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For Immediate Release

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## **CREAM RISING HOW ACADEMICS DETERMINE WHO IS TOPS**

In the academic evaluation system known as “peer review,” peers pass judgment, usually confidentially, on the quality of the work of other community members. This is a secretive enterprise and only those present in the deliberative chambers know exactly what happens there. In **HOW PROFESSORS THINK: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment** (Harvard University Press; March 31, 2009; \$27.95), the renowned sociologist Michèle Lamont observes deliberations for prestigious fellowships and grants in support of scholarly research and reveals much about this powerful, clandestine, and peculiar world.

**HOW PROFESSORS THINK** examines the evaluative cultures of six disciplines: anthropology, economics, English literature, history, philosophy, and political science. Although each has varying degrees of consensus and internal debates, they all develop shared rules of deliberation that facilitate agreement despite disciplinary differences. Lamont finds that during face-to-face discussions panelists make their criteria of evaluation explicit to one another and negotiate about what is “best.” They not only mobilize criteria such as originality, significance, feasibility, but also bring more evanescent criteria into the mix (for example, elegance and the apparent moral character of the applicant).

Despite all the uncertainties about academic judgment, **HOW PROFESSORS THINK** aims to combat intellectual cynicism. Many academics still care deeply about “excellence,” though they may not define it the same way. In writing the book, Lamont aims to broaden the disciplinary tunnel vision that afflicts so many professors. A greater understanding of the differences and similarities across disciplinary cultures may lead academics toward a greater tolerance of, or even an appreciation for, fields outside their own. From a normative standpoint, another *leitmotif* of the book is that disciplines shine under different lights, are good at different things, and are best located on different matrixes of evaluation, because their objects and concerns differ so dramatically.

*Michèle Lamont is Robert I. Goldman Professor of European Studies and Professor of Sociology and African and African American Studies, and Senior Adviser on Faculty Development and Diversity, Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard University.*

### **HOW PROFESSORS THINK**

By Michèle Lamont

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