

# Toward Reflective Admission Work

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## Part I: Making the Case for a Transformative Approach to Admission Practice and Reflection in Action

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“I never really analyzed what ‘white privilege’ is and how it influences not only my work, but my life... I would not want my power as an admission counselor to cloud this... process.”

We cannot separate our thinking from the experiences that shape our lives. The quote above brings this point to bear, and reminds us that the admission process—inherently value-rich and subjective—has great potential for doing harm. What happens when these views are not held in check, when the assumptions that guide our admission practices are rarely questioned or critiqued? This research project explores that problem with a particular view toward underrepresented students whose life and profile

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### LEARN WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW AND DON'T PRETEND:

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Almost two years ago, we approached the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the admission staff at Fordham University in New York City with an idea. What would happen if an admission staff spent one year seriously engaged in a dialogue about issues of difference, power and access and considered the possibility that as a result of that dialogue, new thinking about issues of diversity could be found? Both NACAC and Fordham embraced the idea fully; the research project was funded by NACAC's Fund for the Future, now the Imagine Research Fund. For 12 months, all members of the staff

met monthly in two-hour seminars, as well as smaller “Reflection Groups,” challenged each other, and sought to find ways to think about how their life experiences shape and influence their work.

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Fordham's admission staff, deeply embedded in the rich diversity of New York City, has a long Jesuit-inspired history of inclusive practices. Still, each staffer wanted to do more. Far too many of Fordham's ethnic minority students, for example, are commuters who tend to not participate in campus life with the same vigor as non-commuters. And, like most universities, the university struggles to maintain a balance of students who represent the demographic exceptionalities of life, such as ethnicity and race, geographic orientation, spiritual traditions, sexual orientation, and socio-economic class. But, as we know, the struggle to recruit a “diverse class” is fraught with difficulties. Historians of minority recruitment quickly admit that while universities have made great strides over the past 30 years, most campuses fail to robustly represent the populations that surround their campus and/or region. Why is that so?

Many universities strive for a demographic threshold where ethnic/racial students represent 10 percent of the university. However, even achieving that benchmark rarely changes the culture of the campus. For, in essence, that 10 percent translates into one or two Latinos on a residence hall floor; or the gay student who feels isolated and threatened in a culture of open homophobia; or a lone black student who is embarrassed and infuriated by a history professor's misguided musings on American slavery; or the rural, working class student who feels oppressed by the elitist disposition of his/her peers. Indeed, as universities attempt to create more dynamic environments on their campuses, they tend to do so in traditional ways, never thinking about how their interpretation of “qualified” and “gifted” might keep underrepresented students away from their campuses in droves. After all, the personal interpretations of admission officers' views become the realities with which the university lives. This project, at its core, attempts to bring that error to light, and grapple with it openly.

In two separate but connected articles, we chart what happened when an admission office began a process of looking seriously at not only its rhetoric, but also how its value systems and understanding of self and the world influenced its work. This first paper explores the environment of the college admission staff, and how the culture of universities and standard admission practices makes recruiting and admitting a diverse student population difficult. It also reviews the Fordham admission staff's experience of talking about issues of diversity over 12 months of reflection and critical dialogue. Part II of this article leads to a synthesizing interpretation, showing how the staff's critical engagement of these issues led to new thinking and practices regarding the recruitment and admission of not only their underrepresented students, but candidates across their demographic spectrum.

### **The Admission Environment: Challenges and Possibilities**

At first glance, one could easily argue that the primary purpose of the collegiate experience is to acquire an academic credential. Upon closer inspection, however, the purpose of the university is much broader, leading to confusion over the meaning and purpose of higher education (Lucas, 1994). For instance, institutions also serve social purposes, reproducing and transmitting ideological stances on topics such as religion, a range of perspectives on gender and gender roles, social capital, and economic status, to name a few (Bowles and Gintis, 1976; Bourdieu 1977; Holland and Eisenhart, 1990; MacLeod, 1995). Through their curriculum and social policies, universities also poise themselves to redress social ills that haunt our society (Giroux, 1988; Darder, 1991; Bowen and Bok, 1998). Even in the midst of these sometimes conflicting aims, institutions of higher learning forge ahead and envision their particular conception of the ideal graduate. Admission officers then act as agents of the university, discerning credentials in order to make decisions that are consistent with institutional values.

In the mix of this process, however, very little anthropological work is done as to the origin of these decisions. Admission officers, each carrying worlds of experiences inside their heads, rarely—if ever—think about how their own conceptions of “smart” and “worthy” and “fair” and “just” fit into the admission decision. Think, if you will, of the average admission officer who represents The American College. When he begins to rewind the tape inside his head of his own high school experience, he is likely to see himself as a smart, engaged, active person who understood fully the rules of “the game” and was willing to do what was necessary to succeed, in this case, go to college. That perspective or lens is then used to view others. Admission officers may well have encountered students in their high school who were different than them, those who were bored and unengaged. Or, perhaps they saw students sleeping at their desks, never enthusiastic or prepared for learning. Indeed, maybe some peers were lazy, or malcontents or just not interested in broaden-

ing their minds. But, in this scenario, how did these admission officers come to make meaning of the non-productive behaviors witnessed? Maybe these students were lulled into complacency by the dulling effects of a drill-and-kill curriculum of facts and figures. Or, maybe they failed to see the connection between school and the “real world?” Or maybe what was characterized as sloth was, in fact, exhaustion; maybe peers were sleeping because they were working multiple jobs to support their immigrant families. Indeed, there are all sorts of assumptions and presumptions laced in these wonderings. Regardless, events such as these are etched into the mind, and may well come to influence how that officer assesses issues of motivation, fairness, quality, and preparedness.

