

Summary of

Posselt, J.R., Hernandez, T. E., Villarreal, C. D., Rodgers, A. J., & Irwin, L. N. (2020). Evaluation and Decision Making in Higher Education: Toward Equitable Repertoires of Faculty Practice. *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 35*, 1-63.

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Abstract:

In this chapter, we propose evaluation and decision-making as activities which, properly reconstructed from conventional norms, can be leveraged to change who and what receives access, opportunities, recognition, and status in higher education. We critically review seminal perspectives on faculty evaluation and decision-making, advance a new framework for equitable evaluation and decision-making in higher education, and consider the relevance of this framework in four functional areas of faculty practice: admission of graduate students, hiring, peer review, and curriculum and instruction.

Orienting Assumptions:

1. Faculty are gatekeepers and brokers of status within the academic opportunity structure.
2. Faculty evaluation and decision making are cultural processes that reproduce familiar academic structures and as such, can perpetuate inequality or foster equity.
3. Faculty evaluations lead to decisions with equity implications for knowledge production.

Motivation:

Faculty have more potential than they may realize for shaping patterns of stratification and equity in higher education. Through both *ad hoc* judgments and formal systems of review, they make assessments of quality and worth that become the basis for decisions, through which resources of various sorts are distributed. By drawing attention to the role that evaluation and decision making play in specific areas of practice that affect knowledge-production functions of the academy, we hope to move scholars and practitioners toward awareness of how their practices reproduce or challenge longstanding inequities, and toward adoption of more inclusive, equitable repertoires of practice.

Definitions of Key Concepts:

Equity: A social justice imperative that prioritizes institutional responsibility for transforming organizational practices, policies, and culture to support equality of educational outcomes, in particular by race, gender, and socioeconomic status (Bailyn 2003; Bauman et al. 2005; Bensimon 2005; Dowd and Bensimon 2015; Liera and Dowd 2018; Museus et al. 2015).

Legitimacy: "...a psychological property of an authority, institution, or social arrangement that leads those connected to it to believe that it is appropriate, proper, and just. Because of legitimacy, people feel that they ought to defer to decisions and rules, following them voluntarily out of obligation rather than out of fear of punishment or anticipation of reward" (Tyler, 2006, p. 375). Empirical research on legitimacy in academia reveals it enacted as a cultural resource (Gonzales and Núñez 2014), which in turn shapes the preferences of people, institutions, and organizations who make decisions.

Merit: The socially constructed notion that people deserve social rewards based on individual effort, talents, and achievements rather than other factors, especially their social identities (Alon and Tienda 2007). In practice, perceptions of merit are manifested in the individual qualities and factors that are most intensely weighted and most frequently employed in evaluations, and/or that serve as the basis for a preference when comparing similar applicants. Ideologies of merit cloak the inequities our system creates. The "myth of meritocracy" has been used to justify negative evaluations and the exclusion of people deemed not desirable enough to enter academe, furthering their marginalization. Therefore, it is vital that we do not understand merit as objective and fixed, but rather socially constructed and flexible to resistance.

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Seminal theoretical and research perspectives on evaluation and decision-making

