

# 170,000 Seats:

## How Socioeconomic Inequality Works to Restrict Access to Premier Colleges and Universities

by

Barry Finder

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

In modern American culture the mentality is prevalent that choice and agency are critical shapers of our existence. From “Have it Your Way” slogans to create-your-own university majors, there is a dominant notion that making something your own is an appropriate and almost compulsory component of something being good and desirable. So what happens when the choices you make are in conflict with your unchangeable social background? *1984* presents the idea that managing a life of contradiction would be outlandish and novel; my experience argues the novelty component to be incorrect.

I grew up in Westchester County, New York, and went to a small public high school that routinely places in the *U.S. News & World Report* list of the nation’s best high schools. This prestige (for lack of a better term) manifested itself through overwhelming pressure to go to a prestigious 4-year college. Though I was unaware at the time, the effect of cultural capital was enormous in my high school experience. The experiences I had and information with which I was provided felt commonplace; I did not realize the role of privilege or the resultant advantages from experiences such as being told to take the SAT II in biology sophomore year and to start SAT I preparations early.

The last time I walked out of my high school I passed a bulletin board that I had passed every day for the preceding month, the one that included my picture with the caption “BARRY FINDER: WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY” amongst that of my classmates and the schools they would be attending the upcoming fall. I felt as though this board showcased my abilities and legitimated my intelligence and hard

work. Not only had I succeeded in the way I had been taught to conceptualize success, but my performance was visible to my entire community. I was proud. The inspiration in such feelings by students is essentially the currency on which my high school operated; my school was good insofar as it sent its graduates to schools like Wesleyan. Imagine what happened to that proud high school student as he ventured to college in Middletown and took an extensive interest in and passion for sociology.

Once at Wesleyan, in learning about sociology and talking with my classmates, I was exposed to the unkind realities of the American Dream. I can now speak extensively and candidly about systems of social oppression and hegemony that have been elucidated by countless readings and discussions. During high school I had no idea that society functioned in such a way and did not realize that I was certainly among a small minority of individuals my age whose experience was consumed by the perceived tribulation, “what great school am I going to wind up at?” To help answer this ever-burning question, I greatly relied on the role of tour guides at the numerous college campuses I visited. After matriculating at Wesleyan I became a tour guide during my freshman year and was promoted to the position of student coordinator of the program the subsequent semester, a position I still hold. My involvement with the office and my knowledge of sociology contemporaneously intensified and, combined with my experience in Westchester, led me to be very conflicted.

My sociology courses, particularly Education and Inequality, showed me that institutions such as Wesleyan perpetuate socioeconomic inequality. Elite colleges and universities, year after year, graduate students who hail from all over the world,

but not from all over the socioeconomic spectrum. I recognized that the structure of access for low-income students to the programs, activities, and information that approximate the cultural capital I received by default from my high school is unfair. I recognized the social origins and mystified nature of much of the inequity in our society. The places that profit from this hidden structure of oppression and the lack of a public vocabulary with which to talk about injustice towards those from lower socioeconomic groups are institutions that I have been a member of. I started to view my high school as an institution that unnecessarily privileges the privileged and I began to feel like a hypocrite for working in the Office of Admission at a school that seems to adhere to this same inequality.

My work in the Office of Admission is fairly extensive. It involves giving tours to prospective students during which I consistently stress Wesleyan's commitment to diversity in all its forms, including socioeconomic diversity. I tell visitors how one of the primary criteria that I was looking for in a school as a prospective student was one where my friends would not look like me and/or be from similar backgrounds. I mention that Wesleyan provides me with this kind of experience and that I feel Wesleyan's public image as "Diversity University" as well as its advertisement as such by the Office of Admission is genuine. And I don't feel as though I'm lying. I have had an experience here that has been comprised of individuals whose interests and backgrounds span the spectrums of genuine diversity. But the reality remains that the school, as a whole, is part of a system of extensive oppression.

Another component of my role as coordinator of the tour program is to hire tour guides, and I know these guides disseminate an image of diversity that is similar to mine. I am nearly certain that most of the tours of this campus discuss diversity and portray Wesleyan as a Mecca for all its forms. I also work closely with the deans of admission, those who make the decisions that at the end of the day determine the percentage of Wesleyan's incoming classes that come from low-income backgrounds. I began to view the Office of Admission as a social structure that worked to systematically perpetuate inequality while simultaneously misleading the general public to believe it strived for a diverse campus when it in fact did not.

This accusation conflicted with my personal interaction with the deans in the office and with my perceptions of Wesleyan's institutional commitments and values. The deans are intelligent people who are outrageously cognizant of the fact that Wesleyan is not as socioeconomically diverse as would be ideal, and they view this reality as in need of remedy. I have watched them depart for their travel to high schools across the nation in the fall with some of the books I am reading for this paper to read on the plane trip. Many of these books discuss socioeconomic inequality at institutions such as Wesleyan. Many lambaste admission offices at these colleges, and harshly criticize the schools they portray as institutions that serve the interests of the social elite without regard (beyond lip service) for the disadvantaged.

These deans get it. They understand the inequity that is going on and I believe that they are making efforts to remedy it. But at the end of the day, the reality is that my attendance at Wesleyan makes me a part of another institution of which my Wesleyan experiences has brought me to disapprove. Social psychologists would



certainly claim that my predicament is a form of cognitive dissonance, a condition where one is plagued and distraught by holding two oppositional viewpoints simultaneously. Extensive efforts are made to reduce this condition, and this senior project is certainly mine. I am attempting to understand a constellation of oppressive social systems that I have undoubtedly been a part of for many years of my life. These are systems, as an academic and an intellectual, to which I take serious moral opposition.

To a certain extent, I am living *1984*. I work in an office that produces outcomes that I morally disagree with and am capitalizing on systems of privilege of which I am ashamed. How can I read Marx and Bourdieu and still proudly don my Wesleyan sweatshirts and love and be proud of this institution? But I can. And I can sleep at night. I have come to recognize the college admission process as a small cog in an extensive and deep-rooted social machine, and it is relatively passive and benign in relation to the multitude of other social systems on which it is inherently dependent. In other words, the decisions that are made in admission offices are not the machine; they do not create the inequality in access to education, but rather this inequality fundamentally shapes their behavior and constrains their potential. In employing a very holistic view of the processes that go on, one that I do not believe currently exists in the literature, I have become able to more astutely and accurately understand the college admissions reality.

This reality assuages my fears and reduces my shame. I feel that high schools that prepare students as mine did are socially problematic and shame-worthy only insofar as they exist overwhelmingly for students who come from privileged

backgrounds. This paper will identify the mechanisms that systematically stratify educational access and success as a function of social class. Each year, 170,000 students enroll as freshman at the 146 top tier schools (Carnevale and Rose, 104). Since the classification of these schools as top tier results from their selectivity, it is thus intuitive that far more than 170,000 prospective students crave these spots yearly. The extensive underrepresentation of low-income students amongst these 170,000 has been alluded to and will be more fully substantiated in Chapter 2 and it will be made clear that socioeconomic discrimination is working to limit the applicant pools at top tier schools.

Throughout this essay Wesleyan will be frequently discussed and occasionally used as a case study. I have chosen to do so because of my personal interest in understanding Wesleyan sociologically and situating the school comparatively amongst its peers. Access to information about Wesleyan is also most readily available to me as a researcher. With that said, though, it is important to add a cautionary note about generalizing Wesleyan to its peer institutions, because Wesleyan certainly occupies a unique position vis-à-vis these other schools. Though Wesleyan is certainly regarded as one of the nation's premier institutions for higher education, its budget and prestige do not reach that of schools in the Ivy League. Wesleyan also has less fiscal means than its "wealthy cousins," Amherst and Williams. Additionally, Wesleyan is often referred to as "Diversity University" colloquially as well as by college guide books.

Both of these realities (Wesleyan's seemingly larger commitment to diversity than other schools as well as its comparatively modest financial resources) may make

Wesleyan a bit of an anomaly. Diversity as actualized and conceptualized at Wesleyan may be greater than at its peer schools because the “Diversity University” mantra runs true and Wesleyan has a more sincere commitment to social justice than do other schools. Or the converse may be true, that Wesleyan offers less diversity than do its peer schools because it simply cannot afford to. Either way, it is crucial to remember when reading the interviews with Wesleyan students and admission officers that their ideologies and experiences may not be the same as would be those from representatives of other top tier schools.

The question fueling this paper is the following: how and why does socioeconomic class function as a mechanism for determining which of the nation’s high school students are able to attain the 170,000 coveted seats? It will do so by examining the current literature (that exposes biases in admission criteria) and the policy recommendations therein. It will then introduce new evidence that will more holistically depict the structure and nature of access to elite colleges as these processes are mediated by social class. The goal of this more accurate and comprehensive structural analysis is for future policies that pertain to elite college admission and socioeconomic diversity to be informed such that they have the potential to enact genuine change.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

To say that the quantity of sociological literature pertaining to higher education is vast would be an understatement. Of particular interest to many of these scholars are elite colleges and universities and the admission process thereto. Research “repeatedly demonstrate[s] that socioeconomic background predicts college entrance and completion” (Stevens, Armstrong and Arum, 129). This idea is not a new one, though. Classic sociological theorists have implicated educational systems in the perpetuation of social inequality; Max Weber conceived of education as of “a dual character – both facilitating and constraining social opportunity” (Stevens, Armstrong and Arum, 129) and Pierre Bourdieu has made claims to the effect that “schooling corresponds to the dominant interests of society; as a result, upper and middle-class forms of cultural capital become codified in the school’s curriculum” (Sadovnik, 11).

