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# Complementary rather than contradictory: diversity and excellence in peer review and admissions in American higher education

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Diversity is largely accepted as a positive value in American society. Nevertheless, policies to encourage diversity, e.g. affirmative action, language policies and legalising illegal immigrants, are still largely disputed, and often understood as having contradictory and largely negative consequences. The implementation of diversity is still seen as a threat to meritocracy, national cohesion, and democracy. This paper analyses how excellence and diversity are discussed in two academic decision-making processes: admission at two elite public universities and the distribution of competitive research fellowships. We argue that excellence and diversity are not alternative but additive considerations in the allocation of resources. The administrators and academics we studied factor diversity in as an additional consideration when decisions are to be made between applicants of roughly equal standing.

Diversity is largely accepted as a positive value in American society. Nevertheless, policies to encourage diversity, e.g. affirmative action, language policies, and legalising illegal immigrants, are still largely disputed, and often understood as having contradictory and largely negative consequences. The implementation of diversity is still seen as a threat to meritocracy, national cohesion, and democracy. In this paper we look at one realm of this debate: how diversity and excellence are factored in academic selection processes, specifically grant and fellowship allocation, and admission to selective universities.

Understanding the interaction between excellence and diversity in American higher education system is especially important due to their multiple roles in the production of knowledge, social inclusion, and elite creation. The first legal use of diversity in policy-making in the United States occurred in the realm of the higher education: in the 1978 Bakke decision (US Supreme Court, 1978). Diversity was brought into

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the debate as a 'compelling interest' that enriches the educational experience. Diversity was also the key concept of the 2003 Michigan Supreme Court decision that allowed race consideration and diversity arguments to be factored in admission to public higher education institutions.

Although Powell—the author of the Bakke Supreme Court decision—stressed the multiple meanings of diversity, it was largely interpreted as a way to balance unequal gender and race representation in higher education. Recently, institutional and socio-economic inequalities are increasingly considered in policies and debates about diversity. However, public opinion surveys show that Americans still understand diversity largely in terms of race and ethnic differences—which, according to some, partly explains the understanding of diversity policies in zero-sum terms (Bell & Hartman, 2007). As articulated by Guinier & Sturm (2001), critics of affirmative action still today find it easy to pit meritocracy against diversity, arguing that some 'get in by merit', while others do so 'by quota'. While purists argue that only excellence should be taken into consideration, progressives believe that factoring in diversity allows for the identification of a wider range of forms of excellence; they purposefully aim to break down the opposition between 'standards of excellence' and 'diversity standards.

Since this is a debate that has been going on for 30 years in the United States, we cannot claim to exhaust all the aspects and nuances of it in this paper. Our goal here is to understand how decision-makers in academic selection processes frame their use of diversity and excellence in the aftermath of the Michigan decision. Using interviews with American panellists serving on fellowship funding panels and with American elite public university administrators who make use of affirmative action, we argue that academic decision-makers do not consider diversity and excellence as mutually exclusive, but rather factor both in their definitions of quality and fair selection. University administrators who define admission policies use a collective instead of an individual notion of academic quality: they believe that creating a diverse student body is essential to a truly excellent educational experience. Because students with diverse background contribute to the creation of a diverse environment, it is legitimate to factor in diversity when making admission decisions (on this point see also Stevens, 2007). In the case of peer review, awards are generally made to applicants who distinguish themselves in terms of excellence and diversity, although in varying proportion. Both groups of academic decision-makers use merit and diversity as multipliers, rather than as alternative standards of evaluation. In addition, in both cases, interviewees believe that in order for diversity to be taken seriously, decision-makers need to move beyond race and take into consideration 'diverse diversities', including socio-economic and institutional inequality (class and from what kind of school the applicant comes from, for instance).

We start by briefly presenting our data and methods. We then discuss the emergence of diversity as an issue in American academia. Finally, we present how excellence and diversity are discussed in two academic decision-making processes: admission at two elite public universities and the distribution of competitive research fellowship.[1]

## Data and methods

This paper brings together two different studies: Lamont's project on knowledge production and evaluation in the social sciences (Lamont, 2009) and Silva's comparative study on affirmative action in higher education in the United States, Brazil, and South Africa (Silva, 2006a, 2006b).

