INSIDE THE BLACK BOX:

THE GARBAGE CAN MODEL OF DECISION-MAKING

IN SELECTIVE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

by

B. NOBLE JONES

(Under the Direction of James C. Hearn)

ABSTRACT

The work of college admissions committees in the United States has been described, at best, as an unknowable black box. The process and practice of admissions decision-making remains largely unexplained despite countless journalistic attempts to "glimpse behind the curtain," admissions insider memoirs, inquiries to disclose the formula for success, and annual guides to help navigate the process of college admissions. In part, extant literature has pursued an explanation of admissions policy as an answer to *why* certain students are admitted at the expense of others, often as commentary on American society at large. Instead, this dissertation seeks to describe *how* selective college admissions decisions are made.

This qualitative case study, designed to open up the black box of college admissions decision-making, was guided by two research questions. First, to what extent can the garbage can model ("GCM") of organizational choice explain how admissions decisions are made a selective, private liberal arts college? Second, to what extent do

alternative theories, such as political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rational theory, explain these decisions?

The present study focused on the practice of one distinct admissions committee at a single selective liberal arts college, wherein the admissions committee served as the unit of analysis. Research methods included participant interviews, observation of committee meetings, and content analysis of committee documents used throughout the application reading, evaluation, and committee processes.

Ultimately, I found that the garbage can model offers a compelling theoretical lens for framing and understanding how admissions decisions are made at one selective, private liberal arts college. Notably, I observed the fluid participation of actors, unclear technologies at work, and the presence of problematic preferences, all critical conditions of the "organized anarchy" requisite of the GCM. However, any modern theory of decision-making must incorporate the interrelationship of decisions and the networks of choice alternatives. Thus, an update to the GCM that accounts for the effects of dynamic linkages between decisions is encouraged. I conclude with a discussion of implications for organizational theory and admissions policy and practice.

INDEX WORDS: admissions selectivity, ambiguity, ambiguity continuum, college admissions, decision-making, decision linkages, garbage can model, liberal arts colleges, organizational decision-making, organizational choice, organizational theory, private colleges, selective college admissions, selective colleges, selectivity scales

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INTRODUCTION

Despite numerous attempts to accurately describe the practice through which college and university admission officers choose whom to admit among applicants, multiple efforts to explain the influences bearing upon administrators in the construction of admissions policies, and many endeavors to document the procedures involved in the recruitment, evaluation, and assessment of prospective postsecondary students, the process by which these students are admitted to selective colleges and universities has, at best, been described as an unknowable "black box" (Lucido, 2015). The frenzy over college admissions spirals onward as an ever-increasing percentage of institutions reject an ever-increasing proportion of applicants in a process considered at the elite, highly selective level to be "frenzied, soul-sucking" (Wong, 2016a). As applicants and advocates file lawsuits alleging discriminatory admissions policies against Harvard (Eligon, 2018; Hartocollis, 2018), the University of North Carolina, and the University of Texas, "the debate about who gets into the nation's competitive colleges, and why, keeps boiling over" (Hoover, 2017b, para. 3).

The societal obsession with and fears surrounding the college admission process have captured the attention of Hollywood and cultural commentators alike (Brody, 2017; Jaschik, 2013). Many students and their families worry about college "fit," affordability, and perceived prestige of the institutions within their application set (Wong, 2016b) in a process "scary" enough to inspire one family's Halloween décor (Hoover, 2017c). Media

outlets are quick to publicize the annual growth in applications and the subsequent increase in the number of applicants denied admission to their first-choice dream school. Perennial efforts are made to provide a "glimpse behind the curtain" (Anderson, 2014, 2017; Carapezza, 2016; Kleiner, 1999; Wallenstein, 2016). Some resources offer students helpful hints to "navigate the process" yet simultaneously concede there exists "no magic formula for getting into a selective college" (Hoover, 2017a, para. 1).

This secret formula to predict an offer of admission eludes description, and the absence of said formula is a frequent conclusion drawn by inquirers: "Everyone wants the formula for getting in. There is none" (Anderson, 2014, para. 8). Other efforts describe a "complex and subjective interplay of factors determining who gets in–and who does not" (Anderson, 2017), and further dispel notions of an admissions formula: "People believe it's really formulaic. That's just not true," noted Shannon R. Gundy, the University of Maryland's director of admissions (Anderson, 2017, para. 8). Others in popular media have concentrated their scrutiny on the decision-makers themselves, and subsequent pressures and constraints under which they operate, in an effort to shed light on the ambiguity of the process (Hoover, 2016a, 2016b; Maisel, 2013; Schmidt, 2016).

In response, some college admissions professionals have made efforts to temper the media "hype," contextualizing the difficulty of their decisions and acknowledging that selective college admissions "isn't fair" (Jaschik, 2017), or is in some sense a form of "rough justice" (Epstein, 2006). A former admissions dean urged students and their families to recognize that the college admissions process "is not a meritocracy" (Van Buskirk, 2006, para. 20), likening it to "a swirling caldron of angst and anxiety" (para. 3) while urging colleges toward greater transparency in the process. The heated flames of

debate are fueled higher when institutional practices that favor the wealthy are brought to light (Golden, 2003; Shapiro, 2017). Perhaps the debate crescendos when college admissions decisions are viewed as potentially so random that critics suggest a lottery system as a solution (Schwartz, 2016; Smith, 2017). Institutional administrators have not exhibited a willingness to put an end to this frenzy, playing their part by expanding recruitment efforts to enroll the most interesting and accomplished class while at the same time heightening prestige measurements, such as selectivity or admit rate, that factor into different rankings systems (H. R. Bowen, 1980; Reuben, 2001; Winston, 1999).

Furthermore, how college administrators at selective institutions choose whom to admit from their respective applicant pools remains largely unexplained despite efforts to understand "the vagaries of selection" in college admissions, dating back decades (Beale, 1972, p. 13). The complicated and mysterious admissions decision-making process has been deemed "a craft" by some scholars who have said that this "interplay between external constraints and internal actions describes well the complex system of admissions and financial aid that has developed at selective colleges and universities in this country" (Duffy & Goldberg, 1998, p. xvii). The annual report from the National Association of College Admission Counseling perennially illustrates this uncertainty, confirming the variable and inconsistent consideration of multiple factors used in the decision-making process (Clinedinst, Koranteng, & Nicola, 2016). The likelihood of admission becomes more unpredictable at selective colleges and universities, where there are considerably more applicants with generally highly competitive credentials than available admission offers.

I believe the inexplicability, unpredictability, and ambiguity surrounding selective admissions outcomes exists for two reasons, given my professional experience and subsequent review of the literature. First, quite simply, there is too much to know about all applicants in a pool of thousands of students. There are too many data points to consider; poor, subjective, and inefficient means of assessment available to decision-makers; and too many factors taken into account by an admissions committee in its efforts to shape and create a class. From the outside looking in, an individual applicant or her advocates (families, teachers, counselors) know only the details of her application alone. They cannot possibly know the comparable statistics and details of the thousands of other applicants in a given year. Beyond this, parties external to the admissions committee are not afforded an opportunity to understand how the institution's interests, needs, and goals are prioritized by the committee members, including which institutional priorities might be given the greatest attention in a given year and how well might these desired preferences be met by the application pool as a whole.

Second, I read in the extant literature a prevailing desire to explain admissions *policy* and illustrate *why* admissions decisions fall as they do—as an indictment of American society at large—while explanations as to *how the process of decision-making occurs* are absent in the literature. Wealthy, full-tuition paying students are admitted at the expense of costly First-Generation applicants to help institutions manage the bottom line as federal and state support for higher education wanes. Students with higher standardized test scores are deemed merit-worthy, with higher scores contributing to class averages that send a signal of prestige to external stakeholders. Athletics play a significant role in our society and have earned a collective and implicit unfair advantage

for student-athletes in the college admissions game. The children of alumni or those of wealthy, philanthropic families are treated preferentially with the hope of future donations to their colleges. Each of these explanations for *why* some students are admitted over others has received attention in the literature. Yet, the *how* of the admissions decision-making process remains unexplained, if not unaddressed.[1] *Figure 1* situates this dissertation relative to the extant literature.

Reentering the classroom as a graduate student of higher education, following nine years as a practitioner in admissions and enrollment management, I have not encountered research that accurately captures and tests a theory resembling the complexity in which I routinely participated and observed regularly. This motivates the present research, a qualitative case study of the admissions committee decision-making process at a private, selective liberal arts college.

The admissions committee is where the organization's actors make decisions. Speaking directly to the admissions committee's work, Stevens (2007) stated:

> Committee is the dramatic crest of the annual admissions cycle. It is when all of the many exigencies that officers are charged with managing get explicitly negotiated, and when officers do what the general public perceives them as doing primarily. (p. 185)

[1] Karabel (2005) identifies three components of an institution's admissions policy: *criteria* to "govern decisions of inclusion," *procedures* to assess credentials, and *practices* of the admissions office "which may not correspond to the official criteria and procedures" (p. 2). This thesis focuses on this third component: the *practice* by which decisions are made, undeniably governed by selection *criteria* of interest to institutional stakeholders, informed by the technologies of assessment and standard operating *procedures*, but not necessarily wedded to either criteria or procedures of the admissions policy.

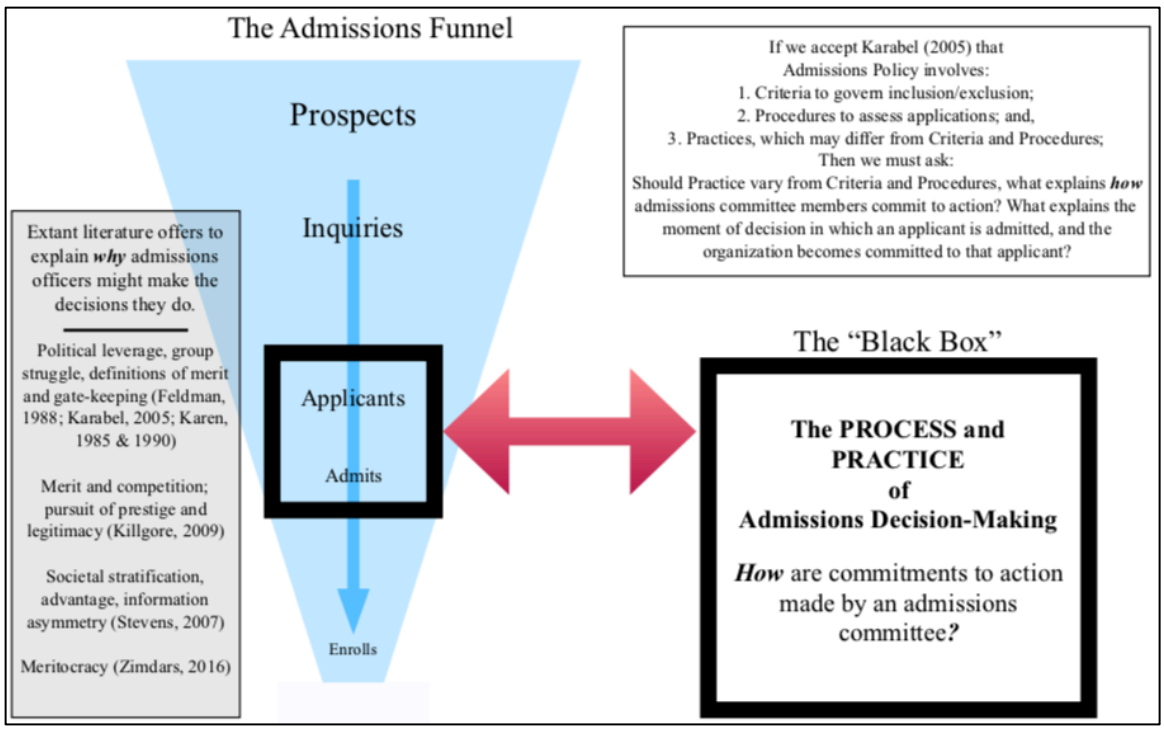

Figure 1: The Why and How of Admissions Decision-Making

Committee is the locus of decision, where all of the competing institutional (and personal) interests are brought forward for resolution. Committee is where a commitment to action on behalf of the organization is enacted and an organization's resources are obligated; it is where decisions are made that impact the very composition of the organization itself.

A number of theories offer promise to explain *why* admissions policies in selective environments exist as they do. Principals of meritocracy certainly justify admission of high-achieving academic applicants, and a broadening definition of merit allows institutions to selectively choose among students based upon organizational needs (Killgore, 2009). Some applicants may be from backgrounds historically

underrepresented in higher education, such as women and persons of color, and their group's relatively recent access to higher education interpreted as a result of growing societal status and political power (Karabel, 2005; Karen, 1985, 2002). Other applicants such those from wealthy families or accomplished athletes may have realized a competitive advantage in the admissions process due to the effects of disparate resources in an economically stratified modern America (Stevens, 2007).

Each of these theories may explain why certain populations are admitted preferentially over others, and each suffers from scrutiny under the constraints of selective environments when there are greater numbers of applicants from these populations than an institution can accommodate—be they merit-worthy, politically-empowered or connected, or wealthy applicants. Furthermore, none of these theories explain *how* the decision is made—the process and practice by which committees arrive at an individual decision when there is an excess of applicants competing for so few positions. They are particularly deficient in explaining the majority of decisions enacted at the committee table. The garbage can model of organization choice (GCM) offers a promising explanation.

Cohen, March & Olsen (1972) conceptualized the GCM to explain complex organizational decisions for which extant theories failed to capture at the time. GCM suggests that decisions in organizations take place in an environment of organized anarchy. Organized anarchies are typified by problematic preferences, unclear technologies, and fluid participation by organizational actors. There are competing institutional goals at play and imperfect and imprecise methods of measurement and prediction available to these actors. Instead, their attention is erratic and fluid as their

time and energy available to dedicate to the intricacies and moment of decision are exhausted by other organizational needs.

In such an environment, problems of the organization exist in a metaphorical garbage can alongside potential solutions that might suffice to fulfill the needs caused by the problems or preferences facing the organization. Simultaneously, there are organizational decision-makers seeking windows of opportunity to enact decisions. Multiple possible solutions may exist for each problem; thus, it becomes the burden of the decision-makers to match them accordingly, despite their limited time, imperfect and ambiguous knowledge, and bounded rationality. Selective and imprecise, these windows open only when a commitment to action is made. There is no promise of a perfect match or an ideal solution.

Therefore, this dissertation is a case study of the admissions committee decision-making process at a selective private liberal arts college. The dissertation specifically examines the following research questions:

1. To what extent can the garbage can model of organizational choice explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?
2. To what extent do rival theories such as political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rational theory explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?

The GCM allows the construction of testable propositions that may be confirmed or negated during research. Specifically, my interest resides in the decision levied by admission committees to admit or deny individual applicants. Therefore, the unit of

analysis for this case study is the admissions committee responsible for each singular decision regarding each applicant and the deliberative process that leads to a commitment to action on behalf of the organization. It is critical to recognize that qualitative examinations of the admissions process at selective institutions have generally studied the policies and procedures in practice. Historically, we lack critical examinations and explanations of the moment of decision, wherein the unit of analysis of the present study is at the committee table—where the 'black box' exists.

My decision to use an admissions committee as the unit of analysis does not suggest that decisions occur in a metaphorical vacuum. Social and political considerations and pressures certainly exist and may be exerted upon admission committee members at all times throughout the college admissions cycle. Decision-makers are pushed and pulled between competing personal and organizational needs and goals relative to an organization's resources. The complex interplay of organizational needs, goals, and resources, as well as personal preferences, time, and energy devoted to decision-making, may alter the decision outcome on two otherwise comparable applicants, and are likely to change over the course of a committee's deliberations. Each decision, in turn, likely affects every future decision, and is also influenced in part by those decisions that preceded it.

This study addresses Stevens' (2007) observation of the thin body of literature on the admissions process, and his call for additional "qualitative research with admissions officers on the decision-making process" (p. 18) to better understand the dynamics at play within each admissions office. The results may inform policy-makers and external stakeholders as to the complexity of decisions and contribute to our understanding of

organizational decision-making and the role actors play within their respective organizations. Further, this research can illustrate the thoughtfulness that may (or may not, admittedly, in some scenarios) guide admissions decisions and the import of holistic review. Hopefully, it proves useful as an introduction to the realities of college admissions for new employees grappling with the frustrations that accompany difficult decisions in a selective environment. Finally, testing the GCM as a theory to explain the admissions decision-making process answers the call from Bowman and Bastedo (2016) "to model explicitly the interdependencies connecting participants, problems, solutions, and decision opportunities in organizations" (p. 3).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Subsequent review of bodies of literature relevant to this thesis is divided into four sections. First, I present an examination of the origin of admissions selectivity in American higher education, to provide context for the modern practices of college admissions. Next follows a review of relevant qualitative research addressing admissions policies and practices. Third, I review related literature, including accounts from journalists embedded in admissions offices and first-hand impressions from former admissions professionals. Finally, I present a brief introduction to organizational decision-making literature relevant to college admissions decision-making.

Rising Admissions Selectivity in American Higher Education

A broad overview of the history of college admissions is helpful to contextualize the current state of affairs. The practice of selective admissions is a relatively recent development in the history of American higher education. In the early years of the American colonies, Thelin (2004) described the rather bleak market facing college administrators, saying, "Most of the colonial colleges both bent admissions requirements and provided preparatory and elementary instruction as a way of gaining revenues and cultivating future student cohorts" (p. 18). A century later, not much had changed. "On the whole, most 19th century colleges were not exclusionist or elite in matters of admission. Entrance requirements were flexible, and tuition charges were low," Thelin

noted (2004, p. 69). Most institutions were in dire need of tuition revenue and were not in any position to turn away potential students. Wechsler (1977) stated:

> The twentieth century practices of limiting enrollment to a fraction of the academically qualified candidates and of rejecting some students with superior academic qualifications in favor of others with more desirable nonacademic attributes were inconceivable to the old time college president. (p. 8)

One of the earliest historical investigations into college admissions underscores this fact. Broome (1903) drew upon statutes, catalogs, and in-house histories to trace the development of college admission requirements at Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Columbia, the University of Michigan, and Cornell, from Harvard's founding in 1636 through the end of the nineteenth century. Admission was offered to any male student who met the qualifications at the time; there is evidence that Harvard at times waived certain requirements out of necessity. Admissions requirements evolved "to bring the college course within reach of a class of young men whom all previous arrangements had excluded" (Broome, 1903, p. 89), as colleges had difficulty finding sufficient numbers of qualified candidates to fill their classrooms.

Selectively choosing among applicants did not emerge as a practice until the 1910s and 1920s (Thelin, 1982); indeed, it was not until 1910 that Columbia University established the first "Office of Admissions" in the United States (Karabel, 2005, p. 129). Selective admissions was shortly thereafter institutionalized in the form of quotas imposed upon the number of Jewish students admitted (Karabel, 2005; Reuben, 2001; Synnott, 1979), as "subterfuge for exclusion based on birth, heritage, and religion" (Thelin, 1985, p. 369). The first institutions to do so were Columbia and New York University (Synnott, 1979), soon followed by Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, all in

response to the "Jewish problem," cast by administrators as the prevailing student preference to attend classes without the presence of Jewish students. Administrators adapted admissions policies to more readily identify Jewish students so that they would not be offered admission, including "photographs attached to admission forms, specific questions regarding the applicant's race and religion, personal interviews, and restriction of scholarship aid" (Synnott, 1979, p. 19). The annual trustees report prepared in 1919 by Columbia University detailed the extensive efforts introduced to vet applicants on their desirability, including:

> personal background (new application blanks would ask for the candidate's place of birth, religious affiliation, and father's name, place of birth, and occupation), leadership in school (measured not only by academic excellence, but also by participation in activities such as school publications, musical and other organizations, athletics, patriotic activities, debating, student government, and by the receipt of honors and prizes), leadership in the community (including patriotic activities, religious and other organizations, as well as employment), breadth of interests (as measured by outside readings), and finally motivation and potential (measured by an essay on why the applicant wished to go to college, why he selected Columbia, and what he expected to make of himself. (Wechsler, 1977, p. 156)

Rooted in efforts to discriminate against students from certain populations in society, the framework for our modern admissions processes was firmly set in place.

An influx of soldiers into higher education returning from World War I, and again after the Second World War, contributed further to the need for selective admissions policies (Geiger, 2016). A desire to maintain quality of instruction compounded the introduction of such policies. However, as Thelin (1982) reminded, "most deans of admission at public and private campuses—even during the 1950s and 1960s—have had to worry about filling the entering class with reasonably sound students" (p. 140). Selectivity was not the norm through the mid-twentieth century, but rather "recruitment

and survival" (Thelin, 1982, p. 140) was the reality for most institutions. Less prestigious, younger colleges and universities needed students in seats for the tuition revenue they generated; thus, higher education institutions were at the mercy of the student marketplace. Consequently, we witness the emergence of a stratified field of higher education based on selectivity. "Differences in status among colleges hardened as a clear hierarchy developed, based, in part, on how academically selective an institution was" (Reuben, 2001, p. 202). The oldest and most prestigious colleges and universities were able to choose more freely among multiple applicants to fill their classes. Newer, lesser-resourced and less prestigious institutions were forced to admit most or all applicants out of necessity. Duffy & Goldberg (1998) cited Amherst College's 1959 annual report, where Eugene Wilson, the admissions dean, described the "tidal wave" in college applications:

> For generations prior to the last war the central problem of admissions at Amherst and similar institutions had been one of *recruitment*—finding enough qualified candidates to fill each entering class. Since 1946, however, the central problem of admissions has increasingly been one of *selection*—picking the "best" candidates from a great excess of qualified applicants. (as quoted in Duffy & Goldberg, 1998, p. 37, emphasis in original)

While not all colleges and universities were positioned so as to capitalize on this tidal wave, generally speaking, prestigious private institutions became more selective while public colleges and universities responded by increasing the size of the incoming class.

Reporting to colleagues in the early 1960s on the changing world of college admissions, Bloomgarden (1961) summarized the evolution of selectivity as follows:

> The increased competition for admission has, naturally enough, been felt most strongly at the old prestige colleges, which include the eight members of the Ivy League, their feminine counterpart, the "Seven Sisters" (Barnard, Mount Holyoke, Pembroke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar, and Wellesley), such

> technical schools as MIT, Carnegie Tech, and California Tech, and several smaller eastern colleges like the "potted Ivy" trio (Williams, Amherst, and Wesleyan). Between 1940 and 1959, the number of applicants to all these colleges tripled, while their capacity increased, on the average, by only 20 per cent. In 1941, Amherst, for example, had 371 applicants for 232 openings, while Princeton had 925 for 644. Today, Princeton has 3,213 applicants for 757 places, and Amherst chooses among 1,677 applicants to fill its 259 openings. These ratios are typical. Prestige colleges today average about four applicants per place, where before the war they had only three contenders for every two places. (p. 10)

It is important to distinguish differences between private and public institutions within this evolution of selective admissions policies. Bloomgarden (1961) also noted some of these differences at the time, continuing:

> Meanwhile, what of the non-elite colleges? The bulk of increased attendance has been absorbed during the past decade by public colleges. In 1950, attendance was divided equally between public and private colleges. Today, 60 per cent of all college students are enrolled in institutions under public auspices—whose rate of growth, moreover, is three times that of the private ones. (p. 12)

Wechsler (1977) similarly generalized the response by public institutions to the influx of students during these decades saying, "Although many public college and universities announced limitations on their enrollments, few had the luxury of implementing full-fledged selective admissions policies" (p. 244).

It is equally important to recognize that differences between secondary and postsecondary curricula and rigor were scant through the early twentieth century. Public high schools did a generally poor job of preparing students for higher education, largely due to lack of demand: "Rather than being schools preparatory to college, they were the capstone of the educational system for many students" (VanOverbeke, 2008, p. 26). In contrast to efforts of some private institutions to limit enrollments, administrators at the University of Michigan sought to increase enrollment, introducing a policy of "admission

by certificate" in 1870, whereby students graduating from public schools accredited by Michigan faculty were offered admission without needing to take entrance examinations (Wechsler, 1977, p. 17). This shift from admission by examination to automatic admission by accredited diploma changed both the relationship between the University of Michigan and secondary schools, as well as the admissions process itself: "The high schools, as a result, were now responsible for identifying and credentialing the students who would continue their education" (VanOverbeke, 2008, p. 5).

Similarly, the University of California's history includes a long saga of reconciliation between issues of access and responsible service to the social contract the system holds to the state's citizens (Douglass, 2007). Arguably, it was the introduction in 1960 of the California State Master Plan that institutionalized the stratification of selective admissions policies across the entire California system (Reuben, 2001). Admission to the state system was open prior to the implementation of the Master Plan. It was not until 1973 that the University of California at Berkeley became selective in practice (Laird, 2005). Writ large, California's public universities could limit enrollments but not practice "full-fledged" selective admissions: "State law usually prohibited invidious discrimination, while public opinion prohibited just about any method not completely based on 'merit'" (Wechsler, 1977, p. 244).

However, considerable and unparalleled growth in both the number of high school graduates and college participation rates in the mid-twentieth century created new demands on all sectors of American higher education. "From 1940 to 1970, undergraduates grew almost fivefold, and graduate students almost ninefold; and the 1960s alone registered the largest percentage growth of any decade" (Geiger, 2016, p.

24). Indeed, in the 1960s, "This flood of students flowed into flagship state universities, which expanded to their limits and then became increasingly selective" (p. 25).

Conversely, private colleges and universities generally chose to limit enrollments and instead "tended to optimize their efforts by building stronger academic programs for a more select student body" (Geiger, 2016, p. 25), while others moved, in part, to adopt selective admission practices:

> Many private colleges did adopt policies of selective admissions, and these institutions admitted on a variety of criteria. Swarthmore gave preference "to candidates who are children of Friends or of alumni of the College," and laid great stress on personal interviews conducted by college officers or alumni. Goucher College required, in addition to a good high school record, submission of personality reports from the principal, two teachers, and two others. Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin, expected students to be in the upper half of their high school classes and asked them to file preliminary application forms after their junior year. It inquired about the student's family environment, and assured itself that accepted candidates were "emotionally adapted to take what we have to give." (Wechsler, 1977, pp. 243-244)

In their study of sixteen liberal arts colleges sampled from Ohio and Massachusetts, Duffy and Goldberg (1998) identified three distinct periods of student enrollment patterns between 1955 and 1995. The first, from 1955 to 1970, was termed the "Tidal Wave" because "both applications and enrollments swelled at colleges and universities across the United States, including almost all of the liberal arts colleges in our study" (p. 3). This period was followed by the 1970s, an era of shifting enrollments and "zero growth" in which enrollment expansion was experienced only at colleges that moved to coeducation (p. 4). Finally, the third period, from 1980 to the mid-1990s, was marked by "a renewed emphasis by parents and the public first on quality and then on value" (p. 4). During this period, prestigious colleges maintained or increased enrollments, while non-elites saw declines.

The most recent report issued by the National Center for Education Statistics showed that selectivity is now a persistent reality for institutions, both private and public. Nineteen percent of private nonprofit four-year institutions admitted fewer than 50% of applicants in academic year 2015-16, while twelve percent of four-year public colleges and universities admitted fewer than 50% of applicants (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 243). On the other side of the spectrum, only 16 percent of private nonprofit four-year and 19 percent of four-year public institutions maintained open admission policies in academic year 2015-16 (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 243). For further context, 69 percent of the 3.0 million high school completers in 2015 enrolled in college (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 232). At the same time, college-going students now submit a higher number of applications, on average, than has historically been the case: 36% of enrolled first-time first-year students submitted seven or more applications in Fall 2015, compared to just 9% in 1990, and 82% of students submitted three or more applications (Clinedinst et al., 2016, p. 8). Broadly speaking, American higher education has evolved from a system of colleges seeking students toward one where students are seeking out colleges. However, a review of the literature makes it clear that student interest is not the sole driver of admission policy and institutional selectivity.

Influences on Admissions Policy and the Decision-Making Process

Prior to considering the pressures bearing upon the admissions committee, it is helpful to understand the goals of the admissions process at selective institutions. The primary objective is to ensure that admitted students are academically prepared for success. “Admissions officers seek to offer places in the class only to those applicants whom they deem intellectually (and otherwise) capable of completing the academic

program successfully and benefiting significantly from the experience" (W. G. Bowen & Bok, 1998, p. 23). Once academic success is sufficiently assured, secondary objectives include the admission of students exhibiting qualities among four areas:

- those that show "particular promise of excelling in their studies (p. 23);
- those "with a wide diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and talents" (p.24);
- "students who seem especially likely to utilize their education to make valuable or distinctive contributions to their professions and to the welfare of society" (p. 24);
- those students who honor "the importance of long-term institutional loyalties and traditions" (p. 24) such as legacies.

Higher education institutions serve different populations of stakeholders, including students, faculty, trustees, staff and administration, families, legislators both at the federal and state level, private corporations, and the public at large, among others (Collis, 2004; Karen, 1985; Kerr, 2001). In terms of influences motivating admissions officers at Harvard University in particular, Feldman (1988) has stated, "Admissions policy is most heavily influenced by four constituencies on whom the committee relies for financial and political support: administration, faculty, alumni, and elite private preparatory schools" (p. 42). For both private and public colleges and universities, there has been considerable growth in interest in their activities by corporations, as well. The rise of research parks, and the heightened investment in research by corporations at the institutional level, certainly classifies corporations as stakeholders in the modern landscape of academic capitalism. Each one of these groups may seek to influence the policies that govern admissions outcomes. Writ large, the admissions policies at colleges and universities "variously reflect academic, economic, and political considerations" (Willingham & Manning, 1977, p. 8).

One key internal issue pressuring admissions officers may be resource dependency (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and the interplay of all revenue providers as stakeholders in providing competing revenue streams. Tuition dependent institutions are highly responsive to student demands, and subsequently, more likely to admit full-pay, no-need applicants. Such institutions must appeal to students and the vital tuition dollars they bring. Quite simply, then, some students may be admitted primarily on their ability to pay.

On the other hand, more well-resourced institutions may be need-blind, admitting students without regard to ability to pay, confident in the institution's ability to meet 100% of demonstrated need and ensuring or increasing the likelihood of enrollment. Need-sensitive/need-aware institutions, in general, promise to meet 100% of demonstrated need but do not have adequate resources to do so without limit; accordingly, the expected family contribution emerges as a key issue and may factor into some admissions decisions. In short, tuition revenue may be a vital consideration of applications and the admitted class at some selective institutions and cannot be ignored by decision-makers (Bastedo, 2016; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998; Reilly & Mott, 2015).

Likewise, the potential contributions of a student's family and the historical legacy status of a family's relationship with the institution may play a critical role in the admissions decision, particularly at institutions more dependent on donative wealth resources or those seeking to perpetuate prestige markers such as rankings (Bastedo, 2016; W. G. Bowen & Bok, 1998; Feldman, 1988; Golden, 2003; Karen, 1985; Shapiro, 2017; Van Buskirk, 2006). Some decisions may entail political issues, both on-campus

and beyond. Admissions officers might wish to appease trustees, presidents, or politicians, in hopes of future support for the institution.

Other on-campus constituents with a certain interest in admissions outcomes include the faculty. Faculty members at each institution likely desire to teach students who want to learn and who are sufficiently prepared to do so; at many institutions, faculty may also play a direct role on admissions committees. Admission officers must admit applicants who demonstrate an aptitude to learn (however it may be defined) to maintain employment and fill classroom requirements. Similarly, admission officers must attract and admit a full complement of academic interests so that all departments are adequately enrolled (Shapiro, 2017).

In the same vein, colleges and universities with athletic programs need to be certain they have met minimum conference requirements to field varsity teams. Furthermore, it is highly likely that the coaching staffs wish to be competitive and field the most competitive teams possible. Admission officers may be attuned to the public's efforts to measure organizational prestige, wherein athletic membership and competition signal prestige to potential students and their families (Stevens, 2007). At a minimum, there is a high likelihood that the interests of the athletic department are represented at the committee table and admissions officers are aware of coaches' interests in certain applications (Shapiro, 2017). Admission officers may need to balance the potential athletic acumen and contributions to teams relative to standards of academic preparedness (W. G. Bowen & Bok, 1998; Karen, 1985).

Similarly, selective colleges and universities may feel pressure to maintain gender balance among enrolled students in an effort to remain "attractive" to students from both

genders (Suggs, 2009). Historically, administrators at some institutions have imposed quotas on the number of female students admitted and enrolled. For instance, Stanford University's Board of Trustees did not act to remove a limitation on women until 1972. This enrollment cap was initially introduced in 1899 by founder Jane Stanford, in response to her fear that the University might become a women's college as the proportion of women grew considerably since Stanford's founding (Fetter, 1997). Recently, differential rates of admission between genders have been the subject of inquiry, suggesting some selective institutions' desires to maintain gender balance in enrolling classes (Bergman, 2017).

An overarching issue, both internal and external to the organization, concerns the academic quality of each incoming class. The public and media outlets use metrics such as SAT and ACT score ranges and selectivity rates to determine the prestige and value of institutions (Lerner, Schoar, & Wang, 2008; Van Buskirk, 2006; Volkwein & Sweitzer, 2006), a practice adopted by the higher education administrative field over the course of the 20th century (Stevens, 2007). The higher the score range and the fewer students admitted as a proportion of total applicants, the better the institution must be, according to this logic. Admission officers may be compelled to admit students with higher test scores and deny students who do not have the social capital to adequately represent their interest in a given college, but who might meet other goals of the organization, including serving this rankings-driven environment.

The judicial branch of the federal government has exercised the greatest impact on admissions practices at the national level, beyond the impact of student financial aid policies. Yet, "courts historically have shown wide deference to the judgment of those

associated with institutions of higher education," in recognition of both "the unique place that colleges and universities occupy in American society but also the specialized expertise held by those who work within the industry" (Blanchard & Baez, 2016, pp. 281-282). Further, judicial interest and influence has been inconsistent over time. Gelber (2015) stated, "Ultimately, the history of admissions litigation indicates that the principle of judicial deference has been a shifting and often contentious basis for academic authority" (p. 39).

Seminal decisions surrounding affirmative action issued by the U.S. Supreme Court certainly influence how admissions decisions may be made (Gelber, 2015; Karen, 1985). Summarily speaking, the Supreme Court "has attempted to resolve the rival ideals of deference and nondiscrimination by analyzing admissions processes (to discern if race is considered holistically or mechanistically) while refraining from questioning the substance of decisions to admit or reject particular applicants" (Gelber, 2015, p. 158). Regardless, legal considerations, including the practice of affirmative action and the *narrowly tailored* use of race and ethnicity in admission decisions, apply varying levels of influence on decisions. The 1978 decision in *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* established precedent for the use of race-conscious admissions programs (Reilly & Mott, 2015). Two 2003 decisions related to the University of Michigan further clarified the use of race as a factor in college admissions. *Grutter v. Bollinger* stated that the "narrowly tailored" use of race in holistic evaluations was permissible. However, the *Gratz v. Bollinger* decision found that the automatic awarding of points in the admissions process was not sufficiently narrowed and made race a decisive factor in whether or not applicants were admitted. The value of diversity to college campuses was further

affirmed in *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (Fisher v. University of Texas, n.d.; Schnapper-Casteras, 2016). Likewise, some state legislatures may impose caps on the proportion of out-of-state students enrolled at public institutions. A state's taxpayers may expect open access to state institutions, and when admission is denied, admission policies come under scrutiny. Still, from the legal perspective, "twentieth-century judges emphasized, in general, that enrollment at a public institution of higher education was akin to a privilege granted by academic experts instead of an entitlement conferred by state officials" (Gelber, 2015, p. 38).

We see the greatest influence of the federal judicial branch upon college admissions processes at work in the latter half of the twentieth century. Perhaps coincidental, it is within this same time period that we note the genesis of the literature on selective admissions.

Relevant Research on Selective Admissions Policies and Processes

The corpus of relevant literature on selective admissions has generally examined the impact of external forces working upon admissions decision-makers. Each piece lends helpful context to the proposed study; however, each of the theories tested falls short of explaining *how* decisions are actually made given their interest in *why* certain student populations are admitted preferentially and disproportionally at the expense of other groups. In most of these prior studies, the site under study was Harvard University or a comparable elite institution.

A 1960 faculty report entitled "Admission to Harvard College" offers an early glimpse as the institution moved to an "active admission *policy*" from "what had long been the preserve of passive admission *requirements*" (Faculty of Arts and Sciences,

1960, p. 4, italics in original). As cautioned within the report, however, "It would be wrong, of course, to exaggerate the abruptness with which the need to pick and choose presented itself during the early decades of the [twentieth] century" (p. 4). In 1933, the college admitted 81.6% of applicants to the Class of 1937 (p. 4) and nearly two decades later, Harvard's admit rate of 62.8% remained far from selective (p. 5). The report documented a declining rate of admission from 48% in 1955 to 38.9% in 1958 and projected that fewer than 30% of applicants would be admitted in the year of the report (p. 5).

Of particular interest in this report is the reading of Harvard faculty wrestling with a process that sought to meet numerous ends, most of which were poorly measured. The report praised the ability of the Harvard admissions office "in holding difficult pressures in balance" (p. 2) and the willingness of the admissions officers to maintain "a clear recognition of the dynamic nature of the entire college admission problem" (p. 2). "Constantly evolving demands, and opportunities as well, leave us no choice but to keep looking ahead, applying to a changing situation the lessons of Harvard's long experience" (p. 2). The report aimed "to bring into full view the very large number of considerations which bear upon the admission of students" (p. 1), despite selective admissions being in a state of relative infancy.

Harvard's faculty report continued to grapple with the circumstances of selective admissions, observing, "The apparent freedom to select poses an inescapable challenge to clarify the bases of selection" (p. 6). It recognized the "calculated risk-taking in admissions" (p. 6) inherent in choosing certain applicants—in particular, those on scholarship—at the expense of others. The committee ceded decision-making power to

the admissions committee, while simultaneously acknowledging the unpredictable nature of the process and the difficulty inherent in measuring potential, asking rhetorically, "How far should we reach for unevenly developed talent?" (p. 10). It answered:

> The Committee urges that the faculty give its full support to just such chance-taking by the admissions staff on any application which satisfies minimum precautions and in which there is a strong hint of warmth, originality and good motivation. (p. 10)

Harvard admissions committee members were charged with ensuring that applicants first met admissions requirements. Beyond that, it was their responsibility to see to it that "Harvard must offer a broad hospitality of talent" (p. 11). The faculty emphasized that Harvard "should continue to define promise in the broadest possible terms" (p. 11).

Despite best efforts to exact sound decisions, the 1960 report spoke to the unpredictability of admissions work: "the point to be made is that *every* admission to Harvard College is in some degree a gamble, to be taken on the basis of all available evidence" (p. 23). It was deemed to be an "often baffling task" (p. 24).

The faculty report concluded with a summary section entitled "Facing the Individual Decision." Notably, it reads:

> When all is said and done, however, aims and standards, limitations and pressures come together in the evaluation of the particular case, in the individual decision about each of some five thousand completed applications. (p. 55)

Beyond stated policy, and in light of the problems facing the institution and the pressures upon "the entire task of selection," there remained the very real issue of making decisions on individual applicants. Application decisions were made in the context of all of these

realities coming together at the committee table, and it fell to the committee to navigate all of the information at hand. And it was quite the daunting task:

> No one who has ever participated in the April meetings of the Admission Committee could fail to appreciate the difficulty of keeping in balance, or even in mind, all the particular arguments which can be brought to bear on the acceptance or rejection of any boy, be he from New York City, Roxbury or a Dakota farming town, from Phillips Exeter or Blue Earth High School. (p. 56)

It was a Herculean effort of decision-making, one that drew the admiration of the Harvard faculty and a reaffirmation of the faculty's "support to the fullest exercise of such judgment and…to intuition itself" (p. 56).

A decade and a half later, Feldman's (1975) interest resided in how rules imposed by internal and external stakeholders affected admissions outcomes at Harvard. She concluded that political power wielded over the admissions office by the administration, faculty, alumni, and private preparatory schools determined who was admitted and who was denied entry to the university (p. 42). Karen (1985, 1990) similarly concluded that admission to Harvard was determined via a political process and by political leverage, the result of group struggle and organizational dynamics.[2] The political mobilization of demographic subgroups such as women, alumni, African American and black students, and other historically underrepresented populations led to momentous and sudden shifts in admissions policy (Karen, 1985). The docket system of admissions in practice at Harvard served to "guarantee a minimum number of places for certain politically-important groups, while limiting these groups' overall numbers in the entering class" (Karen, 1985, p. 405). In his extensive investigation into the history of access at Harvard,

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[2] Notably Karen's work involved a quantitative examination of Harvard admissions records but depended qualitatively upon Feldman's research to explain the admissions process. He did not observe committee deliberations in person and was not present for the moment of decision and commitment to action.

Yale, and Princeton, Karabel (2005) attributed his understanding of the political perspective on selective admissions to both Karen and Feldman. Yet he also argued that evolving definitions of merit explain selective admissions policies: "the particular definition of 'merit' at a given moment expresses underlying power relations and tends, accordingly, to reflect the ideals of the groups that hold the power of cultural definition" (Karabel, 2005, p. 132). More recently, a qualitative inquiry by Zimdars (2016) into the admissions practices at selective, elite universities in England and the United States concluded that the meritocratic order remains solidly intact in college admissions.

Killgore (2009) interviewed admissions professionals at seventeen private, selective colleges, concluding that "Becoming selective in admissions means that newly elite schools expand the meaning of merit into one that is influenced by organizational needs" (p. 485). Beyond the initial assessment of academic merit, "nonacademic 'merit' matters …valued characteristics such as dedication, passion, and, sometimes, leadership" (p. 477). Merit has an "expanded meaning" to the admissions professionals at the colleges Killgore (2009) sampled, a meaning in which meritorious characteristics of applicants are seen as "contributing to their school's prestige, legitimacy, and financial stability" (p. 482).

Notably, Killgore's (2003) earlier research expounded upon Karen's (1990) work on admissions officers as gatekeepers to elite colleges and universities, operating within political and organizational contexts. Karen (1990) had revisited his own 1985 work, proposing a theory of gatekeeping within the "black box" of Harvard admissions. Killgore (2003) concluded, "In the end, colleges are pragmatic organizations that are determined to survive" (p. 16). Admissions officers are both exclusionary and inclusive at

the same time: "Ultimately, the decisions come down to two categories: who *should* we admit (e.g., contest winners) and who do we *want* to admit (e.g., sponsorship opportunities)" (p. 9).

The balance of other recent contributions to admissions decision-making is particularly notable for their ingenuity and admirable motivation, yet limitations complicate the findings of such simulations. Zwick (2017) used a sample of 2,000 students from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 to model admissions decisions resulting from sixteen sets of selection rules. She acknowledged the shortcomings of this approach:

> …my 16 selection rules were intentionally very simple, shorn of the intricacies of actual admissions processes. Real-life admissions procedures take into account many factors that are not encompassed by the simplified rules illustrated here, such as applicants' unusual talents, accomplishments, and experiences—and possibly, their roles as legacies, athletes, or celebrities. (pp. 192-193)

Organizational goals and the nuances of both holistic review and the subjective process of an admission committee are lost in such estimations.

Bowman and Bastedo (2016) conducted an experiment in which 311 admissions officers from institutions stratified by selectivity and type each reviewed three simulated admissions files to gauge admissions officers' propensity to admit students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. While their findings reveal differences in ratings by institutional selectivity, the authors' caution regarding their study's limitations is perhaps more notable and most relevant to the present study:

> When interpreting the influence of admissions office diversity and characteristics on admissions recommendations and outcomes, we must also keep in mind that these admissions officers participated in a realistic simulation of admissions decisions, but the choices they made were not high stakes. As a result, admissions decisions may differ when the applicants and

> institutions would have real consequences for both institutions and applicants. In addition, these decisions are made outside of enrollment management practices that maximize institutional revenue and prestige. This study is thus more accurately a reflection of admissions *scoring* practices rather than admissions *decisions.* (pp. 12-13, emphasis in original)

Therefore, Bowman and Bastedo's study lacked the committee context requisite for decisions, including the numerous goals, possible constraints, and the pressures under which admissions officers operate, and was devoid of attention to their interpersonal dynamics.

Two recent related publications originating from the same experiment highlight the importance of applicant context in admissions decision-making. Bastedo and Bowman (2017) concluded "that the quality of contextual information can play a substantial role in the evaluation of low-SES applicants in college admissions" (p. 73). Findings associated with the development of a holistic admissions typology from Bastedo, Bowman, Glasener, and Kelly (2018) suggest that low-SES applicants fare better in the admissions process when the whole context of applications are considered. Collectively, these publications contribute to an understanding of potential cognitive biases of individuals within the admissions process and suggest real implications regarding who is making decisions and their processes of assessment. However, they fail to capture the complexity of organizational phenomena around decision-making. Committee decisions at selective colleges do not occur in individual silos, devoid of organizational goals, needs, aspirations, and constraints, nor are these decisions made without the relative context of the overall applicant pool and situational boundedness decision-makers face. Consequently, this suggests that alternative theories in the sociology of organizations might offer answer as to *how* admissions decisions are made

at selective colleges. Fortunately, there are several resources that *do* more adequately capture the context under which selective admissions decisions are formed and executed.

Related Literature on Selective Admissions

Stevens (2007) noted the dearth of empirical qualitative research on college admissions while highlighting the depth of "workplace memoirs" (p. 7), insider or journalistic accounts intended to pull back the curtain and reveal the true inner workings of admissions offices. This body of related literature offers valuable insight into the machinations of the admissions processes at selective institutions. I will address the bulk of this literature in Chapter 3 as it interacts with the garbage can model, though a brief introduction here is warranted.

Mirroring the aforementioned growth of selective admissions, college how-to guides and resources for post-secondary planning arose in the mid-twentieth century. Collectively, they underscored the increasing selectivity of certain sectors in American higher education and offered hope to students and their parents that not all colleges and universities are highly selective. Taken together, they offered helpful insight into the state of affairs for college admissions in general as the U.S. system evolved from education of the elites to one of the masses.

First published in 1958 and revised three years later, Bowles' (1960) *How to Get Into College* addressed students and families "on the problems of entering college" (p. 9). He opened with a summary of the current state of affairs, saying:

> The complexity as well as the number of these problems has developed an aura of forbidding difficulty that sometimes creates an atmosphere bordering on hysteria, more reminiscent of the stock market on a day of heavy selling than of the supposedly calm and thoughtful halls of learning. (p. 9)

He then offered comfort and perspective to those worried about the odds of gaining admission to college: “As to getting into college—there is actually room for everybody who is qualified, but some colleges have more applicants than others, so not everyone can get into the college he prefers” (p. 9).

A contemporary piece to Bowles’ (1960) work by Wilson and Bucher (1961) opened with a daunting scene cast to draw in potential readers of their how-to guide:

> You are a student in secondary school; you have heard a lot of talk about college and admission to college. And you have to admit to yourself, if to no one else, that way down inside you are worried about your chances of being accepted at the college of your choice.
>
> You can’t forget that senior last year who was turned down by her favorite college—and she had all A’s on her report card! And that boy everybody said would be a scientific genius who was accepted by two colleges but rejected by two others.
>
> When you add to the cases of rejection you know in your own school all the rumors from other schools and the newspaper reports of the tidal wave of students that is fast thundering toward collegiate shores, you can’t help but worry. And your parents are just as anxious as you, if not more so. (p. vii)

They assuaged readers’ concerns that students would not be admitted to college if only they followed their advice for a comprehensive college search, echoing the evolution of the admissions process and the differences between public and private, in part, discussed earlier. “Each year some colleges open without the total of qualified students desired. Other colleges were able to accept only one out of four qualified applicants” (p. 119). Of equal interest, Wilson and Bucher (1961) offer an intriguing caution to students who might choose only among the prestigious colleges at the time: “If you look up this word ‘prestige’ in the dictionary you will learn that it comes from a Latin word that means ‘illusion’ or ‘delusion.’ Take either meaning you want” (p. 104).

Sulkin (1962) juxtaposes the realities faced by college-going students in the early 1960s to that confronting their parents two decades earlier:

> In those days—the late 1920s—only one out of ten high school graduates went to a four-year college. Today the proportion is five out of ten. And the percentage is increasing rapidly.
>
> Getting into college was a pretty simple matter in the 1920s. If you had the required courses, a high school diploma, and the few hundred dollars for tuition, you could go almost anywhere you wished. Today even the best of students worry about admission. (p. 1)

He advises students to give themselves "plenty of latitude" (p. 80) when choosing where to apply, in part because of increasing selectivity but also because of the imperfect nature of college admissions. He elaborates:

> Most of the screening and choosing of applicants to college is done by admissions officers, and, like all mortals, they are fallible. Not all the statistical analyses of scores, grades or high school quality can render perfect predictions. Admissions officers must also rely on "hunch, hope and heart." They must, in short, be willing to take risks and make mistakes. And they do. (p. 79)

He follows this caution with an entire chapter devoted to an explanation of "Who Goes Where," beginning with "a list of some of the most difficult colleges in the country to get into" (p. 81). Among the list are those institutions that "are old, famous and laden with prestige," as well as some that "have come into prominence only recently" and others that "aren't widely known outside their own regions" (p. 81). In short, Sulkin's (1962) work represents one of the earliest efforts to classify colleges based upon admissions selectivity and reaffirms this mid-century transformation within higher education.