Carnevale and Rose (2004) outline some of the advantages that graduates of elite schools enjoy, and attribute these gains partly to the fact that “selective colleges spend as much as four times more per student and subsidize student spending by as much as \$24,000, compared to a subsidy of as little as \$2,000” (107). The gains include higher graduation rates, increased access to postgraduate opportunities, and significantly increased wages (Carnevale and Rose 2004). One’s attendance at an elite school clearly provides increased opportunities, and is thus a worthy topic of study. If these institutions discriminate against low-income Americans, some of our nation’s fundamental ideologies (such as the “rags to riches” American Dream) may not really exist.

The rhetoric of diversity at these schools is exceptionally prevalent. In addition to the intention of constructing a community with a commitment to social justice, institutions of higher education (even liberal arts colleges that lack specific pre-professional training) serve the purpose of preparing graduates for occupational success. A commonly explained benefit of diversity on campus is that it provides students with interaction skills, and an understanding of “the diversity of people with whom [students will] need to interact” (Sternberg 2005) in the future workplace. The argument follows that “more diversity on campus [is] to everyone’s benefit” (Aries, 2-3). Reports seems to agree, as “international management experts consider that for companies to compete successfully in an increasingly global market, a workforce whose values and ways of thinking transcend ethnocentric frameworks is a must” (Cabrera 1999).

So, does a diverse college campus facilitate student understanding in this way? In an extensive analysis of 560,000 students representing 473 four-year colleges and universities, “student body diversity was indirectly, but not directly, related to gains in understanding people from diverse backgrounds” (Pike 2007). School diversity was found to increase the amount of interaction between individuals of different groups (racial and socioeconomic), and increased the quality of interaction between these groups. Though “class inequalities can engender discomfort, jealousy, envy, resentment, shame, or guilt, the value placed on cross-class relationships helped some students overcome their social anxieties” (Aries, 71). Thus, diversity and interaction between members of different groups is crucial for increased understanding.

For the purposes of this paper, schools will be categorized hierarchically by prestige based on the percentage of applicants that they admit. “Top tier” schools accept fewer than 50 percent of applicants, “second tier” schools accept between 50 and 75 percent of applicants, “third tier” schools accept between 75 and 80 percent of applicants, and “fourth tier” schools accept above 85 percent of applicants. These divisions are simplified versions of those used by Barron’s, a popular college guidebook company. Barron’s divides schools into the following six levels: most competitive, highly competitive, very competitive, competitive, less competitive, and noncompetitive. The selectivity gradations employed in this paper were also used in a comprehensive and prestigious overview of inequality in higher education by Carnevale and Rose (2004) that is cited extensively in this literature review. Their simplified categorization groups “most” and “highly” competitive schools into “top tier” and “less” and “non” competitive schools into “fourth tier.” The primary group of interest in this study is top tier schools which will often be referred to as “elite” or “premier.”

This literature review will draw from a variety of topic areas that pertain to the functioning of these institutions. It will do the following: show that elite colleges are less diverse (particularly socioeconomically) than they claim to want to be, determine that more than enough high-ability low-income students exist to satisfy such diversity ideals, identify biases in the road to college admissions that systematically exclude low-income high school students, determine that students can afford to attend premier schools, and reframe financial aid as dependent on and inherently related to access issues.

Elite Colleges Lack the Diversity they Purport to Value

With just a few clicks from the homepages of many of the nation's premier colleges and universities, one can be fully informed of the racial breakdown of accepted and/or attending students at a given school. Schools showcase their diversity by the accessibility of this information, the notorious images that grace websites and promotional materials of racially diverse groups of students frolicking on campus, visible and poignant diversity statements, and their stated goal to assemble diverse student bodies via their admission offices. For example, a search of the term "diversity" in the "Ask Wes" section of the Admission website (the "virtual advisor" to answer questions about Wesleyan), returns that

Wesleyan has made the recruitment and retention of historically underrepresented students one of its top priorities for more than 35 years. Today, this effort has paid off in a genuinely diverse community, where students, faculty, and administrators work and socialize across lines of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup>

Without digging any deeper, it would appear to a prospective student or to an outsider that schools like this are utopias of diversity.

In the sociological literature, this diverse image is not portrayed as representative of reality. Table 1 shows diversity data for a selection of such elite colleges and universities that was compiled using 2007-08 data collected by the College Data Sets initiative,

a collaborative effort among data providers in the higher education community and publishers as represented by the College Board, Peterson's, and U.S. News & World Report. The combined goal of this collaboration is to improve the quality and accuracy of information provided to all involved in a student's transition into higher education, as well as to reduce the reporting burden on data providers.<sup>2</sup>

The table includes data for selectivity (the most common measure of a school's eliteness), size, and percentage of students by racial/ethnic background.

These data legitimate these schools as elite (by way of their selectivity) and also as somewhat diverse. The means for each school's percentage of each racial/ethnic group were compared in a one-sample t-test to the United States' mean in each category (as per the 2006 U.S. Census). Information about school size (undergraduate population) is included to allow for the obscure statistics to be more comprehensive; for example, the fact becomes measurable that Hamilton College has only 67 black students (3.7% of 1,810).



## Quantifiable Diversity Statistics for Some Top tier Colleges and Universities

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Selectivity</u>	<u>Size</u>	<u>Black, non- Hispanic</u>	<u>Hispanic</u>	<u>American Indian or Alaskan</u>	<u>Asian or Pacific Islander</u>	<u>Total Minority</u>	<u>White, non- Hispanic</u>	<u>Pell Grant Recipients<sup>3</sup></u>
Amherst College <sup>4</sup>	17.59%	1,683	9.51%	9.03%	0.36%	11.65%	30.54%	43.61%	15.00%
Brown University <sup>5</sup>	13.98%	5,813	6.78%	8.41%	0.65%	15.26%	31.10%	48.55%	11.00%
Cornell University <sup>6</sup>	21.40%	13,455	5.29%	5.48%	0.51%	16.27%	27.56%	49.90%	13.00%
Hamilton College <sup>7</sup>	27.73%	1,810	3.70%	4.86%	0.88%	7.07%	16.52%	69.17%	.
Middlebury College <sup>8</sup>	20.60%	2,500	2.92%	5.68%	0.48%	8.40%	17.48%	66.40%	.
Pomona College <sup>9</sup>	16.32%	1,521	8.28%	11.18%	0.26%	14.33%	34.06%	48.45%	10.00%
Stanford University <sup>10</sup>	9.49%	6,502	9.95%	12.23%	2.74%	23.02%	47.94%	38.17%	12.00%
Wesleyan University <sup>11</sup>	27.39%	2,787	6.78%	8.25%	0.54%	10.66%	26.23%	61.21%	12.00%
Williams College <sup>12</sup>	18.43%	1,997	9.66%	8.51%	0.35%	10.52%	29.04%	62.59%	12.00%
Yale University <sup>13</sup>	9.89%	5,311	8.74%	8.12%	1.11%	13.61%	31.58%	48.50%	8.00%
Average at Schools (From Above)	18.28%	4337.90	7.16%	8.18%	0.79%	13.08%	29.20%	53.66%	11.63%
U.S. Population <sup>14</sup>			12.37%	14.73%	0.79%	4.48%	32.38%	59.39%	51.3%**
p-value			0.000106	0.00001	.993	0.000216	.283	.115	.00000

**Table 1:** Diversity (as defined in racial and socioeconomic terms) for a selection of highly selective colleges and universities. Schools were chosen by the following criteria: highly selective schools with which Wesleyan is often compared and schools that choose to publish their Common Data Set  
Note: Racial/ethnic statistics do not include the groups of students classified as “nonresident aliens” or “race/ethnicity unknown.”  
P-Values represent a one-sample t-test that compared group means at institutions to the U.S. population.  
\*\*Percent of households whose income is under \$49,999/year. This is usually the income level for which Pell Grants are awarded. (Marklein 2004)

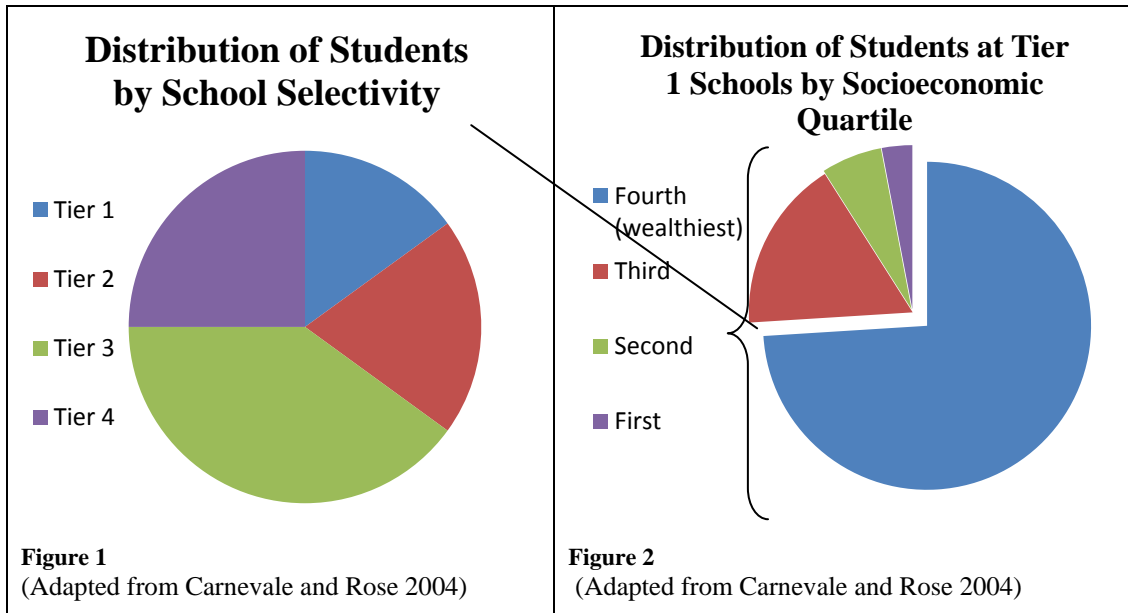
The schools in the table do not statistically diverge from the greater U.S. population for the categories of “total minority” and “white, non-Hispanic.” In other words, the student populations at the elite schools in Table 1 have population proportions that are statistically equivalent to the U.S. population in terms of their division between white and non-white students. The actual representation of the individual racial/ethnic groups does not mirror the population, though, because black and Hispanic populations are underrepresented and Asian and Pacific Islander populations are overrepresented.

