



**F E A T U R E**

# **Interview with Julie Posselt**



**Christopher W.  
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**Julie Posselt, Ph.D., is Professor of Education at the University of Southern California, Associate Dean of the USC Graduate School, Executive Director of the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice (CERPP), and President of the Sociology of Education Association. Her research examines institutionalized inequities in higher education and organizational efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. She is an internationally recognized expert on admissions in selective sectors of higher education – elite universities, graduate education, and STEM fields – where longstanding practices and cultural norms are being negotiated to identify talent and educate students in a changing society.**

**Posselt is an author of more than 75 publications and three books, most recently of *Equity in Science: Representation, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change in Graduate Education* (Stanford University Press). She is a six-time NSF Principal Investigator and currently directs two research-practice partnerships: the Sloan Foundation-funded Equity in Graduate Education Consortium and the NSF-INCLUDES Inclusive Graduate Education Network Research Hub. Posselt received the American Educational Research Association's Early Career Award as well as the Association for the Study of Higher Education's Promising Scholar/ Early Career Award. She held a postdoctoral fellowship with the National Academy of Education/ Spencer Foundation, and earned her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.**

In this interview, Dr. Julie Posselt reflects on her formative years at the University of Michigan, highlighting its profound impact on her career in higher education. She discusses her dissertation research on enrollment management, emphasizing the importance of aligning practice with values to promote equity. Posselt also shares life as a professor and her recent transition to becoming the executive director of CERPP, focusing on research-practice partnerships to support univer-

sities in advancing equity. Throughout the conversation, she emphasizes the need for systemic change in higher education and reflects on her journey from being influenced by professors to becoming a change agent herself. Posselt's commitment to equity and community-driven solutions shines through her work and aspirations for the future.

**Tremblay:** So tell us a little bit about you, since you recently became executive director of the USC Cen-

ter for Enrollment Research, Policy and Practice (CERPP). And again, congratulations.

**Posselt:** Thank you. For years, I've been thinking about the potential of enrollment management processes to be a lever for inequity or equity within the higher education system. My first research publication on selective undergraduate admissions was more than a decade ago, and a focus of my work for the last decade has been deconstructing some of the standard enrollment management practices and mindsets within the graduate and STEM selection contexts—so that what we do in practice is better aligned with what we say is important to us. I've also had the opportunity to do some research on test-flexibility and diversity in professional school admissions. In all of these contexts, it's clear that improving the connection between research and practice is one key to making enrollment management a lever for equity instead of the default for inequity that it tends to be.

My observation is that practitioners want to do right. They are literally in this work because they believe in the possibilities of higher education. And yet the day-to-day pressures we're under, which include limited access to the current state of knowledge, often holds people back from doing all that they could. So the research-practice partnership model has become a real cornerstone for what I do. These are long-term, mutually-beneficial relationships between practitioners and organizations who inform research and benefit from research, as well as the social scientists like myself who help to carry it out and translate it into meaningful formats. The latter is critical to what you want to see from these partnerships as well—commitment not only to producing research and disseminating it, but translating it into language and formats that are legible to practitioner communities.

For me, an organization like CERPP, which literally has “RPP” (research, policy and practice) in its name, is a natural next step in supporting universities in doing the work that I believe that they want to do. One of my major priorities for the last five to ten years has been working with groups of

practitioners throughout higher education to make the social science of admissions and equity more understandable to help improve their practice. That core alignment is really what motivated me to take on the position with CERPP.

**Tremblay:** What are you most looking forward to in this first year with the center in this role?

**Posselt:** There are a few things that I'm looking forward to. One is celebrating all of the goodness that makes CERPP unique. Because they've maintained the same model of leadership for some time, I don't know if they fully appreciate how excellent they are. There are qualities in its culture that, from my vantage point within higher education, are really special, so I see an important part of my role being advocating for and supporting recognition of their work. I'm also looking forward to supporting the strengthening of the certificate program. My intent is to bring to bear what I've learned about research-practice partnerships to convene experts and craft curriculum that is even more appealing to the community. Finally, I'm looking forward to—and have already begun to enjoy—connecting communities that have complementary interests, expertise, and projects. We all have significant needs and challenges right now, but there is also unprecedented energy and effort. My role allows me to use my network and the center to help connect these dots and organize the larger community.