Aside from these early how-to guides and other annual reports issued by a handful of selective colleges that serve as insightful institutional histories, Kinkead (1961) provided the first comprehensive examination into the machinations of an admissions

office. *How an Ivy League College Decides on Admissions* recounts her observations of the admissions process at Yale University. Greene and Minton (1975) offered one of the earliest "advice" books for students and families interested in the admissions process at the most selective institutions in the mid-1970s. They drew upon anecdotes from their careers as a college admissions officer and high school guidance counselor and depended heavily upon Amherst College's annual *Reports on Admission*. Excerpts from many of these same *Reports*, dating back to 1947 and authored by Amherst's Dean of Admission Eugene S. "Bill" Wilson, are presented in Wall (1996). As early as 1952, the process at Amherst was ambiguous, with Wilson quoted as writing to his colleagues at preparatory and high schools, "I wish we could give you a blueprint or measuring stick that would show you precisely what we seek in our students. But we know of no way to do this. We seek no type—no uniform set of qualities" (Wall, 1996, p. 4). What is more, an excerpt from 1956 depicted the depth and subjective nature of evaluations already at work in Amherst's admissions office, as well as the numerous considerations of interest to the committee:

> What factors decide which applicant is to be accepted? Preference is given to students who can present some evidence of intellectual curiosity, imagination, and a desire to learn, over students whose first interest is marks, or doing only the assigned work. We look for students whose success comes more from the ability to reason than from memory. We favor students who are independent in their thinking We favor students who have evidenced outstanding ability in such activities as…music, journalism, drama, creative writing, fine arts and …athletics. For students with similar patterns of performance in academic achievement, selection is occasionally determined by geographical distribution, by school distribution, by interest, by social and economic background and by relationship to alumni. (Wilson, as quoted in Wall (1996), pp. 4-5)

Wall's (1996) personal reflections on the range of factors considered in selective admissions are equally helpful as those of Wilson (upon which he drew). Disabusing

readers of the notion that standardized test scores "were rarely controlling in admission decisions" (p. 12) he stated that the Amherst admissions committee members:

> …sought the widest possible variety of talents, interests, achievement, socioeconomic, racial and ethnic backgrounds, personalities, and career goals in a class of only 375—which was selected from an applicant pool better than ten times that size, where all but a couple of hundred applicants were academically qualified for admission and could do the work of the college if there were room. (p. 12)

Wall (1996) concluded his work with profiles of eighteen successful applicants, a chapter that provides brilliant insight into the evaluative depth, subjectivity, and competing goals of interest to committee members.

Fisher (1975) was afforded the opportunity to spend time observing the Harvard admissions from the perspective of an outsider looking into the admissions process, reading process and committee deliberations. Presenting his findings in the Harvard alumni magazine, he reported that tests applied to each application "seemed good ones: variety, excellence, the estimate that Harvard would contribute much to individual and he to Harvard" (p. 12). These tests, not easily identified from the outsider's perspective, suggest a depth to the goals of the organization and a complexity to the evaluative and deliberative considerations given to each application, and echo the 1960 Harvard faculty report discussed earlier.

Not long thereafter, Moll (1979) published his "attempt to share insider talk on private college admissions with outsiders" (p. 4) as a "how-to" (p. 4) resource for applicants based upon his experience as an admissions officer at Vassar, Bowdoin, Harvard and Yale. Indicative of the subjective nature of admissions decisions and the various goals of different organizations with in the field of American higher education, he suggested that selective colleges sought representation of students exhibiting

characteristics from the following categories in each incoming class: The Intellects; The Special Talent Category; The Family Category; The All-American Kid Category; and, The Social Conscience Category (Moll, 1979). It is challenging to account for such qualities in any quantitative study, and equally daunting to settle on standard definitions or metrics of characteristics that would meet such categorization.

In a comparable effort, MacGowan and McGinty (1988) curated an extensive collection of essays written by admissions directors intended to answer fifty different questions the parents of college applicants may have of the process. This volume yielded tremendous insight into the workings of committees, the various personal characteristics attached to each application and of potential interest to committee members, as well as their efforts to process vast quantities of data as they execute decisions. Within the same volume—and with Harvard as the setting once again—Evans (1988) described a selection process that was "exhaustive" and "labor intensive" (p. 88), intended to admit a class that yielded "an intellectually, socially, economically, geographically, culturally, extracurricularly, and personally diverse student body" (p. 89). Beyond academic merit, committee members "look for personal qualities that promote individual as well as group development, respect, awareness of community issues (local, national, and global), compassion, intellectual verve, and scholarly inquisitiveness" (p. 90). There was more still, to balance: "We also look for those movers and shakers with a sense of consequence, whether it is as a school or community leader or as a quiet force for good in daily life" (p. 90). Furthermore, the committee weighed extracurricular involvement, looking "for energy, leadership, and creativity wherever it is found, whether it is in student government, music, field hockey, religious youth groups, drama, Boy Scouts,

football, or any of hundreds of other nonacademic endeavors" (pp. 90-91). Committee members also considered the context of each applicant's extracurricular activities: "If a student has to commute great distances, work long hours, or is disabled and thereby prevented from involvement in nonacademic activities, this expectation is waived" (p. 91).

A similar perspective from the same volume echoes Harvard's process, as recounted by Evans (1988). Momo (1988), writing of his experiences as a member of the Columbia University admissions committee, distinguished between academically capable and otherwise competitive students based on an estimation of their potential to contribute to the Columbia community. "What seems to matter most at this juncture, what seems to make some applicants come alive or stand apart from the large gray mass, is the committee's sense that they will contribute to the life of the community" (p. 75). And yet again, the estimation of potential contribution is broadly defined:

> Some, for sheer quality of mind and intellectual ability, will be the stars of the classroom, and some will be the campus leaders, the musicians in the orchestra, the writers on the newspaper. Others for reasons of background, or upbringing, or circumstances of birth, will lend a different perspective or outlook. Still others—those who are just "good folks"—will make fine roommates, enliven a dormitory, or help out whenever needed. All of these people will contribute to the community and benefit from one another's company. (Momo, 1988, p. 75)

Momo (1988) summarized his impression of committee decision-making as a subjective process that involves some objective criteria, one requiring "long hours and a good bit of hard work and soul searching" (p. 75). The subjective nature of selective admissions "accounts for equally competitive colleges making different decisions on the same applicant" (p. 75). Not only is the judging of applications done by different people,

different institutions may have different goals in mind and different means of estimating applicants' potentials to meet those goals.

As a reflection on her admissions career at Stanford between 1984 and 1991, Fetter (1997) presented her personal impressions and opinions to inform audiences "about some fundamental philosophical and ethical issues and how they apply to the selection of any college freshman class" (p. vii). Her work provided not only a useful institutional history but also a candid and thoughtful inquiry into the selective admissions process. However, it did not ascribe a theory to how individual admissions decisions occur. What is particularly useful, though, is her self-reflection in the book's *Epilogue* that illuminates her consternation with such a process. After stating, "The primary criterion for college admissions *must* be academic achievement and promise" (p. 250, emphasis in original), she directed several questions to the reader to illustrate her frustration:

> In a country with roughly 26,000 high schools ranging from wealthy, select private schools to poor, inner-city public schools, how do we allow for the considerable variation in opportunities in estimating academic achievement and promise? How do we weigh the disadvantages of the applicant from a family with no history of attending college or from a modest socioeconomic background? (p. 250)

Beyond academics, she referenced secondary criterion used in the evaluation process; these, in turn, beg their own questions:

> Are art and music of more importance than athletics or public service? Is a team activity more valuable than a solitary one? Do cheerleaders and entrepreneurs have any place at institutions of higher education? And, of course, the dilemma of unequal opportunities so apparent in the academic criterion is ever present in these considerations too. Students from economically disadvantaged classes have many fewer opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities and, in many cases, time outside of class needs to be spent on essentials—such as supplementing the family income. (p. 250)

Furthermore, an admissions process that includes the evaluation of personal qualities is confounded by the lack of a standard means of estimating such characteristics. Fetter (1997) noted, "It is hard to construct a meaningful scale of goodness or niceness or likability" (p. 250), and reflected thusly:

> should all college students by "good," or "nice," or "likable"? Some of the most brilliant (thereby satisfying our first criterion) human beings are academically single-minded (thereby failing to meet our second criterion), and selfish and eccentric (thereby also failing the third criterion). How does one weigh out the merits? Is there any place for brilliant, selfish, single-minded eccentrics at the university? (pp. 250-251)

Though complicated and fraught with challenges, "Only a subjective college admissions process, with its attention to the qualities and circumstances of the individual applicant, can weigh and allow for such a range of complex considerations," Fetter stated (p. 251).

A handful of comparable contributions have been made in the two decades since Fetter's account was published. Hernandez (1997) provided helpful insights into the admissions process at Dartmouth and concluded, in part, by calling for "a process that involves deep thought, informed evaluation, input from faculty at the highly selective colleges (very few of the highly selective colleges ask for faculty input), and several different in-office readers to take into account various life experiences and points of view" (p. 244, *parentheses in original*). Steinberg (2002) work attracted perhaps the greatest media attention given his career as a journalist for *The New York Times* and the yearlong access he was afforded into the Wesleyan University admissions office. Finally, Toor (2001) recast anecdotes and impressions from her insider's perspective as an admissions officer at Duke University. Each of these titles receives greater attention in

Chapter Three, as I interact with the garbage can model. However, an introduction to rival theories and the genealogy of the GCM is warranted.

Competing Theoretical Perspectives

In their review of institutional theory as applied to educational organizations, Rowan and Miskel (1999) note that schools of thought have advanced considerably from Weber's (1947) rational bureaucratic model of organizations. Yet, it seems that critics and pundits still seek rationality in organizations. Undeniably, the rational process order may explain certain singular decisions in college admissions offices of varying selectivity. It may be particularly apt to explicate institutions that are captured, programmed, or overly exploitative of their environments—namely, less selective colleges that face hurdles in admitting sufficient numbers of applicants to meet enrollment needs. What, then, does the rational bureaucratic model entail?

March (1994) helpfully summarized the rational perspective, noting that it involves consequences attached to decision alternatives (as action depends on anticipated future effects of a current action) and that preferences are inherent to the process (as consequences from an action are evaluated in terms of personal preference). A rational decision maker considers alternatives, expectations of future consequences associated with different choices, the preferential status of the value of each action, and the decision rule that determines how a choice is made relative to the values of the different consequences associated with each alternative.

Within political science, Allison and Zelikow (1999) applied the rational actor model in one effort to understand decision makers involved in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Comprehensive rationality requires actors and the organizations of which they are a part

to choose "the best alternative, taking account of consequences, their probability, and utilities" (p. 71). Such decisions demand that actors possess an understanding of "the generation of all possible alternatives, assessment of the probabilities of all consequences of each, and evaluation of each set of consequences for all relevant goals" (p. 71). Borrowing a phrase from Simon, Allison and Zelikow (1999) said this process equates to "powers of prescience and capacities for computation resembling those we usually attribute to God" (p. 71). Thus, while rationality ascribes some agency to the individual—as long as the actor executes decisions consistent with organizational goals—it seems a far stretch to assume that individuals are able to adequately gather and process the universe of alternatives and their implied consequences. Indeed, some might say that actors are bounded in their ability to execute rational decisions.

In certain contexts, such a model might explain some decision-making processes within an admissions office, particularly when coupled with resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In short, wealthier, full tuition-paying applicants would be admitted as a priority over other candidates. These decisions would be enacted consistently with dictates from executive administrators, ensuring sufficient future revenue streams in the form of student tuition and fee payments. Decisions would be made in the best financial interest of the college or university, with the assumption that financial exigency is the primary goal of the organization.

Students from traditional "feeder schools" might be also preferentially admitted at the expense of more accomplished students, in the interest of ensuring future application streams from these wealthier, privileged institutions. Admitting talented athletes at the expense of academic high-achievers, or less-accomplished wealthy students from the top

socioeconomic strata (capable of paying full cost of attendance without assistance), at the expense of high-achieving low-income students, may appear rational when an institution is at the mercy of revenue providers—students and their families. Would it not be irrational for a college in need of revenue to turn away those who can afford to enroll without financial assistance from the institution, as a boost to the bottom line?

Supplementing bureaucratic rational and collegial models, Baldridge (1983) offered a political lens to explain decision making in higher education institutions. He highlighted basic characteristics of these complex organizations that distinguish them from industry, government, and business. These characteristics include goal ambiguity, "people-processing" (p. 51), problematic technologies, high professionalism in the academic departments yet a fragmented professional staff, and the increasing vulnerability of higher education institutions to the environment. In developing his political model, Baldridge (1983) concentrated on the act of policy formation as the locus of study, arguing, "policy decisions are those that bind the organization to important courses of action" (p. 51). He continued, "Since politics are so important, people throughout the organization try to influence their formulation in order to see that their own special interests are protected and furthered. Policymaking becomes a vital focus of special interest group activity that permeates the university" (p. 51). In contrast to the political (and ostensibly dismissing the bureaucratic lens), he helpfully summarized the logical process flow of the rational action model:

> Once the problem is recognized (difficult in itself), then a number of steps are proposed: (1) setting goals to overcome the problem, (2) selecting alternatives to reach the goals, (3) assessing the consequences of various alternatives, (4) choosing the best alternatives, and (5) implementing the decision. (p. 52)

The issues of goal identification, prioritization, and ambiguity plague the political model in explaining actions within modern institutions of higher education, however. "Goal ambiguity is common in academic organizations …colleges and universities have vague, ambiguous goals, and they must build decision structures that grapple with uncertainty and conflict over those goals" (Baldridge, 1983, p. 39). Goals may include "teaching, research, service to the local community, administration of scientific installations, housing for students and faculty, support of the arts, solving social problems" (p. 39). Furthermore, actors and subunits within the organization may advance personal or subunit preferences at the cost of overall organizational-level goals.

Others interpreted the college admissions process as being the result of a political calculus. Karen (1990) contributed to a theory of "gatekeeping" based upon his earlier case study at Harvard University (Karen, 1985). Karen's (1990) work, in concert with Feldman's (1975) thesis studying the selection process within the Harvard University admissions office, guided Karabel (2005) in his history of selective admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Karabel (2005) credited these works as he conceived of admissions policies as resulting from political power manipulations. He wrote:

> Some of the most astute admissions deans at the Big Three have acknowledged in moments of candor, the allocation of scarce and highly valued places in the freshman class is an inherently political process, complete with interest groups (e.g., the athletic department, the faculty) and external constituencies (e.g., the alumni, important feeder schools, mobilized minority groups) vying for bigger slices of the pie. (p. 6)

In a critical distinction, though, Karabel (2005) argued that admissions *policy* is a "negotiated settlement" (p. 6) among parties, with each party "wishing to shape admissions criteria and the actual selection process to produce the outcome they prefer" (p. 6). This political theory may explain the broader issuance of admission policy

guidelines, goal prioritization, preferences, or mission statements for a subunit or university. Certainly, select admissions decisions may be explained as political power plays, catering to alumni, donors and potential donors, politicians, and so on, assuming there exists some political leverage held over admissions committee members. However, it falls short of explaining individual, applicant-level decision-making processes.

A more promising explanation might reside in work from the Carnegie School, a group of economic theorists frustrated by the inability of existent theory to explain observed complexity in modern organizations. The foundational works produced by the group include *Administrative Behavior* (Simon, 1947), *Organizations* (March & Simon, 1958), and *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm* (Cyert & March, 1963). The distinguishing tenets of the Carnegie School were threefold: "organizations as the ultimate object of study, decision making as the privileged channel for studying organizations, and behavioral plausibility as a core principle underlying theory building" (Gavetti, Levinthal, & Ocasio, 2007, p. 523). Their research produced a new model to understand how organizations make decisions, the garbage can model. In this next chapter, I introduce this theory and overlay it onto college admissions literature to justify my research questions and research design.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework guiding my research. As previously stated, this dissertation specifically examines the following research questions:

1. To what extent can the garbage can model of organizational choice explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?
2. To what extent do rival theories such as political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rational theory, explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?

Given the first research question, I introduce the garbage can model of organizational choice (GCM) and elaborate on my framework for the GCM within an admissions office at a selective liberal arts college. Interactions between selected admissions literature and the GCM follow as an exercise to suggest the GCM as a promising and tenable explanation of how admissions decisions are made at selective colleges.

As drawn out in my review of the literature, the small corpus of qualitative work devoted to explanations of selective college admissions sought to explain from the sociocultural perspective *why* certain student groups are admitted preferentially at the expense of others. What is lacking is an inquiry into *how* an admissions committee executes a decision to admit or deny an applicant: what describes and explains the

processes and practices used by actors involved in the organization's commitment to action?

This study's inquiry relative to previous literature and within the context of the broader college admissions context was illustrated in *Figure 1* in Chapter One. It shows Karabel's (2005) argument that a college's admissions policy includes criteria for selection, procedures for assessment, and the practice of admissions committee members. Simultaneously he acknowledged that there may exist discord between *how* admissions is actually practiced and the stated criteria and procedures. My research questions focus precisely there, within the *how* of the admissions decision-making process and inside the "black box," wherein there is no certainty that practice aligns with stated criteria and procedures. An understanding of the arguments of the garbage can model is thus required to answer my first research question.

The Garbage Can Model of Organizational Choice

The GCM arose from the realization "that the educational institutions that we studied were typified by goals that were both ambiguous and in dispute" (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 2012, p. 21). Working from the perspective of the Carnegie School, Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) described complex, modern organizations such as hospitals and universities as "organized anarchies" (p. 1). Such organizations are characterized by problematic preferences, unclear technologies, and fluid participation (p. 1). Modern universities have multiple goals that are "inconsistent and ill-defined" (p. 1). These organizations lack structure and are better identified as "a loose collection of ideas" (p. 1). Technologies employed by organizational actors are not well understood; the organization "operates on the basis of simple trial-and error procedures, the residue of

learning from the accidents of past experiences, and pragmatic inventions of necessity" (p. 1). An organization's decision-makers "vary in the amount of time and effort they devote to different domains; involvement varies from one time to another" (p. 1). As Cohen and March (1974) later stated:

> Although a college or university operates within the metaphor of a political system or a hierarchical bureaucracy, the actual operation of either is considerably attenuated by the ambiguity of college goals, by the lack of clarity in educational technology, and by the transient character of many participants. (p. 176)

When conditions of an organization anarchy are present, the GCM offers an apt explanation of decision-making.

Within an organized anarchy, the decision-making process is defined as "collections of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be an answer, and decision makers looking for work" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2). These components are awash in a conceptual garbage can in which time and energy play critical roles in the meaning, definition, identification, and framing of a given choice. "In the garbage can model…a decision is an outcome or interpretation of several relatively independent streams within an organization" (p. 3). These four independent streams include: problems, "the concern of people inside and outside the organization"; solutions, "somebody's product…an answer actively looking for a question"; participants who "come and go," their participation varying according to other demands of the organization; and, choice opportunities, "occasions when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision" (p. 3).

The time and energy available to organizational actors within the decision arena are a primary consideration in the GCM. The model "calls attention to the strategic effects of timing, through the introduction of choices and problems, the time pattern of available energy, and the impact of organizational structure" (p. 2). Within the garbage can model,

> …problems, solutions, and participants move from one choice opportunity to another in such a way that the nature of the choice, the time it takes, and the problems it solves all depend on a relatively complicated intermeshing of the mix of choices available at any one time, the mix of problems that have access to the organization, the mix of solutions looking for problems, and the outside demand on the decision makers. (Cohen & March, 1974, p. 180)

Pursuant to my first research question, I theorize that the GCM can explain, to some extent, the admissions decision-making at a selective liberal arts college. Admissions committee members weigh and balance competing preferences and conflicting goals arising from the interests of multiple stakeholders of the college community. The educational technology used in the assessment of talent, ability, and achievement—both in the classroom and beyond—is far from perfect, and the lack of technology to fully know the odds of enrolling admitted students compounds the challenge of decision-making. And, committee members blend objective methods of measurement with subjective judgement and interpretation of essays, interview reports, recommendations and the like. Finally, committee members have other organizational responsibilities to attend to, and must make all admissions decisions within a small window of time.

Potential Fitness of the GCM as Explanation of Admissions Decision-Making

The GCM was not proposed to explain decision-making all of the time, but rather in certain instances where seemingly inexplicable moments found solutions and problems

linked together while other problems flowed by unaddressed (Cohen et al., 1972). Reflecting on forty years of living with their theory, Cohen, March, and Olsen (2012) reminded that their conception of the garbage can model was "originally presented as *an aspect* of organizational decision making" (p. 23, italics in original), offering "*A…model"* as opposed to *"The…model"* of choice processes within organizations. Acknowledging that organizations "do provide some control and accomplish some purposes," choices or decisions are accomplished via a process that "often makes meaning and generates action through temporal orderings that can defy understanding, purpose, or control" (p. 23). This is so because of the role of human actors within organizations, and their agency within the structure of the given organization—albeit an agency that "is both bounded and contextually variable" (p. 23).

Gibson (2012) revisited Allison's (1969) application of the three models of rational, organizational process, and politic decision-making to understand the event sequences at play during the Cuban missile crisis. Gibson (2012) instead applied the garbage can model, saying the theory "offers an account of how decisions are *actually* made, rather than how we imagine they are made when we liken organizations to unitary, rational, and self-consistent decision makers" (p. 35). The garbage can model accommodates for the participants in control of organizations and subunits, as opposed to ascribing organizational behavior to the organization itself.

Researchers have applied the GCM to higher education decision-making in times of crisis when enrollment targets fell short of budget needs (Riley, 2007). It has been suggested as a theory to explain the enrollment management process at large universities (Johnson, 2013) where time is short and attention waning. The GCM offers a promising

framework to explain the admissions decision-making process at selective institutions. In the study of organizational decision-making, the GCM has been "indispensable, checking the tendency of social scientists to find reason, cause, and function in all behavior, and emphasizing instead the accidental, temporary, shifting, and fluid nature of all social life" (Perrow, 1986, p. 136).

The GCM accounts for the contexts in which decisions are made. Contexts include both the contingency of decisions relative to alternative options as well as the effect of fluid participation and the allocation of actors' attention and energy. To gain an understanding of complex organizational behaviors "requires knowledge of details" (Denrell, 2012, p. 66) when decisions are made. In the GCM, the choice process is nonlinear and contextual, yielding what may be read as irrational decisions if viewed from the outside, absent context. Regarding the GCM, Hearn and McLendon (2012) observed, "As Cohen, March, and Olsen (1972) themselves pointed out, when measured against a conventional model of rational choice, garbage can processes appear 'pathological'" (p. 16). They continued: "Yet such standards are inappropriate, maintain the authors: although university garbage can processes do not actually resolve problems very well, they do enable choices to be made under conditions of extreme goal ambiguity and conflict" (p. 52).

There have been some vocal critics of the GCM's plausibility. Bendor, Moe, and Shotts (2001) acknowledged the "considerable influence" of the theory in political science and institutional theory yet criticize it for some perceived deficiencies. They claim the GCM fails to account for the role of actors within organizations, stating that it "talks a lot about choice and individuals, but the theory really focuses on process and

structure—organizational phenomena—and does not arise from individualistic foundations" (p. 172). Further, Bendor et al. (2001) condemned the GCM's conceptualization of solutions and problems as independent from one another. "By definition…solutions do not exist on their own, independent of specific problems" (p.172). They contend that the GCM fails to account for an organization's structure in favor of the notion of an organized anarchy, and condemn the disconnection between the GCM's informal, verbal theory and what they deem its more formal computer simulation.

Problematic Preferences in Selective Admissions and Previous Models of Admissions Processes

Preference sets and goals of a college admissions office do not align neatly with expectations. At the committee table—the epitome of a "decision situation" when actors must choose among applicants—preferences may be moving and amorphous as a class takes shape and as actors enter and exit the committee room. Goals are ambiguous: as seats are filled and the financial aid budget expended as the committee's work progresses, the conversations surrounding each subsequent application evolve. Those involved in the admissions committee must balance the multiple goals of the college with competing institutional priorities. In effect, each decision on each individual application is a "choice" confronting the institution, a commitment to organizational action.

Committee participants must individually weigh and balance each applicant's potential contributions to and demands upon the college. Some participants may place greater value in a particular ideal: perhaps the diversity officer is primarily interested in admitting students from historically underrepresented ethnic and racial backgrounds, while the athletics liaison prioritizes recruited athletes, and the dean or vice president of enrollment management, acutely aware of the incessant financial pressures burdening the

college, advocates for all possible development cases. In such a scenario, it is not a difficult leap to see a parallel in the inconsistent preferences given the organic and ever-changing situation.

Lucido (2015) acknowledged the dearth of research on the final admissions decision-making processes at selective institutions. He also referenced the frenzied media speculation surrounding this decision-making process, and calls for transparency and insight into the "black box of selective admissions" (Lucido, 2015, p. 162). He directed his audience to the work of Perfetto, Escandón, Graff, Rigol, and Schmidt (1999) for "elucidation and evaluation of admission criteria and decision-making processes" (Lucido, 2015, p. 150), in which nine categories are established to classify the philosophical basis driving this process. They are as follows:

Eligibility-Based Models

- Entitlement: the inalienable right of higher education for all.
- Open Access: the education system in America is K20, and higher education should be available for those who qualify.

Performance Based Models

- Meritocracy: higher education as a reward for success.
- Character: higher education as a reward for personal qualities.

Student Capacity to Benefit Models

- Enhancement: higher education must find and nurture talent.
- Mobilization: higher education must promote social and economic mobility.

Student Capacity to Contribute Models

- Investment: access to higher education for the good of society.
- Environmental/Institutional: each institution is driven to meet its own goals and organizational needs, unique unto it, while providing a quality educational experience.

- Fiduciary: higher education is a business, and fiscal integrity is of primary import. (Perfetto et al., 1999, as cited in Lucido, 2015, p. 150)

I argue that these models are *models of preferences* or *goals* of an admissions committee. They may serve as reasons or justifications to admit applicants on a case by case basis. They may be applicable to the decision-making process and serve to justify admissions decisions, in part, some of the time, at a particular college—chiefly selective institutions.

Lucido (2015) articulated, "Indeed, most colleges and universities draw from several of these theoretical foundations to align their policies and practices with their missions" (p. 149). An effort to apply any one model to any one admissions process to understand all admissions decisions at a given selective college is likely to fail. However, if these philosophical constructs are conceived of in the context of the GCM, we see that these models frame and define the numerous competing problematic preferences confronting participants. It is particularly difficult to understand the machinations of the black box precisely because there are so many constructs shaping the decision-making process. The decision on one individual applicant may make complete sense from one approach while looking entirely inconsistent when viewed from a competing perspective.

Competing preferences and goals may be found elsewhere in the literature. Based on his experience as Director of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of California Berkeley, Laird (2005) offered a series of questions that admissions officers might ask themselves in shaping admissions policies at selective private and public universities. These questions suggest pressures that bear upon decision-makers in the admissions office and the competing preferences and goals these officers might hope to serve within their decisions. Admissions officers might aim:

- To enroll a class that will most benefit from the institution's curriculum and faculty;
- To enroll a freshman class with the most distinguished high-school academic records;
- To enroll a class that will reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the state;
- To enroll a freshman class that will be the most engaging to teach in the classroom;
- To enroll a freshman class that will go on to serve the community, the state, and the nation;
- To enroll a freshman class that will bring the greatest distinction to the university after graduation;
- To enroll a class that will earn the highest collective freshman GPA;
- To enroll a freshman class that will have the highest 4-year (or overall) graduation rate;
- To enroll a freshman class that will support the institution financially after graduation;
- To enroll a freshman class with the highest possible test score averages. (Laird, 2005, p. 19)

In short, institutional missions may create multiple preferences or goals to which an admissions committee works to meet within an admitted class. Furthermore, missions may necessitate decisions that conflict with other competing preferences or constrain the independence of decision-makers at selective institutions as they are compelled to serve their respective missions.

I theorize that more selective colleges are able to draw upon a greater number of these admission models to justify any particular decision, and that there exists an *ambiguity continuum* along which these philosophical models array (see Appendix A). The more selective an institution is, the higher the freedom to factor in more subjective criteria associated with an applicant's capacity to benefit and potential to contribute. With heightened selectivity comes increased ambiguity.[3] Conversely, open-access colleges or

[3] In the Fall 1963 volume of the *A.C.A.C. Journal*, Henry S. Dyer established the basis for this rationale in an article entitled "Ambiguity in Selective Admissions." Contrasting the admissions *policy* at the less selective Miami (Ohio) University to the most selective Harvard and its admissions *requirements*, he

institutions that admit a large percentage of all applicants in an effort to meet enrollment targets fall on the opposite end of the continuum. These institutions will operate under pure eligibility philosophies on the left end of the continuum.

In like fashion, the common first-year class selection models documented by Rigol (2003) map upon the theorized ambiguity continuum in Appendix A. These models include:

- Multiple readers to committee for decision;
- Team readings to decision or further review (usually structured as sub-committees);
- Single reader to decision or further review;
- Reader(s) to computer for decision or further review;
- Computer to committee for decision;
- Computer plus reader ratings for decision; and,
- Computer to decision or further review. (Rigol, 2003)

I theorize that highly selective institutions are more likely to employ one of the first two models for admissions decision-making. In such settings, there exists greater ambiguity in the deliberative and evaluative processes because decisions are less programmable and less routinized. Simply put, lower selectivity translates to a decreased ability to exercise judgment.

I propose there exists a continuum of freedom within college admissions decisions, largely dictated by resources both human and financial. Organizations with poor endowments are captured by their environments, subject to demands of resource providers, whereas wealthier schools benefit from increasing degrees of independence,

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argued: "One of the characteristics that most sharply distinguish between selective and non-selective colleges is the amount of ambiguity in their admission requirements. The more selective a college is, the more ambiguous it has to be in telling the world what it is looking for in students. Conversely, the less selective a college is, the more forthright it can be in specifying who will get in" (p. 15). "Ambiguity is a concomitant of selectivity" (p. 16).

relative to resources (Baldridge, 1983). Selective organizations with greater slack, afforded by higher resources and autonomy, may exact decisions that are less programmed and formulaic than their peers, or less responsive to demands (Perrow, 1986; Simon, 1977). They have greater freedom to experiment, the ability to conduct more extensive, less bounded searches for their solutions, and the flexibility to actively "test-make" and interpret environments (Weick & Daft, 1983). Selective higher education institutions are afforded the opportunity to strike appropriate balance between exploration and exploitation in pursuit of resources (March, 1991). As organizations move to the selective (right) end of this continuum, the garbage can model better describes the process of decision-making. More solutions are attracted to solve a greater number of problems, creating layers of complex decision opportunities that are inexplicable to the outside observer, or to those hoping to seek rationality within the process. Appendix A illustrates the overlay of these admissions typologies upon organizational theory, creating an ambiguity continuum to gauge admissions decision-making.

Appendix B is included as an exercise to conceptualize institutional responsiveness and boundedness by level of selectivity. This provides an illustration of theorized institutional processes, responses to environmental stimuli, and decision-making according to an institution's admissions selectivity. Open access schools and those with high admit rates, where the need for fine distinction is neither necessary, possible, nor administratively feasible, require greater routinization of processes. Quite simply, they must admit all applicants, either due to mission or out of necessity. Application-wealthy institutions exhibit heightened flexibility in exploring to find solutions to problems, enabled to more broadly define competing institutional

preferences. Alternatively, open access or eligibility-based practitioners are more likely to exploit their environments. They are overly dependent upon the applicants and the characteristics of these applicants who have found them. Highly selective institutions benefit from deep applicant pools that serve as a buffer from external forces. Consequently, selective institutions are more likely to generate isomorphic forces downward than be subject to their pressures from the field below. Pursuant to the first research question of this study, I theorize in accordance with these scales that the GCM is more likely to describe decision-making as selectivity increases.

Unclear Technologies in Selective Admissions

In an organized anarchy, organizational processes are based upon "simple trial-and-error procedures, the residue of learning from the accidents of past experience, and pragmatic inventions of necessity" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1). Despite the ability of colleges to "survive and even produce," members of the organization do not truly understand how these processes function as means to serve end-goals. After committee decisions have been made, admissions offices may run regressions (or hire outside statisticians to do the same) to predict yield based upon enrollment trends from previous years, but how well do these analyses capture current student behavior and account for shifting environmental factors? How well do admissions professionals understand the metrics used to evaluate applicants, such as the SAT, ACT, AP or IB curricula and examinations—not to mention grading scales and criteria that vary from school to school, class to class, teacher to teacher? What role does subjectivity play in the supposed objective evaluation of an applicant's credentials—what is the impact when an application essay misses the mark or offends one reader and not another? How do

admissions officers learn to evaluate and rank the competing multiple intelligences of different applicants?

Coleman (2011) argued against standardized testing in part because such tests fail to measure all of Howard Gardner's (1988) eight intelligences (while also serving as a poor measure of both logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligence.) If in fact admissions officers wish to enroll a heterogeneous class of diverse talents, including the alternate intelligences of musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal, naturalist, and existential (Gardner, 1998), what technology exists to accurately evaluate talent across these areas in any applicant pool? All of these questions hint at the unclear technologies at play in an admissions office's efforts to measure and compare applicants' intelligences, potential contributions to the college community, capacity to benefit, and so on.

Despite having standardized testing to aid in admissions decisions, historic biases and admitted shortcomings surround the ACT and SAT (W. G. Bowen & Bok, 1998; Espenshade, Chung, & Radford, 2009; Kidder & Rosner, 2002). We know that standardized testing is a better indicator of parental income than it is academic performance (Schaeffer, 2012), so it must be asked what role this standardized technology plays in admissions decisions. Furthermore, given the secondary school landscape devoid of a standardized curriculum and plagued by non-standardized, school-specific grade scales, how accurate are application evaluations, relative to one another? What is the accuracy of yield estimates employed by admissions committee that might consider demonstrated interest as a factor in admissions decisions? How much insight is gained into the student's own decision-making process by tracking behavior and

interactions with the college's admissions officers? And finally, given the imperfect rates of retention, persistence, and graduation rates, students transferring from institutions, failing GPAs, changes in majors, and perhaps even underperforming athletes, to what extent are any technological tools used to inform admissions decisions clear and successful? In short, unclear technologies abound in the admissions environment. Many decisions and predictions are perhaps informed by simple observations from previous cycles—a process of trial-and-error and learning from past experiences.

Fluid Participation in Selective Admissions

The final property characterizing organized anarchies addresses participants' "amount of time and effort they devote to different domains," acknowledging that "involvement varies from one time to another" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1). Given fluctuating levels of available energy and time on task, organizational boundaries between tasks likewise fluctuate.

Though stated admissions policies and procedures persist from year-to-year, it is likely that individual participation in admissions decisions varies on a month-to-month, day-by-day, hour-to-hour basis. Application reading and evaluation processes require the input of many participants whose schedules place varying imperatives upon them on any given day. Likewise, committee deliberations fluidly evolve dependent upon the committee members present and actively engaged in the decision situation at hand. While standard operating procedures are in place to guide participants to decisions (hopefully in successful fashion as desirable solutions to the problems, preferences, and goals of the organization), the effects of time, attention, and energy may alter the impact these procedures have in any individual choice situation.

Choices or decisions arrived at on the first day of committee may deviate drastically from those reached on the final day of a two-week convening. Similarly, application evaluations are likely to evolve over the four-month or longer reading period, as exhaustion sets in and deadlines loom ever larger. Furthermore, some admissions decision-making models convene sub-committees over the course of several months, comprised of subsets of admissions officers and faculty members. With what certainty is it that these different groups will decide upon the like choice with any consistency across this period?

Selective Admissions Decision-Making Within the GCM

Having established that the three properties of organized anarchies are likely present in some of the admissions decision-making models presented by Rigol (2003) and Perfetto et al. (1999), it is possible to identify the four garbage can components streaming within an admissions committee at a selective college. These problems, solutions, participants, and choice opportunities are independent streams, and "a decision is an outcome or interpretation" arising from the interrelations among them (Cohen et al., 1972, pp. 2-3).

The first stream represents problems confronting the organization to which actors seek solutions: the preferences, goals, needs, and wants of the college's constituents in which members of the admissions committee are primarily interested in addressing. Problems are both internal and external to an admissions office. Internal problems are the competing institutional priorities at play detailed prior, and the optimization thereof, including ethnic and racial diversity; first-generation college-bound status; athletic, musical, and artistic talent; STEM proficiency; gender; geographic diversity; and,

institutional development. External problems are imposed by departments outside of the admissions unit—need- and merit-based aid budgets set by the office of finance; revenue and discount target rates set by the same; available on-campus housing set by residential life; targets for academic department enrollment set by the registrar; and, legacy interests (which is both internal and external).

Solutions represent the second stream within the garbage can. For selective liberal arts colleges, potential solutions exist within the application pool in a given year. Applicants are, in effect, "solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 2). These applicants may provide vital tuition dollars, help the admissions office meet diversity enrollment targets, or fill out athletic rosters with valuable talent. Some solutions may contribute to the band or orchestra, while others fill seats in art classes or spaces in the physics lab. Similarly, nonresident students offer geographical diversity, a solution to the problems of homogeneity and hedges against regional economic recessions. Of course, these students are defined by academic metrics such as standardized test results and GPAs, and as solutions, higher metrics translate to higher rankings. These are solutions to prestige problems within the marketplace. In short, as Stevens (2007) argued, "different kinds of assets coveted by schools are embedded inside each and every college applicant" (p. 226).

The third stream is made up of participants who "come and go," whose levels of participation vary dependent upon other demands exterior to the admissions decision-making process. Admissions officers enter the garbage can the moment that committee convenes, and their participation may ebb and flow until final decisions are released. They might not be fully present in evaluating any given application, or perhaps they are

distracted at the committee table by recent events or in advance of their own case presentations upcoming. Worse yet, maybe certain officers are periodically called from the committee table to attend to other business, resulting in temporary imbalances in power within the committee structure. In short, energy and time clearly impact the roles played by participants in decision situations.

Finally, choice opportunity streams "are occasions when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 3). This is the window of opportunity wherein problems, solutions, and participants align to arrive at a decision—offering admission individually and en masse to applicants whose personal qualities and individual attributes may address some of the many goals of the institution. Viewed individually without the benefit of context, choices may make little sense from the outside looking in. It thus becomes conceptually possible to see that a near infinite number of choice opportunities exist within an applicant pool of several thousand "solutions," each bearing numerous characteristics and thereby multiplying the pool of potential solutions further.

Intersection of the GCM and Admissions Decision-Making Literature

Karabel (2005) acknowledged Feldman (1975) in part for his understanding of the admissions process as driven by politics. However, Feldman's own approach suggested much more at play and deserves reconsideration. Indeed, she stated regarding her observations into the Harvard admissions office in 1970-71, "criteria for selection often seem ambiguous and their choices capricious" (Feldman, 1975, p. 2). Suggesting competing rationales to justify admissions decisions, such as admissions based on merit, auction, or lottery, Feldman stated that these alternative models would be inadequate

stand-alone policies because "they patently fail to accommodate conflicting institutional and social values" (p. 10). She continued: "Admissions decisions are supposed to reflect merit and protect privilege, to promote social mobility while they regulate access to positions of wealth and status in the society" (p. 10). Yet, no rule—simple or complex—can balance competing and at times adversarial ends. In turn, "multiple criteria allow admissions decisions to encompass a wider range of interests than any single criterion of admission" (p. 14). As a result:

> Harvard defends its right to choose its undergraduates on the basis of a wide variety of cultural, social, economic, personal and academic characteristics despite (or because of) the fact that such considerations invest the admissions committee with broad discretionary powers and obscure its policies in ambiguity. (p. 14)

Feldman (1975) does not seem to describe the unfolding of a political process in the hands of the admissions committee members. In fact, she concluded that something altogether different explained Harvard admissions decisions: the discretion of the committee to balance competing priorities:

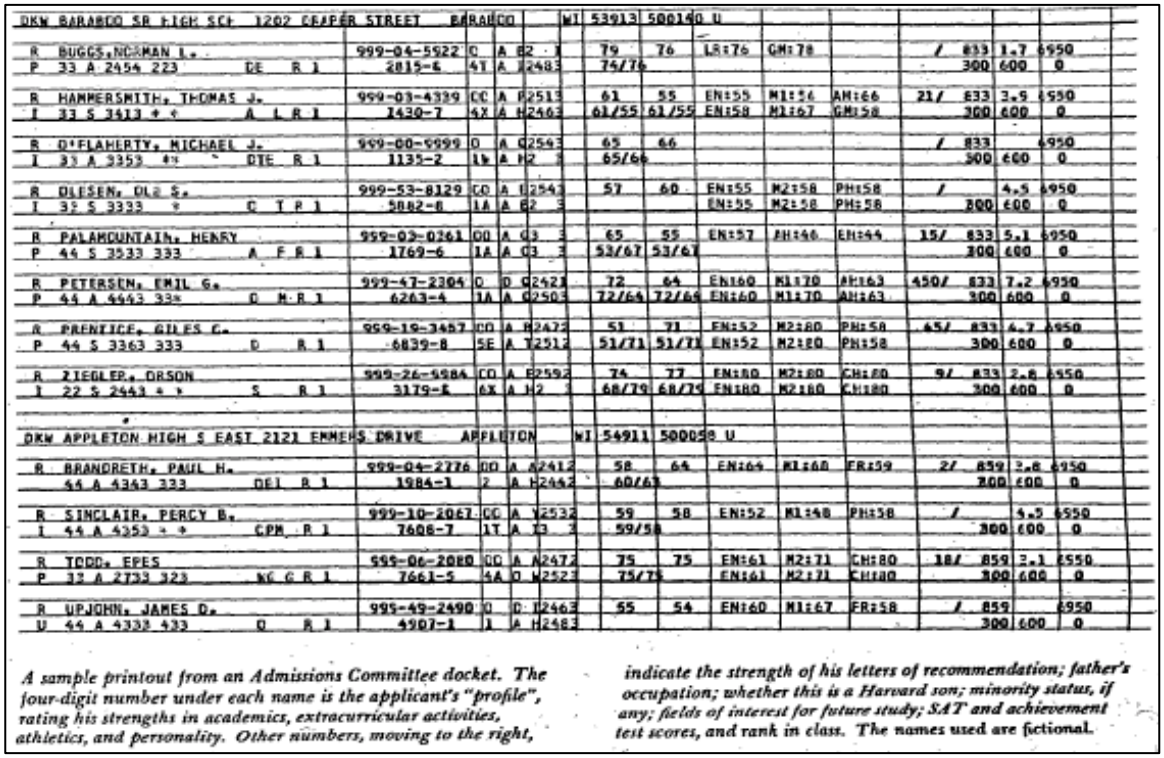
> The basic purpose of Harvard's admissions policy is to allow the admissions committee to select the best applicants possible within a set of financial and political constraints that sometimes appear to dictate decisions which deviate from the committee's definition of excellence. (p. 145)

Politics were but one consideration—in Feldman's analysis, politics were a bounding factor to the agency of the admissions committee members, playing much the same role as budgetary concerns.

A 1975 *Harvard Today* article by Frances D. Fisher echoed many of Feldman's observations. In fact, "A Day and a Half in the Harvard Admissions Office" described a process that strongly suggested elements of the garbage can model at play. Fisher (1975), director of Harvard's Office of Career Services and Off-Campus Learning, was afforded

the opportunity to observe meetings of the Harvard Admissions Committee as it made decisions on the Class of 1978. He walked away "impressed with the variety of factors that were kept under consideration" (p. 12) throughout deliberations, concluding "that if there was a hidden agenda," he did not discover it. In his estimation, the "tests" applied to each applicant "seemed good ones: variety, excellence, the estimate that Harvard would contribute much to the individual and he to Harvard" (p. 12). It is challenging to attain problematic preferences and satisfy such goals, ambiguous in their definition, given technologies to gauge excellence and the broad vector of personal characteristics encompassed in the applicants' variety. How did the committee evaluate and prioritize "variety" and "excellence," and in what arenas were applicants expected to exhibit these characteristics? Is there an accurate means of calculating future contributions to the university, or to estimate the impact the university will have upon the student in the coming four years?

After spending twenty minutes on the fate of one applicant—in a year in which Harvard received approximately 7,500 applications—Fisher "began to wonder how we were ever going to finish the process" (p. 11). Time and energy were clearly at play. "Perhaps a third of those who were not in the running could be determined solely from a review of the docket, but in the day and a half that [he] was present," Fisher estimated, "[they] must have spent over half an hour on at least four cases and close to that amount of time on many others" (p. 12). The docket to which Fisher (1975) referred is a printed binder that summarizes each applicant by an intricate number system, included as *Figure 2*.



DKW BARABOO SR HIGH SCH 1202 CRAPER STREET BARABOO WI 53913 500140 U

R BUGGS,NORMAN L.	999-04-5922	O	A B2	1	79	76	LR:76	GM:78		/	833	1.7	6950
P 33 A 2454 223 DE R 1	2815-4	4T	A	2483	74/76						300	600	0
R HAMMERSMITH, THOMAS J.	999-03-4339	CO	A	2513	61	55	EN:55	M1:54	AH:66	21/	833	3.9	6950
I 33 S 3413 + + A L R 1	1430-7	4X	A	2463	61/55	61/55	EN:58	M1:67	GM:58		300	600	0
R O'FLAHERTY, MICHAEL J.	999-00-9999	O	A	2543	65	66				/	833		6950
I 33 A 3353 ++ DTE R 1	1135-2	1k	A	H2	65/66						300	600	0
R OLESEN, OLE S.	999-53-8129	CO	A	2543	57	60	EN:55	M2:58	PH:58	/		4.5	6950
I 33 S 3333 + C T R 1	5882-8	1A	A	B2			EN:55	M2:58	PH:58		300	600	0
R PALAMOUNTAIN, HENRY	999-03-0261	CO	A	G3	65	55	EN:57	AH:46	EN:44	15/	833	5.1	6950
P 44 S 3533 333 A F R 1	1769-6	1A	A	G3	53/67	53/67					300	600	0
R PETERSEN, EMIL G.	999-47-2304	O	D	G2423	72	64	EN:60	M1:70	AH:63	450/	833	7.2	6950
P 44 A 4443 33+ O M R 1	6263-4	1A	A	G2503	72/64	72/66	EN:60	M1:70	AH:63		300	600	0
R PRENTICE, GILES C.	999-19-3457	CO	A	M2472	51	71	EN:52	M2:80	PH:58	45/	833	4.7	6950
P 44 S 3363 333 D R 1	6839-8	SE	A	T2512	51/71	51/71	EN:52	M2:80	PH:58		300	600	0
R ZIEGLER, ORSON	999-26-9984	CO	A	B2592	74	77	EN:80	M2:80	CH:80	9/	833	2.8	6950
I 22 S 2443 + + S R 1	3179-E	6X	A	M2	68/79	68/79	EN:80	M2:80	CH:80		300	600	0
DKW APPLETON HIGH S EAST 2121 EMMERS DRIVE APPLETON WI 54911 500050 U													
R BRANDRETH, PAUL H.	999-04-2776	OO	A	A2412	58	64	EN:64	M1:68	FR:59	27	859	2.8	6950
44 A 4343 333 DEI R 1	1984-1	2	A	H2462	60/63						300	600	0
R SINCLAIR, PERCY B.	999-10-2067	CO	A	V2532	59	58	EN:52	M1:48	PH:58	/		4.3	6550
I 44 A 4353 + + CPM R 1	7608-7	1T	A	J3	59/58						300	600	0
R TODD, EPES	999-06-2080	CO	A	A2472	75	75	EN:61	M2:71	CH:80	18/	859	2.1	6550
P 33 A 2733 323 NC G R 1	7661-5	4A	O	W2523	75/75		EN:61	M2:71	CH:80		300	600	0
R UPJOHN, JAMES D.	999-49-2490	O	D	H2463	55	54	EN:60	M1:67	FR:58	/	859		6950
U 44 A 4333 433 O R 1	4907-1	1	A	H2483							300	600	0

A sample printout from an Admissions Committee docket. The four-digit number under each name is the applicant's "profile", rating his strengths in academics, extracurricular activities, athletics, and personality. Other numbers, moving to the right, indicate the strength of his letters of recommendation; father's occupation; whether this is a Harvard son; minority status, if any; fields of interest for future study; SAT and achievement test scores, and rank in class. The names used are fictional.

Figure 2: Harvard Docket Example from Fisher (1975)

While this may not be precisely what March (1994) had in mind in his conception of magic numbers, it undoubtedly suggests unclear technologies, as committee members were challenged to capture the individual characteristics associated with each applicant across of a series of otherwise seemingly meaningless numbers. It is also interesting in light of Posselt's (2014) invocation of Klitgaard (1985) and the "magic simplicity" of test scores in graduate admissions. And, these technologies are enacted by committee members who work in service to problematic preferences: preferences that are important enough to garner their own number on the docket, including academic strength, extracurricular activities, athletics, personality, recommendation letters, father's

occupation, legacy status, ethnicity/race, career plans, board scores, and GPA (Fisher, 1975, p. 11).