It is far more difficult to find statistics about socioeconomic diversity, though, as the information is not readily available online in the same way that race/ethnic data are. The only discernible indicator of socioeconomic diversity is the percentage of Pell Grant recipients. Students who are eligible for a federal Pell Grant are the most financially needy; eligible candidates are those whose families are computed to be able to contribute only \$3,850 or less each year to pay for schooling.<sup>15</sup> It is within this category (socioeconomic diversity) that premier colleges and universities most severely diverge from being representative of the greater United States population. The one-sample t-test comparing the percentage of students at top tier schools receiving Pell Grants to the national population that would qualify was significant at the .000000 level, showing absolutely no statistical similarity between these values. This is to say that the percentage of the population that qualifies for Pell Grants is as statistically dissimilar as is possible from the percentage of students at the elite schools in Table 1 who receive these grants.

Figures 1 and 2 (page 18) show more specifically how socioeconomic diversity is actualized at the top schools. These statistics (which draw from the populations at more schools than does Table 1) portray even less socioeconomic diversity than Table 1 does. This discrepancy is fairly intuitive, as the schools used in Table 1 were schools that chose to publish their Common Data Set and thus presumably feel as though their campus is sufficiently diverse to warrant presentation. The underrepresentation of qualified low-income students at top tier schools is perplexing when considering the stated goals by these institutions to strive for a socioeconomically diverse student body. Carnevale and Rose (2004) claim that

while selective colleges purport to provide preferences to low-income students and say they would like to admit more if these students were academically prepared, on average the top 146 colleges do not provide a systemic preference and could in fact admit far greater numbers of low-income students, including minority students, capable of handling the work. (102)

Carnevale and Rose (2004) find that 15 percent of matriculating freshmen attend top tier schools, but only 5 percent of these classes of students at these schools are from the lowest quartile of the socioeconomic spectrum. Conversely, 74 percent of students at top tier schools come from the top quartile.



When considering the role of selectivity, the schools in Table 1 appear to have a genuine commitment to the diversity they purport to value. Correlation coefficients were computed to determine the relationship between selectivity and each category by which diversity has been computed in Table 1. A strong negative correlation exists showing that as percentage of admits decreases (and thus selectivity increases), total minority percentage increases ( $r = -.767$ ). When schools have the ability to be more selective, they become more proportionally diverse in terms of race/ethnicity. Specifically, these schools are more black ( $r = -.640$ ), more Asian ( $r = -.705$ ), more Hispanic ( $r = -.648$ ), and less white ( $r = .767$ ).

In terms of a relationship between school selectivity and socioeconomic diversity, however, the correlation between selectivity and Pell Grant recipients was not strong ( $r = .448$ ). These data show that schools with greater ability to assemble their ideal class (more selective institutions) use this selective ability to create classes that are more racially diverse than less selective schools but are similarly

socioeconomically diverse. This makes clear that the kind of diversity most closely realized in elite college populations is racial diversity, whereas class diversity is less prominent. “Racial minorities are underrepresented” but “the underrepresentation of low-income students is even greater” (Carnevale and Rose, 102). Specifically, preferential admissions policies based on race

boost enrollment from 4 percent African American and Latino under a system of admissions based strictly on grades and test scores [which triples] their representation at elite colleges. If economic preferences were comparable to those provided for race, they should boost the bottom economic half from a 12 percent representation (using grades and test scores) to something like 36 percent. In fact, the bottom half currently does marginally worse than it would under admissions based on grades and test scores. (Kahlenberg 2004)

Do these schools only value racial/ethnic diversity? Do high achieving low-income students exist? If so, are they systematically excluded?

#### Procedural Biases in the Admission Process

The criteria that are used in making collegiate admissions decisions (essays, grade-point average, standardized tests, and extracurricular leadership) are biased against those with minimal socioeconomic resources, and performance on these quantitative and qualitative components can be seen to be stratified in accordance with society’s socioeconomic hierarchy. Additionally, the structure of access to college is very different for low- and high-income students. For low-income students, elite collegiate opportunities are exceptionally bleak; the impediments to which they are disproportionately confronted often disqualify them from admission and more often leave them in the dark about the process. This section will detail and describe the ways in which affluent students are predisposed for success in the admission process to elite colleges and low-income students are not.

It is somewhat misleading to refer to these biased measures as “admission criteria.” Though these are measures that are used by admission offices to determine candidacy they are not administered directly by institutions of higher education. These assessment measures are inherently encountered by students before the college application process and thus do not reflect universities or their admission offices in any capacity greater than in their decisions to use them as means for applicant assessment. As such, it is important to recognize and locate these biases as existing outside of colleges and universities.

### *Standardized Testing*

The SAT and ACT are cornerstones of college admission criteria, but these tests do not seem to be appropriate measures of aptitude. “Critics argue that standardized tests do not measure abilities that are important for learning, such as motivation, imagination, and intellectual curiosity” (Alon and Tienda, 490). In terms of predicting graduation, high school GPA accounts for 8.3% of the variance between students and the SAT-I accounts for less than 0.8% of the additional variance (Syverson, 60). Additionally, the ACT explains 8.6% of variance in GPA for freshman at the end of their first term of study, but explains only 1.1 percent of the variation one term later (Syverson, 61). Research has not concluded what factors influence the remainder of the variance between students, but it seems that standardized tests are faulty predictive measures.

In addition to questionably predicting success in college, the fact that the SAT can be prepared for seems to indicate that it is not a measure of genuine intellect.

For most of the existence of the SAT, the College Board espoused the view that test-preparation workshops and classes would not

significantly enhance a student's test scores because the test assessed higher-order thinking skills that could not be enhanced by short-term coaching. But around the turn of the millennium, the College Board reversed its long-standing argument and began to cash in on test preparation revenue opportunities by offering its own test-preparation resources. (Syverson, 59)

Given this ability to prepare, "the pool of students with high scores on college entrance exams is highly skewed by socioeconomic status" (Carnevale and Rose, 129). Since the test can be prepared for, it seems to be more of a measure of study time and access to study resources (two components that will be described as class-based) and not of genuine intellect.

The SAT is also criticized as "biased against women, minorities," as well as "students from low socioeconomic backgrounds" (Alon and Tienda, 490). This bias stems from the following two factors: (1) components of the test inherently advantage those from affluent backgrounds, and (2) students who are more likely or more able to prepare for the test are from affluent backgrounds that are aware of the importance of test preparation and have the means to provide expensive courses, materials, and tutors.

"Ironically, standardized tests were originally designed to allow selective institutions to identify talented students from disadvantaged backgrounds, yet today affirmative-action opponents use the tests as grounds for excluding them" (Alon and Tienda, 489). For example, if during one of the timed "verbal reasoning" sections of the test, students were required to read and interpret a passage about airplanes, newspapers, or golf it is presumable that affluent test takers would be more likely to succeed given their familiarity with the subject matter. "Students from a lower socioeconomic or less sophisticated background...tend to score less well [on the SAT

and ACT] and are therefore discouraged from pursuing a college education” (Syverson, 57).

Regardless of the originations of these biases, they are certainly real. “Parental education alone explain[s] more than 50 percent of the variation in SAT scores” (Sacks 1997). In the most idealistic sense, being a good test taker (which is not the same as being a good learner) is what is rewarded by the SAT. Even in this sense, the SAT is not a good assessment mechanism for collegiate entrance. SAT performance stratification is influenced by something that has been termed the “Volvo effect.” Therein, “one can make a good guess about a child’s standardized test scores simply by looking at how many degrees her parents have and what car they drive” (Sacks 1997). SAT performance, then, is more of an indication of socioeconomic background than it is of academic capabilities.

### *High-Income Advantage*

It is important to remember that the college admission process encompasses far more than performance on standardized tests. In addition to the fact that there exists “a small industry to prepare students, mainly middle and upper-middle class, to improve test scores” (Alon and Tienda, 490), affluent families have acquired a leg up on low-income families in other dimensions of admission criteria as well. It is important to highlight “privileged families and the impressive organizational machinery they have developed to pass their comfortable social positions on to their children” (Stevens, 3).

Cookson and Persell (1985) outline the advantages afforded to the ruling class as those fortunate enough to attend the country’s premier preparatory high schools are



given an upper hand in the college admissions process. “The founding of boarding schools in the United States was part of an upper-class ‘enclosure movement’” (Cookson and Persell, 23) to inhibit opportunities for the socially disadvantaged, and elite “prep schools have gained the reputation of being educational country clubs where children of wealthy families are sent to get socially polished and prepared for admission to acceptable colleges” (Cookson and Persell, 4-5).

The elite prep school experience predisposes students for success and is not available to all, as “the higher the social status of the students attending a school, the more elite the school is perceived” (Cookson and Persell, 22). The benefits of attending a prep school are inordinate, as they greatly inflate the opportunity for admission to prestigious colleges and universities, as exemplified by Table 2. It is unarguable that students with scores classified as “Low SATs” who did not attend an elite prep school would not fare as favorably in the admission process to such prestigious institutions.

