

Beyond Access:  
Cultural Capital's Increasing Significance in Selective College  
Admissions

By

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Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of Wesleyan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts  
With Departmental Honors in Sociology

## Table of Contents

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Acknowledgements.....	3
Introduction.....	4
Chapter One.....	12
Chapter Two.....	37
Chapter Three.....	75
Conclusion.....	140
Works Cited.....	159

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## Acknowledgements

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First and foremost, I must thank my advisor Daniel Long for his patience and tremendous support during this entire process. Despite his tremendously bad luck in having me as his first thesis advisee at Wesleyan, Professor Long has proven himself time and time again as a generous, kind and attentive advisor—truly, I am indebted.

Secondly, a warm, consoling thanks goes to my mother, whose deer-in-the-headlights countenance when we first visited a college campus together so many years ago inspired this whole thing. I am nothing without her blind, misguided confidence. If this year proves anything, I will look forward to another five years of endless voice mail asking “Is your dissertation done yet? Holly? Is it?”

A special thanks must go to all of the professors I’ve had the privilege of working with at Wesleyan. Particular recognition goes to Charles Lemert, Lynn Owens and Joel Pfister who have played a crucial role in guiding my growth from a terrified freshman into an equally terrified graduate student. I have no doubt that I will be thanking these gentlemen over and over again as I spend the next five (or six, seven) years writing that dissertation my mother thinks should be done by now.

Less visible but no less important to my efforts have been my friends. I thank Mitchell Goldfarb for his unwavering love and sympathy during a time that has been exceedingly trying on the both of us. I thank my housemates, Annalisa Bolin, Abby Hinchcliff, Lynn Favin and the honorary Cedric Bien for tolerating my 4am bedtime and my strange affinity for making animal sounds under duress. All of the beautiful ladies of both the Sociology and Government offices deserve their place here as they, too, were privy to my madness over the course of the last several years.

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## Introduction

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I occupy an incredibly small social category of low-income students attending an elite, private university. Carnevale and Rose (2004) found that approximately three percent of students at elite colleges come from the bottom quartile of the income distribution. Moreover, according to a study by Bowen and Bok (1998), less than one percent of the white students at elite schools come from this same category. Of my graduating class of over 700 students at Wesleyan University, given these statistics, less than seven of us walking during graduation will come from a background like mine.

For this reason, I suspect, this social category does not get much in the way of public or academic attention. Statistically, so very, very few of us who ever make it to such schools that even the most diligent of social scientists would have a difficult time tracking us down. However, this is not to say that such students do not occupy a particularly significant place in our society. What we represent to these institutions and the students within them is the embodiment of the American dream—that despite our backgrounds, we, too, can work hard and grab the brass ring. We legitimate the merit-based system upon which all academic legitimacy rests.

But the severe dearth of us at high-prestige schools should be hint enough towards where this research will be directed. The first question I hope the reader might ask is why we are so underrepresented by institutions which pledge to maintain fairness and uphold the virtue of academic meritocracy in their admissions practices. From this, there are so many other questions one might ask—is it because we do not, as a group, apply to the same extent as our peers from other classes? Is it because we

do not meet the expectations of the institution when we do apply? Are we going somewhere else for college? Are we, as a group, just not going to college? What is going on to perpetuate this inequality?

For my own project, I began with the information session as my initial research site because it paralleled my own foray into the admissions field as a high school junior visiting a college campus six years ago, having never before visited a college campus and not being familiar with what was expected of me once I arrived. What struck me that first time was a feeling of being completely out of place, not necessarily because I was around strangers, but because I was a 17-year-old unaccompanied by parents who seemed to be all around me in the Ivy League waiting room directing all social behavior. Of course, this experience came well before I would take my first sociology course in college, but at the time I remember how frighteningly alone I felt walking alone on the tour, not knowing what questions to ask for myself the parents seemed to be comfortable asking for their children.

During the information session, many facts and figures eluded me such as the significance of class sizes, meal plans, study-abroad in the college setting. And then I heard the question that I would hear in countless incarnations both then and now, “Do you take into consideration the difficulty of the student’s school as a factor? For example, if my son goes to a private school and gets a B, would that be counted the same as an A had he gone to a public school?” My eyes darted back to the admissions officer, searching his face for an explanation as to why I’m somehow different than that boy over there. Why should my A count less than his A? Is my school easier than his school? I thought calculus was hard enough as it is—are his math classes harder

than mine? Am I not cut out for this place? A thousand questions raced through my mind, filling my head with doubt about why I ever drove myself down here and why I ever thought I could maybe get accepted to an elite private school. “Yes, we take the student’s course rigor and school into consideration,” the admissions officer answered. Oh no! Maybe *that’s* why no one from my school ever went here.

What appeared to me that morning were numerous tacit exchanges flowing between parents and admissions staff, between parent and child about the expectations and norms of the process—as if I had stumbled into a secret club. My intensely alienating experience led me to begin asking questions about where, exactly, do people learn this stuff? Why didn’t I know this stuff? And from that point on, I vowed I would learn it if only to prove that I could because, as it would turn out, I would eventually become a sociology major at an elite, private university. Needless to say, then, my experience is actually quite far from the norm and my ultimate acceptance into that Ivy League and many of its peer institutions likely reflects more of my obstinacy than anything else.

I tell this story as a place for the reader to situate him- or herself while navigating a world that is often quite distant from that which towards we as low-income students are oriented. What is clear is that this process is objectively difficult, complex and stressful for everyone involved. But as McDonough (1997), Stevens (2007) and Sacks (2007) observe, low-income students are, for the most part, left to their own devices in navigating the transition from high school to college—if they make the transition at all. Conversely, they observe middle- and upper-class students increasingly guided through the process by knowledgeable external actors—most

significantly the parents. In this sense, their efforts are amplified by the efforts of others.

What is observed at information sessions conveys a status culture operating among privileged families and their approach to the college admissions process. This is not to generalize from a selected sample of elite schools, but rather to develop a starting point from which to examine how information works as capital among these families in their efforts to secure placement at an elite institution. Part of the difficulty in describing the rift between families of high cultural capital and low cultural capital is that there are rarely agents who can to mediate between the two worlds. As a first-generation college student from the lowest quartile of the income distribution, I am a member of a very small minority of students to ever attend the small constellation of schools which constitute the top tier of selective institutions. In this sense, much of what is normalized and rationalized to many of my peers appeared and in many ways still appears to me completely alien. In other ways, many of the obstacles frequently and effortlessly cleared by parents, I had to mow down myself.

What is relatively well known in describing the college admissions process is that no matter where you apply to college, you're expected to know a great deal. What you know is frequently objectified in the form of standardized tests and your grade point average. But what is equally apparent is that much of what the applicant is expected to know rests in a more nebulous cloud of tacit understandings, behaviors, norms and expectations that are infinitely more difficult to pin down, much less standardize. Pierre Bourdieu spent a considerable energy trying to explain the intangible qualities that are valued and rewarded by elite educational institutions but

not explicitly taught by the school itself. He hypothesized that the upper-class student picks up these qualities in the home either through unconscious or conscious inculcation by the family. For children outside of these elite homes, picking up such qualities comes later and is consequentially seen as less natural, more forced and thus less rewarded. Bourdieu argues that while the “precocious” student is prized by the institution, the institution “misrecognizes” the advantages the student receives via the home as his natural ability. In other words, the institution rewards the home as much as it rewards the student. This reality, he contends, results in much of the stratification of educational opportunity.

What first turned me on to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital in examining the stratification of higher education is that his approach to studying inequality problematizes what the advantaged *have* as much as it other studies dwell on what the disadvantaged *lack*. Part of his brilliance, in my opinion, stems from his ability to see what most of us are conditioned to relegate as the ordinary and expected as extraordinary and explosive.

What seems relatively difficult to ascertain is to what extent do different childrearing orientations influence the outcome of admissions. In other words, if we know from Annette Lareau (1987; 2000; 2003) that social class seems to dictate discreet childrearing behaviors in parents, how do such differences manifest themselves in the admissions process? What is clear to me from my experience is that the assistance and actions of parents and other significant others is an unpaid service very much ignored by the academic imagination. If we extend Lareau’s findings from the elementary school level to the high school years, we are likely to see evidence of

how differences in childrearing orientations affect if and where students apply and attend college.

With recent titles such as the *Panicked Parent's Guide to College Admissions* and *The Just-for-Parent's College Admissions Guide* and literally dozens of variants on the theme, the “college prep” section of the local bookstore seems geared as much towards parents as towards the aspiring applicant. In recent years, an industry burgeoned around parents willing to pay for resources, opportunities and services—such as exam preparation and service trips—all promising to increase their child's chances of gaining admittance into America's most selective colleges and universities. Moreover, admissions officers the nation over welcome the parent as an indissoluble partner alongside the applicant in the college search and application process. For most students applying to college today, the parent is seen as a much-needed collaborator during an increasingly competitive and stressful period of their young lives. However, parents differ both in their capability and willingness to help and unfortunately, such differentiation tends to reflect social class background.

To this end, this thesis seeks to explore how differences in parental cultural capital serve to perpetuate educational disadvantages for students applying to college. In so doing, it also challenges cultural capital theory as popularly conceived in English-speaking literature on educational achievement. In sum, this trend of scholarship, modeled after Paul DiMaggio's (1982) interpretation, seeks to correlate “highbrow” tastes and practices of the individual student with his likeliness to achieve academic success. However, Lareau (1987; 2000) challenged this dominant interpretation operating in contemporary analysis of cultural capital, arguing that it

neglected to recognize the institutional standards or the resources that a student draws upon from the home to help him or her reach those standards. In her empirical work (1987; 2000, 2003), she adopts an interpretation which more broadly encompasses the role of parents in helping children meet the standards imposed by their elementary schools and illustrates how such parental competency might itself be considered a form of cultural capital available to the student.

Hence, in expounding upon Lareau's original research of elementary-aged children, I propose that class differences in childrearing persist well into the child's late adolescence, specifically during those years which demarcate the college admissions process. Accordingly, I follow what Lareau and Weininger (2003) identified as an alternative form of cultural capital operating in recent sociological research (e.g., Reay 1998; McDonough 1997). Their account of cultural capital as it operates in education first necessitates a rich understanding of the evaluative standards imposed by the school and secondly, the identification of the resources, knowledge and dispositions which enable students unequally to comply with those standards. As the authors argue, future "studies must document variations among students and parents in their ability to meet the standards held by educators" (588).

Thus, one could easily imagine the college admissions process as a formalized evaluation of one's ability to meet and exceed institutional standards and expectations. While many factors are considered, those students who can best demonstrate their "merit" in their application are those students most likely to gain admission. However, as Jerome Karabel (2005) contends, what has historically constituted merit at the nation's most prestigious schools has long reflected the

existing values and behaviors of the upper classes. Though these criteria shift over time, he argues that the persistent dearth of low-income students at these schools speaks of continual discrimination in what constitutes merit. Despite this, my corollary contention is (no matter how arbitrary the standards) those students whose parents recognize and are able to help them meet those standards are those students given a hidden edge over their peers. As a group, these parents—predominately of the middle- and upper-classes—in acting to support their children’s best interests, may inadvertently be “elbowing” out qualified poor and working-class students who lack this form of cultural capital. As Samuel Lucas (2001) described, these actions may likely contribute in some fashion to the institutionalized class segregation among America’s most elite schools.

In this sense, this thesis is organized in such a way to introduce the reader to the significance of cultural capital theory in observing educational inequity. The second chapter discusses the evolution of selective college admissions and how such changes have altered the opportunity structure over time to ultimately accommodate the childrearing habits of the New Class and encourage the investment of cultural capital. Lastly, the third chapter discusses the current selective admissions environment and the opportunity structure it presents to students across class lines in America.

**The Invisible Elbow in Cultural Capital Theory:  
Reexamining the Role of the Parent in Light of Higher Education  
Inequity**

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One of the more obvious sites of both social and educational exclusion in America is the college admissions process. Indeed, entry into the nation's most prestigious institutions is so highly coveted that admissions offices at these schools receive many times as many applications for admittance than can ever possibly be accommodated. For example, in creating the undergraduate class of 2011, Amherst College admitted only 17.5 percent of applicants while Brown University admitted only 14 percent.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, as one admissions officer at Harvard admitted, while over 90 percent of the students who apply each year are academically qualified to study at their institution, they admit only 9 percent of them.<sup>2</sup> Given the complexity of admissions decisions at these institutions which takes into consideration standardized test scores, teacher recommendations, class rankings, extracurricular activities, supplemental essays and interviews, among countless other factors, it is little wonder why many parents, students and education professionals view the process as a "black box" of sorts, where variables go in, but no reliable formula for admissions comes out. Hence, few seem satisfied by functionalist interpretations which argue that these

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<sup>1</sup> "Enrollment Statistics." Amherst College. 17 Nov. 2007

<[http://www.amherst.edu/admission/important\\_info/enrollment\\_stats.html](http://www.amherst.edu/admission/important_info/enrollment_stats.html)>; "Applying to Brown." Brown University 17 Nov 2007

<<http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Admission/applyingtobrown/admissioncriteria.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Author's observation of information sessions given to the public twice a day; "Harvard College: Admissions." Princeton Review 17 Nov 2007

<<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/research/profiles/admissions.asp?listing=1022984&ltid=1&intbucketid=>>

schools take the cream of the academic crop given how many highly qualified students are rejected each year.

However, one consistency at America's most selective schools is the demographic under-representation of poor and working-class students and overrepresentation of students from the upper classes. According to one recent study, Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose (2004) unveiled startling statistics derived from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study illustrating the sheer dearth of low-income students attending America's most selective colleges.<sup>3</sup> Scarcely three percent of students enrolled in the 146 schools that constitute the first tier of institutions in America come from the bottom quartile of the socioeconomic scale while only a total of nine percent of enrolled students come from the bottom half of the scale. Conversely, nearly three-fourths of the students attending these selective schools hail from the top quarter of the scale (106). Similarly, 64 percent come from the top tenth of the income distribution in America (Soares 2007, 167). Though he focuses on Yale's historical admissions policies, Joseph Soares notes that these schools "share with Yale a similar socioeconomic market. All of them understand, reluctantly or complacently, that their 'natural clientele' are families with high incomes" (168). Hence, there exists a clear monopolization of seats at the nation's most prestigious colleges and universities held by society's most privileged youth.

Since the Coleman Report (Coleman et al. 1966) in its examination of educational inequity unsettlingly revealed that the single most influential variable in

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<sup>3</sup> Carnevale and Rose evaluate a school's selectivity as defined by *Barron's: Profiles of American Colleges*, 24<sup>th</sup> ed. (2000). These institutions, considered the first and second tiers of higher education, constitute 10 percent of the nation's approximately 1,400 four-year schools and account for little more than a third of all college students (pp.102-103).

determining academic success is family background social scientists and policymakers have struggled to explain how home advantage translates into the classroom (Jencks et al. 1972; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Sewell and Hauser 1980). To this end, many educationalists have turned their attention towards the home, seeking out how family life affects academic achievement. However, while many resulting studies repeatedly demonstrate the relationship between socioeconomic status and educational attainment, few studies observe the qualitative practices and behaviors which might account for this correlation. As French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1974) contended, “Simply stating the fact of educational inequality is not enough. We need a description of the objective processes which continually exclude children from the least privileged classes” (32).

One factor typically implied by researchers in studying the effect of social background on educational outcomes but rarely examined in the college admissions process is the role of the parent. Pierre Bourdieu (1974; 1977; 1984; 1986; 1996) continually argued that social class has significant bearing on the economic, social and cultural resources a family can provide for during a child’s intellectual development. Furthermore, these differences in assets account for differential outcomes in educational attainment; for he argues that the home environment of the dominant classes is so much more aligned with the values of the educational institution. As he explains:

The culture of the elite is so near to that of the school that children from the lower middle class (and *a fortiori* from the agricultural and industrial working class) can only acquire with great effort something which is given to the children of the cultivated classes—style, taste, wit—in short, those attitudes and aptitudes which seem natural in members of the cultivated classes and naturally expected of them

precisely because (in the ethnological sense) they are the *culture* of that class. (1974, 39)

Bourdieu proposes that in order for educationalists to truly understand educational inequities, they must first observe how the institutions—whether intentionally or otherwise—serve to privilege the already privileged in rewarding the cultural training students receive in the home. His complex analysis points to the *interaction* between the structure of education and the agents operating within it as the focus of his research. Hence, much of Bourdieu's body of work demonstrates how the socialization students receive in the home can be converted into a resource and invested to turn social profit. In this way, he concluded that the educational system mediates in the reproduction of privilege and has taken on the role of legitimizing the ruling class through the conferral of credentials and prestige.

Hence, in his attempt to conceptualize this home advantage, Bourdieu developed the theory of cultural capital. As he explains:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (1986, 243)

By this, he employs the term to describe a wide array of features: the tastes, practices, habits, ideas, competencies and behaviors considered indigenous to one's particular class culture and which enable social actors to reap social profit. Like currency, cultural capital's exchange value is based upon the worth a market attributes to it and Bourdieu's basic premise is that the educational market disproportionately values the cultural capital these elites bring to the table relative to that of the less powerful. In

other words, the academic advancement of the privileged is relatively guaranteed as familial socialization “steeps” the child in the “correct” culture awarded by the schools.

The works of Bourdieu have inspired a generation of English-speaking sociologists to apply his concept of cultural capital to their own research, particularly within the realm of educational stratification. However, there is no general consensus among scholars as to what, exactly, cultural capital refers. Hence, to speak of cultural capital and its impact on educational attainment it is first necessary to discuss how the concept has been framed by English-speaking scholars and then to assess how effective this interpretation has fared in regards to explaining the academic achievement gap between classes.

In their examination of the cultural capital literature, Annette Lareau and Elliot B. Weininger (2003) identified a dominant interpretation operating within contemporary sociological research. They trace this to the works of Paul DiMaggio, specifically referencing his 1982 article in which he demonstrates a favorable relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement. For his part, DiMaggio (1982) agrees with Bourdieu that something distinct from sheer ability is at play in determining a student’s chances for academic success. To help him examine this possibility, DiMaggio channels Max Weber’s (1968) notion of status culture, contending that “elite status groups...generate or appropriate as their own specific distinctive cultural traits, tastes, and styles” which allows the group to maintain social dominance and distinction “by providing coherence to existing social networks and facilitating the development of comembership, respect, and affection out of which

new networks are constructed” (189). DiMaggio relates this to Bourdieu’s cultural capital theory by proposing that students who, because of their familiarity with elite status culture, are most favorably viewed by teachers who then “perceive them as more intelligent or gifted than students who lack cultural capital” (190). Within this study, DiMaggio finds that a high level of participation in elite status culture does positively correlate with high grades and educational achievement.

DiMaggio (1982) thus constructs a measure of cultural capital by assessing a student’s “involvement in art, music and literature,” arguing that these “represent the most popular of the prestigious art forms” (191). He justifies this measure by referencing a previous study (DiMaggio and Useem 1978) which found that “Patterns of art museum visitation, concert attendance, and literature reading in the United States are similar to those found in France and other western countries, with attendance and reading concentrated in the upper middle and upper classes” (191).

While this instinct is understandable given Bourdieu’s particular emphasis on these activities in his own empirical studies (1977; 1984), the difficulty of DiMaggio’s definition, as Lareau and Weininger will argue, is that it unnecessarily conflates cultural capital with “prestigious” tastes and behaviors (2003, 574). Moreover, DiMaggio does not demonstrate the processes through which teachers “reward” elite aesthetic tastes and misrecognize it as competency. Hence, aside from an assumption that teachers obliquely smile upon such participation, this study fails to convey the processes through which the institution identifies and rewards elite status culture embodied by the student. While exhibiting these traits may very well earn a child a membership at his father’s golf club, there is no explanation as to how, for

example, one's participation in ballet class yields high exam scores. Given this analytical limitation, DiMaggio offers that cultural capital can provide a "boost" in a student's performance in non-technical subjects such as English and social studies where "evaluation is likely to be relatively subjective" but is less influential in technical subjects such as math or science as these necessitate objective evaluation of specific skills (199). In other words, the student must be in a position vis-à-vis the teacher that would allow her the opportunity to exhibit her cultural competencies in order to get "credit" for her elite status participation.

DiMaggio undoubtedly recognized the potential of cultural capital in understanding social reproduction of inequality. But by conflating cultural capital to familiarity with prestigious aesthetic practices, he may have unintentionally narrowed the definition of cultural capital as popularly conceived by the discipline. After examining the English-language literature on cultural capital, Lareau and Weininger (2003) thoroughly trace a dominant interpretation of cultural capital repeatedly attributed to DiMaggio's 1982 piece running throughout most contemporary models of cultural capital and educational attainment (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; De Graaf, De Graaf and Kraaykamp 2000; Dumais 2002; Kaufman and Gabler 2004; among others) According to their analysis, this dominant interpretation relies upon two premises introduced by DiMaggio: first, cultural capital is largely linked to familiarity with prestigious, "highbrow" cultural practices, particularly those in the arts. Secondly, there is persistent understanding that cultural capital must be considered separately from other influencing factors, particularly that of "merit," or academic ability.

Lareau and Weininger contend that this interpretation is inconsistent with Bourdieu's own conceptualization of cultural capital theory and in many ways limits the theory's future scholarly potential for explaining class-based differences in academic achievement. Rather, as Bourdieu later developed the concept (1986), cultural capital referred to forms of cultural competency possessed by the dominant members of society which allow them to procure certain social advantages or profits. Additionally, within this same essay, Bourdieu notes that because cultural capital is intimately linked to the individual and subject to "hidden" intergenerational transmission, "it thus manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition" (245). For this reason, it is near impossible for researchers to divorce cultural capital from ability, since it is very much a learned competency, accumulated hereditarily through the prolonged investment of both cultural and economic resources of the parent. However, it can be recognized, in large part, by observing how such cultural competencies are cultivated and employed in the transmission of advantage from one generation to the next.

Thus, Lareau and Weininger advocate for a broader definition of cultural capital which can encompass the process of this transmission. As they contend, to capture the full potential of cultural capital theory operating in education, researchers must first examine the evaluative standards imposed by academic institutions in America. Secondly, they must identify the resources available through the family which unequally enable them to meet those standards. Given this, they widen the spotlight of social action from the individual student to the actions of the parent (or guardian). In this way, the focus of agency is no longer solely on the passive

reception of cultural capital by the child, but the active process of investment by the parent. This allows for researchers to identify through observation non-“highbrow” practices and behaviors such as supplementing classroom instruction with extra tutoring at the kitchen table, the assistance in constructing science fair entries, or even feeling comfortable during a parent-teacher conference as forms of cultural capital held by the parent which likely contribute to academic success. By broadening the spotlight of cultural capital theory to include parental involvement in schooling, sociologists can better recognize the mechanisms through which intergenerational privilege is maintained.

However, in following DiMaggio’s model, researchers have become preoccupied with identifying habits of prestigious cultural consumption on the part of the student and relating this to academic achievement at various levels. While many have illustrated a positive association between such practices and academic success, they have failed to explain why this association occurs. As Lareau (2000) contends, this largely individualistic approach to capturing cultural capital fails “to demonstrate the standards of social institutions which, according to the concept, are infused with the family life and experiences of the privileged social class. Nor does it show how an individual’s class position provides advantages (i.e., resources) that help him/her comply with the standards of the institution” (5).

Richard Harker (1990) explains that a frequent mistake of scholars is the attempt to uproot Bourdieu from his French origins and transpose him intact into foreign situations. As he explains, rather, “his method demands that empirical realities be faced in ethnographic detail,” thus “those who would invoke Bourdieu’s method

must put it up against the evidence of their own educational reality—reconstruct their own field and try to discern the precise forms of capital, and the kinds of strategies operative within it” (99). As he concludes, “Bourdieu’s work on France cannot be taken as a substitute for this new empirical requirement” (99). DiMaggio himself cautioned future scholars of cultural capital to first observe the habits of upper classes before deciding what constitutes elite culture and developing a causal model, arguing that his analysis of highbrow aesthetic consumption is only “the best alternative” in lieu of an absence of empirical observation of elite status culture (191). However, as Lareau notes in her own study of the literature, few scholars have taken on this task. Consequently, many of these scholars in assuming that the practices and behaviors that Bourdieu observed exhibited by the children of the French elites transfer into the culture of American elite have thus erred in their transposition of Bourdieu’s theory. As Harker insists, the key to successfully applying Bourdieu to non-French fields is to ask his questions, not necessarily to find his answers.

Thus, in her research, Lareau takes on the challenge of observation and in so doing, diverges from the dominant interpretation of cultural capital. In many ways, she attempts to articulate Bourdieu’s method of enquiry with her distinct American accent, stepping away from his empirical analysis set in France by conducting her own. Like Bourdieu, she recognizes that many researchers have already demonstrated a statistical relationship between social class and education, but contends that “statistical models contain many ‘empty places’ with no indication of how particular individuals will fill these places” (2000, 4). Given this, it might be said that these empty places left by statistical analysis provide Lareau the opportunity to conduct her

own empirical research and in so doing, avoid the pitfalls Harker laid out in transposing Bourdieu to the American school system.