The issue takes on more complexity. Much has been said lately about issues of standards and testing and equity. Indeed, that is a debate of immense importance and, sadly, one that will never reach broad consensus. Yet very little attention has been focused on matters much closer to home: how is it that the present culture of admission work intersects with the process of judging and assessing “quality?” Clearly, most admission operations rely heavily on standardized tests and quantitative indicators for college success. That, coupled with the spirited and fast-paced admission life, allows limited opportunities to move beyond the numbers, the quantified and reified world of admission work. Where in the frantic pace of travel, endless hours of paperwork, and reading “more applications than we have the space for” is there time for reflection on what admission officers do and how they make meaning of the factors that influence their decision making?

Schon (1983) characterized the struggle of professionals who make meaning of their work while in the process of doing their work. He wrote:

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is that we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of acting and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action (p. 49).

In this process of knowing their job, admission officers are encapsulated in the dailyness of their work. Phones ring. Unexpected students drop by for counseling. Admission officers must remain in the present, ready and poised to respond to any matter at hand. Even for most directors and deans, the standard quip is “you’re only as good as your last class,” suggesting that one must be in a constant state of forward motion, of exceeding your last

best effort. Thinking back, reflecting on what matters becomes a luxury. But, even when reflection is present, the push to respond quickly necessitates that one consider a limited range of responses. There is not time to call for a meeting of the minds in order to seek broad consensus, to engage with multiple perspectives, or to think seriously about how different worldviews might approach the same situation. As Schon suggests, officers indeed “know” things, but that knowing is rooted in “action,” in the present.

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While this standpoint lends itself well to the development of marketing strategies that are attuned to the market fluctuation, it often fails to consider the complexities of human relationships. There is nothing quick, easy or efficient in discerning human experience. Human responses, by their very nature, defy categorization. While we can anticipate wide swaths of experience, a closer look at any experience/perspective gives rise to the unexpected. Like trying to corral a litter of cats, the attempt to quantify human experience is full of pulls, turns and leaps in places we may not want to go.

Take, for example, the underrepresented student, the one whose life experiences fall outside of what would be called normative. In a rush to “know the student quickly,” little attention is given to how the admission officer makes meaning of the student’s world and how that influences his or her relationship with the university. The university, for example, sends forth applications (i.e., a written expression of its values and priorities), and the student is expected to, somehow, assimilate her humanity into the series of boxes, charts and essay formats. The impact on first-generation, immigrant, poor or ethnic minority students is obvious: they often fail to translate the fullness of their life experiences into a language that the admission officer—typically from a dominant-culture background—can interpret sensitively. But, the impact has wider dimensions. While there are always a small number of students who will accept the challenge of The American Dream, many more are left in a dreamless state. They don’t see themselves as capable of maturing, or feeling themselves to be an important contributor to the academic and social life of a university. As a result, they

decline to accept the invitation that a college future provides. And, our society loses.

It is because of this lack of ongoing reflection, of living in the present, that the project was called, "The Reflective Admission Officer: Moving Toward Transformative Action." The project did not intend to suggest that admission officers are uncaring robots, mechanically going about their tasks without regard for the humanity of students. Rather, it suggests the potential damage that occurs—regardless of good intentions—when professionals are unable to take intentional steps to establish systems that encourage deep thinking, introspective analysis about what they do, and a democratic and inclusive approach to considering the long-range impact of those perspectives and decisions.

Return to the underrepresented student noted above. The problem is not in the filling out of boxes and the writing of essays. Indeed, the data gathered from those exercises are useful and informative. The heart of this matter is students, especially those who differ from what is "normative," or those who cannot be fully understood using the terms that are most readily available. If, for example, the application reader is a 23-year-old white admission officer who has never been outside New York City, it would be difficult for him or her to fully comprehend the values and choices made by a Native American student from a Navajo reservation. Indeed, the officer can read a book or view the film "Smoke Signals," but the process of knowing is much more complicated. The officer needs more information. The officer needs to be attuned to his/her own assumptions about learning, family, the purposes of education, the priorities that are available to those with a different cultural orientation, and so forth. In other words, one can't use a New York City mindset to understand the choices and priorities of a Navajo Indian. It is at this point where reflection-in-action fails miserably. Thinking in efficient, quick and normative ways leads to perpetuating sameness. It does become robotic and, we argue, produces the same type of results over and over again. Perhaps this is why—more than 30 years after landmark civil rights legislation passed in Congress—America's four-year universities' are still remarkably white and middle-class.