Evaluation

1. Functionalist
2. Critical and power-analytic
3. Performativity
4. Constructivist

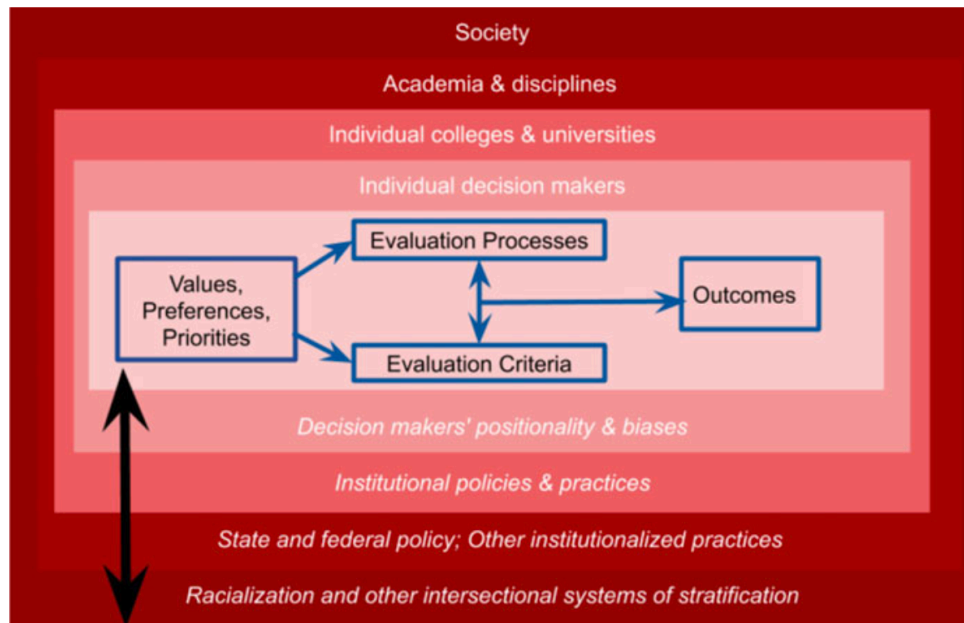
Decision-making

1. Rational choice and bounded rationality
2. Cognitive and social biases
3. Decision making within organizational cultures

Tenets of a new framework for equitable evaluation and decision making:

1. Evaluation is the core of decision making. It is conceptually distinct from, but deeply embedded in, decision-making processes.
2. Decision-making contexts provide a heterarchy of priorities and preferences that drive the evaluative core of criteria, processes, and outcomes.
3. Evidence of bias – both individual and structural – is expected and endemic, given the systems of power into which decision makers are socialized and the conditions under which evaluation and decision making typically occur.
4. Racialized and gendered conceptions of merit and legitimacy are reinforced by the social contexts and organizational cultures within which evaluation and decision making occur.
5. Equity checkpoints throughout decision making can routinize attention to bias.
6. Evaluation and decision making are central processes in the ongoing creation of academia as a cultural community. Therefore, creating equitable repertoires of practice in these areas represents an opportunity to advance equity in higher education as an institution.

Figure 1: A Framework for Equitable Decision Making



Key:
 Contexts= Red boxes
 Paths for Power= Black arrows
 Decision elements= Blue boxes
 Observable manifestations of power= Italics Text

What does the literature say about threats to equity inherent in criteria and processes across domains where faculty have evaluation and decision-making authority?

Domain of practice	Criteria	Processes	Outcomes
Admitting graduate students	Inequities are reinforced via reliance on criteria that privilege groups who are over-represented and which do not reliably predict key forms of success.	Faculty use admissions to predict who is successful, and to create idealized communities. Holistic review has promise, but must be systematic and carried out with equity in mind.	Policy and cultural contexts of admissions, combined with biased criteria and processes, limit equitable access to graduate education.
Hiring faculty	Narrowly written job announcements, implicitly biased conceptions of fit, elitism viz. institutional affiliations are equity threats.	Construction of the search committee, decentralized nature of the process, and secrecy of deliberations are equity threats.	Biased perceptions of merit & fit in a process with little accountability for equitable outcomes enable the reproduction of inequalities.
Peer review	Entrenched perceptions of validity, credibility, & novelty privilege knowledge and ways of knowing that do not challenge established knowledge claims	Unchecked evaluation biases within a peer review process whose subjectivity is accepted as necessary institutionalize inequitable outcomes.	Disparate perceptions and enactments of evaluation perpetuate inequities in both the work & the authors whose knowledge is published and legitimized.
Curriculum & instruction	Content priorities are reflected in academic plans and syllabi, which tend to reinforce a white, masculine, Eurocentric canon.	Choices are situated within multiple, intersecting contexts. Institutional & disciplinary norms are especially powerful.	Learning experiences are racialized and gendered, while course and cumulative grades reflect these same patterns of stratification.

Recommendations for more equitable repertoires of practice

Domain of practice	Recommendations for Research	Recommendations for Practice
Admitting graduate students	Research is needed about non-cognitive competencies, holistic review, and race-conscious graduate admissions. Theoretical development around the purposes of admissions is also needed.	Practitioners should examine how well criteria for admission predict success, and may differentially privilege some groups. Admissions leaders should define in advance a comprehensive set of criteria that reviewers will use, and encourage contextualization in assessments.
Hiring faculty	Empirical research is needed into efforts to diversify the professoriate, into effects of recruitment efforts on hiring outcomes.	Practitioners should write job announcements broadly, construct representative search committees, clearly define in advance the criteria by which applicants will be evaluated, and
Peer review	Scholarship is needed to examine how socially constructed ideas of merit & legitimacy shape peer review outcomes. Research is also needed into citation practices, and how they cement and may challenge legitimated scholarship.	Editors and referees can encourage authors to interrogate, disclose how their positionality affects scholarship. Authors can practice ongoing, critical reflection about the role their social location plays in their selection of topics and interpretations of literature and data.
Curriculum & Instruction	Research is needed that utilizes ecological frameworks and which conceptualizes communities of practice as a site for the development of more equitable pedagogical approaches.	Leaders should leverage the power of critical reflection when developing professional development opportunities;

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