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Mountford Zimdars, A. (2016). *Meritocracy and the university: Selective admission in England and the United States*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic.

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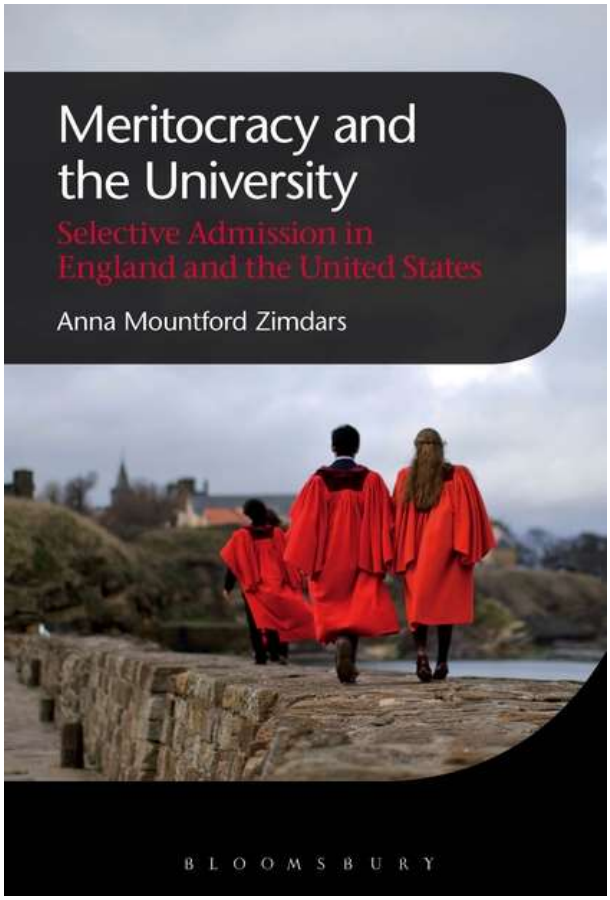

You are raking the multi-colored leaves in your yard on a crisp fall morning when Philip, your neighbor and a high school senior, walks by. As he stops to say hello, you begin talking about the upcoming college application process. Philip has his heart set on a top university on either side of the Atlantic, hopefully in one of the "Big Three" Ivy League institutions (Princeton, Harvard, or Yale in the United States) or Oxbridge (Cambridge or Oxford in England). From your prior conversations, you know that Philip is a serious student and involved in his high school through a leadership role on student government and as goalie on the soccer team. Philip is nervous about his likelihood of admittance, and you are not sure what to tell him.

Will Philip be accepted? Will he join the approximately 4,300 students entering one of the Big Three or 6,500 entering Oxbridge next fall (p. 45)? Can he beat the odds to become one in 14 in the US and one in five in

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England that joins these prestigious institutions (p. 30)?

The answer, it turns out, depends on a number of factors. While Anna Mountford Zimdars' *Meritocracy and the University: Selective Admission in England and the United States* will not provide prospective candidates with a definitive guide for acceptance to their dream schools, she does help to contextualize the admissions process and walk readers through how decisions are made. Mountford Zimdars shares the results of research undertaken with a range of university officials that decide on student admissions across selective universities in both the United States and England. These officials are referred to as selectors in the book. Over the course of nine chapters, she reviews key aspects of admissions from the application process to the ways in which determinations are made across similar candidates. As Mountford Zimdars notes, her goal is to "[explain] the hows and whys of admissions processes in the United States and England" (p. 4). The audience does not need any prior background knowledge in admissions or in the societal context of each country, but instead content is geared towards everyone from novices to higher education professionals.

Written by an academic sociologist serving as a Senior Lecturer in Higher Education at King's College in London, the book serves as part of a larger body of scholarship on elite education, admissions, and attitudes on higher education. As a German living in England for over twenty years, Mountford Zimdars is upfront about her own positionality in the topic, based on her own upbringing in Germany with a flat higher education system. Written through funding and support from sources across both countries, it is clear that Mountford Zimdars is not attempting to argue for one particular approach or process. Rather, the goal is to understand selective admissions in these contexts without the pressure to crown a victor of superior practices.

Philip, a fictional senior created here for the purpose of illustrating admissions processes outlined by Mountford Zimdars, will face different challenges based on the specific contexts in which he is applying. While both institutional groups fall under the umbrella of elite, they are also shaped by their societal context. Mountford Zimdars notes that a legacy of court verdicts and a private non-profit status provide a foundation for the admissions processes in the US. Comparatively, the English higher education institutions are public and enjoy the relative autonomy provided by the Higher Education Act 2004 that limits court interference.

Selective admissions in the United States are aimed at "putting the best class together that meets [the] institutional objectives," (p. 43). Students are not admitted to specific academic programs, so the goal is to attract the best diverse group that will give back to the institution and enjoy the experience. In the US, "academic strength alone is not usually enough for getting in" (p. 52). Special considerations are given to students based on athletic ability, legacy standing, special talents, co-curricular (here called extracurricular) involvements, place of origin, and extenuating circumstances. Diversity is a goal for institutions, so race and socioeconomic status are considered, and many selective institutions in the US offer need-blind admissions with full financial aid packages for low-income students. Thus, Philip's chances of admittance to a Big Three institution may be different if your conversation is taking place in New Jersey or Wyoming, if Philip's involvement has any impact in a state or national context, if Philip's family is on the cusp of sponsoring a large endowment to a campus, or if Philip's prowess as goalie is of Olympic caliber. Any of these might provide the hook that enhances his application and ensures his status amongst his prospective classmates.