It is also apparent that "diversity training," with all of its good intentions, fails to contemplate these matters. Most new admission officers, their bachelor degrees freshly minted, are flashed through summer workshops or an occasional seminar. The content of those sessions is woefully pedestrian, often culminating in PowerPoint presentations of "dos and don'ts." Matters of diversity are also conceptualized as "them" and "us," with little attention given to how both the "us" and "them" contributed to that reality. Even the language of diversity is couched in behaviorist terms such as "diversity training," which suggests that matters of multiple perspectives can be objectified. Officers

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are led to universal assumptions that, "Black students do this" or "Don't be surprised if a financially impoverished student does that." Such approaches limit opportunities for officers to delve into the underlying assumptions that form cultural understanding and lead to ways of thinking that suggest matters of diversity can be manipulated like characters in a video game.

There is also the matter of awareness, or what John Dewey (1934) called "wide awakeness," of being open-eyed to the multiple factors that influence one's world. Indeed, one of the primary components of education is to make connections, to develop capacities to cross-reference ideas and experiences so as to make sense of one's relationship to the world. It is ironic, at best, that the important work of admission officers is structured to preclude these important functions. In an era where students are reduced into data bytes and demographic profiles (e.g., we need more Latinos or full-fare payers or male nurses), it is not surprising that some admission officers find it difficult to resist the demands of the market. Formal quotas rarely exist, but "tar-

gets” tend to serve the same function. Boards of trustees are sensitive to the universities’ public “image” as represented by magazine rankings and lists. Alumni and parents want bragging rights about the enhanced reputation of institutions. There is little room for officers to think outside these constraints, of being open to factors that may not improve the profile in quantitative ways, but will qualitatively change a student’s life. Admission officers as the gatekeepers of universities must be wide-awake to these matters. They hold a special responsibility, a duty as moral professionals to ensure that all students—not just those who easily meet the cultural standards of the university—are treated fairly, justly and with integrity.

The consideration of these topics are the guiding principles and questions of the research project in which Fordham so graciously participated. The staff rose to the challenge. They altered their work schedules to talk with one another and discover how to improve their recruitment of underrepresented students. They asked tough questions. They looked at their identities (i.e., gender, race, class, spiritual tradition, and others) and tried to understand how their worldviews impact threads of their work. And, at the end of the process, we believe our research shows that the staff, both individually and collectively, augmented their sense of consciousness (i.e., a heightened sense of awareness of their own identities) about their work and the importance of considering the identities of their candidates as well. We also saw an enhancement of their relationships with each other and, in some cases, a rethinking of what those relationships should resemble. And, finally, we saw direct connections between the rhetoric of inclusiveness and how that connection both informed and moved them to revisit, and sometimes change the way they conduct the business of recruiting and admitting students.

This paper, the first of two, sets forth the case for why a transformative approach to admission work is necessary. Transformation, in and of itself, suggests the internalizing of new forms, systems, thinking, practices. Such an approach is vastly different than the notion of “reform,” which tends to be satisfied with the mere re-fashioning of existing systems, thinking and practices. A transformative, reflective approach to admission work is a habit of mind, a capacity or standpoint from which admission officers can rely upon when making decisions in a subjective context. Per such a view, admission officers can not view themselves as value-neutral; they must be present to not only themselves, but the workings of the self. Only then are they able to position themselves as advocates for the unexpectedly brilliant, resisting the urge—and acculturation—to value everything in similar terms. The transformative approach, we believe, helps to create university communities that are more aligned with its ideals, and, we might add, makes the world a more just and interesting place.

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## Context of the Project

Each member of the staff received an extensive compilation of articles, essays, clippings, and book chapters titled, “A Critical Reader for Admission Officers on Issues of Access and Inclusion,” which we edited. This reader was designed to be both informational and controversial; we also hoped it would serve as a resource during and after the project.

Typically, conversations about diversity are brief encounters that rarely allow for probing and formative conversations across difference. The project was designed to counter that reality. We also recognized that admission officers live fast-paced lives which, unfortunately, do not provide for a conducive environment for sustained reflection and robust dialogue. As a result, we intentionally interrupted the pace of staff members’ work lives to encourage a different kind of discussion. Monthly seminars, lasting two hours in length, were planned for the entire staff. Between each session, the staff divided itself into smaller segments, or what we called “Reflection Groups,” that allowed them to have deeper discussions in an informal setting. Collectively, these events proved fruitful in broadening the staff’s understanding of diversity and its role in the admission process.

## The Seminar Topics

At its core, the project hoped to encourage staff members to “think outside the box,” to look at their meaning-making and practice in fresh ways. To accomplish that goal, monthly seminars were designed to consider alternative possibilities, to encourage staff members to think about their work as how it might be, as opposed to viewing it within the constraints of “we’ve always done it that way.” Second, we anticipated that staff would develop deeper and more trusting relationships with one another, giving them a new vision of professional dialogue. And, finally, we hoped the staff would be able to develop new practices that would be reflective of their aims for recruiting a diverse population of students. Even with the potential benefit of these conversations in mind, we suspected that rhetoric alone cannot change behavior. Staff members needed a way to connect theory with practice. The seminars encouraged that form of thinking.