**Tremblay:** Outstanding. How would you describe, from where you sit, the current state of enrollment management?

**Posselt:** The Iron Triangle<sup>1</sup> of enrollment management is very real, and the current legal and policy environment places additional pressure on institutions to compromise on mission-driven equity and diversity goals. But that being said, there is also real power in learning in community and in bringing people together more generally, which CERPP has been excellent in doing, and which is the hallmark of the consortium I have created. People become aware of options that they might not have otherwise

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<sup>1</sup> See <[go.aacrao.org/bermuda](http://go.aacrao.org/bermuda)>.

considered. They are also emboldened, because they know they won't be taking actions alone. This is a time for strength in numbers.

The partnership that I've been leading in the graduate education context takes a multilevel approach where you're not just thinking about enrollment management at the admitting unit or training level. Leaders are also thinking about what universities do, and universities together are thinking about how their moves will influence others within the system. In the day-to-day, it's natural to feel locked in by pressures and multiple, apparently competing, interests. But when people get out of their day-to-day, take time for reflection and discussion with people who are in similar positions, they realize that there are possibilities, they realize they're not alone, and they become more motivated, and I think empowered in some situations to try things that otherwise might feel risky if they thought they were the only ones giving it a shot.

**Tremblay:** Let's chat more about your take on the Iron Triangle.

**Posselt:** Every year, if you were looking at its three dimensions—prestige, finances, access—you could say a university has some shape of a triangle, but different universities year-by-year have triangles of different shapes in terms of where they're investing in and prioritizing.

My colleagues, Ozan Jaquette and Brad Curs and I published a piece in 2016 that used the Iron Triangle as a framework to understand non-resident enrollment in public universities and how attention to students who could pay full tuition in the interest of preserving the financial viability side of the triangle was compromising espoused missions of providing access and social mobility.<sup>2</sup> The socioeconomic and racial composition of research universities wasn't keeping up with the population because triangles were really being stretched in the direction of prioritizing finances relative to that mission.

When I recently gave the opening keynote at the CERPP annual meeting, I talked about this from

another angle. Students themselves have multiple interests that they're trying to maximize in their choice about where to go.

**Tremblay:** Can you just elaborate on what that consortium is, how long you've been affiliated, and what the goals of it are?

**Posselt:** I founded the Equity and Graduate Education Consortium ([equitygraded.org](http://equitygraded.org)) in 2018 as the scale up from a pilot that was focused in California. Our goal was to help bring together change-ready universities to learn with one another, what the current state of knowledge is about equitable admissions, recruitment, and mentoring practices, and then to organize change-ready graduate programs within those universities to do the same. There are now 24 participating universities nationally.

We find that people tend to join for the learning aspect of our learning community, for the community aspect of how we operate, or to be at the center of the Venn diagram. Each individual campus commits to a two-year membership in which they spend the first year identifying *change-ready graduate programs*, doing some self-assessment, engaging in high quality development workshops that my team has developed based on the current state of research. They currently select from one of three tracks: admissions and recruitment, mentoring and wellbeing, and equitable selection systems. They work to implement what they learn, stay in conversation with both one another, receive coaching and consultation from the consortium leadership team, and contribute to our research and evaluation. We meet on an annual basis for a project meeting, and partners share their best ideas and lessons with each other, building community, and building trust. In the second year, programs continue the work of change, while central campus units train people to lead workshops on their own campus so that they can institutionalize the effort and broaden it to other graduate programs.

We started this with five University of California campuses as well as USC. And then in 2018, with support from the Sloan Foundation, we shifted to a model that includes membership fees as part of our

<sup>2</sup> See [ideas.repec.org/a/taf/uhejxx/v87y2016i5p635-673.html](https://ideas.repec.org/a/taf/uhejxx/v87y2016i5p635-673.html).

revenues. That allows us to engage with programs that are not within the STEM portfolio that most foundations are eager to fund right now.