Essentially, there exist two critical departures from the dominant interpretation in Lareau's two most recent books, *Home Advantage* (2000) and *Unequal Childhoods* (2003). In sum, while DiMaggio's (1982) analysis of cultural capital implies a relatively exclusive interaction consisting of the teacher "recognizing" the cultural capital embodied by the student, Lareau's assessment leaves room to see the potential role of the parent in interceding directly in between this interaction. For example, this intervention allows parents to secure short-term benefits, such as getting an extension for an assignment or helping the child prepare a science project, and long-term benefits, such as getting the child enrolled into the gifted and talented program. Lareau argues that middle- and upper-class parents, unlike working-class and poor parents, "routinely scanned the horizon for opportunities" to activate their cultural capital and in so doing regularly accrued advantage on behalf of their children (2003, 180).

In her second departure, Lareau examines how what "counts" as cultural capital in America may differ from what Bourdieu observed in France and yet similarly yields unequal rewards by the school. Whereas DiMaggio focuses on involvement in "prestigious" activities as indicative of cultural capital, Lareau departs from this, offering that much of what is rewarded by the institution is not necessarily the "prestige" of the activities as such. Rather, she makes notes note of how American parents perceive seemingly "middlebrow" activities such as gymnastics or cub scouts as equally important as "highbrow" activities such as piano or French

lessons in garnering social benefits for their children. For example, many of the middle-class parents interviewed in *Unequal Childhoods* approved of athletic involvement because such activities promoted skills they saw as highly valued by their culture, such as competitiveness and assertiveness with authority figures. To this end, parents recognized involvement in organized activities, prestigious or otherwise, ultimately “groomed” their children to meet future institutional evaluation.

Thus, while adopting Bourdieu’s (1977) main question of how schools unequally reward the social and cultural resources of students of different class backgrounds, Lareau adapted her research towards studying specifically how social class influences parental involvement in American education. In *Home Advantage* (2000), she identifies two generally contrasting approaches to schooling existent between working-class and middle-class families. While parents from both classes value education and hope their children succeed, working-class parents see their role as one separate from that of the teacher and defer to the institution for the educational development of the child. Conversely, parents from the middle-classes, objectively better educated and thus more confident than lower-class parents in an academic setting, feel more comfortable both negotiating the expectations of the institution and intervening on their child’s behalf when these expectations are not being met. Lareau offers that these variances in attitudes tend to yield unequal benefits for children as the expectations of teachers and other education officials seem more closely aligned with the practices of the latter. For instance, Lareau notes that teachers tend to view the education of a child as a full-time commitment, which occurs both at school with the teacher and is to be continued unabated at home by the parents. While most

middle- and upper-class parents strongly act upon this belief of interconnectedness, taking an active role in assisting with homework or providing enrichment activities such as music or foreign language lessons after school, working-class and poor parents tend to see the home and school as distinct entities and rely almost entirely on the school to provide for the full education of their children. Moreover, these parents often lack the resources of their wealthier counterparts in providing such a home environment, frequently unable to afford the luxury of tutors, lessons or recreation fees. Furthermore, many low-income parents expressed their own limited educational competency in assisting their children with work at home. As one such mother explained her shortcomings in elementary-level math:

I feel that it is the teacher's job to help her as much as possible to understand it because I know that I won't be able to...I can sit down and try to help her figure it out, but I don't think that I'll be able to help her like I should be able to. (Lareau 2000, 108)

In this way, the teacher's belief about the role of the parent was often inconsistent with how many of the low-income parents perceived their own place and their capability to provide such support. This incongruity tended to have very real consequences for the student, particularly when the teacher relied on the parent to bring an unsuccessful student up to par with institutional standards, frequently resulting in ultimate retention of the student or placement in a remedial or special education program. Conversely, the students of the upper classes are more likely to succeed in school in part because of their parental "home advantage."

In *Unequal Childhoods* (2003) Lareau takes her research literally into the home, where she documents the childrearing habits of both working-class and the middle-class families. After observing the behavior of twelve families across class

lines, Lareau proposed that the child-rearing practices of the middle and upper classes tend to reflect what she terms *concerted cultivation*, or a tendency of parents to take active control over one's child's social and intellectual development. Without much exaggeration, children raised in this environment can expect to have their lives scheduled and planned from the womb. From piano lessons to soccer practice to French tutoring, Lareau describes the middle-class childhood as one highly structured towards the end goal of "cultivating" skills they recognize as valued by institutions with which the child will come into contact. These parents, often highly educated, consciously nurture advanced language and reasoning skills in their frequent dialogue with their children, often soliciting their opinions and inquiring about their daily lives. Likewise, these parents often provide extracurricular opportunities mindful of the skills that their children will acquire. As one mother rationalizes her son's involvement in athletics: "Sports provide great opportunities to learn how to be competitive. Learn how to accept defeat. Learn how to accept winning, in a gracious way. Also it gives him the opportunity to learn leadership skills and how to be a team player" (Lareau 2003, 113). However, while such parents "know" the social worth of these activities, it is also crucial to point out their actual financial costs. In assessing the yearly costs of one child's involvement in his wide array of extracurricular activities, a middle-class father estimated he spent approximately \$4,000 in 1994 dollars (Lareau 2003, 59).

On the other hand, Lareau describes a different parenting strategy practiced by the working- and poverty-class families she observed. The burdens of daily life, such as securing housing, food, medicine, childcare, etcetera, are exacerbated among these

classes by the insecurity of financial resources. This unintentional, yet necessary preoccupation with familial security and welfare, Lareau implies, allows for this break between adult and child affairs which grants the child considerably more freedom in structuring his daily activities than his wealthier peers. This concept of childhood autonomy and self-designed development Lareau terms the *accomplishment of natural growth*. However, these children do not enjoy the same opportunities as their middle- and upper-class peers in regards to institutionalized extracurricular activities, such as organized sports or music lessons, largely due to the constraints of time, energy and financial resources of the family.

While one could easily list the humanist advantages of self-discovery, self-valorization and personal liberty to be found in the latter parental style, Lareau asserts that the American educational system as designed specifically rewards the former. By this, she echoes Bourdieu in stating, “Cultural training in the home is awarded unequal value in dominant institutions because of the close compatibility between the standards of child rearing in privileged homes and the (arbitrary) standards proposed by these institutions” (2003, 276). For example, teachers seem to reward more readily a child’s participation in adult-organized activities than other forms of leisure. As Lareau writes:

Adults give organized events such as tournaments and dance recitals more weight than informal play by children, such as playing ball in the yard or watching television. When children volunteer to teachers that they watched particular television shows or that they played an informal game with cousins the previous day, teachers did not express the same level of interest or approval that they do when the children reveal their involvement in an organized activity. (2003, 25)

Thus, Lareau's works help us more clearly see how cultural capital operates in social reproduction theory, that of both the student and the parent. While Lareau identifies how parents activate their cultural competencies gained throughout their own successful educational and professional careers in order better prepare them for election by the school, the behaviors and practices she identifies as cultural capital are rarely indicative of what recent scholars would consider "highbrow." Rather these habits are largely neutral in terms of prestige, but "elite" in the sense that they generate profit within the institutional setting. Lareau's work, however, focused exclusively on elementary-aged children. One must speculate how these advantages and disadvantages play out at the more advanced level.

### **Evidence of "Elbowing" Behavior**

Acting en masse, such behavior on the part of upper- and middle-class parents may potentially come at the expense of poor and working-class students. Indeed, there is some evidence of this in research examining how middle and high school students ultimately end up in their prescribed academic "tracks." In this way, the invisible hand of the parent transforms into the invisible elbow, knocking down low-income students who rarely have advocates working on their behalf.

Elizabeth Useem (1992) describes that students whose parents possess greater stores of institutional knowledge are more likely to be placed themselves in the highest academic tracks. In examining how students are placed in differentiated math courses in the seventh grade, she suggests that parental educational attainment correlates significantly with the level of math placement of their children. Here, she

illustrates how this works by demonstrating a link between the mother's educational attainment and her accurate knowledge of the tracking process and thus her ability to influence and/or intervene in the grouping process. In her study, 70 percent of the mothers of children placed in the lowest ability group either could not identify the ability grouping of their child or understand that it was the lowest track. Of these mothers, 79 percent did not possess a college degree (269). Useem argues that because many of these mothers themselves lacked the background in advanced mathematics, they found it difficult to discern the differences between math courses and ability groupings and thus also struggled to recognize the long-term consequences low ability tracking may have for their child (270). Useem concludes that parental educational attainment significantly influences the student's placement among classes and demonstrates how such education provides parents with the cultural capital to mediate on their child's behalf in order to secure the best possible placement.

Hence, middle- and upper-class parents play an important role in the reproduction of educational inequalities, as they are more adept than the students themselves at securing social profit. Scholars have noticed that in their efforts to procure distinction and individualized attention for their children, parents tend to successfully manipulate the institution into adapting to meet their particular class needs, often to the detriment of those students without such advocates, particularly those from the lower classes. Furthermore, efforts to provide greater equality of access through all levels of education are met with resistance by socially advantaged parents. In an extensive three-year study of ten diverse districts struggling to

“detrack” their curriculums in order to “bring up” remedial students to more rigorous standards, Wells and Oakes (1996) identified two themes thwarting such an effort: a parental demand for differentiation and their expressed preference for the stratification of higher education (138). In observing parent-teacher association meetings, they describe parents’ reluctance to detracking as it takes away from their children’s social advantages over their peers. As the authors explain, “Generally, they want to know what their children will ‘get’ that other students will not have access to” (138). They offer that the efforts of well-intentioned education officials are often angrily opposed by the parents of high-achieving students (and by virtue of their presence at P.T.A. meetings, “involved” parents) to elevate all students to advanced standing, as typified by this response offered by one parent: "What else is my child going to get? Because if the advanced curriculum is the base...he's supposed to get something extra" (138). Thus they conclude pessimistically:

Parental resistance to policies aimed at significantly improving opportunities for students in lower-level classes generally plays out along racial, social class, and cultural lines, with White and/or wealthy, well-educated, and politically powerful parents pressuring administrators of schools and districts to maintain separate and unequal classes for their children, leaving non-White and poorer students in classes that are, by definition, less challenging and meaningful. (138)

Unfortunately, this thirst for distinction early on often has long-term consequences for these poorer students as tracking into academic versus non-academic tiers of course selection often determines to which, if any, institutions of higher education the student will eventually apply. However, again, we see an instance in which the cultural competencies of the parent are translated into real gains for the student,

further supporting a broader interpretation of cultural capital in understanding educational inequity.

### **Activating Cultural Capital in College Admissions**

Given the evidence Lareau (2003) presents about the two distinct attitudes towards child-rearing practices, one might conclude that the children of working-class and poor backgrounds, raised in an environment of natural growth and whose parents demonstrate a hesitancy and even a certain unwillingness to get involved in their children's academic affairs, may face increasing obstacles in the college admissions process compared to those students whose parents take a more forceful approach. Lareau (2000, 2003) describes how educational policies that rely more heavily upon parental supervision in the home work to the advantage of middle- and upper-class students whose parents already actively participated in the educational process. In a competitive, complex college admissions environment which increasingly necessitates and even encourages parental involvement, we can speculate as to how these same disadvantages play out in admissions decisions.

As Patricia McDonough (1997) observed, high school guidance departments assume a relatively high degree of family knowledge about college decision-making, regardless of class background. Consequently, these assumptions "that all students will be able to rely on families to supplement school information leaves a lot to chance" for low-income students whose families lack such information. As in-school guidance facilities become less involved in directing college decisions and stretch their services to accommodate a larger population of students, this leads to problems

for many working-class and poor students who have few other resources to draw upon for advice. As McDonough explains “A first-generation college-bound senior is operating in what for her is uncharted waters and is facing a high degree of uncertainty, both in what college choices to make and how to make appropriate ones” (100).

In this same way, I propose that college admissions offices similarly assume that applicants typically have access to informed adults during the application process. Often, students are encouraged by admissions officers to talk to their parents about making college choices and assessing their candidacy. Likewise, as McDonough found, public high school counselors expect the family to provide students with the information they need to make such decisions. This situation leaves many low-income students in a precarious position relative to their wealthier peers whose families do reflect the expectations of the institutions.

Hence, while commercial college “experts” such as Elizabeth Wissner-Gross (2006), author of *What Colleges Don't Tell You (And Other Parents Don't Want You to Know): 272 Secrets for Getting Your Kid into the Top Schools*, insist that even the most talented and privileged of students needs a firm guiding hand during the college application process, often, low-income students receive almost no such support in their endeavor. The image of college admissions frequently portrayed by such commercial analysts is fiercely competitive and complex—nearly impossible for a student to navigate on her own. As Wissner-Gross writes:

Granted, not all parents are equally capable of helping...That may be, but don't be fooled into thinking that some of the most successful kids just make it on their own. Very, very few do nowadays—no matter

how independent their parents claim they are. Your extremely competent, deserving high school student needs your help. (3)

Therefore, the author encourages active parental involvement in managing nearly all aspects of the student's application for in the zero-sum game of admissions that she portrays, any mistake is tantamount to rejection and failure. While likely a hyperbole, this sentiment is frequently echoed in similar texts and in my preliminary interviews with admissions officers, they have cited that they feel this is the dominant perception among applicants and parents with whom they have spoken.

Wissner-Gross anticipates the argument I and others might bring to bear that students whose parents take an active part are unequally advantaged compared to students whose parents are unable or unwilling to mediate the application process. Instead, she recodes her defense, arguing, "similarly, nowadays, students who have sought help in the application process are sometimes viewed by others—particularly less successful applicants—as unfairly stacking the deck, rather than as good delegators, team players, or initiative-takers," (xvii). But because of the efforts of parents occupying an increasingly larger role in the application process—for example, sending their children to applicant essay-writing summer camps, hiring private admissions management consultants, micro-managing of a student's extracurricular activities, etcetera—the stigma attached to over-involvement is fading. Now, she explains (almost backhandedly) that it is expected that as a "savvy" parent, you are obligated by your position to intervene:

The current generation generally has come to expect heavy adult participation and no longer looks down on parental involvement as a sign of weakness. As this approach becomes the majority thinking of the applicant pool, involved parents are viewing their children's college applications in marketing terms. In fact, many savvy parents

would say that lack of parental involvement or supervision in the application process is irresponsible. (xvi)

She concludes, “While the parents of the Baby Boomers and Xers emphasized the importance of independence, today’s parents are generally less concerned about independence and more focused on the family collaboration as a way to beat the competition” (xvii).

In this, we see evidence of Lucas’s (2001) theory of effectively maintained inequality, in which the behaviors which seek out individual advantage become normalized throughout the social class and work towards securing class-based inequalities in education. Additionally, we see how parents draw on their cultural capital in securing such advantages and in fact, actively supplement their stores by reading “how-to” guides and hiring out private counselors and coaches. Thus, in an effort to examine how inequity persists in higher education in light of this evidence, I contend one critical place to begin is the parent.

### **Research Goals**

In my research, I seek to observe how parental activation of cultural capital operates in the college admissions process. As Lareau and Weininger (2003) suggest, in order to more fully capture its influence, I will both examine the institutional standards sought and rewarded by the admissions office and the actions and cultural resources actors bring to bear in meeting those standards (586). Thus, my research into the college admissions process seeks to examine the strategies carried out by middle- and upper-class parents in securing a place for their children at America’s most selective undergraduate schools. Part of this research will take into

consideration the role of institutions in serving, encouraging and facilitating parents in these efforts as I see this process as a dynamic interchange between the institution and applicant. Therefore, I take a multifaceted qualitative approach to examining this process, including a content analysis of popular literature directed at and consumed by elite parents, an ethnographic analysis of the college admissions offices at several elite schools, and interviews with college admissions officers positioned at these schools as well as with high school guidance counselors.

My objective throughout this project is to demonstrate how Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital remains highly relevant in the discussion of how class differences manifest themselves in the demographic characteristics at elite colleges. As noted, there exist two approaches to this subject by sociologists. In my research into the process, I plan to evaluate which of these proves more accurate in describing the operative reality of student selection. If the dominant interpretation appears to be in effect, then we should see a selective emphasis placed on participation in and knowledge of "prestigious" status culture. If the alternative interpretation is more accurate, then we should expect to see more of an emphasis placed on identifying evidence of "concerted cultivation." The distinction being that the childrearing practice of concerted cultivation presumes less of a passive saturation of the applicant in elite culture, but rather the active transmission of cultural knowledge and technical skill from parent to child.

From my preliminary research, while I certainly find evidence of both approaches, the alternative approach seems most accurate in describing the current reality of college admissions. Nonetheless, there is indication that participation in

elite status culture is still rewarded advantage. However, these signals I observe are rarely the central focus of the process; rather, admissions officers take a great deal of care to ensure that the process appears open and egalitarian. Instead, the signals of elite status culture seem less important during the actual selection process than in the *self-selection* phase of the college admissions process, when the student assesses his or her own candidacy for the institution. For example, at the admissions office of Amherst College, the only reading material available to parents and applicants besides the admissions guidebook were copies of *The New Yorker*, a relatively “highbrow” magazine. While probably unintentional, my thesis will later address how “hidden” signals like these often serve to facilitate the “cooling out” of poor and working-class students early in the process.

Much more important during the full duration of the admissions process seems to be the broader interpretation of cultural capital advocated by Lareau and Weininger (2003) which not only expands what “counts” as cultural capital but also allows the researcher to observe the active process of “investment” of parental cultural capital. Much of what the admissions committee seeks to reward is the total culmination of such cultivation. For instance, referencing the importance of tracking mentioned above, all admissions officers advise specifically that potential applicants take the most rigorous courses their high school has to offer as they see advanced placement and honors courses as prime preparation for college-level work. As Useem (1992) demonstrated, parents with higher cultural capital are both those most likely to recognize the long-term benefits of advanced tracking and those most likely to ensure that their children are placed in those tracks. Better educated parents tend to have a

significantly better feel for the “game” of college admissions than their less educated peers and can better guide their child through the process. My research will illustrate how the process assumes both cultural and technical competencies from the applicant which at times may be complemented or enhanced by those of the parent (or other actors enlisted by the parent). However, for many students (particularly poor and working-class students), these advantages may not be equally available. Hence, ultimately, my thesis seeks to explore how despite societal insistence of academic meritocracy, the process nonetheless confers advantage to students whose social background provides them with access to adult cultural capital.

## 2

**The History of Selective Admissions and the Threat to Moral Legitimacy**

It is not possible to discuss the admission selection criteria of elite schools without discussing, at least briefly, what historical developments led to their implementation. While today we take for granted the Ivy League's perceived prominence in the collegiate universe and ability to turn away numerous students each year, for most of their existence, Harvard, Yale and Princeton have never been able to turn away a qualified applicant. Their relatively short history of selective admissions is one unfortunately and without exaggeration wrought in controversy, racism, classism, sexism, and religious intolerance. Many—if not most—of the criteria and tactics currently employed by elite institutions in drawing a freshmen class were created during a much different era, one during which the chief concern among administrators was the maintenance of racial, religious and socioeconomic homogeneity largely oriented around the WASP ideal. Unfortunately, many of these tactics in devising a freshmen class remain as institutionalized components of the admissions process and for this reason warrant analysis of where admissions criteria has come from throughout the years.

The origins of many of America's most selective institutions are often considerably humble. For example, Amherst College—currently ranked as America's top liberal arts college—began as a charity school with the mission of offering “indignant young men of piety and talents” the classical training necessary for the ministry (Levine and Nidiffer 1996, 39). However, as Rudolph (1962) notes, societal educational expectations, the perceived impracticality of curricula and the associated

costs of college enrollment ensured that attendance would be far from universal.

Nevertheless, the notion of elite colleges as servicing the nation's elites is a cultural understanding that would take time to come to fruition.

During the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, most colleges operated nearly at bankruptcy. As Rudolph explains, "in the absence of significant endowment and of great numbers of men with wealth, the colleges at first found it necessary to turn to other sources of financial support" (182). Seeking to establish endowments which would grant them fiscal independence, colleges began trying their hands at private investments. Lafayette College, for example, ventured unsuccessfully in silkworms (Rudolph 184). Desperate for benefactors, many colleges offered their names to generous donors—a trend leading, for example, to the re-christening of Rhode Island College as Brown, costing Nicholas Brown \$160,000 for the honor in 1785 (Rudolph 181). But towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many colleges—despite their distinctly denominational status—received considerable funding from the state and were heavily dependent upon this financing to maintain solvent. For example, between 1814 and 1823, Harvard received \$100,000 from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Rudolph 185). Moreover, as Rudolph writes, "In the case of Bowdoin and Williams, each of which received \$30,000 as a result of the same legislative act, state aid underwrote whatever solvency the two institutions attained during the period," and for Williams, at least, "the college would probably not have survived its first fifty years without the \$50,000 which the General Court injected into its strictly institution between 1793 and 1823" (185, 187).

Compounding collegiate financial woes, the early half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an era largely characterized by Jacksonian egalitarianism as college education even for the wealthy seemed a pretentious frivolity and many colleges struggled to fill their lecture halls (Bowen et al. 2005, 16). In a concerted effort to recruit low-income scholars, many colleges adapted their academic calendars to accommodate students' work schedules, many of whom served as farmers and school teachers, as well as offering "charity" funds to help them front the costs of attendance (Bowen et al. 2005, 16). Until college education could be made more appetizing an experience for a larger number of prospective students, colleges would remain in dire straits in their organizational capacity to survive.

### **The Exclusionary Education**

However, luck would change for colleges as cultural developments would motivate a new generation to enroll in higher education—albeit for arguably nonacademic reasons. The heightened industrialization following the Civil War generated tremendous wealth for the already established Protestant elite heavily invested in industry, but also for entrepreneurs and second-generation immigrants whose economic success threatened to break into the hardened upper crust of society. With parvenus rapidly climbing the social ladder, the WASP elite saw to the rapid development of exclusionary social institutions during the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the form of country clubs, private boarding schools, vacation resorts, and men's clubs to insulate the establishment in the Northeast cities of Boston, New York and Philadelphia.

As Levine (1980) describes, the Protestant elite “took refuge in their status position, in their conception of themselves as a group culturally superior to both the parvenus and immigrants. They took some solace in their self-image as heirs to a cultural tradition that the parvenus could scarcely understand” (71). In 1886, a patrician published the first rendition of the *Social Register* in New York City. The *Register* lists only “those families who by descent or by social standing or from other qualifications are naturally included in the best society of any particular city or cities” (Mills 1956, 55). Moreover, and perhaps most relevantly, the *Register* listed the alma maters of those men and women listed in its pages (Soares 2007, 19). These exclusionary tactics are largely indicative of what Weber (1968) and Parkin (1979) refer to as social closure. Discussed more fully below, exclusionary social closure is a top-down effort to control social borders with the intent of preserving privileges, status and rewards. As Mills (1956) describes, these clubs and institutions offered two benefits to members of the upper class: “To the outsider, the club to which the upper class man or woman belongs is a badge of certification of his status; to the insider, the club provides a more intimate or clan-life set of exclusive groupings which places and characterizes a man” (61). Thus, the interconnectivity of exclusion would naturally grow to include the institutions of secondary and higher education.

It is during this time, between the years of 1883 and 1906, that seven private boarding schools—Groton, Lawrenceville, Hotchkiss, Choate, St. George’s, Middlesex, and Kent—were founded, joining the ranks of the previously established boarding schools Phillips Andover, Phillips Exeter, the Hill School, St. Paul’s and St. Mark’s to make up the twelve most prestigious boarding schools in the nation (Levine

1980). Levine contends that the founders' intentions in creating these schools were "similar to the aims of the men who started the clubs and resorts." He continues, "They initially wanted to create schools where the children of old established families would be isolated from the children of immigrants and, perhaps even more importantly, the nouveaux riches" (72).

The total institutions of the boarding school, located typically in secluded, rural areas, promised to insulate the sons of the upper classes from the pollutants perceived to be caused by increased urbanization. Moreover, the schools were seen as an ideal place where "gentlemanly" values could be cultivated; upper class families approved of the residential institution over the day school because their sons "might better learn these subtle rules of social behavior through total immersion in the all-encompassing environment of a boarding school" (Levine 1980, 73). Lastly, because of their ability to draw students from a national pool rather than a local region, the boarding schools could offer to the elites the social hyper-exclusivity that geographically-constrained day schools could not. As Levine deduces, by virtue of their national reach, boarding schools "could afford to limit their clientele to a much narrower and more homogeneous section of the upper class. In short, they could afford to take in only children of the old upper class and exclude those of the nouveaux riches" (72).

The boarding school also took on a second function. While offering a safe haven for the young sons of urban sophisticates from the perceived containments of city life, boarding schools would prepare such boys to attend specifically Harvard, Princeton or Yale, thought to be the exclusive domain of privilege. During the 1890's,

nearly three quarters of Boston's upper class sons and over two-thirds of New York's sons attended one of these three schools (Karabel 2005, 25). Between the *Register's* initial publication in 1886 well into the 1920's, 91 percent of Boston families listed and 83 percent of those from New York sent their sons Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Williams or Yale (Soares 2007, 19). As Karabel (1984) argues, elite colleges became "crucial sites for the maintenance of status-group cohesion" as well as ensuring the transmission of intergenerational privilege (8-9).

However, during this same era, the antebellum industrialization induced a widespread demand for public education and many states began investing heavily in public high schools and universities. But even before the war, during the 1850s, a number of institutions geared towards the agricultural and mechanical sciences were founded, including the People's College and the New York State Agricultural College which would become the precursors of Cornell University and the Farmer's High School which would later become Penn State University (Rudolph 1962, 248-249).

