

Access to Elite Education: Wealth, Merit, and Inequality

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Abstract

A basic American value has been the opportunity to succeed, regardless of origin; the Horatio Alger myth is embedded in our folklore, inspiring millions with its promise of opportunity. However, the road to substantial wealth and status runs through America's elite universities, especially Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, and those who are admitted come from families that already occupy a high socio-economic rank. In this way the status quo is perpetuated and upward mobility is stifled. Under such conditions, admission according to merit is a disguised form of social selection because the most meritorious will be the richest. Students from the wealthiest 25% account for 2/3 of the slots in the top 150 colleges, and SAT scores correlate to family income – 12 points for every \$20,000 of salary. In short, the advantages of wealth translate to higher academic scores and hence a higher rate of admission to elite universities. Although we want to maintain academic standards, we might modify our admissions requirements for the sake of social justice. We could 1) judge applicants in terms of demonstrated potential as well as their academic record, 2) provide a plus factor for those whose lower achievement is partly due to a disadvantaged background, 3) take character into consideration as an educational value.

I would like to address an aspect of higher education that is often neglected when educational reform is discussed, that is, who gets to develop their brain power to the highest level? In other words, how do we decide who gains access to prestigious institutions, particularly those in the U.S.

Sociologists tell us that admission depends heavily on wealth because wealth correlates with high academic achievement – 12 points on the SATs for every \$20,000 of family salary. Therefore admitting the highest achievers, who then command higher salaries, perpetuates the hierarchy of affluence and status.

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It also militates against the ideal of equal opportunity and upward mobility, especially since the rich tend to get richer while the poor get children...

As most academics know, the rich are getting richer, in part because of the tax structure and because wealth begets wealth but also through attending elite universities. This enables them to receive a higher income, and in this way families retain their higher economic status. The growing disparity in wealth in the U.S., as well as worldwide, is well known – at least among educated people. The majority of Americans may believe that the extremes of wealth and poverty are rare, and upward mobility is axiomatic, however, the statistics argue otherwise:

The top 2 percent of the nation “own 28 percent of our total net worth. The top 10 percent has 57 percent of the nation’s wealth in its hands, leaving the bottom 50 percent of the population with 5.4 percent. If one sets aside homes and real estate, the top 2 percent of all families owns 54 percent of the nation’s net financial assets...The top 10 percent controls 86 percent, while those making up the bottom 55 percent have zero or negative financial assets.”¹ The recent PEW Foundation poll concludes that the top 1% controls more assets than the bottom 90% altogether.

At one fundraiser George W, Bush remarked “This is an impressive crowd: The haves and the have-mores. Some people call you the elites. I call you my base.”

In 2005, 21.2 percent of U.S. national income accrued to just 1 percent of earners, and CEO pay was 55 times greater than that of a skilled production worker – a much higher ratio than any other developed country. The U.S has the highest income disparity and the lowest social mobility compared to most of Europe, Canada, and Great Britain. As one critic put it, “You can go from blue collar to blue collar in just three generations.”

The economist Paul Samuelson has a striking metaphor: If we were to build an income pyramid out of child’s blocks, with each layer representing \$1000 of income, the peak would be far higher than the Eiffel Tour, but most of us would be within a yard of the ground.

But what specifically has wealth to do with access to selective institutions? Don’t we function in an egalitarian way, basing admission on merit? As was mentioned, wealth confers academic advantages *initially*.

If children are raised in an affluent home their schools will be superior with better instruction and more AP courses; their parents will be better educated and there will be what Pierre Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” in the home, as well as family contacts and networking. They will have access to tutors, more co-curricular activities, experiences abroad, learning camps, and exotic vacations.

Students from better Zip codes will also have the psychological advantage of greater self-confidence, motivation, and an expectation of success – which cannot be overestimated. All of this translates into higher scores on tests for college admission, and it allows privileged families to pass on their comfortable social position to their children.

Lower income children, by contrast, have a higher drop-out rate in high school, especially in the inner city and particularly among blacks, and if they stay in school they will have lower test scores; they are not adequately prepared for learning. Also associated with low income are criminality, unemployment, obesity, malnutrition, debt, high infant mortality, drug use, and mental illness. These young people are not well connected but “unhooked,” according to the Admissions Office phrase. Young women in poorer states are more prone to teenage pregnancy, and disparities in income also correlate with statistics on sickness, accidents, and life span. The child poverty rate of 20 percent in the U.S. is the highest of any industrial country, and blacks are three times more likely to be poor.² Is that because of a high birth rate which causes poverty? No, poverty causes a high birth rate.

The difference in the quality of secondary schooling is especially noticeable, and it correlates with affluence. Wealthy children are also more likely to attend private school and be “legacies” at colleges, the children of alumni – 54 percent overall and 75 percent at some places today. This is not as unbalanced as it used to be: Between 1906 and 1932 some 400 boys at Groton applied to Harvard, and virtually all were admitted; in 1932 Yale accepted 72 percent from blue-ribbon schools.