Silva studied how racial and socio-economic inequalities were factored in the admission processes in public universities in Brazil, South Africa, and the United States. She interviewed higher-level university administrators about their work and the university mission in relation to social inclusion and academic excellence. They were selected because of their key positions in the university in one of the three areas of interest: admission processes, student affairs, and institutional planning. Silva conducted a total of 46 in-depth interviews in twelve public universities in these three countries between 2005 and 2006. She used a semi-structured interview schedule and the interviews lasted between one and three hours. This paper draws on ten in-depth interviews with American university administrators in two of the largest and most selective public state universities. These interviews concerned in part how diversity is factored admission decisions. It is important to stress that these two universities had recently been allowed to use affirmative action in their admissions process after years of legal debates (for details on research design, see Silva 2006a).

Lamont analysed how panellists participating in various fellowship competitions go about selecting winning proposal. She consider the formal and informal criteria of selection used, the customary rules of deliberation followed by the panellists, how they come to view the process as fair, and how they factor interdisciplinarity and diversity in the decision-making process. The study draws on interviews conducted with 81 panellists and program officers and on observation of three panels. Interviews were conducted shortly after the conclusion of the deliberations. Lamont conducted interviews with panellists serving on five different multidisciplinary fellowship panels and twelve funding panels in the social sciences and the humanities. She studied each panel in two successive years. The funding competitions were held by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (WWNFF), a Society of Fellows at a top research university, and an anonymous foundation in the social sciences. These competitions were chosen because they cover a wide range of disciplines, and because they are all highly prestigious. While the SSRC and the WWNFF competitions are open to the social sciences and the humanities, the ACLS supports research in the humanities and in humanities-related social sciences. The Society of Fellows supports work across a range of fields, whereas the anonymous foundation only supports work in the social sciences. The SSRC and the WWNFF programs provide support for graduate students, whereas the ACLS holds distinct competitions for assistant, associate, and full professors. The Society of Fellows provides fellowships to recent PhDs, and the anonymous social science foundation supports research at all ranks (for details, see Lamont, 2009).

While these two projects were conducted with different objectives in mind, they both document tensions and complementarities between excellence and diversity in academic decision-making. In this sense, they can be viewed as two windows into a same phenomena, albeit shaped by different institutional factors—for instance, legal constrains have been much more crucial for admission decision-making than for the distribution of research fellowship. Of course, the selection processes they are part of also differ in the types of population they target, their degree of selectivity, and the criteria of selection. Nevertheless, it is useful to apprehend the dynamic between diversity and excellence through these particular lenses if we are to improve our understanding of evaluative practices in American higher education.

## The debate on diversity in American Academia

Tensions between meritocracy and democracy remain at the centre of academic selection processes in the United States. The sheer size of the American higher education system, its spatial dispersion over a very large territory, its institutional diversity (covering public and private universities, as well as research universities, small liberal colleges and community colleges), and the socio-demographic diversity of administrators, faculty, and students alike, keep these tensions alive. Against such a diverse landscape, in both of our case studies, decision-makers are to chose applicants from a variety of groups, and those selected have to be somewhat representative of the broader population. Thus, evaluators learn to combine various considerations to achieve apparently contradictory ends simultaneously. This contrasts with the situation in other countries, especially in Europe, where despite cross-societal differences, national higher education systems generally remain smaller and less heterogeneous, and thus less subject to complicated weighing of competing considerations when it comes to assessing academic or scholarly achievements. The democratic impulse attenuates the steep institutional hierarchies that characterise American higher education.

