

## Chapter 6

### Getting In: How Elite Schools Play the College Game

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I was first introduced to elite boarding schools as a potential student in 1993. Beautiful, rich, brimming with power and influence, these places are seductive to ambitious families and children. And the schools know it. While walking the grounds of one of these schools, our tour guide smugly told my parents and me, “The headmaster here used to gather together the senior class and hand them three sheets of paper. On the top of one was written, ‘Harvard;’ another ‘Yale;’ the third, ‘Princeton.’ As these papers were circulated among the senior class, boys would write their name on one of the lists. This is how they were accepted into college. It’s different now, but not that much.” This story was not true, of course, but at the time I thought it was. It represents the view of what it used to mean to go to a boarding school. Such schooling was part of belonging to an elite club, where membership resulted in a lifetime of educational, financial, and social privileges.

I heard a very similar story, over ten years later, at another boarding school where I had begun teaching as part of an ethnographic research project on inequality. The former head of college admissions told me that as late as the 1980s, Harvard would come to the school to interview students (importantly, Harvard came to them). “We used to put the Harvard admissions folks up at [a house on campus]. We’d fill the place up with booze. They’d interview our kids, and make decisions that weekend. We always had someone in the room when they made their decisions.” I could never confirm this story either. I suspect it is part reality, part fantasy. Yet the idea that elite boarding schools have unparalleled access to top colleges and an advocate in

the room continues today. As college admissions processes have become more and more competitive, so have colleges become more and more competitive with one another for cherished rankings (Stevens 2007). Elite high schools have played upon this competitiveness.

In this chapter I will tell a story of how elite boarding schools play the college admissions game (for an outline of these schools, see Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). I will outline how such schools continue to get comparatively under-qualified students into the top colleges and universities in the U.S. Today, this story is not as simple as the ones that begin this chapter. The world has changed considerably in the last forty years; with these changes have come transformations in how elites can acquire access to the highest institutions for their students. Our new, more open society is filled with examples of elite institutions – from schools, to businesses, to the presidency – that have welcomed members who for much of our history have been excluded. In puzzling through the story I tell, I will be driven by a core question within my discipline of sociology: how are advantages transferred from one generation to the next in a society in which such systematic advantages are actively challenged as problematic? That is, how is it that elites still enjoy advantages, when the exclusionary “club-like” aspects of membership seem to be less and less prominent?

This chapter proceeds in three steps. First, I will give a sense of the advantages that elite boarding school graduates enjoy, from access to elite colleges to future earnings. The point here is (a) to establish that such schooling matters for future life chances, and (b) to outline how we might explain why such schooling matters. Second, I will talk about the shifts in elite colleges, from bastions of the white upper class to diverse institutions. In looking at the college admissions process we shall see what kinds of diversity are valued and how they are achieved. Through this discussion we will see how the increasingly competitive environment of college rankings has

affected what colleges do in their admissions process. Finally, I will outline how elite boarding schools play the college admissions game. We will see how these schools have responded to both the shifting of elite colleges into diverse institutions as well as the increased pressures on colleges to maintain high rankings through low admissions rates. In the end, I hope to show both how radically the world has changed from the stories that start this chapter, where elite high school students could expect blind admission to top colleges, and also how things have remained somewhat the same; elite boarding schools still enjoy and instill advantages into their students.

### The Elite High School Advantage

Since at least the 1930s, scholars have shown a robust and consistent advantage to elite schooling, and in particular to attending an elite boarding school. There is a reason why people want to go to Harvard, and it is not because a student will understand Plato better upon leaving than if they attended, say, the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Put simply, going to Harvard matters because if you go to Harvard you will be richer than if you went to a less highly esteemed school. There are, of course, exceptions; there always are. But they are few; the safe money is on the reward to elite schooling (Brewer and Ehrenberg, 1996, 1999; Thomas, 2003; Thomas & Zhang, 2005). The question of why Harvard and its peers matter is a trickier one. The school is notoriously hard to get into, so it could simply be the case that the reason Harvard graduates are richer is that they are the best of the best. We expect our best to do better than our second best. So it should come as no surprise that they do.