	High SATs (1220-1580)	Medium SATs (1060-1216)	Low SATs (540-1050)
Accepted at Ivy League College	66%	39%	19%
Accepted at most highly selective colleges	90%	81%	57%

**Table 2:** Advantages afforded to students at the nation’s premier college preparatory high school in regard to college admissions. (Reproduced from Cookson 187)

The trend is clear that “students with higher socioeconomic status tend to go to high schools that are more successful in providing access to college, especially highly selective colleges.” (Carnevale and Rose, 130). In addition to the private schools mentioned above, public high schools in affluent areas serve a similar function

by reinforcing the advantages conferred by the abundant human capital that affluent parents provide their children at home, many public [high] schools have effectively put themselves in the business of

widening the school performance gaps between the rich and the not-rich, of reproducing the class barriers that exist in greater society, not lessening them. (Sacks-2, 92)

Youth from higher-income families are provided with upbringings “in neighborhoods, high-quality schools, and home environments that provide the necessary social support, encouragement and information to smooth their progress toward college” (Carnevale and Rose, 127). Affluent parents can provide their children with substantial advantages through elite private schools as well as prestigious public schools.

Another component of the college application, the essay, can also be affected in this way. Essay coaches, as well as writing and editing services, are becoming increasingly popular and are accessible only to those with the cultural capital to know of their existence as well as the considerable financial means with which to afford them. With Honors, one such essay help service, “promises that two Harvard honors graduates will read every essay” (Gose 2007). With Honors claims that its “goal is to help applicants produce the most polished piece they can...they can be creative, but they have to stay within the boundaries of what’s acceptable in college admissions.” The scope of acceptability is thus privileged information disproportionately available to affluent applicants. Gose (2007) describes the story of a college applicant (who utilized With Honors’ services) who attends Rye Country Day School Student in Westchester County, New York. In 2006 the per-capita income in Westchester was \$70,519<sup>16</sup> whereas for the United States as a whole was nearly half that, \$36,714.<sup>17</sup> Resources such as college essay services are simply not accessible to all.

Affluent students are also abreast of what is needed to be prepared to apply to college. Either from their knowledgeable high school or from family that have gone through the process themselves, these students will be informed of which courses to take to ensure a rigorous and challenging courseload, and to take the necessary standardized tests. Among those in

the top NELS (National Educational Longitudinal Study) test quartile but the lowest socioeconomic status quartile, fully 43 percent took neither the SAT nor the ACT, whereas only 13 percent of the high NELS scorers in the top socioeconomic status quartile did not take either test (Carnevale and Rose, 136).

Additionally, the fee waivers that exist to exempt low-income students from paying application fees and fees for standardized tests are a part of the knowledge that is disproportionately disseminated to the affluent. And this ruling social group is perceived to be unwilling to relinquish their social control, as they will “not easily be persuaded to put their children voluntarily on buses heading for urban schools” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 173) in order to diversify schools. Something else needs to be done in recognition of this problem.

#### *Low-Income Disadvantage*

The advantages that affluent students experience in the admission process are contrasted by disadvantages that low-income students face. These disadvantages will be explored, and they include the reality that public high schools serving predominantly low-income students have worse classroom environments, educational experiences, and teachers. Additionally, low-income students do not benefit from peer effects and are often misguided (or insufficiently guided) by their college counselors.

The classroom environments in low-income schools can be far from stimulating intellectually and often have high concentrations of unprepared and inadequate teachers. Violence and guns are often present on playgrounds and some teachers are so bad that they only use TV and movies for instruction (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2004). Many teachers worsen the problem, as they have lower expectations for disadvantaged students which influence performance. In an experiment in which teachers were told, entirely randomly, that certain students were gifted academically, and those students “who the teachers treated as special actually performed significantly better than others over the course of the year” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 195).

Even in more socioeconomically diverse high schools “there is further segregation of students...with low socioeconomic status students less likely to take the more rigorous college preparatory curriculum” (Carnevale and Rose, 130). This track division often “depends on how well children perform on standardized tests, which reflect the existing social and economic order” (Sacks-2, 93). Once the students are split into different tracks there is a reduction in positive “peer effects,” the motivation to succeed that comes from being around others with similar aspirations (Carnevale and Rose, 131).

College counselors in low-income schools further reduce the possibility of students in these schools matriculating at an elite college. Stevens (2007) “spent eighteen months as a participant observer in the [admission] office of a highly selective liberal arts college in the northeastern United States in 2000-2001” (3). He traveled to high schools on his own as an admission representative for the College

and had “a seven-day tour of duty that included the schools in Portland (Oregon), Seattle, and Vancouver areas” (Stevens, 78). In his travels he came across Ida B. Wells High and remarked that

Ida Wells had everything the College could want from any high school – strong academic performers with their sights on private schools, multicultural kids, and a good reputation in a city with lots of cream to skim. The only thing it lacked was the counseling that would link its students with the selective schools coveting them. (Stevens, 83)

McDonough and Calderone (2006) claim that this “faulty link” is a problem at many low-income high schools. In these areas, counselor:student ratios can be 1:1,056 or higher (McDonough and Calderone 2006), and counselors are thus unable to provide students with the early information about college accessibility and preparation.

In these areas, McDonough and Calderone (2006) found that “counselors engage in college guidance only 13% of the time.” Within these school districts, financial aid guidance is often separated from college guidance, and, as a result, students do not have discussions about “the critical issues of cost and aid” because “the value of financial aid information was routinely undermined by the need to stay true to organizational roles and responsibilities” (McDonough and Calderone, 1709).

Instead of marketing college as a viable, affordable, and preferable option for students, counselors often did not have time to do so. Many were overcommitted to their other responsibilities (drug and pregnancy prevention) that they were forced to rely on external forces to motivate students and inform students. For example, “most counselors did very little beyond providing basic information on local college costs, and a few dedicated counselors provided FAFSA [Free Application for Federal

Student Aid] applications and assistance on filling these forms out” (McDonough and Calderone, 1710). This is problematic, though, because assessing

the affordability of college is not based on externals such as a FAFSA determination of eligibility or a counselor’s assessment of whether a specific college degree would be worth the cost but instead, on whether that individual feels able to afford a college’s costs. (McDonough and Calderone, 1716)

For low-income families, this ability comes from knowing the extent of financial aid packages (not just demonstrated need), and this information has to be provided before individuals begin the college search.

It is clear that “the effect of socioeconomic status on the college enrollment of low-income students is largely explained by the lack of counseling” (McDonough and Calderone, 1705). Some schools set up financial aid sessions with students to go over their options “right after they have their acceptance letters looking at the financial aid that’s been awarded to them” (McDonough and Calderone, 1709). By providing (albeit minimal) financial guidance after students apply is already limiting the dissemination of this information to students who have already chosen to attend college.

The role of the college counselor exceeds financial aid and college application guidance. Counselors are also responsible for providing assistance early in the process, including the need to inform students of what courses they need to take to be credible college candidates. “Of all ‘college bound’ high school graduates in 1992, only 5.9% satisfied all five of the criteria... identified as needed for admission to a highly selective college” (Winston and Hill, 5). These criteria (a high school cumulative grade-point average of 3.5, SAT equivalent score of 1100, four English

courses, three each in math, sciences, and social sciences, and two in foreign language, positive teacher evaluations, and evidence of engagement in extracurricular activities) are certainly poorly communicated to students in low-income schools.

An interview was conducted for this paper with a teacher at a charter school in Hartford, Connecticut. The school's mission is to reduce what is referred to as the "achievement gap," the reality that "by twelfth grade, on average, black students are four years behind those who are white or Asian. Hispanics don't do much better" (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 12). The teacher, Kevin, discussed his time as a student-teacher in Philadelphia while an undergraduate education major at Temple University. He was assigned to be in a

group that worked with the jazz band at an inner-city high school. There were lots of problems funding the project we were supposed to be doing so we ended up spending most of our time just talking to the band. They were mostly seniors in their spring semester, just about to graduate. And so we got to know them, and, I would say a small group of them was talking to us one day about how they wanted to go to Temple. They were asking us if we liked it and what it was like. They said that they wanted to go in the fall. We told them that we liked it and asked them if they had applied and they said no and we told them if they should.

The conversation progressed, and "someone asked them what they got on the SATs. None of them had taken the SATs. One of them even said 'what's the SATs?' We were all shocked and we didn't know what to say." When the group reported the experience to their professor, she "said that the guidance department at the high school was just not big enough to help every kid. They didn't have the resources. She said it was an unfortunate reality."

Kevin and his group members were shocked. "These were good kids!" he exclaimed during the interview.

They wanted to do things like have concerts in the neighborhood to promote awareness of gangs and violence and drugs because they saw those as big problems and they wanted them to stop. These were involved kids who wanted to make a difference but didn't realize that they had to take the SATs! They didn't know. They didn't know anything about how to get to school.

In thinking about these students in the context of his own experience, Kevin became more distraught. “The idea that people have financial hardships is not foreign to me. I went to Catholic school for high school and it cost \$6,000 a year and that was most of the savings my parents had and all of the savings I had.” In working with low-income children in high school Kevin believed that he understood the unfortunate reality that is poverty in America. He did not understand the extent of the structural disadvantages to which those stricken by said poverty encounter. “The idea of what being poor could manifest to in high school was unfathomable. It still offends me. SAT is just such a household term even for me. It’s so sad.”

### Are They Out There?

The previous section shows that the means for assessment used in college admissions are biased such that affluent students have an advantage in performing well and also in being informed of and prepared for the process. Even given these impediments, there is evidence that even when achievement is measured by these biased assessment methods more high-achieving low-income students do exist than currently comprise top tier student bodies. It appears that, without restructuring the application process (or reforming the public pre-college school system), elite schools could be more socioeconomically diverse without sacrificing educational standards. The section does not intend to ignore the fact that procedural biases exist and reduce meritocracy (and are thus problematic), but to show that even students who



objectively meet the current criteria for admission do not seem to be applying and/or being accepted.