While American ethnic and racial diversity has increased significantly in the past thirty years due to immigration, unequal access to higher education—to the pipeline—remains strong. Recent studies demonstrate the relatively low number of women and minority faculty members in the upper levels of the academic stratification system (with their representation decreasing from untenured and tenured positions, from teaching-oriented institutions to research universities, from low to high rate of productivity groups).[2] Thus, it is safe to conclude that diversity considerations affect all forms of selection in American higher education, ranging from university admissions and department tenure decisions, to the awarding of fellowships. Our goal is not to explain how we end up with persisting patterns of inequality despite efforts to foster greater diversity. Instead, we want to gain a more nuanced understanding of how diversity is factored in when it is.

The *University of California (UC) Regents vs. Bakke* Supreme Court case in 1978 (US Supreme Court, 1978) was the first time diversity was formally used to justify the consideration of non-academic criteria in selection to public universities.[3] The Supreme Court was divided—four judges supported the petitioners and four

claimed that it was unconstitutional to give preferential treatment based on race. Supreme Justice Powell was the swing vote: he supported race-targeted affirmative action policies in higher education on the basis that diversity was a 'compelling interest' for higher education institutions and for the country because it enriched the learning process. However, he stressed, ethnic and racial diversity was an important element of diversity, but not the only one; geographical and religion diversity should also be considered. He believed that having a diverse student population would enrich the learning experience of all students, contribute to the construction of a less racially divided society, and allow professionals to learn how to deal with a diverse population.

Powell's decision was crucial to the emergence of diversity as the central legal and discursive element for the promotion of affirmative action policies in admissions. It stressed diversity—a concept tied to public good—and took the focus away from redress, a legally vulnerable concept in the United States, which demanded the proof of discrimination (the so-called 'strict scrutiny'). The 'diversity frame' of affirmative action promoted by Powell of affirmative action went legally unquestioned until the end of the 1990s—not even the judges who in 1978 had disagreed with his opinion questioned the importance of diversity as a compelling state interest.

In 2003, the US Supreme Court decided on two cases of race-targeted affirmative action policies in higher education against the University of Michigan—one against the Law School and the other against the College of Literature, Science ant the Arts. It was argued that the University was disrespecting the 14th Amendment of the US Constitution by discriminating on the basis of race, and this, without serving any compelling state interest. Once again, the court was divided, and this time Judge O'Connor was the swing vote. She decided that the use of race as a factor in student admissions was legal, basing her decisions on Powell's opinion about the diversity as a 'compelling interest' and the constitutionality of considering race as a 'plus' in promoting diversity.

Until today, diversity is the only legally accepted justification for affirmative action in universities. Its main advantage is that it benefits not only those who would not enter universities if not for affirmative action policies: it benefits the whole community by promoting a richer learning environment in which people from different background can learn from each other (Bowen & Bok, 1998). As described in the 2003 Michigan decision and evidenced by survey data (Bell & Hartman, 2007), diversity arguments are largely supported in the United States:

> not only [because they] create educational benefits, but could also enhance cross-racial understanding by breaking down stereotypes and better prepare students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepare them as professionals—which was supported by university administrators, scholars and business leaders. (US Supreme Court, 2003, Opinion of the Court, p. 25)

Despite the legal definition of diversity as multiple, the concept of diversity has acquired a very specific connotation in the eyes of most Americans. According to Bell & Hartman (2007), experience regarding diversity in the United States today tends to be centred on *racial difference* (often framed as cultural difference). Talk

about other kinds of diversity tends to be superficial, and most Americans have considerable difficulty in relating the concept of diversity to class inequality. Moreover, in both legal and everyday discourses about diversity, racial boundaries between blacks and whites are taken for granted. Moreover, those who support diversity in principle have mixed feelings towards the consequences of policies implemented to encourage it.

Our interviews suggest that decision-makers in academic selection processes have a broader understanding of diversity than that documented by Bell and Hartman. They consider multiple types of diversity, e.g. institutional and socio-economic, and take into account unequal access to resources, with the goal of promote more equal chances. Even more importantly, their definitions of excellence—either individual or collective—embrace the notion of diversity.