Nevertheless, admission preferences are still badly skewed. At Philips Exeter Academy, for example, 15 percent were admitted to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. In addition, the number of legacies has increased at those colleges. The “big three” are, in fact, the least academically diverse with a disproportionate number drawn from the top-tier.³

Elite colleges will also set aside slots for students who excel at the “tonier” sports such as riding, fencing, and crew racing, which are offered at private schools. The upper-class also marry within their own ranks, and award trust funds to their children. In this way they perpetuate their status across generations, maintaining a closed and genteel social order. Social scientists call it the “systematic preference of privilege” or “structural functionalism”: that society tends toward equilibrium rather than rewarding ability.

It is also well known that heavy donors to colleges as well as the offspring of wealthy alumni receive special consideration, in effect buying places for their children. To a lesser degree, the same is true of parents who can pay full tuition.

The Admissions Office always has an eye on the Development Office and it wants to come in on budget. Since it is a zero-sum game, poorer children have the cards stacked against them. The wealthy as well as the powerful, famous, and politically connected receive preferential treatment. ⁴

Of course, in human history t'was ever thus, with power having the last word. Even at the beginnings of our country the Pilgrims first fell upon their knees, then they fell upon the aborigines. But if we can shift the paradigm today toward greater fairness and justice, then we should do so.

A more subtle factor that is affected by wealth is intelligence – assuming intelligence or the 'g' factor is something genuine and not a measurement of the absorption of American culture. According to neurobiology, neurons make connections with neighboring neurons until the age of 16, during which time environmental stimuli is critical to intellectual development. After that the capacity of the brain to adapt its connections begins to diminish. ⁵

But this inherited intelligence is not immutable; to some degree it is plastic. It can be affected by various environmental elements: nutrition, gestation, birth weight, exposure to toxic chemicals (lead, alcohol, or drugs), peer groups, early education, and even music (the Mozart effect). Above all, the richness of the environment, and especially a home life conducive to learning, will strongly influence a student's cognitive ability and, in turn, his or her score on intelligence tests. ⁶

If access to elite universities depends on high scores on standardized tests, and the high scorers are those from wealthy homes with academic advantages, then equal opportunity becomes a sham. And if social *dis*advantages are increasing and preventing students from competing equally, then the educational system is a meritocracy in name only. As Daniel Golden writes, if you are a middle class youth or minority from poor circumstances, you have little chance of getting into an Ivy League school.

Students from the top 25 percent of wealthy households account for over 67 percent of all slots in the top 150 universities. ⁷ That does not mean that elite institutions admit only the elite, but they do so in disproportionate numbers. There is a thumb on the scale for class-based affirmative action.

The system is especially unjust if there is an enormous (and increasing) disparity in wealth and limited upward mobility. Then the bulk of the population is effectively denied access to the best universities.

The poorer applicants who experience disadvantages prior to admission are systematically excluded and cannot step foot on the ladder. As Lyndon B. Johnson put it, speaking of the Civil Rights Act, "You do not take a man who for years has been hobbled by chains, liberate him, bring him to the starting line of a race, saying 'You are free to compete with all the others'."

However, the counter argument is also persuasive if not compelling: Parents should have the freedom to pass on their advantages to their children, especially advantages that have been earned through their ability and effort. Not only do they have a right to the wealth they acquired, but the right to give their offspring all the benefits that accrue from that wealth. The children likewise are entitled to avail themselves of these privileges, even though this means they have an edge over other applicants.

Balzac says "Behind every great fortune is a crime," but that is an exaggeration. And we assume that wealth that has been honestly earned belongs to the person who earned it. This is the argument against the inheritance tax or "death tax," raising the tax rate for the wealthy, and against the progressive income tax in general. It is also the Republican objection to congressional efforts to raise the tax rate for mega-millionaires.

In addition, we don't want to lower admission standards at selective universities because we need excellence in education. We need cutting-edge research and scholarship and to remain competitive in the global economy. Society requires the most capable people in the most important occupations, what Talcott Parsons calls "social placement." To lower admission requirements may help the "doubtfuls" but it harms academic quality overall; it's the strawberry jam hypothesis: The wider you spread it, the thinner it gets.

Prestigious universities would soon cease to be prestigious if the less qualified, economically disadvantaged applicants were let in, and the better qualified, advantaged applicants were turned away. We need to maintain the excellence of our top universities, and that means admitting the wealthy.

Besides, achievement is not entirely a function of the environment. Some degree of ability is biologically inherited, which cannot be altered aside from the genetic engineering of *A Brave New World*. And hard work also plays a major role in achievement. Success is due, at least in part, to individual effort. We may argue about how much of a part, but we reject environmental determinism and affirm personal responsibility. Free will means the ability to decide what to do, freedom the ability to do what we decide, and we seem to possess both to a large degree.

Egalitarianism and democracy have their limits, it is argued. We do not ask the orchestra to vote on whether to have a crescendo.