Some historical research provides evidence of garbage can decision-making at play within Harvard prior to Fisher (1975), and in fact, predates the GCM itself. In her thorough history documenting the emergence of selective admissions practices at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, Synnott (1979) drew extensively upon institutional archives to complete her narrative. Her sourcing included original material from Harvard, in which elements of the garbage can model are suggested in the professional reflections of William J. Bender, Harvard College dean of admissions from 1952 to 1960. Synnott (1979) drew from Bender's correspondence files to describe the difficulty in identifying whom among the deserving and, to an extent, the undeserving, should be admitted to Harvard. Being all male at the time, Harvard's admissions office had to weigh costs and benefits associated with seven distinct student profiles, upon which the "success" of undergraduate enrollment hinged. These included:

> alumni sons; Greater Boston social and financial upper-bracket families; those from selected private schools; sons of successful business and professional men who usually had attended other colleges or perhaps one of Harvard's graduate or professional schools; able, ambitious boys on scholarship from other parts of the country often the only representative from their school; and, the sons of middle- and lower-income families from eastern Massachusetts, including commuters. (Synnott, 1979, p. 206)

Bender argued at the time that admissions decisions should not be decided on a small set of criteria such as tests and grades alone. Rather, "factors of alumni loyalty and financial support, relations with feeder schools, geographical representation, and local goodwill had also to be considered" (p. 206). Financial contributions as well as political considerations impacted decisions: "three-fourths of the students must be 'paying

customers'; at the same time, a number of Cambridge and Boston-area applicants had to be admitted for 'political considerations'" (p 206). Some students would be admitted because they deserved the opportunity and had earned their place in the class. Others would be admitted because Harvard needed the money, and yet others because it was the politically astute move.

Further complicating the decision-making landscape were ancillary concerns from external and internal groups. Alumni were active in shared recruitment efforts. Bender felt that "not only should a certain percentage of alumni sons be accepted…but alumni efforts at recruitment should be rewarded by taking their most promising candidates, especially when they resided in the South and West" (p. 207). And he was equally convinced that admitting students of athletic talent served Harvard well: "competitive, if not winning, teams improved Harvard's image nationally and maintained alumni enthusiasm" (p. 207). Bender did not express concern at accusations or suspicions that the Harvard admissions process preferenced certain individuals (or more accurately their characteristics) over others; his concern was with defining the limits such preferences should play in the respective decisions (p. 207). Multiple, competing goals of the organization sought solutions within the applicant pool. It was unnecessary to be abashed by the reality that certain students were admitted for non-academic reasons. Bender's only worry was that too many decisions might consume the process. Indeed, Harvard's story is not an exception, and the GCM finds strong support at Yale.

Projecting the GCM onto Observations at Yale

A *New Yorker* staff writer spent several months with members of the Yale University admissions office as it shaped the 1961 incoming class. First published as a

long article, Kinkead's (1961) *How an Ivy League College Decides on Admissions* was extended into a book, offered as "heartening" insight into "an individual and personal process" (p. 6). A journalistic inquiry and never portrayed as empirical research, the book did not venture to proffer any theories in explanation for what was recorded. Infrequently cited—though Karen (1985) did include Kinkead in his dissertation references—Kinkead benefits from a rereading through the lens of the GCM. Indeed, the book as a whole offers an ideal application of the model, as time and again what was described by Kinkead finds meaning within the ambiguity and happenstance of the garbage can, as choice opportunities arise within committee deliberations.

The sections that follow break down the various components of the garbage can model interpreted in Kinkead (1961) and attempt to categorize vignettes in a manner consistent with expectations of the model. Certain offers of admission to Yale University for the incoming freshman class of 1961 were perhaps easily explained as politically, rationally, or economically justified within the context of the university's goals at that time. Yet none of these theories explain *every* decision to admit or deny individuals to the class, nor *how* the decision-making process unfolded and occurred in the moment.

Likewise, the garbage can model does not explain all such decisions; in fact, some individual decisions may make more sense when viewed as a political concession, for example. It is important to recall the caution of the model's authors on the characteristics of an organized anarchy here: "They are characteristic of any organization in part—part of the time" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1). However, when attempting to understand other decisions within the context of thousands of decisions executed by the committee on behalf of the university, only the garbage can model accounts for problems, solutions,

participants, and choice opportunities within the organized anarchy defined by problematic preferences, unclear technologies, and fluid participation (Cohen et al., 1972). Each component receives individual attention in the coming pages drawn from Kinkead (1961).

Yale's Solutions, Problems, and Problematic Preferences

Central to Kinkead's (1961) work was Arthur Howe, Jr., Dean of Admissions and Director of Yale's Office of Admissions and Freshman Scholarships. His insights were invaluable to setting the scene for Kinkead; likewise, Howe's description of the terms of the decision-making process is critical to this analysis. Within the organized anarchy of the selective college admissions office, actors were likely to be bounded by budgetary and housing concerns. Despite the prestige of the Ivy League, Yale in 1961 was not an exception to such constraints. Howe reported to Kinkead, "the only university restrictions under which the group operates are those limiting the class size and those stipulating the amount of money available for scholarships, loans, and jobs" (p. 82). Howe and his colleagues were free to admit students as they saw fit as long as the financial aid budget was met and there were ample beds available.

However, the problems facing Yale and the admissions committee were fluid, varying from year to year, and indeed, it can be argued, case-by-case. Different needs of the university may arise periodically and demand attention: missing tuba players for the band, a starting quarterback, or ample numbers of physics measures to justify departmental support levels. As soon as that star musician or accomplished quarterback is admitted, the problem effectually disappears, satisfied by the solution. Acknowledging

what may seem to be fuzzy logic (Weick & Daft, 1983) when viewed from an external vantage point, yet certainly striking of problematic preferences, Howe shared:

> It's practically impossible for us to say anything about admissions these days without sounding either smug or obscure. From time to time a college may get out of balance and have special needs or problems that are temporarily reflected in its admission policy. (p. 16)

Put simply, problems arise for which the organization seeks solutions. Once the solution has offered itself to the problem, it is incumbent upon the decision-maker to act upon the window of opportunity and meet the organization goal, pairing the solution to the problem. With the problem overcome, other preferences of the organization gain attention.

Howe's notion of "balance" did not apply solely to the current composition of the student body; the university may have allowed itself inadvertently to overlook certain goals or stakeholder desires. In some instances, Howe said, decisions on average applicants:

> depend not only on their personalities and their scholastic credentials but on the geographical and educational diversity of their backgrounds…on the need for strengthening existing links with schools or alumni groups, or establishing new ones; and, in a good number of cases, on whether the applicant's father happens to be a Yale alumnus. (p. 54)

Students may have gained an offer of admission because some variable component of their application met one or more of the competing goals (preferences) of the organization: a geographically diverse class, prioritizing first-generation college-bound students, filling esoteric or sparsely enrolled majors, building relationships with important secondary schools, or maintaining a supportive base of alumni and their prospective donations. The decision may have been justified in context of the competing

preferences of the organization and the available solutions within the choice set of the applicant pool in the given year.

At other times, it may be precisely the characteristics a student presents that garner an offer of admission. The university desired a heterogeneous class with varied interests, backgrounds, and experiences. Problematically, this likely required an intensive, time-consuming, and costly search. Howe, speaking on the problematic preferences and goal ambiguity of Yale, said:

> A favorite word around here is 'diversity.' First of all, we believe that our student body should be drawn from more than the five per cent of American families who can afford Yale. We know that a quarter of the country's highly talented youngsters never go to college, and one of our big jobs is to find some of these, interest them in Yale, and give them financial help if they need it. (p. 27)

Yale desired to enroll an accomplished and broadly talented class of varied talents, and the committee was dedicated to seeking out possible solutions wherever they may be: "What we're really after is diversity of talent and interest—boys with the unusual flair. They may be found in our back yard as well as in Sitka, Alaska" (p. 27).

Despite a sufficiently deep pool of applicants standing as solutions to the problems facing Yale's admissions committee, certain solutions may have escaped matching to a problem at Yale; these students will have instead chosen to enroll at one of Yale's competitors. The Yale committee cannot have known the preferences of its applicants, nor could members be absolutely certain where else students had applications pending or would eventually be admitted. As Kinkead (1961) stated:

> …the admissions men very often have no way of discovering how many other colleges each applicant is trying for, nor have they any way of knowing, after they have spent months poring over qualifications and culling their lists, how many of the students they decide to admit actually

> intend to come to their college, or how many of the brilliant, needy youths whom they attempt to lure with scholarships will rise to the bait. (p. 15)

Thus, the committee members were bounded in their ability to behave rationally, limited by what they could know for certain and by the actions of both students and other organizations, members of their institutional field. Preferences and problems were just as ambiguous as goals. Choice opportunities were lost when students deposited elsewhere or withdrew applications.

Unclear Technologies at Yale

Early in her work, Kinkead (1961) sat with Howe to gather an understanding of his conceptualization of the work he did on behalf of Yale. Acknowledging that the means of student application evaluation were imprecise, Howe stated, "…we hurt more people than we can ever please. And because we must constantly make judgments and predictions about the characters and future contributions of human beings, we make mistakes" (p. 21). How precisely do committees evaluate what teenagers might become? How can admissions professionals clearly gauge character, and who serves as arbiter to determine what personal characteristics are more or less desirable? Howe added more at a later point that also speaks to problematic preferences:

> Actually, in judging a boy's academic ability, we give less weight to test scores than we do to his four-year high-school record. Besides, academic ability is only half of the matter; the other half is what we call promise as a person. You could sum up what we're after as brains *and* character. We don't put either one first. (p. 25, emphasis in original)

What is the appropriate characteristic mix or balance between "brains" and "character"? Is there a universal tool for estimating character? Illustrating the inefficiencies of unclear technologies employed by the admissions officers, Howe continued:

> If high academic ability were the only criterion, we would have to eliminate quite a few future Presidents of the country and great college teachers, to say nothing of the boys of sterling personal quality Yale would be a poor place without. But high intelligence combined with imagination, vitality, a concern for others, and a capacity for growth—those are the things we're looking for. (p. 25)

If a more rational bureaucratic process were in effect, it would likely have excluded the very national leaders the university so desperately hopes to educate. In what would be described in other models as irrational, the admissions committee willingly sacrificed academic talent for qualities that enhance the life of the university.

At times, decision-making windows of opportunity seemingly opened at Yale when certain applicants were identified; yet, unclear technologies left the success of the solution-problem pairing in doubt. Howe reflected on occasional decisions to admit certain students on financial aid, and its impact on the student and his experience in the Yale community, as yet unknown to the committee members:

> Sometimes we have to decide whether giving such aid is creating opportunity or causing injury. Take a boy, for instance, from a backward community or an uneducated family. Does he have the stamina to make the often painful adjustment to this highly articulate, sophisticated student body? And can he do it quickly enough to bring out his real distinction or will the academic and social competition here kill him before he gets off the ground? Those are some of the questions we have to ask ourselves. (p. 27)

It was unclear if the possible solution before the committee—a desirable candidate because he met many of the expressed preferences of the university—would meet with success and progress through to degree or give rise to other problems such as declines in retention and graduation rates. Certainly, it would be irrational to deny such a student if technologies existed to indicate he would succeed. However, in the absence of such precise evaluation tools, decision makers were left to chance, instinct, and learned experience, their rationality bounded and contextual (March, 1978).

In an effort to improve informational and material input into the decision-making process, Yale introduced its "University Committee on Enrollment and Scholarships" in 1943. Coordinated at the time by Waldo Johnston, the principal alumni liaison, this committee included some eleven hundred Yale alumni distributed across the country responsible for interviewing three thousand applicants annually (p. 55). Kinkead (1961) quoted Johnston in what can be read as an effort by Yale to reduce its unclear technologies employed in evaluating possible solutions to the problematic preferences the admissions office faced:

> …the committee was started after we found ourselves admitting too many boys who were well qualified from the academic point of view but not from any other. Of course, we do want outstanding scholars, but how are we to find out more about the *spirit* of a candidate—the selflessness, integrity, and honesty that are so badly needed in this day of false ideals? It's in making this sort of judgment of candidates that the alumni interviewers fill an important need. (p. 55)

Yale purposefully moved to exponentially expand its information-gathering efforts via character evaluative interviews. Effectively, Yale's administrators embraced the reality that it was a multicephalous organization (Weick, 1976) to realize the benefit of more evaluative heads involved in decision making. Interestingly enough, this adaptation necessitated its own subsequent interpretation, as alumni allowed personal biases to color their evaluations, rendering their contributions unclear to varying degree:

> We realize that such judgments are very hard to make, and naturally the alumni vary sharply in their skill at making them. But we come to know each interviewer's prejudices and predilections pretty well, and are able to make allowances for them. (alumni liaison Johnston, quoted in Kinkead, 1961, p. 55)

When Kinkead was afforded the opportunity to observe committee discussions, she witnessed the effect of unclear technologies at play as members debated the

worthiness of students—each applicant a potential solution to the myriad competing problems and preferences. Time constraints, available attention, and energy affected the ultimate outcome as a function of inefficient, imprecise, and ineffective technologies:

> Another prolonged disagreement had arisen over the candidacy of a boy from a small fundamentalist religious sect known for its rigid customs and outlook. Debate went on for an hour and a half over whether the youngster could adjust to Yale without a profound shock to his equilibrium. (p. 89)

The absence of a clear technology contributed to the time expended on one decision among thousands, taxing the attention and energy of the decision-makers. Notably, the student under consideration was ultimately admitted, though it required a bureaucratic action as Howe, acting as chairman of the admissions committee, called for a vote.

Even elements of the evaluation that seemingly should operate more clearly and objectively Kinkead (1961) observed to be rather opaque. Interpreting student grades and standardizing them to a common term was an arduous and involved process:

> There are at least forty different grading patterns [Associate Professor and director of the Office of Educational Research Paul] Burnham's office has to contend with, not to mention each school's interpretation of its pattern. Not only do some institutions have passing grades of 75 and others of 50, but an E can mean in turn excellent, passing, or failing. There are systems running A, B, C, D, and E, and E, D, C, B, and A, as well as numerical schemes of from 1 to 5 and from 5 to 1. (p. 47)

Burnham's office was responsible, in effect, for interpreting the environment upon which Yale depended to fulfill its many missions. Grading styles varied wildly:

> Certain schools give letter grades for examinations and numerical grades for term marks, and others reverse the procedure. Some use percentiles; an occasional one finds a pupil's work satisfactory or unsatisfactory according to his potential or to his classmates' achievements; and a few rate students into fifths on a group scale. Missouri stands by E, S, M, and G; the French have a scale of from 1 to 20; one establishment settles for plain Good and Bad; and English applicants to Yale often present the results of their Cambridge University matriculating examination, which are so esoteric Burnham's office is unable to process them. Most of these many patterns

> are further complicated by the use of plus or minus to the extent even, in one instance, of a 1 minus rating higher than 1 plus. (pp. 47-48)

Perhaps somewhat a literal interpretation, but in effect, Kinkead witnessed the organization actively sense-making to gain a more accurate understanding of inputs available to it. As Weick and Daft (1983) suggested, "Interpretation systems try to make sense of the flowing, changing, equivocal chaos that constitutes the sum total of the external environment" (p. 78). Misinterpreting the environmental supply chain threatens the performance of the organization: if ill-prepared students are mistakenly admitted, vital outcome measurements such as retention, graduation, and student learning might suffer.

Burnham's interpretations informed the calculation of a "School Grade Adjusted," or S.G.A., which was factored into a regression along with College Board examination results to predict a student's grades in his first year at Yale (Kinkead, 1961, p. 48). This predicted college GPA appeared on the printed docket to inform decision-making, included below as *Figure 3*. The similarities to Harvard's system are notable, and the same observations, it can be argued, apply as to unclear technologies and potentially magic numbers.

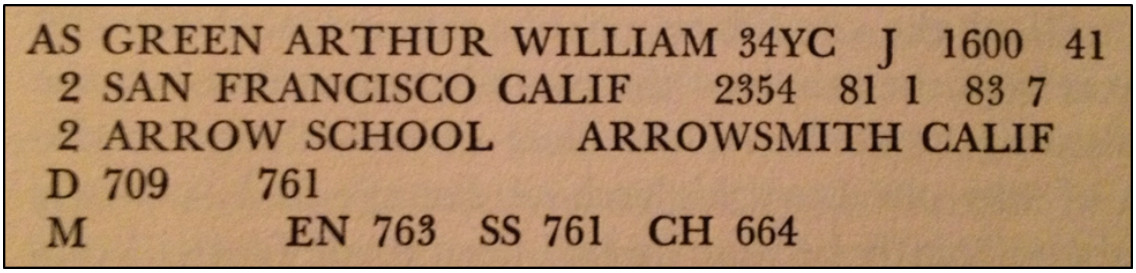

AS GREEN ARTHUR WILLIAM 34YC J 1600 41
2 SAN FRANCISCO CALIF 2354 81 1 83 7
2 ARROW SCHOOL ARROWSMITH CALIF
D 709 761
M EN 763 SS 761 CH 664

Figure 3: Excerpt from Yale's Docket (Kinkead, 1961)

The accuracy of this predicted first year grade point average was unclear, at best, because it required personal knowledge of the context in which each applicant had studied in secondary school, no small feat in 1961: "There were 1,753 boys…applying from schools about whose standards Yale was well-informed, and 2,253 boys from schools about which it had little or no experience. Burnham had been able to make predictions for 4,006 of the candidates" (p. 85). Despite best efforts, Burnham and his staff were bounded in their ability to craft a clear and accurate evaluation technology (March, 1978).

Kinkead (1961) experienced frustration and confusion as she learned of committee decisions on a few particular applicants for whom she had been able to read applications in full. An admissions officer and Associate Freshman Dean, Ernest F. Thompson, was sympathetic to her expressed perplexity. He effectively summarized his own impression of the vague process in which he annually participated:

> Even after years of experience, you sometimes have the nasty feeling that you could take all the thousands of work cards—except those for the five hundred students at the top of the list and the five hundred at the bottom, whose ratings nobody could honestly question—and you could throw them down the stairs, pick up any thousand, and produce as good a class as the one that will come out of the committee meeting. (p. 69)

Of the 4,760 applicants that year, Thompson estimated that 1,000 of the decisions were straightforward and rationally explicable.[4] That left roughly 3,760 decisions on students that were just as likely via random chance to fulfill the broadly defined class characteristics the Yale admissions office had hoped to enroll. Within the garbage can model, the pool of applicants offered a minimum of 3,760 potential solutions, each bearing multiple characteristics of interest to the committee, to meet the 1,109 problems

[4] The discrepancy between Burnham's calculations and Howe's final tally is due to incomplete, late, or withdrawn applications.

facing Yale.[5] Decisions could be left to random distribution, cast upon a staircase, or solutions and problems could be opportunistically matched as windows of opportunity arose, across the stream of committee deliberations.

Elsewhere in Kinkead (1961), Howe provided more perspective on the interplay of problematic preferences and unclear technologies. He proposed three hypothetical choice scenarios to Kinkead to describe how he framed his own internal debate. First, Howe hypothetically juxtaposed two students:

> the lad with the high average and the good, sound personality who is going to do well as an undergraduate but never do very much afterward, or the boy who is a B-minus student in secondary school but may later catch fire intellectually—though perhaps not till graduate school—and never stop growing. (p. 26)

The second choice set involved choosing between "the millionaire's son who is rather supercilious now and is only mediocre academically but will one day fall heir to the means of doing great good for society, or the grade-hound" (p. 26). Finally, Howe proposed a third option:

> the honor-roll boy who has been 'motivated,' because his parents have been pushing him since infancy, and who has had good teaching, but whose aptitude tests suggest that his abilities are only mediocre? He's already reached his academic peak, so in his freshman year here he would be bound to level out and go down… (p. 26)

These decision scenarios demanded the committee choose between high input metrics versus high output metrics, where output metrics were nothing more than opinionated guesses. There was no guarantee that the first "lad" would not amount to much after Yale, and there was no accurate prediction tool suggesting that his counterpart would

[5] Yale admitted 1,609 applicants for the incoming freshman class in the fall of 1961. Taking Thompson's rough estimation that 500 admit decisions were sufficiently straightforward to be made without committee deliberation, the balance of 1,109 remains. In addition, 289 students were strong enough to make a waitlist, in hopes that they might solve an unforeseen problem as other solutions melt away over summer.

"catch fire." Similarly, there was no guarantee that the millionaire would do anything positive with his fortune, or that the grade-hound would not mature into a genuinely curious scholar. And, perhaps the final honor-roll boy would truly blossom once freed from the relentless drive of his parents. The committee would prefer to execute decisions that unequivocally meet the goals of the university, but the technologies required to do such did not exist—in 1961, or today. Richard Moll, a Yale staff member, effectively summarized the conundrum facing the admissions office at that time:

> just as we can't always predict the failures, we can't always predict the geniuses. We can tell what ability-level group is likely to produce a genius, but not which boy in it will have the stability or the itch, the unhappiness or the happiness, or whatever it takes to keep him sweating until he creates something great. (p. 37)

Technologies were unclear and futures unpredictable. Decision-makers, despite best efforts to consistently and accurately measure applicants' potential, faced considerable ambiguity to do so as they searched through the applicant pool. And, they were forced to arrive at decisions by demands of the calendar.

Fluid Participation, Time, and Energy at Yale

Despite Kinkead's success in gaining access to Yale's admissions office, and the forthright nature of her interactions with members of the office, time constraints limited her ability to conduct interviews. Explaining the training process required of new members, indicative of the value of expertise required by the organization to make effective decisions, Howe stated:

> We break in our new people by having them read folders for several solid months. After they've been with us about three years, they get so they can average ten or fifteen an hour. This year, I've given instructions that we must be unusually tough in our ratings, because the competition is stiffer than ever. I'm worried to death for fear we'll be stuck with too many A candidates. It's going to be murder to cut them down. We spend two days

> before the meeting roughly totaling up what we have. Then the committee always knocks down a few boys and moves up considerably more. And of course, that means even *more* cutting back at the very end. (p. 69)

Kinkead's questioning was cut short because time was so scarce: "He added that no one on the staff could spare the time just then to answer any questions I might have…" (p. 69). The effects of available time devoted to the evaluative task were undeniable. The time required for effective committee deliberations necessitated particularly close attention be paid during application reading; more time and energy had to be expended earlier in the decision-making process such that the final decisions making stages could be completed on an actionable timeline.

Nearly four decades would pass before a comparable inquiry to that of Kinkead was conducted in terms of depth and length of time. Stevens (2007) embedded himself as a participant observer within the admissions office of a highly selective liberal arts college in the northeastern U.S. for the 2000-2001 academic year identified only as "the College." His ethnography allows for a content analysis of a modernized decision-making process in which the GCM is strongly suggested as tenable.

Reading an Ethnography Through the GCM

According to Stevens (2007), information asymmetry between socioeconomic classes creates an inherent advantage in college admissions for those students with greater resources (p. 83). Additionally, those students who have advocates in the process, including "family wealth, trustee connections, official minority status, and athletic skill" (p. 227), are advantaged in the college admissions process. Stevens (2007) described the admissions office's search for admission students at the College as a "deceptively complex information problem" (p. 76), and the admissions committee, the locus where

the actual decision is made, as the instance where “all of the many exigencies that officers are charged with managing get explicitly negotiated” (p. 185).

The application reading and rating procedures informed the storytelling process so that the committee could craft its desired class based upon the characteristics embodied by those admitted to the class (p. 191). This process Stevens described was marked by ambiguity as admissions officers boiled down the numerous data points of interest, generating tens of thousands of data points for an applicant pool of such depth. The end result for each applicant was a completed “pink sheet” that “represented virtually every asset of an applicant that mattered to the College” (p. 196). Stevens observed, “A story could be told about a kid on the basis of the pink sheet alone” (p. 197).

The pink sheet provides a helpful glimpse into what characteristics factored into committee deliberations at the College: “they contained most, but not all, of the information that was the basis for final decisions” (p. 197). Stevens recorded the following variables present on the pink sheets: grades; class rank; test scores; “fairly detailed information about high school transcripts and extracurricular activities”; parents’ educational backgrounds and occupations; number of siblings in college and the names of their schools; race/ethnicity; whether or not financial aid applications have been processed; content and quality of personal essays; summarizations of recommendations letters from teachers and counselors; high school name and percentage of graduates to four-year colleges; athletic ratings; and, legacy status. This list speaks to the unclear technology involved in holistic review when so many qualitative and quantitative aspects are considered for students from such varied backgrounds. It also suggests the breadth of preferences the committee might choose to balance in its deliberations.

The most important numbers on an applicant's pink sheet were the "fin" rating, or *financial aid* score. A fin rating summarized the academic and personal performance of each applicant and was comprised of sub-ratings for the two sides of each applicant. In effect, these fin ratings served as functional magic numbers for the admissions committee (March, 1994), encompassing the near countless attributes of each applicant into a few numbers: a final average of multiple aspects of each application folder, shorthand summaries of the "vital characteristics of applications" (Stevens, 2007, p. 196). Academic ratings included estimations for the academic context and performance of each student, including the quality of the applicant's high school, the strength of the student's curriculum, grades, rank in class, and SAT/ACT scores. Personal ratings summarized the extracurricular accomplishments of each applicant (pp. 191-192).

Context was critical even if technology to assay the quality of an applicant's secondary school was unclear. High school quality was "a proxy for a school's academic caliber, on the presumption that the higher the number, the more likely the school was to offer a rigorous college preparatory curriculum and to have an academically-oriented school culture" (p. 192). It was an imperfect adaptation to provide evaluative context to the problem of measuring the performance metrics of thousands of secondary schools while lacking the time or technology to do so.

Though the academic rating included a score for class rank, Stevens documented instances where this statistic was not provided by the student's high school. In such cases, he was forced "to guess" (p. 195) and create a rating without appropriate contextual information. The unclear technologies involved in calculating fin ratings became more

ambiguous as individual actors were forced to invent as to a defensibly correct surrogate value.

Stevens continued to describe his calculations for one particular student's personal rating, one whom he had met while traveling on behalf of the college. Stevens admitted that he purposefully "overestimated" this rating in particular, his evaluation biased by "memories of the nice counselor and the nice campus under the trees" (p. 196). His decision-making was cognitively biased in favor of this applicant relative to the applicant pool for entirely irrelevant, personal reasons. If allowed to stand, this commitment to action by the organization, wholly unprogrammable as a personal preference, would be nearly impossible to predict.

Stevens included an insightful quote from Susan Latterly, a pseudonym assigned to the administrative director of the admissions office under study, describing the final review process involved in crafting the class. She said:

> …what you have to do is go back through and visit the kids getting aid and see who we need to let go…And then after that we spend some time going over the admits trying to make sure that we have enough singers and enough athletes and enough whatevers, talking to the coaches and seeing what we've done with them—just really checking to make sure we've covered what we want. (pp. 223-224)

From her statement it may be observed that student characteristics were thought of as solutions to the college's problems—what the college wanted in the incoming class and the competing priorities it strove to balance in each group of first-year students. She described a fluid decision-making scenario in which the status of prior decisions were in flux, dependent upon how well solutions have been matched to problems. Decisions could be subject to change if too many solutions were identified and admitted to meet a particular demand; conversely, certain students deemed undeserving of an admit earlier in

deliberations may move to admit status if the committee realized their oversight and reversed course.

Perhaps the most striking decision-making observed by Stevens were those decisions to admit applicants based upon the "Rule of One Pick." Comparable to the wild card model as identified by Rigol (2003), this rule "entitled each of them [admissions officers] to choose a single candidate for admission entirely at their own discretion" (Stevens, 2007, p. 225). Each committee member, including the most junior and inexperienced novices, was empowered to make one decision on behalf of the entire organization with complete independence. Stevens argued the rule was special because it "momentarily suspended all of the exigencies that otherwise constrained officers' discretion" (p. 227). It is perhaps more interesting to consider the rule from an organizational perspective, however, given the ambiguity introduced into the decision-making process as a result. In each admitted class, some small percentage of students will have been admitted (and, in some cases, funded) solely by one individual actor's discretion. The reason(s) compelling the organization's commitment to action in these instances may vary wildly according to the motivations or personal goals and priorities of each individual admission officer. Moreover, the rule of one pick can be interpreted as an organizational adaptation to reconcile potential conflicts between the competing preferences (goals) of decision-makers and their organizations (March 1994). It is perhaps a conciliatory gesture, a result of negotiating power between admission officers as a reward for suffering through the struggles of rejection in the highly selective environment.

Stevens (2007) noted the dearth of empirical qualitative research on college admissions while highlighting the depth of "workplace memoirs," insider or journalistic accounts intended to pull back the curtain and reveal the true inner workings of admissions offices. This body of related literature offers valuable insight into the machinations of the admissions processes at selective institutions. At the same time, passages from these accounts suggest substantial ambiguity regarding the decision-making process as well as characteristic elements of the GCM at play.

Viewing Other Admissions Accounts Through the GCM Lens

One of the earliest such efforts by Greene and Minton (1975) drew upon the authors' collective experiences as a college admissions officer and a high school guidance counselor. Speaking to the spectrum of interests in which colleges have an interest, they said, "Fair Harvard has room for running backs as well as walking encyclopedias like Henry Kissinger, and the admissions office must see to both needs" (p. 71). They included excerpted "reports on admission" from several colleges at the end of their work, but it is the *Admission to Amherst College in 1973* statement that provides a most convincing testament to the ambiguous nature of the admissions process.

The Amherst report stated that admissions officers actively sorted for "something extra" in each of the applicants once deemed admissible by academic standards. Amherst defined "something extra" at the time to include:

> demonstrated intellectual brilliance above and beyond marks and test scores; scholarly achievement in some field; keen interest and achievement in the offerings of an underpopulated department at the College; corroborated talent in art, drama, music, writing or sports; sincere social commitment; the extent of the candidate's interest in Amherst; membership in a minority group or an underrepresented socio-economic class (i.e. blue collar or working class background); being the son of an alumnus or a

> faculty or staff member; unusual background or experience; geography; our relationship with a particular school. (p. 251)

These "something extras" are accounted for in a process of holistic review, and broadly reflect the institution's priorities, goals, and preferences to be met within an admitted class of students. In effect, institutional goals are operationalized in the characteristics of each applicant; as Stevens (2007) stated, "different kinds of assets coveted by schools are embedded inside each and every college applicant" (p. 226). An applicant's "something extra" presents an opportunity for decision-makers to match solutions to the priorities swirling before committee members, all competing for attention. The statement concluded with a powerful acknowledgement of the unclear technologies upon which the admissions officers rely, and the bounded rationality that constrained their decisions:

> All other things being equal, one or more of the above factors can, and usually does, make the difference. We don't have a crystal ball. We don't have a Ouija board. We don't throw the folders down the stairs, picking only the ones that land right side up. We don't select on the basis of marks and test scores alone. We can't take all the stars. We have many difficult and often painful choices to make. (p. 251)

Their decisions were informed by the collective previous experiences with decision-making and outcomes, as the organization looks backward (March & Olsen, 1975, 1976) in an effort to predict the validity of these decisions: "we make every effort to bring to bear on each case a combination of 17 years of experience in the profession" (p. 251). Observations on the outcomes of prior decisions may bias the decision-making process and confound the predictability of it.

Steinberg (2002) characterized the decision-making process he observed during his eight months at Wesleyan University as "actually quite a messy process" (p. viii). Despite several adaptations by the admissions office to help sort and measure applicants,

committee "judgments are just as often intuitive and idiosyncratic" (p. viii), he concluded. Quantitative analyses of admissions decision-making processes, which look in from the outside, fail to capture "the various, sometimes competing, institutional priorities at play" (p. viii). The degree of ambiguity and the heightened unpredictability associated with admissions decisions, Steinberg concluded, make it impossible "to reveal the secret password for gaining entrance to a top college" because "…no such formula exists" (p. xx).

Whereas Steinberg (2002) chose to follow the cases of individual students through the lens of one admissions officer over the course of an admissions cycle, Toor (2001) provided a more comprehensive experience of selective admissions. She summarized her lived impressions of the admissions black box based on her three years as an admissions officer at Duke: "There are no real secrets, just a process. It's a process that is at its most profound level simply human, all too human" (p. xii). Humans are not perfect, and their decision-making processes introduce ambiguity and uncertainty. When time is short and energy waning, committee decision-making was compromised: "As weariness sets in and blood-sugar levels begin to drop, decisions are not as judiciously made" (p. 166). She acknowledged that time on task and attention to detail potentially affect decisions on individual applicants, and the very real effects felt by committee members: "Having food does help somewhat, but I always pitied the kids whose high schools came at the end of a long slate" (p. 166). Despite best efforts of the organization to realize consistency in admissions decisions via a prescribed and intentional rules process, committee members are only human, their decision-making subject to the effects of time and energy.

Toor (2001) witnessed and participated in committee decisions that violate bureaucratic rational theory. During the committee's consideration of applicants from Colorado, she noted the decision to deny admission to students whose testing would improve Duke's reported averages—one aspect of prestige measurement. The committee "denied some boring kids with great testing. The director hated to do that—he loved being able to boost the median reported SAT" (p. 173). *Boring* is subjectively and relatively defined, difficult if not impossible to uniformly qualify, and even more so quantify. This observation also violates meritocratic perspectives on decision-making: have not those with "great testing," a supposedly standard means of comparing students from all backgrounds, earned an offer of admission? Even those who outperformed their peers within the smaller contexts of their high schools were not awarded the opportunity to study at Duke: "We took a bunch of valedictorians and denied a number of them as well" (p. 173). These top students were denied at the expense of more qualitatively *interesting* applicants, "some cool kids, outdoorsy types who had bagged the big peaks, skied the black diamond trails, rafted the wily rivers. And lots and lots of mountain bikers" (p. 173). As was the case with the valedictorians, not every *interesting* student was admitted, but many of them were—at the expense of prestige and academic merit. Alternative theoretical lenses fail to account for these unpredictable actions.

Toor (2001) observed that other offers of admission were only extended because of a student's standing relative to the other applicants from her secondary school. Such "precursive linkages," wherein "a decision on one issue can critically affect the premises for subsequent decisions on a variety of other issues" (Langley, Mintzberg, Pitcher, Posada, & Saint-Macary, 1995, p. 274), are near impossible to predict from outside the

committee room. Without full context, some decisions are inexplicable. Toor (2001) presented the decision to admit a highly desirable applicant that resulted in the decision to also admit the valedictorian from the same high school. The valedictorian's application file was labeled with "decision reason Z, or a 'coattails decision'" because the committee preferred to admit "a great Latino applicant, first-generation college" (Toor, 2001, p. 199). She explained, "When there's a student whom we want to take—for whatever reason, either because they will add diversity to the class or because there is an institutional interest in their application—we feel compelled to admit a 'better' student so that school [sic] will 'understand' the decision" (p. 199). The committee's decision on the valedictorian changed to an admit in order to justify their admission of the first-generation student of color. Fears of violating the meritocratic order and the potential conflict at the secondary school, either real or perceived, created a change in decision.

An additional element of ambiguity was built into Duke's committee process. The director analyzed the class of proposed admits prior to decision release, scanning attributes of slated admits for student characteristics that might be lacking. This "tweaking" process could result in the reversal of decisions for a variety of reasons, according to the desired class profile. The director canvassed his staff, asking them to identify students slated for a waitlist or deny that could move to admit:

> Bring me more high-testing Asians. I need more 'impact' kids, more exciting kids to talk about in my convocation speech. We must have more admits from California, Texas, and Florida. We need to pull back twenty North Carolinians—we admitted too many… (p. 212)

At the same time, the decision-making process incorporated the chance for committee members to second-guess their collective decisions and to revisit those with which they were unsettled. The director "realized that committee decisions were sometimes affected

by intangibles like the dynamics of the personalities involved, the time of day the decision was being made, and the role blood-sugar levels played" (p. 213).

Despite efforts to make the best commitment to action, to operate efficiently while serving numerous competing goals of the organization, the opportunity to look back and question the results of its process was built into the routine of the committee. These institutionalized checks run contrary to theoretical notions of rational bureaucracies and meritocracies and introduce ambiguity into decision-making. Be it a tendency to look backwards (March & Olsen, 1975, 1976), a process of double-loop learning (Argyris, 1977), or an institutionalized opportunity to play devil's advocate or protect against the perils of groupthink (Janis, 1982; Janis & Mann, 1977), all decisions were subject to revisit and not final until release—until the organization's commitment to action is fulfilled.

An additional component of Toor's (2001) experience demanding consideration was the power placed in the hands of each individual admissions officer in the form of a "wild card" (p. 213). Consistent with Stevens' (2007) "rule of one pick" and mentioned as a possible selection model by Rigol (2003), wild cards stand as an exception to expected rules of decision-making and introduce heightened ambiguity into the predictability of decisions. A new preference has entered into the garbage can of competing institutional goals: the personal interests of individual actors. Though these "wild cards" were supposed to be generally admissible, and were subject to final approval by the director, the end result is a commitment to action by the organization that otherwise would not have occurred, entirely un-programmable and unpredictable. Albeit only a handful of decisions within the larger context of thousands of applicants, it is clear

that this set of decisions only occur given the happenstance encounters and personal preferences of the individual admissions officers. Wild cards introduce the possibility of decisions that conflict with best organizational interests as well as competing theories.

One last element of Toor's (2001) work deserves attention. Toor (2001) documented her understanding of a separate, special admissions committee convened to consider applicants of interest to the alumni affairs and development offices. The Duke administration had institutionalized a process to address applicants of interest, effectively wrestling away decision-making power from the admission committee. Be they legacies or similarly well-connected applicants, or students of high socioeconomic standing with connections to fundraising and development resources, the admissions director "never wanted to admit these kids and had to fight to be able to keep them out" (p. 209). Despite relying upon his admissions colleagues to provide the director "as much ammunition as possible to use against them," he was unable to buffer the decisions of the admissions committee from these forces external to the process: "He usually lost" (p. 209). In these instances, *losing* meant that certain applicants were admitted to Duke against the preferences of the admissions committee. Such decisions may be better explained on a case-by-case basis as being politically- or resource-motivated. The GCM fails to explain such decisions when removed from the locus of committee where other organizational actors are empowered to commit to action.

These "alum and development rounds" were deliberated in a distinct committee comprised by the admissions director, the development office head, and an Alumni office liaison. It is notable that Toor (2001) highlighted the fact that admissions committee members were present, but their decision-making power vetoed: "We were allowed to sit

in and to speak only if spoken to" (p. 210). The rank and file admissions officers were de-professionalized; effectively, their power to make the commitment to action on behalf of the organization was removed in the interest of serving "long-term institutional goals and the directions of the university" (p. 210). The existence of this special committee is not inconsistent with the GCM, which was not intended to explain every decision all of the time. In some situations, the organization needed to preserve and protect alternate revenue resources or appease long-standing university stakeholders. Perhaps resource dependence theory offers a better explanation for why distinctly different procedures exist for consideration of alumni-connected and development-related applicants: the university depends on external parties to provide future resources and makes admissions decisions that increase the likelihood of receiving future resources from them.

Conversely, it is arguable that these decisions are well accounted for within the GCM. Applicants admitted in the "alum and development round" bore with them characteristics that promised to accomplish organizational goals. Admitting a student with weak academic credentials who offers no diversification of the class by standard measurements but whose family includes potential (or past) substantial donors violates assumptions of a bureaucratic rational lens when decisions are gauged solely on academic merit. Yet in the GCM such a decision makes sense: these students simply offered solutions to a different set of problems. They would not have been admitted otherwise without the presence of these competing preferences.

Hernandez's (1997) more skeptical take on the admissions process as an officer at Dartmouth mirrored the ambiguity later observed in Toor (2001). Hernandez (1997) offered an introduction to the effects of time and energy that bear upon the process while

encouraging an evaluation process "that recognizes the special student in any guise" (p. 244):

> …sometimes admissions officers will miss subtle points because they are not extremely perceptive readers, or because they are reading too fast, or because they are trying to highlight one main point from a letter, or because they are just plain exhausted from reading applications for seven to eight hours a day for months at a time. (p. 3)

Consistent with Toor (2001), the unquantifiable elements of applicants' personal qualities played a significant role in distinguishing between otherwise quantifiably similar academic profiles: "Even in committee, the most interesting students stand out and are chosen over those who are less exciting" (Hernandez, 1997, p. 105). The "very difficult and time-consuming process" (p. 105) of committee "is very tough and many bright kids don't get picked because they simply do not stand out enough to be chosen above others in this brutal competition" (p. 103).

Participation is fluid as it was impossible for every committee member to read and evaluate every application; different combinations of readers may dwell upon different characteristics of the applicants (p. 238). Accordingly, the process reserved time for "docket review" before final decisions were released "to catch inconsistencies or outlier decisions" within high school application groups (p. 240), similar to Toor's (2001) experience at the end of Duke's committee.

A somewhat different mechanistic structure for working through the application evaluation and admissions decision-making process is recollected by Fetter (1997). In *Questions and Answers: Reflections on 100,000 Admissions Decisions at Stanford*, the former dean detailed a process that does not involve committee deliberations. Instead, four application readers (from a staff of twenty full and part-time readers) are randomly

assigned to evaluate each application. Despite the fact that the lack of a committee debate might lessen ambiguity, the process described by Fetter and the random combination of twenty potential readers, yield an equally ambiguous decision-making scenario.

Fetter (1997) postulated at the time that the Stanford admissions decision-making process employed at the time described about 35 institutions in the U.S., namely those admitting no more than 30 percent of applicants. The most important aspects of an application were the academic credentials, followed by personal achievement outside the classroom. She continued to describe additional categories into which students may fall that would receive special consideration, including race/ethnicity, first-generation college-bound status, legacies, athletes, and faculty children. Despite the primacy of academic credentials in review, Fetter (1997) pointed out that Stanford's process "is sensitive to individual circumstances and the effect they may have on the record of any applicant and the available resources" (p. 10). Application readers "take note both of extenuating circumstances and a variety of cultural and economic situations" (p. 10), compounding the problem of ambiguity and further constraining the predictability of forecasting admissions results.

Similar to other sources, the Stanford process had a built-in process for "fine-tuning" (Fetter, 1997, p. 21). By the time applications made their way to fourth readers, seemingly set decisions may change entirely given greater contextual knowledge of the emerging class. "Judgments can change with greater knowledge and the benefit of time to reflect, so it was not unusual for such readers to admit that they had changed their mind and now leaned toward a 'deny'" (p. 21). Notably, Fetter recorded this fluidity in instances where the fourth reader may have been the first, as well, a situation made

possible by the random distribution of application folders.

This is a process that may defy notions of meritocratic theory and rational decision-making perspectives:

> It is fair to generalize that the higher the academic rating, the higher the probability of admission, but ultimately the selection of a freshman class at a highly selective institution involves considerable subjectivity, good judgment, and a sensitive understanding of the criteria for selection and the context of the individual applicant's circumstances, along with a healthy dose of experience to see beyond the quantitative measures. (Fetter, 1997, p. 25)

The pressures of time and energy plague this human decision-making process, an activity that "has to be experienced to be believed," one in which "the demands make for an intellectual and physical marathon" (p. 33). Beyond straightforward calculations and routinized processes, "final decisions must be the consequence of a combination of pragmatism, experience, good judgment, sensitivity to a range of circumstances, independence of thought, and an absolutely essential willingness to make tough choices" (p. 32). While decision-makers at Stanford "admit for life, not for freshman grades," the unclear technologies used in evaluations made it "difficult to get a handle on life's criteria" (p. 15).

As I have established within this chapter, the tenets of the GCM are tenable within the recollections of Fetter (1997) and the corpus of literature documenting admissions decision-making processes. I revisit this dissertation's research questions in advance of the subsequent chapter in which I present the research design of my case study:

1. To what extent can the garbage can model of organizational choice explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal

arts college?

2. To what extent do rival theories such as political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rational theory, explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?

My first research question seeks to test the applicability of the GCM to the process by which admissions decisions are made at one selective, private liberal arts college. The unit of analysis is the admission committee itself, as suggested by Stevens (2007), who stated:

> Committee is the dramatic crest of the annual admissions cycle. It is when all of the many exigencies that officers are charged with managing get explicitly negotiated, and when officers do what the general public perceives them as doing primarily. (p. 185)

Understanding how admissions committee members conceive of their roles and responsibilities within the decision-making process and observing committee deliberations and the decision-making process in the moment of decision, allows me to describe how admission committees make decisions relative to the GCM. Which attributes and characteristics of each individual applicant are cited as evidence at the committee table to support an offer of admission or a denial? To what extent are organizational needs, goals, and priorities referenced in committee deliberations? What technologies inform committee members in the decision-making process, and what is the effect of time and energy upon actors, if any? Simultaneously, the relevance of competing theories, as addressed by the second research question, will be tested. To what extent are decision-makers pressured by others to make certain decisions? To what extent are admissions committees coerced or forced to admit applicants who exhibit certain desirable attributes, such as alumni connections or financial development potential? How

rational is the committee process, from an organizational perspective, and how predictable are the outcomes of an admissions committee at a selective, private liberal arts college?

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation was a qualitative case study that sought an explanation as to how an admissions committee at a selective private liberal arts college makes decisions to admit students to the institution. As established in my opening chapter, many in modern society are consumed with anxiety regarding the college admissions process. Numerous efforts have been made to "go behind the curtain" or to discover the "secret formula" that explains how the process unfolds to determine who is admitted, who is denied, and why. While sorting through applicants and selecting whom to admit was not always the case at American colleges and universities, and certainly does not describe the current reality for all institutions within our system of higher education, an obsession with the admissions process at selective institutions commandeers the national discussion.

Previous literature on the admissions process has sought to explain *why* some students are admitted at the expense of others, generally as a result of sociocultural inequities or imbalances, or to describe admissions processes in an effort to indict the system as unfair or misaligned with the aims of higher education. To date, no inquiries have sought to explain *how* decisions are made: how are commitments to action made by actors on behalf of their organizations? The clarity of decision-making as a process and practice can be described as quite ambiguous when actors are tasked with processing vast quantities of information and the balancing of oft-competing organizational goals relative to constraints. Thus, this dissertation seeks to answer two research questions:

1. To what extent can the garbage can model of organizational choice explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?
2. To what extent do rival theories such as political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rational theory explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?

In this chapter, I establish a case for my research design. I present the rationale informing my sample selection and I discuss the processes by which I collected data. The data analysis phase follows, including a discussion of issues of validity and reliability as they relate to my findings. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the biases and assumptions that accompanied me throughout this study, and limitations to the study's findings.

Study Design

A qualitative case study is "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). Consistent with my research questions, the bounded system under study is the admissions committee at a selective, private liberal arts college, for it is within the deliberations of the committee through which organizational decisions are arrived that determine which applicants are admitted or denied. This method is best suited to answer my research questions given the "countless multiple causes" (Stake, 2010) that bear upon the decision-makers who comprise the admissions committee. It is their task to choose among numerous applicants and admit certain students at the expense of others. Just as admissions officers frequently describe the holistic nature of their decisions, qualitative studies concentrate on the complete holistic experience of the

phenomena under study (Silverman, 2013; Stake, 2010). A qualitative case study is a preferable alternative to quantitative studies given my research questions. Quantitative methods cannot as readily account for the subjectivity, contextualization, and holism of selective admissions decision-making.

Furthermore, the qualitative approach allows observation of the "wide sweep of contexts" that I theorize might influence the decision-making process at the committee table: "temporal and spatial, historical, political, economic, cultural, social, personal" (Stake, 2010, p. 31). Using theories such as GCM and competing explanations allows me to build testable propositions that may be confirmed or negated during research. It is more appropriate to use theory to inform the research design of a case study than other qualitative methods of inquiry (Yin, 2014).

Case studies allow researchers to study the *how* and *why* questions to which we seek answers, and are most appropriate to study current, modern (in the present) questions (Yin, 2014). Histories refer back to events of the past and rely on artifacts, documents, and perhaps the recollections of participants. A historical study of the decision-making process would not allow for observation in the moment or at the locus of decision. It may be biased by the ability of participants to accurately and fully recollect events.

Conversely, this research is not intended to explore the experience of the participants such as might be appropriate for an ethnography or phenomenological study. Alternatively, a broadly distributed survey might capture established rules or expressed goals intended by the admissions decision-making process, and differences by selectivity. Participants' attitudes and sentiments about the admissions process might be captured by

survey, measuring variability across a range of institutional type or selectivity. However, a survey would fail to account for the context of each individual decision, in the moment of decision and throughout the many windows of decision-making present within committee.

This study's research questions pursue an understanding of *how* admissions decisions occur within the moment and within context. What justifications, motivations, and factors internal to the decision-making body, among committee members and unto the committee itself, enter into each decision relative to the institutionally specific problems they might address? What external pressures from other units within the college or beyond the bounds of the college, play into the calculus of decisions—if any? These factors are likely to also explain, in some part, the *why* of the decision, and perhaps echo findings of related literatures.

