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THE EDUCATION OF ELITES IN THE UNITED STATES

Shamus Rahman KHAN

RÉSUMÉ. – Cet article propose d'étudier la formation des élites dans le système éducatif des États-Unis. Il examine comment les étudiants sont acceptés dans les écoles d'élite, leurs expériences au sein de ces écoles et les conséquences de la formation des élites. Il soutient que les écoles d'élite ne sont pas caractérisées seulement par la sélection initiale, la compétitivité, le niveau social ou les caractéristiques des étudiants qui les fréquentent, elles existent aussi par leur insertion dans un réseau complexe de relations culturelles et institutionnelles à dimension nationale et mondiale.

De même que la constitution des élites, la définition de ce qu'est une école d'élite évolue. À partir de l'examen des écoles d'élite cet article développe des réflexions sur le caractère de l'élite américaine.

MOTS CLÉS. – Éducation ; Élites ; États-Unis ; Inégalité.

ABSTRACT – This paper outlines the development of American scholarship on elite education. It reviews how students are accepted, their experiences within elite schools, and the consequences of elite education. It argues that elite schools are not elite because of their properties or competitiveness, nor because of who attends these schools. Instead, these institutions exist within a web of relations, contingent on the national and global institutional and cultural arrangements within which they are embedded. As the constitution of elites changes, so too does the definition of an elite school. This paper uses elite schools to reflect upon the character of the American elite.

KEYWORDS. – Education; Elites; Inequality; United States.

Early American scholarship on elites treated education as relatively epiphenomenal. Classics like Louis Brandeis' *Other People's Money* looked at the relationship between social connections and

finance (Brandeis, 1995). This work was the beginning of a social network analysis of elites and implied that education was an important mechanism by which elites were tied to one another; but it and other work it inspired remained silent on the study of schools. C. Wright Mills' *White Collar* and *The Power Elite* were interested in how education helped create cognitive and cultural consolidation among the elite, but the role of schooling was largely assumed rather than observed (Mills, 2000; 2002; see also the continuation of this tradition in Domhoff, 1970; 1993; 1998). And in his various studies of Boston, Philadelphia, and the protestant establishment, E. Digby Baltzell noted the concentration of elites at particular schools, but he never took his readers into the world of schooling (Baltzell, 1987; 1989; 1996).

In addition to the minimal interest in education by elite scholars, those who studied education were not particularly concerned with the question of elites. The massive growth of the American University system after the Second World War was accompanied by a robust and rising middle class. Education scholars were interested in this "fat middle" of the income distribution, as well as by questions of how to "elevate" the poor (who were disproportionately minorities). This produced a theory methods package of status attainment and regression analysis, where linear models largely flattened out the action at the tail of the distribution (elites). Almost overwhelmingly scholars within this tradition assumed that questions of elites were questions tied to a past we had escaped. The United States was moving quickly toward a middle class society.

To the reader who is relatively uninitiated to American sociology, it is important to realize that within America, the most important question for sociology is inequality. Further, in striving to measure and evaluate inequality with the dominant statistical tools available (regression), continuous variables that were easily observable and had rough equivalence across all actors were ideal. Education was one such variable. The question of inequality and the measure of education have been intimately tied since the early 1970s (when scholars began to model the effect of education on earnings).

Yet by the late 1980s the "golden age" of American higher education seemed to stagnate and new questions emerged. College costs accelerated at rates twice that of inflation and social support for redistribution plans waivered. Still, with a few exceptions, scholars were largely uninterested in the question of elites. But with the publishing of Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez's seminal paper in 2003, this began to change. Economists and sociologists are using

social security, tax return and other administrative data to uncover the inequality and mobility in America dating back to 1917 (1937 for mobility data). These data give us some of the most reliable, longest runs we can expect on the relationship between Americans to one another (inequality), the intergenerational transfer of wealth, and the intragenerational capacity to develop such wealth through wage gains over the lifecourse. The broad story that has emerged is that inequality declined in the post-war period (consistent with the attention of education scholars to the middle class at this time), but then increased starting in the 1970s. Today inequality is what it was at the tail end of the gilded age – which is to say that America is a very inequitable nation compared to other industrialized countries and even compared to its recent past.

One of the more specific take-aways from the account provided by Piketty and Saez is that the engine of inequality has been the rich rather than the poor or middle classes. We cannot explain a variable by a constant. And while the level of inequality in America has varied considerably over time, the relative position of the poor and middle classes has remained roughly the same since the 1960s. The fate of the rich, however, has waxed and waned. And so to understand inequality, elites must be central to our explanations. In short, the study of elites is now seen as central to the study of inequality.