During the course of these seminars, staff members revisited their lives through Scholssberg’s (1989) notion of “margin-



ality and mattering.” Staff considered issues of “white privilege” (McIntosh, 1988) and other forms of advantage/perspective that impact self-views and worldviews. Seminars were highly experiential, as was evidenced in a vibrant discussion on the purpose of education and the impact of one’s perspective on decision-making. Each of these experiences was grounded in the daily practice of admission officers’ work and viewed notions such as marginality in terms of an application or admission interview.

By far, however, the most powerful experience, as recounted by the staff, was a sustained exploration of William Sedlacek’s alternative approach to determining levels of persistence of minority students on a majorly white college campus (we discuss this in greater detail later in this article). Suspicious that quantitative measurements of success were not accurately reflecting the full experience of minority students, Sedlacek and others began monitoring students in 1977 at the University of Maryland. He argues that “if success is measured as retention or graduation, noncognitive variables have more validity than other measures for both traditional and nontraditional students” (p.33). The Fordham staff wrestled with this and other alternative ideas, and ultimately opened themselves to broader conceptions of their work.

We wanted to challenge the staff interpretations of “quality” and “access” and “fairness,” and Sedlacek’s model accomplished that famously. At the conclusion of the process, we found there was significant evidence to suggest—in lesser and greater degrees of intensity—that this approach generated a different kind of conversation about issues of identity and life experiences. We also believe it contributed to changing the orientation of many of the staff members toward the recruitment and admission process.

In summary, we found that a) the staff was able to more clearly translate the theories that support their beliefs into their daily work, and to openly question the assumptions that guide their practice; b) they were more aware of the issues that shape their work and their individual ways of thinking and knowing; and finally, c) they were able to relate to one another with greater degrees of comfort, clarity and intention. In the end, we argue that by coming to a greater awareness of their own worldviews, intentions and assumptions, members of the Fordham staff were able to revisit their application review process in ways that generated a broader conception of a “qualified candidate,” thus allowing for greater potential to include students whose life experiences fall outside the university norm.

### Translating Theory into Practice

The proverbial admonition to “practice what you preach” is difficult to achieve when one hasn’t time nor structural support to critique what you’re preaching. Consider the rapid turnover rate among admission officers, far too many of whom see their job

only as an extension of their undergraduate experience with their alma mater. Even those who do not fall into this category tend to represent the dominant culture of the institution, mainly that of the European intellectual and social experience. These elements can conflate into a naïve form of idealism in which the ideals of equality, fairness and justice are seldom unpacked nor viewed as problematic standards for meaning-making. In part, this is due to being deeply embedded in the culture of that way of being. For example, rarely is a discussion held about whether it is fair to assume a first-generation student should complete an application with the same level of sophistication as a wealthy student with a cadre of professionals (including the parent) supporting that effort. Thinking about Socrates, who asked us to consider the practice of treating unequals equally, is it just to value two students using the same rubric when they have had very different life experiences on which to build an admission application? Do we stack the deck against those who see or experience the world differently, or call upon a different set of assumptions when they describe what they know?

Such a process inevitably invites tension, and we found it within the group. This appeared most poignantly—and most often diplomatically—when they spoke about their frustration with moving from the theoretical to practical realm. They would say things like, “This is a great discussion, but how will this play out in my job?” The culture of admission people, and it seemed particularly present with this research cohort, tends to reflect an eagerness to “move on,” a need to make and see changes. Indeed, that is part of the admission officer’s job: to be proactive; to act decisively in order to craft a quality class. While several staff expressed their preference for action, we resisted that temptation. We wanted the staff to experience an object lesson that would model how their intentions (i.e., values, beliefs, priorities, hopes, dreams) must be reflected upon and then aligned with desired outcomes.

For example, one session required staff to use Sedlacek’s variables to reconceptualize the values and assumptions that guide their work. In particular, they were asked to discern the characteristics of a “well-educated person,” which they defined loosely as having a capacity for curiosity, making connections, a tolerance for ambiguity and varied perspectives, and the ability to care for others. After 45 minutes of animated discussion, members of the staff realized their initial responses failed to take into account the quantitative variables that play such a large role in the admission process. They focused on issues of character, motivation and capacities that allow humans to engage one another robustly. More importantly, when asked if they had considered the range of responses, they believed they had exhausted their options. This exercise led staff members to realize the necessity of pushing beyond their first impressions. When pushed to discuss more than the obvious, they realized that after

a rich dialogue, their response was not only more rounded, but also more reflective of the dual realities they must deal with as they do their work.

## A Closer Look at the Sedlacek Model

The Fordham staff's experience with the Sedlacek model also encouraged them to ask questions, and to actively consider their blind spots. A process of examining students using non-cognitive variables, numerous studies have shown, is a more accurate predictor of success (Sedlacek, 1992). Success, in this view, is measured by undergraduate grades, attending professional school upon completion of the bachelor's degree, persistence toward the bachelor's degree, and rate of graduation. Using Sedlacek's eight non-cognitive variables, a translation model was developed wherein the Fordham staff could use these variables when reviewing applicants. This, we believed, would move staff to consider the context of a student's profile in terms of long-term success, as opposed to the student's ability to make a quick adjustment to the academy.

The staff was divided into multiple "admission committees" to review former Fordham applicants using the rubric developed from Sedlacek's non-cognitive variables. As they participated in this exercise it became clear that this model encouraged them to think differently about the application and the insight it provides into the student's life and character.