Three qualitative studies of college and university admissions in particular helped inform my methodological choices. My research design was guided largely by Posselt's (2014, 2016) works on the admissions decision-making process at the graduate program level. Her publications explain faculty reliance on admissions criteria and the interaction with and impact on organizational goals of diversity and merit. She conducted an ethnographic comparative case study of graduate program admissions for ten highly selective doctoral programs in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Her design included participant interviews and observations of admission committee discussions within each of the ten programs.

Second, Bowman and Bastedo (2016) conducted a randomized controlled trial that required 300 admissions professionals to read and evaluate the same three college

applications that were created for purposes of the study. Their findings concluded that admissions professionals might allow personal biases to influence their decision-making. At the same time, the authors acknowledged that their results would likely vary if the same experiment were conducted within the context of the professionals' respective institutions.

However, critical components of context—the bounded-ness and attention to mission goals, institutional needs, and subsequent constraints—was notably absent from Bowman and Bastedo's (2016) study. The authors may have addressed which factors were considered important relative to others across three example applicants; however, they did not create a real-world experiment that replicated a decision-making scenario within an admissions committee at a selective college or university. Conversely, my case study is set in the specific context of one institution, providing critical contextualization necessary to understand the *how* and *why* sought after by qualitative researchers.

The third study of the admissions process informing my methodology is an extended ethnography previously discussed at length. Stevens (2007) embedded himself as a participant-observer in a small, private, selective liberal arts institution identified anonymously as "the College." His research is notable for its thoroughness and thick, rich description of scene and participants. He commendably documented *how* the college recruitment, application, review, and evaluation processes occur. However, his research agenda and use of theory directed him to look for systematic information asymmetries and unequal access to higher education, moving away from *how* decisions occurred within organizational contexts. He explored *what* factors expressed primacy throughout the process, *why* certain applicants were admitted over others, and *what* impact these

student characteristics might have played upon the process as a whole. The design of my case study allows for examination of the moment of decision on individual applications: *how* the decision, a commitment to action, occurs, as opposed to *why the process yields the results it does*.

A second note on Stevens (2007) deserves brief attention relative to my methodological choices. He justified his study, in part, by critiquing quantitative experiments that hope to attempt, attempt, or even succeed in identifying the factors evaluated by admissions officers in making decisions. As he pointed out, such studies lack the granularity of the decision and fail to account fully for the holistic, and justifiably subjective, components of individual decisions. The role of individual judgment and the impact of subjective evaluation are critical components of organizational decisions, as suggested by Stevens and informed by my own professional experiences, and thus must be accounted for in research studies.

This case study involves multiple methods to allow for triangulation between data sources, lending greater validity and reliability to findings (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Silverman, 2013; Yin, 2014). My two primary methods are participant interviews and observations of the decision-making process of the admissions committee at a private, selective liberal arts college. Namely, voting members of the College's admissions committee were identified as relevant participants, and the deliberations of the College's admissions committee were identified as the site of observation. As a secondary method, my case study includes a content analysis of select committee documents made available to me during my visits.

The unit of analysis identified to study the research questions posed by this dissertation was the admissions committee of the College. Members of the admissions office are present for and play an immediate and direct role in the moment of decision. Again, this case study is interested in the process and practice of admissions decision-making, where *decision-making* is understood to be a commitment to action, made by the actors on behalf of the organization. Consistent with the GCM and organizational decision-making, each offer of admission results from a choice opportunity, "when an organization is expected to produce behavior that can be called a decision" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 3).

Actively moving to admit a particular student is a commitment to extend an offer of admission and welcome her into the community—including all of her characteristics, both easily measurable and identifiable or otherwise. While the organizational actors on the periphery (outside of the committee room) are vital contributors to the daily operations of an office, likely contributing to how an applicant pool takes shape given their interactions with the public (potential students and families) and their efficiency in conducting business (the standard operating procedures and elements of bureaucracy), they are not present for and do not make evaluative or immediate contributions in the locus of decision. They may speak to the application, review, and evaluation process itself, as captured by Stevens (2007), but evidence speaking to the research questions of this case study resides in each particular commitment to action. Peripheral actors would not be present for the decision to commit to an admission offer, though undeniably they may exert influence or pressure upon decision-makers and/or admissions policy.

I spent considerable time deliberating how to appropriately bound this case study, in particular, the selection of participants. Undeniably, there are issues both internal and external to the admissions committee that bear upon decision-makers, and decisions do not occur in a vacuum devoid of organizational needs and constraints. As established in my literature review and statement of the problem, stakeholders in the decision include trustees, presidents, faculty members, coaches, deans of students or diversity, donors (both speculative and proven), families with prior relationships to the college, and the students themselves. While these stakeholders present different pressures and potential conflicts to the committee members, and attempt, hope to attempt, or even succeed at exerting influence or pressure upon the committee, fundamentally they are absent from the locus of decision. Committee members responsible for representing these various stakeholders can recount the machinations and deliberations of the committee to appease their 'constituents' as they seem fit, assuaging them that their interests were well represented. However, what happens behind the curtain may be very different from what happens on the front of stage. Unless these stakeholders are present at the *moment of decision*, they cannot accurately speak to that moment—they can only speculate as to the process and how policy might inform that process.

Interviews were the first method of data collection employed in this case study. An interview is defined as "a process in which a researcher and participant engage in a conversation focused on questions related to a research study" (deMarrais, 2004, p. 55). Interviews "allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (Patton, 2002, p. 34) and may be helpful in describing organizational processes, including "how events occur or what an event produces" (Weiss, 1994, p. 9).

In this study, I employed qualitative interviews to gain an understanding of admissions committee members' perspectives on their work as organizational actors making decisions on behalf of the College. I prepared a list of potential questions to be included in semi-structured interviews given my research interest, and was prepared to ask follow up questions as needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The outline of my interview protocol including potential questions is attached as Appendix C. This interview protocol was purposefully drafted to allow participants to broadly reflect on their participation in application reading and evaluation and admissions committee deliberations. I also wanted to understand how participants perceived the pressures of internal or external stakeholders bearing upon them, if at all. Questions were framed around tenets of the GCM and this theory's strength in explaining the admissions decision-making, as well as the competing theories established in my second research question.

I conducted a pilot interview via FaceTime with a former colleague to gauge the effectiveness and fluency of the drafted questions, as well as a test of elapsed time. This proved immensely invaluable on a number of fronts. First, I learned that the number of questions I prepared would be tremendously difficult to address over the course of an hour-long interview. As a result, I reordered and prioritized the questions so that I could be certain themes would be addressed relative to my research questions. In case a participant was more reticent or less forthcoming with information, I would have reserve questions available to ensure that my time was well spent given this one-shot opportunity, and in consideration of the participants' time demands.

Second, I learned from this pilot interview that only a handful of questions were generally needed to elicit deep, rich responses. I observed that I was immediately awash

in information and was pleased at the prospect of the robust study ahead of me while simultaneously intimidated by the depth of the task at hand. Should every interview yield such robust narratives—as I expected they would—I would have ample resources to test the relevance of different theories as they pertain to decision-making at the College.

Third, my trial interview participant has been an admission professional at three institutions. Selectivity and revenue streams stratify the three institutions. Thus, she had three different reactions to several of my questions based upon the three contexts from which she was responding. I believe my conversation with her, and her disparate experiences across these three institutions, yields further support for the Ambiguity Continuum (Appendix A). This observation suggests the potential for future research. A future study could seek to interview admissions professionals who have worked at numerous institutions across a range of admissions selectivity and financial resources. This would allow researchers to compare and contrast the decision-making processes as practiced across the spectrum of selectivity and revenue.

My second method of data collection was the observation of committee decision-making to account for the moment of decision. Observations "take place in the setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs" (Merriam, 2009, p. 117), and allow for data collection on how people "behave and act within their context" in a natural setting (Creswell, 2014, p. 185). Data gathered from observations "represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview" (p. 117). Merriam stated, "Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed firsthand …" (p. 119). Observations might reveal competing goals playing out at the committee table as

different committee members are charged with representing the varied interests of the College community while also managing personal preferences. Competing stakeholder interests are likely to prevail over others at different times in committee decisions. Observations may describe *how* these interests compete with one another, gain prominence, and ultimately, attach themselves to particular applicants.

Lastly, I was unexpectedly afforded the opportunity to include a content analysis of committee documents in my case study. Krippendorff (2004) described content analysis as "a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use" (p. 24). Content analysis "provides new insights, increases a researcher's understanding of particular phenomena, or informs practical actions" (p. 18). This research method has yielded productive studies on communications by colleges intended for prospective students and families (Hartley & Morphew, 2008; Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Ness & Lips, 2011).

My original research design did not include document analysis; indeed, I did not think that any research site would willingly share such data, let alone allow me to reproduce it as part of this thesis. However, select committee documents were made available to me during my data collection visits. The College's admissions officers use these documents in the application reading and evaluation processes, as well as a resource to, and record of, committee meetings.

Sample Selection

Qualitative methodologists, though they may differ in terminology, encourage single site case studies that are purposefully identified. Silverman (2013) emphasized the value of a single case's representativeness when purposefully identified on logical

grounds. Merriam (2009) insisted that "much can be learned from one case" (p. 51), and said, "Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 77). Further, Merriam (2009) invoked the argument of Erickson (1986), saying, "Since the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations" (Merriam, 2009, p. 51).

Yin (2014) offered five rationales that may justify single-site case studies; of these, one is immediately relevant to this study. Namely, the parameters by which I identified the population from which my sample would be drawn was chosen *critically* based upon the tenets I establish in Appendix A, *Qualitative Degrees of Freedom: Conceptualization of an Ambiguity Continuum for Understanding Admissions Decisions*. Only within the context of selective admissions environments do multiple applications exist for each intended offer of admission and the subsequent place in an enrolling class. Multiple applications allow for the full complement of philosophical justifications for admissions decisions to be in play. As per this ambiguity continuum, the conceptual framework of the GCM may offer a better description of how decisions are made as the admissions selectivity of an institution increases. In this regard, "the single case can represent a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building by confirming, challenging, or extending the theory" (Yin, 2014, p. 51).

Conducting a comparative case study across multiple sites would increase validity and expand the generalizability of my findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, my own time and resources bounded my ability to sample more broadly. The overlapping

calendars of colleges within the annual admissions cycle make it highly challenging, if not impossible, to be present at multiple sites within the same academic year.

I began with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to establish my population of interest. There were 1,271 private, nonprofit, four-year institutions of higher education in the U.S. included in the NCES 2014-15 dataset. I then narrowed this population to those institutions with an admission rate below fifty percent. Approximately nineteen percent of these 1,271 institutions reported admitting fewer than 50% of applicants in 2014-2015. My research questions further narrowed the potential cases to liberal arts colleges. Thus, I narrowed the population to include only the 250 institutions classified as *Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus* in the 2015 Carnegie Classifications as published in the periodic updates. These schools issue more than 50% of their degrees in the liberal arts (as opposed to professional fields), and have limited graduate degree programs, if any.

I then turned to the literature on college admissions to narrow my sample further according to selectivity. As observed earlier, average standardized test scores for admitted or enrolling students served as an indicator of institutional selectivity until the 1960s. Since, researchers have generally arrived at a common definition of selectivity based upon the percentage of applicants offered admission. Killgore (2009) defined her population of elite institutions as selective because "only those colleges that receive more applications than they can accept have the luxury of choosing some student characteristics over others" (footnote, p. 469). She sampled from institutions listed in the "most selective" category and appearing in each of *Peterson's Guide to Four Year Colleges, Barron's Guide to the Most Competitive Colleges*, and the annual rankings

from *U.S. News & World Report* (p. 474). In their research on college undermatch and the methodological shortcomings to properly account for the ambiguity of holistic admissions, or as they termed it, "the messy sorting process," Bastedo and Flaster (2014) used those colleges listed in the "most competitive" category in *Barron's Profiles of American Colleges*. Fetter (1997) speculated that her experiences as an admissions dean at Stanford University would characterize the admissions processes at institutions selecting thirty percent of applicants or fewer.

Thus, I targeted those liberal arts institutions that were identified by *Barron's* as being either "most competitive" or "highly competitive," similarly identified among the top 50 or so national liberal arts colleges as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* in any given year. The most important component for my sample selection was the prevalence of *alternate* solutions available to decision-makers, wherein *solutions* are represented in the characteristics embodied by each individual applicant.

My sample selection considered the presence of a school-sponsored intercollegiate varsity athletic program. An athletics program introduced another measurable variable: mapping onto the Ambiguity Continuum (Appendix A), it introduces additional goals, interests, and justifications for admission that might be addressed by the committee. I decided to sample an institution in an NCAA division that prohibits athletic scholarships. Some private liberal arts colleges are members of NCAA Division I or II, where scholarships are awarded to student-athletes. In these divisions, coaches may have the right to extend offers of admission embodied in the form of athletic scholarships (assuming minimum eligibility criteria have been met). And, in this regard, the commitment to action (the offer of admission) has been removed from the domain of

the admissions committee—the locus of decision occurring in the athletic association or athletic department. Conversely, non-NCAA Division I or II institutions are likely to have maintained the decision-making authority within the admissions office.

Finally, I considered how other institutional characteristics might factor into admissions decision-making, including public liberal arts institutions and special mission colleges. It is possible that selective public liberal arts colleges are subject to restrictions on the proportion of out-of-state residents they enroll, complicating and likely narrowing the search for solutions by committee members. Similarly, institutions with special missions are less likely to admit students with characteristics misaligned to those missions, limiting the pool of solutions available to them. Thus, institutions identified as either public or with special missions were eliminated from my sample.

Having identified the population of institutions from which I intended to draw my sample, I initiated the process of soliciting participation using personal connections established via former professional colleagues and contacts. Perhaps suggestive of the potentially delicate nature of the decision-making process that I would observe, this process took several months. I received responses that were unequivocally negative when administrators were introduced to my proposed research design; specifically, committee observation ended discussions. It seemed fairly evident to me that something occurs at the admissions committee table, within the black box, that organizational actors did not want me to observe and record. Some kind counter-offers were made to share datasets or facilitate interviews, but my request to observe committee deliberations brought discussions with prospective host sites to a halt.

Perhaps it was the fact that, when decisions are made, there is a divorce between actual practices of the admissions committee and the stated institutional admissions criteria and procedures? Perhaps the process is too personal, and admissions deans or directors were nervous about potential interpersonal conflicts that might arise in the heated deliberations of committee, when personal goals might express themselves more readily that some would like to acknowledge? Perhaps moments of decision involve a degree of irrationality and heightened subjectivity, and observations that violate notions of a rational, intended process would not be welcome should the data ever be associated with the host institution? All of this is speculation, of course, but I chose to include these personal reflections to document the extent to which my access as a researcher was prohibited. A number of institutions expressed interest in, appreciation of, and a need for my proposed case study. Yet, time and again, I encountered a proverbial wall immediately upon requesting access to observe committee meetings—and that does not include the number of emails and voicemails I made that went unanswered, even after a letter of introduction and testament to my professional experience as an admissions officer and my research interests as a student were made on my behalf.

Having defined and narrowed the potential population of research sites based on the preceding considerations, and following the communication process as detailed, I eventually received an offer from a selective private liberal arts college. Consistent with previous literature, namely the work of Stevens (2007), and to protect the identity of the institution and preserve anonymity of participants, I refer to my research sample as "the College." The College is a private liberal arts college set in the northeastern United States with an admissions rate that perennially places it among the most selective in the country.

It is a member of the NCAA Division III and offers a full complement of competitive varsity intercollegiate athletics teams. The College meets the considerations factored into my case selection and was drawn from the population of potential research sites as described.

I am fortunate, and remain indebted to, the College, its Admissions Dean, my assigned liaison, and the members of the College's admissions committee, all of whom will remain anonymous—as established in the terms of a site authorization letter issued by the host institution and consistent with the authorization provided by my Institutional Review Board. The site authorization is on file with my home Institutional Review Board. The notice of exemption from my Institutional Review Board is included as Appendix D.

Data Collection

I visited the College on two separate occasions for extended periods of data collection in the 2017-18 academic year. My first research trip, in mid-November, included eight days in the admissions office of the College. It was scheduled to allow me to observe Early Decision I (ED1) committee meetings and complete participant interviews.

During this visit, I was invited to observe committee members engaged in the application reading and evaluation process on the first day of my visit. I separately sat with the dean for a few hours as he reviewed applications flagged for his attention for a secondary review in advance of committee. Both of these were unexpected research opportunities that contributed to my data collection and understanding of the decision-making process.

The College had moved to committee-based evaluations (CBE) for application reading for the first time this academic year (Ellis, 2018; Hoover, 2018; Korn, 2018). A requisite feature of CBE is open dialogue between two application readers, which lent it perfectly to observations as the two readers negotiated different application components concurrently and audibly. Notably, CBE teams could not directly admit or waitlist applicants according to the rules of the admissions office. Teams were empowered to either deny applicants or refer them to committee for further discussion and a final vote. I was initially concerned that my case study would suffer from a limited opportunity to observe CBE, but the fact that applicants could not be admitted in CBE—a commitment of the College's resources could not be made—assuaged my concerns. Application reading, either individually or in CBE, is a part of the process that narrows the field to the more admissible candidates in the applicant pool—akin to Stevens' (2007) observed "coarse sort" or the first goal of admissions officers as described by W. G. Bowen and Bok (1998).

In the afternoon of my first day at the College's admissions office during my first trip, I was also invited to observe a general procedural meeting of the committee members as they prepared to transition from application reading to ED1 meetings. They were debriefing in light of the timely completion of ED1 application reading and setting the schedule and procedures to prepare for committee meetings the following week. My liaison suggested in advance that it would be a good opportunity for me to introduce myself to the entire committee at one time—there were still a few committee members I had not been able to meet on my initial tour of the office—and offered me a few moments before the convened committee members. I seized the chance to express my

gratitude to everyone for the opportunity to observe their work and the willingness to participate in my study. I emphasized the fact that my motivation was not to publish a tell-all, that I was not interested in gossip, and reminded playfully that I was not a spy or member of the press looking to bring down the admissions system.

I reiterated that my interest resided in the *how* of the moment, and I acknowledged previous efforts to document and explain the *why*. It was my intent to observe how they, as actors on behalf of the organization, operated in the moment of decision. I wanted to observe each individual admissions decision, each commitment to action, that resulted from their actions as decision-makers in committee. And, I acknowledged their right to be cautious, anxious, and apprehensive at participating in recorded interviews, particularly in light of the potential risk addressed in my interview consent form. The dean and my liaison frequently mentioned throughout my visit that the office often hosted visitors and observers in committee, and it was their expressed desire to be open and transparent about the admissions decision-making process.

I restated my commitment to the anonymization of the College and participants. I thanked those who had agreed to participate in an interview with me. Finally, I offered to the assembled committee the chance to participate in an unrecorded interview for anyone who might be willing to consider it.

In advance of my visit, Tate Mitchum, the College's Admissions Dean, and my liaison, Associate Dean Matthew Chase, organized my interview schedule around the department's application reading and evaluation schedule for ED1. Nine of the thirteen admissions committee members agreed to an interview, and all nine agreed to allow me

to take audio recordings of our conversations. These audio files in aggregate contain more than ten hours of conversation.

The admissions committee members of the College appear in Table 1. I have assigned pseudonyms and fabricated titles for each person. Whether or not an individual participated in an interview for this study is also indicated in the table.

Table 1 Members of the College's Admissions Committee

Participant	Title	Interview
Tate Mitchum	Admissions Dean	Yes
Erin Rhodes	Admissions Director & Chair of Diversity Recruiting	Yes
Justin Evans	Associate Dean	No
Kathy Barleben	Associate Dean	Yes
Joyce Harmon	Associate Dean	No
Matthew Chase	Associate Dean	Yes
Emilia King	Associate Dean of International Applicants	Yes
Susan Mullen	Junior Associate Dean	Yes
Connor Ackland	Junior Associate Dean	Yes
Katie Hamlin	Senior Assistant Dean	No
Janet Weis	Assistant Dean	Yes
Adam Berry	Assistant Dean	Yes
Bryan Amador	Assistant Dean	No

I asked Matthew if he was in a position to share any insight he might have into the rationale of his four colleagues for not participating in an interview. He reported that the language in the IRB Letter of Introduction (Appendix E) and Study Consent Form (Appendix F) had proved too intimidating, and the potential threat to personal reputation

should their identities be learned caused too great a concern. Some were intimidated at the prospect of being recorded.

I contracted with a private third-party transcription service to convert audio recordings of interviews to text. File delivery between parties occurred on a secure file send service offered by my university. The transcription service guaranteed the destruction of both audio and text files after I confirmed receipt of transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts reside on password-protected folders on my personal computer which is also password protected.

I periodically referred to an audio file while reading through its respective text file to ensure accuracy and consistency. Likewise, when a transcript suggested that a participant's speech patterns might offer additional meaning, I referred to the audio recording.

As part of my preparations prior to entering the field for observation, I drafted a guide to ease the manual recording of data, attached as Appendix G. The observation guide was organized based upon my literature review and the conceptualization of the Ambiguity Continuum (Appendix A), including student-level characteristics or attributes that I expected admissions officers to reference, various justifications for basing offers of admission, and elements of the different theories of interest in my research questions. I had a plan in place to manually record what I observed in committee and had revisited the established procedure for weeks leading up to my site visit.

Once *in situ*, however, I quickly found that the volume of data vastly exceeded my ability to complete the observation guide in real time. It was impossible to precisely record all that I was hearing, seeing, and feeling efficiently within the parameters of the

observation guide. I improvised a note-taking system that was part shorthand, part abbreviation, and part admissions jargon. I committed myself to record everything that was verbalized by committee members. The language used was largely familiar to me given my experience and research. When unfamiliar acronyms were used, I referred to the College's "Special Indicators" document (Appendix K) to decode what I was recording, which was particularly helpful during data analysis. I kept the observation guide on hand to serve as a constant comparative reference to ensure that I did not fail to observe certain aspects of what I was witnessing that I would later realize to be important.

I recorded the time each committee member introduced an application. I recorded a second time when the committee had finalized voting on each applicant. I also noted moments of silence, unrelated asides, interruptions, and administrative or bureaucratic delays. This allowed me to understand the time devoted to any one application.

I found that I had unintentionally developed a means of immediate data coding. When committee members explicitly mentioned any of the concepts I had previously identified and included on the observation guide or used language or exhibited behavior consistent with any of the theories of interest in my research questions, I would highlight the narrative in my notes. During moments of silence or during breaks, I could promptly return to these sections and add further description for later analysis.

Table 2 summarizes the activity I observed in the committee room to which I was assigned during ED1. The first column indicates the application round and day of committee. The next two columns show the start and end time for each block of decisions; the start time is the timestamp I recorded at the beginning of the presentation

for the first application, and the end time is the timestamp as of the vote on the last decisions within the block. I tallied the number of decisions made (votes held) within each block and calculated the duration of time expended within the block. Finally, I made record of the number of decision-makers (committee members who voted) present during each window. The list of committee members present during each window appears in the final column.

Table 2 Early Decision 1 Site Visit Observation Synopsis

Committee Round & Day of Observation	Start Time of 1st Decision Introduction	End Time of Last Decision Vote	Number of Decisions Made	Window Duration (HR:MIN)	Number of Decision-Makers	Committee Members Present
ED1: Athletes: Day 1 (Monday)	9:23 AM	9:48 AM	9	0:25	7	Justin, Katie, Emilia, Susan, Adam, Janet, Tate
ED1: Athletes: Day 1 (Monday)	9:57 AM	10:12 AM	4	0:15	6	Justin, Katie, Emilia, Susan, Adam, Janet
ED1: Athletes: Day 1 (Monday)	10:18 AM	11:59 AM	38	1:48	6	Justin, Katie, Emilia, Susan, Adam, Janet
ED1: Athletes: Day 1 (Monday)	1:18 PM	1:50 PM	8	0:32	5	Justin, Connor, Adam, Susan, Emilia
ED1: Day 1 (Monday)	1:57 PM	2:47 PM	7	0:50	6	Justin, Connor, Adam, Susan, Emilia, Tate
ED1: Day 1 (Monday)	3:01 PM	4:12 PM	15	1:11	5	Justin, Connor, Adam, Susan, Emilia
ED1: Day 1 (Monday)	4:17 PM	4:39 PM	5	0:22	5	Justin, Connor, Adam, Susan, Emilia
ED1: Day 1 (Monday)	4:39 PM	4:56 PM	2	0:17	6	Justin, Connor, Adam, Susan, Emilia, Tate
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	10:17 AM	11:30 AM	19	1:13	6	Tate, Justin, Matthew, Adam, Joyce, Kathy
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	11:34 AM	11:54 AM	6	0:20	6	Tate, Justin, Matthew, Adam, Joyce, Kathy
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	1:18 PM	1:25 PM	3	0:07	5	Justin, Matthew, Adam, Kathy, Joyce
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	1:25 PM	1:34 PM	2	0:09	4	Matthew, Adam, Kathy, Joyce
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	1:34 PM	1:59 PM	9	0:25	5	Justin, Matthew, Adam, Kathy, Joyce
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	2:00 PM	2:02 PM	1	0:02	4	Justin, Adam, Kathy, Joyce
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	2:03 PM	2:14 PM	4	0:11	6	Justin, Adam, Kathy, Joyce, Matthew, Susan
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	2:15 PM	2:23 PM	2	0:08	7	Justin, Adam, Kathy, Joyce, Matthew, Susan, Tate
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	2:30 PM	3:38 PM	19	1:08	7	Justin, Adam, Kathy, Joyce, Matthew, Susan, Tate
ED1: Day 2 (Tuesday)	3:44 PM	4:38 PM	8	0:54	6	Adam, Kathy, Joyce, Matthew, Susan, Tate
ED1: Day 3 (Wednesday)	9:07 AM	9:58 AM	9	0:51	7	Justin, Katie, Matthew, Bryan, Susan, Janet, Tate
ED1: Day 3 (Wednesday)	9:58 AM	11:05 AM	12	1:07	6	Justin, Katie, Matthew, Bryan, Susan, Janet

The second research trip occurred at the end of February and was scheduled to allow me to observe a full week of regular decision committee deliberations. When I arrived, I learned that the committee was ahead of schedule having convened for all five days in the week preceding. Matthew estimated an end to committee by midweek

following the week of my visit. As such, the Wednesday of my visit became a non-committee day for the office, allowing members to address other work duties. The activity I observed in my assigned committee room, the same space to which I was assigned during my first trip, is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3 Regular Decision Site Visit Observation Synopsis

Committee Round & Day of Observation	Start Time of 1st Decision Introduction	End Time of Last Decision Vote	Number of Decisions Made	Window Duration (HR:MIN)	Number of Decision-Makers	Committee Members Present
Regular: Day 1 (Monday)	9:00 AM	10:26 AM	31	1:26	3	Matthew, Joyce, Bryan
Regular: Day 1 (Monday)	10:33 AM	11:53 AM	29	1:20	3	Matthew, Joyce, Bryan
Regular: Day 1 (Monday)	1:17 PM	2:33 PM	34	1:16	3	Matthew, Joyce, Bryan
Regular: Day 1 (Monday)	2:45 PM	4:26 PM	36	1:41	3	Matthew, Joyce, Bryan
Regular: Day 2 (Tuesday)	8:53 AM	9:09 AM	6	0:16	3	Adam, Erin, Connor
Regular: Day 2 (Tuesday)	9:09 AM	9:59 AM	15	0:50	4	Adam, Erin, Connor, Tate
Regular: Day 2 (Tuesday)	10:07 AM	11:56 AM	31	0:49	4	Adam, Erin, Connor, Tate
Regular: Day 2 (Tuesday)	1:25 PM	2:14 PM	20	0:49	3	Adam, Erin, Janet
Regular: Day 2 (Tuesday)	2:14 PM	2:59 PM	6	0:45	4	Adam, Erin, Janet, Tate
Regular: Day 2 (Tuesday)	3:12 PM	4:30 PM	23	1:18	4	Adam, Erin, Janet, Tate
Regular: Day 3 (Thursday)	8:52 AM	10:08 AM	28	1:16	4	Susan, Adam, Matthew, Connor
Regular: Day 3 (Thursday)	10:15 AM	11:50 AM	33	1:35	4	Susan, Adam, Matthew, Connor
Regular: Day 3 (Thursday)	1:20 PM	2:37 PM	23	1:17	4	Susan, Adam, Matthew, Connor
Regular: Day 3 (Thursday)	2:48 PM	4:30 PM	37	1:42	4	Susan, Adam, Matthew, Connor
Regular: Day 4 (Friday)	9:15 AM	9:57 AM	16	0:42	4	Justin, Emilia, Susan, Katie
Regular: Day 4 (Friday)	10:05 AM	10:28 AM	6	0:23	4	Justin, Emilia, Susan, Katie
Regular: Day 4 (Friday)	10:29 AM	11:55 AM	22	1:26	5	Justin, Emilia, Susan, Katie, Tate
Regular: Day 4 (Friday)	1:23 PM	2:18 PM	16	0:55	4	Justin, Emilia, Susan, Katie
Regular: Day 4 (Friday)	2:19 PM	2:38 PM	5	0:19	3	Emilia, Susan, Katie
Regular: Day 4 (Friday)	2:39 PM	2:45 PM	3	0:06	4	Justin, Emilia, Susan, Katie

Conveniently, the Wednesday break provided me the perfect opportunity to conduct follow-up interviews with those participants with whom I had met in November. Happily, each of them agreed. This second interview was loosely semi-structured with a few follow-up questions for each person based upon my re-reading of each initial interview transcript. The introductory questions I posed touched on a number of topics: personal

reflections on regular decision committee to date (as they had had seven days of committee to re-familiarize themselves with the committee experience); any new directions or goals issued or suggested by the dean or anyone else; and, reactions to the CBE process and any impact, real or perceived, on committee deliberations and their individual decision-making processes at the committee table, for instance. Additionally, this meeting provided me the opportunity to have each participant reflect on a set of statements I had prepared and printed in advance. Each statement speaks broadly to the different theories that might explain how admissions decisions are made and mirror my research questions.

These four statements appear below as Figure 4 and appear as I presented them to the committee members. I introduced the statements as an exercise to help me see how actors understood the decision-making process in which they participated. I advised them that they could approach the statements however they chose: they were free to read all of them and respond in aggregate or reflect and share their impressions on each as they progressed. My participants were gracious with their time and participation, and I was cognizant of the fact that I was asking for more time out of their schedules on this workday out of committee. To keep these follow-up interviews casual and less formal, I decided not to take audio recordings of these follow-up meetings and instead took hand-written notes that I later transcribed into Microsoft Word.

Statements that speak to *how* admissions committees make decisions

1. The admissions decision-making process is fundamentally rational. Committee members possess knowledge of all possible alternatives, are able to conduct an assessment of the probabilities of all consequences of each admissions decision, and evaluate each set of consequences (such as likelihood of yield, retention, progression, contributions to the life of the college, success after college, etc.) for the relevant goals of the college.

2. The college depends to an extent upon external resources including tuition revenue, and the admissions committee makes decisions that help to ensure, protect, or improve the college's financial standing. Given that organizational survival or preservation of prestige depends on successful and continued resource acquisition, the admissions decision-making process is informed by resource providers, including students and their families, elite private preparatory schools, the administration, alumni, trustees, and donors.

3. Admissions decisions may be influenced by four constituencies on whom the committee relies for financial and political support, among others: administration, faculty, alumni, and elite private preparatory schools. Admissions can be thought of as a negotiated settlement between internal interest groups (athletics, faculty) and external constituencies (alumni, feeder schools, mobilized minority groups).

4. The admissions decision-making process can be ambiguous and unpredictable, in such a way that the nature of the choices made and the technology employed to inform committee members, the time it takes to make decisions, and the problems each solves (or goals met) all depend on a relatively complicated intermeshing of elements. Decisions are a result of a process that is subjective, holistic, and human.

Figure 4: Theory Statements for Follow-Up Interview Exercise

In total, I spent eight days observing committee deliberations during the two site visits. My data collection *in situ* within the committee room over the two and half days of ED1 deliberations yielded nearly 140 pages of hand-written notes. I recorded discussion and votes on 182 applications in ED1. During the four days of regular decision committee, I recorded nearly 180 pages of hand-written observations covering discussion and votes on 420 applications. To allow for efficient coding and improved analysis, I transcribed all observation notes from both visits into Microsoft Word. The two

documents total 69 and 103 pages for ED1 and Regular Decision committee observations, respectively.

The final data I collected included the documents used for application record-keeping and evaluation. I altered institutional-specific content and redacted references to the host institution to preserve anonymity. I then consulted with the Admissions Dean and together we reviewed the redacted and altered versions that appear herein. These revised documents include the following: Appendix H, *Committee Dashboard for the College*; Appendix I, *Academic Rating for the College*; Appendix J, *Other Ratings for the College*; and Appendix K, "*Special Indicators" of the College.* Collectively these documents contribute to findings as supporting data. They are discussed at greater length in the beginning of the next chapter. I am grateful for the dean's permission to include these documents, as they allow for improved triangulation, a clearer narrative, and a more robust discussion of findings.

Data Analysis

As mentioned earlier, my data analysis began in the field, simultaneous with collection through observations. As Merriam (2009) has stated, "Qualitative data analysis should also be conducted *along with* (not after) data collection" (p. 269, italics and parenthetical in original). Much of this initial analysis began with my *a priori* propositions drawn from the theories under consideration. Additionally, I began coding data as patterns emerged during my observations. For instance, the use of the word "context" arose with such considerable frequency that it quickly became clear to me that the contextual realities of applicants' lives was of primary concern to decision-makers.

Interview transcripts, field notes, and reflection memos from committee observations were uploaded into my selected data management system, NVivo 11.4.3. Using NVivo, I read through each interview transcript in its entirety, applying both *a priori* and open codes as I progressed. Pattern matching (Yin, 2014) between my data and the *a priori* propositions of the GCM, including evidence of problematic preferences, unclear technologies, fluid participation, and the attachment of solutions to problems, worked deductively. Themes speaking to rival explanations in the competing theories of political power, resource dependency, and bureaucratic rationality were coded in similar fashion. Open coding, an inductive process of analysis, allowed me to be "open to anything possible" (Merriam, 2009) as data analysis continued.

Yin (2014) suggested a logic model as an additional means to improve internal validity, and this proved a useful resource as I diagramed different decisions in the moments when solutions attached to problems and became commitments to action. Though constant comparative analysis techniques are more commonly associated with constructivist research, it was a critical component to my case study, as I constantly checked data against the GCM and rival theories during pattern matching.

Validity and Reliability

Internal validity is established in a case study's data analysis phase (Yin, 2014). Construct validity was gained in this case study given the multiple sources of evidence gathered via interviews, observations, and document analysis. Using multiple sources allows for triangulation between the evidence itself as well as ensuring a more comprehensive and thorough capture and validation of what I heard, witnessed, and recorded. The exercise I conducted during my follow-up interviews provided an

opportunity for both member-checking and a personal reflection on the fitness of the competing theories as a bias check on myself, the principal instrument of this qualitative research. Additionally, my second research question sought discrepant information (Creswell, 2014) that might contradict or refute the GCM in explaining how the admissions committee under observation made decisions.

External validity in the form of analytical generalizability is accomplished through the use of theory (Yin, 2014). Statistical generalizability remains the goal of quantitative research while analytical generalizability is the goal of qualitative research. The case study at hand, while lacking statistical generalizability (as will all or most qualitative studies) favored by quantitative researchers, demonstrates analytical generalizability in its theory building of the GCM and in cases that are similarly selected. Successful application of, modification, refinement or contribution to a theory provides external validity in this instance, when the GCM may be applied in similarly situated case studies.

Finally, I sought reliability within this case study via two means. First, I established and adhered to a study protocol. Personal reflections, new opportunities (such as CBE observation and document archiving), and decisions were recorded as the case study developed. Case studies are likely to evolve once they begin, as was certainly my experience. Second, I created and maintain a study database that includes all of the data gathered via interviews, observations, and documents. Reliability does not equate to replicability, but with a protocol in place and a comprehensive database, future researchers would be able to arrive at the same conclusions met in this study and understand logically how the conclusions were drawn.

Bias, Assumptions, and Limitations

My professional career to date includes seven years as an admissions officer at a small, private, selective liberal arts college. The admissions selectivity rate of this institution ranged from the high twenties to the mid-thirties during my period of employment. In short, the college attracted a sufficient number of applicants such that the admissions committee could meet its goals broadly while paying attention to some special needs that arose from year to year. Committee was my favorite time of year—though it was also the most challenging few weeks for my colleagues and me.

The volume of information that we collectively processed on any given day astounded me. The lengthy list of goals, preferences, and needs of the college's numerous stakeholders added to the complexity of our task. And committee did not always flow smoothly: time and energy created frequent interpersonal conflicts that would unravel at the committee table, undeniably fueled in part by our personal preferences and our other duties as assigned.

We also practiced need-aware admissions out of necessity though committed to meeting 100 percent of demonstrated financial need for all admitted students. Given a limited financial aid budget and smaller endowment relative to our peer and aspirational competitors, however, this meant that a student's ability to pay tuition factored regularly into our decisions. It was an unfortunate but necessary reality, and not a unique one. What this meant for committee, though, was a boundedness on our ability to admit every "needy" student we deemed deserving or worthy. It heightened tensions between committee members and served as a constant reminder of the humanity of the process. We had to make difficult choices that impacted the community in which we lived.

As it relates to this study, my professional experience suggested to me that there was much to be studied from the organizational perspective at the admissions committee table. Coupled with my review of the literature in which I could not find descriptions or theories that explained my lived experience in committee, I was driven to design a study that sought an answer to explain *how* we made decisions. From literature and experience, I knew I had to be present when votes were held—those moments when actors committed the organization to an action.

Ultimately, I observed a committee decision-making process that felt very familiar to me, though with a lesser degree of interpersonal tension between committee members. Perhaps, as application numbers grow ever higher, admissions professionals become more resigned to the difficulty of their decision-making and embrace the emotion more readily. Perhaps the need-blind nature of the decision-making process at the College somehow eased the burden of decision-making. Whatever the case, I believe the College's setting met the critical threshold conditions I sought to test the GCM and its rival theories.

Researcher Bias

A few internal debates arose as I prepared for this case study: how to gain access, particularly in light of the resistance I was hearing from the field early on, and how to account for my own personal biases given my previous experience as an admissions practitioner. As mentioned previous, Posselt's (2014, 2016) research on graduate admissions informed my research design. Dr. Posselt was kind enough to entertain a phone call from me in summer 2016 to help me think through these issues, and I think her thoughts on this proposed case study deserve recognition and are relevant here.

A promise and preservation of anonymity of site and person became a critical component of gaining access to a research site. My preference was to retain the right to disclose the research site so that readers might better understand the host's institutional context and place within the U.S. higher education system. However, it was more critical that I be granted access into the debate surrounding decisions, observations being essential to address my research questions. At the same time, I want to reiterate that this case study was not intended to explain how particular student profiles are treated in the admission process; this was not a tell-all recasting of what happens behind the scenes. I did not have a political or social agenda compelling this research, and it was never my intent to 'call out' individual student cases I might observe that could be suggestive of findings of relevant literature motivated as such.

Rather, my intent for this case study was to test theories that might account for ambiguousness in a world of bounded rationality relative to competing theories of decision-making. It has been my personal professional experience that there simply is too much to know about an entire applicant pool, let alone any one applicant, to allow for fully rational decisions. Admissions decision-makers may be *intendedly* rational, it is highly unlikely that they are knowingly irrational, but their ability to be fully rational is considerably bounded by knowledge. It is my stance that with adherence to institutional mission and in concert with the financial constraints of each institution's resources, decision-makers can arrive at the best decisions possible, *in the context of their institutionally-specific parameters*, given their limited search abilities within a given applicant pool. This, of course, does not preclude the likelihood that there are alternative "best" or "as good as" decisions available to them within deep applicant pools.

My own bias deserves further attention given my role as a key instrument within the study as data collector and interpreter (Creswell, 2014). The GCM immediately struck me as a compelling explanation of how certain admissions decisions are made from the first moment I was introduced to it. As previously stated, the conceptualization of modern colleges and universities as organized anarchies resonates with my previous professional experiences. I witnessed organizational actors "make choices without consistent, shared goals," and agree with the GCM's theorists when they claim, "Situations of decision making under goal ambiguity are common in complex organizations" (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1). I am confident that in the course of my data collection and analysis I have accounted for my personal bias favoring the GCM explicitly because I included alternate theories as a check and balance, and in light of the theory exercise conducted with interview participants.

Simultaneously, I am acutely aware from experience that actors' attention, time, and energy devoted to decision-making may be distracted, inconsistent, and intermittent. My research design was thus informed by the GCM's tenets: I needed to situate myself in an environment that might best fit the descriptions of an *organized anarchy*, gather data germane to the research questions as established, and account for rival theories that might explain the admissions decision-making process equally as well. Not only does theory development distinguish a case study from other types of qualitative approaches; theory development is a desirable component of case studies to yield "surprisingly strong guidance in determining the data to collect and the strategies for analyzing the data" (Yin, 2014, p. 38).

Researcher Assumptions

My assumption entering this study is not that organizational actors are ever intendedly irrational. Rather, they lack the ability to be fully rational. They are incapable of knowing everything they would like to know to make a "perfect" decision, should such an option exist. What is more, in the setting of a selective institution, they may be bounded in their ability to admit all deserving students, however that may be defined. There is neither room nor, typically, financial aid resources, to accommodate all applicants they might wish.

A secondary theoretical assumption is that organizational actors share goals in common with those of the institution and seek to make decisions consistent with the college's mission. They are able to divorce themselves from their personal biases and preferences and enact decisions that are objectively aligned with the college's goals. In truth, I expected to observe a mix of institutional goals and personal preferences at play, and the influence of subjective assessment tools bearing upon decision-makers.

One final assumption I made involves actors' understanding of their own participation in decision-making. This speaks directly to the notion of the black box in admissions. I assumed during interviews that participants were forthright and honest. I assumed that what they said they did in the capacity of an admissions decision-maker was consistent with their training and professionalization, and in accordance with the stated criteria and procedures of the College. It was my assumption that they had a proper understanding of their role within the organization and their potential and likely impact on the outcomes of the organization. In short, what they claimed to do over the course of reading, evaluation, and committee decision-making was consistent with their charge,

that what they actually did over the course of a decision is consistent what their recollection and understanding of it.

Limitations to the Study

There exist several potential limitations to this study. First, the theories tested were not included to potentially explain decision-making across all sectors of U.S. higher education. The tenets of the GCM are unlikely to offer explanations as to how open access institutions make admissions decisions, for example. Consistent with the proposed Ambiguity Continuum in Appendix A, the GCM will exhibit a better fit with those institutions of heightened selectivity.

Second, the role of institutional wealth as reflected in endowment level and financial aid practices undeniably influences admissions decisions. As endowments increase, responsiveness to tuition revenue needs likely decreases as endowment drawdowns or returns comprise greater proportions of institutional operating budgets. Financial aid policies reflect the varying levels of institutional reliance upon tuition revenue. Institutions that admit students via a need-blind financial aid policy do not need to factor institutional financial aid budgets into their decisions. Need-blind institutions theoretically have fewer problems to address, in that decision-makers do not have to factor projected tuition revenue into considerations. Institutions that admit students via need-aware or need-sensitive financial aid policies, however, must be responsive to estimated family contributions and the impact that admitted and enrolling students may have upon aid budgets—particularly if the institution commits to meeting full demonstrated need.

Mapping onto the GCM theory, we see that financial aid budgets serve to bound decision-makers in terms of matching solutions to problems. We also observe a corollary proposition: full-pay or no-demonstrated-need applicants present themselves as solutions to budget demands, providing much-need tuition dollars upon which the institution is dependent. Thus, this study is limited in its generalizability according to the financial resources available to the institution. The more tuition-dependent a college is, the less likely the GCM will offer an apt explanation into decision-making. Arguably, though, if a student's increased ability to pay is considered a potential solution to the problems facing decision-makers, namely generation of tuition revenue, then GCM might be equally well suited.

A potential limitation resides in the fact that four committee members rejected my interview requests. I am lacking their perspective and understanding as to how they arrive a decision on behalf of the College. However, I remain confident that the quality participation of the other nine committee members, in concert with the volume of data recorded during observations, helped me to arrive at data saturation. Additional interviews may have contributed depth to the study, but their absence is unlikely to alter my findings and conclusions.

Another limitation addresses the reality I faced during observations. Namely, the full admissions committee was split into three or four deliberative bodies by design. The volume of applications necessitated sub-committees to efficiently make decisions on schedule to meet the College's notification deadline. Accordingly, it was impossible for me to observe every single vote as these smaller committees met concurrently. Perhaps the personalities at play in other rooms affected the processes of decision, allowing power

imbalances or political pressures to exert greater influence. Given the fact that I was able to observe a mix of committee members cycle through my assigned committee room over the course of my seven days of observation, and I did not detect such pressures at play, this risk of this limitation is minimized in my mind.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I begin with a brief synopsis of the application reading, assessment, and evaluation practices that I observed in order to orient readers to the preparations undertaken by committee members in advance of committee meetings. To address my first research question and assess the fitness of the garbage can model of decision-making, I first establish to what extent the admissions committee I observed may be described as an organized anarchy. As established in my theoretical framework in Chapter Three, only under conditions of an organized anarchy would the GCM offer an explanation as to how decisions are executed. This involves a discussion of evidence speaking to the fluid participation of actors, unclear technologies, and problematic preferences. I then proceed to a discussion of findings that speak to the validity of the competing theories of political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rationality, as posed by my second research question. Finally, I discuss the findings of my follow-up interviews with committee members.

Application Reading, Rating, and Evaluation: Organizing for Committee

It is helpful to first understand the criteria and procedures of the admissions committee particular to the College as an introduction to the discussion of findings. This year, application reading began in early November in preparation for the first round of Early Decision (ED1) committee which was held in mid-November. Reading season resumed following ED1 as the office prepared for the next two application rounds. Early

Decision 2 committee was scheduled in the third week of January followed by Regular Decision (RD) committee. RD committee meetings began in the third week of February and lasted two and a half weeks, though committees were not held every day during this time. Late-completed applications necessitated reading during committee, a task accomplished during breaks from or around committee time. As discussed in the previous chapter, my visit schedule allowed me to be present for the entirety of ED1 committee and four days of RD committee, as well as observation periods with a reading team and the Dean.

Historically, the College used a model of decision-making that involved multiple readers prior to committee review. As a trial effort, the College had implemented committee-based evaluations (CBE) for the duration of this reading season. The goals of the CBE procedure are threefold: 1) to narrow the pool of applicants for committee consideration, eliminating those deemed not admissible or sufficiently competitive within the applicant pool; 2) to evaluate applicants' credentials using holistic review and assign scores according to established ratings parameters; and, 3) to sort through and categorize each applicant for data relevant to committee discussions and of interest to the College. CBE teams are not empowered to admit applicants; teams can either deny an application or refer it to committee, which may be accompanied by a recommendation. At the College, then, the CBE process in place for this year on a preliminary basis fits the second model as described by Rigol (2003).

The first goal of the CBE process finds corollary in Stevens's (2007) "coarse sort." According to my liaison, Matthew Chase, the goal was to narrow the RD applicant pool by at least half for committee consideration. This year, the College received more

than 8,000 RD applications. Approximately 3,200 would appear before committee, with the number of admission offers made to RD applicants projected to be in the range of 1,200 to 1,300. Thus, the CBE teams had performed well in this metric.

I would dispute any description of the College's CBE procedures as "coarse" given my observations: every complete application submitted was reviewed by a pair of readers. Academic, extracurricular, personal qualities, and overall ratings were assigned to every applicant. While accurate that those applications with the lowest ratings would not make it to committee for a full hearing, each received a comprehensive and thorough consideration, albeit somewhat more hurried for lower-rated applicants. As it was told to me, and to which my observations attest, "Two sets of eyes fall on every application, at a minimum."

The initial sort was holistic, detailed, and intensive. Dean Mitchum confirmed this as he shared his perspective on the notion of a coarse sort at the College, saying in reference to an article published that week in a national newspaper:

> Grades and test scores still matter the most, but if it were a coarse sort, we'd go down an X and Y axis and say, "Here's the cutoff point, don't even bother with these, and then let's go into these." We read every one with at least two sets of eyes and everyone gets a rating. And that's where—to the degree you want to make this as fair as possible, [we ask] did we miss anything, are there extenuating circumstances or anything in there?

CBE may best be thought of as a bureaucratic, administrative adaptation made out of the necessity to accurately and systematically process inordinate volumes of data. It may lend itself to efficiency gains in this processing of data but what it certainly does is realize heightened efficiency in decision-making leading up to committee. Erin Rhodes, Admissions Director and Chair of Diversity Applicants, reflected during my first visit:

> And now that we're doing committee-based reading, where we're kind of doing the first and second read at the same time, I think we've had more conversations where we've said, "This person is really not going to likely make it at that further conversation, so we really shouldn't even push them to that point." Those are the ones that you can sort of open up and say, "I don't know if this is going to happen."