But perhaps the most widely influential of these efforts is the Morrill Land Grant act of 1862, which authorized states to establish public colleges with the revenue extracted by selling public lands. As early as 1848, Vermont Congressman Justin Smith Morrill established himself as a critic of the curriculum widely adopted by more established eastern colleges, proposing that these universities should "lop off a portion of the studies established centuries ago as the mark of European scholarship and replace the vacancy—if it is a vacancy—by those of a less antique and more practical value" (Rudolph 1962, 249). He first submitted the Land Grant proposal in 1857, but was opposed by Southern lawmakers. Incidentally, Morrill succeeded in his

second attempt in 1862, in the midst of the war when many of the bill's opponents had seceded from the Union (250).

Despite the bill's intention to habituate the sons of farmers towards new technologies, in the years leading up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century educationalists and officials predicted that the narrow, agrarian focus of these schools would give way to a more expansive opportunity of higher education to the lower and middle classes. Commenting on the future mission of land-grant colleges, United States Commissioner of Education, Isaac Newton postured, "These colleges are not to be agricultural only... The sons of our farmers are not less ambitious of distinction than others, and an education that regards them as farmers only cannot meet their approbation" (Rudolph 1962, 256). In his inaugural address as the first president of Ohio State, Edward Orton promised to lead his university towards offering "the education of a man as man, rather than that which equips him for a particular post of duty" (256).

Nevertheless, land-grant universities thrived on a widely-recognized democratic ideal in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century—to offer a fine public education to ordinary men—and this ideology could be seen reflected in their admissions criteria. As Douglass (2007) argues, "To a degree perhaps unmatched by any other single institution in or society or by any other nation in the world, America's public universities were conceived, funded, and developed as tools of socioeconomic engineering" (7). With the rise of land-grant universities, Michigan first introduced in 1871 a certification system through which to prepare students for higher education by moving to create high schools structured around a centralized college preparatory

curriculum. Michigan would appoint an inspector (usually a state university faculty member) who would assess and approve high school curricula for college preparation. The principal or headmaster could then confer graduates with a certificate which would allow him to enter the University of Michigan without further admissions requirements (Hawkins 1972, 179). By 1899, 187 secondary schools had adopted this program and many other state university systems began adopting their own certification programs (Hawkins 1972, 179; Soares 2007, 15). Andrew S. Draper, President of the University of Illinois, praised the certification system as “making the road to college ‘smooth and continuous and practically free’” (Hawkins 1972, 180). Rudolph (1962) argues that certification “was a device that unleashed the high school movement in the Middle West” (283). The certification system generated an intimate relationship between public universities and secondary schools as they both worked towards fostering and maintaining standards which would adequately prepare graduates for university study.

Rudolph (1962) argues that following the establishment of land-grant universities, older colleges lost their claims to the government’s financial generosity upon which they had grown dependent. He writes, “Everywhere spurned by government, the old colleges discovered the principle of the independent, self-reliant, private college” (254). It is during this time that old-line colleges—should they seek to survive in this new competitive collegiate environment—would need to capture their niche market and began to solidify their relations with the upper elites. These colleges seemed to find the answer to their economic woes in the resources and cultural legitimacy provided by the patrician class. It is in this sense that a symbiotic

relationship flourished as the organizational needs of the college met with the social needs for exclusivity by the upper class.

### **Exclusionary Social Closure**

As mentioned previously, social closure is a concept first introduced by Max Weber (1968) which describes how members of a privileged class employ exclusionary tactics and behaviors with the intent of restricting access to the group's social or material resources. While maximizing potential rewards through restriction, such exclusionary actions are indicative of status groups seeking to preserve their community boundaries. These actions may typically include restrictions on whom members may marry or with whom they may socialize, for example, but more generally constrain and delimit the social behavior and expectations of membership within a recognized social group or class.

Frank Parkin (1979) expounds upon Weber's notion of social closure. In Parkin's analysis, Weber's focus on "inside-out" forms of status group exclusion neglects the responsive actions of those on the outside looking in. As he argues, "collective efforts to resist a pattern of dominance governed by exclusion principles can properly be regarded as the other half of the social closure equation" (45). In this sense, Parkin identifies two countervailing processes related to social closure: *exclusion* and *usurpation*. Whereas exclusion refers to the "use of power in a 'downward' direction because it necessarily entails the creation of a group, class, or stratum of legally defined inferiors," usurpation refers to "the use of power in an upward direction in the sense that collective attempts by the excluded to win a greater

share of resources always threaten to bite into the privileges of legally defined superiors” (45).

Thus, underlying the reliance upon elite, exclusive schooling is a belief of the upper class’s superiority over others and their legitimate entitlement to privilege. As Weber writes: “for all practical purposes, stratification by status goes hand in hand with a monopolization of ideal and material goods or opportunities” (190). Parkin names two devices historically employed by the upper-class in maintaining exclusive social boundaries: property and credentials. Scholars such as Weber and Bourdieu believe that educational credentials have grown exponentially in social importance largely due to how well they “simplify and legitimate the exclusionary process” (Parkin 55). Reliance on property to demarcate the social boundaries of class proved far too unstable for the purposes of the Protestant elite during nineteenth century, as evidenced by the growing economic power of the nouveaux riche. Parkin explains:

Property in an expanding and commercially energetic society is too volatile to serve as a reliable safeguard against either class demotion of bourgeois offspring or the steady infiltration of parvenus. New families are continually appearing in the propertied ranks, flung up by the capitalist wheel of fortune, while established names sink without a trace. (60-61)

It was and is incredibly difficult to police boundaries demarcated by property qualifications as “outsider” groups can amass property much in the same way “desirable” groups can lose their claims.

Given this, the increased tendency to rely on academic credentials for the establishment of social boundaries is not surprising, as much of the efforts surrounding the use of private schooling during the Gilded Age and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century fit the definition of exclusionary social closure. Among the Protestant elite

families, the enrollment of their sons into exclusive schools such as Groton and later Harvard would become a priority as immigrants and parvenus began to threaten the social structure upon which they presided. These schools served two purposes: first, their exclusivity ensured and concentrated their social cohesion as a dominant group and secondly, the status of having gone to these schools would legitimize their membership amongst the leadership class.

### **The Process of Exclusion at Elite Colleges**

Thus, in light of their dependency upon the upper class for their organizational sustainability, colleges would need to ensure, at least in some fashion, that they could offer the product sought by these families—exclusivity. It cannot be said here to what extent the upper class directly controlled the gates of these institutions, but it can be assumed that their presence undoubtedly influenced the processes through which the organization could operate. Originally, each selective college administered their own subject tests to interested applicants. Fuess (1950) describes the situation as “educational anarchy” as each college required its own set of academic subjects and standards, typically revolving around Latin, Greek and arithmetic and tested material changed from year to year (3-4, 7). At the cusp of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, policies at Harvard, Princeton and Yale dictated that they offer acceptance to whomever should pass these entrance examinations; however, the tests posed two significant hurdles for the general public. First, only a handful of locations offered the exams—typically top-flight private secondary schools and the colleges themselves—which made physical access for the average student difficult (Soares 2007). Secondly, the ancient language requirement posed what Karabel (2005) describes as an “insurmountable

obstacle” for public school students, who were rarely instructed in such subjects (23). As Fuess describes, for example, the entrance examinations at Columbia in 1878 entailed a battery of questions on “Caesar’s *Commentaries*, Sallust’s *History*, Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, Greek and Latin prose composition, and Ancient Geography” (6). While such material may elude contemporary readers, Karabel (2005) notes that for the properly trained student “the tests were not especially demanding, and a young man with modest intelligence from a feeder school like Groton could usually pass them with ease” (22). Though Harvard would drop its Greek requirement in 1898, it retained its Latin subject exam while Princeton and Yale continued to require both well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (22-23). Karabel (2005) concludes, “especially when coupled with the high cost of tuition, the net result of these requirements was that the students at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton were overwhelmingly from well-to-do backgrounds” (23).

However, pressure for reform would come less from the public and more from the administrators of private schools who felt the diversity of subject material tested across the college system made sufficiently preparing for them all a difficult task. In 1900, the heads of many top-flight colleges—most notably the Ivies—came together to establish the College Entrance Examination Board in an effort to simplify the admissions requirements across the board (Schudson 1972). In 1905, Harvard moved to employ these exams, tripling the availability of where students could sit for them (Karabel 2005, 44). Yale followed Harvard in 1907. By 1916, Harvard, Yale and Princeton moved to dismantle their own examinations in favor of the CEEB exams (Pierson 1952).

During the early days of the Board's existence, however, its future seemed uncertain as several member schools, including Dartmouth, Amherst and Williams, continued to accept high school certification in lieu of examination. Eventually, these schools adopted the testing as the sole passage for admission. As Soares (2007) argues, "competitive pressures from the Big Three persuaded the rest of the private sector of the idea that exams were superior to high-school certification as a way to judge a youth's academic merit" (17).

Thus, again, many of the obstacles preventing the general public from taking the subject exams were not addressed by this reform and while the introduction of a single College Board exam somewhat streamlined the process and allowed for a greater degree of access, the exam continued in many ways to serve as a socioeconomic filter. As Soares (2007) writes, the College Board system "was a bridge between boarding-school students and private colleges, and a barrier to public-school youths" (19). The curriculum shared by boarding schools paralleled the material tested by the exam and most, if not all, preparatory students would be expected to take the full battery of exams. Conversely, few public school applicants were as well-versed in the exam material nor familiar with the testing procedures as they often lay well beyond the culture of expectations of their schooling and social life. As Soares describes:

If one were a public high-school student thinking about taking the [College Board] tests, one had to prepare for exams that were foreign to one's school culture, travel to a test site, and pay the unusual fees and expenses of the procedure. Very few, if any, of one's peers would be sharing the experience, and one's teachers and counselors were not well informed or particularly encouraging about that path. (19)

Thus, the usage of college examinations versus certification in admissions drew a heavy line between public and private universities and the clientele each would serve.

### **Responding to Jewish Achievement**

One of the most interesting developments in the history of college admissions came during the early twentieth century when selective universities such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Williams began experimenting with their admissions criteria in order to ensure the maintenance of a homogenous student body. Despite the relative difficulty of public school students in mastering the subject material tested by entrance examinations, many such students did nevertheless manage to pass the exams or gain entry, particularly after Harvard's efforts to reform the exam system began to take hold at its peer institutions. As the public university movement began directing increasing numbers of previously excluded social groups into higher education, many of these students set their sights on the nation's most prestigious universities. Historically based on a premise of accepting all who could pass the examinations—as esoteric as they might be to the average public school student—universities were compelled to accept a great number of these students just as they would a student from Groton or Andover. For university officials and alumni who entertained only a moderate tolerance for cultural diversity from its student body at these top-flight schools, this perceived threat led to the adoption of new means of selecting for the desirable student body. As Levine (1980) notes, by the 1920's Harvard would be among the first institutions to begin systematically *rejecting* academically qualified applicants. It is during this time that many of the tools and

strategies for assessing “merit” currently employed by admissions offices around the country were developed.

As Karabel (1984) describes, these universities were still heavily dependent upon the traditional Protestant elite families for their financial solvency. In this way, institutions were constrained in their capacity to admit the growing numbers of qualified, but comparatively low-income students by their institutional need to maintain a requisite number of “paying customers” and ensure the steady flow of private donations from wealthy alumni and parents (5). In protecting the social and cultural homogeneity of the dominant class, the selective universities provided an exclusive site for the “maintenance of status-group cohesion,” a place where elite parents knew their sons would mingle and socialize with other privileged sons (Karabel 1984, 8-9).

But, specifically, the number of Jewish students meeting the entrance requirements of these universities threatened this relationship. Urban Jewish youths, in particular, epitomized the socially mobile public school student universities feared would soon crowd out the institutionally more desirable sons of the established, propertied elite. The highly visible presence of Jewish applicants at the gates of America’s most exclusive universities would pose a considerable challenge for institutional officials in their efforts to preserve the academic legitimacy of social exclusion. As Steinberg (1971) argues, this reality posed “the first time the conflict between the status claims of the elite colleges and their educational functions became apparent” (71). Given this, as Karabel (1984) contends, “as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton faced the ‘Jewish problem,’ organizational and status-group factors pointed

towards the same solution: a move toward ethnic closure that would preserve opportunities for the WASP upper class at the same time that it protected vital institutional interests” (11). Thus, it is with these intentions of perpetuating exclusionary admissions practices that universities would work towards developing a variety of new tools to assist in their ongoing efforts to assess “merit.”

Columbia University, given its location in New York City, was most affected by the increased enrollment rates of local Jewish applicants which Karabel (2005) estimates may have at this time comprised 40 percent of the student body (87). The large proportion of Jews, many observers perceived, led to the abandonment of Columbia by New York’s elite; by the 1920’s, 84 percent chose to attend Harvard, Yale or Princeton, while only 4 percent chose to matriculate at Columbia (Karabel 2005, 87). Karabel (2005) describes that elite university officials across the board viewed Columbia as a harbinger of their own fates should they not respond quickly and sufficiently to the growing “Jewish Problem.” As Harvard President Abbott Lawrence Lowell wrote to philosophy professor William Earnest Hocking:

The summer hotel that is ruined by admitting Jews meets its fate, not because the Jews it admits are of bad character but because they drive away the Gentiles, and then after the Gentiles have left, they leave also. This happened to a friend of mine with a school in New York, who thought, on principle, that he ought to admit Jews, but who discovered in a few years that he had no school at all. A similar thing has happened in the case of Columbia College; and in all these cases it is not because Jews of bad character have come; but the result follows from the coming in large numbers of Jews of any kind, save those few who mingle readily with the rest of the undergraduate body. (Karabel 2005, 88).

In response, Columbia and its peer institutions would pioneer several significant ploys to decrease Jewish enrollment while operating under the guise of selecting for merit.

As Steinberg (1971) contends, the influx of eastern European Jews during the “new immigration” between 1890 and 1920 made Jews of all social backgrounds vulnerable to the same brand of anti-Semitic discrimination which flourished in the Northeast. Just as other social institutions began closing their doors to Jewish membership, Steinberg (1971) offers, “the Eastern colleges—elitist, tradition-bound, repositories of Puritan values and upper-class standards—could not remain untouched by these trends, especially when their enrollments contained increasing numbers of Jewish students” (68).

### **Closing the Gates**

Thus, one of the more interesting dilemmas facing colleges was the struggle of maintaining socially legitimate homogeneity in light of Jewish academic achievement. Among the first tactics adopted during the 1920’s by elite schools during this time in their efforts was to limit—for the first time—the number of freshmen granted admission, in contrast to the previously maintained policy of accepting all those deemed academically qualified. In 1919, Columbia began to cap each incoming class, a move, Karabel (2005) argues was “a crucial step toward controlling the number of Jewish students” (130). Yale followed suit in 1923, capping its freshmen class at 850 followed two years later by Harvard, capping it at 1,000 (Karabel 2005, 114; Karen 1985, 103). Karabel (1984) argued that such limitation on class size gave universities the new ability to turn away qualified candidates which

granted university officials the “expanded discretionary power to produce the right ‘student mix’” (15). As Harvard President Lowell wrote in a letter to the Committee on Admissions regarding the decision to limit students:

To prevent a dangerous increase in the proportion of Jews...a selection by a personal estimate of character on the part of the Admissions authorities, based upon the probable value to the candidate, to the College and to the community of his admission...If there is no limit, it is impossible to reject a candidate who passes the admission examinations without proof of defective character, which practically cannot be obtained. (Synnott 1979, 108).

With this new discretionary flexibility, colleges institutionalized a number of strategies in their efforts to maintain social closure.

### **The SAT: The First Academic Attempt at Ethnic Social Closure**

The origins of the SAT are inarguably linked to the eugenics movement which gained significant influence among select circles between 1890 and 1920. While many scientists, scholars and educationalists at this time imagined more benign purposes for IQ measurement, many other proponents of IQ testing advocated for its use as an “objective” device in social selection and sorting, believing it would establish a social hierarchy of intelligence and ability they hoped would be based on racial heritage (Lemann 1999, 20-27). “Evidence” of racial differentiation in intelligence came from early testing advocates such as Lewis Terman, who found through the application of intelligence testing that 80 percent of immigrant children could be classified as “feeble-minded” (quoted in Oakes 1985, 36). As Terman argued in 1916:

Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least in the family stocks from which they came. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes

suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew. (quoted in Bowles and Gintis, 1976, 123)

At this time, school leaders increased their reliance on intelligence tests in controlling and moderating the advancement of American children through the academic system. “The idea of the IQ testers was not to reform education, especially higher education, so much as to reserve it for highly intelligent people, as indicated by IQ scores,” Lemann (1999) concludes, but “none of them championed the expansion of education. For the IQ testers, selection of the intelligent few was the overriding goal” (24).

Columbia University broke controversial ground as one of the first colleges to require an IQ test for admissions purposes in 1919. Douglass (2007) describes the original incarnation of the exam used by Columbia, developed by Columbia psychologist Edward L. Thorndike, as “a deliberate tool for ethnic screening” as they “largely measured familiarity with American colloquialisms and customs...the cultural bias of the test was extreme” (51). Nevertheless, the University of Pennsylvania soon adopted the test for its own admissions process (Lemann 1999, 30). Lemann describes these early tests as having “some questions involving mathematical calculations and some involving the identification of shapes and facial expressions—but the bulk of the test was devoted to word familiarity, the eternal staple of intelligence testing” (31).

If there were any doubts about the original intentions of elite schools to use these tests as an exclusionary measure, these concerns were confirmed with the push to create the SAT. In 1923, Carl Brigham, a Princeton psychologist and staunch

eugenicist, published *A Study of American Intelligence*, on the benefits of IQ testing as the first line of defense in what he saw as the “dumbing down” of America (Soares 22). Brigham believed IQ tests, such as those being used by the Army for assignment purposes, pointed to the natural superiority of the “Nordic” peoples, whom he classified as those of Anglo-Saxon descent. With these results in hand, Brigham began aggressively lobbying for the use of IQ testing in educational settings. That same year, Princeton began pressing the College Board to introduce its own IQ testing for standardized admission purposes (Soares 23). In 1926, Brigham led the College Board in adapting Thorndike’s original IQ test into the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) (Douglass 2007, 51).

As both Karabel (2005) and Soares (2007) describe, administrators at Harvard, Princeton and Yale hoped the implementation of the SAT would select specifically for their desired WASP constituency while legitimizing the exclusion of Jewish students who were in large numbers passing the College Board subject exams. Underlying this objective was the supposition that such an aberration could be corrected for by testing for inherent intelligence as opposed to the sustained academic cultivation necessary to pass the subject examinations. As Soares writes, “Yale wanted an IQ or psychological aptitude test that would separate the truly brilliant Nordic stock from Alpine or Mediterranean individuals who were academically deviant from their racial types by virtue of hard work” (25).

The historic irony of the introduction of such examinations is that they obviously did not work to discriminate as desired by the institutions as Jewish youth still maintained to meet and surpass the examiner’s expectations. As Steinberg (1981)

offers, one of the greatest historical assumptions that persists even today is the notion that all immigrant groups arrived in America at the bottom of the social food chain, lacking the skills and resources that would enable them to prosper upon arrival. Steinberg challenges this notion with particular reference to Jewish immigrants who in large numbers brought with them a very different work experience than other immigrant groups, who were principally drawn from peasant and farm laborer backgrounds. The Jews, in contrast, arrived with industrial skills that Steinberg found “corresponded with remarkable precision to needs in the American economy” (99). This unique historical moment enabled more than a few Jewish families to achieve rapid social mobility in the commerce and industrial sectors of New York City during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is in this light in which Steinberg reexamines the popular notion that Jews relied on education as means by which to advance through the class structure, arguing that “there is no evidence to indicate that the children of Jewish rank-and-file workers received more education than other immigrant children of the same class” (1981, 136). Instead, what he argues is that for the many Jews who did break into higher education, their family’s social mobility was largely a *precondition* rather than an *outcome*, an idea which led Steinberg to conclude that social class accounted for the educational success of many Jewish students at this time rather than any singular cultural affectation towards schooling. Berrol (1976) echoes this in her own study which found the limited number of public secondary schools in New York City during the first few decades of the twentieth century made it virtually impossible for Jews in large numbers to have relied upon schooling for their ascent into the middle classes. As she affirms, “most New York

City Jews did not make the leap from poverty into the middle class by going to college. Rather, widespread utilization of secondary and higher education followed improvements in economic status and was as much a result as a cause of upward mobility” (271).

In light of this evidence, the venture of Jewish exclusion at selective universities seemed largely destined to fail so long as the criteria employed assumed that upwardly mobile Jewish students could be “screened” for on the basis of their immigrant or racial heritage. Though unlikely as wealthy as the more established, elite families who dominated the *Social Register*, most of the Jews seeking admittance to prestigious universities could not be said to have experienced the same social and economic conditions of other immigrant groups or even many other newly-arrived Jewish immigrants. Instead, this was a group which might be considered the most socially visible vanguard of the new middle class to begin exerting pressure on elite universities and holding them accountable to the meritocratic ideal which was rapidly becoming a critical part of American culture.

Thus, it is none too surprising that the intelligence tests, despite their cultural bias, failed in their execution to screen out any significant number of high-achieving Jewish students. This failure led universities to turn towards other, more reliable methods of restriction. The first and perhaps most infamous among these was the introduction of the quota system. Following the failure of IQ tests to limit Jewish enrollment, Columbia moved to limit the number of Jewish students from its peak of 40 percent in 1921 to 22 percent (Karabel 2005, 87). While the Big Three did not enroll nearly as many Jewish students, by 1922 Harvard’s Jewish enrollment of 21.5

percent caused President Lowell to move towards instituting a similar quota. Lowell proactively sought to lobby Harvard faculty to consider the Jewish quota as the only effective means of controlling the growing “Jewish problem” facing the university. For these efforts, Lowell was lambasted in the press and Harvard stood publicly accused of racial discrimination (Karabel 2005, 93). As a June 14, 1922 editorial in *The Nation* blared:

A university which bars a persecution-scarred race...cannot keep alive the traditions of intellectual integrity, of noblesse oblige, and of essential democracy which have made our elder universities play so great a role in American life—or it must open its doors frankly and fairly to all who can meet its requirements of scholarship. (Karabel 2005, 93)

Despite public remonstrance against the use of quotas, schools began actively revamping admissions policies in their effort to assess the social background of applicants. In 1922, applications to Harvard began requiring for the first time detailed information about one’s race, religion, mother’s maiden name, father’s birthplace and as Karabel (2005) quotes, “What change, if any, has been made since birth in your own name or that of your father? (Explain fully.)” (94). Moreover, applicants would also be required to have their principal or headmaster specify on a form with what religion he believed the boy affiliated (94).

### **Subjective Meritocracy**

Given the less than welcome response to outright quotas, institutions began manipulating the application and selection process in such a way that would facilitate the over-selection of the “right” kinds of boys based on extra-academic qualifications. Some less obvious tactics included admitting only a small number of students during

the official admissions season and relying on the waiting list to fill in remaining seats. This would allow universities to hand-pick applicants while easily by-passing any costly “objective” selection or accusations of discriminatory conduct (Steinberg 1971, 72). Another tactic instituted at Harvard involved admitting all young men who ranked in the top seventh of their graduating secondary school class. As Karabel (1984) notes, the chief objective of this was to diversify the geographic representation of Harvard’s freshmen class, a move administrators hoped would draw more talented white boys from outside the Northeast, the region Jewish students were most heavily concentrated (14). When it was discovered that the top seventh plan enabled an even greater number of Jewish students to bypass the examination requirements and gain admission, the plan was reconstituted to only apply to selected schools, specifically those outside of the urban New York and Boston regions (Karen 1985, 105).

However, the most significant adaptation to public disapproval towards the application of quotas was the institutional redefinition of “merit.” The “Jewish problem” made one issue clear—purely academic criteria for merit would make the admittance of “undesirable” candidates unavoidable as public schools became more adept at sending an increasing number of diverse (albeit primarily within the upper-middle class) students to college. To ensure the desired “mix” of students, elite colleges would need to maintain flexibility in their selection criteria for admission. In this sense, the definition of merit would have to be expanded to include heavily subjective considerations. As the Admissions Committee at Harvard expressed in a letter released to 4,000 secondary schools in March 1926:

Each individual application for admission will be carefully reviewed by the Committee; and much weight will be attached to character,

personality and promise as well as to scholarly attainments. Satisfactory showing in the last of these qualifications is not of itself sufficient to guarantee admission. (Karabel 1984, 7)

Thus, the new notion of merit at elite colleges would largely be oriented around the term “character,” a widely abstract term to contemporary readers; but as Karabel (1984) insists, at the time “the very definition of ‘character,’ ...was stamped with distinctively Protestant, upper class cultural ideals” (16). He continues to note that the terms “very intangibility made it an ideal instrument for restricting the number of Jews,” and “promised to succeed in turning back the ‘Hebrew invasion’ where exclusive reliance on academic criteria had failed” (12). These changes required a new organizational bureaucracy delegated with the authority to sort and select students based on a complex matrix of qualifying characteristics. In this sense, the first incarnation of the admissions office as we recognize it today was born.