At the same time, a new theoretical paradigm gained traction: that of Pierre Bourdieu. At the time of writing Bourdieu is the most cited sociologist in America; of the 50 most cited works in the last year, Bourdieu wrote four, including the most cited (*Distinction*). His theory of elite production and his attention to education as a central mechanism for such reproduction has inspired American scholars to look more closely at elite schooling (common drawn upon works are: Bourdieu 1967; 1974; 1977; 1984; 1996; Bourdieu, Boltanski, 1981; Bourdieu, Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, Saint-Martin, 1974). Bourdieu provided a model of culture that could be measured (one could have more or less cultural capital) and thereby adapted to regression analysis (DiMaggio, 1982 and especially DiMaggio, Mohr, 1985).

And so while it was an adaption of Bourdieu that may not have sat well with Bourdieu himself, American scholars found a theory of reproduction in Bourdieu that could be adapted to their methodological techniques. Bourdieu provided a theory that could help explain how elites might be the drivers of inequality, and in his focus on education, Bourdieu's work matched what earlier American stratification research had been using as a key explanandum of inequality (what might be best thought of as the "Wisconsin model"; Blau,

Duncan, 1967; Duncan, Featherman, Duncan, 1972; Ensel, Lin, Vaughn, 1981; Haller, Portes, 1973; Hauser, 1971; Sewell, Hauser, 1975; Sewell, Hauser, Featherman, 1976).

As a result, recent quantitative and qualitative scholars have delved deep into the worlds of elite schools, exploring how they both reproduce and challenge stratification processes. The American observation of the strong relationship between education and earnings could allow for imagining educational institutions as mobility pathways for the disadvantaged. But, if the structure of school was such that the children of those with higher earnings also completed more schooling and at higher rates, then education might well be a mechanism for the maintenance of inequality.

What happens at elite schools thus became of interest to stratification research. The relatively high status of stratification research also drew young researchers into the study of elites. Combined with increased attention to the work of Bourdieu and more acute concern about the role of elites in the maintenance of inequality, researchers have recently turned to the relationship between elites and education. Their findings have developed insights not only into the area of elite scholarship, but have also shed light upon a range of social processes that are import beyond the world of elites.

Defining “Elite Education”

Before we can continue, we must define our object. To speak of “elite education” in America is a difficult task. The first challenge is to define “elite” (see Khan, 2012a). Does it refer to the status of the institution, or, the families who populate it? Quite obviously, these two are related, but they are not the same. For example, Stuyvesant High School in the city of New York has one of the most competitive systems of admission of any school in the world. And it provides students with one of the world’s best educations. Families from around the city prepare their children to take an entrance exam, and only 3 % of those students who take the exam are accepted (making it twice as hard to get into as Harvard). But elite families have not flocked to Stuyvesant – no doubt in part because the strict admissions competition means their children are not that likely to get it. For this “pure meritocracy” does not favor their status and as an “open” institution it does not quite service their needs, which go beyond academic excellence (those needs include social connections and status perpetuation). For much of the 20th century Stuyvesant

was a heavily Jewish institution, and it has steadily shifted to being predominantly Asian. In 2014, almost 75 % of the students from Stuyvesant are from Asian families.

So, is Stuyvesant an “elite” high school? If we were to look at selectivity and academic excellence, the answer is unquestionably yes. And such excellence results in a high degree of social influence. Yet prominent and wealthy families rarely send their children to Stuyvesant. And as such, other aspects that mark elite institutions – their social, cultural, and symbolic transference to children – are less pronounced at Stuyvesant than at other far less competitive schools. By such criteria, Stuyvesant is not an elite school.

The simple explanation of this “non-elite” status is that almost overwhelmingly elite families and elite schools are tightly coupled. There are two reasons for this. First, residential segregation in America means that wealthy families rarely live anywhere but near other wealthy families (Massey, Denton, 1993). And so their local schools are both well funded¹, and relatively economically homogeneous. The second is that most elite schools are private. While many offer financial aid, in general such private schools have a considerable financial barrier to entry, servicing the families of wealthier Americans. Elite private high schools (for students aged 14–18) can cost well over \$ 50,000 per year; elite private universities are approaching \$ 70,000 in total costs per year. In short, the cost of private schooling exceeds the earnings of the average American family. It should not be surprising, then, that about half the families who send their children to the Ivy League, for example, have incomes above \$ 200,000 (well within the top 5 % of American families, to say nothing of the global population these schools draws upon).