Committee members are able to process data together in real time in CBE:

> …in the past we had this sort of three-tiered situation where it was all sort of individually reviewed, and so you kind of sat in your own little silo and read the application and then you did a second read on a different application, and you're thinking, "I don't really see this, but I guess I'm supporting my colleague, because the colleague saw something." You know? So now you can sit in the room [together] and say, "I don't really see it, I just don't. I'm not sure this is someone who's going to get pushed through," or, "This is someone we really should talk about in committee."

As reading pairs navigate potential pitfalls or sticking points together, it alleviates the need for the committee's full attention of otherwise minor points of distinction. Committee attention and time can be spent discerning between the most competitive and intriguing applications within the pool.

The process of CBE was purposefully designed so that reading partners rotated every single day. The intent here seemed twofold: first, to diffuse personality conflicts that might stifle discussions and evaluations, building over time to hamper the efficiency and validity of the process; and, second, to mitigate the risk of any potential knowledge gaps or possible collusion between readers. Further, CBE rotation functions as a systematic check against the dangers of groupthink and may help to preserve diversity of opinion and perspective. Should a certain pair be more apt to make assessments inconsistent with the objectives established by the office, or be out of sync with ratings parameters, their potential influence would be mitigated.

Of course, the reading styles of different readers are likely to vary. I was interested in how different personalities may interact in these early stages of decision-making as a source of ambiguity. What degree of certainty is there that any two CBE members will process information identically and also arrive at the same recommendation? Janet Weis, Assistant Dean, acknowledged that the experience of alternating reading partners is "going to be a little bit different every time." However, she appreciated "that we're all arriving at the process and going through the same process and arriving at probably similar conclusions but doing it a little bit differently based on how quiet we are, how much we talk." She shared her impressions of CBE:

> …It was interesting to see how different people want to work through their CBE process. So for the first three people that I read with, we always had a silence period of about, like, at least two minutes, depending on how quickly the file was going or not. Usually it was about five minutes of silence to go through everything sort of separately and then come together and discuss what we had been reading, where with the fourth person that I read with we talked the whole time. And I like them both. It was—the dynamics were all really different and I enjoyed them all.

The second CBE goal was to evaluate applicants' credentials using holistic review and assign scores according to established ratings parameters. To accomplish this task with uniformity, CBE training instructed reading pairs to approach each application in like fashion and consider application documents in the same order every time. This order of consideration mirrors the structure of the Committee Dashboard (Appendix H) so that all fields within the evaluation form would be populated where relevant, or the process would at least offer certainty that each team considered all items of interest.

The Committee Dashboard provides the backbone of all decisions. It contains sections for capturing all elements of each application as provided by each student and is the modern equivalent of the docket images discussed in Chapter Three. Every complete

application has her or his own dashboard within the College's admissions data management and communications platform.

The first page of the dashboard summarizes the student's demographic information and displays ratings as assigned by members of the admissions office. It also indicates which office members were teamed together for the initial read, the roles for which they were responsible, and whether the two readers dissented in some manner. Additional information includes legacy status and type of relationship to the College, whether or not a student is the first in her family to attend college, intended major, disclosure of disciplinary or criminal sanctions, and campus visit history. Academic information follows with details on high school setting and the percentage of the student body from that high school that continue on to four-year colleges. An applicant's reported and College-calculated GPAs through junior year and for senior year-to-date follow. (In the vernacular of the office, current senior year grades are called "SYUs," pronounced "soo-ees," an acronym for "senior year unweighted grades"). Class rank, either exact or approximate, appears when provided by the student's high school counselor or as estimated by the readers.

At the bottom of the first page of the dashboard is a section devoted to standardized testing and College-assigned ratings. The College requires the submission of standardized test scores from a selection of alternatives. In addition, predicted International Baccalaureate and self-reported Advanced Placement scores may populate, where relevant. Ratings as assigned by the College's alumni interviewer, art and music faculty, and varsity coaches are provided, when relevant.

The second page of the dashboard contains some fields abandoned as a result of the move to CBE, but generally consolidates notes from CBE and subsequent reads. In prior years under the former system of reading and rating, multiple readers would individually write narratives, a process of "storytelling" (Stevens, 2007, p. 191), for use by committee. CBE narratives are much shorter, intended as thirty-second, high-level, broad-stroke introductions to applicants. Under CBE, committee members are responsible for paging through application components individually and building their own internal narratives while in committee.

The end of the dashboard provides space for committee members to record votes and committee comments. These may factor into final discussions as the committee shapes the class. They may also inform any discussions as to offers of admission from the waitlist that might be necessary later in Spring.

Readers must calculate and assign ratings in four areas for each application to meet the second obligation of CBE teams. Appendix I replicates the grid used to inform the calculation of academic ratings. Academic ratings, or "ACADs" are the first, and most important, rating assigned by readers. The grid reminds readers to consider the "overarching question" to which the academic rating seeks an answer: "To what extent does the applicant demonstrate intellectual achievement, engagement, and potential for academic success?" The academic rating incorporates data from the student's transcript, supporting materials such as recommendations and accompanying school-supplied grids, and test results. Scores are assigned on a scale from seven-plus (highest, most accomplished academically) to one-minus.

Grids for the other three ratings, each with its own guiding question, are replicated as Appendix J. Each rating is assigned on a numerical scale identical to the academic rating. The extracurricular rating asks, "What level of contribution will this student make outside the classroom, taking into account skill level, initiative and leadership capabilities?" It speaks to the individual's capacity to contribute to the community based on demonstrated participation, passions, and pursuits. The second question drives a rating of personal qualities, and assesses the character of applicants: "How will the College community be impacted by this student's personal qualities?" This adds an extra dimension to the potential contribution to community life and well-being. Finally, an overall rating is assigned that is informed by, but not directly connected to, the other three ratings. The guidance for the overall rating reads, "Considering the applicant's overall contribution to campus (including academic talent, extracurricular talent, personal qualities, and special considerations), what recommendation would you give to the committee?" It ranges from seven ("Tops for admission") to one ("Not viable").

Notably, the grids for academics, personal qualities, and extracurricular activities do not reflect minimum criteria for admission. There are no automatic cut-offs determined by standardized test scores or GPA. Every application is evaluated across these three areas. Only in the final overall rating grid does there exist language that speaks to admissibility. An overall 'one' is "not viable" for admission at all while a 'two' can only be a "refuse" (deny). The final decision on applicants rated at overall 'three' will "likely" be a denial but overall 'threes' are still eligible for committee consideration. Granted, the probability of admission for an applicant evaluated at an overall 'three' is

extremely low, but it is not impossible according to the admissions criteria or policies of the College.

The final task of CBE members is to sort through and categorize each applicant for data relevant to committee discussions and of special interest to the College. Appendix K presents the College's "Special Indicators" list issued to committee members to assist in this objective. These abbreviations and acronyms are termed "attributes" by committee members; applicants are "tagged" with these attributes as CBE teams read through application files. In essence, most of these attributes symbolize the various goals and preferences of the College. They provide a means for the committee to operationalize goal attainment. Some refer to the race or ethnicity of applicants (AA for Asian American or Pacific Islanders; BAC for African American, Black or Caribbean; HL for Hispanic, Latino/a, and Latinx; and, NA for Native American) while others signal contextual elements from which the student is applying, i.e. BC for Blue Collar, WCF for Working Class Family, and FG for First Generation college-bound. Other attributes may serve a dual purpose. For instance, LD signals to committee members that an applicant has a diagnosed learning disability so that they may assess his performance in light of this challenge. It also alerts the College's Dean of Students' Office should the applicant matriculate to the College so that appropriate advising arrangements may be made should the student so desire.

Bureaucratic Structure Within the Black Box of Committee

The committee process requires members to simultaneously perform necessary administrative tasks while hearing the presentation of applicants and making decisions. In ED1, three committee members are each individually responsible for specific duties

associated with roles as assigned at the beginning of each committee session. These roles are playfully referred to as *Thing 1, Thing 2,* and *Thing 3*. *Thing 1* is responsible for summarizing notes of the discussion and recording the votes of the committee. This includes recording the number of people in the room which plays an important role in the final shaping of the class. (For example, a vote of six admits to one waitlist is more binding than a vote of four admits to three waitlists.) *Thing 2* is responsible for calculating and/or recording senior grades, confirming the ED agreement is signed and on file, recording any reasons that the committee might have for holding an applicant from final decision, and whether or not a student's athletic attributes factored into the decision (as per the ATH attribute). *Thing 3* reviews the data presented on a separate athletic sheet to be certain that coaches' interests are appropriately made known. In RD and later rounds of ED1 and Early Decision Two, there is no *Thing 3* because the majority of athletes have already applied ED1. Thus, it is possible that in some instances every member of a committee is responsible for some administrative duties—while also being charged with the task of voting and evaluating the facts relevant to each vote. Time, energy, and attention to the task of decision-making are certainly taxed in light of these competing administrative duties.

When a committee holds a vote on an application, every member must cast a vote of either admit, waitlist, or deny. Abstentions are allowed when personal circumstances prove problematic to individuals. Inconclusive votes—those that end in ties—default to the lesser outcome. For example, if in a committee of four people two vote admit and two vote waitlist, the decision defaults to a waitlist. Similarly, if a committee of four holds a vote and there are two votes to admit, one to deny, and one to defer or waitlist, it is

declared a tie. A second vote is held with the admit option off the table; the revote choices would be between a deny or a defer (in ED) and waitlist (in RD).

The committee may also elect to hold an application from a final decision and refer it to the full committee. Extenuating circumstances might confound the decision, or the committee may be waiting on more context to inform their thinking. Perhaps they are awaiting clarification on a data-point from another committee member or external party, such as a coach. Whatever the case might be, the current committee conducts a vote and records the outcome and logic leading to a full committee hold. The leanings of the first committee are part of the context the full committee will consider—the initial in-the-moment reactions to a file are valuable to decision-making.

Introduction to an Organized Anarchy and the GCM at Work

In the afternoon of my final day of regular decision committee observations, I recorded the following discussion of a committee consisting of Susan, Emilia, and Katie. Tate and Justin were assigned to the room as well, but Tate had a presentation and he needed Justin to help him prepare. As a result, a committee room of five by design was forty percent smaller than planned. Fluid participation defines such decision-making occurrences. Whether there is any effect upon decisions remains open to speculation: how might the decision have unfolded with all five actors at play, or with an entirely different mix of committee members in the room?

Susan was presenting a handful of applicants from a nearby state. Given the size of the committee, all three members were responsible for administrative duties, as *Presenter*, *Thing 1*, and *Thing 2*. In addition, one of the "Things" would be calculating senior year GPAs, typically *Thing 2*. While their primary organizational responsibility

was decision-making within this setting, their time, energy, and attention were drawn simultaneously by necessity to other duties, participation arguably meeting a definition of "fluid."

Ambiguity emerges in the context of an unfamiliar high school setting. Further, the context of the applicant's family background and academic preparation play a factor in the decision, vital context that informs their debate, otherwise lost if on the outside looking in. Unclear technology, in this instance committee speculation regarding the student's standardized test performance and the absence of an alumni interview, is present in the decision arena. The deliberation unfolded over the course of four minutes:

Vignette 1

> *Susan introduces the applicant as a "singleton" from an unfamiliar high school. She notes an assigned academic rating (or "acad" in the parlance of the office) of five and an overall rating of six-minus. She describes his hometown as "very rural." Katie interjects with the observation that the attribute code FGA [First Generation: parents attended but didn't complete college] is present, and then Susan continues by closing the CBE narrative summary: "1470 SAT, community-based organization, FGA, not a fancy background, some mixed bad grades, scores strong in context, strong extra-curriculars, president of the civil rights club." She summarizes for her colleagues, "bright rural background with First-Generation scores."*
>
> *Katie cites the fact that the student did not take advantage of an alumni interview despite three efforts made by the college's volunteer to schedule a meeting. Susan highlights statistics on post-secondary attendance from this high school, as provided by the student's guidance counselor, to further contextualize his performance: "Forty percent to four-year colleges here; I have a feeling the 1470 is pretty stellar in context." She asks her colleagues for a quick check of current grades on file given that the student was earning a C+ at the time of CBE. Emilia responds that no new grades have arrived.*
>
> *Katie states, "I really like him. He cites his time with the CBO [community-based organization] as a life-changing experience in his essays." Susan seems on board as well: "I can support him as a rural [student] with CBO backing. Let's give him a chance." Emilia is close to an admit yet not completely sold, advising, "I might split." This will signal to colleagues that the decision was not unanimous, and the applicant's name could be offered*

> *earlier for moves to the waitlist should they have to trim admits in shaping. A vote is held; the student is admitted by a margin of two admits to one waitlist, Emilia the intentional holdout.*

When I spoke with my liaison after full committee when decisions had been released, I was curious to verify if the fate of this "rural" student had changed as a result of shaping. He confirmed that the student had been admitted, his application having survived the trimming process.

This student, despite being below average within the pool as measured by academics, offered a combination of attributes that appealed to the College's admissions officers. An SAT of 1470 coming from other, more privileged applicants would be inadmissible or at least less excusable. Admitting a lower SAT also lowers reported class averages on standardized tests and jeopardizes the College's rankings and prestige markers.

His failure to follow through on an interview, perhaps suggesting a waning interest in the College, might signal a lower probability of yield, threatening an important external metric. However, the support of a community-based organization signals resources and a knowledge base of social capital from which he might draw. The CBO connection inspires greater confidence in his ability to perform at the College. And, his ability to write effectively about the impactful, "life changing" role the CBO has held in his life, draws the committee in further. This rural first-generation boy, a leader of a social justice club, is a contextual standout. His characteristics meet several goals of the College's mission.

Fluid Participation of Decision-Makers

My observations from the morning of the first day of regular decision committee illustrate the fluid participation of decision-makers. Of the thirteen members of the office, only three comprised this committee. Despite the small size of this committee, there were administrative duties that required their time and attention. Every committee room in regular decision is required to have two members who serve double duty as data-entry clerks, *Thing 1* and *Thing 2* as described above. These two individuals have table tents to remind themselves and others of their responsibilities. The reality that I observe is that this diverts some of their attention and likely distracts from their information processing ability, relative to crafting their decision for a vote. *Thing 2* also records the decision as a quality control measure, or as they share later in committee, to prevent a colleague from "going rogue," any reasons for holds, and general athletic attributes, if any. Both *Things* enter all of this information into each file as the committee finalizes its decision. At one point, Katie Hamlin confirmed my suspicions. She was acting as a *Thing* and was quickly growing frustrated with the added demands and split attention it required. Without prompting, she stated to the room, "It's hard for me to do what I need to do and listen to the presentation."

Similarly, other administrative responsibilities arise throughout the course of committee. Emails are crafted to officemates while deliberations occur for a variety of reasons, most frequently to correct an applicant's name or to add or remove certain attributes. Colleagues may enter the committee room and interrupt deliberations to ask for input on an unrelated meeting or issue. The office also welcomes occasional visitors to observe committees at work. For several sessions of regular decision, the committee

room where I was conducting observations played host to a number of senior students at the College, all of whom had worked in some official capacity for the Admissions Office. Committee members interacted with their visitors to explain lingo and terminology, or to share their rationale behind certain votes. Though every effort is made to remove distractions and focus the attention of committee members, other needs and responsibilities command attention.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of actors' fluid participation resides in the two observation synopses presented in Chapter Four for ED1 (Table 2) and RD (Table 3). In ED1, the office of thirteen admissions officers was split into two committees. There were seven members assigned to the room in which I was making observations. All seven were present and involved in the first nine votes that were held over the first 25 minutes of the first day of ED1. Then, Dean Mitchum removed himself for a meeting and would be absent for the subsequent 17 decisions. The committee contracted to five after lunch as Katie Hamlin, Senior Assistant Dean, had other duties to which she had to attend. Throughout the course of the afternoon's committee votes the size of the committee would fluctuate between five and six as Dean Mitchum's schedule allowed him to be present. On the first day of ED1, the committee made 88 decisions that involved five, six, or seven of the 13 possible voting members of the Admissions Office. Given the roles of *Thing 1*, *Thing 2*, and *Thing 3*, then, up to 60 percent of any given committee was actively engaged in both decision-making and administrative responsibilities.

The following day saw even greater fluidity in participation. A different combination of seven committee members were assigned to the same room. However, Junior Associate Dean Susan Mullen would be absent: she had to stay home to tend to a

sick child. The committee of six made 25 decisions that morning over the course of an hour and half of decision-making save for a four-minute break. The afternoon would tell a different story altogether, however. Reconvening at 1:18 PM, the committee had lost Mitchum again to another meeting and was down to five people. After just three votes, Associate Dean Justin Evans was called out of the room to help Mitchum prepare for a meeting. It was a committee of four for nine minutes, in which time two decisions were made. Evans returned, and the committee successfully moved through nine decisions in 25 minutes.

However, the physical toll of sitting at the committee table had begun to wear upon them. Matthew Chase excused himself to retrieve a stand-up desk and was absent for one vote, held by a committee of four. Upon his return, Susan made it into the office and joined committee, her childcare needs addressed by family. The committee again returned to six people and heard four cases. Mitchum returned shortly thereafter and the full committee of seven would decide 21 applications. In the late afternoon, Justin had a conflict and would be absent for the final eight decisions of the day. All told, the intended committee of seven would range in size from seven to four members while making 73 decisions. Again, in light of the administrative duties required by *Things*, two committee members were simultaneously balancing their attention between deliberation and administration.

My observations were the same on the final morning of ED1 committee. Dean Mitchum would only be present for an hour of decision-making, during which nine applications were voted upon. A committee of six would decide the final 12 applications, bringing ED1 to a close.

The fluidity of participants around moments of decision is notable because committee decision-making is fundamental to their responsibilities. It is the core of their service to the mission of the organization as a whole. However, participant time and energy are required elsewhere, and committee participation must be compromised and sacrificed. Simply, there is no escaping the competing demands of a modern admissions office. The one decision-maker with the most experience, responsible for certifying that the needs of the College had been met as best as possible in the out-going admissions notifications, Dean Tate Mitchum, was pulled regularly from the committee table by other responsibilities. This, despite the fact that he considered committee a "sacred cow," as he had shared with the assembled full committee prior to deliberations early in the morning of the first day of ED1. The expectation was that all admissions officers would be fully present when committee was convened; the reality was much different, out of necessity to the functioning of the larger organization.

Observations of RD committee speak further to the fluidity of participation at the moment of decision. On the first day of my visit to campus—the fourth day of RD committee—there were four committees operating simultaneously. One of these committees was devoted to deciding international applications. Their task would be complete by the end of the day thus resulting in three committees for the balance of RD.

I was assigned yet again to the largest committee room simply because it was the only space that could easily accommodate additional people. I recorded deliberations and decisions on 420 applicants over the course of four days observing members in this committee room. On day one, the committee consisted of three people: my liaison

Matthew, Associate Dean Joyce Harmon, and Assistant Dean Bryan Amador. This committee of three voted on 120 applications.

The committee membership in my assigned room changed entirely on the second day of RD. Admissions Director Erin Rhodes would lead a committee consisting of Assistant Dean Adam Berry and Junior Associate Dean Connor Ackland for the morning session. They would be joined by Dean Mitchum for all but six of the 52 decisions they made in committee. In the afternoon, Rhodes and Berry remained; Ackland had to attend to personal matters off campus so Assistant Dean Janet Weis was reassigned to join them. After 20 decisions, Mitchum rejoined the committee and participated in the final 29 decisions on the day.

On Thursday of that week, the RD committee I was observing began at 8:52 AM. It would run until the final vote was held at 4:30 PM excepting two brief restroom breaks and an hour and a half for lunch. Notably, the same four individuals were present for and participated in each of the 121 decisions: one Associate Dean, an Assistant Dean, and two Junior Associate Deans. Tate Mitchum had meetings all day and would not be involved in any committee discussion this day.

The fourth and final day of my RD observations saw more fluidity in committee membership. Susan Mullen, Katie Hamlin, and Associate Dean of International Applicants Emilia King would be present for each of the 68 decisions made between 9:15 AM and 2:45 PM. Justin would be present for all but five of these decisions. Again, other responsibilities kept Tate out of the committee; he participated in the decisions on 22 applications, less than one-third of those decided in this window.

Thus, the size of the committee I observed during the four days of RD varied from three to five people. Nine combinations of 12 of the 13 admissions officers comprised the committee membership throughout this time. Associate Dean Kathy Barleben was not assigned to my committee room in RD. In ED1, I witnessed 12 different combinations of 12 of the 13 decision-makers deliberate during the three days of observation. I saw committees range from as few as four to as many as seven participants. Erin Rhodes was the only member not to participate in the committee space where I was present.

From the outside speculating on the admissions process within the black box at the College, we might conceive of an entire committee of all 13 members convened together for every decision. However, the reality I observed is that small committees of as few as three people sometimes made decisions. In an office of 13 committee members, then, there are 1,716 permutations of individuals that could make up a three-person committee, or 17,160 combinations for a four-person committee, and so forth. Each and every permutation of participants is possible; each different combination creates a different mix of experience, perspective, and personal preferences.

Taken together, the process I witnessed is best characterized by fluid participation. The full committee of thirteen members was not convened for decision-making at any point during my visit. They would make final decisions on a handful of applicants prior to decision release. There was not one single locus of decision for the committee; as many as four committees were held simultaneously, in effect creating four distinct decision-making arenas. And, the composition of each committee was constantly in flux, impacted by actors' schedules and rival demands for time.

I asked Matthew Chase if the composition of the smaller committees was intentional. Did he and the dean purposefully structure committee membership in any way? He answered that the dean was not involved in such decisions but acknowledged that he and Erin Rhodes considered a number of factors as they together made committee assignments:

> Maybe I should have run [ED1 assignments] by somebody, but the idea is each room has a series of balancing factors—experienced people with less experienced people, people who run regions that have very high numbers of applications and those that have lower…I think we do think a little bit about personalities. You know, every room should have the extroverted, quick thinking decision-maker, and every room should have at least one processor, you know, that we just need to build in that yin and yang so that there is the balance.

Different participants bear upon the process differently and play different roles as decisions unfold. Committees are fluid and evolve over an admissions cycle. As Erin recognized, "So the composition of the committees will change, sometimes daily, sometimes every other day." And, as my observations attest, they also change within the course of any given day.

What is more, time and energy fluidly affect actors' participation levels and attention. Susan Mullen said that "regular breaks are key" to maintaining concentration and mitigating the potential effects of time and energy on the process. "Sometimes committee gets rolling and it's been three hours and we haven't stood up to, like, change what we're doing." The committee was mindful of the threat posed by fatigue to possibly compromise the consistency of decision-making. Susan continued:

> I do think for the 99th and 100th or 85th and 86th and on to the end of the day, like, those decisions—I think there's often sort of open conversation in the room like, "Wow, we've done a lot today, like, let's stay focused." I think people are pretty open and honest about that decision-fatigue piece.

Committee members are human, subject to error, and vulnerable to the effects of time, energy, and attention. And despite efforts to achieve consistency through training and professionalization, there is no guarantee that any one combination of decision-makers will reach the same decision on any applicant to that made by a different group.

Decision-makers come and go from the locus of decision in the micro but also in the larger, macro sense: quite simply, there may be staff turnover from year-to-year. Though the committee strives for consistency, individuals within the office may affect the path of decision-making. Erin Rhodes shared:

> …I think [we are] as consistent as we can be. I think part of that is ensuring that there is a consistent message about expectations and a consistent conversation about who the College is as a community, and that, you know, certainly hopefully is kind of ever-changing every five to ten years, you know, kid of thinking about who it is as an institution. We still have the same majors and the same programs, but you do have a slightly different makeup of faculty, you do have a slightly different makeup of leadership.

Each time a new president arrives, "there are priorities being set there that will certainly ultimately impact us." Administrative changes at the College outside the admissions office are likely to alter organizational goals, as well.

Unclear Technologies of Decision-Making

To gain an understanding of technology used in admissions decision-making at the College, I asked Matthew Chase to share with me how new employees were trained to read and assess essays and other subjective elements of an application. His perspective was particularly insightful, juxtaposing the technical aspect against the human:

> We have a pretty thorough training process, but I think a cornerstone of it is that we really want to highlight that we have hired you to be a human being and not a machine. So obviously, we are looking at things that are numerical—grades, transcripts, curricular assessments in terms of difficulty, standardized test scores. That stuff's easy to train because a 25 ACT score is worse than a 35. But we really are trying to train new staffers

> to, again, see it holistically with that idea of fit in mind. You're not just reading to find the, quote unquote, smartest kid in the pool. And even that we could debate all day what that even means, right? But, you know, you're looking for personality, you're looking for spunk and spark and the elements of a person's file that allow them to be distinctive among 9,000 other people. And so a lot of the training is sort of investing new people with the sort of authority to say, "I think this kid's a cool kid," and to go beyond just, "Here's a B plus average and a 1440."

There is a clarity in numbers, naturally, though as Matthew rhetorically asks, how is the smartest student identified? There is so much more enveloped in the reading and evaluation process beyond hard numbers to identify distinctive features of applicants. And, there exist no universally objective standards to measure such qualities. Matthew continued, saying, "And of course, we all define 'cool kid' differently and we all define 'funny kid' differently and we all define heartbreaking, you know, in an essay differently. And to me, that's the strength [of the process]." Desirable applicant characteristics and the interpretation of personal qualities vary from member to member.

To emphasize his point, Matthew shared a moment he experienced the prior day in CBE reading. He was paired with Janet Weis and the two encountered an essay in which the student wrote about a deceased parent. The human, subjective aspect of the application struck Janet deeply. Matthew shared:

> That's very moving, you know, and we all might react to it a little bit differently, but she—you know, she as a reader, she absolutely has the power to say, "You know, this kid feels kind of special, the way she's processing this loss and the way she can articulate it." That feels special to me. And I think the process allows for those things to come through.

Human beings are reacting to displays of human emotions. There is neither a clear technology to capture the human experience nor the degree of impact the human-ness of the evaluation process plays upon decisions.

Despite best efforts to professionalize a new staff member and hone their reading skills, perhaps nothing is important than experience, according to Matthew. "I think a lot of the training is also 'you don't really know how to do this until you do it at least once.'" The pressures of selective decision-making might not correlate directly to an increased tendency to make poor decisions but learning to be a selective decision-maker can generate tension. Matthew explained:

> I think for us, the hardest thing is training people to be selective. I mean, it is one's natural human tendency I think to be as kind and decent as we can be, and our job is to say no 83 percent of the time, and that's definitely the learning curve. So, a new young hire here reads a kid that is very impressive—has a couple of Bs and a 31 ACT score, lots of interesting things going on outside of class. The new hire might say, "This kid sounds great," and the experienced people have to say, "She absolutely sounds great, but she's just like thousands of other people in this pool," and that can be a little bit of a shock to the new folks. "Wait a minute, we're going to say no to this kid?" We're going to say no to thousands of that kid, and that doesn't mean that that kid is in any way undesirable or unqualified. It's just a reflection of how competitive the pool is and how tight the spots are.

The context surrounding every application—the proximity and position of each student relative to "thousands of other people"—becomes part of each decision's calculus. An already ambiguous process of decision-making becomes more unclear as the committee seeks to measure an applicant against thousands of alternate options. Otherwise desirable or qualified applicants are rejected because they fail to exhibit "spunk and spark," as Matthew phrased it previously.

Janet Weis likened admissions decision-making to making investment decisions. The technologies to forecast price changes in equity markets are as unclear as those available to the committee to predict the likelihood of yield on their offers of admission. She shared:

> I feel like admissions sometimes is sort of like playing the stock exchange.…In early decision, like, you know you're going to yield those students because it's a binding contract, but in regular decision, if we're seeking to fill the remainder of our class, we can't take specifically that number of students. We have to take more, with the expectation that most of them will say no. And so you have to guess, educatedly, about how to accept sort of a rough estimation of all of those different types of students that you want to be a part of the student population, with the hopes that that rough number will say yes and join us….I don't know, it's hard, because in every sort of population of students that we're trying to gather, they respond differently—and sometimes you don't even know how students are going to respond if they attend our yield event, like, if they come to Visit Days. Like, something as little as they didn't serve enough, like, I don't know, peaches in the dining hall and I would rather go to another college…like, you never know.

The intent of the office is to admit students who want to enroll at the College. The reality is that their powers of prediction are far from perfect. The technology behind the yield calculus cannot capture the complex world of data that may or may not factor into a student's decision to enroll. Where else has she applied? What are the competing options and financial aid packages, if any? How well does a student sense compatibility with the College's community, academically and socially? When an admitted student chooses to enroll elsewhere, the College's coveted yield rate declines. If too many students accept a spot in the class, the College will be short on living space in the residence halls.

Unclear Technology: Context Lends to Ambiguity

Context does not refer solely to how an applicant stacks up relative to the larger pool. Understanding the context *from* which every student applies, both physically and metaphorically, is critical to the decision-making of committee members. In committee, the context of a student's high school, state, and geography are typically presented first. When an applicant is from out of state or from an area or school less familiar to the committee, members require more information to interpret the contents of the file. But

context takes on further meaning still. Students' home lives factor into the committee's understanding of the place from which each student is applying. Parental education is often noted, as is the number of siblings and their education, when applicable. Disclosed, too, are the parents' occupations, and whether or not there are step-parents in the picture, the family experienced a divorce, or the student comes from a single-parent home or might be adopted.

In total, this effort to contextualize applicants seeks to quantify and qualify different capital resources—familial, social, cultural, environmental—available to students. The committee expects students applying from more capital-rich environments to demonstrate that they have used these resources to create a more compelling application. Students coming from capital-deficient backgrounds are given the benefit of the doubt, per se. The committee evaluates their applications with the expectation that they have overcome more in their personal lives and interpret their academic and extracurricular performance in that light. The following vignette illustrates much of this contextualizing. It was observed on the morning of my first day in regular decision committee:

Vignette 2

> *Bryan is presenting a student from the South. A few moments earlier, he prefaced his presentation by reminding the committee that this state is the best represented Southern state in both the applicant pool and the overall student body. He begins his presentation by stating that there is a stronger applicant academically within this school group, and then lists the attributes of note: AA, DOS, LD, 6/6, which translates to mean the applicant is an Asian-American with a Dean of Students tag for a diagnosed learning disability. The student is a double six with the same strong rating for both academics and overall. Bryan highlights the strength of the student's rank relative to the group and within the high school. He then shares that the student was adopted and raised by a single mother. The extracurricular*

> *activities are deemed "standard, not sparkly," but Bryan adds that the CBE readers like the "fit" of this student within the College's community.*
>
> *Matthew chimes in to remind the committee that this student was deferred from early decision—they could be more confident that she was more likely to enroll if admitted. (It also removed the waitlist option off the table; deferred ED applicants could not be waitlisted by rule.) Joyce highlights the strength of the teacher ratings provided. Several moments of silence pass as the committee members individually click through the electronic documents within the virtual application folder, reading items of interest and looking for points to confirm or negate their growing sentiment. Matthew highlights the occupation of the mother and the fact that she graduated from a competing institution. Bryan asks if the group is prepared to vote, and Matthew responds that he is, though he feels compelled to add some additional summary thoughts to contextualize his thinking: "Yes, I'm ready to vote. In [a nearby state], she's a clear waitlist. But in context, this is really strong." After four minutes of presentation, re-reading, and a brief debate, the vote is unanimous: three votes to admit.*

The applicant's context included being adopted into a single parent family. In addition, she was a student of color from the South; diversity of ethnicity and geographic context factored into the decision. However, her extracurricular involvement was average in the overall pool. Had she been raised in a capital-rich environment where the average applicant was more competitive, or in a two-parent household that might offer greater opportunity for parental attention, her fate at the College and the committee's decision likely would have varied. A compelling background and personal story, along with a sense of fit, altered the decision outcome. As it was, she was slated to be admitted and protected as a student of color from out of state with a unanimously favorable committee vote.

In a similar case that also echoes the story portrayed in *Vignette 1*, context played a critical and deciding role in the committee's decision on an ED1 applicant. Susan was presenting two applicants from the same high school to a committee that included Justin, Connor, Adam, and Emilia. Following a unanimous vote in which the academically

stronger (academic six-minus and overall five-plus) of the two applicants was denied, the decision on the second applicant unfolded as such:

Vignette 3

> *Susan reminded her colleagues that this was a "very rural" high school in a neighboring state. For context, she shared that only 30 percent of graduates continue on to a four-year college or university. The student had two attributes of note: FGA signaled that his parents either attended but did not complete college or had earned a two-year degree, and WCF, to reflect that the student's family was working class—as per the Special Indicators, "definitely not middle-class lifestyle." Susan continued, saying, "Shiny scores, has done well in context, nice PQs [Personal Qualities]. Works 21 hours per week. [Guidance Counselor] recommendation is light but not a standout."*
>
> *Susan said the CBE pair hoped to see an interview report in committee, but they had not received one. She then returned to add more context to his home-life by sharing the working-class occupations of his parents, who were divorced, she also noted. A sister, much older than the applicant, had attended technical school. His stepmother had a Bachelor of Arts degree. She concluded with a summary: "Definitely not a fancy background."*
>
> *After a few moments of silent reading, Emilia stated, "Poor kid…sounds like a tough home life." She was impressed by his six-overall rating and the "rarity" of seeing high SAT scores from rural applicants. Justin was less impressed and pointed out that the student had not worked throughout all of his high school career, saying, "He works this year. There is little before that." Susan responded with a summary statement of her thinking: "It's so hard for me to find rural kids who can do the work. Those are my reflections on his context." The committee voted to admit him by a margin of four admits to one deny after seven minutes of discussion and review.*

The applicant's home-life and family background provided a vital framework to understanding his performance: he had "done well in context." With the attributes of a First-Generation student from a working-class family, his application became more compelling and he offered a noteworthy to their class as a solution to a few of the College's goals.

A like instance of the unclear technology of context and speculation played out in ED1 when the committee was deciding on seven recruits for one of the varsity athletic teams. Emilia King began by setting the context of these seven applications and their potential value to the team in light of the current team's roster. She shared that "one of them will be an issue," and she began with that applicant who also happened to be at the "top of [the coach's] list" in terms of athletic ability. The student had been assigned an academic rating of three-minus with a sub-1200 SAT and curriculum rating of four. "Scores really low, GPA would be top 22 percent of last year's class," Emilia continued. The student had suffered a serious injury in the spring of her junior year; the College's coach speculated that the injury contributed to a dip in her GPA. Athletics were the highlight of her extracurricular activities. Emilia concluded by offering family context as a possible explanation for her performance, saying, "She's a triplet. Perhaps she's not as prepped as usual [athletic] recruits." The committee voted unanimously to admit her with an athlete (ATH) attribute. As a recruited student-athlete, she fulfilled a preference of the College despite a lower academic profile. The speculation about her experience as a triplet provided some additional contextual margin for the committee to justify her admission.

All else being equal and looking in from the outside, decisions can seem spurious, inconsistent, and unpredictable, revolving on the unknown contexts both within an application folder and across the overall applicant pool. Seemingly identical candidates—at least as quantified by the subjectively and objectively assigned ratings for academics, extracurriculars, personal qualities, and overall—receive different decisions because of the context in which students have grown and studied. Importantly, weights, points, or

ratings are not automatically assigned or altered by default, due to any component of an application.

The committee goes to great effort to understand, appreciate, and account for the context from which a student applies. Lower standardized test results or a string of sub-par grades are certain to receive committee attention but so are the extenuating circumstances to contextualize such performance. Susan Mullen, Junior Associate Dean, used the phrase "keep it spinning" to describe how tenuous applications might survive for further debate until the full committee convenes, but only when context dictates it. When asked what she as a decision-maker is looking for to keep an applicant "spinning," she responded:

> Well, I think family context. Is there—you know, is the student first gen or are they from a blue collar or working-class family background or just lower SES that would sort of impact test scores? Statistically, I think we all know how that data looks. So, trying to make sure we're not missing contextual pieces like that, that might have resulted in a weaker academic rating. If it's a whole transcript full of Cs, you know, if a student is also first gen in that case, or I think coming from a school that's more challenged or under-resourced, I don't think we would flex [on our ratings]. But if there was a very weak year [on the transcript] and the rest has been really good and we learn that something happened in that weak year with the family or—you know, there's all kinds of stuff that comes up in kids' lives that I think can affect their grades, and if it seems like a valid enough kind of explanation based on—you know, it's corroborated by the student and maybe the counselor or the teacher or something, we sort of see it in a couple places in the file, then I think we would maybe be inclined to push that student through [to full committee].

Students with extenuating circumstances to perhaps explain or justify their performance receive the benefit of the doubt. There is not a formal institutionalized policy to capture contextual variation per se, but compelling circumstances "keeps them spinning" a bit longer. Should an applicant fail to demonstrate attributes that align with the goals of the college or fail to convincingly paint the context of her life, or if the attribute isn't caught

by CBE teams during holistic review, the window of opportunity closes, and the solution fails to be paired with a problem.

Susan elaborated further on how family context informs her general impression of each applicant beyond academic performance. It includes "home life…parents' education, work status," according to Susan, and more: "whether it's a blended family or a deceased parent or a deceased sibling, just trying to kind of understand the family constellation." She allows her background in school counseling to inform her decisions when necessary. "I think the lens that I bring to this is often, like, that home context helps me feel as though I can understand the student more clearly in terms of what their experiences are." For Susan, context is about the realities of each individual student's life. "I also look at how they identify in terms of race and ethnicity, whether they identify as gay or trans. I think those are really important kinds of contextual bits of information that can impact an academic performance for a student."

The committee also strives to understand the academic context from which the student is applying. This year, Susan added a new travel territory to her portfolio. With it came the need to learn the details of the secondary schools in the area to help her evaluate applicants:

> All the schools are sort of new to me. I did my travel, but reading them has been just a good reminder of how much you have to kind of dig into that school profile to understand what are the college-going rates? Are there clubs and activities that these students can do? What types of classes can they be taking?

Upon initial read of a file relative to the entire applicant pool, some applicants stand out as weak; when their performance is gauged in the context of their high school, though, they might be considered rather strong. "They don't look so good in our bigger pool

because we have such an incredibly sort of deep and talented pool, but within their school, they might be really shining stars." This doesn't change the academic rating Susan assigns, "but I think knowing how they're doing within their school actually does sort of impact my overall understanding of the student and how they might, you know, whether they're viable candidates here, I guess."

Unclear Technology: Student Fit

Fit is an important metric for committee members though its definition is difficult to pin down and the technology to assess it is unclear. Fit means different things to different people and can be somewhat controversial in the admissions arena. Broadly defined, fit asks: to what extent does the committee detect that the applicant will be at home in the College's community and contribute to the academic and extracurricular life of the College?

I asked Janet Weis, as a committee member and alumna of the College, how she senses fit in an applicant. Her response was helpful in contributing to a definition:

> I think self-awareness is a big thing for me, because I think that's something that indicates a good amount of maturity. And I don't, personally, expect students to be their most mature by the time they're 17 or 18 because that's not fair at all. They have so much more life to live….Yeah, I think it's a good indication of how they treat other people and the kind of effort that they're willing to put in to be a better actor in their community and understand how they move about the world. I look for that a lot. I look for students who are diligent, for the most part, but not diligent to the point of being, like—I don't know the right word…students who are too high-strung? It makes me nervous.
>
> The College is a very academically competitive school to get into, but once you're here, everyone is really intellectually curious and deeply interested in what they're learning, or at least they pretend they are, but there's no competition amongst students to know who's ruining the curve or to know who's getting that fellowship over whom, and there's just none of that, which is incredibly refreshing. So, students who are able to be cerebral and want to go exploring a little bit in their academics, but also willing to say,

> like, I really like frisbee too and be flexible in that way is something that I look for, as well, and I think a lot of that comes from self-awareness.

Janet's calculations of fit include self-awareness, maturity, humanity, a diligent but tempered academic drive, curiosity, a depth of interest, flexibility, and a spirit of exploration. While fit is vital to the spirit of community, the technology to capture it is perhaps at the heights of ambiguity and subjectivity, and altogether unclear.

The responsibility for measuring fit does not fall solely upon the shoulders of committee members, either. In part, the admissions office outsources this information-gathering process to alumni in the form of student interviews. Regarding the information gathered via the formal technology of alumni interviews, Emilia said:

> …the alumni interviews are really helpful too…we do really appreciate hearing from people who have gone to the College, take time out of their day to meet with these students, and then report back to us on what they think, and you know, in most cases, they have a very good idea of whether this student would be a good fit for the college.

Into the mix of technologies employed by the office to inform decisions come the impressions of external parties—hundreds of alumni interviewers all over the world. The committee's understanding of an applicant's fit is colored by different alumnus' personal ideas of what traits and characteristics fit with the College's community. Hundreds of different subjective definitions of fit amplify ambiguity in the committee's decisions.

When asked to share her understanding of what makes a good fit for the College, Emilia responded:

> …everyone wants to know what kind of kid is the right kid for us, and the hard part is we're actually charged with going out and getting a very diverse group, so they shouldn't actually all look alike. But things that I do think that I see across the board are students who care about doing good in the world, probably tend to do that sometimes even at a cost to themselves (laughs). So, we do have sort of a high number of students going into education or, you know, environmental causes. I think students who come

> here often really appreciate the natural setting that we're in, whether that means they're outdoorsy – sometimes it doesn't mean that they're outdoorsy, but just appreciate not being in a city. And then students who like delving into sort of global issues with their neighbors, and some of those really interesting discussions that might happen in the dorm. I say to students, like, the best conversations you have are probably not going to happen in your classroom, they're going to be in the dorm, in the middle of the night, when you get into some weird ethical or philosophical issue with your dorm mates, and so we want to make sure we have a variety of different people in that conversation as they're living together.

For Emilia, a student fits into the College's community if she wants to do good things for the world, broadly speaking. She needs to appreciate the rural setting of the college and be comfortable not being in the middle of a large city. The ability and willingness to engage a dormmate in a deep debate suggests fit, and importantly, possessing an angle to contribute to a diverse array of perspectives enlivens such debate.

Is fit universally consistent across committee members, and is it a shared goal throughout the committee? Dean Mitchum's perspective revealed an interesting dichotomy. "You know, I don't think the idea of fit is overrated, but it's—it is a catch-all overused kind of generic term that's supposed to mean a lot of things." As dean, Tate wants to be certain the committee admits students who can build impactful relationships during their time at the College, be it with "a classmate, a mentor, a teacher, an advisor, a coach, somebody to connect with, that will drive that influence and shape that [student's experience]." For him, fit is seemingly calculated after the fact of enrollment, when students have successfully transitioned to the College and made connections that enliven the community and their student experience.

On the other side of fit, Tate discussed what he considers to be the "ironic challenge" of the committee. He wants to dispel the notion of a perfect fit for the College. He wants his committee to admit students from different walks of life, from different

strata of society. Tate wants the College to meet the challenge of educating a diverse student body that more truly reflects the demographics of the country:

> In some ways [the College is] looking for more kids who don't fit that typical mold, to see how they'll allow us to change and adapt and fulfill our mission, you know, in earning the good will of the American public, right? To do what we say we will do, and then provide those opportunities for others, as well.

So, if a student is retained, progresses on schedule to a degree, and graduates, all while building meaningful relationships, the committee correctly determined fit. It is all the better for Tate if non-traditional, mold-breaking students make up the classes he admits and enrolls. Doing so fulfills the College's commitment to society.

How, then, does this unclear technology of determining fit play out in an admissions committee? My observations suggest that the committee wants to admit applicants for whom they can sense a good fit with the College, as *Vignette 1* captured. Fit is determined by unclear technologies, but is also a goal of the committee, in as much as the goal is to *not* admit those students ill-fitted with their community. Students who fit will tend toward successful college careers and contribute to the life of the community. What is more, an enrolling class will fit well *together*, a host of attributes, tags, and characteristics teeming alongside one another, creating a vibrant, diverse, community.

Late on the first morning of RD committee, fit factored into the second to last decision before lunch break. The committee at the time was composed of Matthew, Connor, and Bryan; Bryan was presenting applicants from the southern U.S. After reading the student's application number so they were all at the same starting point, he began: "Art supplement is a five. Has a DIR tag. Ranks in the top decile and has a perfect test score. His religious life and art activities comprise the bulk of the ECs. CBE

summarizes as a possible waitlist." Nothing jumped off the page from this applicant despite being in the top ten percent of his graduating class and earning a perfect SAT or ACT. He had received a fine, not great, assessment of his art portfolio from the College's faculty. He demonstrated "significant leadership" experience in a non-athletic activity as captured by the DIR attribute.

Matthew agreed with the recommendation of the CBE readers. "For a six-plus ACAD, I'd be at waitlist." The student did not deserve the severity of a decision to deny, but yet he wasn't compelling enough to be admitted. Why? The consensus of the group was that "fit didn't seem right." Either the applicant had failed to demonstrate to the committee, or the committee had failed to interpret, the potential of this student to *fit* into the College's community. What might he add? How might he benefit from and contribute to the community? Whatever it might have been, the committee was at a loss. And if one of their goals was to bring in students who *fit* with the community, they couldn't offer admission in this case.

An applicant's fit was often included in the presentation of his or her file. Usually, estimation of fit came as one data point among many others. In a quick unanimous deny, for example, Susan Mullen presented a female applicant succinctly: "Interview now in. Five academic, four-plus overall. Good curriculum, fit makes sense, unhooked, not standing out." Similarly, Adam Berry reliably included a mention of fit for most applicants he presented, saying broadly, "a pretty good fit for the College." At other times, students were said to be a "good fit with the liberal arts and the College."

Fit was frequently a closing refrain for Adam. For instance, a typical introduction by him would follow this structure: "One of two in group from this top independent

school. 1540, all As but 1 B. Advanced curriculum, academic six-plus and overall six-plus. 3.56 GPA versus school's high of 3.93." He would then highlight extracurriculars of note and mention particular passions held by the student. He concluded in this instance by saying, "Vegan essay, met her in person and really liked her, she loves the college. She's pretty type-A. Seems like a good fit as well."

Academic interest and ability was often cited in committee as proof of fit, from being "a good fit with what we offer" to an ask-and-answer routine of "Why the College?" At other times, though, fit spoke to the campus culture. "Cultural fit" may be highlighted when an applicant's extracurricular interests aligned with what the College was known for offering. At other times, fit seemed to capture something else altogether. In regard to one applicant, Matthew opened his presentation by saying, "This kid is the poster child for the college. If you designed a kid for a brochure, this is it." He continued by highlighting the parents' occupations and then pivoted back to the student: "an awesome fit." This, despite the fact that this boy had been rated low academically. "He's a four-plus, maybe I'm wasting my breath. But he's interested in the environment, has done work related to solar energy, interned with a national eco group, works on a science publication, and plays Frisbee. And, his essay is honest." When the committee voted, the applicant would be deferred to the waitlist. Eventually, though, he would find his way into the class via an application of the College's equivalent of the "Rule of One Pick." Whatever this student demonstrated in terms of fit, it worked for at least one of the decision-makers.

Some decisions defied otherwise rational convention due to the role of fit. A male applicant from Adam's territory with a 35 ACT and only three Bs in his school's most

demanding curriculum was denied in part because the CBE team was "not seeing fit." His high school guidance counselor contributed to this perception as the student received only "average" checks on the College's grid. His family was no stranger to higher education, both parents having attended Ivy League institutions. However, the committee was concerned that the student inherited too much of his parents' competitive streak: Connor felt he came from a "pretty hardcore family." Would this competitive nature, if his demeanor was truly competitive, fit poorly with the ethos of the College? The final strike against the student was of his own doing, however. Susan did not react well to his essay which "had a strange tone to it." She detected a competitive streak coming through in his writing. All told, his application suggested a poor fit. He was denied inside of three minutes.

