



# Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping

By Julie R. Posselt

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How does graduate admissions work? Who does the system work for, and who falls through its cracks? More people than ever seek graduate degrees, but little has been written about who gets in and why. Drawing on firsthand observations of admission committees and interviews with faculty in 10 top-ranked doctoral programs in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, education professor Julie Posselt pulls back the curtain on a process usually conducted in secret.

*Inside Graduate Admissions* presents admissions from decision makers' point of view, including thought-provoking episodes of committees debating the process, interviewing applicants, and grappling with borderline cases. Who ultimately makes the admit list reveals as much about how professors see themselves and each other as it does about how they view students. Professors in these programs say that they admit on merit, but they act on different meanings of the term. Disciplinary norms shape what counts as merit, as do professors' ideas about intelligence and their aversions to risk, conflict, ambiguity, and change. Professors also say that they seek diversity, but Posselt shows that their good intentions don't translate into results. In fact, faculty weigh diversity in only a small fraction of admissions decisions. Often, they rely upon criteria that keep longstanding inequalities in place.

More equitable outcomes occur when admissions committees are themselves diverse and when members take a fresh look at inherited assumptions that affect their judgment. To help academic departments promote transparency and accountability, Posselt closes with concrete strategies to improve admissions review.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

A pleasure to read. Posselt offers a deep and compelling take on graduate admissions procedures and practices—a topic that has received little attention, despite a relatively large body of work on undergraduate admissions. This book will undoubtedly be of great interest to scholars from a broad array of disciplines, particularly when it comes to the practicalities of conducting admissions work. (Laura T. Hamilton, co-author of *Paying for the Party*)

*Inside Graduate Admissions* is an important and exceedingly well-written book. Posselt enters a closely guarded corner of academic work, illuminating one of the most pressing policy questions of our time: how to diversify higher education student bodies, and through that, the intellectual, political, and professional leadership of our nation. (Anna Neumann, author of *Professing to Learn*)

Politicians, judges, journalists, parents and prospective students subject the admissions policies of undergraduate colleges and professional schools to considerable scrutiny, with much public debate over appropriate criteria. But the question of who gets into Ph.D. programs has by comparison escaped much discussion. That may change with the publication of *Inside Graduate Admissions*... While the departments reviewed in the book remain secret, the general process used by elite departments would now appear to be more open as a result of Posselt's book. (Scott Jaschik *Inside Higher Ed* 2016-01-06)

Revealing... Provide[s] clear, consistent insights into what admissions committees look for. (Beryl Lief Benderly *Science* 2016-03-02)

#### About the Author

Julie R. Posselt is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Southern California.

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**Marc Dean:**

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