With a national boom in college applicants following the Second World War, elite colleges faced the fortuitous dilemma of dealing with far more qualified applicants than could be accommodated by admissions. As Yale Dean of Admissions and later college president, Arthur Howe, Jr. commented on the post-war admissions situation: “Our problem today, insofar as we are permitted to call abundance a problem, lies in the fact that about 85 percent of our 4,500 candidates seem to be qualified” (Soares 2007, 37). While such a boom in applications seemed to promise elite schools the ability to cherry-pick for the first time the most academically talented students in the country, universities still relied heavily on the very small number of American families who could afford to pay the full asking price of an elite

education to fill more than three-fourth's of their available seats (Synnott 1979, 206; Karabel 2005, 187).

In this sense, the surplus of qualified applications would allow the university a greater flexibility to select applicants on the basis of subjective characteristics—an exclusionary strategy previously disclosed in efforts of maintaining cultural and status homogeneity. And as Soares (2007) affirms, “character was never more important to admissions than after the Second World War” (51). As Harvard Provost Paul Buck admitted quite openly that “many of the boys we want [are] in the second quarter of classes” and that recruiting exceptional academic applicants should not take precedence over seeking out these “healthy extrovert kind...so much admired by the American public” (Karabel 2005, 185). As Harvard dean Wilbur Bender echoed, “We admit boys with IQ's well below others who we reject when we believe that they have...intangible qualities in high degree,” later adding, “we do discriminate in our admissions policy...and I hope we always will” (Karabel 2005, 185-186).

By selecting for variables such as “character” and “social grace” among others, admissions officers could predict a certain social pedigree in ways that academic criteria could no longer guarantee. In order to assess for such new characteristics qualifying as merit, the application process expanded considerably and for the first time the application required a personal essay, a listing of extracurricular involvement, a headshot and most importantly, a letter of recommendation (Karabel 2005, 131). In addition, the Ivies began requiring a personal interview with the applicant to be conducted by the Director of Admissions or a hand-selected alumnus

(Karabel 2005, 131). Interviewers were being instructed to glean from applicants their level of cultural capital.

At Yale, hand-selected volunteers from the Alumni Schools Committee (ASC) were carefully trained to cull a thorough personal profile of each interviewee as consistent with the university's evaluative procedures and evidence suggests that the school relied heavily on such reports for the personal assessment of potential candidates. Soares (2007) found during this post-War era, "the alumni interview rating predicted the final action on admissions better than anything else, including high-school grades, SAT scores, and school counselor's letters of recommendation" (46-47). On the "specimen report," alumni were asked to check the characteristics which best described the applicant, asking the interviewer to evaluate across a range of variables, such as the candidate's sense of humor, personal appearance and hygiene, posture, eloquence and maturity (Soares 2007, 47-48). Chairmen of local ASCs were invited to New Haven for an alumni convocation each four years where they would be "refreshed" on the values and mission objectives of the Yale admissions office. Workshops would help standardize among interviewers what qualities the university most sought in applicants. As Soares (2007) describes, interviewers were specifically trained to deduce the applicant's social breeding and pedigree and to downplay the importance of academic achievement in favor of these personal attributes. Alumni would learn "how meritocracy worked at Yale. Test scores alone would not get one in, and bad scores would take a back seat to family line and personal qualities" (50).

Howe would later comment about such qualities as they translated into “merit” and allowed admissions officers to screen for the truly “deserving”:

First, there are certain qualities that make one person intrinsically more deserving of admission than another...The notion that one candidate is more deserving than another is illustrated by [hypothetical] College X’s admissions decisions on Bill and John. Both are of good character, both are “B” student. But Bill, who is rejected, had to work hard for his secondary grades, earning them primarily through rote memorization. Though an agreeable, wholesome person, he had neither the time nor the inclination for things books or people beyond his required course of study. His lower-class family’s aspirations for upwards social and economic mobility via a prestige college kept his eyes focused on the one thing he believed would pay off: good grades. (Soares 2007, 54)

However, “John” was a different story, for John:

mastered his school work with only a reasonable degree of industry. His interests and sensitivities are broad, he had a rewarding social life with his friends, and he reads widely beyond the confines of Time magazine and the books required in school. Finally, he comes from a middle-class family that can afford to pay his college bills. (54)

Howe concludes that “John was judged inherently more deserving of admission than Bill” (54). Of course, the exclusionary aspects of elite admissions did not go without their critics. In 1958, Richard King, serving as Harvard’s associate director of admissions and financial aid expressed his disapproval of their practices, arguing that the techniques employed in assessing merit were heavily biased in favor of the upper class. These boys, he argued, would be more likely to make a good impression. When compounded with their educational advantages, he concluded that “the odds are pretty well stacked against the very needy student because he will probably not look as good on paper (or at least on the papers we ask for) as his socioeconomically favored competitor” (Karabel 2005, 260).

Soares (2007) concludes that by the 1960's, "the logic of exclusion had moved on from 'racial' anti-Semitism to social class" (54). With this, Soares indicates that the 1960's marked the peak of "subjective meritocracy" operating in elite admissions, during which officers relied on "more explicitly cultural criteria" than in years past, screening specifically for those students who demonstrated a similar ease with highbrow arts and culture (73, 114). The application of subjective exclusion, as it was first used to filter out high-achieving Jews, was now adapted to being used to filter out other undesirable candidates. Much in the same way the Jewish applicant of the 1920's represented as an upwardly mobile "invader," the lower- and middle-class student challenged the university's traditional base. Through hard work and determination, many of these students could overcome their social disadvantage to score as high as or higher than their upper-class peers on exams; however by screening for the "ease" of acquisition (as opposed to the strenuous study of "grinds") and cultural tastes schools were consciously screening for social class. Bourdieu (1996) describes the preference for precocity as a significant factor institutions sought in the social selection of upper-class students. As he writes:

When, in the indefinable nuances that define 'ease' or 'natural' talent, we think we recognize behavior or ways of speaking considered authentically 'cultured' because they bear no mark of the effort and no trace of the work that go into their acquisition, we are really referring to a particular mode of acquisition: what we call ease is the privilege of those who, having imperceptibly acquired their culture through a gradual familiarization in the bosom of the family, have academic culture as their native culture and can maintain a familiar rapport with it that implies the unconsciousness of its acquisition. (21)

While Bourdieu argued that such precocity often translated into higher grades, Howe's comparison of Bill and John allow us to see the undergirding logic behind

how Yale and other elite schools viewed even variables of “objective” academic merit through a lens of cultural bias. In other words, it was not enough to score highly on examinations or achieve high grade point averages; admissions officers actively sought out specifically those students to whom the academic culture came naturally, without struggle.

### **Critical Analysis of Changes in the Definition of Merit**

What the shift of the 1950s and 1960s represents is the beginning of open social contestation over the field of college admissions. Echoing Collins (1979), Karen (1985) argues that “education may be used as a resource in struggles of dominant groups to exclude other groups from filling elite positions or by subordinate groups to usurp positions that have more status, power, or privilege attached to them” (23). As Karen and Karabel (2005) have concluded, the definition of merit within the realm of elite college admissions needs to be understood as the product of ongoing cultural struggle between competing social groups over the control of educational opportunity.

What we have seen in this chapter is evidence of top-down, exclusionary tactics employed by institutions still heavily dependent upon the resources and patronage of the upper class. However, with the rapid enrollment in public higher education following World War II, Gouldner (1979) identified the rise of a “new class of intellectuals and intelligentsia” (12). This “New Class” represents a “new cultural bourgeoisie whose capital is not its money but its control over valuable cultures,” a control they gain not through direct inheritance but by virtue of their successful negotiation of the educational system (21, 19). While in a class subordinate to the

moneyed capitalist elite, members of the New Class are in direct conflict with the established upper classes, continually contesting their social legitimacy. As Gouldner describes, this conflict “sometimes has the character of a civil war within the upper classes” as many of its members originate from the very class it challenges and gained their formal training from institutions dominated by traditional elites (18).

This leverage Parkin (1979) argues has allowed the New Class to pursue usurpationary action. Just as the dominant elite pursue the monopolization of their social privileges through exclusion, usurpation, he describes, has “the aim of biting into the resources and benefits accruing to the dominant groups in society” (74). As Gouldner (1979) argues, the New Class’s leverage comes from their embedded position as the purveyors of special skills and language, otherwise known as cultural capital. They employ this leverage both towards usurping further rights and privileges from the upper class but also in preventing those below from usurping their hard-won rights and privileges, resulting in what Parkin refers to as *dual closure*. If cultural capital represents the tool necessary for this struggle by the New Class, it is, as Parkin himself suggests, education and its ability to direct the intergenerational reproduction of cultural capital that the New Class will most likely seek to control. This gradual takeover has granted the New Class immense social power. As Disco (1982) summarizes, “the gradual replacement of money by cultural capital in production and the state constitutes the major class contest of our time” (816).

In this sense, college admissions became a chief site of intergroup struggle. However, during the mid-century decades, historical developments created political opportunities for the New Class to aid in their resistance. Perhaps most influential to

redefining the stakes of higher education was America's entrance into the Cold War, particularly the threat posed by the Soviet Union's launch of Sputnik in 1957. As Karen (1985) argues, "while the ideology of meritocracy was very important to justify the selection and exclusion processes of the colleges from rather early on, it was not until a 'foreign threat' appeared that it had a major effect upon actual admissions practices of an elite institution" (22). As the scientific achievement of the Soviet Union loomed quite literally overhead, political pressure to remain academically competitive led to rapid reform in nearly all sectors of American education. Moreover, this fear of inadequacy also led policymakers to radically increase federal funding which would grant universities, for the first time, independence from their traditional moneyed clientele (Karen 1985, 130-131). This juncture of opportunities offered both the university a new level of autonomy in defining its own standards of admissions and the middle class the flexibility to afford the high costs of tuition.

Moreover, in a more nuanced line of argumentation, Brint and Karabel (1989b) propose that maintaining the semblance of equal opportunity in education was imbued with renewed vigor at a time when foreign policy seemed clustered around an ideological bipolarity. In differentiating its ideological stance from socialism, America needed to actively secure its semblance of individualist mobility in justifying its apparent social inequality. The perception that the American educational system was open, then, was necessary to support a "social order that emphasizes individual advancement over collective advancement, personal success over group solidarity, and equality of opportunity over equality of condition" (Brint

and Karabel 1989b, 732). America, as they note, is notoriously sparing in social entitlement spending compared to other western nations, but invests disproportionately heavily in higher education. What Brint and Karabel conclude is that the perception of equal opportunity in higher education maintains the dream of social mobility despite the inequality of conditions. Whereas the United States is comparatively poor in providing for social welfare relative to other Western states, it has striven to maintain—at least in principle—a high degree of structural mobility (733). As they argue, though intergenerational inequalities remain, “it seems that the more opaque the mode of reproducing inequalities, the more effective it is likely to be in legitimating these inequalities” (732). At a time when the legitimacy of American ideology seemed at its most tenuous, the moral threat of appearing undemocratic proved especially trenchant.

By the 1960's, the New Class could begin exerting considerable political pressure on not only institutions, but the very cultural idea of merit. Parkin (1979) argues that one common strategy of usurpation has been the effort “to manipulate the belief system of the dominant group by pointing up the inconsistencies between its advertised doctrines and its actual conduct” (85). He highlights evidence of moral persuasion's effectiveness during the Civil Rights movement in securing rights and privileges for minorities (85). The obvious point of moral vulnerability in the admissions policies came about precisely because of institutional efforts to exclude members of the rising middle class, who despite a lack of moneyed capital, were nevertheless in large numbers meeting the socially biased standards of criteria of selective universities. This adaptation forced universities to continually respond by

proliferating new strategies of exclusion, resulting in increasingly contestable legitimacy.

However, it is precisely that which defines the New Class—their increasing authority over the production of cultural capital—that allowed them to be ever more capable of adapting to each of these successive changes than the propertied class. Moreover, as Karen (1985) argues, their increasing embeddedness within the organizational structure of elite universities as faculty and administrators helped to offer institutional support and leverage for changes towards a set of meritocratic criteria that seemed to favor the students bred from the professional class rather than the traditional sons of business elites.

Despite the tilt in favor of achievement-based qualifications preferred by the New Class, Parkin (1979) is quick to note that individualist, academic forms of exclusion and stratification—while among the easiest to legitimate—are among the most difficult to guarantee from one generation to the next. As he explains, “bourgeois forms of closure are not exactly tailor-made for self-recruiting purposes,” and “the bourgeois family...cannot rest comfortably on the assumption of automatic class succession; *it must make definite social exertions of its own* or face the very real prospect of generational decline” (62-63, emphasis mine). One of the more interesting aspects of Parkin’s analysis of social closure is the inherent contradiction of usurping actors to seek to reward true merit versus their desire to ensure the intergenerational reproduction of rights and privileges. Thus, as he writes:

The process of class formation and social reproduction of the bourgeoisie is significantly different from that of preceding classes in that the conditions of membership are, in principle at least, attainable by all. Exclusionary rules and institutions must always be justified by

universal criteria that are indifferent to the pretensions or stigmata of birth. There is thus a permanent tension within this class resulting from the need to legitimate itself by preserving openness of access, and the desire to reproduce itself socially by resort to closure on the basis of descent. (47)

In this light, we can better understand the current arena of college admissions. The members of the New Class, having achieved their aims in reconstituting selection criteria, must continually adapt itself to these changing criteria in order to maintain the kinship advantage expected for their own children. As Karen (1985) writes, professionals, “having acquired their positions based on their mastery of a specific body of knowledge, are committed to using knowledge as a means of social differentiation and of selection and exclusion” (136). In this sense, we begin to see cultural capital as it is employed by a certain class of parents for the benefit of their children as a weapon in procuring dual closure of access.

If we can understand generational cohorts as defined by Howe and Strauss (2007), then the original post-boomer or “Generation X” of college students represents the first generation born and raised by members of Gouldner’s New Class, born between the years of 1961 and 1981. Karen’s (1985) dissertation examining the selection of Harvard admits during the year of 1984 would be observing one of the first cohorts to enter the competitive college admissions arena as the product of this cultural struggle. Karen observed that the children of professionals enjoyed greater advantage in this new era, with the children of doctors, lawyers and college professors increasing in their representation from twenty percent of the freshmen class to almost a full third while the number of children of business executives declined from twenty percent to less than thirteen percent of the class between the 1950’s and

1980's (127). Moreover, Harvard's average SAT scores were steadily on the rise throughout this period. What he concludes from this evidence is that, by the 1980's, "The two dominant groups, the national capitalist class and the 'new class,' are in a power-sharing situation, with the new class holding senior partnership" (Karen 1985, 166). By now, the cohort of students Karen observed for his dissertation has since gone on to begin navigating their own children through the educational process.

With each generation, parents have become increasingly more involved and invested within the college admissions process. Their tactics and strategies differed from the propertied elites in securing privilege in that these parents did not rely exclusively upon external institutions for the academic training of their children but instead took a proactive control over the direction of their children's education and cultivation. The New Class has largely relied on its control of cultural capital to help them gain, if not a dominant position, then a rivaling position within academia and society. This key position, as Gouldner and Karen argue, has afforded the professional class the ability to meet and contest the social dominance of the propertied elites. Within this overarching struggle, these groups both seek to secure social status for their children among a select handful of the nation's most prestigious schools.

Given the paucity of literature which examines the admissions process as just what it is—a process—rather than the statistical outcome of inputs and outputs, the next chapter will discuss much of *how* cultural capital is used to secure advantage within in the contemporary field of admissions. Though there have been several notable attempts to illustrate this (cf. DiMaggio 1982; Jay and Gabler 2004), as the

previous chapter has noted, such analysis is typically constrained by a limited interpretation of Bourdieu's usage of cultural capital as solely the applicant's inculcation of highbrow status culture. In my analysis, I will discuss at length how the broader definition of cultural capital endorsed by Lareau and Weininger (2003) allows for a fuller understanding of how families employ their cultural resources to meet the standards and expectations of elite admissions. What this analysis hopes to shed light on, in particular, is the involvement of parents and their usage of cultural resources in what is nevertheless broadly conceived and policed as an individualist, meritocratic process. Low-income students, less likely than middle- and upper-class students to reap the benefit of conscious parental advantage, are therefore less likely to be able to meet the continually intensified standards which result from a virtually unrelenting competition between two much more advantaged and organized groups each employing the full extent of their resources—both financial and cultural—to ensure admission to elite universities. This competition, as recognized by nearly all observers, has resulted in the continually escalating standards that students must meet relative to their peers in meeting the expectations of the most prestigious universities (Karen 1985; McDonough 1997; Karabel 2005; Ostrum 2006).

What I believe has underlined much of this work is an old African proverb which states, "When two elephants fight, it is the grass which suffers." In other words, when two forces which embody financial and cultural capital battle for position, those without either will be likely to flounder. As Bourdieu (1986) argues, the transfer of cultural capital is among the least tangible and thus most hidden forms of maintaining intergenerational privilege. Within the admissions culture, there seems

to be a willful ignorance of the capacities of the parent to bring these resources to bear throughout the high school experience in favor of their children, despite active recognition by admissions officers of their actions at the gate (for example, by fraudulently writing personal essays which are to be written entirely by the applicant). Conversely, there is a recognition that low-income students are handicapped in their ability to meet the standards set by the competition, but this neglect of the middle- and upper-class parents' entrenchment throughout the process allows for their failures (and alternatively the successes of the middle- and upper-class applicants) to be ascribed to the individual as an entity divorced from his or her family. As Bowen et al. (2005) conclude, "Although explicit policies to keep certain people out have been eliminated, more 'organic' barriers...are limiting college opportunities for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds" (73). Without this recognition, it is little wonder why low-income students are drastically underrepresented in the applicant pools of selective universities as chief among these "organic" barriers is the unrecognized parental advantage conferred to middle- and upper-class students. As I will maintain, the account for this reality is often obscured by a number of problematic assumptions about the capacity of the applicant to meet continually shifting and accelerating expectations of college admissions without the assistance of experienced cultural capital.

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**Cultural Capital in Contemporary College Admissions**

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In the last chapter, I discussed how shifts in the social structure generated new opportunities for Gouldner's (1979) New Class in securing advantage via dual closure. By virtue of their near monopolization of cultural capital as the most morally legitimate form of societal currency, the New Class significantly redefined the contours of the tertiary educational opportunity structure. In this new era of meritocracy, merit can be defined, as Bourdieu first contended, as the possession and demonstration of the "right" forms of cultural capital.

From this Bourdieu observed that families could preserve status intergenerationally by investing their stores of cultural capital to reap social profit on behalf of their children. As Bourdieu argued, within the new "merit-based" social structure, such transfer is seen as infinitely more legitimate by the whole of society than the more visible process of direct inheritance. Rather, this form of transfer allows for the general misrecognition that the beneficiary earns or is entitled to social rewards on the basis of his or her achievements rather than some accident of birth. To summarize Bourdieu's argument, the work of the parent in this equation is often therefore invisible or hidden in the reproduction of status and privilege, particularly as it affects the social field of education. In other words, we ascribe merit to the individual irrespective of the external social work that goes into said achievement. To put it simply, a student who completes all of his trigonometry homework with the assistance of his parents will get the same amount of "credit" for that assignment as a boy doing the assignment himself from a single-parent household whose mother

never took any math beyond algebra. As Parkin (1979) suggests, our very definition of achievement and performance in this way favors privileged children unfairly and allows for the perpetuation of inequitable outcomes in the name of meritocracy. But moreover, the ultimate stratification of educational rewards within our society is thus framed as legitimately distributed based on individualized output of achievement, despite the “hidden” inequalities of inputs.

The trend observed by researchers such as Lareau (1987; 2000; 2003), Lucas (1999; 2001), Reay (1998), Oakes (1985) and Useem (1992) seems to demonstrate that *proactive* middle- and upper-class parental management tends to be a significant factor in examining the effects of social background on academic achievement at the elementary and high school level. What is evidenced by this research is that such a complex variable as parental intervention necessitates ethnographic and other forms of qualitative methodology to evaluate its impact on educational outcomes. Yet, when previous studies try to observe how the parent affects a student’s chances of transitioning on to college—and particularly an elite college—much of the emphasis is on passive parental characteristics, such as income, occupational prestige, and education and then evaluating these characteristics against the child’s chances for success in transitioning from a secondary to a tertiary educational setting (e.g. Sewell and Hauser, 1980; Mare 1981; Hout et al. 1993).

Originally, my initial research on the field of selective admissions took me to two general sites of research: the sparse landscape of analytical work written by academics on the subject and the surplus of mass-market material written explicitly for parents and prospective students. The disjuncture between these two realms

seemed fairly obvious to me; academics who examined the high school-to-college transition spent considerable energy examining the student and his or her social characteristics, and used these variables to construct quantitative descriptions of who gets sorted to what institutions. In other words, much of what previous researchers (e.g. DiMaggio 1982; Kaufman and Gabler 2004) have done was to create “input” variables based on student characteristics, plug them into a formula and conclude an output of admissions outcomes. However, as Gamaron et al. (2000) maintain, there is a limit to the explanatory power of input-output models which tend to construct a black box where social actions seem largely obscured. Much of the shortcomings of DiMaggio’s (1982) explanation of cultural capital’s impact on academic achievement can be derived from his quantitative construction of inputs such as museum attendance. What, as previously argued, he failed to discuss was how such variables are rewarded by the school or how such familiarity with highbrow culture translates into “capital” in such a way to secure social profit.

What seems apparent to me in assessing previous models of college attainment, is that researchers seem to frame college admissions as a rather rational, if not automatic transition from K-12 to a four-year university. Our culture similarly condenses the process to taking the SAT or ACT, receiving guidebooks in the mail to prospective colleges, sending out the applications and receiving a decision in the mail a few months later. Seen in this way, the process does seem rather automatic—as if sitting for the SAT and filling out an application were all a student need to do prepare for college.

However, as a survivor of the process, I can attest to how drawn-out and involved the process truly becomes when described at a micro-level for elite schools. First, for example, it involves not just one three-hour exam, but actually three different standardized exams, including the Preliminary SAT (PSAT) to be taken in the eleventh grade (or earlier), the SAT (or ACT), and a litany of subject SAT exams (SAT II's) to be taken at the applicant's discretion. Beyond this, applicants to America's most elite schools are also expected to sit for a number of Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) exams. Each of these require the applicant to register, pay for (between \$40 and \$100 per exam<sup>4</sup>), prepare for, and sit for each exam amounting to, without exaggeration, hundreds of hours of mental labor investiture. How students become aware of the testing requirements of the schools they ultimately decide on, how they prepare for these exams, who pays for these exams and how students come to evaluate their eventual scores are just some questions missed by quantitative assessment of what their scores translate to.

But more than this, the application to elite schools invariably requires that the student involve others in the process in the form of recommendations. For most schools I observed, the typical requirement is two recommendations from secondary school teachers and one recommendation from a guidance counselor. Again, how students learn about these requirements, how they approach their recommenders, how comfortable they feel asking for such a recommendation and how the school has prepared students for such a situation are just a few more of the questions observers need to be asking when trying to assess how students handle the application.

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally, it should be noted that the process of *sending* the official scores to colleges and universities entails a separate expenditure and an additional administrative task for the applicant.

To summarize briefly, the requirements of the application process extend well beyond what is explicitly “required” by the institution such as recommendations, personal essays and the matrix of standardized test scores. I admit quite frankly that one lapse in my research stems from my inability to observe more deeply how and when high school students begin seeing themselves as college applicants and as to *where*, exactly, they envision themselves attending college. In other words, given the stratification of institutions and the corresponding stratification of admissions requirements, where students “see” themselves as college students is incredibly important in how they begin in the eighth grade onward to prepare themselves and their high school “résumé.”

A student who sees herself at Amherst or Haverford, for example, will take a qualitatively different course of action than a student who sees herself enrolled at the local community college or non-selective state school. The requirements of each course will be drastically different in the sense that the student who is preparing to compete for a limited number of spots at a top-flight university will need to take more exams, more advanced courses, take on more extracurricular responsibilities, and build relationships with teachers she hopes to one day ask for letters of recommendation. The support of knowledgeable significant others will undoubtedly impact how successful the applicant is in this endeavor. How students are assisted, encouraged, redirected, stymied or blocked in navigating this process will depend on so many different factors that it would be impossible for me to list them. However, what I hope to convey is just how crucial observational analysis is in bettering our

understanding of what is truly at play in assessing the role of social class in reproducing educational inequalities.

Bourdieu's arguments for the role of the family seem particularly prescient given just how much the application process seems to be carried on behind the scenes, in the home. A number of seemingly small tasks accumulate to make up the sum of expectations of the institution. But moreover, many of these expectations in elite American higher education are for the most part socially constructed. What this means is that expectations are not so firm, for example, exceeding a certain score on an exam, but rather the institution assesses candidates in relation to others competing for a limited number of available, but highly desired places. Their evaluation of candidacy is thus holistic, in the sense that institutions assess applications which include, among other things, grades, transcripts, personal essays, recommendations, extracurricular résumés, test scores and interviews. In other words, a holistic evaluation on the part of the admissions office of the candidate seems to necessitate a holistic evaluation on the part of researchers of all those factors which go into making the candidate—including the childrearing environments of the home.