In examining the distribution of students by family income and SAT-equivalent score, Winston and Hill (2005) demonstrate scenarios by which top tier schools could conceivably increase the percentage of low-income students at their school with minimal alteration to the educational standards in place. The schools included in the data set were all schools classified as “COFHE Schools” (for a list see Appendix 1). COFHE (The Consortium on Financing Higher Education) collects data from selective private colleges and universities about enrollment and fiscal policy. All of these schools are classified as “top tier” as has been defined for the purposes of this paper. The data also includes SAT equivalent scores from the entire 2003 test-taking population. Scores termed “SAT equivalent” are SAT scores as well as scores on the ACT that are deemed to be comparable.

SAT Equivalent Score	Family Income (by quintile)				
	Lowest	Lower Middle	Middle	Upper Middle	High
1600	1.6%	6.7%	10.7%	24.9%	56.1%
1520 and above	2.6%	8.1%	14.2%	25.2%	45.9%
1420 and above	3.7%	9.1%	16.1%	25.2%	45.9%
1300 and above	4.8%	11.2%	18.7%	26.3%	39.0%
1220 and above	5.6%	12.6%	19.9%	26.3%	35.6%
1110 and above	7.3%	14.7%	21.2%	26.0%	30.7%
1030 and above	8.7%	16.2%	21.9%	25.6%	27.5%
400 and above	17.6%	20.9%	21.6%	21.3%	18.6%

**Table 3:** SAT Equivalent scores for the 2003 National SAT and ACT test-taking population for individuals reporting family income (Adapted from Winston and Hill 2005)

Table 3 calculates the percentage of students by family income for each level of SAT equivalent performance. Each row shows the distribution by income level of those scoring at a minimum criterion so, for example, of all test takers scoring above

1300, 4.8% are from the lowest socioeconomic status (SES) quintile and 39% are from the highest. Only test-takers who report family income are included. Using the data in Table 3 it can become clear that by using SAT/ACT performance as a sole indicator of candidacy, COFHE schools could boost the representation of low-income students in their student bodies. For example,

if 1420 were taken as the minimum ability level, the present 10% in COFHE schools from the bottom two income quintiles would have to be increased to 12.8% – instead of the 2,750 low-income students now matriculating per year, there would have to be 3,520. That’s the schools’ demand. On the supply side... at 1420 and above, there are, nationally, 4,276 students in those bottom two income quintiles. So meeting that target is not impossible, but it’s tight: nearly 85% of the low-income, high-ability students in the US would have to go to one of these COFHE schools in order for them to mirror national population shares under that definition of high-ability. If the high-ability definition were reduced to a minimum score of 1300, the enrollment target would become 16% which means that 4,400 would have to be matriculated each year from the low-income population of 19,959 who score 1300 or above. (Winston and Hill, 10)

It appears that sufficient numbers of low-income students are able to overcome (at least one) of the mechanisms through which they are generally systematically disadvantaged in the college admissions process.

It is important to note that the data used for the preceding speculations may be slightly flawed because of their reliance on self-reported income. Additionally, a large percentage of test-takers did not report a family income and were thus excluded from analysis. To test the accuracy of self-reported income Winston, Hill and Zimmerman (2007) compared the records of 401 Williams College students. They compared “self-reported family income (on Williams’ Admitted Student Questionnaire) and, again, the [actual] incomes reported for these students on Tax Forms 1040” (Winston, Hill and Zimmerman, 8).

The results, in Table 4, demonstrate that students who self-identify as low-income often do not belong to this category. Specifically, only 61% of students who self-identify as 1<sup>st</sup> quintile (lowest income) actually are, and only 75% of students who self-identify as 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> quintile actually are.

Actual Family Income (Form 1040)	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5
% of Students self-report “Q1”	61%	22%	9%	5%	2%
Actual Family Income (Form 1040)	Q1 or Q2		Q3	Q4	Q5
% of Students self-report “Q1” or “Q2”	75%		16%	5%	4%
<b>Table 4:</b> Relationship between self-reported income and actual family income (by US Census Quintile) for Williams College students (Adapted from Winston, Hill and Zimmerman 2007)					

To assess the question “are they out there?” the most accurate answer is “kind of.” It appears that some low-income students do perform well on standardized tests. “There is in fact a significant pool of students from disadvantaged backgrounds with ‘high academic qualifications,’ at least as measured by the SAT” (Karavel, 538). The problems with self-reported income as well as with the large percentage of test takers that did not report income raises doubt as to the accuracy of the speculations by Winston and Hill. Also, standardized tests are only one component of a variety of application components that are stratified on the basis of social class. This section only provides proof that perhaps some low-income students perform well on standardized tests, but does not provide sufficient evidence that elite colleges are “missing” a large number of high-performing low-income applicants who are ardently seeking admission.

#### Financial Aid: Affordability After Access

Perhaps the students identified in the last section do not apply to elite schools because of issues of affordability. Specifically, though they meet the criteria for admission they cannot afford to attend elite colleges. One aspect of affordability has

already been discussed, that college counselors in low-income areas often do not usefully convey information to their students in regard to college aid and affordability. Hypothetically, were these counselors to provide more useful information in a timelier manner, are these schools affordable? This section will demonstrate that, in an objective sense, elite schools are affordable for students from low-income backgrounds, with the caveat that these generous packages are access-based. Only students who are informed of or who seek these schools out will be privy to their affordability.

Hill, Winston, and Boyd (2004) sought to answer the question “*can* a hard working and highly able poor kid realistically afford to go to Harvard or Swarthmore or Stanford?” (Hill, Winston and Boyd, 2). In a study using 41,404 financial aid records from students attending 28 COFHE schools in 2001-02 the authors claim that their

findings should be highly encouraging to ambitious low income students, telling them that efforts of many of these schools to achieve equality of opportunity have been successful – as a student, if you’re good enough to get in, you’ll almost certainly be able to afford it, often through price reductions alone. (Hill, Winston and Boyd, 29)

The results of their research are shown in Table 5. Of their sample “only 45% of the students were on financial aid and only 10% [of the entire sample] came from families in the low and lower-middle income quintiles” (Hill, Winston and Boyd, 7). This table portrays the average “net price” at COFHE schools, which is the yearly cost after subtracting financial aid from the “sticker price” (full tuition). Specifically, Table 5 demonstrates how net price is adjusted as a function of income level and how this adjusted price compares (percentage-wise) to a family’s total annual income.

Families of:	Aided Students						Full-pay students
	Low	Lower-Middle	Middle	Upper-Middle	High	Average Aided Student	95 <sup>th</sup> Percentile
<i>Lower Bound</i>	-	\$24,001	\$41,001	\$61,379	\$91,701		\$160,250
<i>Quartile Median</i>	\$15,347	\$32,416	\$50,890	\$74,418	\$113,689		-
Average Net Price (Costs after Aid)							
All COFHE Schools	\$7,552	\$8,547	\$11,557	\$16,365	\$23,690	\$16,058	\$33,831
Coed Colleges	\$5,487	\$7,280	\$10,374	\$15,259	\$22,738	\$14,726	\$33,403
Ivy League Universities	\$8,169	\$9,200	\$11,893	\$16,499	\$23,949	\$16,667	\$34,508
Net Price as a Percent of Sticker Price							
All COFHE Schools	22%	25%	34%	48%	70%	47%	100%
Coed Colleges	17%	22%	31%	46%	68%	44%	100%
Ivy League Universities	24%	27%	34%	48%	69%	48%	100%
Net Price as a Percent of Quintile Median Family Income							
All COFHE Schools	49%	26%	23%	22%	21%	28%	21%
Coed Colleges	36%	22%	20%	21%	20%	24%	21%
Ivy League Universities	53%	28%	23%	22%	21%	30%	21%

**Table 5:** An overview of financial aid packages as they relate to family income (Adapted from Hill, Winston, and Boyd 2004).