In one instance, the committee was at a standstill because it did not have the information it needed to make a fully-informed decision. The officers were bound in their limited capacity to gather data. Fit would emerge to play an important factor in their vote:

Vignette 4

> *In the morning of day two of ED1, the committee I was observing stood at six members: Tate, Justin, Matthew, Adam, Joyce, and Kathy. Matthew was presenting out of state applicants from a traditionally ultra-competitive area. Expectations of applicants from this "geography" were high; it was one of great privilege and substantial wealth, and students had the benefit of extensive resources.*
>
> *He began his presentation by disclosing his personal bias about this applicant by asking his colleagues to "forgive the opinion sharing." The student was completing a post-graduate ("PG") year at a school the committee deemed of lesser quality than the school from which he had graduated in the previous year. It didn't sit well with Matthew, though the applicant, a boy, had been rated at an academic rating of six. "Obvious question is why he's doing a PG year?" he continued. The committee debated a while but could not arrive at a consensus. Someone pointed out the student's midyear grades were all As. Matthew shared, "He's actually*

> *a pretty neat kid. His interest in the environment is something." Unfortunately, this student's athletic talent wasn't as important to the committee. He was recognized for his skill in a sport the College didn't offer; he missed the benefit of an ATH [Special athletic talent] attribute that would have added a compelling hook for the committee.*
>
> *Tate had happened upon the student's transcript: "Wow. Those grades are good." Joyce wasn't convinced yet, pointing out that the two teacher recommendations submitted on behalf of the student were written by teachers at the first high school. Why hadn't the student asked for a recommendation from someone at his PG school? Further adding to their confusion was the fact that the guidance counselor ("GC") hadn't included anything about a disciplinary issue, which might explain why the student elected to complete a PG year. Was it an intentional oversight by the GC, or did the student have a clean record?*
>
> *Matthew countered again, "Interested in stuff that we are good at." The student fit well. But Tate was still having trouble figuring out how he wanted to vote: "I'm flummoxed. I feel like had he applied last year we'd have taken him. That's an awfully nice transcript from this school." Matthew called for a vote with his standard refrain, "Know what we need to know?" Tate still wasn't ready and asked for the committee to "hold on." Justin spoke up and shared his thoughts, saying, "It feels like he isn't telling us something."*
>
> *Matthew made another pitch to bring the committee to a decision. "I don't know this, but I think he's a straight-up academic PG year." A few moments of silence passed and then he acknowledged their stalemate: "All right, we're perplexed." After an additional extended silence, he made his newly formed opinion known in an effort to guide his colleagues' thinking: "Smart boy, good fit with our program. GC says he has a blue-collar attitude." Though the committee couldn't apply the BC tag officially, there was an appeal to this description. Matthew's final pitch apparently worked: the committee voted to admit the student by a margin of four admits to two defers.*
>
> *The committee had taken nine minutes to arrive at this decision. Matthew's argument to his colleagues seemingly convinced himself he was wrong at the outset: his was one of the four admit votes. And, despite that impressive transcript, Tate had voted to defer.*

The committee had concluded there was evidence of sufficient fit between the college's academic programs and the student's interests. It didn't matter that there was a clear gap between his athletic interest and the college's varsity portfolio. Nor did it matter that they

didn't know for certain whether or not he had been found guilty of some infraction at his former school. They were bounded in their abilities to know everything they wished to include in the decision calculus. Why the PG year, and why at a school of lower academic reputation? Had he done something wrong they didn't know about? Would he accept their offer, or would his athletic interest pull him elsewhere? Ultimately, he was smart, happened to be a boy, was judged to fit well program-wise, and known for his blue-collar attitude. His attributes solved a number of problems they hoped to address in their admitted class.

Unclear Technology: Measuring Potential to Contribute

The inability to measure an applicant's potential to contribute to campus life plagued the committee at times. One RD case in particular suggests a compelling argument of the fitness of the GCM to explain how the committee arrived at its decision. Adam was presenting students from a Western state early one morning to a committee that included Tate, Erin, and Connor. He began the presentation of the CBE pair's notes:

Vignette 5

> *"Public school. BAC [African American, Black, Caribbean] girl, dependent. 26 ACT. Ranks in top 25%. Some Bs, 1 C. ECs are short, and her essay is poorly written. Wonder how she'll contribute to life on campus?" He then added that an alumni interview report was new. It added a helpful piece to the decision: the girl was interested in the College because of a renowned program it offered. After some silence, Adam shared that her father was a Colonel in the U.S. Army to add context to the dependent indicator he mentioned. Erin responded with a perplexing, "Hmmm…"*
>
> *Tate spoke up, confessing, "I don't really know this place." Despite years of experience his knowledge of this particular school was lacking; he was missing the contextual knowledge of her high school to understand her rank and test score. He then pointed out the lower marks appearing on the transcript: "In 11th we have a B+ and a C+." Adam added again, "I have a hard time seeing what she'll do on campus." Erin seemed to see where*

> *she would contribute, though, countering, "She'll live in the [academic] program's house and be happy there."*
>
> *Connor circled back to her essay, arguing that it didn't help her case. Erin conceded that it was a "less sophisticated" piece of writing. After a brief distraction from music coming from a neighboring office, the committee refocused. Tate saw something that appealed to him in her application even if she wasn't within the typical bounds of an academic fit. "Hate to lose her…could we lose her in shaping? Anyone thinking an admit?" If they didn't admit her, the odds of yielding her from the waitlist were slim. He knew she would be admitted elsewhere and have options. And, if need be, she could be trimmed from the class during shaping. Erin was on board. Connor asked for a point of clarification: if she were denied in their current committee, was it final? Tate and Erin responded that she could be brought back in full committee if they needed to add balance to the class.*
>
> *Tate asked if she had lived abroad, seemingly hoping to attach some international diversity to her file. She had not. A vote was called but Tate asked for more time. He reread the alumni interview ratings aloud (all fours), and Connor offered something of an extra attribute by saying simply, "Better geo." She offered more compelling geographic diversity than prior applications from this state. After another period of silence and some vocalized consternation and frustration from Tate, Erin pushed them to a vote. "Let's get unstuck." It was time to make a decision. After seven minutes of deliberation and reflection, the applicant would be admitted by a margin of three to one. Connor would cast the lone waitlist vote.*

There was no clear technology to forecast how this applicant would impact campus life. Further, this high school was not well known to the committee; contextualizing her performance was a challenge. The committee's attention and energy were distracted; their participation waxed and waned over the seven minutes of the decision. They sought to attach additional attributes to her to make for a more compelling and convincing decision. In the end, diversities of race, ethnicity, and geography, and her status as the dependent of an Armed Forces service member, successfully paired to numerous goals of the College.

Unclear Technology: A Limit Upon Rationality

At times, either a lack of information or the inability to accurately interpret information received about an applicant affected the committee's decision. In the late morning on my first day of regular decision committee observations—the sixth day of deliberations for the office— Bryan was presenting to a committee including Matthew and Joyce. An unexpected turn of events played out.

Vignette 6

Bryan begins with his usual pattern of introduction to the student in which he pulls highlights from the dashboard: this student is an Eagle Scout (so the committee understands that the applicant is also a male), a captain of his sports team, rated six-plus academic and six overall. He's received a book award issued by another college as recognized by his high school, and his extracurriculars are mentioned along with the fact that he has actually captained two teams. Unfortunately, there's new information in the file: the alumni interviewer has reported back that the student did not respond to phone messages and emailed invitations to meet. But, Bryan concludes, "There's lots to like." He revisits the school group from the previous year, and shares that this applicant presents a stronger academic case than all of last year's group.

Matthew enters the conversation inviting a philosophical discussion: what about the fact that the student was matched for an interview, but didn't follow through? He was assigned a volunteer and didn't respond; however, Matthew quickly countered his own internal debate saying that interviews are not required by the college. Should they penalize him for failing to interview? Bryan responds, saying, "I feel like he won't come. He's a stronger student from the South."

After three minutes of presentation and discussion, the group holds a vote. It's a split vote, with Bryan and Joyce voting to admit and Matthew casting a waitlist vote. Bryan states the meaning of this split vote to the larger committee, should shaping be necessary: "okay to trim." But before the votes are officially recorded, Bryan has a change of heart: he's turned off by the failure of the applicant to follow through with the interview. He changes his vote to a waitlist, and in a second, the student is flipped out of the class.

The committee, while split positively between a "yes" and a "maybe," needed more information. Namely, what was the likelihood of yield? Why had this very strong boy (six-plus academic, six overall) from the South—an area of interest given projected future changes in demographics and a geographic hook, failed to take advantage of the opportunity to interview? Was he no longer interested? Was he too busy?

They did not know and would not know. But they knew enough to be cautious, and in a split second, the decision moved from an admit to waitlist. Perhaps if the boy was truly interested in the college, and his other options did not prove to pan out as he expected, he could still end up enrolled at the college next fall—if there is room to admit from the waitlist, the committee is in search of boys at the time, and his name bubbles to the top when the time is right. Yet without an admit in regular decision, there was no way to know his true interest and justify admitting him. Their fears of pushing the college's yield rate lower should the boy truly have no interest in attending, despite the fact that his probability of enrollment was unknowable to decision-makers at the time, coerced their decision. It drove them away from a positive decision that in all other respects was in the best interests of the college, aligned with goals and preferences.

My findings suggest that unclear technology was universally present throughout the committee's decision-making process. Different contexts meant different expectations and interpretations of different performance metrics. An SAT of 1400 from a privileged applicant in a high-performing secondary school was weak; the same score from a First-Generation public-school kid was an achievement. Some applicants were the first from their high school to ever apply to the College, and the committee knew little about the rigor of the school's curriculum or tendencies for grade inflation. Likelihood of yield was

unknown after binding rounds of ED applications; knowing an applicant's interest in the College and probability of enrollment was a guess. Predicting the future was a challenge; informed speculation was a necessary reality of decision-making. How might any one applicant become a contributing community member, and how might the College benefit the student?

Measuring fit was a subjective and fluid effort. And fit could be measured in a host of ways. Committee members looked for "spark" and were pleased when they detected "spunk and spark" in an application. Strong academic applicants without equally compelling personal qualities were summarized as "solid but not really sparkly." The committee tried to assess whether or not applicants would merely "blend" into the life of the College or contribute in such a manner as to be visible and known. When a committee member had the chance to meet an applicant in person, it informed their decision-making and allowed them to speak better to fit, in Adam's presentation above. Introducing an applicant with a seven ACAD, Joyce shared, "I really liked her in person. Lots of spunk. She stood out in the school visit." When the student was unanimously admitted, Joyce responded, "Yay! I was hoping that would happen!"

One way to assess fit was for committee members to ask themselves, "What's *the thing*?" How does one applicant distinguish himself from the rest? Where is the hook that pulls a student into the class? It could be a relatively esoteric pursuit. Regarding one application, a committee member remarked, "The bee-keeping thing is cool." For others it might be a perception of program and culture fit: "the ecology thing is something."

Fit could be a determining factor even among the strongest, most academically meritorious applicants. Consider the following decision in which an academic seven-minus student ended up on the waitlist:

Vignette 7

Katie Hamlin presents the first of four RD applications from a high school set in a particularly wealthy area of a large Western state. One of them had been denied in CBE so they would hear three. After setting the context of this school and the privilege associated with the area, she began: "Seven-minus, six [overall]. SAT 2330. Nice sense of humor, doesn't take herself too seriously. Yearbook, athletic captain. ECs include EMT squad. Nice poise throughout the app." Justin had pulled up the student's artistic supplement on the room's television screen, saying, "Supplement is photographs, rated by the new professor." This generated a distraction as the committee viewed the photos and led to a moment of levity as they reflected on prior memorable supplements.

As the group regained focus, one of them asked for more time and they read in silence. Emilia was trying to understand the applicant's place in the larger context of the school group. The applicant was the first to be presented which meant that she was the strongest academically, but what else would they be hearing? Susan asked her colleagues, "She's really bright but what's the thing?" to which Katie responded, "This is not a GEO." The geographic attribute would not help her into the class.

Emilia observed, "She does yearbook and wants to continue." Susan worried that the applicant was too one-sided in her interests, and that the yearbook experience consumed the discussion the applicant had had with the College's alumni interviewer. Justin suggested a problem confronting them to which she might serve as a solution: "We need English majors." Susan was unconvinced, though, asking, "Is that proven? Based on stats?" Her colleagues, including Emilia, countered that a decline in English majors was a national trend. However, this fact wasn't adequate to sway Emilia. "That's not enough to tip me over." And, even if the student intended an English major, she wasn't bound to it. As Susan conceded, "Plus, they can change majors."

At the end of four minutes of reading, debate, and the side conversation prompted by the student's art supplement, the committee vote ended in a split decision. Justin and Katie voted to admit but Emilia and Susan were both waitlist votes. This seven-minus academic student would be waitlisted because she didn't have a "thing."

Rationally, a seven-minus academic student who was also rated at six overall arguably met the definition of merit-worthy. She offered to fulfill one of the primary goals of the College as such a strong academic performer. She also offered geographic diversity though not from an area that was underrepresented. It was possible she would contribute to the College's yearbook production, but that was the most noteworthy area the committee could foresee.

Her two classmates that followed would receive better news from the committee—both were admitted despite having lower academic ratings than the waitlisted student. Emilia considered the first, a double-six Eagle Scout, to be "not cool and glamorous, but endearing." She admitted his final Scouts project "grabbed my heart." The alumni interviewer reported a "great fit" and suspected a strong likelihood of yielding him. He was unanimously admitted.

The third student, admitted by a margin of three admits to one waitlist, wrote his way into the class. Emilia said his essays were "very effective." They were written "at a high level but connected to himself." What is more, he was tagged with an ALLY attribute signaling personal qualities and experiences that suggested he would be a "Bridge Builder" between different communities on campus. His CBE readers considered him "a nice person that we'd benefit from having on campus." The committee was drawn to what they saw as his potential to contribute to the community.

Problematic Preferences of the College

What are the organizational preferences or goals with which the committee is challenged to meet in any incoming class? The committee's documents offer the first insight. Appendix K provides a list of the College's "Special Indicators" that are applied

to applications by the admissions committee during reading season. For those applications that make it to committee, these indicators often frame the debate around each candidate. Committee members refer to these indicators alternatively as either "attributes" or "tags." Each of the indicators below offers a possible solution to one of the many organizational problems confronting the committee. After all, it is the responsibility of the committee to fulfill certain goals the College's administration hopes to meet in every enrolling class.

The attachment of an attribute to an applicant operates as a signal to colleagues that special attention is warranted. It may be that the applicant offers diversity in terms of race or ethnicity, as indicated by the tags AA (Asian American/Pacific Islander), BAC (African American, Black, Caribbean), HL (Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx), MR (Multi-Racial background), NA (Native American), or a combination thereof. Students with a diagnosed, documented learning difference receive an LD tag to contextualize their performance, with or without accommodations. SPV represents Special Visitors to the College; these students were flown to campus for an overnight visit program designed to attract students from historically underrepresented backgrounds, including First Generation college-bound students.

A collection of attributes contextualizes the family background of applicants. Blue Collar (BC) signals that the student's parents work as manual laborers. Dependents of the military receive a DEP attribute. Children of faculty and staff members receive the FS tag. First-Generation college-bound students are assigned one of two tags: FG means that neither parent has any college experience; FGA means that parents attended college but did not earn a bachelor's degree or have earned a two-year degree or completed

vocational training. Students whose first language is other than English are tagged as FLO. WCF signals that the student is from a Working-Class Family (as guidance, "definitely not middle-class lifestyle").

Some indicators characterize the leadership qualities offered by an applicant to bolster the community life of the College: ALLY (Bridge Builder in school or community), CPRS (Class President), CPT (Captain of a varsity sport), DIR (Significant leadership such Head Boy or Head Girl, in a non-athletic role), EDR (Editor-in-Chief of school publication), LDR (Noteworthy top leadership in several activities), OTB (Innovative or entrepreneurial qualities), SCT (Eagle Scout or Gold Star award honoree), or SVC (Service commitment is extraordinary and worthy of weight in the committee's decision). Athletes deemed sufficiently skillful and talented enough by one of the College's coaches to contribute to a varsity sport, but whose academic profiles are less competitive for admission, are tagged as ATH. Applicants that have served in a branch of the U.S. Armed Services are recognized as veterans (VET).

Exceptional life experiences factor into the committee's decision-making, as well. These students may bring such qualities as new international perspectives, global awareness, and unique leadership traits to the community. In some cases, participation in one of these programs signals to the College that an applicant's personal characteristics are likely well-aligned with the community; program alumni have attended the College in the past and were recognized for their unusually high-profile roles in the community. In short, there is greater confidence and appeal in such applicants because of their experiences. The American Honors Program tag (AHP) identifies a transfer student applying from select community colleges. CBO students have the support of and

preparation from a community-based organization; students affiliated with the nonprofit Posse Foundation receive one of two distinct tags (PP for Posse finalists not selected elsewhere or POS for Posse applicants). CHE means that the student attended Camp Chewonki in Maine whereas attendees of The High Mountain Institute in Colorado are tagged with HMI. Applicants that attended the semester program of The Mountain School in Vermont are labeled MTS. A few international programs merit their own tags, as well, including Royal Thai Scholars (RTS), School for Ethics and Global Leadership attendees (SEGL), Seeds of Peace participants (SOP), and United World College students (UWC).

A smaller set of attributes categorize the potential of an applicant to bring prestige to the College. The CASE tag is applied when an applicant presents such an overall compelling story that the office wants to identify her for possible inclusion in future publications. Students who have already established themselves as professionals, "worthy of special profile of class superstars," those all-around "great" kids, receive a PRO attribute. When students have a famous parent or are from a famous family, the College assigns the VIP tag. Relatedly, admissions officers can choose between two tags when an applicant is accompanied by the potential for a financial donation. When the College's Development Office believes there is "potential for a 5 or 6-figure gift" from a relation, the applicant receives a DEV tag. As committee members are reading an application, they may apply the attribute "DEV?", meaning "possible development potential assessed by reader."

There are also a few attributes that signal the special interest of external parties in an applicant. If the College's president has an interest in an applicant, the PRE tag is

applied. TRU signals that one of the College's members of the Board of Trustees has special interest in the applicant.

Administrative attributes are applied for a variety of reasons. An applicant's essay can be labeled as exceptionally good or particularly poor. ESS merits attention as an "Essay of note." These are "especially compelling" and may be used in the future as an example of an "exemplary" effort. On the other hand, SES signals a problem with the essay submitted by a student. Such essays are "not great" and may be used as a sample to demonstrate what students should not do. FULL may be added to an application when a CBE team encounters a particularly challenging application, a small committee cannot reach consensus, or a mix of attributes suggests that the combined knowledge and perspective of a full committee is needed to arrive at a decision.

Each of these attributes contextualizes a student's application materials. The indicator system brings efficiency to holistic review. However, I find that each attribute also metaphorically represents a preference of the College's administration. These preferences are the goals with which the admissions committee is tasked to meet in an enrolling class. The first set of indicators speak to diversity. The administration wants to enroll a racially and ethnically diverse class that also has numerous international perspectives. They also want to make certain that differently-abled students have a place at the College. The administration wants a class that includes students from all walks of life, of socioeconomic status both high and low and in-between. They desire some experienced leaders of special interest groups, student clubs and organizations, and athletics, as well those passionate for community service. The administration seeks those students who, writ large, will contribute to the life of the community.

The committee also seeks to bolster the reputation of the College. The College's prestige is driven in part by the accomplishments of its students. Successful athletic teams capture the public's attention, instill pride in the community, and may attract future student-athletes. Alumni who become critically acclaimed writers, successful entrepreneurs, or wealthy professionals heighten perceptions of the College's quality of education. Students who have already proven themselves in these areas in secondary school offer great potential to do the same at the College.

The administration also seeks to grow the endowment and diversify revenue. Admitting a student whose family has a history of philanthropic support increases the likelihood of future donations. Speculating on the promise of future donations is part of the calculus in decisions, as well. If a student isn't admitted, the odds of familial donations plummet.

The interests of certain stakeholders are represented in the PRE and TRU attributes. These are part of a political calculus that the admissions committee must navigate. The committee relies on direction from Dean Mitchum to interpret the relative importance and strength of these presidential and trustee relationships. Alas, personal preferences of select influential stakeholders have been institutionalized as official "special indicators," problematic due to the competition they create with mission-specific goals for decision-maker attention.

The "Overarching" questions that accompany the ratings grids offer further insight into the organizational goals of interest to the committee. The Academic Rating (Appendix I) asks, "To what extent does the applicant demonstrate intellectual achievement, engagement, and potential for academic success?" An applicant's

transcript, supporting materials including essay and recommendations, and standardized testing factor into estimations of that student's proven academic performance, potential to engage in the academic life of the college, and the likelihood of and capacity for success. The academic rating answers the first goal of the committee: to admit only students who have the credentials to suggest they will navigate the academic curriculum of the College successfully and earn a degree. Though the Academic Rating ("ACAD" as abbreviated by the committee) encapsulates notions of academic merit, academic merit alone is not sufficient to earn an offer of admission.

The Extracurricular Rating in Appendix J asks, "What level of contribution will this student make outside the classroom, taking into account skill level, initiative and leadership capabilities?" The rating adds depth to understanding the potential impact each applicant promises to make in the life of the community, beyond the classroom. It also triangulates back to the Special Indicators and the models of preferences and goals suggested by Perfetto et al. (1999). The Extracurricular Rating encompasses part of the *Student Capacity to Contribute* justification for admission. The goal of the committee is to find those students that offer the greatest promise to enhance the environment and, possibly, the reputation of the College. For instance, to receive the highest Extracurricular Rating of seven, a student must be deemed to have "unusual or rare ability to contribute here." Leadership qualities and initiative are deemed to be "exceptional." Committee members believe such students will make an "immediate and lasting impact" outside of the College's classrooms, including "possible national-level talent."

The Personal Qualities Rating (Appendix J) further teases out potential contributions to community: "how will [our] community be impacted by this student's personal qualities?" The College is not only looking to avoid community members "that will be disruptive to the dorm and community" (ratings of one); it doesn't want those with "poor social skills" who are "harmless" but will offer a "non-existent presence" (ratings of two). Students of sound personal quality enhance the vibrancy and vitality of the community. They contribute to an all-around higher quality of education.

As discussed earlier, a high overall rating does not guarantee admission. There are no automatic cut-offs, high or low. It is the task of CBE teams to weigh each applicant's academics, extracurriculars, and personal qualities, assign an overall rating, and make a recommendation to the committee. Together, then, the committee must navigate the multitude of competing goals and preferences, each applicant likely embodying more than one attribute, all attributes serving as solutions to match to the problems the College collectively hopes to address.

Working in concert with these problematic preferences are the unclear technologies employed by the committee to find solutions. How well does the fleet of assessment tools that inform the Academic Rating measure "intellectual achievement, engagement, and potential for academic success"? What differentiates an essay as being exceptional, excellent, strong, solid, standard, average, or weak, and how might the reading of an essay vary from person to person? How does the committee measure "intellectual fire" or determine whether a student's intellectual curiosity is "genuine"? What is the difference between strong and solid intellectual engagement?

A similar line of questions is relevant to the other ratings. With what accuracy can readers estimate the level of extracurricular contribution in college based upon high school activities? What guarantee is there that a six-rated student "will make significant and visible contributions"? What is an "average level of maturity for an 18 year old" and why does average maturity suggest a student will be nothing more (or less) than a "fine roommate"? Again, with what degree of faith can committee members state that a student has "exceptional potential to positively impact the lives of others"? These questions do not condemn the efforts of the committee members though they certainly speak to unclear technology at work in the pursuit of problematic preferences.

Participant Understanding of Goals

Defining the committee's goals is a challenging effort for committee members. Some broad goals remain consistent from year to year, but according to Associate Dean Kathy Barleben, "In a lot of ways, they feel unspoken. Some of the same priorities year after year that we pay special attention to—recruited athletes and legacies and sort of institutionally important cases [such as resources and donors]. Diversity." Quotas aren't set, and targets are soft. "So, there's never sort of a defined, like, this is our goal, to get to this number, percentage—so it's more nebulous than that." Contributing to this notion of "nebulous" goals is how some goals are defined. Susan Mullen stated that diversity is a consistent goal to meet in an admitted class, but that diversity was not limited to race or ethnicity. "Diversity goes way beyond the checked boxes on the Common Application."

Matthew Chase affirmed Kathy's take. "We're never told 15 percent of the next class has to be international, or we need six kids who major in Latin. We get very little in the way of sort of a directive in that way." He continued:

> I mean, everybody wants their thing, right? The math department wants—probably want the whole place to be great mathematicians, and the theater department—I mean, we all have a bias, I suppose—the faculty would all want their expertise represented. But we, as sort of the gatekeepers, as it were, are not told X amount should be this or that or the other thing…You know, I mean, sometimes we might be told, whatever—the orchestra's in rough shape this year so let's read with an eye towards very talented musicians. But it's never "go find me three trombonists," it never gets that specific.

Adam Berry echoed the same. "I think Tate Mitchum thinks that he trusts our judgement and says bring in the best students that you can, who you think will be a good fit for the college, who we think will make a good class." Adam recognized the impact he and his colleagues have on their community: "I think that's the coolest part about the job, is that you're literally shaping the future of the college."

This, of course, begs the question previously raised: to what extent does the composition of the committee in any given year affect the composition of the College community? If there exists room for personal preferences to factor into decisions, it naturally follows that personalities may impact the processes of decision-making as personal preferences supplant shared organizational goals.

Problematic Preferences: Revisiting "Spark"

About an hour into my first day in regular decision committee—the sixth day for the office—a bit of insight into the humanity and subjectivity came to light. Matthew was presenting students from a nearby state. The vast majority of applicants from the high school under consideration were generally from the highest socioeconomic class. Matthew set the context for discussion among the two colleagues present, sharing insight as to his understanding of this city, and then reminded them of what the College has

already seen and decided to date in the current admissions cycle. The decision unfolded as such:

Vignette 8

> *Followed by some context-setting that included the school picture and reflections on the wealthy neighborhoods surrounding this applicant's high school, Matthew begins by pointing out that this girl is the top applicant from the school as determined by ACAD. The CBE readers agreed on a six-minus overall rating. Notably, she has a legacy tag attached to her: both an aunt and an uncle graduated from the College. He covers her extra-curriculars which are fine but otherwise unremarkable. Similarly, recommendation highlights are read, and he concludes, "Academic leads the way, but what pushes her into the class?" He answers in part his own question to the group, quoting the CBE notes: "not seeing a spark to admit."*
>
> *In a fit of humanity or a moment of weakness, Connor says, "She's done so well." It was recognition that the most meritorious student in the group, an above average applicant academically, had not done enough to distinguish herself within the pool. Without a "spark" she would end up as a waitlist, at best. After three minutes in total time on this applicant, spent largely in silence as the committee solitarily read through application components on their own and partly on an unrelated aside, her fate was sealed at the College with three votes in favor of a waitlist offer. Matthew reacted with personal acknowledgement of the difficulty such decisions present, saying, "I go home and hug by daughter every day. She'll look like this kid someday."*

What was wrong with the top-of-the-school applicant with a six-minus overall rating? She lacked 'spark,' that certain something that signaled potential to contribute to the life of the community. It didn't mean that she couldn't come to the College and be successful, nor would she "drag" the community in terms of productivity or creative life. She simply didn't distinguish herself beyond academics in such a way as to make her application admit-worthy. All predictors pointed to a successful college career, and her zip code predicted her family had the financial resources to contribute to tuition revenue as a full-

pay student, though this wasn't discussed or mentioned by the committee. She didn't have 'spark.'

The committee's quest to identify spark raises a question: how is spark universally measured or estimated, and is it consistently applied across sub-populations? Unless someone is in the moment to see the parameters of decisions unfold, how is spark accounted for in other research? Within the GCM, this student offered a few solutions confronting the committee: she was bright, at the top of her class's applications, active and involved, and had soft legacy connections to the College. But her characteristics important to the College ended there, and an offer of admission here would leave problems unaddressed more broadly. She would end up becoming a solution elsewhere.

Her case is not unique in a competitive applicant pool, where decision makers can sort through viable candidates that present a more compelling mix of attributes, or solutions to problems. The second-highest academic applicant from the same school as above, an academic six and overall six, was deliberated next. In less than two minutes, her name would appear on the waitlist along with her classmate:

Vignette 9

> *Matthew opens the decision-window in a fashion that is now familiar to me as he follows the same order each time. "Six-six with an interview of six. Parents went to [an Ivy] and a [highly ranked state university]. CBE notes say there is absolutely nothing not to like here but wish she had applied early decision." At the same time, Connor is preoccupied writing an email to the administrative support staff to correct an issue with this student's name as it appeared on file.*
>
> *Bryan responds to the vivid picture the student successfully portrays in her essay, a graphic experience in her volunteer work as an EMT. Matthew, perhaps with a degree of remorse, laments to the group that had she applied early decision she would likely have been an admit. "There's no fault here, but there are a lot of students like her in the pool, and actually they all have the same first name." It was a unanimous waitlist.*

Thus, it was through no fault of her own that her application could not distinguish her: she was one among many with the same profile. As was the case with her classmate before her, she was above average academically, and highly compelling at a six overall. But of those that bore comparable credentials, she lacked attributes to distinguish her file. Some students with the same name would make it into the first-year class, but these two would not be among them.

The third application from this school to be heard in regular decision would receive much better news from the committee. This student, a male, presented identical numbers as the second candidate above with "sixes in the corners" meaning ratings of six for both academic and overall. Likewise, his alumni interviewer assigned him a rating of six. But there was more of note, as Matthew continued:

Vignette 10

> *"AA [Asian American/Pacific Islander] from Taiwan, book award winner, strong curriculum, extracurriculars of note include a national ranking in chess and his election as chess club president." The fact that he's from Taiwan indicates that he might have a higher association to his family's cultural heritage, and hopefully bring this perspective to campus. Matthew offers that this student's essay about chess "may be a bit competitive," but not enough to raise serious concern as to community fit. It was worth mentioning, but unlikely that he would cause disharmony on campus. CBE thoughts conclude the presentation: "Plenty to like here, he's a contender."*
>
> *Connor contributes with an observation that the student's senior year schedule is "really tough." Matthew agrees, suggesting that he "might be one to put more energy behind." Connor states again that the student is taking all Advanced Placement classes as a senior. Informally collecting the group for a vote, Matthew concludes with a leading statement, "boy, Taiwan, chess, something going on here." In the span of two minutes since the previous vote was held and recorded, the entirety of the moment of decision as recorded occurred and concluded in a unanimous vote to admit.*

The mix of attributes for this third student served to fulfill numerous goals, explicit or unstated, which the committee hoped to meet. As a boy, he offered a balance to the deep pool of female applicants. As a person of color and one who likely identified culturally with his birth nation, he offered diversity as a statistic and in identity. As a leader and chess player of national renown, he would contribute to the community and perhaps the prestige of the college. It all led to "something going on here," a compelling, intriguing combination of characteristics to meet the college's problems—not spark explicitly stated, per se, but something more that offered in total a more interesting solution than did his classmates, "one to put more energy behind."

Spark could be a point of contention at times. On the second day of regular decision observations, Tate rejoined deliberations of a committee that included Adam, Connor, and Erin. In a moment that also suggests fluid participation, he had removed himself as a participant in the first six cases because of a problem with his computer. The seventh case of the morning was presented by Adam:

Vignette 11

> *"Large public [from the West]. We have four of eight applicants to hear in committee. 1570 in a most demanding curriculum and a 4.0. Difficult to understand the school group given GPAs. ECs are good, somewhat outdoorsy, essay is standard, but we wondered if there was a red flag of perfectionism in it." He closed in summation to allow his colleagues to read the file: "academic highlight, top of school group, one to discuss."*
>
> *Tate asked if the CBE pair had the alumni interview on file when they had read the application. They had. Tate noted that the student had a music rating of four assigned by one of the College's faculty members. Connor made an effort to contextualize this applicant's place in the school group; she was a six-minus overall. A vote was held, and the committee split, Adam and Connor voting to waitlist while Erin joined Tate as an admit vote. Given that "ties go down," the decision on this student was a waitlist—even though the Dean and Director had voted for admit.*

> *Tate appeared surprised by the outcome. He asked the two why they voted as they had, saying, "A seven-minus six-minus public-school girl from [the West]. Tell me more about not taking her?" Connor responded, "Holding on for more spark. There are stronger apps coming [in this school group]." Flummoxed, perhaps, Tate asked rhetorically to the room, "Seven-minus ACAD isn't spark?" But the committee would move on to the next applicant without further discussion. The vote had been held.*

For at least this applicant, her lack of spark trumped her perfect grades and an SAT that placed her in the highest academic category. And, her overall rating was above the pool's average. Whatever spark was, it had won the day.

Problematic Preferences: Evolving Goals

Goals may be just as fluid as actors' participation with equally unclear means of measurement, all driven by the effects of time. Erin Rhodes, Admissions Director and Chair of Diversity Applicants, offered a summary:

> We're in a very incredibly fortunate position to be able to have the interest and then have the applications to kind of make those selections, but it does become tricky as you're kind of thinking about all the—you know, juggling of priorities around wanting to have a class that we feel is inclusive, wanting to have a class that represents multiple geographies, so that we're not solely wedded to the [one local area] or solely wedded to [another], making sure that we're supportive of international efforts that we're doing to reach out to international students, given that we have sort of a global perspective as the central theme at the college, making sure that we're attracting students who've got some of that mindset already and have had some experience. And, so, often it's foreign language that students have exposure to or maybe international travel, if they've had that opportunity to do those things, and I think all of those things are sort of in the back of our mind as we do those initial reads of certainly looking at the hard numbers, the "how they do in school and what are the testing?" you know, where they fall in testing?

Understanding the context from which a student has applied is vital to shaping a decision, particularly relative to past decisions made by the committee. So, too, does the potential contribution to the community play an important role:

> But I would say that we also really, you know, give some weight to the context and certainly – you know, it goes very quickly because we have

> such a volume of applications. But you probably heard from, you know, [CBE] conversations where a student kind of falls in the landscape of who we've admitted in the past from particular schools, but also, is this someone who's going to contribute something slightly different within the group and trying to figure out what those things look like.

There is little that is precise about the process, in Erin's understanding of it. Goals are constantly in flux.

> [Decision-making is not] an exact science, but I think sort of understanding the landscape of what the College is and what our overall priorities have been, in terms of where we're sort of heading as an institution and the things that we feel like are our strengths. So certainly a kid who's outdoorsy, a kid who understands what the College offers and really seems clued into those things, if that comes through in the application, in terms of fit, and then, you know, the larger, "what are the institutional priorities at this point and how does that kind of play out, and each year?" It's not that there's major shifts in institutional priorities, but there's always little things that are coming up—you know, finding resources to increase the amount of financial aid we have available that particular year or doing some belt-tightening as an institution, where are we in that kind of strategy? And so admissions really sort of is the listener of all of those things and tries to collect that sort of holistically and then come to an application – a common application form and try to figure out kind of how it works.

Preferences of the Committee evolved as solutions were paired with problems. Emilia King, the Associate Dean of International Applicants, described competing priorities and goal optimization within the sphere of the College's decisions on international applicants. "In international committee, we're looking for as many different students from around the world. We are cognizant of having too many from any one country is not sort of within this institutional framework that works for us." One goal is to maximize the number of countries represented by the student body. At the same time, a concentration of too many students from one country adversely affects the community. She continued:

> You know, we've noticed over time that if you get too many from any one part of the world, they tend to clump together on campus and not be as

> integrated into the community as we would like them to be, because part of the goal of international admissions is to get, you know, different voices on campus from different parts of the world who can add to that sort of global conversation. After all, a lot of our students are studying sort of international global politics, international global studies, and having a voice from Zimbabwe or Russia or Sweden is helpful to the bigger conversation.

Despite the potential of an individual applicant to further add to the vibrancy of campus life, engage in the ongoing academic debates, or grow the proportion of international representation of the student body, the threat of an over-concentration from an area might change the committee's decision. What is more, this suggests the presence of precursive linkages as proposed by Langley et al. (1995). Namely, admissions decisions on earlier international applicants might adversely affect the outcome on later decisions, based on the current composition of the admitted class. Applicants are judged on both a global realm as well as within the context of their home country, in addition to the number of applicants from that country.

Committee preferences and intended goals may change from year to year based upon a number of factors. For Emilia, the representation of international countries on campus is an annual concern. She was actively trying to address a downturn in applicants from one country in particular in the prior year. She planned a change in recruitment strategy in general and to be more aware of students from that country in particular during this year's reading process and throughout committee:

> I'm cognizant this year that we didn't have a lot of students from [a particular country] last year. I don't know why the numbers are lower…So I'm paying attention to that country and we're going to go and visit there twice this year and probably twice next year, and I'm going to make sure that I take a better look at Indian applications this year…

In this year's committee, at least, and likely next year, applicants from one country would receive something of an advantage. Without knowing it, they would receive a slight

increase in their probability of admission because their country had become underrepresented relative to standard expectations. There was a noticeable absence of Indians on campus and Emilia sought to rectify it.

The impact of evolving goals applies more broadly to the committee's decisions beyond the pool of international applicants. Associate Dean Kathy Barleben says that the "selection process in general is truly dynamic." As decision-makers successfully pair solutions to problems, the organization's actors (committee members) can pay less attention to these needs. For instance, if the College's orchestra is in dire need of an oboe player and the committee admits and enrolls a student renowned for her skill playing the oboe in ED, all subsequent applications from oboe-playing students are less likely to benefit from the committee's goal of finding oboe players. Nowhere is this more evident than when it comes to student-athletes.

Referring back to the observation data presented in Table 2, it may be seen that applications from athletes were decided first, before all other applicants. Both committee rooms first held these "athletic committees" to separately and distinctly determine all decisions on recruited athletes. In part, it was a means to realize greater efficiency: these student-athletes were not guaranteed admission but were promised the support of the varsity coach in their sport. However, coaches could not unilaterally offer their support of any applicants they desired. They required the permission of the admissions office before they were permitted to communicate their support to a recruit.

Via a pre-evaluation process overseen by Kathy Barleben that began annually in mid-summer, a pool of thousands of potential recruits was sorted down to those deemed most academically admissible. Once a high likelihood of admission was ascertained,

based on academic performance, Kathy would authorize a coach to encourage the student to submit an early decision application. With this notification from the coach came an unwritten endorsement from the admissions office that, barring any unforeseen or undisclosed concerns as to behavior or decline in academic performance, the student was certain to be admitted.

It is important to understand that the power of decision-making was not removed from the admissions committee. The locus of decision remains at the committee table for recruited athletes; every recruited athlete appeared before committee. Admission pre-reads allow coaches to concentrate their recruiting efforts on admissible students. Further, pre-reads save time and energy for both the athletics staff as well as admissions officers as net attention of the organization's actors is focused on only those students who offer to contribute to both a varsity sport and the College's classrooms. Coaches are better able to meet their roster needs. Given that an average of 25 percent of each incoming class are student-athletes, coaches are thus recognized as highly interested stakeholders in the admissions process. Meeting these targets is an important accomplishment for the athletics and admissions departments alike.

Applicants for whom athletic ability plays a deciding factor in their admissions decisions receive the ATH attribute. This attribute means that "Special athletic talent moves otherwise unfavorable decision in student's favor." Such applicants are not inadmissible. Admissions officers have determined, via the documented standard admissions ratings, that these recruits can be academically successful at the College. But without that ATH "bump" it is unlikely they would have been admitted otherwise.

At the same time, it is equally important to understand that the ATH special indicator is only applied to a portion of these "athletic committee" cases. A balance of recruited athletes is so strong academically, or offer a compelling mix of competing attributes, that athletic ability is not the determining factor in their offer of admission. After all, the committee is not admitting athletes that only play and perform solely on the field or court. These are multifaceted individuals who contribute to the classroom environment and the extracurricular life of the College.

Returning back to the concept of evolving goals, then, it is evident that if the preferences of varsity coaches are addressed in ED, their influence would play a lesser role later in the process. Assume that the men's baseball coach needs to add a catcher to the next incoming firstyear class. There are two catchers currently on his roster, but he knows he needs three at a minimum: one to play, one to warm up relievers in the bullpen, and one to substitute in case of injury. He is successful in finding a quality recruit who applies ED and is admitted. The athletic ability of any applicant who happens to be a catcher will not be a deciding factor for any other applicant out of the few thousand the committee will hear throughout the remainder of the admissions cycle. The organization's goal, which is that of the coach—to enroll one student with the skill to be a collegiate catcher—were met. The problem was paired to a solution in the ED window; other possible solutions will fail to find a problem to which they might be the answer.

As suggested above, numerous decision linkages (Langley et al., 1995) add to our understanding of how the College's admissions committee made decisions. Put simply, all decisions are inextricably intertwined as "interwoven networks of issues" (p. 260). Each decision is informed by previous decisions and possible future decisions. In the

example of the baseball team, the enrollment of an accomplished catcher preempted the need to admit other catchers.

Cards can be thought of as creating precursive linkages through learning. Committee members are constantly mindful of the status of certain "card-worthy" applicants. Susan said that she usually maintains a list of possible cards throughout the reading process. As students are admitted in committee, she removes their names. Alternative choices to play her card are narrowed as committee progresses. She decides where her card will be played after learning the decisions on all other competing card-worthy applicants in which she held interest.

At times, a prior decision on an application within the same school group influences the committee's decisions on subsequent applications. Late in the morning on the second day of ED1 committee, Matthew Chase set the context for a decision.

Vignette 12

> *Matthew began, "There are three in the ED pool from this school. One was a five ACAD athlete already admitted yesterday, and a five-minus was straight denied. We're hearing the best." Matthew didn't read the academic or overall ratings aloud, but he did highlight the applicant's grades and a positive grade trend. The student's recommenders gave her "best in career" marks and heaped on "effusive praise."*
>
> *Tate Mitchum was impressed with the alumni interview report and read numerous quotes to his committee. He made note of the seven rating the alumnus had assigned to the applicant. This applicant had another dimension to her to contextualize her performance: Joyce Harmon pointed out that a close friend had passed away last year.*
>
> *Kathy Barleben found her extracurricular activity list a bit thin. "Kinda late to join her ECs." Justin Evans agreed, saying, "Yeah, that's what I thought…a lot of 12s." Matthew called for a vote with a closing argument: "A lot of high grades there. Truth is, she's pretty typical in our pool. I would argue that because we took a five ACAD recruit she should be a defer at least." His colleagues concurred; four voted to defer and two to admit.*

The student had a compelling academic profile, one not uncommon in the College's applicant pool. In the context of the applicant pool from her high school, she was the most competitive and academically stronger than her classmate admitted with an ATH attribute. Academically, then, the committee could have justified an offer of admission. Outside of the classroom and in the broader context of all applicants, the committee could have justified a deny. However, a prior decision to admit an academically lower profile student necessitated a decision to defer: the first decision had a cascading effect on the second.

Not long thereafter, a committee of Matthew, Adam, Kathy, Justin, and Joyce heard the only one of four applications from the same high school who was not a recruited athlete. The other three were admitted with the ATH tag during athletic committee. Matthew first had to orient his colleagues to a special, non-traditional grading scale used by the high school; the unusual and unclear technology made the applicant appear weaker than she was. He then introduced her case: "SOC, mixed As and Bs, 35 ACT, intense PQs. GC says she needs balance. Overall we had concerns of intense PQs." Tate peeked into the room to pull Justin out for assistance with a different issue. Matthew had made up his mind. "Six ACAD Hispanic Latino woman from a high school where we've taken much lower classmates." It was clear to him that the earlier decisions should inform their decision on this applicant. Joyce wasn't convinced, and she shared, "I'm not excited about her intensity. And the teacher recommendation doesn't gush." When the vote was held, though, Adam and Kathy joined Matthew as admit votes.

Applicants from the same high school receive extra attention from committee members because of the linkages between them. I regularly recorded members directing

their colleagues' attention to the "school picture" for context or to the "school group" for reference. Larger school groups are likely to complicate decision-making as more attributes enter the decision arena and the committee requires more attention and energy to distinguish differences between groups of applicants. Simply, there is more contextual information to consider as school groups grow in size.

At the same time, the collective decisions on applications from the same school can be seen as a message from the committee to a given high school as to what is and what is not deemed admissible at the College. As such, the committee makes an effort to ensure all decisions on the group make sense when taken together to those external observers who would have the best understanding of the myriad personal qualities, characteristics, and academic details at mix within a group—namely, high school guidance counselors. While neither beholden nor answerable to school counselors, the committee seeks sets of decisions that are consistent and make sense, decisions that appear rational from the perspective of their secondary school audience.

A set of "lateral linkages" offer further explanation of the complexity and ambiguity of decision-making at the committee table. Namely, an organization's people, culture, structure, and strategy create contextual linkages between decisions (Langley et al., 1995). The priority of preferences ebb and flow according to the organization's needs and goals at a given moment, the committee members involved in any decision, and the mix thereof. My interview with Erin Rhodes suggested the committee's awareness of and attention to such contextual linkages. She said:

> There are definitely students that you review that you feel like, oh, this could be a great fit, but then you also have to kind of think about the larger pool. So, in the scheme of this larger pool, this is certainly a wonderful student, but there's also similar kinds of students that we have in the pool, and maybe

> we opt for a different kind of student to sort of find some balance within that…it is tricky.

The committee does not have the resources in terms of space to accommodate all "wonderful" students deemed to be a "great fit." They must choose between applicant characteristics and arrive at some sort of balance in the class.

My committee observations provided further evidence of contextual linkages between decisions. In one instance, a female ED1 applicant was deferred to RD by a split vote of six committee members despite a legacy tag and the fact that she was "stronger than the boys" they had just heard. Arguing against an offer of admission for her, Matthew said to his colleagues prior to the vote, "In regular, we have thousands of girls like this." If they admitted her in ED1 they would forfeit the opportunity to choose a more compelling candidate later. Four minutes later, a second female applicant from the same high school, also with a legacy connection to the College, was denied. As he had done prior, Matthew stated his case prior to the vote. "Again, lots and lots of girls like this in regular. If everything stays the same, we'll have much stronger apps coming down the pike."

Consider the shaping process the committee must use to arrive at a final admitted class. Though no cuts were needed in this cycle, Tate Mitchum reflected on last year's shaping that occurred. At the end of RD, the committee projected that they were going to over-enroll and needed to move 28 students from the admitted class to the waitlist. The decisions on the first 1,100 admits changed the decisions on the final 28 removed from the class. The College was bound by what it had projected its financial aid expenditures would be and the number of on-campus beds available. The 1,100 admit decisions had

pooled together and created a problem in aggregate. This new problem necessitated new decisions on 28 applicants.

Personal Preferences in an Organized Anarchy

Beyond explicit goals that may be articulated by Dean Mitchum, individual committee members tend to have their own preferences and goals that they incorporate into their decision-making processes. Susan Mullen said, "aside from sort of the guidance from Tate, in my mind, I'm thinking about the most academically talented and diverse class" as an overarching goal. "But I also think carefully about the kind of community qualities that students are going to contribute, and I have these three words: empathy, imagination, resilience." For her, these speak to the "building of a community; to me, those are qualities that make a strong community." Building a class includes "having some leaders and having some introverts—you know, we don't want a whole community full of, like, loudmouth kids because it'll get really messy."

Such goals are ambiguous; they are challenging to quantify objectively and are likely to vary according to the decision-maker. "Measuring is so hard," Susan stated. "Resilience I think often goes back to kind of contextual pieces, and to me sort of what are you up against in your life and how are you dealing with that," she continued. Susan's estimation of resilience comes back to a consideration of context:

> Yeah, I guess kind of looking at those contextual pieces of a student's identity and experience and trying to understand how they have navigated that, because I think a lot of times being a student of color puts up some walls, and being a first gen student puts up some walls, and if you're gay, that puts up some walls, if you're trans, you have huge walls. There's a lot of climbing and maneuvering I think that students have to do.

To measure imagination, Susan said it "can come through in the way that teachers talk about students." As for empathy, it "is usually something that's gleaned, again, I think

more from the way that others sort of speak about the students, and sometimes in the essay you can get a sense for that." She concluded, "they are really hard to actually measure. And those probably come out in my PQ ratings more than other places."

Connor Ackland spoke to the role personal preferences may play in a decision. "Everyone brings their own thing to the table, which kind of is what makes the magic happen." As an alumnus of the College, his internal deliberations around each candidate are informed by his understanding of the College's community and its needs. Beyond the general charge to committee, Connor said:

> I'm also bringing in my own sort of 'what's important to me,' and also reflecting on my own experience here, and trying to imagine the students on this campus contributing to life in different ways here, whether that be different extracurriculars or talents or those sort of skill elements that a student might bring, whether that might be academic interests or academic experiences or intellectual achievements from when a student was in high school. But then also, very importantly, is the piece of how can the student land here and be a voice for pushing this campus forward?

The preferences and goals of the individual committee members infuse the decision-making process. Connor seeks to estimate the potential contributions to the life of the community embedded within each applicant. He also strives to answer how a student can challenge the community toward positive growth. Of course, none of these assessments are perfect or objective. "It's essential to trust your instinct a little bit here."

Adam Berry, a fellow alumnus in his first year as an admissions officer at the College, spoke from his perspective with personal knowledge as a student in the community. When asked what he looks for and identifies with in applicants, he responded:

> So there's a few things. One, I'd say first of all there's no mold of a College student. I think that's kind of a tough thing. Like, sure, we're looking for certain things, we're looking at that holistic application, but there's no mold.

> So students [in our community] come from such diverse backgrounds, whether it's racially, socioeconomically, geographically, interest-wise, and you can really learn from a lot of students from a lot of different backgrounds. So time management is probably a big thing for me. We all come here for the academics, but we'll definitely make sure to participate in extracurricular activities and have fun on the weekends, and there sort of is that work-life balance, which I think is really, really nice. I think probably one of the last things I'd say is a passion for learning…I want to go to a place where it's much more collaborative than competitive, which I think is definitely true here and to be honest, at least for me, [grades] weren't even a topic of conversation between students.