## Lost in translation: re-defining diversity in elite public universities after the Michigan Supreme Court case

The 1980s have seen a backlash against affirmative action in the United States. In the academic world, state universities were most affected due to their dependency on state finance (and politics!) and their large number of students. The 2003 Michigan Supreme Court decisions were in favour of affirmative action legality, but against the point system used by the university.

The Supreme Court cases brought diversity back to the centre of public debate. Ironically, the administrators we interviewed believe that the resistance to affirmative action did not decline after the decision. The concept of diversity has received criticism both from the left and from the right. Critics from the right argue that it undermines social cohesion, can potentially make the learning process more difficult, and violate individual rights. Critics from the left argue that the pro-diversity discourse masks the deep inequalities that are associated with the diverse experiences of various categories of students. As put by one African American female admissions officer, 'Diversity got lost in translation. . . . We may have won the court case, but not necessarily public opinion'.

This evaluation seems to hold true once one looks at state referendums outcomes: The 309 decision of the Supreme Court, which followed another challenge to diversity coming from the University of California system in 1998, forbade the consideration of race in admission, causing the number of minority students to decrease significantly (Chavez, 1998). In the case of African American students, enrolment went from 6.8 per hundred in 1997 to 2.3 in 1998 on the Berkeley campus. The University of Texas system was also forbidden to factor in race in admissions—although it used it again after the Michigan decision (Tienda *et al.*, 2003). Three years after the Michigan Supreme Court decision in favour of factoring diversity in admission decisions, a state anti-diversity policies referendum won the majority of votes (Schmidt, 2006). All these setbacks show the mixed feelings Americans have towards the implementation of affirmative action and diversity policies, especially those targeting race and ethnic diversity. We believe that the university administrators

interviewed were largely responding to the criticisms that emerged during and after the Michigan legal debates (our interviews were conducted less than three years after the court decisions). Their belief in the complementarity of excellence and diversity is striking, and it is intrinsic to the meaning they give to both concepts.

All admissions officers and student affairs officials interviewed for the study were straightforward about their belief that excellence and academic quality cannot be measured purely by quantitative indicators whether GPA scores or class rank. They are familiar with the deficiencies of these objective measures, which carry inherent socio-economic, and sometimes cultural, bias (as shown in the work of Claude Steele, e.g. Steele, 1997). Most of them are familiar with the literature which shows that these objective measures, especially SAT scores, are not good predictors of college academic performance (Zwick, 2004). In accordance with the 2003 Michigan Supreme Court decision, which argued against defining diversity with a pure point system, administrators in both schools stated that they make use of a holistic approach to evaluating students' potential and qualities. As argued by a white female Student Affairs official:

> I argue with the notion of what 'better qualified academically' means. One of the things that most people imagine selection officers are doing is that they are taking that thing, for example a test score, or a GPA, and imagine that we can line up all of these applicants in order. And [that we establish] here the cut-off on numeric. They believe that math will solve all their problems. But we know we are admitting to a number of different programs that have different needs, which require different talents from our students.

In line with the panellists serving on fellowship selection committee, these admission officers explain that because they are evaluating applicants for highly selective schools, they select among a very strong pool of candidates and turn down many individuals who could succeed if they were chosen. In this context, they factor in diversity and excellence in a complementary rather than mutually exclusive way. Indeed, as one African American institutional strategic planner explained:

> What we result in right now, which is good for us, which is a move upward, is that we are admitting the best students. We have a nice incremental, small perhaps, but nice incremental movement upwards. [...] In the process of admitting the best students we are still getting a more diverse class. These are the best of the best, and we know that. Not these are the best of the best in some contrived notion that we have deliberately accomplished.

Administrators mention high retention rate and generally positive evaluation by students of their experience as supporting this view of the necessary complementarity of excellence and diversity. Considering diversity means considering the context of excellence. As argued by a white male institutional strategic planner, that does not simply mean giving advantage to students who have gaps in their K12 education, but it means considering their potential, evaluating these students holistically:

> The affirmative action, or to use a race-base or SES-base admissions process allows us, institutions, to recognize the value of a student within their context. Recognize the value of background. [...] Because students are more than just numbers, and our process has evolved enough in the past fifteen years to know that students are more than just class ranks, they are more than just test scores, and that we need to have a

latitude to select those who can benefit the most from us and those who we can benefit the most from in our applicant pool. And that is the admissions office responsibility; we cannot solve what happened in K-12 [...].

