence on committee decisions. Although valuable for the student body, the appropriateness of this approach in admissions decisions is difficult to ascertain. Regardless of the ethical implications of student involvement in admission decisions, the information that a given student was admitted primarily because of the availability of funds earmarked for a racial (or gender) category should remain confidential, not accessible to students. The perils of information leaks are considerable. It is surprising that neither the faculty nor the student raised any questions about the appropriateness of the student's participation before the committee's activities began.

This case raises further questions about the relationship between faculty members and students (which differs from the one-to-one student-mentor relationships discussed in other cases). Should students be limited to their research and academic activities? Is their involvement in program decision making worth the perils it brings?

A second point of conflict arises from the decision itself. For this discussion, it is important to consider some of the most common arguments favoring affirmative action. Affirmative action is often promoted in the interest of compensating for past situations deemed wrong. It is cited as a challenge to a historian by insisting on a contextual analysis of issues. Current inequalities and institutional practices, it is argued, are linked to earlier periods. There is a presumption that racism (or gender bias) has contributed to contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage, resulting in differences in income, education and rates of incarceration, among others. The United States, like many other countries in this hemisphere, was born of different forms of violent colonization, with slavery being critical to a national economy. For some, the mere memory of this often overlooked past justifies the need for affirmative action. It could be argued that these types of harms spill over from person to person in the form of stereotypes. The net result of this hypothesized cultural contagion is that future members of society inherit the cumulative effects of macro- and micro-level discrimination before they are ever in

a position to experience a specific and identifiable harm that many consider a prerequisite to reparation, the concept cited by Professor Harris. Other rationales for affirmative action include compensating for current bias, redistributing resources vital to survival, democratic participation in society, preventing social disintegration or bestowing charity.

It would appear that a key element of the discussion is that Lambert was born and presumably educated in Kenya, while Rodney grew up in the United States. This difference would make Rodney more qualified to receive the fellowship even though merit and qualifications for admission have not been discussed yet. It could be argued that Kenya's precarious economy, due to colonialism, qualify Rodney for the fellowship. A third point of friction arises from the potential conflict of interest faced by the faculty members. For example, Professor Belman is not yet tenured. For her, quality research (and the means to achieve it) might be a decisive factor for her professional career. However, Professor Belman might find racial or gender diversity in the workplace valuable and hence encounter a definite conflict. Similarly, Professor Harris argued against Lambert's admission based on the notion of restoration. Is it because he firmly believes in affirmative action or because Rodney has expressed interest in working with him?

From the text, it is not clear what motivates each faculty member to make the statements presented. The alternatives outlined above are plausible and point to definite conflicts of interest. One could think of similar situations in admissions processes where conflict of interest is not as clear, and yet it exists. For example, what should be done when a highly qualified student expresses interest in working in a field where research money is scarce, but it is clear to the faculty that his abilities would be in suited to other, more promising areas of research.

A fourth point of conflict is the flexibility of standards in determining the admission of either or both of the students. As presented, the case is ambiguous about Lambert's qualifications for entering the program, but the case presents Rodney as less qualified than Lambert. Should the admission decision be based solely on academic standards or merit? How can letters of recommendation be comparable if they come from different countries or areas of study? The word "merit" is often used to illustrate one aspect of affirmative action, but how does one define merit in this context? While the general implication is that merit refers to standardized test scores, these determinants are more accurate reflections of the socioeconomic status of the parents. Defenders of affirmative action policies focus on the

importance of having a healthy skepticism toward claims of neutrality, objectivity and color blindness, and meritocracy. These claims appear to be central to an ideology of an equal opportunity that presents race as an immutable devoid of social meaning and tells an historical, abstracted story of racial inequality. But is affirmative action the answer?

The fifth point of conflict takes the discussion back to the role of graduate education in society, and more specifically, in a public university. Should graduate education focus on individual success or on the advancement of knowledge and science? What is socially responsible education? Are the advancement of science and social responsibility mutually exclusive? As stated in the opening paragraph of this commentary, these questions are difficult to answer because they are embedded in the social and political milieu of the educational system. Awareness, discussion of the issues and tolerance surface as catalysts for understanding what is ethical and desirable for society.

Additional Discussion

There is enough ambiguity in the case to allow the construction of other scenarios for further discussion. For example, both applicants are males. Do the issues discussed here apply to gender discrimination? Would the case be different if the Kenyan applicant were a woman?

What if Professor Belman, motivated by her tenure worries, said that she would not accept responsibility for the tutelage of either student and pushed other faculty to state whether they would mentor them? Where do one's role as a leading researcher, one's responsibility as a mentor to the students and one's obligation to society begin and end?

A common feeling among minority students in graduate (and undergraduate) school is that other students view them only as a result of affirmative action policies, thereby discrediting individual merit. In a society that appears to value merit over other personal aspects, is this concern legitimate? Can schools address this concern? How?

Cornell West states that, "if racial and gender discrimination could be abated through the good will and meritorious judgement of those in power, affirmative

action would be unnecessary." (West, 1993, p. 65) Can discrimination be effectively reduced with affirmative action policies? Are other policies more effective? How would they affect graduate research?

References and Further Reading

- Ansley, Fran "Affirmative Action: Diversity of Opinions - Classifying Race, Racializing Class," 68 *University of Colorado Law Review* (Fall 1997): 1001-33.
- Edley, Christopher Jr. *Not all Black and White: Affirmative Action, Race, and American Values*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1996.
- Gordon, Robert W. and Margaret Jane Radin, eds. *Words that Wound*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1993.
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