We found that by actively looking for information related to non-cognitive variables, a different kind of conversation took place. For example, one of the staff reviewed a Latina student with an 880 SAT, who attended a high school where she was one of eight students of color. She was founder of a multicultural club at the high school and was also its president. It was one of the most successful clubs at the school with regard to active members and accomplishments. This student clearly had a sense of her self culturally and had a successful stint as a leader. Each mock admission committee selected her unanimously when using Sedlacek's variables. However, when her SAT score was revealed along with her 3.2 GPA each committee indicated they would not accept her. This example encouraged the staff to reconcile what they believed to be a qualified applicant with the applicant's "numbers." Staff members were required to contemplate, "What really leads a student toward success?"

The Fordham staff also began to acquire a working knowledge of non-cognitive variables they would traditionally not have used to measure the potential to completing college. When reading a recommendation, for example, staff began to notice when a student was tenacious and went regularly for tutoring. This, according to Sedlacek, shows the ability to successfully seek solutions to problems that present themselves. Staff also noticed when students were involved with an outside group where they

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had a mentor and/or support person. This was seen as evidence that the student had a support network to call upon to solve problems and to gain exposure to other ways to see and understand the world. The admission officers were also sensitive to students who saw their long-term goals being realized, and seeing community service projects to fruition. According to Sedlacek's research, these examples indicate a successful experience, again, of reaching out and developing support networks, and seeing the benefit of that exercise. Each of these factors, Sedlacek argues, is a more valid predictor for determining if a student will persist on a college campus, and certainly more so than the use of standardized test scores and/or grade point averages.

In examining and becoming familiar with Sedlacek's eight non-cognitive variables, the Fordham staff reviewed additional applications using the model shown here. As a result of these discussions, they began to question their own wisdom: Can useful information be gained using this model? Would the students accepted under this method really be successful on campus? Many believed the model could work, though some argued only within certain sectors, and to a limited degree. These questions and comments indicate a change from traditional ways of thinking to a more critical and inclusive way of obtaining information in applicant reviews. It also provided new insight into how the staff could attract underrepresented applicants who could likely be graduates of Fordham.

### Relationships

The process of building relationships is one of the central components of admission work. For the most part, colleges require students to reduce the richness of their life experiences into a series of boxes, short essays and interviews full of sound bytes. Admission officers, on the other side of the desk, grapple with this information, often making decisions based on a series of dominant culture assumptions. Our hope as researchers was to interrupt the ordinary flow of assumptions that guide daily practice and to give the Fordham staff a chance to experience how a process of ongoing dialogue enables one to see familiar matters in a strange light.

The seminars enabled staff to talk about issues that often fall into the category of the politically incorrect, and therefore exiled to the land of non-discussion. One ethnic minority member of the staff suggested that the dialogues enabled the staff to talk more meaningfully about important topics.

The staff was required to confront serious issues in the midst of everyday tasks. Admission officers, arguably, tend to have a service orientation of accommodating others, and “making nice.” For these staff members, lifting the veil was a troubling gesture as it asked them to see a colleague in a less-than-favorable light. It begs the question: how do I deal with attitudes and values that are unattractive in my view? Honest dialogue in the workplace is dangerous because it moves relationships outside the zone of what is typically sanctioned as appropriate workplace conversation. People tend to not get “personal” for such details can cloud one’s perceptions of others. Such a stance, however, can be problematic. How does one deal, for example, with racism or homophobia or sexism in the workplace? “Isms” such as these are rooted in personal life experiences, so relegating “the personal” to the margin becomes not only uncomfortable, but harmful to both applicants and colleagues. Even considering troubling issues such as these, the seminars and reflection groups provided staff members with an opportunity to experience both the benefits and problems of reflecting on one’s work, and also of exploring more fully their relationship with others.

### Why Does This Matter?

This research was conducted with an eye toward transforming institutional behavior. As professionals, we know the issues surrounding admission and higher education seem to parallel the larger issues our society faces: diversity, access and equity. We also know that America talks in flourishes about these matters, but rarely attempts to create processes that put its rhetoric into productive action. This research speaks to that concern and offers a new approach to addressing these matters.

A project of this type gives but a glimpse of what can happen when a staff takes intentional steps to improve not only

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its number of underrepresented students, but how it approaches that task. The staff committed itself to meaningful exchanges on issues of identity, social justice, and educational goals—not simply for politically correct reasons. Even in the midst of their chaotic lives, they took time to reflect on their identities and life experiences, and how they influenced their approach to admission work. They also did this in a way that honored the humanity of colleagues, and even more important, they honored the humanity of their prospective students by opening up real opportunities to see them “beyond the numbers.” The changes in practice that staff eventually recommended came from places of conviction, as opposed to edicts from above, and in some cases, what was the most efficient thing to do. This, we believe, is the foundation for transformative, principled admission work.