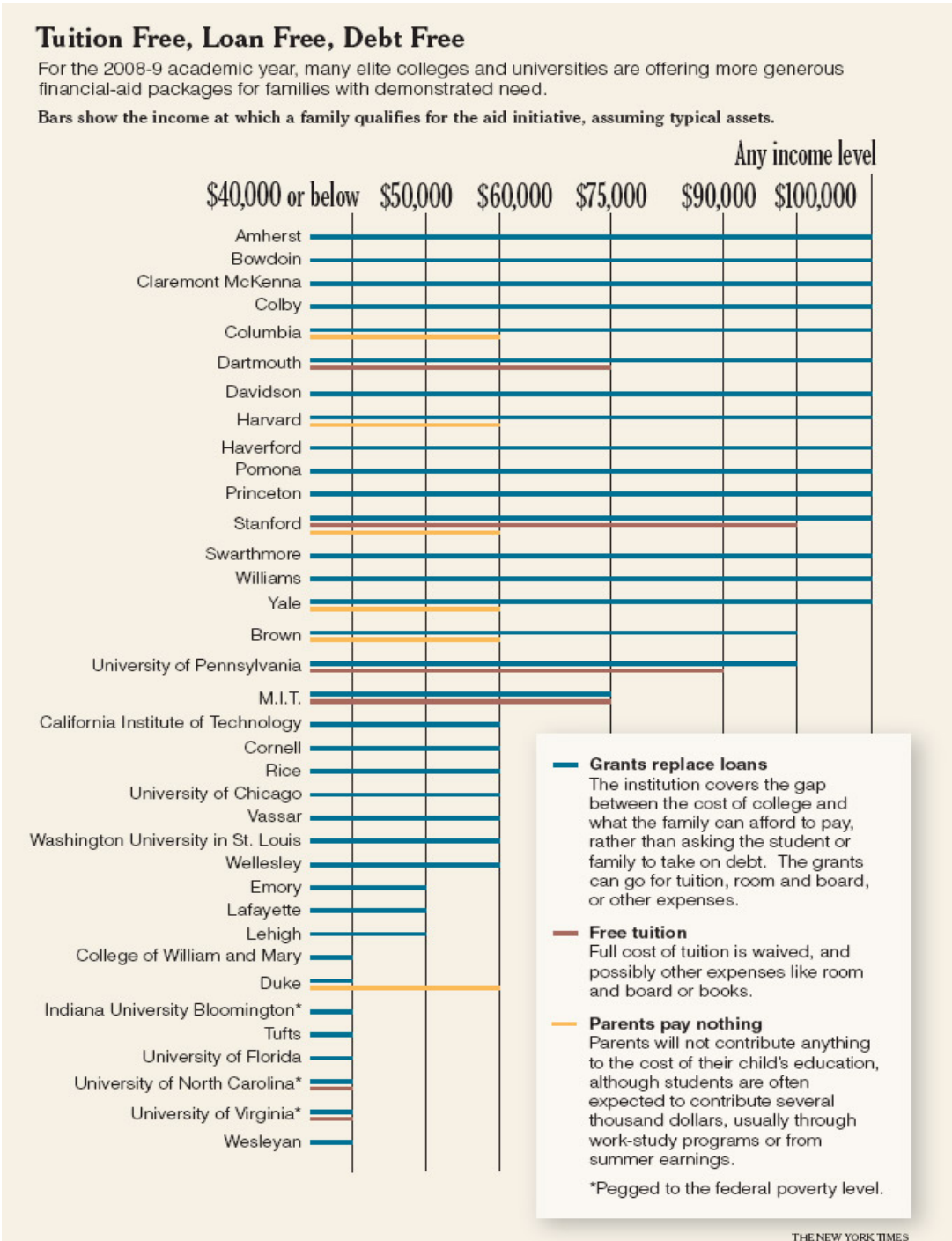
The averages in the bottom section of Table 5 show that the percentage of a family's income occupied by the net price of tuition are far higher for low-income families and it is for families with income in the lower-middle and middle quartiles for whom the net price percentage more closely approximate that for families of full-paying students. The authors note that average net price for students from the low-income quartile

varies a great deal between schools with one setting its average net price for low income students below \$800 a year and others charging more than \$11,000; measured as a share of median family income for this quintile (\$15,347), price range from 5% to 74%. So institutional variety among these schools is a major fact but a fact that includes

some very low prices for low income students. (Hill, Winston and Boyd, 13)

The extent of this range certainly skews the averages for students in this bracket, and the over-arching answer the authors reach to the question “so can a low income student reasonably aspire to go to these schools?” is “surely ‘yes’ but prices will vary a great deal among schools” (Hill, Winston and Boyd, 28). The data in Table 5 were based on financial aid information in the 2001-02 school year. Since then, top tier schools have increased the scope and extent of their aid such that it is certainly more generous than earlier measures.

As is shown in Figure 3 (Page 37), many premier schools have adopted “no-loans” policies<sup>18</sup> in the 2008-09 academic year that eliminate loans for students (all students at some schools and students below a certain income cut-off at other schools) and provide all aid in the form of grants. This means that at need-blind schools (where students are admitted regardless of their financial need and the school will pay whatever need is computed) low-income applicants can expect to pay very little in tuition and not be burdened with loans after graduation.



**Figure 3:** A summary of policies by top tier schools to reduce the financial burden on low-income applicants from *The New York Times* (Leonhardt 2008).

Such policies are part of an effort to show that these schools have a commitment to and desire for socioeconomic diversity in their student bodies. Even during the current financial crisis, Wesleyan's president claims that Wesleyan's top priorities are "protecting teaching, research, and the student experience and preserving a robust financial aid program that admits students regardless of their ability to pay."<sup>19</sup> The affordability of top tier schools for low-income students seems to have become a reality and a genuine commitment on the part of the institutions.

In addition to alteration to aid and financial remission policies, some schools (including Harvard, Stanford, and Princeton) have removed the option for applicants to apply early decision (Pachico 2007).

Because accepted students are obligated to enroll at the colleges to which they apply early, lower-income students cannot consider or negotiate their financial aid packages and therefore rarely consider submitting an early application. Wealthy students, for whom financial aid isn't a deal breaker, face no such dilemma. (Sacks-2, 148)

Since such an admission model is binding, students are thereby required to attend a school regardless of the aid they are being provided. Additionally, applying early provides an increased likelihood for admittance, because "even after holding SAT scores constant, admission rates for the early applicants dwarfed those for the unfortunate students who waited for the regular cycle" (Sacks-2, 149). Thus, "it is generally affluent and well-informed students who benefit from the boost given to early applicants [because] of the inability to compare financial aid packages" (Cabrera 1999).

A critical component of these aid policies is their relationship with the aforementioned procedural biases. Given that these biases shape the applicant pools



at elite colleges such that low-income students are less likely to be qualified for or to apply to these institutions, these aid policies are only attainable for the few students that overcome impediments in accessibility and performance to which they are most likely to be disqualified. Therefore, though these policies are more than sufficient in making an elite college education attainable for low-income students, the scope of low-income students who are exposed to (and can ultimately benefit from them) these policies is minimal. A great financial aid policy in-and-of-itself is enervated; strength and effect come from dissemination to the audience that could benefit from it as well as the ability for this audience to be viable candidates for admission in the first place.

### **Chapter 3: Reframing the Problem**

Given that colleges appear to have genuine commitments to diversity and that (at least some) high-achieving low-income students exist, why are there not more low-income students at top tier schools? Most plausibly they either do not apply or they apply and do not meet the criteria for admission. These explanations are certainly plausible given the structural disadvantages outlined in the preceding section that these students experience (including ineffective college counseling) because these diminish the likelihood that they will engage in the application process and/or restrict their compliance with the criteria for admission.

Since schools are not very socioeconomically diverse, it follows that even the students who overcome one obstacle, standardized testing, presumably do not overcome the rest. This reality highlights the complexity of the procedural biases discussed in the previous section; though certain students can overcome the biases in standardized testing, something else stops their journey to an elite college.

Many sociologists who have analyzed socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges have suggested alterations to admission criteria that would reduce the underrepresentation of low-income students. This chapter begins with an overview of these recommendations and will then proffer various flaws in this literature that render these recommendations misguided and unlikely to be effective. This section is not intended to provide policy recommendations, rather it is to show what other sociologists have identified as potential remedies to the problem in response, of course, to the way in which it has been identified and defined in their analysis. This

paper attempts to reframe the problem so that future recommendations can be based on more comprehensive, accurate, and holistic evidence.

### Recommendations for More Equitable Policies

One suggestion is to increase the focus on class rank. Alon and Tienda (2007) “show that defining merit using performance-based criteria, rather than test scores, is more compatible with institutional diversity” (508). This mentality attempts to take the variability of high schools into consideration and would more accurately consider a student’s candidacy within the context of his or her high school. Officers who considered class rank as an important factor declined from 42 percent in 1993 to 31 percent in 2005 (Alon and Tienda 2007).

Another suggestion is to eliminate standardized tests from admission criteria. In fact, “the level of dissatisfaction with the SAT has prompted an increasing number of selective institutions to adopt (or consider adopting) admission policies that place less emphasis on standardized tests, even to the point of making them entirely optional” (Syverson, 55-6). Reed College claims that

Although we at Reed find SAT and ACT scores useful, they receive a good deal less weight in our admissions process. We have found that high school performance (which we measure by a complex formula that weighs GPA, class rank, quality and difficulty of courses, quality of the high school, counselor evaluation, and so forth) is a much better predictor of performance at Reed. Likewise, we have found that the quality of a student’s application essay and other “soft variables,” such as character, involvement, and intellectual curiosity, are just as important as the “hard variables” that provide the sole basis for the *U.S. News* rankings. We are free to admit the students we think will thrive at Reed and contribute to its intellectual atmosphere, rather than those we think will elevate our standing on *U.S. News*’s list. (Alon and Tienda, 508)

This type of policy will not increase the representation of low-income students, because the factors that are considered (difficulty of courses, quality of high school) would tend to preserve class advantage. Schools that go further than Reed by making the SAT entirely optional have been accused of playing the “ratings game” and not ardently attempting to increase socioeconomic diversity. By this kind of policy, “students with higher test scores would tend to submit them” and therefore “*U.S. News & World Report* would present a stronger academic profile for the institution” (Syverson, 61) because only submitted scores would be included in the average.

Golden (2006) claims that admission policies can be conceived of “preferences of privilege” that “amount to nothing less than affirmative action for rich white people” (Golden, 6). Sacks (2007) offers a similar claim, offering that it is likely that elite schools do not “necessarily want the brightest students, but rather socially ‘well rounded’ ones who are most likely to become highly paid executives, lawyers, or investment bankers, or powerful politicians” (Sacks-1 2007) and make donations as legacies. The preference for wealthy students is cited as overwhelming, and Golden’s argument can be well summarized in an anecdote relating to Wesleyan that is detailed in the book.

Susan Tree, who became director of college counseling at Westtown [Prep] School in Pennsylvania after leaving Bates recalled “one year when on a Monday in March, Wesleyan told me that a particular senior would not be admitted. Three days later the student told me joyfully that he received an admission letter...I went to my office and called my liaison in admissions and said, ‘Is this a mistake?’ He (a rookie) said, ‘Oh, no,’ they had received a call from the development office and the decision was changed.” (Golden, 60)

The argument concludes with the claim that California Institute of Technology (Caltech) “comes closer than any other major American university to admitting its

student body purely on academic merit” (Golden, 261) because its small size and creative fundraising allow the school not to need to depend on prospective and alumni donations and gifts.