I would like to suggest a way through the horns of the dilemma. Although we want to maintain academic quality and to keep it paramount, we might *modify* our admissions requirements for the sake of social justice.

1) For one thing, we could assess the promise of applicants along with their academic record. To some extent this is being done already, but we could weigh potential even more heavily as compared to credentials. For example, being in the top 1 percent of a poor school could count more than being ranked high in a good school in terms of what it says about aptitude and ambition. Succeeding in the harder courses is also a good indicator, as well as recommendations from a skilled teacher who recognizes potential.

2) We could also make allowances in admission for disadvantaged applicants who have lower GPAs and SATs. In other words, we could allow for the extent to which an underprivileged background is responsible for lower performance. We could have more "provisional admits" with longer dismissal times for students to prove themselves. And for this population remedial programs would be necessary, because admitting the less qualified while maintaining standards and not providing academic support would only set them up for failure. It goes without saying that we also need more money allocated to need-based scholarships and work-study programs.

3) Perhaps most radically we could take character into consideration as an educational value. Part of the goal of education should be to help form individuals whose ethical actions proceed from their moral character. And we certainly want our leaders to be people with a strong social conscience – those who are caring, humane, and otherwise "virtuous." Excellence as a person should count.

This approach has been somewhat tarnished by the practices of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the 1920s of heavily weighing nonacademic, subjective factors in order to stem the number of Jewish students. When applicants were judged on grades, a disproportionate percentage of Jews were accepted, "an alien, unwashed element." In the present day, Asian-Americans have charged discrimination for the same reason, and there is a distinct parallel.⁸

Nevertheless, that does not invalidate the practice. Harvard was doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, and we shouldn't be so afraid of making the same mistake that we make different ones. It could still be argued that a less qualified individual of outstanding character might be chosen over a more qualified one who lacks "redeeming social value."

Another objection is that talk about values always becomes conflated with religion, which can be problematic. But in fact, the two are distinct. As Socrates pointed out, the gods command actions because they are right; actions are not right because the gods command them. That is, ethics is autonomous and not derived from religion because a god would not issue commands arbitrarily but for good reasons. And people can endorse ethical principles while rejecting religion – a rejection, sometimes based on rational considerations. No one ever doubted the existence of God until St. Thomas tried to prove it.

Still another objection is that in this age of diversity there is little consensus on virtues and vices. To Taoists, seeking harmony is paramount; Christians extol selfless love; and in Islam, obedience is supreme. Plato favors courage, temperance, and wisdom, and Aristotle moderation (although it is virtuous to be angry at injustice). Postmodernists, of course, treat values as quaint. It is as though Santa Klaus' decision on who's naughty and who's nice merely reflects his male, Euro-centric bias.

Nevertheless, some virtues do not go out of style, and there is rough agreement on the value of honesty, gratitude, compassion, respect, generosity, tolerance, empathy, and understanding. In my view, ethics is ultimately about cruelty and kindness.

Such virtues can be identified in those who perform acts of service. For example, it speaks well for an applicant if he or she reports digging wells in Ethiopia, making audio tapes for the blind, rebuilding homes destroyed by Katrina, participating in literacy programs, and so forth. Work experience, leadership, volunteering, and citizenship could all matter, and athletics could count insofar as it breeds courage, sportsmanship, discipline, and teamwork.

Again, actions that demonstrate ethical makeup are already recognized by colleges, but such commitment could be emphasized more strongly. In an age of greed and self-interest we need to foster good character in our graduates, especially those who will take important positions in society.

In short, in college admissions I would like us to be more aware of the advantages of wealth, including early education, family enrichment, higher IQ, and as a consequence, higher scores on standardized tests. And I think we should make greater allowances for poorer students, from identifying a disadvantaged background and crediting potential to emphasizing good character as educationally important. I would like to see excellence separated from affluence, quality from snobbery, so that admission is based on worth rather than privilege.

As Jerome Karabel said, “the nation’s leading universities have a special responsibility to make real the American dream of upward mobility through education.”⁹

Notes

Shaw, William, *Business Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1992), 6/ed. 103ff.

The diversity movement has not offset the advantages of privilege since the wealthy still dominate; students of modest backgrounds are under-represented. See Meighan, R. and Siraj-Blatchford, I. *A Sociology of Education* (London: Cassell, 1997), and Karabel, Jerome *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

Soares, Joseph *The Power of Privilege* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007) 89.

Golden, Daniel, *The Price of Admission* (Three Rivers Press, 2007). See also Stevens, Mitchell *Creating a Class: College Admission and the Education of Elites* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Stevens refers to “the tendency of privileged families to hand privilege down to their children” 13.

Some psychologists such as Howard Gardner argue for multiple intelligences, such as spatial, bodily-kinetic, musical, interpersonal, and so forth, but the psychological community asserts a ‘g’ factor or general IQ that can be measured. See Gardner, Howard *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

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Golden, Daniel, *The Price of Admission*, 213.

Karabel, Jerome, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005).

Ibid, 541.