## Part II: New Directions for Thought and Practice

As participants in the ongoing experiment of American democracy, we struggle to find opportunities for growth while being sensitive to persons undervalued or systematically marginalized. Our educational system, far more than any other institution, is a place in our society where individuals are able to develop a capacity to negotiate the boundaries of race, class, religion, and other affiliations that separate one group from another. Indeed, the university setting might be the last place where young adults with different views, life experiences, value structures, and priorities share the same space as they work toward similar goals. For this reason, the work of admission officers takes on significant meaning. Officers are not simply “building a class,” or “paying the university’s bills,” they are also strengthening (or weakening) the very fabric of our democratic way of life.

Historically, universities have not been bastions of diversity. Perhaps, like the characters in Sartre’s play, *No Exit*, our human condition is both attracted to and repelled by that which is familiar to us. Such close associations can either be hellish, or they can provide an opportunity to move beyond our differences. Too often, our human inclination is to surround ourselves with those who share our own views, hopes and dreams. Universities, in that sense, are remarkable in their homogeneity. But, we also know that we learn and grow through paradoxical experiences. Most everyone can recount an electrifying moment of realizing a new way of doing or seeing things, or when the experience of another person caused us to seriously consider an alternative view.

In January 2000, the admission staff of Fordham University (NY) entered into a 12-month process through which they seriously reviewed the nature of how they know themselves (How is it that I see myself and the world?) and considered how that particular view influenced their admission process. During that time, they participated in monthly seminars in which they shared insights, discussed provocative texts and ideas, and probed the structures and value systems that guide the admission choices they make. As a result, and as has been outlined previously in the Winter 2003 issue, Fordham staff became much more conscious of their ideologies and were able to align them in such fashion to better recruit and matriculate students into the entering class. The relationships among staff were more visible, real and trustworthy. Staff members found themselves more aware of their thinking and assumptions, and of how those frames of reference enhanced or lessened a student’s chance of admission. In sum, staff members became present to themselves and their own worldviews, resulting in a more reasonable ability to transform aspects of their admission process.

This project, funded by NACAC’s Fund for the Future, is an initiative to promote fresh thinking about the problem of increas-

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ing access and diversity on our college campuses. The nagging question, “Why has representation of underrepresented groups not increased since the landmark events of the 1960s?,” lurks throughout the entire project. In responding to that question, we hope this research disentangles how the structures of the admission process lead prospective students to assimilate into mystified “standards.” We argue that such a pejorative process, de facto, leaves little room for the student who represents “difference” in wholesale fashion. The student whose life experiences and intellectual/social gifts fall outside the standardized norm of university life must climb a mountain that dominant students are not required to contemplate. (The standards for admission most frequently reflect the standards of middle-class, European Americans. If one is holistically nurtured in that environment, one is not required to operate outside that comfort zone). Meta-

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phorically, non-dominant culture students are expected to wear boots; they instead wear sandals. What is amazing, in keeping with this metaphor, is that students from non-traditional groups have the ability to reach the top of the mountain, but are penalized because they did not reach the mountaintop according to "our rules."

This project seeks to undermine, even shake loose, the assumption that all students with great potential for contributing to our society think, write, test, speak, and represent their person-ness in similar ways. As researchers, we ask the question: Is there potential for the number of underrepresented students to increase if we look differently (and still with an eye toward fairness) at ourselves and the process of recruiting and admitting students?

The first article makes a case for how the project broadened the thought process and practices of the Fordham admission staff, which already had a strong presence of underrepresented students. We argued that admission officers must find new ways to think about their work, ones that resist the errors that occur when one's views and assumptions are never questioned. This goal was accomplished through a series of seminars and small group encounters in which Fordham staff members considered alternative ways of working. During those sessions, staff probed, questioned and formulated problems regarding their views and practices. They deepened their relationships with one another and found ways to approach their craft by reaching outside conventional wisdom.

This article reflects those changes, particularly how the project generated broader and, sometimes, new ways of recruiting and reviewing students. In conclusion, we found that the changes staff members made suggest a transformative, reflective approach to their work. By asking new types of questions with a heightened sense of awareness about issues of "otherness," they began to welcome new ways of seeing and doing their work. Fol-

lowing are examples of how Fordham's staff participation in this project affected their admission process.

#### **Pudding and Proof: Fordham Staff Members In Their Own Words**

The first article discussed staff members' heightened awareness about their own lives and work as a result of this project. Participants changed their personal way of thinking about admission and their thinking about diversity outside the workplace, about how discussions on diversity affected them personally, and about their increased awareness of diversity issues in the world. Beyond individual changes, the Fordham admission staff also evolved as a collective unit. When asked how to describe the project one participant stated:

"We looked at how we evaluate things, and then being able to apply that back to admission work."

By looking at our different views we [were able to] ... reshape how we look at them as a team."

Change was most clearly evidenced by the new ways of thinking and approaches to the recruitment process. At the close of the seminars, all staff members participated in focus groups to discuss what they learned and how the seminars influenced their perspectives about issues of difference. Those comments, in addition to a staff-produced summary report, inform the analysis that follows.

#### **Theme One: Fresh Thinking about Diversity and its Impact on Admission Work**

"I have worked with urban, non-traditional students for so many years that it was hard for me to think about [how this project changed me]. Then I recalled our discussion about [working-class students]. When I read files and I see a student from a different socio-economic background, it opens up a whole level of, 'what are the differences there, and how or what do I need to be looking for that I've never looked for before?'"