It is a fairly good answer, but not a great one. One of the better predictors for getting into elite schools is having rich parents, and rich parents tend to have children who grow up to be rich (Espenshade & Radford, 2009; Massey et al., 2006). So it could be that Harvard does not do much at all. It simply happens to be where rich people try to send their children, and rich people

want their children to be around other rich children. This is certainly true; one only needs to look at how segregated the homes of the rich and poor are to see it (Massey & Denton, 1998). But the problem with this explanation, of course, is that not everyone who attends an elite college is rich. This is increasingly the case, and those who aren't rich who go to elite schools also end up being richer (Thomas, 2003). Here we might ask, what is it that students from elite colleges are learning, or developing at these schools, that helps them out so much?

My answer, drawing on a long tradition in sociology, will be that it is not what you learn in classes, but how you know it, who you meet as you begin to know it, and what knowing it from an elite institution means to others as opposed to knowing it from a non-elite institution. This is to say that culture, social ties, and status symbols all matter. The inequality that emerges through schooling emerges in part from the cultural traits that students develop at elite schools. These help to show other elites who are making admissions (and soon, hiring) decisions that a student belongs in an elite environment. Having people who culturally “fit” matters, and one of the best ways to fit in elite environments is to spend time within them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Inequality also emerges from the social connections that develop from spending time with other elites (or soon to be elites). Such connections assist individuals in gaining information about opportunities, and access to positions (Grannovetter, 1974). And finally, inequality emerges because status symbols matter. To say, “I graduated from Harvard” impresses, regardless of how one ever did at that school. All of this is to say that culture, social ties, and status symbols are a kind of “capital” (Bourdieu, 1984, 1996). They are like money in your wallet – you have more or less of them, and they can be used as investments in your future.

What elite schools do, then, is not just teaching students a particular curriculum in a particular way. They help transfer certain qualities into students – culture, ties, and symbolic

markers – that advantage them throughout their lives. Up until this point we have thought through this argument by talking about an Ivy League school, one that most of us are familiar with. However, the point can be even more dramatic when we look at elite high schools – elite boarding schools in particular. This is a world less well known, but one that is incredibly important for understanding the depths of advantages that going to an elite school can provide.

In order to understand the advantages of such elite schooling, I will draw upon my own work at an elite boarding school (Khan, *forthcoming*). For the purposes of this chapter, I will simply call it, “The School.” The School I studied is a member of the “elite 16” – the top preparatory boarding schools in the country (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009b). The college students from The School are most likely to attend is Harvard (meaning that each year, more students attend Harvard than any other college), followed by Brown, University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Yale, Cornell, Princeton, and Stanford. Students from The School are admitted to these institutions at a rate well above three times the national average. In recent years, more than 30 percent of the students in every graduating class attended an Ivy League institution; and around 80 percent attended the top 30 colleges and universities in the nation. The School’s per-pupil expenditure of over \$70,000 per student is approximately ten times the national average. It has one of the largest endowments of any educational institution in the country (nearly one million dollars per pupil). The School has buildings designed by famous architects, a sports complex that would be the envy of most professional gyms, a campus that resembles more of an estate than a school, a faculty teacher ratio of around 5:1, and many faculty who hold advanced degrees. The School is the kind of educational institution many might dream of, and for the privileged few, it is a reality.

Though rare, The School is not unique. There are other schools like it. Many are in the Northeast, and most are boarding schools. But throughout the nation, primarily near wealthy enclaves, there are a couple dozen schools that have an almost unimaginable opulence and are able to transfer enormous advantages to their students. If one takes a cursory look at the student bodies of these schools there can be no doubt that they are places where already privileged youth spend their adolescent years. Yet the students are not all boys from wealthy white families. The School, for example, is co-educational, and there is considerable racial and economic diversity. The school is relatively diverse racially; the student body is 30 percent students of color. It is much less diverse in terms of class background. While 33 percent of the students receive a significant amount of financial aid, the tuition of almost \$40,000 makes clear that 66 percent of the students are from families capable of paying what for almost all U.S. families would be unfathomable for high school. Like the elite colleges they feed, these schools are beginning to look less and less like an exclusive yacht club, and more and more like diverse communities.