**Tremblay:** Let's switch gears totally and talk about what led you on the path of becoming a college professor?

**Posselt:** I was fortunate to have positive examples and encouragement about my academic abilities from professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I double-majored in history and secondary education. They planted the seed for me that being a professor was something that I could do, but for whatever reason, I assumed that I would work for a long time and then get a Ph.D. and then mid-career, at some point, become a professor. But instead, what ended up happening is that after my master's degree, I worked for a year with the United Refugee Services of Wisconsin and discovered that the college campus environment was really where I wanted to be. For four years, I worked with the University of Northern Colorado's McNair Scholars Program. My role was unique in that it involved advising students who were thinking about applying to graduate school. This was ironic because I only knew about graduate admissions from what I could pick up from the director of the program and from the research, which was limited at the time.

I was teaching one class per semester, conducting research and evaluation on the program, and served as the administrative representative for the university on the faculty senate. Without intending to, I had stumbled into a day-to-day life that was not altogether unlike being a professor, and that I was doing research, teaching service, and advising. I loved it and discovered I was good at it. I decided to return to graduate school for a Ph.D. with a goal of becoming a professor. University of Michigan was an outstanding training ground for me.

Faculty life has been sustainable for me in part because USC respects and appreciates interdisciplinarity in tenure and promotion processes, and recognizes both translational research as well as theoretically groundbreaking work. As somebody who wants to use my career for change, the freedom

to work across disciplinary boundaries gives a lot of meaning and motivation to me, day-to-day and year-to-year.

**Tremblay:** Excellent. Do you have a favorite class that you like to teach?

**Posselt:** There are two classes that allow students to learn and apply organizational theories to questions of enrollment management and educational equity. One is a master's-level course on organizations and leadership, which serves practitioners of enrollment management. The other is in the Ph.D. program, and it serves budding theorists. The different populations represented in those two classes bring distinctive spins to the same type of conversation. I've always been a believer that theory gives us language for phenomena that we think we know, and with that new language, we possess deeper understanding about what to do with the challenges of the work that we encounter.

**Tremblay:** What was your college search and application process like, and has that informed any of the work that you do now?

**Posselt:** Admittedly, I was under-informed about how to approach the college search process. I applied to exactly one liberal arts college that was just across the state line from where I grew up in Wisconsin and one research university, the University of Wisconsin Madison. The latter I mainly applied to because I knew I would have a full tuition scholarship as one of the top people in my high school class. It was also where my father had gone and where other people whom I knew aspired to. And after visiting both places, I chose UW Madison. I don't have any regrets about that choice, but I do sometimes wonder what would've come from a national search. Now, whether it is with my advisees or with my own teenager, I encourage people to think broadly, while also knowing the factors that they want to privilege when it comes time to make a decision.

Recognizing that everyone does something after high school, I appreciate that the goal of the USC College Advising Corps is to ensure that every student makes a fully informed choice—that they do not act not only on the defaults that they might've

picked up from their family or from their school environment. To me, that's what we do when we're at our best: help students navigate structures that aren't necessarily created with the assumption of access to full information.

**Tremblay:** So you're also involved with USC's Pullias Center for Higher Education. What does that entail?

**Posselt:** I've been a faculty affiliate of the Pullias Center since I moved to the University of Southern California in 2016. Pullias is first and foremost a research center, and it has an excellent apparatus for grants and sponsored project administration. Engagement with that apparatus is a big part of my engagement with them. They also have an outstanding collective of faculty and other scholars who share the commitment to the research practice partnership model and, substantively, to questions around college access and success. It is a strong hub of like-minded scholars, although we're fortunate at USC to have great equity-minded scholars of higher education in a variety of centers, including the Race and Equity Center, and, just down the hall for me, the Center for Education, Identity, and Social Justice.