In contrast, Philip's admission to Oxbridge relies on his academic ability and potential. Any materials, interviews, or test

scores receive consideration only so far as they support his candidacy based on that aim. Philip will apply through a centralized application called the Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS) that will make Philip choose between either Cambridge or Oxford to save public time and money. Once his application gets to Oxbridge, a specific academic department will consider Philip's candidacy. Final selection will be made by faculty aiming to evaluate Philip's ability to learn through the tutorial style and his aptitude within a certain program. Very few special considerations will be made aside from extenuating circumstances and the school environment from which Philip hails. A lone exception at Oxbridge is the consideration given to organ and choral scholarships that are tied to specific obligations and benefits in the university.

A salient theme across the book is the idea that the admission process is a reflection of the larger institutional mission and goal. Mountford Zimdars notes that the U.S. model is broad and well rounded, rooted in liberal arts educations that do not begin specialization until postgraduate studies. Higher education serves as a means to prepare individuals to give back to society and the institution in a variety of contexts. In contrast, students in England are expected to know their course of study upon application. They move through degree programs in three to four years, with the aim of successful employment upon graduation. Moreover, U.S. institutions focus on holistic student development that spans across peer groups, residential experiences, and leadership opportunities. English institutions prioritize academic engagement, rooted in faculty-student relationships and learning. Such findings parallel much of the field of student affairs, which is heavily rooted in the United States and often more emergent internationally.

A second theme focuses on the responsibility of selective education to greater society. Providing access is revisited in a number of ways, most explicitly in Chapter 8, "Fair Admission in the Context of Inequality," to question which population selective institutions serve. Mountford Zimdars mentions aspects of exclusive admissions histories, noting that many Big Three universities had special relationships with elite private high schools to create a direct entry pipeline. However, the scope of access and its implications are so heavily reliant on the cultural and historical context of the United States and England that one major limitation is their large absence from the book. For example, the ways in which race is considered a special interest in selective admissions draws upon a long legacy of racial discrimination in the United States. In fact, many U.S. selective institutions stand on traditionally indigenous lands with buildings constructed through slave labor (for more information, see Wilder, 2013). Understanding such context illuminates why enrollment practices that are inclusive of race and socioeconomic status barriers serve as a social imperative. While Mountford Zimdars states in the final chapter that the book is not meant to cover how elite higher education serves the public good, relegating such context to further reading creates a notable omission.

Like the imagined experience of Philip above, Mountford Zimdars focuses the bulk of her attention on the Big Three and Oxbridge. Although additional selective institutions are included, there is a disproportionate focus on these top elite institutions. Without even inclusion, it is unclear why the focus is not solely on these five institutions without trying to include a broader sample. An alternative strategy could be to create institutional composites of each type (i.e., Big Three Ivy League, Oxbridge, U.S. private liberal arts, Russell Group institutions, etc.) that would help the reader to follow the characteristics of each more explicitly and advocate for more specific coverage beyond the top elite colleges. As is, the permeable boundaries in the descriptions across national admissions processes risk

blurring together any nuance between these top tier institutions and their closely following counterparts.

However, in many other regards Mountford Zimdars acknowledges her limitations directly. Chapter 9 explicitly addresses what the book does not cover, even including a section titled "Some things we have not learnt-beyond admissions" (p. 200). Mountford Zimdars does not explore counterfactuals that ask if pursuit of a non-elite education impacts students' lives differently or accounts of the student experience beyond admissions. If you are looking to understand if an elite institution is truly better in terms of giving back to society or providing its students positive quality of life, another book may better suit your purpose.

Chapters can be read individually or as part of the whole book based on interest. As some content has minor overlap, use by relevant sections may be most beneficial. A glossary at the back of the book provides an easy reference to those unsure of the academic jargon used across the national contexts. Each chapter ending summarizes the content presented, and the final chapter provides a reiteration of the content with the acknowledgement of limitations. Chapter 5 has several charts to walk readers through application processes that could even be copied for use as an overview into admissions.

The book is an accessible read, and Mountford Zimdars seamlessly blends together supporting information with the voices of selectors across contexts. It is the type of volume that will be insightful for scholars, practitioners, and even prospective applicants. Scholars researching the impact of elite institutions or their campus climates will benefit from the context that this book provides to understanding student populations. For high school counselors and teachers, particularly those that work with students seeking selective admissions, the chapters on applying and selecting are particularly insightful. Zealous parents seeking to understand the Ivy League admissions context may pick up a copy to understand the process their child will encounter. Philip may even benefit from the book directly as a means to gain a sense for what happens once his application is submitted.

References

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About the Reviewer

Genia M. Bettencourt is a doctoral student in Higher Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her research focuses on student activism, college access, and the experiences of marginalized student populations in higher education. Her background includes work in student affairs and social justice education, as well as service as an Insight Resume reader for Oregon State University.

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