In general, Golden portrays elite institutions of higher education as corrupt and dysfunctional. And that despite

the popular notion that top colleges foster the American dream of upward mobility and equal opportunity, the truth is quite different. While only a handful of low-income students penetrate the campus gates, admissions policies channel the children of the privileged into premier colleges, paving the way into leadership positions in business and government. (Golden, 1)

With similar convictions, Carnevale and Rose (2004) propose five hypothetical models that could become the focus of college admissions in order to make them more equitable to students from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Each of these alternatives was evaluated by the following four criteria: public approval, racial/ethnic diversity, socioeconomic diversity, and college success/performance. The five alternatives are 1) hard variables alone, including grades, test scores, recommendations, and demonstrated leadership, 2) lottery with minimal academic qualifications, 3) class rank, 4) class rank with minimal academic qualifications, and 5) academically qualified but low socioeconomic students (students with high SAT scores and GPA, demonstrated personal excellence and leadership, and hailing from the bottom 40 percent of the socioeconomic status scale). A brief summary is located in Table 6.

Alternative	Criterion 1: Public Approval	Criterion 2: Racial/Ethnic Diversity	Criterion 3: SES Diversity	Criterion 4: College Performance
1. Highest Grades, test scores, recommendations, leadership (hard variables)	Pass	Fail	Fail	Pass
2. Lottery with minimal academic qualifications	Fail	Fail	Pass	Fail
3. Class Rank	Pass	Might Pass	Pass	Fail
4. Class rank with minimal academic qualifications	Pass	Fail	Fail	Pass!
5. Academically qualified but low SES students	Pass	Might Pass	Pass	Might pass, but unrealistic

**Table 6** Overview of policy recommendations. (Adapted from Carnevale and Rose 2004)

None of these proposals is able to sufficiently satisfy their four criteria, but the fifth seemingly comes the closest. By this model, the admissions “boost” will be given to those with outstanding academic achievements and a less privileged family or poor high school. Carnevale and Rose argue that public approval will be satisfied, because when asked “if a low-income student and high-income student are equally qualified, fully 63 percent say that the low-income student should be given priority in admissions” (148). This system would satisfy the criteria for increasing racial/ethnic diversity because low-income schools disproportionately serve a large proportion of minority students because minority students are disproportionately concentrated in low-income schools. Based on their findings, these authors put forth the following policy recommendations: “class rank plans are fraught with difficulty; economic affirmative action should be widely adopted; race-based affirmative action should be maintained; and financial aid policies must be reoriented toward need” (Carnevale and Rose, 150).

### A New Framework

It is the flaws of the aforementioned policy recommendations (which will be discussed) that help to elucidate the necessity for and purpose of this paper. The

literature review shows the scope and extent of procedural biases in the admission process and how these biases inherently shape the applicant pools that elite colleges receive each year. The fact that the overwhelming proportion of these applicants hail from affluent backgrounds speaks to the fact that the admission process (particularly the educational structures upon which it is dependent) do not provide for meritocracy. Low-income students simply are not provided with the social leverage to learn about the opportunity, affordability and plausibility of an education at an elite college. By considering and examining the flaws of the aforementioned policy recommendations within the context of the literature review, a more holistic and comprehensive overview of what the problem of underrepresentation of low-income students at elite schools looks like will be achieved.

The assembly of a diverse student body is stated as a goal by admission offices at elite colleges and universities with the intention to increase “opportunities for lower-income students based on the principles of promoting social mobility, social justice, and equity” (Aries, 3). The policy recommendations that have been cited so far are either unrealistic or will have the effect of boosting statistics of socioeconomic diversity at these schools without actually making the admission process more meritocratic. They localize the problem of underrepresentation of low-income students within admission offices at elite schools. The proposals that advocate for a re-orientation of admission criteria (away from standardized tests or towards class rank) and/or lessening recruitment of wealthy students will not influence the problems that diminish the candidacy of the majority of low-income high school students. These recommended policies fail to take into account that lack of

socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges presents a problem that originates and exists before the application process begins.

Specifically, for admission offices to focus highly on class rank requires valedictorians (and other high-performing students) from low-income schools to have heard of elite colleges, and to have taken the proper entrance exams and required courses. To engage in vigorous economic affirmative action would only serve to recruit and admit the few high-performing low-income students that exist. It would not alter the structural imbalances that cause so few low-income students to be engaged with or qualified for the elite college admission process. Additionally, the nature of the social systems from which these imbalances stem is such that they are inherently intertwined; alteration to one in-and-of itself lacks the systematic leverage needed to accomplish more fundamental structural change. “By itself, admissions policy will not change the percentages drastically. Leveling the playing field is a challenge for education, economic, and social policymakers” (Carnevale and Rose, 147).

By situating the problem in the admission offices at these schools (as many of the aforementioned authors have done) there is little ability to enact the genuine structural change needed for meritocracy. Schools might become slightly more diverse, but the procedural biases in the entire process would persist. There are few if any conceivable changes that could be made by admission offices themselves to remedy the problem as it currently exists. Remedies of this nature inherently only have implications that affect their audience, of which low-income students are unlikely to be members.



It is additionally important to recognize that the procedural biases in the admission process are the result of a long history of discrimination by which the “qualities that come to define ‘merit’ tend to be attributes most abundantly possessed by dominant social groups” (Karabel, 549). This makes elite colleges’ goal of meritocracy quite difficult given that ‘merit’ has become a class-based property, by which its definition “in a given society generally expresses the interests of its dominant groups” (Alon and Tienda, 507). Lucas (2001) argues that society’s ruling class employs “effectively maintained inequality” to maintain its social control and domination, specifically by way of college admissions. By this theory, the ruling class in effect “raises the bar” which defines merit so as to keep low-income students from achieving success. “Social background advantages seem to work to effectively and continuously secure for the children of advantage advantaged locations of their own” (Lucas, 1681).

This paper attempts a holistic view of elite college admissions that is intended to elucidate the functioning of many of the mechanisms that constitute this process. When considering the commitment to socioeconomic diversity that schools purport in conjunction with the procedural biases that can be seen as a form of effectively maintained inequality, the potential for social change looks far more complicated than the aforementioned policy recommendations appear to appreciate.

Throughout the rest of this paper, additional factors will be presented that help to explain how and why elite colleges are not more socioeconomically diverse. The path by which (the few) low-income students do make it to elite schools will be

identified and analyzed. Factors will be introduced that may help to explain pressures that schools face that limit their abilities (such as prestige and the nature of the elite college's classroom). The nature of class (and its relationship with race) will be introduced in the perpetuation of minimal socioeconomic diversity. Also, the role of admission offices at elite schools will be contextualized in a constellation of oppressive social systems that preclude higher education (as an institution) from reaching its meritocratic ideal. In this context, it becomes clear that admission officers have deemphasized roles and these individuals are working for meritocratic diversity.

The purpose of the paper is not to lambaste capitalism for functioning as it inevitably will, supporting those with economic capital and oppressing those without it. It is to accurately and holistically highlight the way that capitalism is functioning in terms of elite colleges. The vast quantity of literature on this topic does not do so, and its recommendations for change are resultantly unusable. Given the reality of effectively maintained inequality, it could be argued that any orchestrated change is likely to be moot because the social elite will redefine merit and again exclude low-income students.

Regardless of this somewhat defeatist caveat, there is the potential that once a system of meritocracy is established it would empower those who are currently disempowered such that they would resist backlash from the affluent. This paper intends to elucidate the functioning of the social machinery that currently exists in order to enable future policy recommendations to be more astutely informed and more capable of this kind of change with the hope that, if implemented, it would

persist. To make any change towards meritocracy (and thus towards increased socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges) requires accurate identification and comprehension of the problem and its causes. This paper employs an ideological approach similar to that of Stevens (2007) who claimed that “in order to understand how admissions officers [make] their decisions I [need] to look carefully at the social machinery that delivered applications to admissions offices in the first place (Stevens, 3).

#### **Chapter 4: Crossing Over for Success**

The literature review elucidates that the characteristics needed for a high school student to be attractive to an admission officer at an elite college require tools most accessible to students from affluent backgrounds. These students have been intensely groomed by parents, teachers, and counselors for college admissions over many years. Presumably, the student parking lots at elite schools should therefore resemble a Volvo showroom, and all students should hail from exceptionally wealthy backgrounds. The reality is, though, that the numbers in Table 1 indicate that an (albeit small) group of low-income students do transcend the barriers to access that their socioeconomic class inflicts upon them.

This chapter will explain some of the reasons that elite colleges are not very socioeconomically diverse. A critical component missing from the existing literature body is how and why the few students from low-income backgrounds that overcome the obstacles to their success in the elite college admission process are able to do so. Of the many texts that were examined in the preparation of this paper, several discuss the existence of low-income students at elite colleges (Ares 2008, Karabel 2005, Carnevale and Rose 2004) but only as a phenomenon. The sentiment is one exposed by the following: “although a family history of deprivation reduces the likelihood that students will...go to college...[a] share do enroll and graduate nonetheless” (Carnevale and Rose, 138).

It is important to investigate and explore the process by which this happens and see how and why the few low-income students who do matriculate at elite colleges are able to do so. This chapter will do so with the theory of “crossing over”

that will be substantiated by evidence from a survey conducted at Wesleyan. This perspective adds a valuable component to the literature, one that will be instrumental in understanding the lack of socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges.

Reconceptualizing Race, Class, and Social Capital: Access to the Means for Success

Lareau (2003) followed twelve families from different locations in the socioeconomic strata and observed that “differences among families seem to cluster together in meaningful patterns” (3). The observed parenting style of the middle-class families is termed “concerted cultivation” and that of the working-class families is termed “the accomplishment of natural growth.” In concerted cultivation, “discussions between parents and children are a hallmark of middle-class child rearing” (Lareau, 1). By the accomplishment of natural growth, on the other hand, parents use directives when talking to children and the children “have more control over the character of their leisure activities” (Lareau, 2).