And yet, while many private schools are overwhelmingly populated with wealthy families, this does not necessarily make such schools elite, like Harvard. The reason for this is simple: dozens of schools cost the same amount but do not have anything near Harvard’s status. Often these second or third tier wealthy schools lack academic, cultural, or historic prestige. It is neither enough to be highly selective, nor extremely rich to be an elite school. Instead, the definition of our object lies elsewhere.

What defines elite schools is the fact that they have vastly disproportionate control over or access to resources, where such resources

1. American schools rely heavily on the local tax base (often property taxes) for additional funding. Schools in wealthier communities, in addition to being able to draw upon their cultural, social, and human capital, are also likely to be better funded.

are relevant to the elite. Those resources included academic capital, social ties to elite families and other institutions of power, the capacity to guide and transfer culture, economic capacity, and human resources. Yet the value of each of these resources to being “elite” is a shifting target. Ties to what we might think of as “prominent” families are less central to elite educational status today than they were just a generation ago (though they are still important).

From my definition, elite schools are not elite because of their properties or competitiveness, nor are they elite because of who attends. Instead, these institutions exist within a complex web of relations, often highly contingent on the national and even global institutional and cultural arrangements within which they are embedded. These vary in time and place. As the constitution of elite changes, so too does the definition of an elite school. More complicated still, elite schools themselves can change the composition of the next generation of elites.

In short, we must think about elite schooling not by looking at elite schools alone, but by embedding them within the complex matrix of the ever-shifting power bases of the elite. And so it is impossible to talk about the relationship between elites and education without talking about broader transformations among the American elite. Thanks to the pioneering work of Thomas Piketty and his co-authors (Piketty, 2014; Piketty, Saez, 2003; 2006), the economic part of this story is rather broadly known. In my own previous work I have combined that story with the more sociological literature; I will therefore not review this here (see Khan, 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2015a and b forthcoming; Khan, Jerolmack, 2013). For our purposes it is important to remember that just as elite status is not fixed but shifting – sometimes family connections are king, other times human capital, social networks, cultural capacity, lottery, etc. are more important – so too is the relationship between elites and education.

The remaining four sections of this paper work within this shifting terrain. First, I outline who is accepted to elite schools, second, what the experience within such schools is for students, third, what the consequence of elite schooling is, and finally, some conclusions for understanding the character of the American elite.

Acceptance: who goes to elite schools and how do they get in?

Who gets into Elite American schools? Much of the answer is conditional on who applies. The Ivy League – now international

powerhouses of elite schooling – were once mostly regional schools (recruiting primarily from the Northeastern United States). Their acceptance rates were, at one time, quite high: in many instances accepting half their applicant pool. Today they have transformed into far more international institutions. This alone marks a shift in the relationship between elites and education – elites are constituted globally, and the schools that serve and produce them reflect this. But just because acceptance rates have declined, it is not clear how much harder they are to get into. The most competitive Universities now accept about six percent of their applicants, but this is in large part because ranking systems evaluate schools by their acceptance rates, so schools have incentives to solicit as many applications as possible. Some recent work has indicated that schools are soliciting applications from applicants they know they will not accept.

It should not come as a surprise that one of the better predictors for getting into elite schools in America is having rich parents. Using survey techniques of attendees of elite schools, scholars have explored the social background characteristics of students at elite schools, and how this influences their performance within schools (something we explore in greater detail below; see Bowen, Bok, 1988; Charles *et al.*, 2008; Espenshade, Radford, 2009; Massey *et al.*, 2003). The findings of this literature are that coming from a wealthy background advantages students in their admission, but not because wealth alone increases the likelihood of admission. Instead, wealth increases the likelihood that children have attributes that schools search for (for more on the admissions process to elite schools see Khan, 2012b; Steinberg, 2003; and Stevens, 2006). Foreign readers must remember the degree to which the American educational system, and child development in general, is based upon a market system which allows elite parents to invest heavily in their children and thereby advantage them.

There are two parts to this story. First, elite schools in America care a lot about non-academic aspects of applicants (for a history of this and its origin in anti-Semitism, see Karabel, 2006). Schools field large sports teams; for example one in six students at Harvard play varsity athletics, Harvard has 41 varsity sport teams, and that represents the largest number of teams of any University in the country. Elite schools also have orchestras, choirs, dance ensembles, debate teams, and hundreds of special interest clubs. Students are selected to staff these non-scholastic units on campus.