The project intended to give rise to the type of thinking exhibited by the staff member quoted above. Clearly, she is comfortable with herself as a professional. Still, her widened approach to her craft suggests she is more discerning in how she facilitates the understanding of a candidate. Her language suggests that not only is she more aware of different forms of diversity, but she also exhibits a broader perspective of diversity's parameters.

Likewise, some members of the staff thought differently about their approach to recruiting underrepresented students. As noted, many conversations among the staff considered issues of standards, fairness and equity. One former staff person,

now a college counselor at a high school, stated that the project made her more aware of different ways of perceiving quality and preparedness. Below, we find her asking new and probing questions about how admission officers approach the process of understanding the subjective data presented in an application. She asks:

“How are admission counselors going to take what the kid’s going through [i.e., life experiences] into account? I think this project was an eye-opener... to say there are other ways people can show they’re worthy of admission to the university and that they can still be successful.”

Both voices address the problematic nature of assumptions and stereotypes that influence making meaning of someone’s life. Staff members are revisiting the important questions that need to be asked: Who are the candidates who apply for admission? What do I really need to know about the candidate to evaluate him/her fairly and appropriately?

We argue that the seminars provided an opportunity for staff to recognize and challenge their tacit understandings of their jobs. They began to ask questions that invited deeper and more complicated analysis of their candidates. Most gratifying, however, was how officers took significant steps toward critiquing how their reliance on a numbers-only oriented paradigm limits how they recruit and evaluate candidates for admission.

## Theme Two: Candidates as “Who” Instead of “What”

A paradigm shift was evident on many fronts. Consider the officer who stated:

“We need to know who the person is, instead of a list of facts. Without knowing how to expand our horizons when we’re reading these applications, we’re going to deny a lot of really good students, unless the students come to interview and we get to know them better.”

During their annual summer planning retreat, staff members revisited both the recruitment and information-gathering process, and also the tools used to evaluate candidates’ appropriateness for Fordham. For example, a vigorous discussion about the merits and nature of the personal interview invigorated the staff members. Some believed their interviewing approach was staid and, more importantly, was not unearthing the kind of information needed to understand the holistic attributes of the applicant:

“I completely changed how I do an interview. I guess it was a few weeks after we talked about it [in a seminar]... Erica and I went out to do interviews in Buffalo. She had written [down] all the questions we talked about, and we used those new questions, and the students loved them! I asked the

question, ‘How would your friends describe you and do you think they’re accurate?’ And, I got, ‘That’s a good question! These aren’t the normal questions asked.’”

This new approach was directly influenced by William Sedlacek’s (1992) research on non-cognitive variables, which shifts the focus of our traditional—and often mystified—notion of success. Success, according to this ideal, is the completion of university study, possible entrance into a post-graduate program or success in entering one’s chosen profession. As a result of looking at a different set of variables, staff members were empowered to think more broadly about what makes a “qualified applicant.” More powerfully, however, staffers were encouraged to find ways to connect and highlight attributes that the university values in students. For instance, they scripted new interview questions that unearthed issues of self-concept and how a student views himself or herself. They created questions to determine if students had a realistic self-appraisal of their talents and shortcomings. They found inventive ways to talk about candidates’ interests and influences. As one staff person put it, “The [candidate] might not be a superstar writer but when they get in front of you, they’re incredible.” Another staff member commented about her new approach to interviewing:

“It’s so easy to fall into ‘Oh, you grew up in New York.’ This is my chance to get to know the student. And I should be much more positive about this. My interview write-ups are more in depth, I feel like I can address more interesting issues, or ask fun questions, not just find out that they ‘live in New York.’ I can already get that off the application. I think before I was looking at it routinely.”

A second area of change for Fordham included the interview profile form. Originally, the form requested information such as GPA, SAT score, rank-in-class, and a listing of extra-curricular activities. These questions have been eliminated and replaced with: “Briefly describe your most meaningful activity or experience.” The staff believed this new question addresses what is really important to the applicant and where they spend their time, and it allows the student to select from outside the school setting (another insight from the Sedlacek model). By adding this question, staffers believed they were consciously setting aside their human tendency to predetermine the worth of a student through objectified stats such as GPAs and standardized tests. This realization was important as they were intent on reversing practices that encouraged them to rely on stereotypes and unchallenged assumptions. As one admission officer noted, “The first thing I checked was the address and stats. So, right off the bat, I’ve seen their GPA, rank and SATs and it’s made an impact on me, whether or not it has the impact of the final decision.”

In a similar fashion, staff members also redesigned essay questions on the application to reflect their interest in getting more meaty information about what matters to the candidate, the candidate's approach to thinking and problem solving, and how the candidate connects with the world around them.

### Theme Three: Thinking Beyond the Office

With the hope of reaching a wider and more diverse student population, Fordham also implemented new recruitment strategies. The admission officers researched college fairs and high school visits and have elected to expand this aspect of their recruitment plan. The new college fairs and individual high school visits specifically target students of color and students from culturally diverse backgrounds. In an additional strategy, Fordham has elected to appoint an admission coordinator for multicultural initiatives. While this person is not the lone staff member working on issues of diversity, she

is charged with consistently researching more effective ways to recruit and retain this targeted group. She will work closely with student groups on campus and other university personnel to ensure that once these culturally diverse students arrive on campus, they will feel welcomed and supported. In addition, on-campus programming was enhanced to better service this population.