Lareau (1987, 74) first proposes that in examining the effects of parental cultural capital on educational inequity, we need to ask two major questions: What is it that the institution expects of the parent in shaping the educational experience? And secondly, how do parents vary in their ability to respond to such expectations? Much research supports the fact that having parents with advanced degrees translates into a considerable advantage in determining one's likelihood of applying to and gaining acceptance at an elite university, amounting according to Soares (2007) to tripling

their odds of acceptance (187). However, little research has been conducted examining exactly those mechanics which contribute to this social fact. This chapter seeks to examine precisely the selective mechanisms of the college admissions process—to open the black box, so to speak—and illustrate to a fuller degree the opportunities the process presents to parents of high cultural capital in securing relative advantage for their children. In other words, in echoing the research question of Lareau (2003), this research will attempt to describe how professional parents can invest their cultural capital in their childrearing behavior in such a way that facilitates in their capacity to meet and exceed the standards and expectations of the institution. As Soares (2007) concludes from his analysis of the role of social background in contributing to one's likeliness to apply and gain acceptance to an elite university, "This is a contest in which winning requires dedication and sustained effort from the youth and from the parent. The parental contribution weights as heavily on the scales as anything done by the young." Finally, "Professional-class parents are pros at making academic stars of their young" (189).

The college admissions process is a prime site for observing the effects of parental involvement on college attainment. The process itself, in its complexity and seeming arbitrariness has long invited the creation of a kind of social mythology about whatever it is Harvard wants to see in its prospective applicants or what extracurricular activities will most benefit a student in the admissions chamber. But beyond this, there is clear evidence that students from low-income cultures rarely, if ever, stumble upon this strange and mysterious social realm. Instead, much of the mythology used to explain a relatively mystified process likely serves to alienate and

repel many low-income students well before their wealthier peers begin the actual physical process of applying.

Unfortunately, the discipline has long treated the transition from high school to college as an automatic sorting mechanism—as a rational alchemy which turns high-achieving high school students into elite college students. This approach to the transition, in my opinion, that has long allowed for the obscuration of what it is the parent does to navigate and direct the child to college. There exists ample literature in the forms of magazines and mass-market books targeted specifically at the educated parent seeking to “coach” or manage their child’s college admissions experience. What the multi-billion dollar college prep industry “sells,” so to speak, are instructions of how the parent can act and invest their resources in such a way to reap educational profit for their child. In this sense, these are instruction manuals on how to invest cultural capital. The role of the parent is infrequently passive in this process; rather, for many middle- and upper-class college applicants, the parent may be the often the *most* active participant. And for this reason, a re-examination of what cultural capital refers to is imperative for those scholars concerned with issues of the perpetuation of educational inequity and the increased stratification of educational credentials.

We can expect that parents with a high degree of cultural capital are better equipped in their ability to monitor contemporary educational standards (Lareau 2003). In particular, as Ostrum (2006) maintains in her own guide, *The Thinking Parent's Guide to College Admissions: The Step-by-Step Program to Get Kids into the Schools of Their Dreams*, keeping up to date with changes in educational

expectations is crucial for ensuring that students remain competitive for college admissions. As she writes, for example, “You may think that a high school mathematics class working on fractions sounds acceptable because that is what you were working on at your child’s age,” but as she explains, high school freshmen should have already mastered this material in earlier years (25). To help parents keep up to date on these expectations, she recommends that the parent “find information on state standards on either the school system or state department of education web site” (25). In this sense, Ostrum strongly encourages parents to take a proactive role in monitoring and policing their child’s curricular tracking, much in the same way Useem (1992) observed highly-educated parents already practiced. This example clearly illustrates the division between the middle- and upper-class parents described by Lareau (1987; 2000; 2003) who take an active role in supervising their child’s educational development and low-income parents who rely extensively on the school to ensure that their children meet these standards. According to Ostrum, expecting the school to manage your child’s academic curriculum is an invitation for them to get left behind, which might very well jeopardize her chances for admittance to an elite college. However, this is just one among many compounding instances in which one’s knowledge or *savoir-faire* in maintaining a long-term college plan enable parents of high cultural capital the ability to ensure advantage in the eventual process of admissions.

### **Research Design**

Hence, my research design was largely aimed at observing the mechanics of the admissions process as a precisely that—a process—in which social actors interact

with institutions and standards. This is a process which includes a great many sites of action which includes the high school guidance office, the college admissions office, the applicant's home, and very often countless stops in between from SAT prep classes to soccer practice. My efforts to examine how actors interacted with the process led me to several sources, including the admissions office and widely-available preparation materials.

To observe the admissions office as a social site, this portion of my research took me to several colleges in the New England/Mid-Atlantic region. Three of these schools could be considered "elite" by nearly every standard in that they constitute three of the most selective private institutions in the country and accept less than thirty percent of applicants who apply. Two other schools I visited for comparative purposes are public universities, one a moderately selective state flagship institution and the other a less competitive state school. At each of these schools, I recorded the hour-long information session given daily to the public.<sup>5</sup> These information sessions were useful in my study as they provided observable interaction between an admissions officer and prospective applicants and parents. Information sessions tend to be a casual discussion in which an admissions officer describes his or her institution for approximately forty to forty-five minutes, leaving ample time for questions and answers along the way. These sessions are not closed to only prospective applicants and their families, but the nature of the session at each was geared specifically towards addressing their concerns and questions. In addition to these visits, at one of the elite schools, I interviewed two admissions officers, one

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<sup>5</sup> Except at the small public school which does not offer public information sessions.

who had been working in admissions since the 1970s and the other a recent graduate of the institution who had been working in admissions for a several years.

In addition to this, I surveyed a wide selection of mass market admissions-related literature, geared towards students looking to gain admission to a selective institution. I deliberately limited my selection of books to those that are currently available in the “college prep” section of Borders bookstore because these works are nationally available and widely-distributed. I chose relatively randomly from a large selection of guides which sported titles such as *Panicked Parents' Guide to College Admissions* by Sally Rubenstone and Sidonia Dalby and *College Countdown: The Parent's and Student's Survival Kit for the College Admissions Process* by Jill Von Gruben. Many of these books explicitly invite the parent in their titles while others with more generic titles nevertheless interpellate the reader as a parent of an applicant, often in a tone that conveys casual familiarity like two friends chatting over lunch as they discuss their son’s or daughter’s future prospects. These authors tend to generalize their audience as one that is generally educated and privileged in the sense that the authors typically assume that the parents reading will have the resources and skills available to both understand and incorporate the author’s tips and strategies into their children’s college preparation program. Some behaviors typically recommended for parents across the genre are monitoring grades, managing student activities and seeking opportunities for awards and recognition, and providing ample guidance and support as the child as she navigates the complicated process. When the author senses a parent might be unable to meet the guide’s expectations, the author very often shrugs and recommends that the parent seek out the assistance of a private college

counselor much in the same way a taxpayer may, out of frustration, enlist the services of an accountant. But, for the most part, it is nevertheless assumed that the parent will be organizing and managing the lion's share of the process.

The emphasis of these books, for the most part, is not on college admissions as a general venture, but rather to focus specifically on the mechanics of a narrow handful of the nation's *most selective* colleges. These universities typically include the Ivy League (Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Cornell, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Brown and Dartmouth) and a typically several dozen of similarly competitive private schools. Many of these titles claim to offer "insider" information and strategies for how to "get in" as many of the authors are themselves former admissions officers who have since gone on to become private counselors. Many of these texts seemed heavily influenced by *A Is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting into the Ivy League and Other Top Colleges* by Michele A. Hernandez, published in 1997 by Warner Books, which, despite its age, remains the best-selling item within Amazon's college prep category.<sup>6</sup> Hernandez readily qualifies herself as a college admissions expert based on her years accumulated as an admissions officer at Dartmouth. From her experience, she elucidates the inner sanctum of the admissions office as a social site with its own set of bureaucratic protocol, expectation and rules and in so doing, sheds light on the mechanics of a process she admits has long mystified and fascinated a large audience of applicants and their families. Her effort has long since inspired emulators to write their own guides.

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<sup>6</sup> Because Amazon's best-seller list is updated live, this changes from day to day based on the purchasing habits of consumers. However, I chose for my research those guides which have performed as best-sellers within the "college prep" category.  
([http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/11678/ref=pd\\_zg\\_hrsr\\_b\\_1\\_4\\_last](http://www.amazon.com/gp/bestsellers/books/11678/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_b_1_4_last))

### **Admissions Management and the role of Information Asymmetry**

McDonough (1994) argues that the collective actions of middle- and upper-class families have worked to transform the contest arena of college admissions. As she explains: “as the numbers and types of people attending college increased, competition increased, and the means that people used to gain access to more selective colleges changed” (431). Thus, McDonough contends that in response to the organizational-level shifts in college admissions to favor a more meritocratic form of evaluation, privileged social actors began supporting individual-level services aimed at bettering their prospects in an uncertain admissions environment. She terms these services as “admissions management,” defined as: “a constellation of behaviors which include [but are not limited to] buying services to help mostly high-SES, college-bound students maximize their college prospects, package themselves, and anchor themselves emotionally as they navigate the troubled waters of college admissions” (428). Moreover, she warns that such behaviors have already become “normative” among upper-middle-class families and thus, are now embedded in their status culture. As she notes, these families rely on their economic capital to “purchase” additional cultural capital from experts to further maximize advantage (428).

What reliance on these services suggests is that information has become currency in the struggle for position at elite universities. Admissions officers lament that information is unequally distributed by class background. In particular, there is an understanding among officers that high school counselors are differently equipped

in their ability to prepare students for higher education. As one admissions officer described in an interview:

Generally speaking...you could absolutely say there is information asymmetry...the information processing is somewhat different either because they don't have the time or attention that for example...the typical public high school guidance counselors and their caseload is from the last study I looked at 450 to one. Whereas at private schools the number is significantly less. Well, you can't expect that there'll be parity there in terms of the information that's available and the time and attention that they receive. So there's a breakdown. Not everyone is operating with the same amount or quality of information.

McDonough (1997) describes this *organizational habitus* as particularly influential for low-income or first-generation college students who often are highly dependent upon the knowledge of school actors as their sole source for college-choice knowledge. As she writes, "Individuals who lack college-choice cultural capital are dependent upon the sponsorship of the guidance counselor to help them receive insider information and marshal the organizational resources that back their college applications" (101).

However, college counselors from famous private schools, namely Choate, Groton, Harvard-Westlake, and their peers, are far more versed in the realities of selective, private as opposed to general public university admissions than public school counselors, especially those with weaker college matriculation numbers. McDonough contends that the organizational habitus of public schools seems far more orientated towards directing students towards less selective, public institutions and thus, guidance counselors' familiarity with the rigors and requirements of selective, competitive admissions is largely limited.

As counselors find themselves spread thin serving a frequently substantial body of students, college admissions at large public schools may be among their lowest priorities, behind rectifying behavioral problems and policing basic graduation requirements. What Venezia et al. (2006) find is that students are increasingly looking towards their teachers for college admissions advice. Aggregated data pulled from across the states of California, Georgia, Illinois, Maryland and Oregon found that more students spoke with their teachers about college admission requirements than they did with their counselors. In California, 79 percent of students stated that they had spoken to a teacher at least once, compared to 62 percent who stated they had spoken to a counselor (42). However, in interviews with the authors, many teachers confessed their lack of training and familiarity with college admissions. As one Georgia teacher confided:

I wish the counselors did it [college advising] instead of us. It terrifies me and I think most teachers feel the same way—that we just do not know enough to be doing all this advising with our little hour or hour and a half session and our notebooks and the way [college requirements] change. I'm always really worried I'll miss something. (37)

The constraint that teachers in low-income schools expressed to have is their lack of familiarity with colleges beyond where they themselves attended and schools in the immediate area. Teachers, though typically more educated than many other adults the low-income student comes into contact with, are not trained to understand the multitude of complicated factors which comprise the admissions arena. Additionally, the teacher-to-student ratios at public schools often limit how much contact the teacher regularly has with the ordinary student. As one admissions officer I spoke to stated:

It's hard to ignore the advantage that students have when they have access to a teacher who know them well, who may know them outside the classroom as well as inside the classroom, who may have known them for two or three years rather than just a single year and who have the time and ability to write effectively. That's an advantage to the student.

In this sense, the capacity of teachers and counselors to assist with college decisions is heavily constrained in the schools where students are disproportionately reliant upon them for college knowledge. Moreover, Brantlinger (1994) observed a frustratingly startling trend that low-income students are less likely to feel comfortable with speaking with their teacher compared to high-income students who expected their teachers to like them and in fact, over 70 believed their teachers liked them (193). Conversely, high-income students felt they were treated well because of their individual characteristics and superior ability to meet imposed standards (196). If such a gap such as this proves true during the high school years, it may have a damaging impact on the student's ability to obtain a favorable letter of recommendation from their teachers and counselors. These constraints in shaping the organizational habitus of institutional actors plays a crucial role in where these heavily dependent students ultimately set their sights.

### **Parental Shepharding and the Significance of Timing**

Stevens (2007) argues that information confers a certain advantage in the admissions process, particularly if that information is gained early enough to allow the student to act upon it. He concedes from his observations that students who begin their information search during their junior year are often *too late* to act on their findings in such a way that would advantageously impact their admissions folder. By

junior year, most students' curricular tracks are rigid and their ability to demonstrate commitment (or "passion") in an extracurricular activity is less than it would be if they had known earlier of its importance. Consequentially, Avery et al. (2003) note that the structural realities of public school, where often each counselor is assigned to many hundreds of students, limit the college admissions "cycle" to only a year, beginning the fall of the student's senior year. At the private schools mentioned above, not only do specially-trained college counselors deal with a smaller caseload, the college admissions cycle officially begins in the ninth grade, if not informally sooner—as is advised, for example, by Ostrum (2006), Cohen (2002), Wissner-Gross (2006) and Hernandez (1997) in their mass-market preparation guides. As McDonough (1997) echoes, "Long-standing college goals can be resources" and that "a student's cultural capital will affect the level and quality of college education that a student intends to acquire" (5,8).

Thus, one area of significant difference between social classes is thus *when* the student begins seeing him- or herself as a college applicant. The timing of the college "trigger" is of utmost importance in discussing stratification in higher education. For most middle- and upper-class students, the trigger to begin thinking about college is brought on by the parents, who ingrain the reality of going to college habitually from a young age and reinforce the notion in day-to-day interaction and cultivation (McDonough 1994; 1997). As Lareau (2000; 2003) and Reay (1999) observed, such parents consciously incorporated enrichment activities into the daily lives of their children with a lucid understanding that such actions would prime the child for better academic opportunities in the future. Bourdieu (1996) argued that this

naturalization of the culture of college attendance in middle- and upper-class children is brought on by many conscious years of inculcation.

Conversely, for many low-income students, the trigger is more often coming from school personnel. Increasing evidence suggests that poor and working-class parents rely on education officials to sort students to their appropriate academic destinations on the basis of their demonstrated academic ability and talents (Useem 1992; Oakes 1985; Lareau 1987; 2000; 2003; Venezia, Kirst & Antonio 2003; Wells and Oakes 1996). As Lareau (1987) writes, “Just as they depended on doctors to heal their children, they depended on teachers to educate them” (81). Lareau (1987) first cautioned against a policy of reliance of an “interdependence between family and school” as it typically yielded unequal social profit based on socioeconomic class (82). Schools that relied on parental involvement often did so based on the assumption that parents from all classes are capable and willing to meet the standards imposed by the school. However, as Lareau (1987; 2000; 2003) and Reay (1999) have both observed, there are distinct class differences between poor and working-class parents and middle- and upper-class parents in regards to such involvement. Low-income parents who typically themselves have not gone to college find it very difficult to help their children navigate between high school and college, nor do they readily understand the diverse, often confusing expectations of colleges in their admissions decisions. Beyond this, they lack the financial and social capital that can be converted into cultural capital in the form of hiring private counselors and prep services which wealthier families use to fill in gaps in their own cultural capital.

For this reason, the role of the parent is seen by both the secondary and tertiary institutions as instrumental in plotting the navigational trajectory of their children towards the final destination of higher education. According to Tornatzky, Cutler and Lee (2002) the juncture of college admissions should “be seen as the culmination of the years of student and parent decisions, behaviors and values. Those activities start in grade school and continue throughout the school years,” and “they number into the hundreds or thousands over the thirteen years of K-12 education.” They concluded that these activities are “Undoubtedly additive in impact,” as “the parent who points out the fine points of local colleges dozens of times to a child is likely to have more of a cumulative effect than a parent who starts that dialogue over Christmas vacation in the senior year” (5).

Thus, what is implied here is that parents vary in their capacity to navigate this process which may have decisive consequences for the ultimate outcome for their children. As Tornatzky, Cutler and Lee (2002) write, “it is not that less-educated parents necessarily have lower aspirations for their children, but that those aspirations are less likely to be backed by knowledge on how to work the system” (6). In fact, in a telephone survey of over 1,000 Latino parents in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, Tornatzky and his associates found that 65.7 percent of parents answered at least five of ten questions about basic college knowledge incorrectly. The content covered by these questions ranged from information about one’s eligibility for financial aid to the difference between the SAT II subject exams and the Graduate Record Exam (1, 24). As expected, low-SES parents were considerably less knowledgeable than high-SES parents as scores on the exam were significantly and

positively correlated with socioeconomic status (10). The authors note that their findings are incredibly important as they relate to academic achievement as “parents need to be actively involved in sheparding their children through the process” (1). Children of parents who lack this knowledge are at distinct disadvantage, as without even a grasp of basic facts, such parents are less likely to be able to effectively utilize the traditional sources for college information, such as teachers, counselors and college representatives. In other words, such parents do not know what it is they do not know.

One admissions officer I spoke to highlighted the importance of early “sheparding” as it relates to tracking and college preparation:

It’s not enough to have them see themselves [as potential admits] as seniors in high school. They really have to see themselves that way as eighth graders because what math course you’re taking as an eighth grader will basically determine whether you take calculus as a senior, or not. You can’t get through four years of math if you haven’t taken algebra 1 as an eighth grader, these days. And you’re not going to take four years of a foreign language if you’re not taking advantage—if your school even has it—of a first year of foreign language as an eighth grader. And there’s a whole series of similar statements that could be made.

The sum of this argument seems to be that the admissions folder is largely to be understood as the *culmination* of one’s high school achievements but beneath this is a tacit assumption that those achievements are often built upon earlier investments of cultural capital.

In his research into the ways in which class manifests itself in inequities of higher education, Lucas (1999; 2001) theorizes that throughout their academic career the socially advantaged aggressively seek out educational benefits for their own children when such opportunities present themselves. They are successful in this

endeavor, he explains, because in addition to their access to material and social resources,

They have personal experiences that make it more likely they will be able to recognize the pivotal 'given instance' to which they may *want* to bring those resources to bear. They know which decision points involve high stakes and which can be ignored safely. Having been to college themselves, they can help their children navigate the high school curricular structure in ways that make subsequent college entry a real possibility. (2001, 1650)

Thus, like Lareau, Lucas recognizes the power of cultural capital of parents in procuring educational benefits for their children.

Lucas goes on to describe how middle-class parents, by virtue of their own successes in academia, have the capacity to "coach" their children through the educational process towards their goal of college attainment whereas even the most well-meaning parents without such experiences can only cheer on their children from the sidelines. As he concludes, "Access to knowledgeable parents and teachers makes savvy and strategic forward-looking behavior more likely, while lack of access to these resources diminishes its likelihood" (1657). Thus, he assesses this phenomenon as a contributing factor in what he terms effectively maintained inequality, meaning that middle-class parents as a group play a key role in mobilizing their assets towards preserving advantages for their own while simultaneously (if inadvertently) maintaining educational inequity.

Thus, it is unlikely to expect a seventh grader on her own volition to choose a matrix of eighth grade courses that will ensure her competitiveness as a college applicant five years down the road. Common sense leads one to the conclusion that external actors are largely influential in her decision-making process. Nevertheless,

looking back retrospectively, the rigor of course selection is often framed by admissions officers as the result of the applicant's full agency—that she chose these courses and the “work” of external actors is largely invisible.

As previously discussed in the first chapter, Oakes argues that middle- and upper-class parents use the weight of their cultural capital to ensure differentiation in the public school in an effort to safeguard their children's passage to competitive, prestigious universities. There is an underlying assumption in this line of research that college-educated parents possess a certain understanding of what the future college admissions horizon will look like for their child and they unhesitatingly use the resources available to them to ensure the best possible outcome. As she explains, “Most parents who attended universities, particularly high-status ones, had a clear image of what their children's high school transcripts should look like to assure them a seat in the college of their choice” (278). For example, they understood that in order to be seen as competitive at the most selective colleges, Advanced Placement courses “were absolutely critical” on one's academic transcript (278). Useem (1992) discovered that many less-educated mothers could not recognize what academic “track” their child was placed in and consequently did not understand the impact such tracking decisions would have on the child's future academic ambitions. Conversely, the well-educated parents tended to understand very well the differentiation of academic tracks and fought actively to maintain such differentiation to benefit their children and to ensure that their children “get more” than the others. As the authors explain, early tracking is crucial for ultimate placement in AP or honors courses and that students on the wrong track will be unlikely ever have the opportunity to take the

Advanced Placement courses seen as necessary for selective admissions. This often translated, as both Oakes (1985) and Lucas (1999; 2001) found, to middle- and upper-class children being disproportionately tracked in advanced and college preparation curriculums while lower-income students are tracked disproportionately in remedial and vocational tracks.

Kirst (1999) argues that the discrete compartmentalization of K-12 and higher education has resulted in a “Babel of standards” which ensures that students who depend largely on school resources to guide them to college will likely find themselves left behind. Venezia, Kirst and Antonio (2003) observed an obvious disjuncture between the curriculum of the high school and the requirements of postsecondary education. For example, the graduation requirements of the public high school system in California failed to match up with the entry requirements of the University of California system. While the high school requires only three years of English, the university system requires four. Students need only take two years of math in high school, while the more selective universities recommend at least four, including calculus. The public school system requires no instruction in foreign language while the university system requires at least two years and recommends more (25). Compare this to the expectations of Stanford University, for example, a very selective private university in California which stipulates no required courses for entry, but strongly recommends at least four years of English and mathematics and three or more years in science and foreign language.<sup>7</sup> Obviously, students who

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<sup>7</sup> (<http://www.stanford.edu/home/statistics/#GeneralInformation>) Private schools are interesting in that they rarely publish the same “requirements” as public schools. Nevertheless, their selectivity mandates that applicants are competing for a limited number of spaces. At every information session I attended,

complete only the minimum requirements for graduation will not meet the expectations of their state's most selective colleges. This becomes a problem when students and parents rely on the school to prepare them adequately for college, but later find that what they are only prepared for less competitive institutions and often only marginally. As Melissa Roderick, co-director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago describes the plight of low-income parents: “[These] parents want the same thing parents in the past wanted...They want their kids to be middle class. The problem is that the economy has changed so doing better now means going to college. And someone has to help them figure out how to do this because the parents don't know themselves” (Rimer 2008, 1).

The implication that Venezia and his associates draw from their data is that the public school system fails to prepare students for even the public university system's requirements for admission. Given Lareau's (2000; 2003) observation of how low-income parents rely on the school to direct their children's education, these findings are especially problematic given the tendency for poor and working-class parents to rely on the school to prepare their children adequately for college. In the end, they may find they are only prepared for less competitive institutions and even then, often only marginally.

Unfortunately, there is no standard measure of what constitutes “college preparation” given the fractured and differentiated requirements of America's higher education system. As Conley (2005) and Venezia et al (2003) find, large public schools tend to focus their curriculums towards meeting the standards of the public

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the officers made it clear that students are expected to take the most academically rigorous curriculum available to them at their school, otherwise they will not be seen as highly desirable candidates.

state university system which tend to be less rigorous and less demanding than what is typically expected at more selective universities. To this end, it is little wonder that within this stratified constellation of schools, low-income and first-generation students tend to be less prepared for meeting the standards of admission at the most selective schools and are consequently concentrated among the least selective tiers of this system (Soares 2007; Bowen et al. 2005; Brint and Karabel 1989a; 1989b).

Elite colleges overall tend to expect more from applicants than less selective institutions. As Soares (2007) explains, “elite colleges have a market niche and brand name to defend,” and do so by mandating different admissions standards, academic requirements and strive to offer different educational and cultural experiences than less prestigious rivals (10). They tend to require more essays, more recommendations, more standardized tests, and a more rigorous course selection from the applicant than do less selective institutions. For example, “state-related”<sup>8</sup> Penn State University (main campus), which maintains an acceptance rate of 58 percent, requires only a high school transcript and a standardized test score and does not require any letters of recommendation, any list of extracurricular activities or a personal statement. As they state openly on their admissions page, “the most important factor, the high school grade-point average (GPA), accounts for approximately two-thirds of the admissions decision.”<sup>9</sup> The other third, they maintain, will be based off other criteria including the required SAT I score and the optional statements and activity lists. In contrast, University of Pennsylvania (UPenn), a member of the Ivy League which maintains an

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<sup>8</sup> Penn State maintains that it is a “state-related” rather than a public school because it is “not state-owned and –operated” but maintains “the character of public universities and receive[s] substantial state appropriations.” (<http://www.psu.edu/ur/about/mission.html>)

<sup>9</sup> <http://admissions.psu.edu/facts/studentbody/>

18 percent acceptance rate (placing it among the most selective universities in the nation) requires substantially more from its applicants than Penn State. UPenn, after the revision of the SAT I, requires two additional SAT II subject exam scores, no less than two different full-page personal essays, two teacher recommendations, and a full report to be filled out by the applicant's guidance counselor.<sup>10</sup> These requirements amount to obstacles to students who rely on a school whose organizational habitus orients most students towards the less selective set of requirements typically found at public universities.