The second part of this story is that to learn to play the bassoon, or be an expert rower, or develop skills as a debater, chances are good that you have had some kind of private lessons or investment. Such

lessons and investments are not provided through public provision and are mainly attainable for children whose parents can pay for them. As such, wealth allows parents to “buy” credentials for their children, increasing their likelihood of admission. There are more wealthy children at elite schools because elite schools have developed metrics of “qualification” wherein certain qualifications can be purchased. Thereby, wealthier people have a better chance of admission.

So it could be that there is no advantage to going to Harvard – already advantaged people attend this elite school and so the University appears to have effects on student lives but it is all just selection. 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); some of the strongest effects of going to an elite school on earnings are observed for minority and poorer students (Krueger, Dale, 2014).

Further, even though elite schools are disproportionately composed of children from wealthy families, elite schools spend an enormous amount of money to recruit and retain non-wealthy students. Harvard provides some form of financial aid to over 70 % of its students; 60 percent receive need-based scholarships and pay an average of \$ 12,000 per year (keep in mind that it costs about \$ 63,000/year to attend Harvard, far more than the average American family makes, so some families making up to \$ 200,000 can still receive aid). Every student who attends Harvard graduates without debt; Harvard provides scholarships to its students, not loans they must repay.² And over 20 % of students at Harvard pay nothing at all to attend the school.³ While students of the wealthy

2. There are three ways that students can pay for their education: loans, grants, and personally. Loans are typically federally subsidized. This means that the government “backs” a loan to pay for tuition. These loans accrue no interest until the student leaves school after 8 months (either because of dropping out or graduating). The interest rate is typically low; it is federally subsidized. Students can also get private loans, though this is rare. Grants are given to students by schools or private foundations. They require no repayment. Elite schools typically rely upon grants to fund students who cannot pay. This means that students who go to places like Harvard will graduate without debt. The average student in the United States graduates with about \$ 30,000 in student loan debt; at elite schools this number is typically closer to \$ 0. A sizable portion of the endowments of elite schools goes providing grants to poorer students. Finally, students can be expected to pay themselves. At elite schools there are almost no merit-based scholarships/grants. Financial assistance is given on the basis of need, not performance.

3. Parents with total incomes less than \$ 65,000 and are not expected to contribute to tuition at Harvard; families with incomes between \$ 65,000 and \$ 150,000 will contribute from 0-10 % of their income; those with incomes above \$ 150,000 will be asked to pay proportionately more than 10 %, based on their individual circumstances.

disproportionately attend elite schools, they are not the only ones there, and America's more market-based system of education may not bias it any more toward the children of the wealthy than more state-based systems like France.

The largest interest in diversity is not class diversity, but race. This diversity is reflected in the admissions process, which aggressively recruits students who reflect disadvantaged minority groups. 25 % of the students at Harvard are Black or Latino; only about half the students are white. While their class composition is nowhere near reflective of the overall American population, when it comes to race, these schools are nearly a mirror of the national population. This reflects some dynamics of the American elite more generally – one wherein “diversity” means race and not class (Berrey, 2015), and where race is generally associated with disadvantage, whereas class is seen to reflect achievement.

This racial diversity, combined with aspects of the American racial system, also has an important consequence within elite schools. Black and Latino families are, on average, much poorer than white families and Asian families. Financial aid budgets are not limitless. And so there is a strong overlap between students on financial aid, and non-white students. According to Espenshade and Radford's (2009) work on this topic, the predicted probability of a lower class Black student being accepted to an elite private university is an astonishingly high .87, compared to .65 for Hispanics, .58 for Asians, and a staggeringly low .08 for whites. Poor Blacks are about 10 times more likely to be accepted than poor whites. Racial differences between students are thus also very likely class differences as well. I will address some of the consequences of this for experiences within school in the next section.

It is important to note that minority students are not the only students who receive a relative advantage in admissions (in fact, Asian students are disadvantaged in the admissions process). If we control for race we find that poorer students receive no advantage in admission. This is surprising, given how much more wealthy students have invested in their education through private means. Yet students who are legacies or who are recruited athletes receive special consideration for admission.