As a white male admissions officer puts it:

[To create social mobility and reduce social inequality] is certainly a goal. I think it is a more central goal to create a vibrant intellectual community that will benefit everyone. [...] I think the best educational environments are built by students who have different life experiences, different backgrounds. And the good thing about college is that it should be promoting that open, respectful dialogue. So, I think it is a goal to help correct social inequalities but I don't think it is the main goal, it is a goal. Educational experience is as much of a goal as the social inequality, then everyone of these students benefit.

This last quotation points out what we consider the central redefinition of excellence through the inclusion of diversity: excellence becomes an institutional rather than an individual goal. Creating diversity means creating a richer educational environment. And that is part of a central reconceptualisation of the goals of affirmative action through diversity since Bakke: it does not simply means giving a chance to a student who would not get admitted otherwise, it means creating the best institutional environment that will graduate the best students. Two white male admissions officers agree:

I think a university should never admit an unqualified student. Period. So the first question is that individual qualified, and by that I mean do they have a reasonable expectation or probability of success? Answer that question first. Then the second question is, in that pool, who you can choose to guarantee the best educational experience for everyone. If you choose the top scoring students in your admitting class, you are going to end up with a lot of students who are essentially alike in every way. [...] You see it is as much important to produce the best graduating class, as it is to admit the best freshmen class. Because what we have control over is the four year they are here. It is important to us to produce the best graduating class and that has to include exposure to different cultures, different economic backgrounds, different races and different ethnicities.

In the selection committee you have to keep in mind that you want to form a community of learners, create a community with students who have the academic preparation to be successful. That is the real question. It is not [whether some are] higher or lower academically qualified. Quality is can they be successful in your academic environment. If they can, now you create a situation in which people base off their backgrounds, experiences, academic and social experiences they all come into a classroom, they all read the same assignment from a faculty member, but when they come back together they all interpret it in different ways because of their backgrounds and that is when real learning takes place.

These university officers appear to believe that the promotion of diversity is part of the mission of the American higher educational system. It is through the promotion of diversity that the richness of the system is created. The possibility of exchanging ideas with people from very different backgrounds allows students to learn and enrich themselves. Diversity in that sense guarantees rather than threatens excellence. One African American male admissions officer explained:

The whole idea of higher education in this country has always been the robust exchange of ideas. People with different ideas. They didn't say race, in those days, but it was more different regions of the country. Different perspectives on a particular issue to be brought

to that laboratory called a college and be allowed to speak, and grow, and exchange in the hopes that you can learn from others and exchange something in an academic sense that might give you opportunities to think differently. That is kind of the goal of higher education in this country, period. It is my broad definition of diversity that would apply in that sense.

A broad definition of diversity also appears in almost every interview we conducted. Even if at moments administrators, like the general public, use 'diversity' as a synonym to racial and ethnic differences, once pushed to define it, all offer a broader definition of the concept that included socio-economics, institutional, and even individual characteristics, as well as race. As expressed by an African American female admissions officer, 'Students judge based on appearance. [Not to consider race] Says that race is not a way we live our lives. And that is not true'. But diversity is more than race for this white female student affairs official:

> For me diversity is not only about race, [it] is about a kid from a XX (a local inner city) interacting and being in the same classroom as a kid who came from a family of a CEO or whatever. Those kids have two different backgrounds and two different frames of reference, and to me they should be treated equally in the campus. And to me [our university] has been successfully in bringing together kids from different races, different socio-economic backgrounds, different parts of the world, so to speak.