Pullias has also been special to me because of its founding director, Bill Tierney, and current director, Adrianna Kezar, have been excellent mentors for me. Adrianna and I even had the opportunity to co-edit what has become a go-to textbook in higher education administration courses, titled *Higher Education Administration for Equity and Social Justice*. The heart of that book is to recognize all of the ways that we can use the day-to-day work of higher education to challenge systems of inequality. Much like the Iron Triangle of enrollment management, often we are pressed in by day-to-day time constraints, resource constraints, personnel constraints. It's normal to feel stuck. What we wanted to do was to bring together scholars and practitioners to each write about the ways that you can understand standard practices like budgeting, mentoring, hiring, and other sort of day-to-day work as mechanisms or levers for positive change.

**Tremblay:** It sounds like a good read. As you reflect on your career in higher education, what's been the biggest change you've observed or experienced?

**Posselt:** The most fundamental change I've seen is that more people are more open to change. When I first entered higher education, dialogue was principally about maintenance. I see a shift underway from leadership as an exercise in caretaking to one of changemaking—and I see two reasons behind it. One, it has become normal and understandable and respectable to make change a priority as leaders commit to aligning historic policies and practices with their espoused values.

Over and above this, because so many changes have come to us, leadership is less about whether we want change and more about how we're going to do it. Whether it's the move away from standardized tests, the COVID-19 pandemic, moving everything online in 2020, or the Supreme Court's ruling or the FAFSA changes, everybody is conscious that dramatic changes may be involuntary, so we'd better get good at *doing* it instead of trying to avoid it.

As an organization's scholars, this marks a positive turn! Work is dynamic, and we should always be looking to upgrade and align and continuously improve. The more comfortable we can become with change in the cadence of our day to day, the more open we are to improving rather than assuming we can just get into a system of best practices and execute it forevermore.

**Tremblay:** So tell us about your most recent publication. What have you been writing about?

**Posselt:** I enjoy research very much, and I am fortunate to work with an amazing team, without whom it would not be possible. I've had four publications in the last six months that are all focused on inequities and possibilities in U.S. doctoral education. Each paper uses organizational and sociocultural theory to deconstruct standard processes and critically examine change efforts. Although we conducted the research in doctoral education and STEM contexts, my team has been purposeful to design the studies and write up findings with the needs of a larger community, including undergrad-

uate education. One study looks at the role and the malleability of trust networks when students are making educational transitions and universities are admitting students.<sup>3</sup>

Another paper explores the potential of manipulating everyday organizational routines as a way to redefine merit.<sup>4</sup> I am proud of how this paper uses findings from the pilot of our consortium to support change efforts in a broader K–12 undergraduate and graduate student audience. That one is published in *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*.

I also wrote a think piece about the limits of isomorphic change—what happens when a sector moves, or more often, and drifts together in the same direction. Some people are starting to hope that we may all drift together toward equity, but my observations of test-optional policy, with bridge programs, and with other types of change warrants some caution. Because as motivations and implementation vary, so too do outcomes.

**Tremblay:** Since you brought up test optional, I would love to know your thoughts about what’s going on in this space right now.

**Posselt:** Lots of thoughts here, and I have to preface this by saying that tests are the tip of the equity iceberg in admissions. First, there is a false narrative around test optional that suggests the COVID-19 pandemic motivated it. For a decade plus before 2020, more and more universities were moving away from tests. The pandemic pushed the system to a new norm, one that many universities did not fundamentally want to be their norm. Basic ambivalence helps explain what we have seen over the last six months: that institutions returning to test requirements are doing so on the basis of internal analysis, not an analysis of how their policies may affect access and opportunity for groups that have been underrepresented.

I respect the folks who had the courage to sue the University of California system on a disparate impact claim. It is an uncomfortable, but important,

truth that our admissions policies and practices really do have implications for racial segregation in higher education. Standardized tests are a lightning rod, but we have not had enough of a conversation about the ways that disparate impact is being propagated through the use of different admissions criteria. Nevertheless, kudos to universities for making an effort to select excellent students without the use of a tool that reliably disadvantages students from the same groups that their diversity discourse suggests that they want to attract.