There is considerable evidence that elite high schools do something for their students – something even greater than what elite colleges do. The evidence here is surprising. Otherwise equivalent students from top boarding schools are more likely than non-boarding school students to get into elite colleges, but once there, they do less well in college than their non-boarding school peers (Lewis & Warner, 1979). After college they have no greater educational or occupational attainment, but have greater earnings and a higher likelihood of holding positions of power (Harris, 1940; McArthur, 1954,1960; Seltzer, 1948; Zweigenhaft, 1993; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1991). The results are robust even when we control for students' background (Lewis & Warner, 1979). In short, these schools are managing to get less qualified students into college, and even though these students are out-performed academically in college, they still manage to

out-earn their college peers (within their respective professions). Espenshade et al. (2005) argue for a “frog pond effect” – where going to a highly competitive school might otherwise *decrease* your likelihood of admission to a top college because there are so many other attractive candidates to colleges in your competitive school. However, Espenshade’s (2009) later work shows that one of the strongest predictors of getting into a college, public or private, is attending one of the top 72 high schools in the nation. This advantage is even more dramatic the more elite the school is. There is considerable work showing that institutions like boarding schools matter enormously in the production and maintenance of elites (Baltzell, (1958/1989); Cookson and Persell, 1985, 1991; Domhoff, 1970, 1993, 1998; Harris, 1940; Levine, 1980; Marcus, 1991; McArthur, 1953, 1954, 1960; Schwartz, 1987; Seltzer 1948; Useem, 1979, 1984; Useem & Karabel, 1986; Zweigenhaft, 1991, 1992, 1993).

The explanation for how elite boarding schools matter is less clear, but recent work is beginning to fill in the picture (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a; Khan, forthcoming). These explanations draw on what I described above in relationship to Harvard. Elite boarding schools are highly concentrated environments – much more so than colleges. The experiences at these institutions are intense, and the culture, ties, and symbolic markers developed within them are that much stronger, denser, and more developed than in larger, more amorphous colleges. Instead of being surrounded by thousands of other students, those at elite boarding schools are often among several hundred. Previous work has even characterized them as “total institutions,” controlling every aspect of the students’ lives (Cookson & Persell, 1986). And so the cultural, social, and symbolic advantages that a place like Harvard helps students develop are magnified in elite boarding schools. In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on one piece of the explanation for why such elite schooling matters. And that piece is how students from these

schools get into elite colleges at such astonishing rates. In order to generate this explanation I will briefly turn to how colleges accept students in an increasingly competitive environment.

### What do Colleges Do?

Mitchell Stevens' (2007) work, *Creating a Class*, wonderfully tells the story of how a college creates an incoming freshman class. While working at an elite liberal arts college, Stevens explored how admissions officers made decisions about applicants. Important to what Stevens finds is that colleges are not looking to pick one kind of student again and again – say, for instance, outstanding academic performers. Instead, they are looking to pick a group of students whose individual stories each say something interesting and where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The goal of admissions officers is to create a dynamic group where these different “interesting characters” interact with one another while in school to make the environment that much richer for all.

These admissions officers also “take care” of the different interest groups on campus, from the development office who must raise money to keep the college running (and importantly, maintain its financial prestige) to the athletics department. What we might take away from Stevens' story is that through the process of admissions, schools seek out those students who can increase institutional prestige as cheaply as possible. They do this by satisfying a variety of interest groups: from those to whom diversity matters to those whom financial well-being does. From athletes to scholars, activists to legacies, oboe players to chess club members, colleges look to create a wide ranging student body that is “interesting” both to inside and out. Each class of admitted students helps construct a narrative for the college; it is the story the college tells about itself. Colleges want to be able to talk about how their students represent the range of faces and experiences of our diverse world, from the kid who is from a rural potato

farming family in Idaho to the one who climbed Kilimanjaro last summer. Anyone who has sat through a college orientation process knows this story well; a common aspect of such orientations is to have the Dean of Admissions stand up and tell the incoming class just how diverse, fascinating, and qualified their peers are. But as we shall soon see, there are ways that this diverse variety help create advantages for students from elite schools.

Though we might think that this rejection of a single academic standard in favor of an “interesting class” is something that helps boost diversity, historically the practice had a more nefarious origin. Jerome Karabel’s (2005) work on admissions to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton shows how these schools chose to give up on pure academic performance as standards for admission and instead focus on something more varied, ambiguous, and amorphous as “character.” In his careful historical study of the personal writings of admissions officers and college deans and presidents, Karabel found that the move away from academic standards to character was motivated by a deep anti-semitism. In the early 20th century, across the East Coast the children of Jewish migrants were academically thriving, and their success was allowing them access to the most prominent schools in the nation. Young Jewish men were outperforming many of the children of America’s most established and wealthy families. The schools that had served as training grounds for such legacies and as adolescent homes for such wealth, largely despised the increasing presence of Jews and sought to find ways to exclude them. The solution, settled upon by Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, was to begin to de-emphasize academic credentials, and focus instead on those personal traits that overwhelmingly underscored the values, orientations, and sensitivities that were typical of established, “WASP” families.