Adam seeks to measure a broad range of characteristics when evaluating applications. None of these have standard scales or universal standards; much of his judgment is informed by his experience as a student. And, applicants must successfully present their case for each of these ambiguous areas—without explicitly being told that they are being assessed on such characteristics.

As he stated, there is no mold for a student at the College. A holistic review, as he considers it, incorporates consideration of a spectrum of diversity: race, socioeconomic status, geography, and interests. Then, his calculus involves time management and evidence of work-life balancing skills. Finally, Adam is looking for a passion for learning and a spirit of collaboration. How well does anyone—on the committee or external to it—understand the technology to make such assessments?

His knowledge of and experience in the College community shapes Adam's decision-making. And though there is no mold for an ideal College student, there are personal qualities and characteristics that students bring to the community that the College values over others. This speaks to the notion of an applicant's *fit* with the College, a common theme I heard and witnessed during my data collection visits.

Personal Preferences: The Card

In the same fashion as the "Rule of One Pick" documented by Stevens (2007), Tate Mitchum gives each of his committee members the power to admit one student each year with "no questions asked." Around the office, this privilege is known as a "card." I was present on the first morning of ED1 committee when Tate physically handed out a playing card to each committee member and reminded them of the rights and responsibilities that accompany a card.

He used the same deck of cards every year, having written the officer's name on the card to whom it was originally assigned in their rookie year. The distribution of the cards was playfully orchestrated and ceremonial, involving a real sense of tradition, institutional history, and memory, while simultaneously having a jovial feel marked by laughing and levity. Someone remarked that card holders were part of an "order of secrecy." A card was clearly a meaningful, valued privilege, a reward to the grueling, endless hours spent recruiting students and reading applicants. The responsibility was one not to be taken lightly; it was "cool and empowering," as Tate pointed out to his colleagues.

There were some rules governing the use of cards. First, otherwise inadmissible applicants could not be carded. Students had to be fully admissible as deemed by the reading and ratings process. Second, a card could not be played on a family member; "no relations" were allowed. Third, "nothing that violates college policy" was allowed as the result of a card being played. It was unclear to me exactly what Tate intended by this, but my assumptions were that the card could not be "sold" to outsiders or traded for a favor and any carded applicant would meet all other admissions requirements as required.

Fourth, cards had to be played or forfeited each admissions cycle; they could not be accumulated over time.

Tate directed that cards "may be used at any point, no questions asked." Ideally cards should be played for someone who "got squeezed out" as a part of shaping or who was close to being admitted in committee. When a card was symbolically played it was physically surrendered to Tate. If an officer lost his card, the right to play his card was forfeited for that year. Otherwise, the discretion of card play was up to each individual committee member; Tate said it was up to each of them to "decide the poker and calculus of it."

The card system is relevant to this study because it represents a deviation from organizational preferences and goals. Each card opens the window for competing personal preferences to enter into the decision-making of the committee. The organization's stated policies and preferences are subjugated by actors' goals via an institutionalized process. Granted, carded students represent about one percent of an admitted student class in any given cycle. However, the irrefutable fact is that the decisions on up to thirteen applicants every year change to an admit because one of the actors felt personally compelled to exercise his or her professional right to do so. Undeniably cards introduce greater ambiguity into the organization's decision-making process as a formal avenue for personal preferences.

When I spoke to Matthew over the phone during our follow-up conversation after committee had concluded and decisions were final, I asked him to summarize the play of cards for the year. He shared that only twelve cards were played. Joyce Harmon returned her card to Tate at the end of committee, as per the rules. She informed her colleagues

that the applicant she had planned to card was admitted outright and thus she did not need to play it. She did not choose to find a second "card-able" applicant in the pool, evidently content knowing that another card-worthy student was in the admitted class.

Though beyond the scope of this study, cards explain *why* certain decisions are made. Asking *why* decisions are made introduces a litany of questions. How does any one committee member identify one applicant in particular from among thousands of competing choices and choose to grant admission to the College? What motivates and compels an actor's decision to play a card? How is card-worthy defined? Cards are seen as "sort of a magical part of the whole process" (Emilia King) and are received as "a huge honor and responsibility" (Susan Mullen). Matthew appreciates the personal investment in the decision-making process that cards symbolize. From his perspective, the card system:

> …invests everybody in the office, regardless of sort of rank, with the idea that we really are all in this to change peoples' lives, and every one of us can get at least one life per year, no questions asked, that we can affect.

Whatever future research may conclude, the fact remains that card calculus contributes to an anarchic organizational decision-making environment.

Power and Politics

I observed a few instances of political factors at play in committee decisions. Unexpectedly, though, political calculus most frequently impacted waitlisted applicants. The first decision after lunch on the first day of RD observations made by a small committee including Joyce, Matthew, and Bryan was quick. Only one of five applications from a private independent preparatory school in the Northeast had been referred to committee; the other four were straight denies by CBE readers. After a brief context-

setting, Joyce provided a quick introduction: "GPA top of the group, strong interview, more dynamic in person." The applicant apparently did not warrant an offer of admission as Matthew in response asked of his colleagues, "Please waitlist. It will help with the relationship." The committee had no intention of ever admitting this student from the waitlist. She would be there if they needed her, but the waitlist offer was symbolic and intended as a message to her high school. Waitlisting the top applicant, strong in her own right but simply average in the context of the College's applicant pool, would signal to the school that the College recognized her talent. Matthew wanted to preserve the relationship in hopes of fostering future, more admissible, applicants from the school.

An hour later, the same committee members would arrive at another waitlist decision, motivated by a different political calculus. Joyce was presenting applicants from the Midwest. Inside of two minutes, two votes were held:

Vignette 13

> *Joyce gave her narrative introduction: "MLEG [Mother Legacy], lives in a neighboring state from where he attends school. Grades dip. 31 ACT leads to the lower ACAD. GC says she was homeschooled before becoming a boarding student at this school. In Tate's third-read notes, he wrote, 'not sure she'll stick in RD.'"*
>
> *None of the readers had advocated for an admit; she was referred to committee because her mother was an alumna of the College. Without further debate, Joyce called for a vote. Matthew voted to waitlist, but Joyce and Bryan were both deny votes.*
>
> *Before the outcome of the vote and accompanying notes were recorded, though, Matthew spoke up. "Should we waitlist her to help the dean? It costs us nothing." Joyce was unmoved, saying she was "not enthused at all." Matthew countered, "I'm not trying to admit her. Just a waitlist for political purposes." Joyce remained firm: "She's a five ACAD." But Matthew's concern for the impact a legacy deny would have on the dean resonated with Bryan. He volunteered to change his vote and thus the student was officially placed on the waitlist.*

Legacy status was enough to get this applicant to committee. To acknowledge her familial connection to the College, she was waitlisted out of courtesy. It was a political move by Matthew to make life easier on Tate—not a political favor, but an administrative nicety to save Tate from a likely uncomfortable phone call of complaint.

Politics played a considerable role in multiple decisions on applicants from a high school well known to committee members. Though no applicant was admitted explicitly due to political factors alone, familial relations lent largely to a decision to admit one of the group's applicants. Several others were waitlisted, as opposed to being denied, due to political connections.

The committee included Tate, Erin, Adam, and Connor. Erin was presenting applicants as the territory manager. Adam was responsible for *Thing 1* duties; Connor was operating as *Thing 2*. Complicating this group of decisions was the fact that it was an unusually large school group this year, "The largest I've ever seen," according to Tate. More than ten students would be heard in RD committee after one had been admitted in ED. The first six applicants were resolved rather quickly, each an admit. At the seventh application, the pace of committee slowed. Erin began: "FLEG [Father Legacy], some Bs, low scores: SAT of 1270. Sports are the main EC, though a distinctive essay." Tate interjected with his perspective:

> We're in four [ACAD] territory…and we have one serious political one to decide. I think we're going to have to waitlist her. Context is going to have to play a role here. Playing it straight up will send a good message to the top.

This opened up a larger discussion by the committee led by the dean and his perspective on the group as a whole. After five minutes, he asked Erin, "where are you: waitlist or

deny?" She was leaning waitlist, and her colleagues all joined her for a unanimous waitlist vote.

The next applicant was introduced as a five-plus academic and five overall by the CBE readers. Dean Mitchum had followed their read with scores of six-minus and five-plus. His third read was necessary because the applicant was the son of a faculty member. The student had a 1430 SAT and ranked in the top 15 percent of his class, according to Erin's narrative. He twice served as varsity captain and received solid but "not glowing" support from his school. Erin shared that the alumni interview report was disappointing and inconsistent with her take on the file; the applicant "doesn't read that low."

After a brief interruption by Matthew to check on their progress for the day, the committee regrouped mentally. Tate remarked, "Had he applied ED, I'd have done it." Connor asked, "That's kind of the luck of the draw, isn't it? Had he applied last year, would we have admitted him?" Tate's response encapsulated so much more at play within the decision than a mere political calculus. He said, "There are so many other variables. It depends on who's presenting, to be honest. Any year, we'd do it as ED. Any year in regular, it's always up for debate." Perhaps Connor was on to something: as luck would have it for this student, he was unanimously admitted. His parent's relationship with the College was the final piece the committee needed to admit him.

The next application to be heard, the ninth of the group, elicited an immediate reaction from Connor. "Oof!" was his response when he saw the student's name and assigned ratings. He would abstain from this vote, saying, "I'm too invested. Dad is a good friend." Erin opened with a succinct summary of the assigned ratings, "all fours all around," with a top 20 percent rank and 1320 SAT. The applicant, too, had the faculty

attribute (FAC), but also lower recommendations from his teachers. He was also a varsity captain and served in student government. His academics were considered "not compelling, but solid."

The student had cancelled his appointment for an alumni interview on the day it was scheduled. Additional information could have helped steer the committee, but they would not have it for this decision. Erin observed the student's relatively light extracurricular participation, saying, "Not a ton going on in the EC grid." Tate asked for confirmation that this applicant's older brother had been a student, and indeed, he had been. The committee fell silent for several minutes as they hopelessly clicked through the electronic documents of the application. Eventually, Tate stated, "Objectively he's not even a waitlist." But he would receive a waitlist offer regardless, with the three voting members all in favor of a waitlist.

Next came another applicant bearing multiple connections to the College. She had the lowest test score of the group but was recognized for "some involvement" including one of the leadership attributes. For context, Erin volunteered the ratings that had been assigned to the applicant's brother when he had applied in a previous term. He had been admitted but was a stronger all-around applicant. Tate asked what Erin was thinking, to which she responded, "Courtesy waitlist if you think it would be better." To placate her family and be politically sensitive, a double-four (CBE) four-three-plus-rated (Dean) female would end up on the waitlist. It was a political move to be accommodating of the student's relationships, one that would make the lives of the committee members easier.

Participant Understanding of Power and Politics

Dean Mitchum was best positioned to speak to the effects of external power and politics as they bear upon the decision-making process. His role as a senior administrator of the College included the responsibility of acting as a member of and liaison to the President's cabinet. He met regularly with the Board of Trustees and knew many of them well. When a Trustee, President, or fellow cabinet member had specific interest in an applicant, Tate would certainly hear from them. It thus fell to him to navigate and balance these personal preferences with the broader, overarching, and arguably more critical organizational goals.

Tate shared, "My job is to interpret all of these things people are saying." Nobody is telling him exactly what to do as dean; rather, he is actively scanning the organization for information as to what should matter to the committee. He continued:

> Now, the authority does rest somewhere, right? There's the strategic plan, there's the senior staff and a board. But there's also [campus events, controversies, and on-going community debate], right? And the feelings of the staff, and what's happening nationally and demographically, and my job is to pull all of that together and proceed to the very best degree that we can to be the best place we're capable of being, while brokering scarce resources among a lot of competing constituencies.

Admissions decisions are informed by Tate's understanding of everything the College community requires to fully optimize its resources. His goal is to allow the community to become the "best place" possible. His office does not operate in a vacuum, devoid of direction and consequence and ignorant of external interests.

From his perspective, Tate sees three aspects to his work in the admissions office. The first is data processing. "Modern admissions is information management. We're trying to manage information in an accurate, thorough, efficient way that then allows us

to produce as humane and educational a process that allows all the things that we idealize, right?" Ultimately, the committee is driven to meet a very high-level institutional goal by providing "An access to a wide range of students for whom we can provide life-changing opportunities and get a great education at the right fit." However, as documented previously, there are multiple competing goals, needs, and preferences from numerous stakeholders, and it falls to Tate to find some degree of equilibrium.

His language to describe this second aspect of admissions work takes on a more political slant. "At the same time, you're brokering a scarce resource among competing constituencies, you know?" It isn't that the committee is positioned to negotiate with these different constituencies, though. He continued, "I'll also describe it—and the best kind of metaphor or whatever you're going to call it—to some degree, is a matter of sifting. And so, we're doing a lot of sifting with parameters, right?" By his estimate, somewhere around sixty percent of admission offers in any year are "pre-identified" for certain groups. By the time the admitted class is set and decision-making closes for the year, a mix of student-athletes, international students, students of color, and home-state residents will together make up sixty percent of the class. Four in ten spots remain available for applicants at large, generally speaking.

Finally, with the power and privilege instilled in him as Admissions Dean, he reserves the right to exercise final judgment on any application. He must be certain that the office has adequately addressed the collective needs of the organization, including those of its stakeholders. Some committee decisions may change as a result of his bureaucratic oversight. He described his message to his admissions staff:

> So let's pick a number. Let's say 90 percent of the decisions will be driven through the committee process and each of you as a reader, and the

> responsibilities, and the training you've had, the judgment and discretion authorized to you to make these decisions, through what you just ascertain in reading…As you go through committee, as you know about all the things we're trying to achieve idealistically as well as practically, that's a tremendous amount of responsibility. And that will be yours, but I'll tweak and shape and look to the degree that I can. Ten percent—again, pick a number, 20, it's probably ten or so—are going to be decisions we are stuck at, can't decide, we might not like, that I'm going to make the decision on. And then what I will do is sit in front of you and tell you what I'm going to do and exactly why. What we're not going to try to do is vote towards a consensus where you have to decide. We're still going to vote, I want to see what you want to vote…some of these I truly don't know what to do, and if it's [a vote of] seven-seven, that tells me one thing. If it's ten to three or whatever depending on who we have saying no, I might not do it. Others I know I might be going to do it anyway, and even if the vote is 13 to nothing, I'm still going to do it, but I'm going to tell them that.

Some admissions decisions may be pre-ordained because of associated attributes and special indicators in the file. Tate knows of them in advance of committee; often he contributed as a reader. Others are so complex that he purposefully brings them to committee to gather the collective wisdom of the group. Perhaps the debate and vote may help him decipher what might be best for the College. Or, he wants to see how one or two of his most valued or experienced colleagues reads a file.

Tate believes the information-processing and decision-making system he established "empowers" his staff. His hope is that his faith in their decision-making in turn generates their own trust in the outcomes of the process. "They have faith that the vast majority of the time, they're driving it through, but they also understand it's admissions professionals running a place with all those competing internal constituencies, all the stuff we need to get done."

A few weeks after my second visit to campus, I spoke over the phone with Matthew Chase. He had offered to provide a summary of the committee's shaping process since I could not be present. From the data Matthew provided, at least in terms of

RD committee decisions, Tate's estimation that ten percent of decisions were driven through him as Dean was quite high. The committee heard more than 3,200 applications in RD, admitting nearly 1,300 students. Only 29 decisions were changed from an admit to a waitlist in shaping. Notably, several of them were rated as academic threes, but not all academic threes were waitlisted: eight would remain as admits. No applicants with a development or trustee tag were added to the class. However, "a handful" of applications with the DEV or TRU attributes, originally slated to be denied, were moved to the waitlist instead.

Had the committee done a particularly good job of weighing the competing priorities of the different constituencies? Perhaps this admissions cycle included fewer applicants with connections to the College. Whatever the explanation, politics may factor into a handful of decisions every year. Navigating the distribution of the College's resources is all part of the necessary calculus that the dean and his staff must determine. Notably, no external entity had the explicit authority or power to dictate a decision. There exists administrative structure to ensure external interests are known and accounted for, but decision-making power resides in the Dean and the admissions committee.

Resource Dependence

Evidence from my research to support resource dependence theory as an explanation for decisions of the admissions committee is scant. Quite simply, the College is fortunate to have a sufficiently large enough endowment that it does not have to respond to potential resource providers as may lesser-resourced, more tuition-dependent institutions. For the majority of admissions decisions—those on all domestic applicants—the committee does not consider a student's financial need. The committee does not need

to be responsive to the demands of full-pay families; it can decide freely whether or not an applicant presents a sufficiently compelling mix of attributes to meet different goals of the College. The College's budget only bounds decision-makers in their consideration of international applicants.

As previously discussed, different attributes ("Special Indicators") exist to signal an applicant's association with special stakeholders. From a resource-provider perspective, the DEV tag is perhaps most applicable. Potentially sizable monetary gifts from an applicant's family can strengthen the College's financial position. It could be foolish, albeit principled, for the committee to ignore these possible resource providers. As Janet Weis said, "It's not a beautiful part of the admissions process, but it's a necessary one." However, the College is not solely dependent on these donations as a lone revenue source.

Undeniably, the promise of development gift dollars factors into some decisions. The development office's interest in a family may ultimately tip the scales in favor of some applicants. However, admissions decision-makers are independent from the influence of the providers themselves. They are able to exercise their professional judgment to determine when, and to what degree, the development attribute weighs into a decision.

The College benefits from a sizable endowment and a more diverse revenue portfolio than many liberal arts colleges. It also benefits from its prestigious reputation that help to attract a deep applicant pool. The prospective students in this pool offer solutions to the many competing goals of the organization. These abundant resources and assets give the admissions committee members greater slack between themselves and

external parties, both inside the organization and external to it. As Dean Mitchum succinctly summarized, this provides him and his colleagues "the luxury of doing things the right way."

Bureaucratic Rationality

Put simply, committee members rely upon unclear technologies to assess how applicants might meet some of the competing preferences they seek to address in their decisions. As such, they lack full rationality in their decisions. Through no fault of their own, they are unable to know everything they must know to make the optimal choice on each applicant.

It makes little sense to admit a student with a near-zero probability of accepting her admissions offer—doing so hurts the College's yield rate. Yet, attempts to measure a student's yield likelihood infused most decisions with speculation and some trepidation. Hearing the presentation by Adam Berry of an out-of-state Asian-American male with a GEO tag in addition to a 1570 SAT and a most demanding curriculum in which he earned only one B, Tate Mitchum responded to the gathered RD committee: "Great interview. No visit. Think he's interested?" Not long thereafter, Tate said in response to the presentation of a double six-plus boy, "I like him very much, but I feel it would be a wasted admit." And the dean wasn't alone. For instance, Matthew Chase concluded an introduction of an academic seven-minus / overall six-rated student from his territory by saying, "Hasn't visited, that's the issue." The committee wanted to know the interest level of the student and the chances of her accepting their offer, but they had no way of knowing for certain.

A half hour after this comment by Matthew, a RD committee consisting of him, Susan, Adam, and Connor spent five minutes to make a decision on a highly compelling applicant. However, there were concerns. Matthew began his presentation with a contextualization of this student, the second of two applicants from the same school. The previous applicant, an academic six and overall five, had been unanimously denied. The committee's discussion unfolded:

Vignette 14

Matthew stated, "Higher GPA [than his classmate] but nowhere near on scores. HL, FG, five-plus, six. Interview of five. Spanish is the first language spoken at home. Only two ECs. CBE team was disappointed by the EC piece." This Hispanic/Latino student would be the first member of his family to attend college. He was at the academic rating average of five-plus and the CBE team rated him as an overall six. He had interviewed well, too. It was a compelling profile.

For the time being, Adam was responsible for calculating applicants' current GPAs. He stated, "Current C in AP Bio. SYU is a 3.72." Connor observed that the student's mother is unemployed and speculated that it was "likely he's working to support his family." Susan contributed a statement from the alumni interview report: "Lack of leadership due to lack of involvement, as per the alum." Matthew wanted to know which way his colleagues might be leaning. "What are you thinking?" he asked the group. Adam answered, "Probably at a waitlist now."

But Connor speculated there was more to the applicant's home life than they could know, and it was playing an important role in shaping his decision. "My guess is he's contributing in some way." Was he responsible for housework and sibling care, and thus couldn't be as involved in extracurricular activities as they might hope of him? In Matthew's mind, though, it didn't matter because they couldn't know. "It's not in there. It doesn't come up in the interview."

Matthew's stance elicited a comment from Susan in support of Connor's thinking. The two held a back and forth about the committee's extracurricular expectations in light of other demands, in particular the number of Advanced Placement courses this student was taking. Susan finally concluded, "He has five AP classes. I'm going to take a chance."

Susan felt the student deserved recognition for his academic performance in light of what they speculated to be his additional responsibilities at home. As a First-Generation Hispanic/Latino male with an academic rating of five-plus, he deserved a chance. Maybe he would be a silent, invisible, non-contributing member of the community if he enrolled—they couldn't know—but they could only find out if they admitted him. And they did, by a vote of three admits to one waitlist. The risk of him failing to contribute to the life of the community was mitigated by the reward of possibly enriching the community given his diversity.

The inability to be fully rational is not intended to suggest that committee members behave as irrational decision-makers. While accurate that I observed applicant after applicant with strong or perfect test scores and almost flawless transcripts denied or waitlisted, maximizing academic merit in an admitted class is far from the only goal they seek to achieve. In similar fashion, I did not observe, nor did I expect to observe, the committee making capricious, random, unfounded decisions. When they were moved to admit a student with a lower academic rating such as a three or four, there was extended debate around the decision. They went to great lengths to balance every piece of information available to them, to consider how well these students would be prepared for success at the College, and exactly what they imagined the students might contribute to the community.

I asked each of my interview participants to speak to their ability to gather all of the relevant information they would like to have for making admissions decisions. Emilia King's response was particularly insightful:

> The hard part is we're sort of stuck with imperfect avenues for getting information. I don't think that an extra essay about why [the College] is so

> great is helpful to the process. I know a lot of colleges do that in their process, and yes, that's more information, but is it actually changing or helping decision-making?

More data doesn't promise a better decision. And, the fact that students have the ability to choose how they portray their personalities, interests, and aspirations, clouds decision-making and confounds rationality. Arriving at a better decision is particularly challenging "when students curate their applications to read as they think we want them to read." Readers cannot make a completely rational decision because they cannot arrive at a universal truth on every applicant, if such a thing exists. What, then, does Emilia think would help her make the best decision? She continued:

> You know, I'd love to be a fly on a wall in someone's life for a day. That would be the best way to decide whether they would be a good candidate for us, but that's probably not going to happen in the near future!

As she herself acknowledged, the ability for Emilia to be more fully rational is an impossible aspiration.

Participant Interaction with Competing Theories

On Wednesday of my second visit to campus I took advantage of a day-long break from committee meetings to schedule follow-up interviews with those committee members with whom I had met in the fall. My hope was that capturing how they understood their participation in the decision-making process closer to the moment of decision might improve their reflection and recollection of the roles they play as actors on behalf of the organization. I also felt it would benefit my research if I could get participants to specifically reflect on the different theories of interest to me.

To enhance my findings, I invited their participation in an exercise in which they were exposed to the four theories of interest to this dissertation. These theory statements

as they were presented to them were included in Chapter 4 as Figure 4. I debated whether or not such an exercise would threaten the validity of my findings had I conducted this exercise during my first visit. I did not want the possible treatment effect of exposure to these theories to alter their behavior during subsequent observations of committee. Given that my observations were nearly complete, and I had long since reached a point of data saturation, I was confident that this exercise presented minimal risk of compromising my study.

When I presented the statements to participants, I advised them that they were free to approach the exercise however they saw fit. They could read each statement individually and respond progressively or read all four statements and then respond in aggregate. Emilia responded immediately to the first theory statement, saying that personal knowledge and experience is critical to the decision-making process. As the Associate Dean of International Applicants, though, the second statement resonated with her as well, given the financial aid budget available for international students. The College is need-aware for international applicants, and the committee is bounded by the aid budget. She reminded that regular decision "is not the primary driver for international decisions," and highlighted the differences between ED and regular rounds for international and domestic applicants. As she had shared in our first interview, the majority of international admits would happen in ED. By committing to a student, and by committing aid resources, the office ran a smaller risk in overspending aid budgets. Ability to pay plays a most immediate role in international decisions in regular committee.

In response to the third statement, she said it "no longer holds weight." Though there may have been a time when negotiations were held with private elite preparatory schools, that was no longer the case at the College. Further, she stated that diversity is "what we strive for, but we don't feel pressure" around it. While the interests of the athletic department do play a role in some decisions, "there's so much work that goes into" shaping the recruited athlete pool over the course of many months in advance of committee. Student-athletes aren't admitted via a process of negotiation. Notably, she immediately identified with the final statement, saying, "Yep, it is a messy process." It is not a fully rational process, error-free: "We may miss a kid that would have been great here." She drew attention in particular to the phrase *a relatively complicated intermeshing of elements*, nodding her head and again affirming the accuracy of this statement relative to her perceptions as an admissions committee member.

A similar vein ran through my conversation with Janet. After seven days of committee and with at least four full days of committee on the horizon, she was "tired and ready to be done." She reacted to the first statement, saying, "I guess it's fundamentally rational, but there's the whole shine thing." Asked for clarification as to what she meant by "shine," she shared, "we're looking for the thing that feels authentic, not just an applicant that checks all of the boxes." Upon reading the fourth statement, she said the admissions decision-making process in her experience was "definitely ambiguous and unpredictable," echoing our conversation from the fall.

Janet felt the second statement "doesn't apply as much here," though admitted that the financial aid piece would play a larger role in waitlist decisions—who exactly might be called in May and offered a spot, should the College come up short of their

enrollment target. She also recognized that external resource providers would more likely influence decisions at lesser-resourced institutions. Janet found some validity in the third statement relative to goals of the admissions office, asking rhetorically, "Otherwise, what would we work off of?" Still, she took issue with the notion of a "negotiated settlement," offering that the Classics department faculty, for instance, were invited to have a say in expressing their concerns about departmental enrollment levels, though they wouldn't be permitted to have a direct voice at the committee table.

Connor preferred to read all of the statements and then share his reactions to the group. He expressed an enthusiasm for the exercise, calling the statements "thought-provoking," and shared his appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on his role as a decision-maker on behalf of the College. The first and fourth statements best described his experience, and he said, "our work falls somewhere on the spectrum between the two." He continued: "There are definitely rational elements and a tone around the necessities of our outcomes set by leadership." On a daily basis "and as we conduct ourselves as officers, we try to make rational decisions which are gladly founded in biases we hold as admissions officers." These personal and professional biases, "not all bad…are further influenced by preferences," and individual people and their characteristics "naturally play a role in committee." Thus, in Connor's eyes, "one and four operate together: if you are holistic [in your reading and evaluation], you can be rational."

Reading through the statements, Kathy responded to the first by "tossing it out," saying that "rational connotes consistency, not formularity. It isn't consistent and fair, but it comes with some great outcomes." The second statement did not hold at the College,

though she found some element of truth in the third statement. But it was again the final statement that seemed the best fit in her reading, and she was drawn to the final line in particular: it is a process that is subjective, holistic, and human. “It’s a dynamic process with lots of steps, and we have different backgrounds and experiences. We each bring these experiences and biases to the work.”

As one of the more seasoned veterans with a greater body of experience, Erin Rhodes shared that she had come to rely upon travel season to provide her with context to make more informed decisions: “I feel lucky to travel to be able to understand [the context of a high school] and factor it in.” The committee process “isn’t random. There is some expertise.” Context is critical, and the dialogue within the media, from the outside looking in, misses the importance of understanding the true holism of the process: “no two students are coming from the same place, and we do think about context.”

Erin’s reflections during our second meeting echoed the conversation from our first interview. She stated that the decision-making process touched upon some difficult-to-gauge measurements: the committee is “looking for the ones who can take advantage of the College’s resources.” She continued, “We do a lot of the ‘What Ifs’: who would they be at a place like this? Would they be overwhelmed? Engaged in the life of the College?” She shared that she had printed out a recent statement she had overheard to keep her grounded when reading and as a guide for finding desirable character traits in the community. The College’s administration hoped to welcome students who would be bridge-builders and contribute to a persuasive dialogue; to fill spots across the curriculum and in particular at some new innovative programs; and those who see themselves as change-agents within the larger world. At the same, the committee had to consistently

"be mindful of what we're moving towards and where we've been," in terms of realizing a community of diverse backgrounds, interests, and experiences.

As per the statements, Erin felt that none of them individually accurately described the *how* of the process. Rather, a hybrid of all four would be more fitting from her perspective. She responded, "number four makes a lot of sense to those who do this work," and recognized that that must be "frustrating to outsiders." The intermeshing of elements made sense, "but at its core, there are fundamental standards, but flexibility [within the process] to infuse personal experiences and institutional priorities simultaneously." In international committee, there is the added "calculus of resources" to complicate decision-making. Undeniably, the financial aid budget impacts outcomes on international deliberations. But for domestic applicants, she argued that the media has it wrong. "It's not about the budget," she maintained.

Adam Berry was in the middle of his first regular decision committee as a "rookie" admissions officer. I inquired as to his impressions of committee as one of the newer members and his approach to voting. He responded saying that he was consciously arriving at a decision on his own before seeing how others had voted and sticking to that decision regardless of how his colleagues had voted.

Adam read through the statements and responded one by one. He agreed with the first statement in part, saying, "sometimes we'll look at other factors and all talents are incorporated, but at the same time nothing is set in stone." He shared that "overall, it's very rational, and no one has more power than others." In his mind, the most important factors he strove to assess in applications were contributions to the life of the College and whether or not the student could do the work. Responding to the second prompt, Adam

stated that different people in the office are responsible for "such things, and they don't see these in committee." He emphasized the committee's adherence to the College's need-blind admissions policy, saying, "We really hold on to our need-blind well." He acknowledged some accuracy in the third statement:

> Sure, there are certain circumstances, but context matters. We look at everyone in the context of where they are. At the same time, the school is a business and that's why we go through the Dean, to get a sense of power, hooks, and other factors.

Largely consistent with his colleagues, Adam reacted most strongly, and positively, to the fitness of the fourth statement. "The application process is holistic, and we have many ways to gather additional information." Components such as alumni interview evaluations and supplemental materials "allow for an objective and holistic review as is possible." At the same time, the committee needs to admit sufficient numbers of students proficient in sports and music, among other talents, and such community needs require input from other areas of the college more skilled to assess ability. Adam continued:

> I definitely agree with the ambiguous and unpredictable part. There's more than just words on the paper: we may have met students, we may want a relationship with a school. Our biggest task is to ensure they can do the work. It's a fine line, and balancing contexts is important.

Adam's responses to the theory statements made me eager to meet with Matthew again as he seemed to reflect frequently on his role as an admissions officer. I expected the exercise would elicit a particularly lively conversation, and I was not disappointed.

Matthew's professional resume includes time as a school teacher. By his own admission his personal biases acquired as a teacher tainted his response to the first statement. He took issue with the notion of committee members knowing "all" they needed to know. They *attempt* to assess such things as fit, yield, ability to thrive

academically, and non-academic contributions to the life of the college. He flatly disagreed with the second statement, saying that tuition revenue is never part of their reading or committee process. They "don't play yield games" with merit and financial aid packages or tuition-discounting schemes.

He reacted to the third statement, saying it "doesn't strike me as real true. Our day-to-day life isn't influenced by what others think. We do business with the elites but aren't beholden to them." Notably, though, he continued: "A development case may alter the result but not the process. The end result may change but it isn't an exception." A decision may change with the presence of a development tag, but this tag is merely one more piece of information the committee must factor into deliberations. Nobody is dictating the decision to the committee, and the means of arriving at the decision are incorporated into the structure of the committee's policies and procedures.

Upon reading the final statement, Matthew responded, "I like four. I would sort of sign on to the concept of a *relatively complicated intermeshing of elements.*" He drew attention to the close of the statement ('Decisions are a result of a process that is subjective, holistic, and human.'): "The last line for sure." He concluded by saying, "one and four hit me and say, 'Yeah, this describes my goal.'"

Susan arrived at a very similar place when evaluating the statements. She read through all of them and then responded that while she understood the second and third, a blend of one and four best described her understanding of how admissions decisions are made at her institution. "There are very rational parts of it. We talk about yield and interpreting an applicant's actions, but it's not formalized. There is no regularly applied logic; it's about each case. Context is important." Speaking to the final statement, she

said, “We’re all humans and bring different biases.” Susan continued by offering an example using her recollection of one decision from the prior day’s committee. There had been a split vote of three admits to one deny. She was the lone deny. Her colleagues had read the essay as “fun,” but she had an opposite reaction. The interpretation of the essay’s meaning “changed the direction of the decision, and the decision could have changed at any point if different people were in that committee.”

Summary of Findings

Eight major findings emerged from this study. First, the three conditions of an organized anarchy must be met in order for the garbage can model of decision-making to hold as an explanation as to how an admissions committee at a selective private liberal arts college makes decisions as to which applicants should be admitted. This study found significant evidence of:

- *The fluid participation of decision-makers*, who displayed varying degrees of attention, were subject to the effects of time and energy, and whose participation in decision-making fluctuated throughout the course of committee;
- *Unclear technologies* used in application reading, rating, and assessment, and throughout the course of committee decisions;
- *Problematic preferences of the organization*, the goals and interests of organizational actors and stakeholders both within and beyond the admissions committee and the College itself.

As such, I conclude that the GCM offers a highly compelling explanation for how decisions are made at this selective, private liberal arts college. However, this study also found considerable evidence of the effects of dynamic linkages interacting between and upon decisions. Accordingly, the fourth major finding of this study is stated:

- *Preferences of the organization become more problematic due to dynamic linkages between decisions.*

To comprehensively understand any of the organization's decisions requires an understanding of the competing alternatives from which the decisions-makers might choose.

Competing theories to explain how the admissions committee at this selective, private liberal arts college makes decisions receive little support in this study. Namely, this study found that:

- *Political considerations may factor marginally into some committee decisions, but decision-makers are largely immune to the effects of power and politics;*
- *Resource dependence theory does not explain how decisions are made in light of the resource-rich environment of the College;* and,
- *Members of the admissions committee cannot be fully rational in their decisions because they lack to the ability to know everything they must know to optimize their decisions.*

Participants' understanding of their decision-making process affirmed each of the above findings. In addition, the concluding exercise in which participants reflected on the four theoretical statements of interest to this study yielded the eighth finding of this study:

- *The garbage can model of decision-making received the strongest support by participants upon consideration of competing theories to explain how admissions decisions are made.*

The garbage can model of decision-making opens up the black box of the selective college admissions process even if it does not offer a clear lens to predict individual admissions decisions.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, I conclude with a discussion of findings from my research. I discuss support for the garbage can model of organizational choice, which holds under conditions of an organized anarchy, of which I recorded considerable evidence. I continue with a discussion of findings related to the competing theories encompassed in my second research question. Next, I discuss the theoretical implications of my findings as they contribute to conceptualizations of the GCM. A review of findings relative to the proposed ambiguity continuum in Appendix A and the selectivity scales in Appendix B follow as a contribution to theory-building. Areas of future research are considered, followed by a discussion of implications for admissions policy and practice.

The two research questions that guided this study are stated as follows:

1. To what extent can the garbage can model of organizational choice explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?
2. To what extent do rival theories such as political power, resource dependence, and bureaucratic rational theory explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective, private liberal arts college?

The setting for this qualitative case study, anonymously referred to as The College, is a private liberal arts college set in the northeastern United States with an admissions rate that perennially ranks it among the most selective in the country. It is a member of the

NCAA Division III and offers a full complement of competitive varsity intercollegiate athletics teams. The College meets the considerations factored into my case selection and was drawn from the population of potential research sites as described in Chapter Four. This case study involved participant interviews, observations of admissions committee meetings, and a content analysis of committee documents.

This study's research questions pursue an understanding of *how* admissions decisions occur within the moment and within context of committee. What justifications, motivations, and factors internal to the decision-making body, among committee members and unto the committee itself, enter into each decision relative to the institutionally-specific problems they might address? What external pressures from other units within the college or beyond the bounds of the college, play into the calculus of decisions—if any? Accordingly, this study focused on the committee process and practice of admissions decision-making to understand how commitments to action are made.

The major findings of this research describe the organizational conditions at The College as an organized anarchy, including the fluid participation of actors, the use of unclear technologies in decision-making, and problematic preferences of the organization. As such, I found that the garbage can model of organizational choice offers a compelling explanation as to how the College's admissions committee makes admissions decisions on applicants to the College. In addition, I found that dynamic linkages between decisions play an important role in decision-making. Finally, the study found limited support under the scope conditions of the College for the competing theories addressed in my second research question.

Discussion of Findings

The garbage can model explains the process of decision-making when an organization's internal environment meets the definition of an organized anarchy. I found that the College's admissions committee functions as an organized anarchy given the abundant body of evidence illustrating the fluid participation of actors, unclear technology at work, and problematic preferences in competition with each other. Committee members moved in and out of the locus of decision, and the membership of any given decision-making body was inconsistent, changing day to day. Admissions decision-making occurred in as many as four loci at any one point in time, involving from as few as three to as many as seven deciders. Further, the attention and energy of actors flowed according to competing demands on their time. Administrative duties within committee as well as other work in the office required attention within and across decision windows. Time itself bore upon actors as a constraint as they were driven to efficiently arrive at decisions to keep the organization on schedule for timely decision release.

The committee regularly relied upon contextual evidence to inform decision-making which contributed to ambiguity within their processes. The home life, family background, and school group of each applicant regularly framed the committee's deliberations and served as a technology to contextualize test performance and grade trends. Professional yet subjective judgment was involved in every decision, from the evaluation of student essays to the interpretation of recommendation letters. Applicant interviews were outsourced to a team of hundreds of alumni volunteers, for which there existed no guarantee of the consistency of assessments. The committee sought to identify

and qualify vague, ambiguous characteristics such as a student's fit with and potential to contribute to the community. The technology to forecast any student's likelihood to accept an offer of admission was ambiguous and unclear—yield was an educated guess, at best, in regular decision committee.

The committee was responsible for balancing numerous preferences of the College's many stakeholders. Competing preferences were found in the nearly fifty "Special Indicators" attributed to applicants during reading and evaluation processes. Overarching questions that guided the assignment of ratings for academics, extracurriculars, and personal qualities frame how preferences were balanced throughout the decision-making process. Goals were broad and unspoken; diversity, for instance, encompassed much more than an applicant's geography, race or ethnicity, and included worldviews and lived experiences. Spark, something the committee hoped each applicant would possess, simultaneously operated as a problematic preference given its vague, subjective definition, and lack of any standard means to measure it.

Preferences were problematic given the fluidity of their relative importance and the value associated with them, both of which fluctuated over time. As committee progressed and needs were addressed by prior decisions, the preference accorded to an attribute changed. Lateral linkages due to pooling and context existed between applicants in competition for a limited number of seats in the class and in light of strategies to shape the College's community. Decisions on international applicants were linked because these students competed for the same pooled financial aid resources. Some decisions were related due to precursive linkages. As the committee learned the outcomes of past decisions, it could change their decision on a given case, particularly as it related to the

playing of a card. A cascading effect was observed between applicants of the same school group. In short, this study confirmed the summative argument of Langley et al. (1995) and the "interwoven networks of issues" (p. 260) that confronted the admissions committee.

Personal preferences competed with organizational preferences. Personal impressions mattered, and subjective judgement infused decisions. The existence of cards introduced the possibility that thirteen decisions might be made explicitly because of each individual committee member's preferences.

In contrast to the GCM, evidence to support competing theories was thin in comparison. However, I did document traces of each theory during my research. Power and politics factored into some waitlist decisions and marginally into some decisions to admit students. Though the interests of external stakeholders were represented at the committee table, decision-makers seemed free to exercise their own professional judgment throughout all of the committee's decisions. Any political calculus was left to the Admissions Dean to maneuver and share with his colleagues. He reserved the right to revisit certain decisions according to his interpretation of the organization's environment and how well other decisions had met the needs of the organization and its stakeholders. As stated previously, there exists administrative structure to ensure external interests are known and accounted for, but decision-making power resides in the dean and the admissions committee.

Given the depth of the College's endowment resources, a theory of resource dependency receives little support in my research. Donative prospects and family wealth can factor into decisions, but the committee was not forced to make decisions to appease

revenue providers. Rather, applicants that might introduce new sources of revenue to the College were tagged with a corresponding attribute. Such data is then incorporated into each decision as one additional possible solution to the competing preferences and goals for the committee to consider. Legacy applicants were tagged with an attribute, but the presence of such an attribute was not significant in and of itself to automatically merit a decision to admit.

Lastly, as it pertains to a theory of bureaucratic rationality, committee members lack full rationality in their decisions because they rely upon unclear technologies to assess how applicants might meet some of the competing preferences they seek to address. Decision-makers are unable to know everything they must know to make the optimal choice on each applicant. Despite their desires to know all that they can about applicants, committee members are bounded in their ability to do so.

The reflections of interview participants on these competing theories affirmed associated findings in my research. Committee members desire full rationality in the decisions they make, and they are never intendedly irrational. However, the summary statement that encompasses the tenets of an organized anarchy and the GCM most resembles their experiences as organizational actors.

From observations of decision-making, in conversations with participants, and via an exercise in participant reflection on theories, I conclude that the GCM offers a fitting explanation of how admissions decisions are made at this selective, private liberal arts college. Within the garbage can, decision-makers and their attention come and go from the choice opportunity of committee according to competing administrative demands of their work. While in committee, they seek to address problems, goals, and preferences of

both organizational and personal interest, using generally unclear technologies, by pairing potential solutions to these problems in the form of thousands upon thousands of characteristics as represented in the College's applicant pool.

However, it is important to reiterate that this study yielded compelling evidence of the effects of sequential, lateral, and precursive linkages (Langley et al., 1995) on decision outcomes. The College's admissions committee does not make decisions in isolation. A failure to capture the complexity of these networks of decision overlooks the impact of contextual evidence, oversimplifies the process, and misdirects us from an accurate understanding of how admissions decisions are made.

Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to our understanding of how complex, modern organizations make decisions. There is no one singular goal the College's admissions committee pursues in its decisions. Rather, an extensive list of preferences from stakeholders across the organization vie for attention at the committee table. Organizational actors who comprise the committee are charged with negotiating the collective needs and priorities of the College in hopes of finding solutions for the problems of interest to the College's stakeholders. The import of the goals on this list constantly evolve as decisions are made and the admitted student class takes shape.

This research answers the calls made by organizational sociologists for further research into the fitness of the GCM. It also serves as a response to critics of the GCM by presenting compelling evidence of the model at work in a selective, private liberal arts college. Yet as critics and proponents alike have suggested, the GCM can benefit from revitalization. The incorporation of sequential, precursive, and lateral linkages (Langley

et al., 1995) does precisely that. Further revision to the GCM is encouraged to allow the model of decision-making to properly account for such linkages between decision alternatives.

Any study of admissions decision-making, be it qualitative or quantitative, will miss its mark if it fails to account for both the individual context of decision and the broader linkages within an applicant pool. Any theory that seeks to explain how admissions decisions are made at a selective institution must account for linkages between decisions. Just as the admissions committee at the College does not make decisions in a vacuum, application decisions cannot be viewed in isolation. Each seemingly independent decision depends on all of the decisions surrounding it. The multiple contexts around each individual decision bear upon the decision-making process. Failing to account for such contextual data will mislead those who hope to understand why certain decisions were made within the committee room. Thus, this study's findings imply that the GCM must account for the interrelatedness of solutions to solutions, problems to problems, and the degree to which solutions and problems relate and evolve over time.

Fitness to the Ambiguity Continuum

My findings affirm the placement of highly selective higher education institutions on the theorized Ambiguity Continuum included in Appendix A. The College's admissions committee drew from the range of philosophical justifications for admissions decisions under Capacity to Perform, Capacity to Benefit, and Potential to Contribute. They devoted considerable decision-making time in committee to assessing each applicant's potential to contribute to the institutional environment of the College.

Ambiguity around decision-making abounds because the committee has a wealth of alternatives for every available offer of admission. More applicants mean more options and necessitate more committees devoted to decision-making. Higher selectivity allows the committee to test-make, to define what student characteristics are important to them as gatekeepers. It gives them the freedom define esoteric characteristics such as fit, spark, spunk, and shine.

They are granted a higher freedom to explore their environment, a wider range to explore for solutions. Applicants that "blend" can be dismissed even if they are academically meritorious. Further, the committee is not resource-bound beyond beds available and an international financial aid budget. While some consideration is given at the end of the process to make certain they haven't admitted an overly expensive class, the committee is need-blind for domestic applicants. They have greater slack than decision-makers at less selective institutions given a wealth of resources.

Fitness of the Selectivity Scales

The College is categorized as a highly selective institution on the proposed Selectivity Scales as presented in Appendix B. The committee has at least three alternative choices for every possible offer of admission given the volume of applications received and the number of students admitted to the college. My findings support the fitness of these scales as a means of describing the institutional processes, responsiveness, and decision-making in this highly selective organization. The College's admissions committee has a *very high* range of freedom in the following areas:

- *Ability to craft alternative tests.* Committee members can alternate between various unclear technologies to craft different tests that serve as justification for how the choose to vote on any applicant.

- *Adaptability.* Given the volume of applicants, they are afforded adaptability in their decision-making; they can make small points of distinction between otherwise similar applicants as needed.
- *Deliberate pursuit of a goal.* The committee can be intentional in their decisions as the admitted class takes shape, choosing which competing preferences take precedent at the expense of others.
- *Environmental freedom / independence.* A deep applicant pool allows freedom from the environment; the committee is dependent upon environmental pressure.
- *Extent of holistic application review.* Committee members assign ratings for academics, personal qualities, and extracurricular activities, in addition to an overall rating, all while making every effort to consider the many different contexts from which applicants apply.
- *Internal slack.* Interests of the College's numerous internal stakeholders are noted as attributes, but the committee is otherwise autonomous in the decision-making process.
- *Professionalization of admissions staff.* The Admissions Dean trusts the judgment of his staff and entrusts them with the power to exercise a card. Given his position that allows him the most comprehensive understanding of the needs and goals of the College, he reviews decisions only at the end of the process.
- *Spontaneity.* Though the committee will tend away from irrational decisions, there is room for them to accommodate personal preferences as they deem applicants' spark, spunk, and fit.

Likewise, the College's admissions committee is situated at the *high* end of the selectivity scales in the following areas:

- *Ability to explore and seek alternative solutions.* The committee can pass on academically meritorious applicants to find other students who offer different contributions to the College's community.
- *Autonomy to make decisions freely.* Decision-makers are free to operate within the norms and expectations ascribed to them and can pick and choose which problems are paired with appropriate solutions.
- *Range of discretion in decision.* The committee has a wide range of discretion, though it won't behave irrationally.

The College's admissions committee is on the *low* end of the scales for:

- *Attention to efficiency.* While the committee must meet notification deadlines and operate with an eye toward efficiency, they have a heightened degree of efficiency to dwell in decision-windows when they deem it valuable or necessary.

- *Subject to isomorphic forces.* The committee wants the College to meet expectations of external stakeholders and future students, but a large endowment, deep applicant pool, and an established prestigious reputation make it less susceptible to coercive isomorphism from the field of higher education institutions. A small body of near-peer institutions are likely to exert more pressure on the College than will less selective institutions.

Finally, my findings confirm that the admissions committee has a *very low* responsiveness in the following areas:

- *Capture or boundedness by the environment.* The committee is far removed from the realities of open access or low selectivity institutions which must admit the vast majority of all applicants. The College can actively set new environments and seek applicants from different geographies.
- *Everything is functional.* Much of the committee's application reading and review is highly subjective and functionality of the subjective characteristics of applicants is opaque.
- *Exploitation of resources.* The committee is able to make different markets and does not rely upon students who pay full tuition.
- *Predictability of admissions decisions (outcomes) beyond coarse sorts.* A host of competing attributes, the fluidity of actor participation, and the role of unclear technologies all contribute to ambiguity in predicting outcomes.
- *Use of automated evaluation process.* There is structure and form to application evaluation, but it is human and far from mechanical.

Directions for Future Research

Future research conducted at institutions across the scale of selectivity may confirm or negate the degree to which these organizational features apply under different conditions. Likewise, future studies may replicate the methods of this study at less selective institutions to assess the degree to which the conceptualized Ambiguity Continuum in Appendix A holds true under the varying degrees of freedom each organization has from its environment.

The ambiguity continuum and selectivity scales propose that decisions become more predictable as admission rates increase. Fewer applications translate to fewer choice alternatives and subsequent limitation upon the philosophical justifications by which students may be offered admission. Future research may explore how well these schemas hold true for less selective institutions. Future studies might also investigate how other organizational conditions such as endowment value or rankings interact with selectivity and admissions decision-making processes.

While beyond the scope of this study, my observations of the committee decision-making process suggest the need for future research from a psychological perspective. We must wonder what the implications may be on decision outcomes given different combinations of committee members and the fluid participation thereof. How do seniority and experience play out as a function of interpersonal power imbalances, if at all? What impact does the gender balance within a committee have, or the diversities and demographics of committee members—gender, race, ethnicity, and beyond? Does the proportion of alumni on an admissions committee perpetuate inequities within the student body, or are alumni more acutely aware of, and as such driven to address such inequities, should they exist?