### **The Significance of Guides and the Normalization of Parental Intervention**

My initial hypothesis for using mass-market guides is that given their popularity and market appeal, they constitute a critical source of information for a large number of applicants and their parents about the arena of selective admissions. The knowledge—however accurate or inaccurate—purported by these guides becomes “normalized” among privileged populations which in turn pressures institutions to react and adapt, creating a never-ending cycle of action and reaction within the field of selective admissions (McDonough 1994). What many of these texts then represent are “do-it-yourself” guides which enable parents of certain ability to invest themselves in the educational credentials of their children.

These guides shed light on the “hidden” work the authors believe should be taken on by the parent to ensure optimal outcomes. These tasks might include such tasks as scheduling optional interviews, registering for exams, purchasing test guides, practicing for interview questions, choosing outfits for interviews, etcetera. There is a

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.admissionsug.upenn.edu/forms/CompleteApp.pdf>

large constellation of expectations assumed by the writers of these guides that they feel the “smart” or “responsible” parent will be in a position to help their children meet. Even helping the child choose a teacher to approach for a recommendation, Ostrum (2006) advises the parent should employ their cultural capital in assessing their fitness for the task. “Look at a teacher’s comments on your child’s corrected tests and papers to get a sense of how well she writes,” or “Keep an eye out for passionate and experienced teachers among those you are considering, as those qualities come through in letters and can add valuable strength and substance to an educator’s discussion of your child” (171). While it seems the child may make suggestions, ultimately this author implies it is the *parent* who must decide among these teachers can best “package” a recommendation for their child.

Moreover, there is persistent pressure applied to the reader (the parent) to take active control over ensuring the academic success of their children. As Wissner-Gross attests: “People commonly believe that parents should keep away from issues of grading. Many savvy parents of top-achievers secretly have learned otherwise” (49). There is considerable goading and reassurance that parental intervention on behalf of the student for better grades is not only “savvy” but *expected* and *anticipated* by the institution. Wissner-Gross recommends doing homework with the child and stay up late as long as it takes for them to complete their homework. Moreover, the parent should be the one who manages and tracks all upcoming assignments and tests (53-55). As she insists, “You’re a team. If your kid gets a C, then you get a C as a parent” (56). Again, it is difficult to assess the individualization of merit in this instance, when the parent is expected to play such a major role in academic achievement.

The “secrets” many of the authors apply are often subtly hidden between the lines. Many of the authors demonstrate their awareness that college admissions officers are suspicious of overt displays of either wealth or parental assistance in gaining an admissions edge. Instead, nearly all of the authors I have read offer advice on how “savvy” parents can “hide their tracks,” so to speak as they invest themselves in the process and make it seem as if the student himself is responsible for the whole of his accomplishments. Hernández (1997) suggests, for example, that a wealthy applicant should intentionally “be somewhat vague” about fully disclosing his parents’ occupations as subconsciously the admissions officer will expect more from a child of privilege. As she writes:

For example, if your father is the president and CEO of a big-name investment bank, the committee is going to be expecting quite an amazing applicant...You might just write down ‘banker’ for occupation. It’s not a lie, but at the same time, it doesn’t create such a high expectation in terms of wealth and privilege. (9)

What Hernández surmises is that obscuring the ability of admissions officers to assess the background resources of an applicant will protect the applicant “from this unfair treatment,” and consider them “entirely on [their] intellectual merit” (9). Moreover, other authors suggest different tactics for hiding wealth. For example, Wissner-Gross (2006) warns explicitly against applicants writing essays about “glamorous vacations,” as she writes “college admissions officers hate this kind of essay, which only says, ‘I’m privileged’” (181). In this sense, the authors are speaking to an audience they presume is relatively more advantaged than the average high school senior and much of the strategy of these guides revolves around sweeping the

evidence of advantage under the rug, instead catering to the middle-class idealization of “self-made” achievement.

What this evidence seems to suggest is that although authors such as Wissner-Gross spend ample time justifying the advantages of parental intervention, it is still perceived by many as a gray area of moral legitimacy. There is still a recognition that such actions do unequally advantage those with parents who have the knowledge and ability to apply that knowledge in such a way that will enable their child to smoothly navigate what is objectively a very complicated and tumultuous process. Even some of the most knowledgeable and wealthy parents have extreme difficulty assisting their children in their admissions decisions and are encouraged strongly by these texts to seek out professional help if they feel confused or lost. As Wissner-Gross writes: “Parents who feel uncomfortable supervising their sixteen- or seventeen-year-old in the application process, or who feel that the college essay process is too mysterious and esoteric to interpret, may prefer relegating the responsibility to an outsider” (170). The problem is that those parents who are likely to be most confused by these obstacles are those who are least likely to be able to afford the outside consultant recommended by these authors. Instead, poor and low-income parents tend to relegate responsibility to the school or leave the task to the student himself due to lack of other options. I contend that this is often a decision which has very real consequences in the placement of students in the stratified hierarchy of higher education.

What is illuminating about these guides is their ability to portray an admissions field in which the small actions of the parent and the child accumulate to create a competitive admissions file. In fact, perhaps the most striking similarity

among all of this literature now is an understanding that the parent is expected to be *directing* this accumulation. However, when the completed application reaches the admissions office, the student stands alone and it is believed that he is accepted or rejected on the basis of his and only his own achievement. Though some admissions officers I spoke to insist that they try their best to evaluate each applicant fairly based on his individual circumstances, still others admitted there is very little that the officer can do to sort between what can be properly attributed to the student's ability and what can be attributed to his "background," a nebulous catch-all term used to describe the wealth, elite schooling, private counseling, tutoring, or direct parental intervention.

As I have argued in the first chapter, it is nearly impossible at this stage of the educational process for the evaluator to divorce invested cultural capital from one's ability. In this sense, the benefit of such parental investment is exactly as Bourdieu (1984) contends in that, unlike direct inheritance of financial capital, the process of inculcation is largely "hidden" from external observation and thus maintains its appearance as morally legitimate in the eyes of the wider population. However, given previous research on academic institutions favoring those students whose parents enmesh themselves within the academic experience, it is highly likely that such institutional behavior can be extended into the college admissions process—albeit more obliquely and more obscured than in previous academic stages. To borrow a quote from Wissner-Gross in her assessment of the process: "At the very top colleges, the class roster becomes a national who's who among students. If you want your kid

to play in this league, you need a game plan while the kid is still in high school. That's what other parents have done to get their kids there" (38).

Thus, knowledge about the college admissions process is largely stratified among class lines. But ironically, access to face-time with knowledgeable professionals which may alleviate some of the gap is likely equally stratified. As Ostrum (2006) notes, "college counselors at small, independent high schools almost always set up individual meetings with each family," whereas "those at large public high schools generally convene a college night for parents at which those who attend hear a presentation, ask questions and meet the counselors" (32). Ostrum advises that parents whose children attend the latter must take initiative to meet with their child's counselor, otherwise she warns the child may get lost in the process. Moreover, she advises that meeting with the counselor early will allow the parent to assess how knowledgeable his or child's counselor is about the admissions process—specifically in regards to navigating students into more competitive schools. In her work, Ostrum notes the proclivity of public school counselors to direct students to more local, less competitive schools with which the counselor is familiar rather than urge them to strive for more competitive schools whose expectations and requirements with which the counselor is less familiar (32). Instead, Ostrum suggests that the parent rely on the school counselor only as one among many in building a team of informants to help navigate the child successfully to a selective university. However, as Lareau (2003) notes, low-income parents are less likely to have a wide net of college-educated contacts from whom to draw admissions information and their rational reliance upon

the counselor, if Ostrum's observation holds true, may constrain the options of many low-income students.

What many tend to qualify as unpreparedness or lack of values operating among low-income students which results in high numbers of attrition<sup>11</sup>, McDonough argues is often a general inability of low-income students to meet all of the minute requirements that are required along the path to college. Most students of all class backgrounds she observed in her study expressed the desire to go to specifically a four-year university, particularly a University of California institution, but for many low-income students, they realized only in their senior year that they had not taken the required coursework necessary to meet the admissions requirements. Many did not know when to take the SATs or that many students prepare diligently for what appears to them as an aptitude test to be taken cold (101). What McDonough describes is often a feeling of shock and disappointment among low-income students, as if students are "let down" by the school they relied on in preparing them for college.

The significance of information asymmetry and organizational habitus as it relates to college admissions is that at schools which send streams of students to selective universities, all actors involved from parents to counselors to students seem to have a relatively firm grasp on college knowledge. What the parent may miss, for example, the necessity of the SAT II, a knowledgeable teacher or counselor may step in and remind the student of the exam. However, at a school where very few students apply and are successful at gaining acceptance at selective universities, the habitus is

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<sup>11</sup> See Lott (2001) for discussion on the middle-class bias operating in much educational literature in describing how low-income parents and students are assessed by researchers.

reinforced as those who do attempt to “break” the norm may likely fall through the cracks in meeting the relatively complex and different sets of requirements and expectations sought by the selective institutions in contrast to less selective public universities. As Avery and his colleagues (2003) describe:

In most games, such as corporate politics, dating, chess or Monopoly, players get many trials and slowly refine their skills. The college admissions game is different, at least for the applicants. They get to play the game only once. By the time these applicants learn the admissions equivalent of ‘don’t leave the office before your boss does,’ ‘don’t wait until Thursday to ask for a date on Saturday,’ and ‘don’t move your knight to the edge of the board,’ it is too late. They have applied in the wrong way to the wrong colleges. (12)

In this sense, cultural capital seems relatively crucial to ensure that students “know” the rules of the game before they play. Privileged children are advantaged not only by their access to more attention and resources in the school setting, but also by parents who typically have a strong reserve of cultural capital and a willingness to invest it in insuring that their children are successful in their academic trajectory. On the other hand, as McDonough (1998) observes, low-income students because of their limited access to the “right” forms of cultural capital, tend to face the game largely on their own. What is troubling about this analysis is that both classes of students tend to have their records assessed as the culmination of their *own* achievements. Parkin (1979) criticizes how we as a culture assess merit as a factor in contributing to social closure when he writes:

Clearly, a girl from the black ghetto who succeeds via high school and college in becoming a junior high school teacher will have demonstrated far more in the way of individual achievement and effort than, say, the son of a doctor who enters the medical profession. Yet every ‘achieving society’ will lavish more benefits and honors on the latter than the former. (71)

It is likely in this sense that achievement as it is measured by the college admissions process largely favors those who have been herded by those with significant stores of cultural capital. In many ways, the investment of cultural capital is, as Bourdieu claims, misrecognized as student achievement by not only admissions officers, but parents, teachers, counselors, and the students themselves through what he frequently refers to as the mysterious legitimating process of social alchemy.

### **Ideology of Entitlement and Habitus of Denial**

For the most part, self-selection plays a sizable role in *where* one attends college. Unlike many western nations, America offers no national system of higher education and the system of state-controlled institutions represents only a portion of the nation's postsecondary offerings. Because there is no rigid system of requirements or federal exams<sup>12</sup>, students are free to apply to whatever institutions they feel qualified to attend. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence of a well-recognized stratification of institutions within the realm of four-year universities reinforced by the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings (Trow 1984; Astin and Oseguera 2004; McDonough 1994; 1997).

Thus, underlying any further discussion of college admissions is the incredibly powerful role of ideology in shaping the realm of college possibilities to which each individual student feels he or she belongs. Bourdieu (1996) would contend that students "choose" the school which best reflects the expectations and dispositions they have cultivated in their family life. Soares (2007) supports this idea through his observations that in America, 74 percent of college-going students are

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<sup>12</sup> However, such a system does not necessarily solve for issues of stratification, as much of Bourdieu's research of the French exam-based system illustrates.

accepted and attend their first-choice institution and another 20 percent attend their second-choice (11). With most students attending schools which match their professed preferences, Soares observes, “It is not an exaggeration to say that college-bound youths in the United States know where they belong” (11).

Argued here is that students from the upper reaches of the socioeconomic index are conditioned to see themselves at high-status schools by virtue of their social conditioning while low-income students are—even when similarly academically qualified—less likely to apply to the same schools. As Hearn (1991) found, when controlling for equal academic ability, high-SES students in 1980-81 were significantly more likely to enroll in selective institutions than lower-SES students. Hearn argued, “The evidence suggests that within the matching process lies a sorting mechanism that subtly reinforces nonmeritocratic tendencies in U.S. society” and concluded by warning “the most fundamental threats to equality of opportunity may lie in the *realm of choice*” (168,169, emphasis mine). Similarly, McPherson and Schapiro (1991) observed an “application gap” among students who achieve competitive scores on the PSAT (a non-required exam typically taken during the October of the junior year). In 1987 dollars, only 33 percent of these high-achieving students whose familial income fell under \$20,000 and 39 percent of students whose familial income ranged between \$40,000 and \$60,000 applied to 31 highly selective private institutions which make up the Consortium on Financing Higher Education. More recently, Soares’ (2007) analysis of NELS 88 data reflects this theory of entitlement. He finds that children of high-income professionals in the Northeast region are 3.39 times more likely than working-class students to apply to a top-flight

institution, even when holding gender, race and academic achievement equal (185). He maintains that outside of the Northeast region, the same principle holds, with the children of high-earning professionals applying at twice the rate of working-class students (186). Given this, there is obviously something to be said of how one's background works to help students "see" where they belong in a stratified academic system such as ours. To this end, I explore how one's social class influences how students approach the admissions process and what role Bourdieu's (1990) habitus plays in bounding or expanding one's college options.

There is a wide body of literature documenting evidence of an ideology of entitlement operating among middle- and upper-class parents. Oakes (1985) noted in her study on tracking that wealthier parents and students vehemently opposed efforts to "detrack" or desegregate inter-school stratification of curricula. As Oakes writes, "These parents expressed the belief that their children are entitled to more—more resources, more teacher time, more challenging curriculum, better instructional strategies, and so forth—because they are more intelligent and talented than other students" (277). Moreover, she found such parents often sought advantages for their children in relation to their own expenditure of effort. She explains, "We also found a related sense of the parents' own entitlement; that is, they had worked hard enabled themselves to move to certain neighborhoods, and paid taxes, and their children merited advantages comparable to the parent's own efforts and resources" (277).

Brantlinger, Majd-Jabbari and Guskin (1996) found further evidence of this ideology operating in middle-class parents in their opposition to redistricting efforts. They found that middle-class mothers both supported stratification of the schools and

legitimized their children's position atop this stratified system. Nearly all parents interviewed described feeling that their children were singular in their entitlement to better schooling. They supported this belief by referencing the social distance between their children and their less privileged peers. As one mother admitted, "I just want my children to be with children from educated families who are motivated and have values and goals." She continues, "I don't want my kids to be a model for other children and feel the gap. I would prefer my kids to go to school separated by social class" (583). Most parents believed their children to be exceptional students and feared what they perceived as the contaminating effects of low-income students, predominately seen as "slow," "valueless," and "unmotivated." As one mother complained, "Unfortunately, the teacher has to gear toward the average student and that means that the bright ones have to be slowed down and get bored" (584). Another more bluntly insisted, "Since teachers have to deal with more problems with low-income kids, I would not want my children to be where a majority of emotionally disturbed kids are, so I would send my kid to a more separated school—mixed are okay as there are only a few low-income people" (585).

This study found that middle-class mothers in particular took on the responsibility of ensuring that their children retained the same status as their parents. Representative of members of Gouldner's (1979) "new middle class," these mothers expressed repeatedly in interviews their perceived obligation to cultivate a "taste" for education and to facilitate the appropriation of cultural capital among their children. It is this attitude which evidences that middle- and upper-class parents take ownership over their children's academic achievement and actively ensure that their children

succeed in the prescribed manner expected of middle- and upper-class children as a status group. Moreover, they differentiated themselves from lower-class parents who they believed failed to cultivate these same values in their own children. Because lower-class parents did not invest the time, resources and effort they viewed as necessary for children to succeed, the substandard schooling many low-income children receive is seen as legitimate. As the authors describe, these parents operate within a field of psychological insularity, one in which they categorically demote lower-class students by ascribing them with negative—and often stereotypical—attributes which they believe legitimates their placement in inferior schools while at the same time, posturing their own children as entitled to the area's better districts.

This ideology is not isolated amongst parents of school-aged children. Rather, the effects of such psychological legitimization are largely cumulative and with every successive effort to secure differentiation only serves to legitimizes further differentiation. In an interview, an admissions officer at an elite New England liberal arts school echoed this sense of entitlement operating in privileged families. He explains, “But the very expensive private counseling and very expensive tutoring, contributes, I think, to a feeling people have that this—this kind of college—is their birthright. I’ve already paid a lot for this and I’ve earned it.” As McDonough (1994) found, there was an extreme emphasis on the part of middle- and upper-class parents to get their children into the “right” colleges and universities. “Right” typically referred to the most prestigious schools in the nation, often specifically the Ivy League or other selective private schools. As Bernstein (1977) argued, elite credentials are seen as crucial by elite status groups in the transfer of social status.

These parents believed that their children were entitled to elite education and were prepared to invest considerable fiscal and cultural capital in order to ensure their access. These feelings of entitlement will persist even when the student herself does not meet the general academic expectations as articulated by these elite schools. In McDonough's (1997) study, many of the high-SES girls demonstrated average academic ability evidenced by middle-range class ranks, standardized test scores and GPA but nevertheless maintained a desire to apply to the nation's most competitive institutions—a finding which contests Blau and Duncan's (1967) original findings on how students sort themselves through higher education. For instance, Candy, a student who attends a private west coast high school, scored a 1170 on the SAT after taking the exam three times. She nonetheless applied to Princeton, Columbia and Brown where her SAT score would place her more than 200 points below their averages (25). After being waitlisted by Princeton, she took a year off and reapplied to another set of competitive schools, this time Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Barnard and Stanford. In this case, as in several others McDonough documents, these students and their families sought exception in their application to prestigious schools.

Conversely, low-income families do not foster the same sense of entitlement to elite institutions as do their middle- and upper-class counterparts. As McDonough (1997) contends, “a student's cultural capital will affect the level and quality education that a student intends to acquire” (8). Thus in stark contrast, for low-SES students, who have been continually closed out of enrichment opportunities often translates into their unconscious foreclosing the opportunity to even consider high-prestige colleges—if they ultimately consider college at all.

Evidence does suggest that low-income students do not apply to elite colleges in significant numbers. Bowen and Bok (1998) in their work, the *Shape of the River*, found that only one percent of the white students at elite colleges from the bottom quartile of the income distribution. However, they argue, “the problem is not that poor but qualified candidates go undiscovered, but that there are simply very few of these candidates in the first place” (50). Moreover, they insist interestingly enough, “It usually requires more than a single generation to move up to the highest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder” (50). However, this fact Karabel (2005) directly rejects, arguing that there exists a “significant pool of students from disadvantaged backgrounds” who demonstrate high qualifications based on high SAT achievement. In terms of scoring over a 650 on the math and verbal sections of the SAT in 2004, he found that there exists a pool of 22,477 and 14,812 first-generation students nationwide who meet this threshold (538). He offers for comparison’s sake that this pool is considerably larger than the national pool of African Americans who have scored over 650 on either section (2,962 on the math and 3,3039 on the verbal).

What can be drawn from this is an interesting discussion on issues of self-selection, affirmative action and “thumbing the scale” for the sake of meeting certain racial diversity goals. One consideration that Bowen and his colleagues (2005) point out is that minority students are more likely to apply with the same score than a non-minority (98). They point out although culturally disadvantaged, underrepresented minorities are both aggressively and publicly recruited by selective universities and are given a substantial admissions preference if they do apply. However, as it stands, they note that financially disadvantaged students as a category are not nearly as

heavily recruited and are, according to their analysis of admissions data, given absolutely no admissions preference to offset their disadvantaged circumstances in the same way affirmative action has been defended to offset racial disadvantage (99-100). But, perhaps more importantly, the fact that minority candidates nevertheless apply to elite schools at a greater rate than do non-minorities speaks to the power that affirmative action has in offsetting cultural habitus and speaks to the potential that Karabel (2004) and Bowen et al. (2005) defend in establishing class-based affirmative action.

Thus, as argued, low-income student underrepresentation may be in no small part due to their under self-selection. Admissions officers often attribute the dearth of low-income students enrolled at America's most prestigious schools to the lack of qualified low-income students who even put themselves in the applicant pool. As the dean of admissions officer at one elite liberal arts school describes:

I think the first thing is that a very small number of [low-income] students put themselves within reach. If someone doesn't apply, you can't admit them—that's from the college's point of view. From your—the student's—point of view, if you don't apply to that school, you can't go to that school. So a student can "protect themselves"—from what, I'm not sure—from the emotional damage of being rejected for not applying. And I think a lot of students do that. They say, there is no place for me at school x and I have been able to figure that out somehow therefore, I'm not going to even bother asking school x do you have a place for me because I've already figured out you don't have a place for me.

Karen (1991) observed that students tend to apply to schools they find within the "realm of the possible" and students from low-SES backgrounds were significantly underrepresented in the pool of Harvard applicants.

Within the past five years, however, we have seen significant efforts on the part of America's most prestigious universities to recruit and enroll low-income students. Avery et al. (2006) further discuss the frustrations of Harvard in its recent effort of recruiting low-income students as a part of its new Financial Aid Initiative. In 2008, students from families whose incomes fell below \$40,000 made up only 1.8 percent of the applicant pool, compared to 75 percent of applicants from families earning over \$80,000 a year (13). In order to meet the goals of recruiting more income diversity, the authors recommend employing a strategy that specifically targets qualified low-income students in an effort to make them feel "wanted" by Harvard—a strategy which runs counter to their traditional recruiting efforts of simply dispersing information to those who self-select for it.

To channel Bourdieu (1990) agents make sense of their social world by developing a subjective consciousness (*habitus*) influenced by what they perceive as their options based on objective realities. Bourdieu observed the correlation between outcomes and aspirations and argues "this is not because agents consciously adjust their aspirations to an exact evaluation of their chances of success, like a gambler organizing his stakes on the basis of perfect information about his chances of winning." Rather, the agent's dispositions are largely shaped and determined by one's probable outcomes. "The most improbably practices are therefore excluded, as unthinkable, by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable" (1986, 54).

Thus, it does appear that few low-income students who qualify place themselves in the applicant pool at elite schools in the first place. As McDonough (1997) explains, students assess their college options “by looking at the people who surround them and observing what is considered good or appropriate across a variety of dimensions” (9). In the field of college admissions, students from social worlds where few members of a status group make the transition from high school to college—let alone an elite college—are likely to form a habitus in which applying to an elite school lies beyond the realm of possibility. Whereas students from more privileged backgrounds, as McDonough (1994; 1997) observed, are trained from a very young age to focus specifically on a very narrow category of institutions classified objectively as elite. As she writes, “Through proposing the concept of entitlement, students believe that they are entitled to a particular kind of collegiate education based on their family’s habitus or class status” (1997, 9). As described above, middle- and upper-class parents help to shape this entitlement as they guide their children through the schooling process, to see elite institutions, as one admissions officer described it, as their “birthright.” Alternatively, few low-income students, even when academically qualified, seem to espouse the same beliefs.

### **Class Action: Where it Matters**

What I have identified above are three areas of focus which I believe run throughout all stages of the college admissions process. These are issues wherein one can speculate how social class differences affect how the student approaches the application and the college attainment process in general. Below, I have identified

several aspects of the process in which I believe are exacerbated by social class and the issues I have previously described.

### **Early Admissions**

The recent controversy over the use of Early Action and Early Decision programs largely highlights what many already recognize as the ability of high-income students to make their college decisions well before the senior year to allow them to submit their applications by the earlier November deadlines. Harvard's dean of admissions, William R. Fitzsimmons told *The New York Times* after their decision to end their Early Action program in 2006, "There is no question about it: early decisions advantages the advantaged...it's truly tilted" (Leonhardt 2006, 4). Many schools followed in Harvard's footsteps after examining how the ED/EA applicant pool skewed decisively towards the more privileged caste. Of the 948 students admitted early to the University of Virginia's class of 2010 (having applied in the fall of 2005) less than 20 even applied for financial aid (Kinzi 2006, B04). This conclusion led U-VA's Dean of Admissions John Blackburn to tell the Washington Post, "There was never any intention, of course, of elbowing out low-income students...[but] the way it played out, it did not include low-income students" (Kinzi 2006, B04).

What Early decision programs represent are typically a contractual agreement between the applicant and the institution that if accepted, the applicant promises to withdraw all other applications to other institutions and matriculate to the school to which he or she applied early (usually two or three months earlier than when the majority of the applicant applies "regular" decision). Early decision, then, is a

“binding” agreement and students find out their admission decision months before regular admissions applicants.<sup>13</sup> Early decision programs were founded in 1959 among the Seven Sisters schools of Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mount Holyoke, Radcliffe, Smith, Vassar and Wellesley. Several liberal arts colleges such as Amherst and Williams followed soon after and by 1965, Amherst had admitted more than half of its freshmen class from its early decision pool (Avery et al. 2003 33). By 1983, the year in which the *U.S. News and World Report* college rankings were introduced, all of the Ivy League schools had adopted the program. The rankings included a student selectivity index based on how low the acceptance rate favored compared to the yield rate (how many accepted students actually matriculate). As Michael Benke, vice president of enrollment at University of Chicago explains, the “*Report* has forced us to care much more about admit rates and yield. If we don’t, other institutions will, and we’ll be out of a job” (Avery et al. 2003, 181).