This does not mean, however, that administrators are naïve about the resistance that students have to interacting with people who are different from them. As expressed by an African American female admissions officer, universities can offer diversity and encourage it institutionally, but it is up to students to take advantage of it:

> I would hope that exposure and working together and being around and learning from would change people. But people can be stubborn and it all depends on where a person is coming from as where they will go. That is the premise. [. . .] You cannot make people open up their mind, but maybe I am skeptical because I come from a minority population. You can expose them, and help that other person. I think that for the majority, yes. But we hear and see plenty of terrible things. . ..

Finally, for most university administrators, factoring diversity into admission counters the inherent bias of selection processes. Because top level administrators are mostly from a privileged educational, socio-economic, and (usually) racial background, factoring in diversity allows them to 'get out of their comfort zone' and more fully consider the merit in applicants that come from milieux different from their own. An African American female admissions officer was open about the need to acknowledge bias and her goal to produce change:

> I think affirmative actions were created to recognize that there is an inherent bias [. . .] It is a social program but part of it is [to] create a social change. To make sure that we have people at the table who can make us realize things that we don't know.

As in the case of scholars serving on fellowship panels, these elite public university officials are aware of their central role for social change through knowledge creation.

### Diverse diversities: grant panellists understandings of diversity in grant selection

Similarly to public universities who are openly in favour of diversity and affirmative action policies, the funding agencies included in this study require that panellists do not discriminate and in some cases, they require that panellists factor diversity into their decisions. It is reasonable to expect that all panellists take it into consideration when making awards; diversity's relevance to academic evaluation is widely acknowledged in settings where panel members typically perform their day-to-day work as evaluators of colleagues and students.

In the world of funding panels, diversity takes many forms and comes in many hues: panellists consider racial and gender diversity, but they assign most weight to institutional (i.e. where the applicant teaches) and disciplinary diversity: 34% of the interviewees mention institutional diversity and disciplinary diversity as criteria of evaluation, compared to only 15% who mention ethno-racial or gender diversity when discussing how they went about evaluating proposals. Additionally, framing the funding of women and people of colour as the extension of a broader principle minimises what could be perceived as an antinomy between promoting excellence and fairness. Diversity in topics is also a popular criterion but more difficult to interpret. Only one respondent mentions geographic diversity. These 'Diverse diversities' (Bail, 2008) are valued as an intrinsic good that contributes to the overall quality of the research environment. A white history professor says, 'I do believe in having a mix, as much of a mix as possible, as much diversity of whatever kind. And that includes diversity of background or training or interest or maybe even age or personality'.

Diversity is also valued as means to redress past injustices, level the playing field, and shape the academic pipeline. However, merit and diversity often act as multipliers, rather than as alternative standards of evaluation, as very good but not perfect proposals are push above the proverbial line because of diversity consideration. One white English scholar asserts 'It's important for foundations such as these to encourage the production of as wide a range of knowledge as possible', explaining that this 'helps us check some of the biases that we as evaluators may bring in. And I think it also allows us to 'level the playing field'. That's a metaphor that gets used often in terms of racial or class diversity, which I totally think is important'. An African-American panellist also defends factoring in diversity by appealing to fairness because of this uneven playing field. As he notes:

> You've got people applying who teach at institutions where they have much heavier teaching loads and haven't had opportunities to publish as much. It is often the case that their proposals may not look as slick and polished—I should say polished, I shouldn't say slick. They may not have been able to maintain connections to leaders in the field whose names carry some kind of weight or who may have some kind of facility with letters of recommendation or kind of like a nice style where you communicate with the panel.

Still other panel members are concerned with the role fellowships play in shaping the academic pipeline and in determining what the professoriate will look like in the next decades. According to an African-American liberal historian:

> Since [the competition] is a gateway to the academy, I'm interested in seeing the academy have more than just white, upper-middle-class, careerist professionals that essentially come at this with a kind of dogged, mandarin-like desire to reproduce themselves in the academy. . . . It's nice to see somebody that did different work, older candidates and young candidates, I mean those kinds of things are good. I don't think they ever enter into the discussion, but if at the end of the day you've essentially given a license to a group of people who will fill out the academy with very different personality and different backgrounds, that's like a massive plus.