As captured in this study, the admissions decision-making process at this selective, private liberal arts college is described as human and substantially subjective. What is the toll of the humanity of the process upon decision-makers who have to say no so frequently? How does the burden of decision weigh upon them, and how might this burden impair decision-making, if at all?

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study addressed a common call for more qualitative research into the black box of the college admissions decision-making process. It is unlikely that an explanation such as the GCM, which necessitates a degree of comfort with ambiguity, will be merrily received by audiences who seek concrete explanations as to how, and subsequently why, admissions decisions are made. As argued, the rationality and fairness of decisions can only be ascertained when a comprehensive understanding of the entire applicant pool is available, and the goals, preferences, and constraints of the organization are known. Even then, the ability of decision-makers to fully know everything they would like to know in order to make a perfect decision eludes them.

So, what, then, do the findings of this study imply for institutional policymakers and practitioners? First, this study encourages a renewed appreciation of the degree of complexity admissions committee members face in their choices as institutional selectivity increases. To successfully professionalize new admissions officers requires they be oriented to the numerous competing preferences of interest to the College's stakeholders. It also requires them to gain an understanding of how they account for their own personal preferences and biases as they are expressed in decision-making. Committee members play a most immediate role in determining the future ethos of the organization; it is the committee that decides who should be invited to join the community.

Second, selective admissions decision-making is not a mechanical process. It is human and subjective. To assume that applicants of like academic credentials will receive the same admissions decision ignores the fact that human beings are responsible for

synthesizing all of the information for thousands of applicants. It is a task none too small, and one intimately connected to the personalities of the committee.

To pretend there exists a uniform, standard means of objectively assessing a student's potential to benefit from and contribute to a college community is short-sighted. Every student applies from a different context, a different lived and learned reality. And every student displays varying degrees of different intelligences. To what extent does a modern admissions policy and the practice of selective decision-making account for competing intelligences, and to what degree should all of Gardner's (1998) intelligences hold weight in the practice of selective admissions? Further, how well can an admissions committee evaluate competing intelligences, particularly in light of the disparate contexts from which students apply?

What are the implications for the College's community when student-athletes are given preference via an early read process and a distinctly different admissions committee process? From my observations, it seemed that the athletic recruiting process was tailored in such a manner as to maximize the academic and athletic attributes of incoming student-athletes. It was a process designed to realize efficiency, but the question remains: what does the college community forego when "special athletic talent moves [an] otherwise unfavorable decision in [a] student's favor"? Could there be more First-Generation college-bound students or students of color in the class without these student-athletes? What would the impact on the community be if some of those academically meritorious students were admitted instead of waitlisted? Conversely, what might be lacking from a community absent its athletes, individuals in their own right who

also bring diversity of talent, interests, and perspective, in addition to tuition revenue and the promise to raise the prestige of the College?

Third, administrators responsible for modern admissions policies should aspire to allow institutions to be as accommodating to students from all backgrounds as institutional resources allow—and critics of policy and practice must recognize the bounds that limit admissions committees. Policy should be written "for inclusionary purposes: to seek out those who may not meet the traditional criteria but who have the ability to profit from a college's offerings" (Wechsler, 1977, p. 295). Importantly, though, the admissions criteria, procedures, practices, and processes must align with and serve that policy. It was evident in my study that the College's admissions committee strove for inclusion; members challenged themselves to be open to, and thoughtful and cognizant of, non-traditional markers of success. They sought students who would challenge the status quo of the College, students who would push the proverbial envelope and compel the community to expect more of its members. The College's admissions committee sought organizational change from within the student body while also meeting the ongoing needs of the organization.

Given the ambiguous nature of the process, can we think of the policies and practices of selective college admissions as being fair to applicants? Consider these two viewpoints from the College's admissions officers. Associate Dean Matthew Chase argued that the process affords every applicant fair consideration, but that the needs of the organization play an equally primary role in decision-making:

> I love the process. I love that every file gets read by somebody who knows something about their school and somebody who knows nothing about their school. I think that's healthy. I love that we are sort of tasked with being sort of advocates and teachers and sort of detectives all at once. I love that

> we have to think about what's best for the student and what's best for our school…The process is really holistic. I think it is genuinely holistic…I think we're all cautious, careful, caring people who genuinely want what's best for these kids and what is best for our school, and I think every kid gets a fair shake.

Is a "fair shake" the same thing as a promise that every applicant receives a holistic review of her application, or that every applicant has the same probability of admission from the start of the process? When the committee incorporates the question, "What's best for our school?" into the calculus of each decision, the process inherently changes the metrics of decision-making.

Alternatively, Dean Tate Mitchum juxtaposed fairness relative to an admissions process in which thorough practices deliver integrity:

> …I say we're very biased in this process. I'm very biased towards smart, talented kids, you know, and no bones about that. So, I think it's important to reassure people that it's a thorough process that weighs as much as possible, but I've never made claims to it necessarily being fair. I think it needs to have as much integrity as possible, as opposed to being fair…To the degree that it's possible, we are empathetic towards the student's situation and we try to account for it, while at the end…trying to create and build and put together a more interesting thing.

The "more interesting thing" he directs his committee to piece together is made up of more than just academically or athletically meritorious students, those considered by society to be the best and the brightest, or the meritocratic elite of Young (1994). The admissions process cannot be fair to every applicant because, when all is said and done, the interests of the College must prevail. The committee does not want a class of look-alikes, all of identical perspective, viewpoint, and worldview. The admissions office seeks "smart, talented kids," *smart* as an indicator that they will likely be successful in the classrooms, and *talented* to address the preferences of its multifaceted community and the interests of its stakeholders, both internal and external to the College.

Evaluating fairness perhaps makes most sense when asking *why* certain students are admitted at the expense of others. Some student-athletes with lower academic ratings are admitted while students with near-perfect standardized tests are rejected. Wealthier students who leverage their resources and maximize their performance benefit from their socioeconomic status in the admissions process. Legacy connections still matter to an extent. Killgore's (2009) argument regarding the organizational expansion of the definition of merit rings true when we ask *why*. Judging fairness of the admissions process is more complicated when we ask *how* decisions are made because the decisions serve the interests of the organization—not the interests of applicants.

This study found that the garbage can model offers a compelling explanation as to *how* decisions occur inside the black box of the admissions committee at a selective, private liberal arts college. The garbage can metaphor speaks to a somewhat messy process given the volume of data and the demands upon decision-makers. It is a process far from being described as formulaic, mechanical, and programmatic.

Policymakers must be sensitive to the fluidity of the process, the human-ness of the *how*, and the participation of practitioners. Efforts to assess fairness of the process must account for the host of problematic preferences and the unclear technologies used to assess applicants' potential solutions to address these problems. Admissions policy must be tailored to meet both the institutional mission and organizational needs in light of the organization's resources including endowment, prestige, ranking, and depth of applicant pool. Organizational context is vital in shaping policy and understanding how decisions are made.

Practitioners at selective colleges contribute to a fair process by promising to account for their own personal preferences and biases throughout application reading, evaluation, rating, and assessment, and as expressed through voting in the committee room. The subjective elements of admissions decision-making cast open the process to ambiguity; admissions officers need to understand how their own experiences, perspectives, and worldviews shape how they interpret applications and inform their decision-making. A promise of holistic review in a "thorough process" requires a comprehensive accounting of the many contexts from which students apply. To meet a standard of fairness, practitioners must strive to establish and maintain a process in which context matters. And, they must account for the effects of time, attention, and energy on their decision-making ability. These are the means to realize integrity within the *how* of the process.

Each admissions decision at this private, selective liberal arts college entails a host of interwoven, interconnected decisions. Every commitment to action is made to address any number of problems faced by the organization and its stakeholders. Every decision to admit a student offers multiple potential solutions to these problems. Practitioners and policymakers would be well suited to embrace Langley et al.'s (1995) concept of the insightful decision maker, one that cannot be fully rational, is not intendedly irrational, but who seeks to capitalize on as much information as is possible in the decisions that are made.

The black box of selective college admissions decision-making yields unpredictable results. Decisions might not make sense from the outside looking in when context is lost. However, the lens of the garbage can model helps contribute to an

explanation of the *how* of the admissions decision-making process. The garbage can necessitates acceptance of the human and subjective nature of decision-making. It requires comfort with ambiguity, rejects the notion of a perfect, fully rational array of decisions, and embraces the noise within the process. As Assistant Dean Janet Weis effectively summarized, despite (or perhaps because of) having the benefit of being inside the black box of decision-making, "It's just so ambiguous! It's such a human process!"

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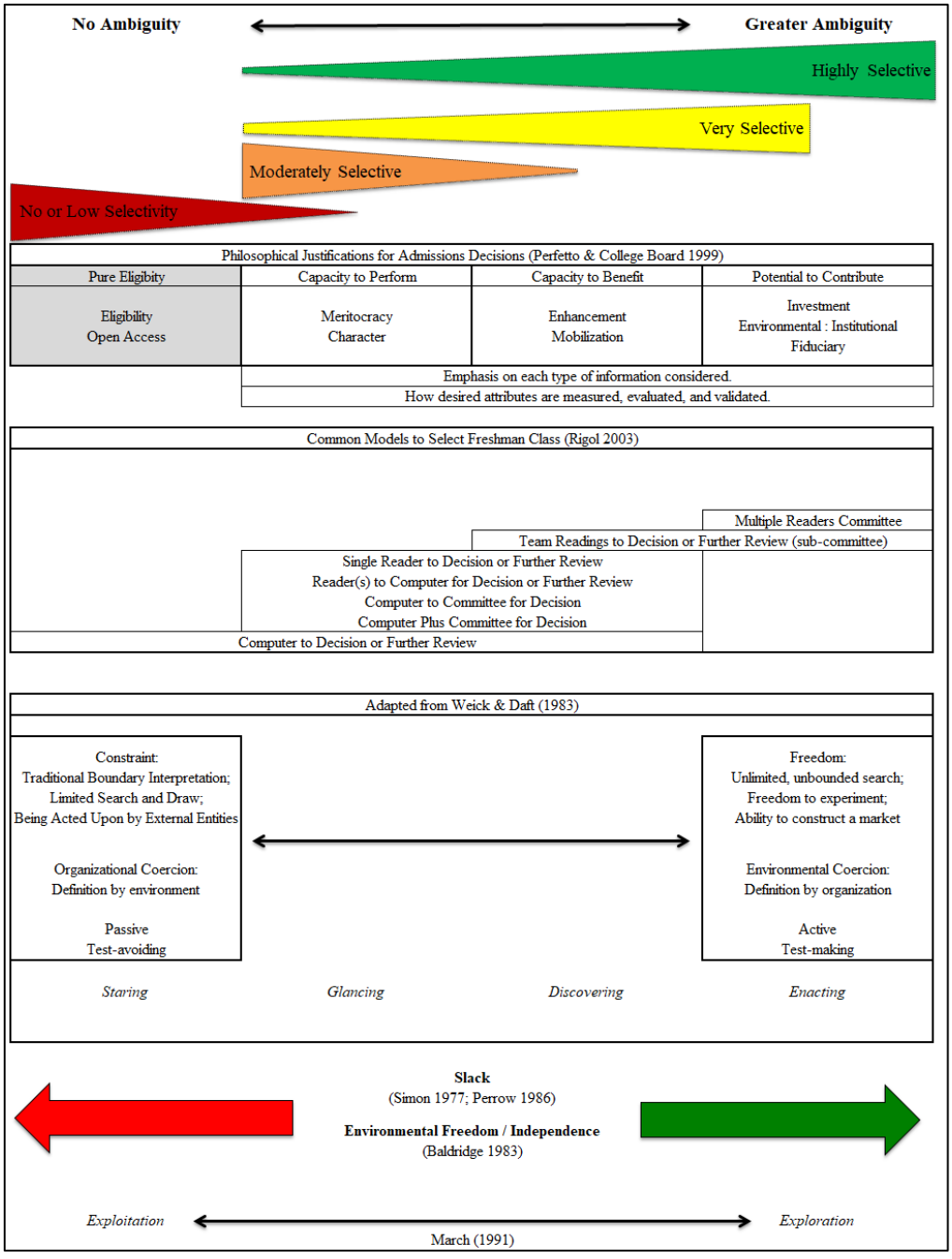
APPENDIX A

QUALITATIVE DEGREES OF FREEDOM: CONCEPTUALIZATION OF AN AMBIGUITY CONTINUUM FOR UNDERSTANDING ADMISSIONS DECISIONS



APPENDIX B

CONCEPTUALIZED SELECTIVITY SCALES OF PROCESS, ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION, AND DECISION-MAKING

Institutional Process, Response & Decision-Making	Selectivity Ranges				
	Open Access	**Low** *(Admit Rate 100-85%)*	**Moderately** *(Admit Rate 85-50%)*	**Very** *(Admit Rate 50-33%)*	**Highly** *(Admit Rate below 33%)*
Ability to craft alternative tests	None	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Ability to explore and seek alternative solutions	None	Very low	Low	Medium	High
Adaptability	None	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Ambiguity surrounding admissions process beyond coarse sorts	None	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Attention to efficiency	Very high	Very high	High	Medium	Low
Autonomy to make decisions freely	None	Very low	Low	Medium	High
Capture/Boundedness by environment	Very high	Very high	Medium	Low	Very low
Deliberate pursuit of a goal	None	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Environmental Freedom / Independence	None	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Everything is functional	Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low
Exploitation of Resources	Very high	Very high	Medium	Low	Very low
Extent of holistic application review	None	Very low	Medium	High	Very high
Internal Slack	Very low	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Predictability of admissions decisions (outcomes) beyond coarse sorts	Very high	Very high	Medium	Low	Very low
Professionalization of admissions staff	Low	Low	Medium	High	Very high
Range of discretion in decision	None	Very low	Low	Medium	High
Spontaneity	None	Very low	Low	High	Very high
Subject to isomorphic forces	None	Very high	High	Medium	Low
Use of automated evaluation process	Very high	Very high	Medium	Low	Very low

Note: Selectivity ranges are theorized to scale from either *Very High* to *Very Low* or *Very Low* to *Very High.* In some instances, namely for *Open Access* institutions, a given condition may not apply.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

How does the process work at your institution?

1. Please describe the admissions committee meetings for me, thinking about the following:
    a. Are there rules governing the terms of deliberations—things that are "admissible" into the conversation, or a protocol for presenting an applicant?
    b. Are you advocating based on territory? Or are cases randomly assigned to different committees? If by territory, are you provided with target numbers for admits? Any other rules for presenting cases?
        i. How do you prepare to present in committee?
    c. Does everyone have an equal voice and vote at the committee table?
    d. Is there anything that isn't allowed, in terms of arguing for or against an application?
    e. Do personal conflicts ever arise? Change the feel or function of committee?
    f. Is committee the final voice, or can the dean/director/VP overrule?
    g. What's the process of balancing the class?
    h. In your opinion, do you feel as though you are afforded sufficient time devoted to committee deliberations? Do you ever feel rushed, as though some deliberations are constrained by time? Have you ever wished the committee had more time to spend on certain applications, or was forced out of necessity in the interest of time into making a decision too soon?
    i. When committee convenes, are all members present for each and every decision? Do they ever step out?

Goals and priorities of the committee process

2. What goals do you feel are priorities for the committee to meet within the admitted and subsequently enrolling class?
    a. Are you able to share your understanding of explicit goals set forth by the admissions office management that the committee is charged with meeting, if any? Certain populations or needs you're hoping to address in an admitted class? Are goals consistent from year to year?
    b. Are there other, competing sub-goals or class parameters the committee makes an effort to adhere to or hopes to realize that aren't obvious to me as an outsider? Things that you might hear mentioned, such as, "It would be nice if the class contained a certain percentage of…"
    c. Are there specific, particular talents the committee is charged with identifying this year in particular? Any holes or gaps in different departments the faculty has asked you to pay attention to?
3. What would a perfect class look like to you? Describe what it looks like? Who is in it?
4. Are you able to identify and describe any instances in which you felt as though the committee arrived at the wrong decision? Asked another way, are you able to share and describe instances in which you were disappointed in the way the committee voted?
5. **In your experience, have you found yourself or witnessed any instances of your colleagues advocating for a student based on personal reasons?** For instance, a terrific

interview, or a student you met at a high school visit that seemed particularly engaging—someone you desperately wanted as a part of this community, but who might not have the traditional academic metrics to be admitted? Have you felt conflicted because you wanted to advocate for a particular student but knew it might be an uphill battle in committee because she/he wasn't so strong?

6. Do you ever feel that committee deliberations are sometimes driven or dominated by colleagues?

Unclear technologies and ambiguity

7. Relatedly, are you able to identify and recall instances where the final decision of the committee surprised you? If so, can you please elaborate, and share how the decision varied from what you expected?
    a. Reflecting on these occasions, did the final committee decision vary from what you expected would happen (according to any rules or parameters or goals with which the committee was charged), or personally hoped would happen (in terms of applicants with whom you've personally met, worked, represented, or advocated for)?
8. **As the committee begins deliberation of a file, how confident do you feel that you are able to predict the committee's decision on that file?**
9. What metrics matter to you as a reader and committee member? What's most important for you in a file? What really makes you stand up and advocate for a student?
10. How well equipped do you feel given the evaluative tools and processes available to you to sufficiently measure and assess applicants?
    a. How challenging is it to evaluate the rigor of different curricula such as AP, IB, Honors, College Prep, etc., from all of the applications and different high schools you receive? How well do you feel this is accomplished as a team?
11. How does the committee weigh or consider a student's potential to benefit from being a student at your college versus a student's demonstrated capacity to perform at your college?
12. **Do you describe the admissions committee process as more subjective or objective? Is it more human or more mechanical?**

Fluid participation

13. Do you feel you pressure as to the time you are able to devote to reading, evaluation, and committee, and your other job responsibilities?
    a. I'm assuming based on my experiences that reading season doesn't exempt you from other job responsibilities. What other duties do you have to balance throughout reading and committee season?
14. Do you feel you have adequate time to devote to every application for a thorough and comprehensive review? Do you wish you had more time to devote to reading?

Competing theories

15. In your experience, do you feel that the committee has made certain decisions for political reasons? To placate a president, dean, faculty member, or donor?
16. Have you ever felt any pressure as a committee member, either from within the office or from external parties, to admit certain applicants for political reasons?

17. Do you feel any pressure to admit certain applicants because of development reasons? If not pressure, do your colleagues ever suggest development hooks as a reason to admit a student?

Management Questions

18. Knowing that you're moving to team reading this year, what consideration did you take into account when pairing readers together?
    a. Will these reading pairs remain the same throughout the cycle?
19. Knowing that you hold numerous mini-committees simultaneously, what considerations are involved in determining the membership of those committees?
20. Are there separate processes, formal or informal, for weighing the interests of people external to committee? Deans, faculty, alumni, development, board members, etc.?
21. Is there a formal process for revisiting decisions, and if so, can you please describe it?
22. Is there class-rebalancing process, and if so, can you please describe it? Do decisions change between committee and mailing? What final things do you consider, if any, before you mail?

Removed Questions/Save for Future Research/Survey?

Do you feel the committee process as it is structured here is an efficient means of making decisions? Do you feel there might be better alternatives to this process, and if so, can you describe them? Have you worked in other admissions offices, and if so, how did your experience with committee compare to this?

How long does it take you to complete an application read? How many hours do you estimate you spend, cumulatively, reading applications over the course of a reading season?

I've familiarized myself with your reading and evaluation process, so I know the many elements of an applicant's file you consider. However, I'm curious if there are certain metrics or aspects to an application that stand out to you as a particularly important consideration in whether or not a student should be admitted.

a. How helpful are standardized tests to you? In your opinion, and in light of your college's policies on required standardized testing, do you feel that standardized tests provide a clear and accurate metric of a student's capacity to benefit from or contribute to your academic community?
b. In your opinion, what is the correlation between a student's high school GPA and her/his performance at your college?

To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

c. As a committee, we are free from external influences to vote as we see fit in accordance with the goals of the college.
d. We operate as independent actors but solely in the best interests of the college's priorities.
e. Some decisions won't make sense if you weren't present for the committee's discussions.
f. We admit every student with perfect standardized testing.
g. We admit every student with a perfect GPA.

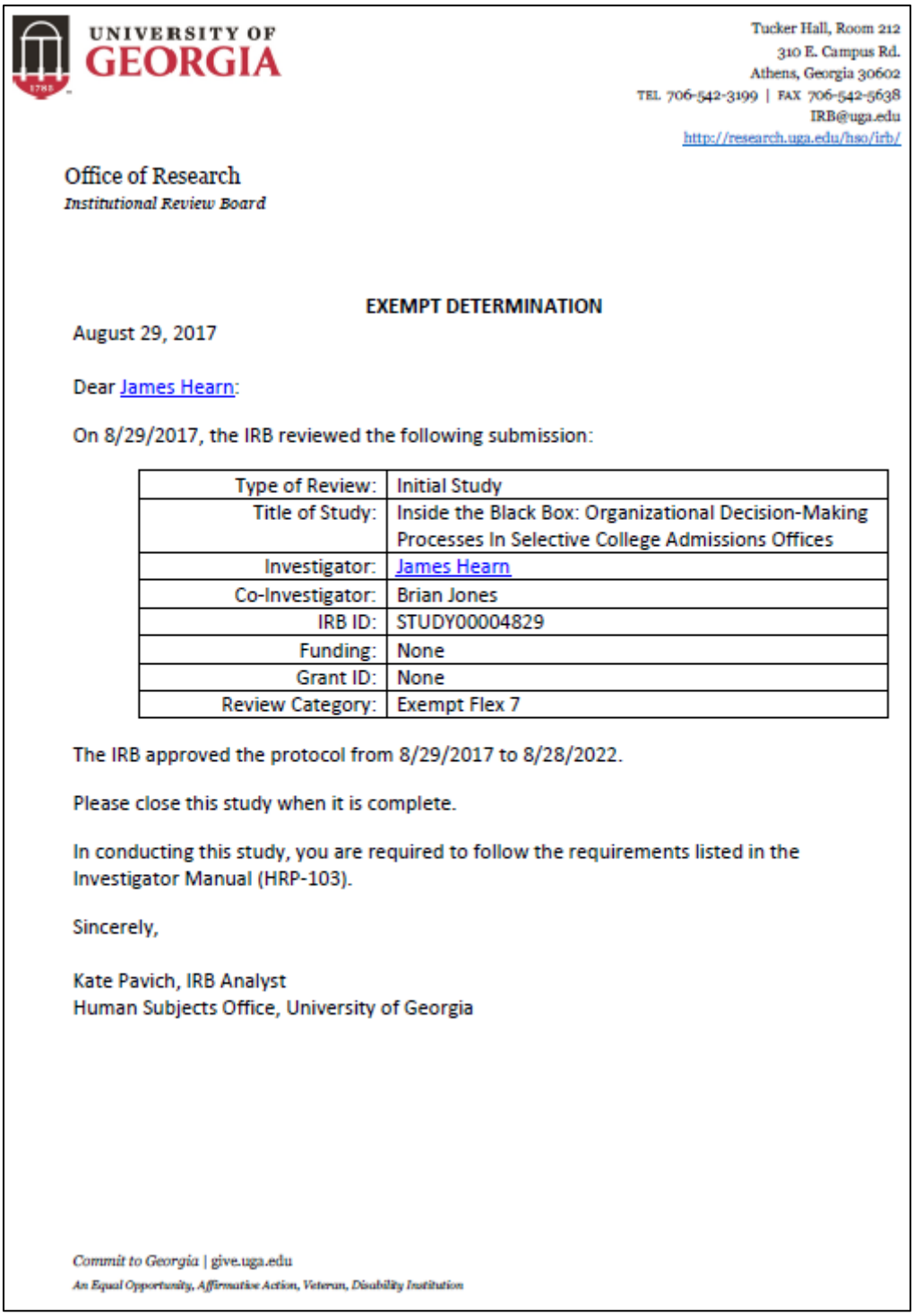
h. Some decisions might appear contradictory to notions of merit because we aren't able to admit every capable or deserving student.

In the light of your experiences here, how do you respond to the following statements?

i. We admit every student who has earned it.
j. We admit every student who deserves it.
k. We admit some students because of their potential, not their demonstrated performance.
l. We sometimes "take a chance" on students.
m. We admit only those students who are capable of success.
n. We deny some students who would be successful here.
o. Our decisions on international students would likely differ at time if we were also need-blind for international applicants.

APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL VIA LETTER OF EXEMPT DETERMINATION



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Tucker Hall, Room 212
310 E. Campus Rd.
Athens, Georgia 30602
TEL 706-542-3199 | FAX 706-542-5638
IRB@uga.edu
http://research.uga.edu/hso/irb/

Office of Research
Institutional Review Board

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

August 29, 2017

Dear James Hearn:

On 8/29/2017, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Inside the Black Box: Organizational Decision-Making Processes In Selective College Admissions Offices
Investigator:	James Hearn
Co-Investigator:	Brian Jones
IRB ID:	STUDY00004829
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Review Category:	Exempt Flex 7

The IRB approved the protocol from 8/29/2017 to 8/28/2022.

Please close this study when it is complete.

In conducting this study, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103).

Sincerely,

Kate Pavich, IRB Analyst
Human Subjects Office, University of Georgia

APPENDIX E

INTRODUCTORY LETTER FOR INTERVIEW PARTICPANTS

Date
Name
Address

Dear <name>:

For a research project on how admissions committees make decisions on behalf of the colleges for which they work, I am writing to confirm your participation in an interview with me on your campus the week of <>.

I am a Ph.D. candidate in the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia, under the direction of Dr. Jim Hearn (jhearn@uga.edu). My study seeks to improve understanding of the ways in which organizational decision-makers balance the numerous institutional priorities they consider. My research questions are motivated by my own experience as an admissions officer at both a highly selective, private liberal arts college and a moderately selective public flagship university. My study design calls for interviews with administrators who are present at the moment of decision, namely, members of the admissions committee who participate in its deliberations and vote on the admission or denial of applicants. The study presents an opportunity for you to share your perspective on the workings of decision-makers at higher education institutions.

Your participation would entail an interview with me at your office for about an hour. The interview comprises general questions about the committee process and your involvement as an admissions officer in the decision-making process, including impressions of the reading process through committee and class balancing. Unless otherwise stated, our interview will be audio-recorded. Strong precautions will be taken to protect your identity. Your name will be removed or excluded from your transcript, and the transcript will be stored on a password-protected computer. In the dissertation, quotations from or references to your interview will be attributed to a generic title, to which we will agree upon in the interview. Your institution will be described broadly and anonymized.

Your involvement is voluntary. You may decline or stop participation any time without penalty. If you withdraw, your materials will be included in the research unless requested otherwise in writing. I do hope you will participate, for your understanding of how admissions offices makes decisions will provide valuable insight into a misunderstood yet oft-scrutinized process. There are no known risks or discomforts associated with participating in the research. If you have any questions, you may contact me at jonesbn@uga.edu.

Thank you for your consideration and time on behalf of my research. I sincerely appreciate your participation. Please feel free to contact with me if I may address any questions that you may have about the study. I look forward to talking with you in <>.

Sincerely,

Noble Jones
Ph.D. Candidate
Institute of Higher Education
University of Georgia

APPENDIX F

STUDY CONSENT FORM

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
CONSENT FORM
INSIDE THE BLACK BOX: ORGANIZATIONAL DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES IN SELECTIVE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS OFFICES

Researcher's Statement

I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator

B. Noble Jones; Ph.D. Candidate, Institute of Higher Education, University of Georgia; 740-485-1631; jonesbn@uga.edu

Purpose of the Study

My study seeks to improve understanding of the ways in which organizational decision-makers balance the numerous institutional priorities they consider. My research questions are motivated by my own experience as an admissions officer at both a highly selective, private liberal arts college and a moderately selective public flagship university. As a graduate student reading literature on the admissions process after nearly a decade in admissions, I have not identified research that accurately captures or describes my understanding of how admissions decisions are made at selective institutions.

Study Procedures

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to ...

- Participate in two semi-structured interviews with me. The interviews will last about an hour, and will be scheduled in person on your campus, or via telephone should we not be able to meet during my site visit to your campus. Interview questions will be related to your understanding of how admissions decisions are made at your institution, and revolve around how you describe the process by which decisions are finalized, relative to the institutional mission and priorities supported by the admissions office. One interview will be conducted prior to your committee deliberations, and one interview will be conducted post-committee. You will not be asked questions of a personal or sensitive nature.
- Pending your approval, interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.

Risks and discomforts

I have identified the following potential risks associated with this research. Please refer to the Privacy/Confidentiality section below for an explanation of steps taken to minimize these risks.

- There are risks to individual participants' reputations associated with the interview and observation processes should these individuals disclose or display instances or patterns of bias or discrimination for or against certain student demographic groups or characteristics. Similarly, some committee deliberations may elicit unexpected emotion and unprofessional reaction. Such behavior could be potentially embarrassing.

- There are risks to the admissions committee as a whole should this group disclose or display instances of or patterns of bias or discrimination for or against certain student demographic groups or characteristics, or behave in a manner that unduly benefits or punishes applicants bearing certain characteristics.
- There are reputational and legal risks to the institution should interviews or observations document, disclose or display institutionalized instances or patterns of bias or discrimination for or against certain student demographic groups or characteristics, or in the event the institution conducts admissions processes inconsistent with current legal interpretations of affirmative action guidance.

Benefits

- Participants will contribute to an increased understanding of organizational behavior as competing theories of decision-making are evaluated.
- Participants will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of decision-making in selective admissions, wherein there are more applicants than offers of admissions available such that officers are afforded the opportunity to consider competing student characteristics to meet the college's needs. One anticipated benefit would be an endorsement of the holistic review process such that stakeholders external to the admissions committee arrive at a new appreciation for the difficulty of the process and the tremendously taxing work performed by admissions officers.

Audio/Video Recording

To fully capture your response and be certain I do not minimize your understanding of the decision-making process, I intend to record our interview. The recording will be stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed two years after the completion of the study. However, audio recording is optional for participants.

Privacy/Confidentiality

I will remove participants' names from interview transcripts and replace them with pseudonyms. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer. Participants will be described generally by organizational title and role. I will not release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law. Reference to facts and details associated with your institution will be made in generalizable fashion, broadly written in such a manner that does not easily identify it.

Taking part is voluntary

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or irb@uga.edu

Research Subject's Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

APPENDIX G

OBSERVATION GUIDE (ABANDONED)

1. Characteristics of individual applicants highlighted by a committee member or made reference to in committee deliberations:

AA	academic achievement
INT	academic interest
ATH	athletic achievements
PQ	personal qualities
PERS	personal accomplishments
SOC	race/ethnicity
1G	first generation status
GEO	geographic representation
GEND	gender
ALUM	legacy relations
SS	secondary school relations
RECS	recommendation letters
OTH	other

2. Reference to notions of an applicant's:

	capacity to perform in post-secondary education
MERIT	-meritocracy
CHAR	-character
	capacity to benefit from post-secondary education
ENH	-enhancement
MOB	-mobilization
	potential to contribute to the campus
INV	-investment
ENVIRO	-environmental
FIDU	-fiduciary

3. Incidences of committee members:

FORE	-attempting to forecast post-secondary performance
EVAL+	-references made to confidence in evaluative resources
EVAL-	-references made to frustration with evaluative resources

INX **4. Incidences and frequencies of committee members citing a personal interaction or impression of individual applicants as justification to admit or deny an applicant. (For personal interactions, opinions, expressions, reasons, etc.)**

5. Incidences and frequencies of committee members revisiting past decisions from the same cycle or past cycles to justify or contextualize an application under deliberation.

REVISIT

6. Incidences of committee members advocating for a decision contrary to the primary advocate.

OPPOSE

7. Discussions and interactions between committee members during applicant deliberations, and the conversation surrounding each instance of a committee vote.

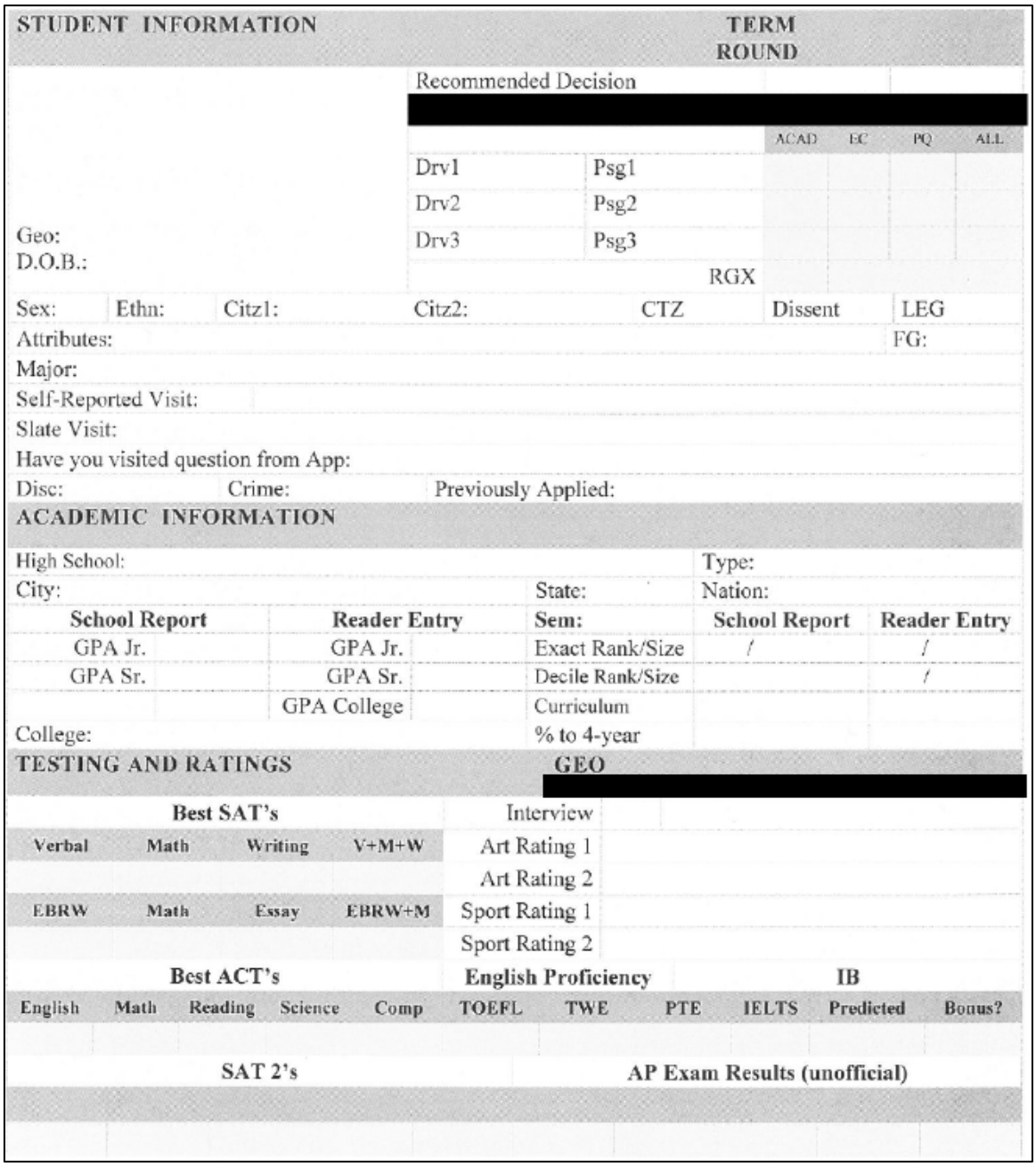
POWER	-Particular interactions suggesting power inequalities.
EXT	-Particular interactions suggesting the influence of external stakeholders' interests in the outcomes of the decision under deliberation.
THEORY	-Other theories that might make more sense.

8. Consistent with Posselt (2016), **"the physical setting and participants' nonverbal communication in the setting"** is of interest, in an effort to gauge the effects of time and energy bearing upon committee members and subsequent deliberations.

TIME	-References to time
ENERGY	-Referenes to energy

APPENDIX H

COMMITTEE DASHBOARD FOR THE COLLEGE



STUDENT INFORMATION — **TERM ROUND**

Recommended Decision [redacted]

ACAD | EC | PQ | ALL

Drv1 | Psg1

Drv2 | Psg2

Drv3 | Psg3

RGX

Geo:
D.O.B.:

Sex: | Ethn: | Citz1: | Citz2: | CTZ | Dissent | LEG

Attributes: | FG:

Major:

Self-Reported Visit:

Slate Visit:

Have you visited question from App:

Disc: | Crime: | Previously Applied:

ACADEMIC INFORMATION

High School: | Type:

City: | State: | Nation:

School Report	Reader Entry	Sem:	School Report	Reader Entry
GPA Jr.	GPA Jr.	Exact Rank/Size	/	/
GPA Sr.	GPA Sr.	Decile Rank/Size		/
	GPA College	Curriculum		
College:		% to 4-year		

TESTING AND RATINGS — **GEO** [redacted]

Best SAT's

Verbal	Math	Writing	V+M+W

EBRW	Math	Essay	EBRW+M

Interview

Art Rating 1

Art Rating 2

Sport Rating 1

Sport Rating 2

Best ACT's

English	Math	Reading	Science	Comp

English Proficiency

TOEFL	TWE	PTE	IELTS

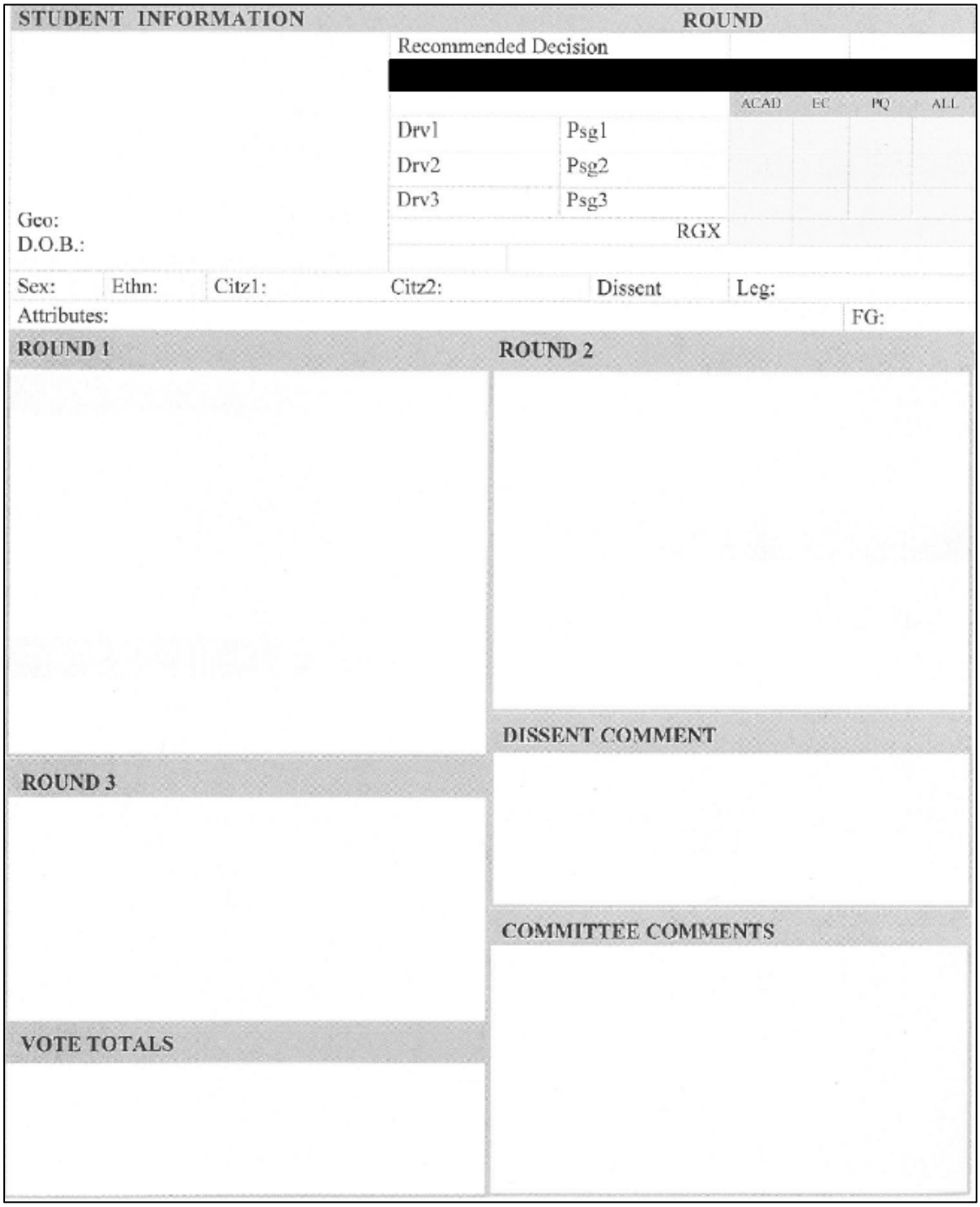
IB

Predicted	Bonus?

SAT 2's

AP Exam Results (unofficial)

COMMITTEE DASHBOARD FOR THE COLLEGE (Page 2)



APPENDIX I

ACADEMIC RATING FOR THE COLLEGE

Academic Rating

Overarching Question: To what extent does the applicant demonstrate intellectual achievement, engagement, and potential for academic success [redacted]

	Transcript	Supporting Materials	Testing	Reader's Grade
7	More compet. HS: - Within top 5% Less compet. HS: -Val/Sal Consistently A student Exceeds "Most Demanding" curriculum (5+)	"Best in Career" school support Exceptional essays Intellectual fire	SAT I/II Average: New:1550+/770+ Old:2300+/760+ ACT: 34+ IB: 43+	7+ = (7.33) 7 = (7)
6	More compet. HS: - Within top 10% Less compet. HS: - Within top 5% Primarily A student "Most Demanding" curriculum (5)	Top school support Excellent essays Genuine intellectual curiosity	SAT I/II Average: New:1500+/750+ Old:2200+/730+ ACT: 32+ IB: 39+	7- = (6.67) 6+ = (6.33) 6 = (6.0)
5	More compet. HS: - Within top 20% Less compet. HS: - Within top 10% Mostly A's, some B's student "Most Demanding" curriculum (5-)	Strong school support Strong essays Strong intellectual engagement	SAT I/II Average: New:1460+/730+ Old:2100+/700+ ACT: 30+ IB: 37+	6- = (5.67) 5+= (5.33) 5 = (5.0)
4	More compet. HS: - Within top 30% Less compet. HS: - Within top 15% Some A's, mostly B student "Very Demanding" curriculum (4)	Solid school support Solid essays Solid intellectual engagement	SAT I/II Average: New:1380+/690+ Old:1950+/650+ ACT: 28+ IB: 35+	5- = (4.67) 4+= (4.33) 4 = (4.0)
3	More compet. HS: - Within top 40% Less compet. HS: - Within top 20% Mostly B student "Demanding" curriculum (3)	Positive school support Standard essays Enjoys learning	SAT I/II Average: New:1280+/640+ Old:1800+/600+ ACT: 26+ IB: 33+	4- = (3.67) 3+= (3.33) 3 = (3.0)
2	More compet. HS: - Within top 60% Less compet. HS: - Within top 30% Below B student "Average" curriculum (2)	Average school support Average essays Average intellectual engagement	SAT I/II Average: New:1190+/590+ Old:1650+/550+ ACT: 24+ IB: 31+	3- =2.67) 2+= (2.33) 2 = (2.0)
1	More compet. HS: - Lower 40% Less compet. HS: - Within top half Several C or lower grades "Less Demanding" curriculum (1)	Below average school support Weak essays Intellectually unengaged	SAT I/II Average: New: Below 1190 (590) Old:Below 1650 (550) ACT: Below 24 IB: Below 31	2- = (1.67) 1+= (1.33) 1 = (1.0) 1-= (.67)

APPENDIX J

OTHER RATINGS FOR THE COLLEGE

Extracurricular Rating

Overarching Question: What level of contribution will this student make outside the classroom, taking into account skill level, initiative and leadership capabilities?

7	Unusual or rare ability to contribute here. Exceptional leadership and initiative. Immediate and lasting impact. (Possible national-level talent.)
6	High level of accomplishment or advancement in chosen activities. An initiator and high ranking leader. Will make significant and visible contributions. (Possible state-level talent.)
5	Strong dedication and commitment to activities. Palpable passion and enthusiasm. Potential for significant contributions. (Possible school-level talent.)
4	A perfectly fine addition to the community. Interests might be generic, but a solid contributor nonetheless. An "active member" type.
3	Some evidence of EC interest or involvement. Lower level impact.
2	Less obvious interests, passions, or involvement. Would we know he/she is here?
1	No foreseen involvement on campus.

Personal Qualities Rating

Overarching Question: How will [redacted]ommunity be impacted by this student's personal qualities?

7	Exceptional potential to positively impact the lives of others.
6	Unusually mature, thoughtful, and sincere. A very strong presence in the dorm and community.
5	Someone with a strong sense of self and well above average personal qualities. Great roommate.
4	Average level of maturity and thoughtfulness for an 18 year old. Fine roommate.
3	Lacking some maturity or social skills, but still an OK roommate.
2	Poor social skills. A harmless but non-existent presence.
1	Has personal qualities that will be disruptive to the dorm and community.

Overall Rating (updated 11/6/12)

Overarching Question: Considering the applicant's overall contribution to campus (including academic talent, EC talent, PQs, and special considerations), what recommendation would you give to the committee?

7	Tops for admission.
6	Strong case for admission, may need to be waitlisted.
5	Could be admitted if room. Someone we'd like to have.
4	Solid candidate, but not in the top tier. Probable refuse.
3	Likely refuse.
2	Refuse.
1	Not viable

APPENDIX K

"SPECIAL INDICATORS" OF THE COLLEGE'S ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE

AA	Asian American/ Pacific Islander (use only with American citizens)
AHP	American Honors Program - transfer students from select Community Colleges
ALLY	Bridge Builder in school or community (e.g. GLBTQ+ involvement, etc.)
ATH	Special athletic talent moves otherwise unfavorable decision in student's favor
BAC	African American, Black, Caribbean formerly MSB (use only with American citizens)
BC	Blue Collar (manual labor, parent works with hands, etc)
CALL	Suggest faculty member call
CASE	Applicant who may be good for a "casebook" set in the future
CBO	Community-Based Organization
CHE	Chewonki
CPRS	Class President
CPT	Captain of a varsity sport
DEP	Military dependent (use VET if student has been on active duty)
DEV?	Possible development potential assessed by reader
(DEV)	Development- family has potential for 5 or 6-figure gift
DIR	Significant leadership (Head) in a non-athletic role
EDR	Editor-in-Chief of school publication
(ENC)	Eligible non-citizen (international student who qualifies for US Federal aid)
ESS	Essay of note - especially compelling (often used later as exemplary)
FAI	Financial Aid International - means student checked yes for f/a on CA
F/S	Faculty/Staff kid {parent= employee)
FG	First Generation college-bound applicant; parents = no college experience
FGA	First Generation: parents attended but didn't complete, 2 yr. degree, voch training
FLO	First language other (for students with a first language that is not English)
FULL	Recommendation that app should be considered in full committee
HMI	High Mountain Institute
HL	Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx formerly MSH (use only with American citizens)
LD	Learning Difference - documented ADD, ADHD, blind, deaf, etc
LDR	Noteworthy top leadership in several activities (beyond PRS, CPT, EDR)
LNN?	Low Need/No Need - international students only - outstanding student who may be low or no need
MR	Multi-Racial background (American citizens only; will have several indicators: WHT, etc.)
MTS	The Mountain School
NA	Native American student (use only with American citizens)
NASP	National Achievement Scholarship Program (recognition for outstanding MSB students)
NHRP	National Hispanic Recognition Program
NAFA	International Student who is not applying for financial aid
NMSF	National Merit Semifinalist
OTB	Innovative or entrepreneurial qualities evident in applicant
(POS)	Posse applicant
(PP)	Posse Access - Posse finalist not selected by another college
(PRE)	President has an interest in applicant
PRO	Profile person (great kid, worthy of special profile of class superstars)
RTS	Royal Thai Scholar
SCT	Eagle Scout or Gold Star award
SES	Sample Essay (not great)
SEGL	School for Ethics and Global Leadership
SPRS	School President
SOP	Seeds of Peace camp attendee
SPV	Special Visitors
SUB	SAT Subject Tests used to calc. ACAD
SVC	Service commitment is extraordinary and worthy of weight in our decision
(TRU)	Trustee interest in this applicant
UWC	United World College applicant
VET	US Armed Services - has been on active duty (not parents; use DEP for that)
VIP	Celebrity status - usually famous parent/family
WCF	Working Class Family (definitely not middle class lifestyle)
WHT	White: use only with multi-racial (MR) kids, to indicate racial background