Finally, there is an increasing massive and increasing overall female advantage to college completion (Buchmann, DiPrete, 2006); whereas in 1960 there were 1.6 men to every woman graduating from college today there are 1.4 women for every man. Yet this is not reflected in elite colleges. Some of the best public schools, like

the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, are not allowed to consider gender in their admissions process. As a result, they are 60 % women. By contrast, places like the Ivy League are persistently 50-50 in their gender ratio. Young women are relatively disadvantaged in admissions, and schools are expressing an interest in making sure their gender ratios are roughly equivalent.

We could read these “non-academic” standards of admission as being the source of bias, inequality, and elite advantage. But such might simply be a scholastic bias imposed by those most likely to gain from a broad scholastic orientation – in short, professors. Instead, such standards of admission to elite schools help reveal what is of interest to elites in America. That is not mere academic prowess. Instead, it is also the capacity to be elected to and lead a student organization, to be part of an athletic team, and to identify and cultivate non-scholastic skills. Elite schools want to present themselves as a reflection of a diverse world, rewarding varieties of achievement, perhaps serving as an elite marriage market, but also providing new stocks to American industry (that has similar expression of interests in diversity, and favors men). This, certainly, reveals something of the character of the American elite.

Experiences within schools

What is it that students from elite colleges are learning, or developing at these schools? Why would parents pay so much to send their children to elite schools, and why is the application process so competitive? Disappointingly, there is not much research on what happens in classrooms at elite schools. While scholars have done interviews with elites and talk to them about what they’ve done there, and almost all scholars active in this research area themselves teach in within schools, there is a surprising dearth of observation of actual behavior and interactions among students at elite schools. As a result we are likely to commit the attitudinal fallacy – erroneously inferring behavior from verbal accounts (Khan, Jerolmack, 2013). We know surprising little about elite classrooms, but happily, considerably more about other aspects of life within elite schools.

In my own work I have looked at curricula and classroom behavior (Khan, 2011). Drawing on a long tradition in sociology, I argue 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 the grades received 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. Such arguments should be very familiar to the French reader. However, considerably more work could be done in the American case that explores what actually happens within classrooms.

Outside classrooms, however, there is considerably more work. Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton (2013) followed students for five years as they navigated college life at an elite public university; they document how it is that more advantaged women are able to augment their advantage. Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez have collected together a range of scholarship on the ways in which elites are educated in the American context (2009); again, much of this work is inspired by the Bourdieusian tradition. Almost none of the focus of this research is on schooling before high school (students typically start high school at age 14). While there has been considerable work at the high school and college level, and even post-secondary education at business schools (Anteby, 2013; Khurana, 2010) and law schools (Granfield, 1992), we know very little about elite early childhood education. Our understanding of the early childhood formation of elites, and the role of education in this process, is severely lacking.

We do know a bit about school culture, and younger scholars are presently addressing the absence of in-school literature (see especially Jack, 2014 and Jack, LaDousa, *forthcoming*). We also know that men are more likely to enter into fields with higher economic returns than women, that at elite colleges wealthier students are more likely to select high earning majors, and that white and Asian students

are slightly more likely to select high earning majors than Black and Latino students (Davies, Guppy, 1997). This race effect is not simply explained by class. In being poorer, it is not surprising that Black students are less prepared for college. At elite schools half of the Black students are in the bottom 20 % of their class rank. But beyond academic performance we find that the social dimensions of interaction across race tell us something quite different. Black students are likely to socialize with others of a different race. Whites, by contrast, are the most likely to socialize within their racial group (Espenshade, Radford 2009, p. 223).

But even given lower levels of preparation and lower overall academic performance, we also find that the greatest advantage of attending an elite school (in terms of future earnings) goes to the most disadvantaged students. It is to the consequences of elite schooling that we now turn.

Consequence of elite schooling: what are the rewards?

Since at least the 1930s, scholars have shown a robust and consistent advantage to elite schooling. 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. But they are few; the safe money is on the reward to elite schooling (Brewer, Ehrenberg, 1996; 1999; Thomas, 2003; Thomas, Zhang, 2005; for a dissenting view, see Krueger, Dale, 2014). 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.

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 somewhat 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, 1989 [1958]; Cookson, 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, 2011). 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.

Abstracting, then, we might indicate that the reasons elite schooling matters is not because of what one learns in the classroom; this may well justify the lack of attention to the academic environments of such schools. Instead, what students are capitalizing on within elite schools are the same thing such schools are selecting upon – not the hard skills of academic performance, but instead the soft skills of cultural competence, social connections and leadership, and symbolic advantage.