Gradually, “a good or interesting character” was introduced to the college admissions process. Sports took on an increased importance (particularly those sports like Crew and Squash,

which were favored by the elite). For applicants, engaging in unique activities created advantages in the admissions process. The Ivy League's strategy was largely successful. As such "interesting characters" both tended to be defined by what WASPs liked to do (and tended to do), and for other non-WASPs these character traits were costly to acquire. These schools had found a way to exclude the advancing members of society and protect the powerful.

Today, schools across the nation continue to focus on character. As Stevens shows, creating a college class is to admit a set of young men and women with "interesting" characters. What was once rooted in exclusion is now mobilized to celebrate the triumph of diversity in the higher levels of educational institutions. It would be intellectually dishonest to deny that elite schools are far more diverse than they once were (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). But as we shall see, what counts as diversity matters; while they have become more racially diverse, elite colleges have also become populated by wealthier student bodies. Important to my story, elite boarding schools have adapted to these changes. This selection on "character" continues to help students from elite schools because they are given more opportunities to develop "interesting characters" through the wide range of activities that are a central part of their everyday schooling. School resources make such interesting aspects a mundane part of what such elite schools do, and they thereby are able to advantage themselves in the application process.

In order to understand my argument, I ask that we imagine what the process of admission into college is like – both from the side of colleges, and from the side of elite boarding schools. For colleges, Mitchell Stevens (2007) is a useful guide. The thing to remember is that colleges are pressured from all sides: coaches, teachers, the development office, the office of diversity, trustees, etc. At the top colleges in our nation there is the drive to accept the best of the best. And "the best" is defined differently by competing constituencies on campus.

This challenge for colleges is an opportunity for elite boarding schools, as many of these pressures advantage students from such schools. Athletes from these schools tend to have extremely strong academic qualifications (not the best, but very strong ones). They can be admitted without worrying about their failing out, or lowering standards. Many students from elite boarding schools are fantastically rich. They can be expected to give a considerable amount of money. And elite boarding schools are increasingly diverse. The minority students are particularly attractive as they have proven that they know how to navigate an elite school. For them, the worries of adjusting to life at the Ivy League are not as great as they might be for a student from a poorer public school. But the really interesting story, and the one that will remind us of those boys simply writing down their names in order to be accepted into top colleges, lies within concerns over those increasingly important rankings.

One of the key aspects of a college's ranking is its yield – how many of the students who are accepted actually attend a university. The higher the yield, the higher the ranking (in part because an increase in the yield means a decrease in the acceptance rate). Yet when colleges look at outstanding students – and there are many of them – there is a challenge. These outstanding students will also be outstanding to all competitor schools. A student who is going to get into Harvard is very likely to also get into Princeton, or Yale, or Stanford; in short, it is extremely unlikely that she will just get into one school. So admissions officers at top colleges are presented with a challenge: how do they know that the students accepted to their college will attend their school? There are lots of “equivalent” schools out there that the students are also likely to get into.

One answer used to be to offer an early admissions process, where students fully committed to a college if accepted before the normal application process. This eliminated a lot of

the uncertainty. But it was hardly fail-safe, as the majority of a college class would not be accepted early. And importantly, these programs have become less and less popular as they have been revealed as mechanisms for rich students to increase their chances of admission.<sup>1</sup>

This is where the college counselor from an elite boarding school steps in. These counselors are likely to be one of many people in their office. They have the luxury of getting to know all the students that they are assisting with applying to college. Unlike many schools, where a placement advisor might be responsible for several hundred students, they are only responsible for about forty. Their job is to make these students (and particularly their parents) happy, guiding them to the best college that they can attend, and where they will be happy. But for the counselors there is the pressure of making sure their school seems worth it – that sending children away from home, paying some \$40,000+, really does aid students in the college process.

College counselors at elite boarding schools want to get as many kids into Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, and other top schools as possible. Unlike many high schools, they have lots of good students – about a third of a graduating class will go to the Ivy League, and, as noted earlier, almost all of them will go to the top thirty colleges and universities in the nation. But there's a problem: some of students are slightly better than others. These better students will likely get into every school, and this will lower the chances of "second best" students getting into top schools. If a student gets into Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, they can only go to one of these schools. By getting into all three, they reduce the chances of getting into top colleges for other students from their school. No student, no matter how good, is guaranteed admission to a top school, and counselors can't fall on a solution where they limit where your best students apply. So what do they do?