Avery et al (2003) found that applying early confers tremendous advantage to the applicant, amounting to the statistical equivalent of scoring an additional 100 points on the SAT exam. They postulate that the reason for this is that universities rely on early admissions to stabilize matriculation numbers and in light of the importance of rankings, maintain a high yield and maintain the veneer of selectivity. However, the schools which have scaled back their ED/EA programs have since recognized how the program advantaged the already advantaged. Former Dean of Admissions at Stanford wrote, “I would be willing to wager that an overwhelming percentage of Early Action and Early Decision candidates are white students who

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<sup>13</sup> The College Board maintains that the only exception for students to be released from their contract is for the university to fail in meeting the full-financial need of the applicant. However, this is to be determined by the university and not the applicant in question (Avery et al. 2003, 55).

come either from select private schools or from established public high schools in higher-income neighborhoods with well-informed college guidance counselors” (Avery et al. 2003, 58).

Two factors seem to be at play in perpetuating this gap: first being the binding agreement which does not allow students in need of financial aid to compare award packages from a number of different institutions; secondly, and perhaps most relevantly to my analysis, admissions officers and Avery and his colleagues insist that the ability to make use of Early Decisions/Action programs requires a singularly sophisticated understanding of the college admissions process. First, the deadline is months earlier than regular decision, pushing back what is typically expected of applicants in the fall well into the summer months when school resources are largely unavailable. Secondly, it mandates that one’s college “search” be completed well before that summer to allow the applicant to decide on his or her ultimate choice. Third, as experts postulate, the knowledge of ED/EA programs is not well-known among schools which do not typically send large numbers of students to highly selective institutions. Lastly, Avery et al. (2003) find that in their content analysis of websites and admissions literature from the Ivies, MIT and Stanford conducted in 2002, the authors struggled to locate clear explanations of the colleges’ policies, expected benefits and obligations of applying early. From this, they conclude that knowledge about ED/EA programs seems largely anchored within the social mythology operating among elite status cultures—as in players learn about the program by their exposure to other players rather than from the referee. This leads the

authors to speculate as to why such programs have persisted despite the clear implications that they perpetuate inequality within admissions:

Perhaps colleges believe that the most desirable group of applicants—better-connected students who tend to be full-payers from leading feeder schools—will be able to ferret out the information that early applicants are favored, and that others will not. Then a garbled message, but one decipherable with hints or considerable experience, may be the preferred message to disseminate. (83)

While many schools have as of 2007 begun dismantling their Early decisions programs in light of evidence that it disadvantages low-income students, many other selective private schools have nevertheless hung on to tradition. However, it is far too early for there to be any evidence in how such decisions will affect enrollment.

### **Finding a Passion**

One particularly troubling and confusing site of advantage appears to be the realm of extracurricular activity. While admissions officers at selective schools are hesitant to recommend “doing more” for the sake of having “more” to list on one’s application, they do emphasize that they are looking to see as to whether there is a documented trend of involvement or “passion” as some have referred to it. This can typically mean many continuous years of pursuing one activity extensively, such as a musical instrument or sport and there is the tacit expectation of achievement within this activity, such as state or national recognition. Part of what can be gleaned from admissions information sessions and related literature is that admissions officers are seeking individuals who use their extracurricular involvement as a means to stand out from the competition and distinguish themselves. As one Ivy League admissions officer explained, they used the extracurricular table “to figure out how you are

different from someone else who might have the same exact grades, taken the same exact classes, with the exact same title.”

The caveat that many admissions officers and writers on the admissions process such as Ostrum (2006) want to make known is that admissions officers want to be made aware of how one’s familial resources may limit or constrain one’s ability to get involved in activities outside of school. Though there is no such official protocol in place which specifies this kind of conditional treatment, the subjective nature of the process allows admissions officers to nevertheless “thumb the scale” so to speak when they are made aware of an applicant’s special circumstances. Ostrum, with her own admissions experience and with her connections to other officers tells of how each applicant becomes an objectified folder and that the objective of the admissions officer is to figure out from the materials therein the story of the applicant’s life. At elite colleges, where most of the applicants are academically qualified to attend, the burden of selection is quite often assessing one’s “life story” over another and making decisions based on subjective factors such as character or charisma. As one admissions officer I spoke to explained:

I think at most of the schools and this would be competitive selective schools where we have the luxury of reading the full application and talking amongst ourselves about what we value and how those values get expressed in what we do I think we have more freedom to respond to what’s really there and not to be driven or forced into decisions by high scores, or high rank in class or a long laundry list of activities or any of the other products of the kind of privilege that we’re talking about.

An admissions officer at an Ivy League information session spoke distinctly to those members of the audience who might feel that they do not fit their own preconceived notion of what defines an Ivy League applicant:

We don't make a judgment call as to whether or not babysitting a family member or working a part time job is more important than playing a sport or doing academic research. We don't make those judgment calls, but we want to make sure you've found something that is meaningful to your life and something that makes you different than another college student from somewhere else in the world.

An admissions officer at an elite New England liberal arts school expressed his own concern with the application of “passion” in admissions speak in how it might be interpreted by applicant. He explained in an interview, “It’s not a word I use...To me, passion suggests something about a level of excitement and it also suggests something that rises and falls rather quickly...to me, what’s important is that a person be engaged, involved—ideally in more than one area for more than just one or two years.” He referenced a belief that extracurricular activities help predict college success and were thus valuable in the selection process. However, he expressed his awareness of how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds view extracurricular involvement. As he explains:

If I’m speaking to a group that I can reasonably guess is fairly privileged...I might slant what I say in that circumstance more to what somebody might describe as passion. I might try to say to that group, don’t just try to fill out your resume with activities. This is not just about what you’ve done, but why you’ve done it thing. If you don’t have a reason for doing something, you probably shouldn’t be doing it...But often people are doing things because their mother told them or their father told them it would ‘look good’—‘look good’ being the operative phrase.

But when speaking to a less privileged group of students—his example being a public school in Hartford which sends approximately 50 percent of seniors to a four-year college and “a very small percentage” going to a liberal arts school as selective as his institution—he explained “I’m not going to talk to them about passion and

engagement. I'm going to talk to them about [the institution's] accessibility." It is interesting that admissions officers reference an understanding that low-income students face difficulties in meeting the extracurricular expectations of selective universities, but little in the zeitgeist of admissions would let on to this secret.

Thus, beneath this talk of wanting to admit students based on their achievements within the context of possibility rather than holding them up to an objective standard is largely what Bourdieu would maintain as a disjuncture between objective and perceived realities. There are a number of factors playing into what is perceived as an ideal applicant. First and most prevalent among these is the persistent fact that the majority of matriculates at the 146 schools which constitute the top tier come from the top quarter of the income distribution (Carnevale and Rose 2004, 106). Over the years, this makeup of the entering classes has changed relatively little and no doubt contributes to a general understanding among low-income youth that these institutions cater to a student of a much different background and these students, due to their persistent successes in the admissions field, are those students whom they should expect to emulate if they want to gain acceptance. If they do not, even if because of their familial circumstances, for example, force them to work a part-time job instead of participating on debate teams or travel soccer leagues, they likely interpret this as means to believe they do not "belong" with this cohort of the elect. An argument might be made that the extracurricular expectation is one significant reason as to why many academically qualified students refrain from applying to the most selective private schools based on their self-assessment of merit by these standards.

For these more privileged students, who make up the majority of applicants, elite admissions officers and private counselors and coaches do in fact openly express their expectation of extraordinary achievement given the extraordinary competition each applicant faces. As the Ivy League admissions officer described rather cavalierly during an information session, “There is an extracurricular table in the application asking about one thing or a bunch of things you’ve done, that you’ve chosen to do [outside of the classroom]. It asks about time commitment for each year of high school, *on the national level, on the international level*” (emphasis mine). There most definitely exists a culture of expectation operating among these privileged families which drives much of the admissions process and this culture is not lost on the observant low-income student.

It is precisely here where parental cultural capital seems to be of critical importance. As private counselor Wissner-Gross confides, “Significant achievements require lots of family legwork...Mozart could not have composed such beautiful music if his parents had not invested in a piano and arranged his performance schedule” (4). Wissner-Gross speaks directly to how parents can help create or foster the kind of “passion” college admissions officers often speak. “In order to help your child to create a track record in a supposed passion, be proactive. Seek out potential wards and prizes...If you wait for your kid to plan his or her own strategies or find opportunities or pursue applications, your kid is less likely to be successful” (13). For, she explains:

The best resumes don’t happen—they’re carefully planned. When should you start planning? Now. As soon as you realize the value of planning. Plan with your child. She should be the decision maker in choosing a direction—but you, the parent, should figure out the

opportunities. You're the chief scout. Find that audition, science class, rocketry camp, or architecture competition. Inspire multiple interests and expose your child to multiple fields. The younger the child is when you start, the greater the resume and the more opportunities that will become available. (4)

Moreover, she notes that parents should choose activities “with specific colleges in mind” and that they should take it upon themselves to contact the gatekeepers directly and ask specifically what kind of activities they like to see in applicants. This type of advice is echoed by many admissions professionals (McDonough 1994; 1998; Berger 2007) and has become standard practice in the field of admissions management to involve the parent in seeking out and paving the way for the child's extracurricular success.

Some critics feel that the emphasis on “passion” is legitimating the reliance on professionals to ensure proper imaging, much in the same way a major corporation would rely on marketing specialists for branding. As Chioma Isiadinso, a private coach and former admissions officer at Harvard Business school and Carnegie Mellon, revealed, “Just as it would be ridiculous to expect a company like Volvo to stop marketing itself as the premier safety car, it would be ridiculous to expect applicants applying to extremely competitive schools to not use branding to stand apart from the competition” (Berger 2007, B.7). Isiadinso meets with students to help them understand how college admissions officers will view their extracurricular activities—“What they care about is the passion, commitment and consistency” (B.7). In this way, she encourages them to take on or create leadership roles within their current activities and “channel” their interests into a summer activity which “might demonstrate their ardor.” Bruce Poch, Pomona's Dean of Admissions, laments this

development, arguing “Colleges have to accept some blame...the vocabulary of admissions officers has for years sometimes tended toward slickness and colleges put so much energy into marketing themselves that kids are just responding in kind” (Berger 2007, B.7).

Referencing the work of Lareau’s *Unequal Childhoods* (2003), the behaviors expected by the colleges for the majority of applicants seems to parallel the already practiced childrearing norm among middle- and upper-class families. As described in the first chapter, this behavior she terms “concerted cultivation,” or the purposeful direction of a child’s social and intellectual development. As Karen (1991) notes, “applicants from social backgrounds that are more familiar to institutional selectors (i.e., middle and high cultural capital applicants) display divergences that are ‘embedded’ in the process itself” (368). In this sense, he notes the parallel consequence of the overrepresentation of both applicants and admits whose parents attended either professional or graduate school relative to national graduation seniors (358). In this sense, it does appear to most actors involved that the schools are in fact rewarding those behaviors cultivated in the home. The only actors taking exception seem to be the admissions officers themselves who realize that low-income students face considerable obstacles in meeting the extracurricular expectations more generally held for their wealthier peers. However, as noted, this exceptionalism held for disadvantaged students in what seems to be a relatively standard expectation of extraordinary achievement is not relatively well-known among disadvantaged communities—particularly white, low-income families who do not benefit from such well-publicized, systematic affirmative action policies. Instead, it seems, the

prevalent portrayal of the “ideal” applicant to the dominant applicant community likely leads those who lack the “right” activities tend to take themselves out of the picture well before any admissions officer would see their file. Ironically, the only actors who are affected by the flexibility in defining merit are precisely those who, due to lack of familiarity with the admissions process, are the least likely to be aware of it.

### **The Manipulability of Merit**

One aspect of the college admissions process that seems bifurcated across class lines is that of the mercurialness of merit. As McDonough (1997) observed, high-SES students approached the college search differently than their low-SES peers in that they saw the indicators of merit—grades, test scores, extracurricular activities—as malleable. Because their parents employ their cultural capital in such a way that enables them to see the consequences of activities and performance as early as the sixth and seventh grade on a child’s high school outcomes, they can help to “train” their children to consider their college options in their adolescent decision-making. Conversely, low-SES students, who as stated previously are “triggered” to think about their college choices later than their more privileged peers, come into their late adolescence with the perception that their academic ability has largely been determined. To put it another way, there seems to be a more forward-thinking mentality among high-SES students in shaping their high school careers to match their range of college choices and a backwards-thinking mentality among low-SES students to match their college choices to their high school careers. What this helps to preserve, interestingly enough, is the perception among low-income students of the

legitimized stratification of college options since it seems as though their wealthier peers were just more inherently more worthy of elite education than they.

The forward-thinking strategizing observed in high-income families is hardly new. As described previously, upper-crust families enrolled their children in private preparatory schools knowing full well that such placement would virtually guarantee one's advancement into Harvard, Yale or Princeton. However, even at a time when admissions testing favored "preppies" by design, many students nevertheless took the exam multiple times before achieving a passing score that would allow them entrance to these institutions. Author F. Scott Fitzgerald, for example, failed Princeton's entrance exams twice before "bickering" his way in (Karabel 2005, 72). These families did not consider alternatives to these elite schools in their conception of college attendance. Instead, they invested considerable capital—cultural, social and economic—to ensure that their sons would meet their pre-ordained expectations. In other words, expectations would not accommodate achievement, achievement would accommodate expectations.

What McDonough (1994) initially observed in her study of the use of private college consulting was the normalcy of the practice among high-income youth. What she drew from her observations is that the status culture of high-SES families had already incorporated and legitimized the parents' role in maximizing academic advantage at the college level. Other researchers (Oakes 1985; Lareau 2000; 2003) have also observed active parental intervention at earlier stages of a child's academic career which, when extended into the high school years, would support much of what McDonough (1994) theorizes about the college admissions field—that parental

activities are largely transforming the opportunity structure into one in which such interventionist behavior is normalized and rationalized along class lines. As Stevens (2007) observed, “affluent families fashion an entire way of life organized around the production of measurable virtue in children” (15).

Consider the SATs, predominately referred to in admissions literature as the objective “yardstick” of scholastic and academic ability. Crouse and Trusheim (1988) found that “the College Board and ETS [Educational Testing Service] both claim that college-bound students can use their SAT scores to help select a college appropriate to their level of ability” (7). On the College Board’s website, it states clearly that: “Your SAT scores can tell admissions staff how well prepared you are for college-level academics...Combined with your high school grades, the SAT is the best predictor of your success in college.”<sup>14</sup> From this information, one might imagine that the exams are an objective measure of one’s aptitude.

However, despite the professed use of the SAT as an indicator of merit, affluent families see their children’s success on the exam as largely a function of the effort and resources they invest into preparation. In other words, the exam is predominately viewed among high-SES families as “coachable.” McDonough (1994; 1997) observed that in high-status high schools, the reliance on preparatory services for the exam was nearly universal in practice and viewed as expected within the upper-middle-class status group. These services may include hiring a private tutor, attending commercial classes, or working with a hired admissions consultant on test-taking strategy—even though the costs of such services may range from over \$1,000

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<sup>14</sup> “Frequently Asked Questions.” 2008.  
<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/testing/sat/about/sat/FAQ.html#quest24> (accessed Jan. 21, 2008).

for a private class to over \$200 an hour for an individual tutor (Wissner-Gross 2006, 92). As Wissner-Gross (2006) advises in her guidebook for parents, “Remember: The SATs and ACTs are not IQ tests. They test ability but not necessarily ‘raw ability.’ ‘Raw’ is no longer encouraged or admired. Today’s wisdom mandates independent study, private tutoring, or participation in a prep course to guarantee that one achieves good results” (89). Wissner-Gross advocates that parents take an active role in researching test-prep options “as far in advance as possible” and warns expressly against waiting “until midway through junior year to start thinking about test-taking strategies for your children” (88). She further advises that parents look into commercial services as “even the most educated parents are unable to get into the ‘mind-speak’ of the test writers” (90). On the Friday before the student sits for the exam, a “secret holiday” she dubs “Cram Day,” Wissner-Gross urges parents to take off from work to spend the day working with their children as they study lists of words and mathematical equations (94).

Sacks (2007) also observed that this attitude towards the exam was prevalent among affluent families, as one middle-class father he interviewed refused to accept his daughter’s initial score of 1400 as high enough “to play in the ‘big leagues’”—a range of private, elite schools he had previously chosen from *Barron’s Guide to Colleges*. Instead, he hired a private SAT tutor to coach his daughter until she achieved a near-perfect score of 1580 (32). As he would later expound upon his perception of the test:

It’s a test that really doesn’t measure anything other than how well you take the test. So teaching Gillian to basically be aggressive and to make informed guesses or to be able to exclude answers quickly and really concentrate on the others was probably the biggest thing. I have

a very—well, moderate—dose of hypocrisy about this. I actually don't approve of test prep, but it's an arms race kind of thing: if you don't do it, you're at a disadvantage. So we went along, and we went with the flow. (Sacks 2007, 32-33)

Moreover, McDonough (1997) found that high-SES students took the exam several times in an effort to elevate their scores to the range considered acceptable to a group of schools the students had already had in mind.

Conversely, low-income students often saw their fates as largely determined by their scores in much the same way the College Board professes students should. Lareau (1987; 2000; 2003) observed similar class differences among parents, finding that poor and working-class parents seemed more resigned to the level of their children's evidenced abilities as measured by the school or other officials whereas high-SES parents often contest and challenge these assessments on behalf of their child. As McDonough articulates, "working-class students see academic achievement as set, an inflexible fact of their admissions potential" (12). And because they tend to see the exam as testing some inherent ability, they tend not to prepare to the same degree or take the exam as often as their wealthier peers who are externally goaded by parents and social expectations (Sacks 2007, 234).

Admissions officers I spoke to have noted extensively that they recognize that standardized test scores tend to be highly correlated with social class. As Ostrum summarizes:

Experienced admissions officers know that they cannot use standardized tests to compare a student from an affluent, professional community to one from an economically depressed, rural area. Instead, they look at the high school a candidate attends, the environment in which she lives, family income level, whether or not parents attended college, and more. They then use standardized test scores as one way

to distinguish between applicants from the same or similar groups.  
(110)

However, the most significant hurdle may not be what students score, per se, but where they *feel* that score will place them. If, as theorized, students with less college knowledge—specifically lacking in the knowledge that colleges do tend to assess one’s performance based on background characteristics—will not know that their lower score on a standardized test might be offset by extenuating circumstances such as being the first in their family to attend college. While this seems to be relatively common knowledge among admissions officers and admissions experts, it is not clear how well this information has been distributed among information consumers, particularly non-minority low-income students for whom race-based affirmative action does not apply. In other words, should they take their scores at their face value—as is suggested by the College Board’s literature aimed at the general audience—as an objective measure of their preparedness for college study, they are likely to misinterpret, so to speak, their low scores relative to the averages published by elite schools as an indication that they are unfit to apply. In this sense, the continued use of the SAT may continue to result in the stratification of self-selection so long as it is less well known that it is not interpreted as an objective measure of merit, but rather a subjective, flexible tool officers use to measure merit across segmented categories. This is a complicated matter not easily addressed in the media or by officers who typically speak to a category of students for whom class-sensitive interpretation of scores need not apply. For these students, given their privileged position in society, high scores are to be expected. But the catch-22 of subjective interpretation of scores means that the low-income student would need to have an

incredibly sophisticated understanding of the admissions process to allow him or her to understand how his or her scores will be interpreted by admissions staff.

### **Geographic Diversity and the Significance of Travel**

At the beginning of an information session at Amherst College one October morning, the admissions officer began his discussion with an audience of approximately 30 people—a mix of parents and high school students—by asking all the students in the room to declare where they had come from. His aim was to find who had traveled the furthest to visit Amherst this Saturday morning. “California!” one girl shouted. He asked her, “North or south?” “South,” she responded.” “Miami!” yelled another. “Northern California!” “Virgin Islands!” To this he responds, “Wow. If I had a prize, I’d give you the prize.”

We know from previous research (Karabel 2005; Steinberg 1971; Soares 2007) that the institutional goal of geographic diversity in admissions began first with a desire to curb the number of Jewish enrollments at very selective universities. Such schools hoped that by drawing high-achieving students from the west, they could limit the number of students the university drawn from major Eastern cities who were largely members of the Jewish working class. Steinberg (1971) argued, “the concept of ‘regional balance’ unquestionably originated as a rationale for discrimination and may well continue as such today” (76).

Today, elite colleges maintain their “national” identities by continuing to place an emphasis on geographic diversity in recruiting and admissions decisions. Interestingly, at all three selective universities I observed—Amherst, Wesleyan and Harvard—admissions officers declared the institution’s representational “coverage”

of the United States as a fact they took exceptional pride in and hoped the audience would be impressed by their regional diversity. As the example at Amherst demonstrates, even in a small session of thirty students in western Massachusetts, the regional representation is considerable and wide-reaching.

Travel is a topic mentioned frequently during information sessions at elite schools. At Amherst, one parent asked which airport students fly in and out of during breaks. A prospective student at Harvard asked about the study-abroad opportunities available. Consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) and Desforges (1998) analysis, a taste for travel may be considered a form of cultural capital that children can inherit from their parents. Travel among middle- and upper-class children often carries the social weight of sophistication and distinction. But more relevant to our discussion, an ease with travel may facilitate a broader realm of possibility for college than could be said of low-income students whose experiences with travel are typically more limited and alien.

The distance traveled to schools may seem amusing conversation fodder to parents traveling with their children and often I observed during my own travels parents joking with one another in the admissions waiting room about how far they have come to visit. However, for low-income students, the luxury of such travel is often foreign and may make them feel unwelcome and otherized in the presence of such open privilege. There exists an inherent conflict between a university's desire to maintain diversity among its students and the availability for extensive air travel for most American students. Many

colleges nevertheless parade their geographic reach as a point of pride, not as a mask for socioeconomic inequality.

At private or high-achieving public schools which tend to service more high-income neighborhoods, students are acclimated to travel and being away from home often, sometimes even by the school itself. As one private school college counselor described in an interview:

A lot of them visit schools...go to special summer kinds of programs...Andover, Exeter, and places like that...as a preview to see whether or not 'Yes!' They want to go to a school in the East. 'Yes!' They would be happy in a small liberal arts school...A lot of them travel abroad. The Spanish teacher here takes a bunch of kids to Spain every year...Last year the Latin teacher took them to Greece and the year before she took them to Italy. (McDonough 1997, 49)

As an admissions officer of New England liberal arts school explained in an interview, high-achieving students from low-income, first-generation families need considerably more coaxing to consider a school a great distance away from their hometown:

Not only do they have to apply, they have to be admitted. And then you have to convince them of why it's a good idea for a Latina of 17 years to leave her family in California or Chicago or wherever, and be that many thousands of miles away from home, which is not her sister's experience, is not her cousin's experience, it wasn't her mother's experience. Why should she do that? So there's a lot of convincing and it's at every stage, from becoming applicants to becoming enrolled.

However, willingness and ability to travel may not only just be an advantage for wealthier students in that they enjoy a larger radius of institutions, some admissions professionals believe that going to a school far from home may ensure an admissions advantage. As private counselor Ostrum (2006) writes:

I cannot urge you and your child strongly enough to consider colleges and universities outside of your own region. Your willingness to do so could mean his getting into a significantly more selective academic institution than he might if he only applies to places close to home, as most colleges and universities that consider themselves national institutions put extra effort into attracting students from underrepresented areas. (132)

However, the coming-of-age ritual of college visitation among the middle and upper class is considerably less common among low-income students (McDonough 1997).

As one admissions officer I spoke with describes:

The information sessions are often quite skewed in the cohort they represent. It's that cohort of people, generally speaking, who can afford to travel, who can afford to take time off of work, who have the luxury of visiting campuses, particularly those who are coming from any distance. The people who are coming here from California, coming here from Chicago and Atlanta are generally not high-need financial-aid candidates. They're generally high income, high asset, privileged students and/or families.

McDonough (1997) found that high-SES students she observed from California were far and away more likely to consider schools outside their home state than those from lower-SES backgrounds. However, all students she observed expressed a desire for a college that was an "appropriate" distance from home, which she found described as "being able to come home when lonely, or being able to have one's mother come quickly to visit during an illness" (132). Interestingly, however, the "appropriateness" of distance was constrained by one's economic resources. As McDonough found, while many students measured this distance by number hours away from home, high-SES students measured this distance by air travel whereas students from low-SES determined this by ground travel, likely by car or public transportation (133). Students from low-income backgrounds who may have rarely, if ever, been on a plane and would likely see air travel's costs as prohibitive for frequent

use are not as likely to consider schools on opposite coastlines. In this sense, though we know that students across the socioeconomic distribution value the accessibility of home in their college choices, students from more privileged backgrounds cast a wider net of possibility than their less wealthy peers.