The tension between 'merit' and 'quota' when factoring diversity into decision-making is present in some panellists' reflections on the panels' final choices. An African-American English professor summarises the situation thus:

> Let me put it this way: Some [winners] are there because of questions having to do with field diversity and a diversity of kind of institutions, because [there is] less of a consensus about the qualities of the proposal. In other cases, there's more of a consensus that the project is suitable.

In other words, diversity is a tie-breaker between two somewhat faulty—but differently so, and thus not easily commensurable—proposals. Again, this applies not only to racial diversity, but to the other standard forms of diversity. Taking diversity into consideration later facilitates the decision-making process and helps 'move things along'. An example is provided by an evaluator who describes the self-monitoring process in which her panel engaged. After members noted that they seemed to be funding a disproportionately large number of proposals by historians:

> [The panel] took field into account so that we didn't appear to be advancing a wildly [disproportionate number] of historians. So that meant that certain projects were included in our top list by taking into consideration field diversity as well as other kinds of [criteria, such as] institutional range, geographical range, all of which I think are very important categories.

Of course, this is not to say that awardees who benefit from diversity considerations are less meritorious—in a varying proportion, some of them are among the 'top awardees', i.e., the first recipients to be chosen; similarly, the 'maybe' pile invariably includes many white applicants. Moreover, those who benefit from diversity considerations may have had to overcome additional hurdles to join the pool of contestants—stigma based on their institutional affiliation, class, race, or nativity. That these applicants' trajectory may have been steeper may suggest a greater determination and perhaps also a greater potential than that of applicants from more privileged backgrounds.

In promoting greater diversity among awardees, some panellists purposefully aim to break down the opposition between 'standards of excellence' and 'diversity standards'. A prominent feminist who has served for many years on panels at the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Association of University Women recalls promoting women academics and women's studies proposals at a time when

these organisations were not inclined to fund them. She explains that she 'would not argue for them as women's studies projects, but as being excellent', stating that general standards of excellences and standards pertaining to feminist scholarship have become barely distinguishable over time.

Social science research has contributed important findings in discrimination in performance evaluation (Castilla, 2006). For instance, a widely cited study of peer-reviewed evaluations of postdoctoral research applications show that reviewers consistently gave female applicants lower average scores than male applicants, despite similar levels of productivity (Wenneras & Wold, 1997). More broadly, we know that men's traits are generally viewed as more valuable than women's, and that men are diffusedly judged as more competent (Ridgeway, 1997). Many panellists are aware of the literature on bias. A white historian, when asked how he deals with questions of diversity as he evaluates proposals, says:

> I [don't] foreground them, but I try to take them into serious consideration. [. . .] After I've gone through a batch of proposals I look for a pattern. Are the ones that I'm scoring higher distinguished by gender, by discipline? [By being] at research universities, and so forth. . . . Two very different examples: One was when [. . .] an assistant professor was applying for an advanced research project. A number of us remarked that this person seemed to be under-employed, or employed at a relatively non-prestigious university and certainly deserved a better position but at this point starting out very low. . . . Another time someone remarked, 'Hey, two of the last three were not at major universities'. And suddenly somebody attended to that matter, and we said, 'Yes, that is true'. We wanted to make sure we were not blindly ignoring those kinds of things.

But it is institutional diversity that seems to be the most central concern of panellists. Winners cannot all come from a few select institutions in the Northeast—this would undermine beliefs in the legitimacy of the system as a whole, from a meritocratic and a democratic standpoint. It would also be viewed as an organisational failure and as betraying poor efficiency or procedures. During post-deliberation interviews, more than one-third of the panellists mentioned institutional affirmative action as a criterion of evaluation. Funding officers can sometimes urge panellists to apply different standards depending on the resources offered by the applicant's institution and the stage at which the applicant is in his/her career. The chair of a panel says that in an effort 'to avoid clustering [of winners] at those institutions that are best at doing this', he provided panel members with this guideline: 'Try to get the best of clusters, then spread that around. I mean, don't get twelve anthropologists from Chicago. Take the best of those and then go to the best of the [ones from] Michigan'.