Luckily, the problem for elite boarding schools matches up quite nicely with the problem faced by elite colleges. Schools play upon this matching. Counselors talk to their students about where they really want to go, and then they talk to colleges. So let's say that at one elite boarding school there are two very strong students – Susan and Billy. Susan is probably going to get in everywhere; she is the best of the best. Billy might get into some top colleges, but his success is less certain. Billy really wants to go to Yale. Susan really wants to go to Harvard. Here is an opportunity for all the players involved, and under this simple scenario we can begin to see how the admissions game works.

First, the college counselor calls Harvard. They talk about all the kids they have applying. Harvard has already looked at the files, and is interested in some but not all of the students from the elite boarding school. The school provides Harvard with valuable information about its applicants. It affirms decisions that it thinks are correct, pushes Harvard in directions of students it thinks they have passed over too quickly, and reveals the preferences of the students who really want to go to Harvard (so Harvard knows they will attend if admitted). Harvard is getting something valuable here: information about students. This information isn't just about whether they will attend; it's about the students' character – who they are, a sense of the kid that goes far deeper than the file. This helps Harvard, but it also helps students from elite boarding schools, as the additional information gives these students a richer presence in the minds of college admissions officers. There is a give and take to these conversations, built upon a long relationship between elite boarding schools and colleges. The relationships and conversations are on-going. On both ends of the telephone there is an attempt to get the “right” students into the “right” colleges (like matchmaking), while also solving some of the problems we've seen

confronting both the colleges and the elite boarding schools: getting kids in, and keeping yields high.

In Susan and Billy's case, the counselor makes sure Harvard knows that they should accept her (she's a truly great student). In this discussion the counselor will reveal to Harvard that it is Susan's first choice. After years of dealing with an elite boarding school, Harvard knows they can trust this information. If the school is lying, there are real consequences. Harvard might stop taking these telephone calls and ignore the information provided. They may even start accepting fewer students from the school, thinking it is less than an honest place. But both the elite boarding school and Harvard have an incentive to continue with a strong, honest relationship. Boarding schools need to get students into top schools; Harvard needs to make sure that its yield is low and its class is made up of outstanding students. Before the conversation about Susan ends, the counselor asks for confirmation that Susan will be accepted, and might tell Harvard to look seriously at Billy (he has yet to be accepted anywhere).

The next step for the counselor is to call Yale. The task here is simple: work on Yale for Billy. The counselor tells Yale how great Billy is – the interesting things he has done, how he has the kind of character Yale wants. If Yale asks about Susan, they are told, "You really want Billy." Yale realizes that Susan will not come to Yale – the counselor may even explicitly tell them she is going to Harvard. Yale rejects Susan, and takes Billy. One of the delicate challenges is to make Yale not feel like they are getting a second-best student. In a moment we will see the solution to this challenge: at elite boarding schools there are many "best" students. Susan may be the best at some things, but Billy others, and in conversations with Yale the counselor conveys this. The counselors work is not yet done. They still have one more call to make: to quickly get on the phone with Harvard again and tell them not to think about Billy any more; he's going to

Yale. This helps Harvard and Yale keep their yields high and their acceptance rates low, and it strengthens the position of the elite boarding school in these top college's eyes; it's the kind of high school that gets students into the very best colleges in the nation.

Through this work the college admissions office has very likely increased the number of students from their school who will get into top colleges. This has happened in three ways: (1) matchmaking, (2) giving more information about students to make them more attractive (giving a fuller sense of their "interesting character"), and (3) keeping the profile of the school high by building upon the reputation of the school as a place that "gets kids in." For Harvard and Yale, this process has helped them increase their yield (lowering their acceptance rate), making their schools continue to seem like they're incredibly desirable. This game only works if the college counselor at the high school has lots of students to trade on (many students are poised to be accepted to top schools), long term relationships with schools (their information is known to be reliable, and they can be sanctioned for bad information), and the colleges in question have an interest in taking these phone calls to increase their yield and get better information about some of the students applying.