Obviously, what the norm for the future is remains to be seen. My observation is that universities that want to require tests scores will find ways to justify it, and those that do not, for whatever reason—be it principles, competitive advantage, you name it—will find a way to justify it as well.

On the note of justifications, I’m concerned to see variation in student performance under recent test-optional policy being levied as a justification for going back to test score requirements. For at least five years, pandemic influences will confound any influences of admissions policies that we see. Students struggled mightily during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students today are struggling mightily because of the struggles that they had during the pandemic. To attribute the variation we’re seeing among college students today to the change in our admissions approach would be a very bad causal inference.

Finally, from an enrollment management standpoint, I think it’s important for universities to keep in mind how their requirements may pose psychic barriers, affecting the pool that applies. Again, tests are a lightning rod for larger, important conversations.

**Tremblay:** Since we both have a University of Michigan connection, let’s chat about your time in Ann Arbor.

**Posselt:** My time in Ann Arbor was so good. I cannot imagine the trajectory of my adult life without the Michigan years. And I tell people who want to be in higher education in any capacity— as an administrator or as a faculty member—to get yourself at least a summer in Ann Arbor because it is the “university’s university.” The culture of Ann Arbor, the culture of the university, the default commitment to com-

<sup>3</sup> See <[dl.begellhouse.com/journals/00551c876cc2f027,21fb-b00a1e9fc816,25b4c992780f403f.html](https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231201612)>.

<sup>4</sup> See <[journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/01623737231201612](https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231201612)>.

petence and excellence— these were each formative and resonant for me.

The rigorous training that I received is an invaluable resource. That training was part, I think, of a broader socialization to academia where I learned to live and breathe and organize my work and professional priorities around the things that academia tends to value. That's not to say that the best socialization perfectly inculcates you or assimilates you into the system as it is. Part of what Michigan did was give me a perspective that allows me to see flaws in academia as it's currently constructed, and to use whatever sphere of influence I have as a means of helping interrupt, transform, or at least challenge the system as it is. My Michigan influence is significant and deeply appreciated. I probably wouldn't be sitting here right now as somebody whose career is dedicated to making change if it had not been for Michigan's encouragement to be excellent within the system while also working to change the system.

**Tremblay:** What was the topic of your dissertation?

**Posselt:** I did my dissertation on a question of enrollment management.<sup>5</sup> I specifically examined faculty decision-making in Ph.D. admissions, within programs that are ranked in the top fifteen for their field. My hope was to unpack why it is that faculty espouse commitments to diversity and then carry out admissions in ways that undermine that goal. And so with the theoretical tools of organizational

sociology and cultural sociology, and with the methodological tools of ethnography, I observed six Ph.D. admissions committees and interviewed faculty and all of those committees plus four more departments to understand from their perspective how they balance the multiple interests that are in play when we make admissions decisions. It was the most fun research I have ever done. It's going to really be hard to top. And I had two years to work on it thanks to a fellowship that I was awarded.

**Tremblay:** Yeah. Just for fun, outside of the center, is there a hobby you enjoy or things that you do outside of the academy?

**Posselt:** I picked up a love for hiking in my years in Colorado, in addition to “what would it be like to be a professor.” I try to hike at least once per week in addition to my daily dog walk. My Instagram feed is mostly dogs, hiking, food, and flowers; those are pretty good indications of my life outside of family and the academy. But the hikes that I am able to take in Los Angeles are really remarkable. Just fifteen minutes from my front door are Griffith Park, the Angeles National Forest, and the San Gabriel Mountains. An hour away is the beautiful Topanga Canyon and Malibu Canyon. I'm extremely fortunate.

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<sup>5</sup> To read the book that developed from Posselt's dissertation entitled “Inside Graduate Admissions: Merit, Diversity, and Faculty Gatekeeping,” visit: <[hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674984042](http://hup.harvard.edu/books/9780674984042)>.

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## About the Author

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