Even without this kind of encouragement, panellists practice institutional affirmative action because they believe that private, elite, and research universities are privileged in the competition process. Such institutions put an array of resources at the disposal of applicants—including internal graduate research fellowship competitions, closer mentoring and more extensive graduate course offerings. One white woman panellist notes that:

> Occasionally you get a proposal from someone that is really off the beaten track of these research universities. Clearly, they are at a big disadvantage both in not having colleagues

around to help and not having the help to talk about the proposal, just not being well-informed about the kind of research method that goes on.

This same person adds:

> How much weight should one put on the excellence of the graduate program as far as one knows it? There's no question that a student in the fields who works with one of the top people in the field in one of the major programs...is going to be at an advantage. . . . Once a student enters a second- or third-rate program and works with someone who's totally unknown, you know, even though they might in fact have as good qualities as anybody else, they're going to be at a major disadvantage. Partly because for graduate students, it's very hard to evaluate their training other than by these kinds of institutional means.

Perhaps there is something distinctively American in how these tensions are experienced, something that is linked to the sheer size of the higher education system, to its spatial dispersion, and to its institutional diversity as well as its unique socio-demographic diversity. That panellists deploy so much energy to elaborate positions with regard to diversity that are nuanced and compatible indicates how aware they are of the sheer complexity of the academic world they inhabit.

## Conclusion

That so many American academics are struggling so hard to reconcile diversity and excellence speaks volumes about their importance as a stake structuring our academic world. That they exist in tension helps us understand why so often excellence and diversity do not function as alternative criteria of evaluation, but as multipliers—contra popular perceptions and rhetorical attacks against affirmative action and other policies aimed at promoting diversity within higher education. Like excellence, diversity appears to have become a moral imperative of the system.[4]

The two studies presented here point out the use of affirmative action as bringing important advantages to selection processes. On the one hand, higher education institutions benefit from processes that select a diverse student body and create a richer learning environment. On the other hand, institutional diversity is considered a key aspect to the promotion of diversity. When panellists select candidates working in a range of settings, they frame it as a way to help democratise the higher education system itself. In both cases is implied the notion that diversity is a good in itself and that US higher education works best if a wide range of types of individuals are brought in because it is presumed that talent takes many forms. The principles of diversity in its individual and institutional forms are viewed as virtues that can enrich academic excellence.

This contrasts with the situation in most European countries where higher education systems are smaller in scale and less heterogeneous, and thus less subject to complicated weighing of competing considerations when it comes to assessing academic achievements. In these countries, considerations such as spreading the riches across types of institutions are less common (Lamont & Mallard, 2005). For example, the British reform of evaluation exercises imposed in the 1980s was a straightforward application of meritocratic standards that allowed no

consideration of needs and distributive fairness, in response in part to the histori-cally ascriptive system of distribution that favoured elite institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge.

Looking ahead, future comparative research should fully consider the meaning given to diversity across higher education systems, the mechanisms put in place to promote it, and the conflicts this generates. The various European higher education systems are responding very differently to the challenges raised by the growing ethnic and racial diversity of the potential student population. The American case may serve as a harbinger of things to come, or stand as a counterexample against which to define national objectives. In either case, the American answer to diversity in higher education cannot be ignored. It is our hope that this paper may help set the agenda for future reflections and policies around this new challenge.

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## Notes

1. In order to preserve the anonymity of interviewees, it was decided not to include the name of the universities in which interviews were conducted.
2. In the case of African-American faculty, for instance, Allen *et al.* (2000) show 'serious, persistent obstacles to their recruitment, retention, and success' (see also Jacobs, forthcoming; and Perna, 2001). On problems affecting the presence of women in the academic pipeline, see especially National Academy of Science (2006).
3. Before that, the argument of diversity had been used by private elite institutions to create quotas to exclude Jewish candidates.
4. See also the notion of 'diversity imperative' proposed by Roska & Stevens (2007).

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