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The Admissions Committee

Year

2006

Description

This case is a discussion about affirmative action, graduate education and graduate research; the case raises questions about the responsibilities of university research in society and issues surrounding student-mentor relationships.

Body

Background

In the early 1990s, Major State University instituted multiple two-year fellowships to be awarded to students from under-represented racial groups in order "to attract a higher quantity and quality of minority students to the school's higher education programs." The number of fellowships available per department was a function of the number of full-time faculty members, roughly, one fellowship for every ten faculty members in any given department. The fellowships were to be granted and administered individually by each department. According to the instructions given by the school's administration, the only eligibility requirement was that the recipient "must be a citizen of the United States and a member of a racially under-represented group." Fellowships were available on an annual basis; fellowships that were not awarded in a given year did not accrue to following years.

The Admissions Committee

As a graduate student, you were called to serve on the admissions committee of your department. Faculty members see students' participation in the committee as a necessary and legitimate input toward the selection of the incoming cohort. As a student, it is not only an honor to be asked to serve on the committee, but also a duty to act responsibly in a way that ensures a fair and transparent admissions process. The admissions committee was composed of four faculty members and one doctoral student. Three of the faculty members, Professors Wilson, Harris and Ahuja, had tenured appointments; Professor Belman was an Assistant Professor in a tenure-track position. The committee members' core responsibilities involved reading each applicant's portfolio and determining whether the applicant was qualified.

The admissions committee planned three meetings during the spring semester. Straightforward admissions decisions were to be made during the first meeting. During the second meeting, the committee would screen late applicants, identify candidates for fellowship support, and review borderline cases. Final decisions on any pending applications would be made during the third meeting.

The first meeting was uneventful; for the most part, members agreed on admission recommendations for the cases considered. However, none of the individuals discussed during this first meeting fulfilled the requirements for the minority fellowship. As the second meeting progressed, it became apparent that only two minority students were even being considered for admission. The first applicant, born in Mombasa, Kenya, was Lambert Motowi. Lambert recently married Sarah Bailey from Provo, Utah, thereby becoming a U. S. citizen and hence eligible for the minority fellowship. The second applicant was Rodney Williams, an African-American applicant from inner city St. Louis.

Professor Wilson categorized the two students as borderline cases. Although Lambert's work experience and technical background made him more fit for the program, it was not clear that he should be offered admission. Rodney had a weaker technical background than Lambert but enthusiastically expressed interest in working with Professor Harris. To further complicate the decision, both applicants expressed an imperative need for financial assistance. Without financial assistance, it would not be possible for them to attend graduate school.

Who should be admitted? Who should get the fellowship? The committee needs to make a decision regarding the two applicants. The financial need of both applicants implies that the university's minority fellowship would be attached to the admissions decision. That is, if one of the two is admitted, he would automatically be assigned the fellowship. The committee decides to have a candid discussion of the pros and cons of each candidate. After a few minutes, the committee appeared divided. Professors Wilson and Ahuja sounded pretty convinced that the fellowship should be awarded to Lambert, given that he satisfies the eligibility criteria and he has an acceptable academic record. Professor Ahuja said, "It would be a waste to let that fellowship money go. We should award it to Lambert Motowi."

Professor Harris argued persuasively against Lambert's case. He said that he did not believe that a foreign student, who had presumably faced little or no racial discrimination, should be eligible for the minority fellowship. "This is about restoration," he claimed. Further, Professor Harris argued that the school's failure to articulate the fellowship's intent more clearly should be understood as a call for exercising discretion in awarding it. In contrast, Professor Belman explained that she believed that academic standards should not be lowered to accommodate students who were not fully qualified for the academic rigors of a doctoral degree. "These students will not learn and act in a vacuum," she said. "They will interact with other students and professors and take time and energy that we do not have. By accepting them, in the end we are shortchanging the students and ourselves," she claimed.

You have refrained from voicing your opinion because you might tilt the balance. In addition, you feel that is inappropriate for you to be considering this case, given that it is plausible that you and Lambert or Rodney (or both) may end up sharing an office or a bench next year. Inevitably, Professor Wilson asks for your opinion.

Notes

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