These changes represent important initiatives that have been put into place. However, this type of work is not stagnant, it is a way of being, an ongoing process or approach to understanding matters of difference which, of course, are part of a never-ending evolution. This is the nature of the reflective and transformative approach: reflection, dialogue and action on new understandings. In fact, the admission staff at Fordham has committed itself to continuing these seminars in order to educate new staff members about these ideas and perspectives. As researchers, we believe this was additional confirmation that the approach not only worked, but also instilled in staffers a desire to maintain a transformative stance in the future.

### Implications for Individuals, the University and NACAC

The implications of this project are multifaceted. The work of transformation—adopting new systems, roles and approaches that are aligned with one's beliefs—is a key factor in such a project. Our transcripts present rich examples of how staff members—as individuals and as a group—found themselves in introspective positions that not only challenged their previously held assumptions, but also allowed them to do so in caring, critical and well-intentioned ways. From that standpoint, staff members were able to collectively reshape their practices and align them with the ideals that can sustain them over time. However important these outcomes are, the implications of this research stretch beyond changes implemented at the university level.

For example, NACAC might find ways to embody the implications of these research results. As is evidenced in its mission statement that affirms such efforts, the association has a rich history of embracing diversity. Indeed, NACAC hopes that every student recognizes the entitlement of open access and equity in the admission process. However, steps must be taken to ensure that the notion of access does not collapse into romanticized rhetoric. Even the most welcoming language can not overcome admission policies and practices that structurally limit an underrepresented student's ability to gain admission. By encouraging admission officers to consider methods and assumptions that guide their understanding of diversity, NACAC makes good on its intent to expand the big tent of the baccalaureate experience. It changes the nature of the debate.

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The membership of NACAC might directly benefit from an approach to diversity that provides such an inclusive spectrum. As an organization, it should continually be in the forefront examining its philosophy and approach to issues of diversity and equity. It can continue the movement to level the playing field by sponsoring generative research that fosters

change among the membership or by revising its approach to diversity discussions. Most state and regional ACACs, for example, offer brief workshops that introduce topics of diversity to staff, and NACAC offers the summer program for Counselors of Color, but only a small percentage of professionals are reached. Quite frankly, such sessions tend to attract counselors who already have a commitment to diversity. The Fordham project functionally considered every member of the staff as an integral contributor to both the problem and solution of multicultural recruitment and admission work. NACAC must do the same. If the intention of both the association and its membership is to diversify college campuses in ways that expand beyond mere demographic representation, then a fundamental and holistic shift in approach and attitude must occur. Diversifying a campus has to start on the ground level and in the context of everyday life.

Implications exist for the university as well. As stated in the opening of this article, the university serves as an important model for how society might coexist with a mixture of cultures, lifestyles, perspectives, values, and priorities. We can no longer hide behind the rhetoric and imagery of ivy-covered walls. As John Dewey (1938) said, schools are not preparation for the real world, they are the real world. We are evocatively reminded by the terrorist events of September 11, 2001, that our world needs places where stark differences can be negotiated in reasonable ways. We desperately need communities where the powerful and the powerless don't simply listen to each other, but hear each other's issues and respond with integrity, compassion and care. This research asks the university to take seriously what it means when it says "we honor diversity." The begging question looms: Does diversity manifest itself only in demographics, what we call popdiversity, or are real attempts underfoot to develop inclusive policies and practices that encourage transformative practice? The university must also commit to ongoing, introspective dialogue about both its intentions and how it goes about achieving those aims.

In sum, if we are to make vast changes with regard to the experiences and the richness that underrepresented students bring to our campuses, we must make counter-cultural shifts in how we view our work. We must also generate methods of daily practice that ensure that a diversity of voices can always be heard, and on equal terms. Institutions must think about how to generate such possibilities on their campus for their admission staff, regardless of the previous history of success or cultural make-up of the student body. We must better understand the culture of admission work and those who carry it out. This project argues powerfully for a formal, ongoing and local program designed not simply to bring admission officers to a simplistic understanding of "other cul-



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tures,” but to recognize that if “we” want broader representations on our campuses, “we” must look in our own mirror and not ostensibly blame the “minority student” for failing to meet our often arbitrary and mystified standards for admission.

Finally, transforming institutional behavior is not an easy process in terms of energy or time. It only occurs when staff members take intentional steps to see and know one another differently, and provide opportunities for prospective students to do the same. Creating such spaces will, perhaps, be the most difficult hurdle for staff to overcome. Not doing so, however, is even more deeply problematic as it suggests that staff members are unwilling to take measures to keep in check the dominating effect of mainstream culture.

For the transformative approach to be effective, ongoing dialogue is critical. Fordham University tackled that challenge with impressive results. In the words of one participant, “I think the whole goal was to change our worldview when it comes to admission, and I think ultimately, it changed my own view outside of my job.” As professionals with a moral charge to serve the needs of every student, we have a responsibility to not only be conscious and critical of our individual worldviews, but also those of colleagues and the structures we create to make our world fair, just and equitable.

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