### **Summary of Empirical Findings**

This chapter highlights the summary of my empirical findings of how social class operates within the admissions process. I sought to break down the mechanics of the process to illustrate how social class influences how applicants meet many of the various aspects of the procedure. What I have identified by doing so are three particular areas of focus in regards to where class may play a critical role in contributing to the inequality of outcomes: information asymmetry, parental sheparding and ideology/habitus. These issues are difficult to isolate as they are threaded throughout the process and act together to impact different aspects of the process simultaneously. But perhaps most significantly, it is not clear based on previous research how these issues in particular affect how students of different socioeconomic backgrounds approach the application.

The second half of this chapter explores a handful of key sites where I see these issues at work and resulting in class-based inequality: early admissions/early decision programs, extracurricular management (“finding a passion”), the manipulability of merit, and the geographic radius of possibility. These are not the only sites the admissions process offers in examining the role of social class as it operates therein, but I feel these are a good place to begin. What I hope future

research will accomplish is to continue fleshing out what has been previously assumed to be a relatively straightforward process into what it truly is—an extraordinarily complex and problematic endeavor which spans across multiple years of an adolescent's lifecourse and will undoubtedly affect his or her future prospects.

## Conclusion

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*There is nothing more difficult to convey than reality in all its ordinariness. Flaubert was fond of saying that it takes a lot of hard work to portray mediocrity. Sociologists run into this problem all the time: How can we make the ordinary extraordinary and evoke ordinariness in such a way that people will see just how extraordinary it is?*

*--Pierre Bourdieu (1998)*

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### Fleshing Out the Admissions Process

What is just so discomfoting about works such as *Savage Inequalities* (1991) by Jonathan Kozol or *Ain't No Making It* (1987) by Jay MacLeod is how fragile the moral legitimacy of our nation's educational system is when social scientists cast a spotlight upon the inequalities threaded throughout our public school system. However, rarely is the same light cast on the realm of tertiary education. For whatever reason, we as a society tend to take for granted the breach between K-12 and what lay beyond as a time of personal choice. While mandatory schooling captures the lion's share of legislative and public attention, the inequalities of higher education come secondary—and probably for a very logical reason.

Sociologists have long recognized that class background translates into educational advantage. However, what we still are unsure of as a discipline are those mechanisms which allow for the persistence of this inequality in education despite our professed national commitment to meritocracy. In the first chapter, I discussed how Bourdieu offered theory of cultural capital as a possible explanation of how privilege is preserved under the guise of merit and how familial cultivation translates into educational advantage. This theory has inspired a number of social scientists to investigate those characteristics of the upper-class home which are converted into

social profit by the educational institution. However, as Lareau and Weininger (2003) conclude, much of these attempts to understand this process have been somewhat undermined by a misapplication of Bourdieu's theory. What I have argued in the first chapter is that DiMaggio (1982) and others have dispatched with Bourdieu's method of inquiry in favor of testing his conclusions—typically asking as to whether familiarity “highbrow” culture can account for the stratification of achievement rather than first observing cultural differences between socioeconomic classes and then analyzing how such differences may translate into educational advantage.

What Lareau (1987; 2000; 2003) achieves, I affirm, is perhaps among the first significant attempts of a sociologist in observing American class culture and its effects on how a student is evaluated and rewarded by the educational institution. In this way, Lareau identifies that which may constitute cultural capital within an American context in light of the differences which exist between our culture and France. What Lareau finds by doing this is that tastes, traits and norms which may not fit the bill for “highbrow” culture but are nonetheless practiced by middle- and upper-class families as normalized status group behavior are in fact being rewarded by teachers in ways that are misrecognized as individual merit and achievement. Thus, I believe Lareau compels researchers to reassess cultural capital theory and the role of the family in future discussions of educational inequity.

But perhaps what Lareau does best is apply qualitative methodology in a way which invites future researchers to fill in holes left by quantitative analysis in documenting and assessing educational inequality. For my own part, this is largely I have tried to do with this research. Herein, I have found DiMaggio's (1982)

assessment of how cultural capital is rewarded in the college attainment process to be lacking in explanatory power as it fails to see the transition between high school and college as little more than an automatic and rationalized process. From my own experience, I know that the process is not so simple as it spans across many years of preparation and—for lack of better description—the jumping through many, many seemingly arbitrary hoops on the way to gaining admissions at a selective four-year university. Moreover, what DiMaggio's and others' analysis fails to account for is how the definition of merit has shifted over the years to favor a more academic, rather than "cultural" basis of achievement than in generations past. In light of these shortcomings, it is little surprise to me that their analysis of cultural capital's role in the college attainment process is somewhat tortuous and limited.

What I have attempted to do is widen our understanding of the admissions process as a lived experience in the lifecourse of individuals. Because it is a lived experience, it is messy and incredibly difficult to describe in numbers as each individual experiences the process differently and under different circumstances. Despite this, I have tried to illustrate the strength of Bourdieu's theory in examining how social class operates at the micro-level of what is too often analyzed at the macro-level. In other words, what I attempted to do here is flesh out the admissions process as a rich site of social reproduction which warrants considerably more attention than previous educationalists have devoted to it. But more than this, I reiterate that the process is not easily reduced to statistical facts, but its complex nature necessitates that we as researchers quite literally open our eyes and observe, as

Lareau does with her elementary school students, those mechanisms which has long resulted in the stratification of educational achievement.

### **Elite Schools and the Challenge of Maintaining Moral Legitimacy**

Where this inequality is somewhat easier to observe, incidentally, is at very selective universities which have constructed an elaborate bureaucracy of admissions to derive from a swollen pool of applicants a small body of incoming students. In their work, *The Shape of the River* (1998), Bowen and Bok defend this social project which turns away thousands of applicants each year as socially beneficial. The nonprofit status of selective institutions is justified in that such schools at the very least are expected to foster a public-minded mission of identifying and selecting extraordinarily talented individuals who can contribute to the needs of society.

For this reason, all of these schools which constitute the top tier list the fostering of diversity and tolerance among the chief aims of their institutional mission. Bowen and Bok contend that racial diversity on the campus is seen as crucial for the implementation of this mission as such diversity contributes to students' capacity to respectfully understand the nature of social differences and through this, assume their place as effective social leaders. Higher education has made admirable strides in valorizing racial diversity's role in the creation of a just society. While there is undoubtedly a long road left to travel on the route to racial, gender and sexual equity, there is no denying that many colleges and universities have adopted a broadly progressive view towards fostering an accepting community where a diverse student body can thrive. These efforts are nothing short of commendable.

However, the authors are nonetheless remiss to neglect the importance of socioeconomic diversity for many of the same reasons. Part of what I feel needed to be conveyed in this project is just how blinding the white elephant of social class is in the college admissions office. As Carnevale and Rose (2004) found, the underrepresentation of poor and working-class students at our nation's most prestigious universities is considerably greater than our underrepresentation of racial minorities. From this study, we know that a low-income student is twenty-five times less likely to wind up at such institution than he from the highest quartile of the socioeconomic distribution and that students from such backgrounds receive no special consideration in regards to admissions on the basis of their disadvantage. All parties seem relatively aware of that low-income students are disadvantaged somewhere in the process but few seem to agree about just how this disadvantage plays out for this social group. When we discuss the importance of maintaining affirmative action policies for meeting the institutional desire for diversity, one is typically reminded of the countless ways in which racism still affects students of color. But no such parallel program currently exists to systematically recognize the challenges that socioeconomic disadvantage poses for a significant portion of the student population.

Social class garners considerably less attention from administrative officials in constructing and maintaining a diverse student community. Social class plays an incredibly influential role in how students interact with the institution, its methods and its goals. Too often, colleges are seen as venues where students of limited-means push themselves through to reap the reward of a middle- or upper-class lifestyle.

While a black student will graduate a black alumnus, a lower-class student, it is widely assumed, will not maintain such an identity upon graduation. I believe it is this assumption which allows the problems faced by low-income students during their earlier lifecourse to be discounted upon matriculation. Unfortunately, such a view tends to trivialize such problems in a way that is not only presumptive given how social class operates in the construction of one's personal identity but almost negligent given the current operative reality has long translated into to a severe underrepresentation of such students at the nation's most elite and prestigious universities. As a working-class student attending one of these such universities, it is agonizingly clear that my problems are seen by Wesleyan as almost entirely financial and thus met by my financial aid package and that beyond this, I face no unique social obstacles here on the basis of my low-income background. In our affirmative action/equal opportunity statement, our administration has cast a considerably wide net in protecting the diversity of the educational community from discrimination, but lacking from this statement is quite obviously social class:

Accordingly, the University recruits, hires, trains, promotes and educates individuals without regard to race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, veteran status, sex, marital status, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.<sup>15</sup>

Personally, I find this lack of sensitivity towards social class an interesting fissure in my school's professed investment in protecting social diversity.

I chose college admissions as a specific site where the cultural realities of social class remain largely ignored by the administrative process of selection. Though admissions officers professed to keeping an eye out for indications which might

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.wesleyan.edu/affirm/statement.html>

suggest disadvantages faced by their applicants, there is no systematic way for applicants to convey this themselves—unlike the boxes on the application which allows them to specify their ethnicity and gender. In this light, it is not clear that the student himself will know *how* to indicate to the reader that he has overcome disadvantage to get himself in the applicant pool. Nor is it clear that the applicant knows that he even *should* indicate such facts in the first place for it is not public knowledge that such information is desired by the institution or may be advantageous to him. Typically, as authors such as Lott (2001) and Weinger (1998) have found, low-income students typically fight against considerable social stigma because of their class background and may be considerably hesitant to share this information with strangers for fear of harmful assessment. But more specifically, any advantage disclosing one's disadvantaged circumstances might play in the process is nebulous at best to most actors involved aside from the admissions officers themselves.

Thus, one of the more obvious obstacles in assessing the impact of socioeconomic class on college admissions is that there exists no simple categorization of class for officers to distinguish in the same way there exists a box to check of one's ethnicity or gender. Instead, because most selective universities maintain what is called “need-blind” policies in which the applicants' financial information is kept separate from their application to the college, there is, as one officer I interviewed admitted, no way for the admissions committee to objectively assess the class background of the applicant. Instead, as nearly all officers I spoke to and observed contended, they rely on context clues such as the occupational status and college attendance of the parent to make the best possible guess of the

candidate's resources and background. However, as the reader might imagine, this practice is non-standardized and thus underpublicized as admissions officers took great care in explaining to even a well-informed audience how students are evaluated against their own unique circumstances.

Unfortunately, while this helps institutions avoid some of the costs of affirmative action identified by Bok and Bowen (1998) in "labeling" disadvantaged racial minorities as targets for privileged treatment in the process, it likely also contributes to the misrecognition<sup>16</sup> of middle- and upper-class candidates and under-recognition of low-income candidates.<sup>17</sup> But more importantly, because of the national attention paid to middle- and upper-class idealization of what achievement "looks like," low-income students—particularly white low-income students—are not as likely without direct intervention to break through their habitus and see themselves as "worthy" candidates to elite institutions. This is not an easy matter by any means as the conception of merit operating in our culture favors those who, as I have argued in the first chapter, have the resources—specifically cultural capital—to help them realize what they perceive as the expectations of the institution. While it is not clear how standardized across all status cultures these perceived expectations are, based on my research there does seem to be a collective understanding operating in the popular media and much of the guides to college admissions as to what the ideal application

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<sup>16</sup> Here, I reference specifically the passage previously described in which Hernández (1997) instructs upper-class students on how to "hide" their social class by obscuring their parent's occupational status.

<sup>17</sup> One variable observed by guides and that my interviewees attested to using on the application was the section in which the applicant is to list where her parents went to college and their occupation. First-generation students are in fact evaluated as overcoming disadvantage, but as Bowen et al. (2005) observe, the overlap between first-generation and low-income categories is actually, surprisingly quite small. But even beyond this, the numbers of low-income students applying to these universities is incomprehensively small and likely complicates how their profiles are assessed within a much greater pool of privileged applicants.

looks like, what the ideal applicant is capable of, and the resources she can draw upon to meet these expectations. For the most part, this idealization favors those families which have, as Lareau (2000; 2003) observed, cultivated their child's both academic and extracurricular interests from a very early age and have invested resources towards helping these students excel. These typically middle- and upper-class students are held as the ideal to which all others are assessed against. For students of nontraditional backgrounds—and in this category I do not hesitate to place low-income and first-generation students who make up such a small percentage of students at elite universities—they very often do not fit the popular conception of an ideal applicant. They struggle to create an application that they believe rivals their wealthier and more-informed peers. Though admissions officers profess to assessing an applicant against the circumstances of his own personal situation, this claim does little good when the student never becomes an applicant in the first place because they cannot see themselves as a worthy candidate.

One officer I interviewed admitted quite frankly that unless the candidate herself “outs” herself as a low-income student in her personal essays or is “outed” by a recommender or counselor letter, there is really no way for the institution to be made aware of her challenges. It is nowhere clear in the application, the institution's admissions website or really anything I've read that low-income applicants will know that unlike racial minorities who need only check a box to indicate their adversity, that they must demonstrate proactively how economic disadvantage has hindered their ability to meet the expectations more popularly professed to middle- and upper-class students. However, what I have observed in my own application process to

graduate school is a practice already used by some graduate and professional schools which asks the applicant for an “optional” diversity statement. The prompt of this essay asks specifically for the student to explain to the admissions officers how their background has impacted their life and will help contribute to the diversity of the institution. Interestingly, the prompt very often specifically stresses economic and class-based factors as something the office would like to consider. My hypothesis is that if such an essay were to become a standard component of the undergraduate application at elite schools, many low-income students would begin to see their unique background as a strength which is valorized by the institution as contributing to the diversity of the institution much in the same way Bok and Bowen (1998) find that affirmative action has helped valorize racial minority status as a positive addition, rather than negative detraction in both the institution and our society at large. Moreover, as class becomes increasingly more recognized by actors in the process, high schools that may have previously closed out the option for their students to apply to high-prestige schools may gradually begin rethink how the process works in ways which might be advantageous to a student with a non-traditional background.

As I write this, many public and private institutions have been gradually re-orientating their admissions policies to reflect what is regarded by many insiders as a “post-*Grutter v. Bollinger* (2003)” world.<sup>18</sup> What *Grutter* brought into question was to what extent the University of Michigan could apply minority preference in its admissions decisions. After the Supreme Court brought the practice of race-based

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<sup>18</sup> Karabel (2005) speculates on the significance of this case among others and its impact on the future of college admissions (542-543). However, it should be noted that while *Grutter* was seen as a victory by elite schools in defending the practice of race-based preferences, the state referendums that followed largely threatened and continue to threaten this victory.

affirmative action into a grey area of moral legitimacy, universities began taking it upon themselves to reconstitute their admissions practices as state referendums such as the Michigan Civil Rights Initiative (2006) made such affirmative action policies essentially illegal for institutions reliant on public funding. This move has likely contributed to more recent strategies among elite universities to begin recruiting more heavily students of low-income backgrounds in meeting this goal of diversity, given the disproportionate number of minority students who also come from this social category.

However, a point is raised in this discussion of how both affirmative action and this new unformulated area of socioeconomic recruitment maintain the culture of admissions as one in which, as Karen (1985) first suggested, students from outside the middle- and upper-class strata must be *consciously* selected and sponsored through a process which is anticipated to be largely unnatural to them in exactly the ways it is natural for those members of the privileged class. This begs the question from observers then as to what is just so strange and elusive about the dynamics of the process that it requires such policies and programs in the first place to ensure that at least some students from outside of privileged communities can gain acceptance.

### **How Social Class Operates at the Gates and What Institutions Can Do About It**

Part of what I sought to confront in this thesis is exactly this point: that what has become ordinary for the middle- and upper-class families and the institutions is truly extraordinary for low-income families. There exist distinct differences in both the resources that middle- and upper-class parents can invest in the cultivation

process versus low-income parents as well as differences in the childrearing orientations of each class. The first chapter went into a discussion of how these differences are manifest within the educational process and the rewards distributed therein. The second chapter discussed the evolution of the admissions process into its current state, in which the role of parental knowledge in a game of “merit”-based assessment has become increasingly more important with each successive generation. The final chapter discusses this current state and how the differences in cultural capital and habitus affect the applicant and his family’s (if any) interaction with the application process at selective institutions.

What is apparent throughout is a discussion of how crucial institutions are in framing the popular conception of “merit.” Karabel (2005) argued extensively that the admissions policies of elite colleges in America reflect the power dynamics of society. He hints that the cultural shifts following the Second World War allowed for a reform of the process in favor of the children of the rising New Class, which was contesting and supplanting the old elite for societal dominance: “The main beneficiaries were the children of families that, while lacking the wealth of the old upper class, were richly endowed with cultural capital” (539). Karabel maintains that the reason for this is that elite schools have long been dependent upon society’s most powerful constituencies, which he remarks, naturally leaves low-income students at a loss no matter who is in charge. Nevertheless, Karabel qualifies this by making the argument that the social closure of *visible* groups undermines the social legitimacy of the institution. As he writes, schools seek out racial diversity: “not because the visible presence of previously excluded groups adds to the diversity of their students’

educational experience, but because it reinforces a belief—crucial to the preservation of the social order—that success in America is a function of individual merit rather than family background” (545).

What Karabel concludes, ultimately, is that so long as institutions select on the basis of merit, the definition of merit will reflect the characteristics of those already privileged because of this dependent relationship of universities upon the socially powerful.

On one hand, I agree with this assessment that the continued exclusion of underprivileged groups jeopardizes the legitimacy of merit-based selection. We know that had the exclusion of racial minorities and women continued at elite institutions, they would not have remained elite for long. On the other hand, what seems to be missed is the increasing autonomy elite institutions enjoy in light of endowment investments, long-established cultural legitimacy, and private and federal research moneys. What Karabel’s conclusion seems to undermine is the institution’s role as a powerful actor in it of itself in shaping and influencing society. As Bowen and Bok (1998) suggest, elite universities are a place where we might trace the origins of progressive multiculturalism and the valorization of racial diversity during the civil rights movement. While it may sound idealistic, can we not hope, at the very least, that universities might again be a site for the valorization of socioeconomic diversity?

One hopeful aspect is that the process is fiercely guarded by admissions officers as a realm where subjectivity is necessary as students across the nation come from a variety of varying backgrounds, schools and experiences. This thesis is not to be considered an affront against this right of institutions to maintain autonomous

subjectivity within their selection process, but a critique of how that subjectivity has been applied in the past and how it continues, despite its potential, to favor certain privileged populations. In this way, one hope of this author is for institutions to seize their ability to assess the achievement in such a way that does not discriminate against the challenges faced by low-income and other disadvantaged students. What is necessary is for institutions is to maintain their prerogative to assess students based on their individual circumstances, but they must also continue to publicly guard against accusations that such students who do not meet the cultural norm of “high achiever” are somehow being admitted under a lower bar than the rest of their cohort. Bowen and Bok (1998) have made the argument that this is crucial for the maintenance of affirmative action’s social legitimacy and likewise, I argue, it must be applied for the continual commitment of universities to foster socioeconomic diversity.

One aim of this project is to describe some of the problems inherent in the process itself. However, though this aim is sufficient enough for a project of this magnitude, I feel remiss if I left the reader with a sense of these problems’ inescapability. This is not the conclusion I draw from this body of research. Rather, what I was surprised to learn in my interviews, personal observations and empirical analysis is there exists already an enthusiastic willingness on the part of institutions to begin reassessing their own organizational biases towards privileging the already privileged and redirect their institutional energies towards those outlets which might facilitate greater socioeconomic diversity. We see this demonstrated in several institutional initiatives to scale back Early Decision/Early Action programs in light of

evidence of them favoring certain privileged communities at the expense of lower-income students. Recent initiatives like these suggest the institutional will is largely already present and that there exists already an acute awareness among institutional actors that low-income students have long faced obstacles not yet fully appreciated or recognized. These obstacles these actors are willing to seek out and mitigate and this leaves considerable room for optimism.

Other initiatives which warrant some discussion include some lesser known programs which seem very much drawn from the ground up at individual colleges I've observed. Harvard's recent Financial Initiative, introduced in 2004, proved that a lowering of academic standards was not even particularly necessary to increase enrollment of low-income students at selective colleges. The initiative ensured that students from families which earned less than \$60,000 would not be expected to contribute to their tuition expenses. What Avery et al. (2006) found, what the highly-publicized initiative achieved was reaching previously untapped markets of what the authors termed "one offs." Avery et al. (2006) describe "one offs" as students who attend high schools where they may be among the very limited number of students qualified for elite schools. These schools tend to have little to no history of sending even their highest achievers to very selective institutions. In their detailed analysis of Harvard's class of 2008, Avery et al. found a approximately 78.5 percent of accepted students come from schools which sent more then 10 applications in the previous five years compared to less than 3 percent of students from schools which have sent no applications to Harvard in the same span of time (21).

Thus, one aspect of the Financial Initiative anticipated that while academically qualified on the basis of class rank and SAT scores, targeted low-income students may be deficient in other areas typically valued in the admissions process. These “weaknesses”—if we can call them weaknesses—may warrant special attention paid by officers in their recruitment efforts. As Avery et al. (2006) explain, “Some schools offers such modest academic and extracurricular opportunities that even a student who takes advantage of every opportunity may find herself with little advanced coursework and limited experience in leadership, athletic, and cultural positions. As a result,” the authors conclude, “applicants from low income backgrounds may appear to be less meritorious than they truly are” (5). However, the authors warn that though admissions counselors may try to recalibrate their standards based on unique challenges such students face, these efforts on the part of the institution may be “insufficient for students who attend secondary schools that are unfamiliar to the Admissions Office” (5). What is implied by the authors is that in their efforts to increase socioeconomic diversity, Harvard’s admissions office must also work to acclimate a wider number of high schools to open channels of communication and information between the two. Harvard and other private schools must invest considerable resources to tap a relatively untapped market of low-income students.

In tapping this pool of high-achieving, but low-income applicants would require admissions offices to rethink strategies of recruitment if they are to be successful. What many of these strategies include seem to be ways to overcome many of the problems of I tried to identify in the third chapter. Some of these problems include issues of breaking the organizational habitus of underachieving schools by

building and maintaining relationships between admissions offices and high school counselors, reaching out to low-income students earlier in the process and allocating resources specifically towards aiding low-income students through the complex process in much the way high-income students can expect from their schools and parents. The authors suggest specifically targeting such individuals with more nuanced techniques such as personal telephone calls from current students and creating specially-designed marketing materials to cater to their specific needs and situation. As they argue, “The specialized efforts should presumably be designed to compensate for the counseling and informal advice that they lack because they are isolated” (22). These authors and other aspects of Harvard’s Initiative demonstrate a sensitivity to the problems facing “one offs” and other qualified applicants drawn from low-income backgrounds such as inadequate encouragement, lack of counseling and as Bourdieu might contend, a lack of ease with the standards established for admission.

However, given the incredibly complex and convoluted nature of social inequality and class culture in our society and educational system, there is no silver bullet to solving the stratification of higher education. Nevertheless, it is incredibly crucial that institutions not rest on their laurels and expect external actors such as the government, the family or the high schools to solve the problem for them. Instead, what I hope the third chapter made clear is that such behavior in the past has allowed for a billion-dollar private industry in college preparation and counselors to burgeon which has undoubtedly contributed to the widening stratification observed by McDonough (1994; 1997) and McDonough, Korn and Yamasaki (1997).

Furthermore, what is not fully understood or explained herein is how parents have taken on increasingly greater shares of the work expected by colleges in their selection process. Many commentators outside of academia have marked the rise of increased parental involvement, folding the extent of such action under the rather derogative term “helicopter parenting,”<sup>19</sup> which describes a wide range of interventionalist behaviors. This behavior seems pronounced in middle- and upper-class families and remarkably consistent with Lareau’s research of social class differences in childrearing orientations at earlier stages. But moreover, as Lucas (2001) contends, there are likely significant consequences of such differences which results in educational inequity. Similarly, Brown (1990) hypothesized based on his observations of the British educational system that the academic election of students increasingly favors those whose parents embed themselves in the process, resulting in what he terms a “parentocracy” rather than the professed meritocracy. The active role of the parent, in particular, is an important subject for future research in examining how privilege reproduces itself within the educational process. I hope that I have presented here an effective foundation of why future qualitative research is necessary to capture such behavior in action.

The thread that runs throughout this research is the question of how the underrepresentation of low-income students threatens the moral legitimacy of our educational process. What I contend is that the disjuncture between K-12 education and college has allowed certain opportunities for private, exploitative behavior which have long been realized within the admissions process. Lucas (2001) contends that

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<sup>19</sup> See Mahshie (2007) and Merriman (2007) for recent examples of the media’s usage of the term and Howe and Strauss (2007) for an example of how demographers are classifying this childrearing behavior.

such behavior has largely resulted in what he refers to as effectively maintained inequality, in which privilege is maintained via the educational structure by the conscious and unconscious actions of embedded actors whose collective actions change the opportunity structure. Several generations of such actors have brought their resources, particularly that resource of cultural capital, to bear in the selective college admissions process which has altered dramatically the institutional behavior of both the high school and the college in meeting this new dynamic reality. What I hope future research will accomplish, as I have attempted here, is to continue in a concerted effort to better understand the ways in which socioeconomic status impacts how applicants and their families interact with institutions. I hope in this way we can better understand and fix those mechanisms which contribute to inequalities at all stages of higher education in America.

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