The days of sending a list of the names of students who should be accepted were long gone; today it is a negotiation. This negotiation helps get more kids in from elite boarding schools, those who, as the literature shows, are often less academically qualified than their peers from public school. It's important to remember for a moment Stevens' (2007) and Karabel's (2006) work for a moment. While it often surprises parents who are working incredibly hard to get their kids to work incredibly hard at their schoolwork, most top colleges are not structured to take the best academic achievers. They want students who meet a minimum threshold, but are also "interesting," displaying the varied kinds of characters that such schools are looking for to

make up their classes. Elite high schools are thus not willing to just rely upon these negotiations and hope for the best. They are also structured to make sure their students are as likely as possible to get into the top colleges in the nation. They do this by working hard to develop in them an “interesting character.”

### How Elite Schools are Structured to Win

It may seem silly to point this out, but by definition, only 5 percent of any one class can be in the top 5 percent. Even the best high schools cannot convince top colleges that they should accept students who are not at the top of their graduating classes. From our example above, Yale’s worries about getting students who are anything but the best turn into real pressures on both students and elite high schools. How, then, do these schools make most of their class in the top 5 percent? How do they get so many kids into our nation’s top colleges when these all colleges only want those at the top? There seems to be an impossible math going on here. Most elite colleges only want students at the top of their high school classes, but elite boarding schools seem to get almost *all* of their students into elite colleges. How is it that the bottom 50 percent of these high school classes are still getting into outstanding colleges?

The first part of the answer is simple. Even the “bottom” students of these classes are very good. At the school I studied, the average SAT score was around 1390 out of 1600. That’s a very high average indeed. But we also cannot underestimate the status-consciousness of most elite colleges; almost none feel they are “second best” and would bristle at the idea of taking students who were simply mediocre in their high school, no matter how good that high school is. And so elite schools find a way to make sure that even the students at the “bottom” of their classes aren’t really at the bottom.

The seemingly impossible math suddenly becomes possible when we realize that there are lots of five percents. We typically think of the top of a class as being an academic category: who has the highest grades. But we should recall, if only quickly, Karabel's work on the triumph of "character" and the decline of academic standards as *the* standard for admission. Grades now create a baseline, a minimum that a student must have to be considered for acceptance to a top college. But they are not all that matters. In fact, they are a small part of it. Beyond grades, there are other dimensions on which to compete. And if we quickly recall the work of Mitchell Stevens, we will know that it is most often these dimensions upon which college admissions officers accept applicants. There are sports, arts, community activism, quirky interests or activities, and extreme wealth – a whole host of arenas for success. If you can get almost all of your students above a basic bar – high enough grades and board scores – and then create lots of different arenas in high school life for them to do well, then suddenly you have lots of "best" students. Almost all of your graduating class will be in the top five percent. You have made the impossible possible.

This gives us a different way to read what is happening with the schooling of students at elite boarding schools. No matter how good, academically, their students are, the top five to ten percent will always only be five or ten percent of the student body. But if all your students can have qualifications equivalent to the top five or ten percent of most high schools and they have something else special – they can really row, or play the oboe or squash, or are a special violinist or painter or mathematician, or they write interesting fiction, or you can argue that they have an interesting philosophical mind. or will give a lot of money to the college, or will be a successful student who is from a poor, nonwhite family – then suddenly your students become that much

more interesting to colleges. You have lots of five percents, and most of your students fit in somewhere among those percents.

The key here is that resources really matter. You can only create many areas for your students to succeed if you have the money to invest in getting them all above a basic bar, and then still have some left over to pay for many areas wherein students cultivate diverse interests. On a budget of \$7000 per pupil, most high schools cannot create music, painting, photography, sculpture, and dance programs; they cannot have seemingly countless clubs for students to join, from literary, philosophical, and language societies to science teams that build robots and observe the heavens from their own observatory. Most high schools have trouble covering a basic curriculum with their budgets; they cannot support the development of “interesting” tastes and experiences. But on budgets of some \$50-70,000 per pupil, elite boarding schools can. Everyone can find a place to be the best at something, and everyone can develop a notable character. So when college counselors get on the phone, they have an interesting story to tell about almost every student – a story that colleges want to hear (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009a, Khan, forthcoming).

What might seem a fairly homogeneous group (at least 60 percent of students from elite high schools come from wealthy families – often those wealthy enough to pay over \$40,000 per year for high school), suddenly becomes a diverse one. Students have different interests and activities. They represent a wide range of areas, from future scientists to poets. They have achieved in an enormous number of ways. They are interesting. They come from all over the country and the world. Everyone is the best at something. Where they were the same, they are now different. And these differences allow colleges to accept students from what is a fairly narrow range of students, economically, and think of them as being enormously varied.

