

Michael Pritchard's Commentary on "The Admissions Committee"

Commentary On
The Admissions Committee

I will address this commentary to the graduate student who is serving on the department's graduate admissions committee. Understandably, you feel that you are in an uncomfortable position. However, it may be helpful to sort out issues you do not need to address from those you do. One issue you do not need to address is whether there should be a special fellowship program for minority applicants. This program has been approved by your institution, as has the number of such fellowships for your department. Even if others (or you in another capacity) wish to challenge this program, that is not your present task. As a member of the committee, your task is to determine who, under the present guidelines, should be admitted to the graduate program and to identify potential candidates for the minority fellowship program.

Your first specific task is to assist the committee in making its admissions decisions. I think it is important to separate this task from that of making recommendations for the fellowship. Professor Belman is right in saying that if students are not fully qualified for the academic rigors of a doctoral degree, they should not be admitted, regardless of minority status. For her, apparently that settles the issue: Neither Lambert Motowi nor Rodney Williams is fully qualified. For you, however, the matter may not be so clear.

As a committee member, it is your responsibility to make your own judgment about whether Lambert and Rodney are capable of succeeding in the program. That may not be an easy matter to determine, but it must be done - and with a steady eye on factors that are important for academic success at the Ph.D. level. Unfortunately, some members of your committee seem to be making it more difficult to stay focused on only those factors. Professors Wilson and Ahuja apparently are convinced that Lambert's (but not Rodney's) academic record is sufficient for admission. However, Professor Ahuja's comment ("It would be a waste to let that fellowship

money go") may raise the question of whether the opportunity for financial support is clouding judgment about the adequacy of Lambert's academic record. You must postpone the issue of "waste" until you have rendered your judgment about qualifications for academic work.

Professor Harris's comments also pose difficulties. It is not clear whether he opposes both admitting Lambert and awarding him a fellowship. Since admission is likely to lead to a fellowship award, Harris may be opposing admission primarily because he opposes awarding the fellowship to Lambert. Harris's opposition to awarding the fellowship to someone who has faced little racial discrimination raises the question of what is really driving his opposition to admitting Lambert. Harris is making two assumptions. First, he is assuming that Lambert has not suffered significant racial discrimination, and this assumption may not be true. Second, he is assuming that the presence or absence of such suffering on the part of the specific applicants (the "restoration" factor) is a key criterion for the fellowships. It is very unlikely that this is one of the stated criteria for minority fellowships, as such a standard would greatly complicate the evaluative process. In any case, even if the awarding of a fellowship is likely once a minority candidate is admitted, the candidate's qualifications should be considered independently of the fellowship opportunity.

It is also possible that Harris favors Rodney because Rodney has expressed a strong interest in working with Harris. (It is also possible that Harris believes neither candidate should be admitted.) It would be unfortunate if Harris is opposing Lambert's admission because he favors Rodney over Lambert in regard to the fellowship. As I have already indicated, it is important that the judgment of academic qualifications should not be clouded by the fellowship opportunity.

It may be your judgment that both should be admitted. If both are admitted, then the issue of who should get the fellowship can be considered. If your judgment is that neither should be admitted, then, if others agree, the fellowship issue becomes moot.

Since the discussion seems to mix considerations of academic potential with issues about fellowship criteria, perhaps the most useful role you can play at this point is a clarifying one. Without suggesting that any of the faculty have suspect motives for denying admission to Lambert or Rodney, you could suggest that the committee postpone consideration of the fellowship issue until admission decisions are made. To that extent, you will be siding with Professor Belman's view that academic

standards should be preserved. If you share her view that neither Lambert nor Rodney is fully qualified, then you should recommend against their admission. If you disagree with her judgment on the candidates, then you argue their cases. Clearly indicating to others that you think the first order of business is to separate the qualification and fellowship issues might actually change the focus of the discussion. Others may join you in trying to make a separate assessment of academic qualifications.

Assuming you adopt the stance outlined above, it seems to me that your problems can be redefined. You have rendered your judgment about the qualifications of the candidates. The committee now makes its admission decisions, taking into consideration what you have said only about qualifications. (You are silent about your fellowship recommendations at this point). If, despite your efforts, the committee as a whole does not separate the qualification issue from the fellowship issues, at least you will have performed responsibly. If neither candidate is admitted, then you have nothing further to do.

If only Rodney is admitted, then Harris will support the fellowship award. Perhaps the others will, too. If two support and two do not, you may be thrown into a tie-breaking role - but only if you remain silent until the others have cast their lot. If you enter fully into discussion of the intent of the fellowship program, there is no more reason to think of yourself as the tie-breaker than any other committee member. I can see no good reason for waiting until the others have made their positions evident. In fact, as a responsible participant you should be helping to shape the discussion as it goes, not simply casting the tie-breaking vote.

It seems unlikely that the committee would vote to admit Rodney but not offer the fellowship. In that case, sharing an office or bench with Rodney would pose no special problems for you. If only Lambert were admitted, he would probably be awarded the fellowship, too. It is stated that Lambert's citizenship does qualify him as a fellowship candidate, assuming he is admitted. Even if Harris still opposes awarding the fellowship to Lambert, it is quite possible that Belman would become convinced that Lambert is qualified to pursue the doctoral degree. You would not be the deciding vote in that case. If Belman remained opposed, then your vote would swing matters one way or the other. That is a decision you would have to live with, but it is not clear why this outcome should pose any special problems for you. If you ended up sharing an office or bench with Lambert, his not having a fellowship would not be the result of your decision alone. In any case, there is no reason for you to

discuss the deliberative process with. (In fact, the specifics of that process would presumably be confidential.)

Finally, if both were admitted, then full attention would quite appropriately turn to the fellowship opportunity. Here you could enter into the discussion from the outset, expressing your views about the candidates' respective qualifications and the apparent intent of the program. Again, there is no reason to view yourself as occupying the tie-breaker's role unless you allow yourself to play a passive, wait-and-see role -- an arguably less than fully responsible role as a committee member. You are one vote among five.

In conclusion, you must resist the temptation to view yourself as being the one who might tilt the balance one way or another. All of the committee members could view themselves in that way, in which case there would be five wait-and-see members, thus rendering the committee ineffective in performing its task. It is an honor to serve on such a committee. It is also a responsibility. The responsibility is to serve on the committee as an equal, not as a possible tie-breaker when the others are divided equally on an issue. In the end, you may find yourself sharing an office or bench with someone you either supported or rejected. The same is true of the faculty. However, anxieties or hopes about such outcomes should not be the driving force behind one's decisions about these matters.