Conclusion: Implications for understanding the elite

More often than not, we imagine the past relative to the present. Take the Ivy League. These institutions seem like enduring pillars of elite life. To a degree they are; but such a view clouds as much as it reveals. One needs only go back to 1990 to see a time when admissions rates to the University of Pennsylvania were almost 50 % (in 2014 it is just under 10 %). In the 1950s, Harvard University admitted 95 % of applicants from the most elite boarding schools; today these boarding schools would be lucky if 20 % of those who applied were admitted. The history of certain families, and the history of certain elite institutions, could not be told without one another. Indeed elite institutions were the sinews of upper class families, and *vice versa*. The rest were mostly absent, or if fortunate enough to attend, “just visiting.”

Yet today, such schools have become distinctly more diverse. In 1951 blacks made up approximately 0.8 percent of the students at elite colleges. Today blacks make up about 8 percent of Ivy League students; the Columbia class of 2014 was 13 percent black – representative of the black population in our nation as a whole. Columbia University is now a “majority minority” institution, meaning half its students are non-white. Women today are outperforming men, creating a gender gap in college attendance in favor of women. Without question our elite educational institutions have become far more open racially and to women. This is a tremendous transformation, nothing short of a revolution.

Elite schools have shifted from being a somewhat closed social clique to “something else.” Understanding this provides us with a vision of our new elite. Rather than accept students because they manifest a character that revealed good heritage, the new system of admission and seeks to look beyond the trappings of society and reward people’s inherent individual talents. When meritocracy began to make its way into college admissions, the then dean of Harvard admissions, Wilbur Bender, worried:

“Are there any good ways of identifying and measuring goodness, humanity, character, warmth, enthusiasm, responsibility, vitality, creativity, independence, heterosexuality, etc., etc., or should we care about these anyhow?”

As Jerome Karabel (2005) has shown, many of these traits were used as proxies for elite status, and served as the basis of college admission in order to exclude Jews (who were performing well academically).

With “merit” we stripped individuals of the old baggage of social ties and status and replaced it with personal attributes – hard work, discipline, native intelligence, and other forms of human capital that can be evaluated separate from the conditions of social life. The impact of the adoption of this approach has led to rather contradictory outcomes. It has undercut nepotism. It has been used to promote the opening of schools to talented members of society who previously were excluded. But this meritocracy of hard work and achievement has also naturalized socially constituted distinctions, making differences in outcomes appear a product of who people are rather than a product of the conditions of their making. Though rich students overwhelmingly populate elite schools, the new American system suggests that this is because they are more meritorious, not because they are richer. It is through looking at the rise of the meritocracy that we can better understand the transformation of elite and thereby some of the workings of our contemporary inequality.

The rich today are drawn from a wider spectrum of families than they were a generation ago, and elite schools are drawing upon a wider range of young men and women. While this diversity is notable and important, in the American case the focus on racial diversity often occludes the class dynamics of this transformation. For at the same time as elite institutions are looking different, the elite are moving further and further away from the rest. And the wealthy are increasing their social dominance. It is not only their wealth that is increasing, it is also their capacity to have their cultural frameworks dominate other institutions and spheres – particularly schools.

The transformation of elite schools is both inspiring in terms of its opening, and yet disturbing in terms of the crippling cultural logics it seems to embrace. The best students are admitted now, not just the children of a small, stagnant regional elite. The best faculty are recruited, retained, rewarded, and extolled. Competing for funding, the strongest proposals win, and elite institutions are rewarded for their academic quality. The logic is not tradition, history, and social and cultural connectedness. Instead, it is competition, openness, and excellence. As Elizabeth Berman (2012) has argued in her recent book, *Universities* (especially their research arms) have moved from holding themselves apart from commerce and markets, to fully embracing them (particularly in the sciences). This is particularly pronounced in elite educational institutions, which have moved further away from the arms of elite families and closer to those of the market.

American elite schools have effectively suggested that in achieving racial diversity they reflect a great social equality. The American elite are similar in their orientation. The burdensome categories of the past have been shed. Yet in ignoring class, and in embracing the rhetoric but not the logic of markets, the also tell us something important about elites in America. Their view is that positions are, for the most part, achieved and earned, not inherited and ascribed. Enormous institutional work goes into obscuring any way in which this view is untrue. Elite schools play a central role in such work. Better understanding this process, the inner workings of such schools, and the meaning of elite schooling within a complex matrix of elite relations is the primary task of the next generation of scholars.

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