## Conclusions

The elite schools of our nation are far more diverse than they used to be. But it matters how we think of “diversity.” If we think in terms of class, our top colleges are filled with many rich students, and there are hardly any poor ones there. As Andrew Delbanco noted in 2007, Ninety percent of Harvard students come from families earning more than the median national income of \$55,000, and Harvard's Dean of Admissions was quoted in the *Crimson* a few months earlier defining "middle-income" Harvard families as those earning between \$110,000 and \$200,000 ... It is hardly surprising that lots of rich kids go to America's richest colleges. It has always been so. But today's students are richer on average than their predecessors. Between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s, in a sample of eleven prestigious colleges, the percentage of students from families in the bottom quartile of national family income remained roughly steady – around 10 percent. During the same period the percentage of students from the top quartile rose sharply, from a little more than one third to fully half. If the upscale shops and restaurants near campus are any indication, the trend has continued if not accelerated. And if the sample is broadened to include the top 150 colleges, the percentage of students from the bottom quartile drops to 3 percent. (Delbanco, 2007; Figures from Bowen et al., 2004)

These numbers provide a rather stark picture of what is going on within our elite educational institutions today. They are returning to what they once were: increasingly places for the rich. This is curious, of course. And the reason it's curious is that these institutions seem so much more diverse than they once were. They seem to have heeded the call to open their doors to those who were excluded and begun to be a more accurate representation of our increasingly open, diverse, social world. They seem less and less club like, particular because they spend so

much of their time telling us just how diverse they are, and how hard they are working to make the advantages associated with their institutions available to all.

I think we can puzzle together an answer from some of the insights generated in this chapter. The triumph of individual stories among applicants – showing that they have each developed a unique character that is worth having as part of a class – has also created the appearance of diverse variety, wherein there is enormous homogeneity. As the work of William Bowen points out, most colleges are filled with the children of rich families. They may all do interesting things, from playing the Irish tin whistle to starting a local land mine advocacy group or hiking the Andes. But these diverse experiences do not mean that students represent the U.S. If only three percent of college students at the top 100 schools come from the bottom twenty-five percent of American earners, we cannot claim that these colleges represent the range of young adults in our nation.

The strong ties between elite high schools and elite colleges are a major part of this story. As the literature has repeatedly shown, these high schools still manage to get comparatively under-qualified students into elite colleges. They do this by deploying their resources to help turn considerable economic homogeneity into a diversity of stories that appeal to colleges. These different stories also help almost every student at an elite prep school be “the best.” Unlike schools with limited resources, where students must compete with one another on a single ranking system (grades), elite schools can use their resources to make sure that there are seemingly countless areas for students to excel. Every student is a special talent. And because these elite high schools have many students that elite colleges might be interested in, and because these colleges have an incentive to reduce their admission rate, elite colleges and high schools

negotiate with one another over students, resulting in a greater number of students going to top colleges than would otherwise be accepted in the absence of such negotiations.

Early in this paper I drew upon the work of other scholars to point to why elite schooling matters. Those explanations were cultural, social, and symbolic capital. We can see all of these forces at play in the picture I have just painted of the admissions process. Culturally, students from elite high schools develop the set of interesting traits that colleges select upon. Socially, the ties that their schools have to elite institutions aid in a negotiation process that helps get comparatively less qualified elite high school students into elite colleges. And symbolically, going to an elite high school still matters – colleges are willing to take their calls and select students from such institutions because those institutions matter, symbolically, for them. Kids from elite high schools get into elite colleges not because they “know” something the rest of us do not. Instead they can draw upon the social, cultural, and symbolic resources they develop within one elite institution in order to gain access to another.

Though they may not be simply writing their names on the top of a sheet of paper to get into top colleges, students from elite boarding schools are still having a comparatively easy time getting into our nation’s top colleges. In the process, those who historically were never allowed to even attend such schools now may apply, but they still find themselves largely outside their walls.

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Notes

1. The acceptance rates for early application processes are higher, and richer students are disproportionately likely to apply using these programs, as they have access to more information about college application processes. Because this has been widely revealed and criticized, schools like Harvard and Princeton have dissolved these programs; no doubt many of their competitors will follow suit.