Whereas concerted cultivation allows children to “gain important institutional advantages” (Lareau, 4), the accomplishment of natural growth and its associated “cultural logic of child rearing at home is out of synch with the standards of the institutions” (Lareau, 3). Affluence permits this more involved parenting model because these parents generally have more time to be involved, more financial resources to expend, and also often have a personal background of success in these institutions such that they feel as though they have legitimate grounds for voicing their opinions. For the most part, “working-class and poor parents depended on the leadership of professionals” (Lareau, 12) whereas middle-class parents felt as though they had the knowledge of their child and what is best for him/her to ensure that the

proper courses of action were taken. In practice, though these class-based differences in parenting styles are explainable by social structure, affluent parenting is in line with institutional standards and leads to more success in relationships with social institutions.

Parenting styles (and their disparate effectiveness with social institutions) can help to explain the procedural biases that exist in the college admission process. Affluent parents (generally) have both the means and the know-how to assist and predispose their children for academic success. This includes micro issues such as monitoring their child's progress to ensure that he or she is keeping up and are on the right track to college (information that is privileged and not accessible to many low-income individuals) and macro issues such as choosing a community and high school intended to facilitate these same results. For low-income parents, the incongruity between their parenting style and the ideology of social institutions (particularly schools) can create "distance, distrust, and difficulty in [low-income families'] relationship with educators" (Lareau, 228).

The "high-income advantage" and "low-income disadvantage" sections of the literature demonstrate more practically how class-based differences exist in terms of preparing a high school student for college. The crucial factors that comprise these differences will henceforth be termed the "means for success" in elite college admissions. Though this will often be simplified as the "means for success," this paper in no way claims that an elite college education is a prerequisite for success objectively; the term simply describes things needed for success in this dimension. These include taking a rigorous and appropriate course load during high school,

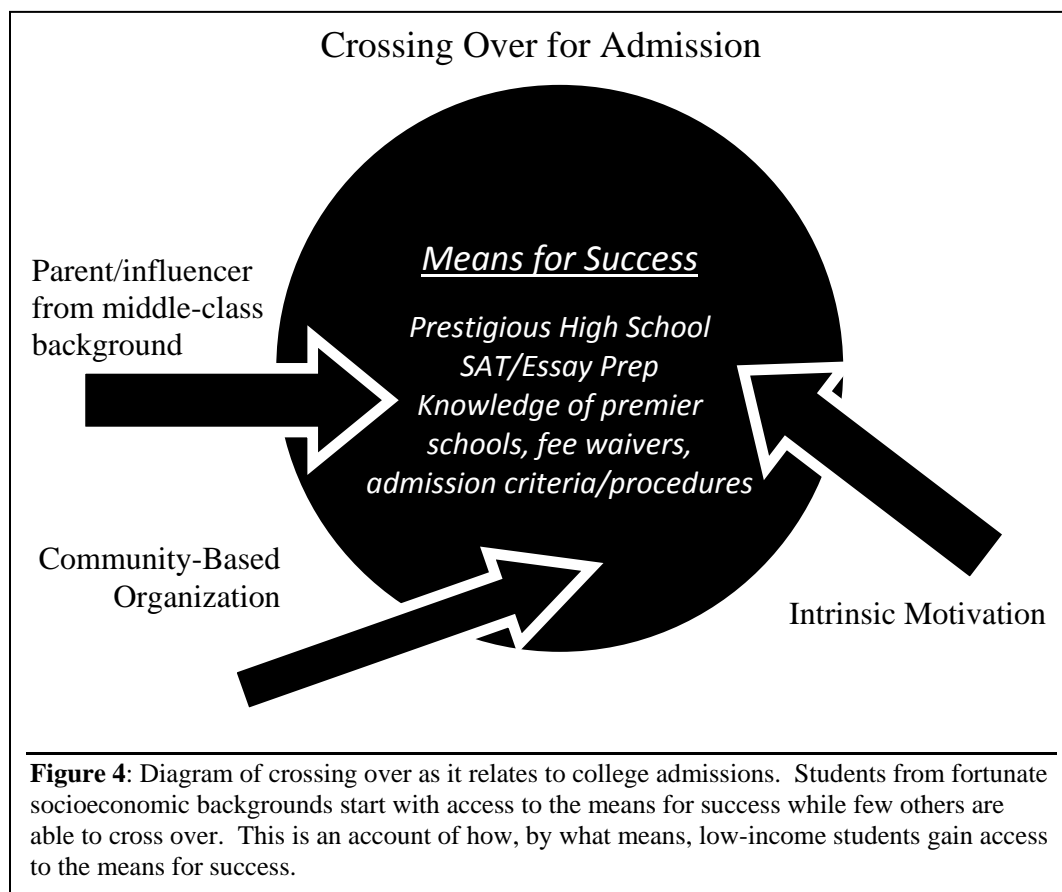
preparing for and excelling on standardized tests, demonstrating leadership and personal capabilities, and writing an appropriate personal statement (essay). Affluent families disproportionately possess the economic and sociocultural capital that has been extensively explained in this paper to make these means for success both desirable and attainable.

For low-income families, the negative relationships with social institutions that result from the accomplishment of natural growth parenting model is often combined with a bad school system to make the high school experience and potential outcomes look very different than it does for affluent families. Consider the extreme case of Elisabeth Jones in Boo (2001). Elisabeth, a single mother welfare recipient in Washington, DC, spends each day working two jobs, sleeping for two hours, and spending the miniscule remainder of her day taking her three children to and from school. She lacks a college education and worries about the extreme violence and teenage pregnancy for which her district is known. Though she “has impressed upon her daughter the importance of breaking that chain” (Boo, 96), she lacks the time, resources, and cultural capital to provide much more than the basic necessities for her children. For her, the safety of her daughter and her attendance at high school far outweighs concerns about academic rigor and the likelihood that one her children will attain an Ivy League degree.

Though it is exceptionally intuitive, day-to-day life looks very different for affluent and low-income families. The differences in lifestyle, experience, cultural capital, and wealth fundamentally shape the relationships that families can form with society. For affluent families, access to the means for success in elite college

admission are often understood and attainable. Low-income families need to overcome formidable social obstacles in order to be afforded these things.

The process by which low-income high school students attain access to the means for success will henceforth be termed “crossing over.” Figure 4 is a visual representation of crossing over. Affluent families have the ability (and often the desire) to situate themselves within the black “means for success” circle. Low-income families lack the economic (and often sociocultural) capital to do so, and they must begin outside of the circle and cross over for entry. The captions for the three arrows are names of crossover “vehicles” which will be discussed.





Hypothetical examples can show that social class does not automatically or necessarily predict or determine if a family chooses to provide their children with access to the means for success. A plumber who has amassed the wealth to be considered affluent but did not go to college and does not send his children to a preparatory high school does not provide his child access to the means for success and has therefore crossed out of access to the means for success. An artist, however, who went to a prestigious college but is classified as lower class based on his income has the cultural capital to inform and prepare his child for college, thus crossing over into having access to the means for success.

There are three primary vehicles (depicted in Figure 4) by which crossing over occurs. These include: community-based organizations (CBOs), parent/influencer from middle-class background, and intrinsic motivation. Many community-based organizations exist that identify and assist students from low-income backgrounds. Each has a different selection process and entry criteria, many of which require a parent's initiative on behalf of an academically talented child. Organizations of this type (such as QuestBridge<sup>20</sup>, A Better Chance<sup>21</sup>, and Prep for Prep<sup>22</sup>) use scholastic achievement as an indication of giftedness, and some even match these "students with 20 of the nation's top colleges" (Carlton 2007).

Charter schools, though not technically a community-based organization, certainly function in the same way and do the same thing. A prestigious charter school model, the Kipp model, provide low-income students with tools to allow the development and demonstration of their academic and intellectual talents such that they will be informed contenders in the college admission process. These schools

aim to artificially remove the baggage that race and class inequalities create in education by providing students with the cultural capital to perform in the middle class framework in which success is socially defined. Students are exposed to Shakespeare and classical music and are given conversational tools with which to interact with the economic elite, including the scoring and procedure for golfing (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2004).

Kipp schools hire sensational teachers (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 51), mandate attendance at “homework club” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 55) for students struggling academically, and enforce strict, stringent disciplinary procedures that can humiliate misbehavers (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 57), and have great results. Students “do splendidly on statewide assessments” (Thernstrom and Thernstrom, 49) and are thus assessed according to their performative merit sans class-based handicaps. These “crossover organizations” (community-based organizations and some charter schools) imbue students with cultural capital and provide access to the means for success.

Another crossover vehicle, the influence category, a role that can be filled by a parent, teacher, or guidance counselor whose background is such that he/she can help compensate for these obstacles. This person provides a low-income student with the information necessary to be a viable candidate in the elite college admission process.

The last crossover vehicle, intrinsic motivation, is that used by students who, of their own volition, seek out elite colleges and do so early enough to be prepared

and qualified for success in the admission process. The three crossover vehicles will be explored further in the next section.

### Crossing Over at Wesleyan

A voluntary response survey was conducted at Wesleyan University using undergraduate students between the ages of 18-22 (for full survey text see Appendix 2). Most polling was done with hard copies of the survey at the Usdan University Center, but some respondents were surveyed in various classes/student organizations, and other students were given the identical survey in an online version<sup>23</sup>.

Respondents to the hard copy survey received a Blow Pop as gratitude for their efforts.

The goal of the survey was to determine what the journey to Wesleyan looked like for students from low-income backgrounds and to categorize and describe their experience of crossing over. Accordingly, the respondents were not acquired randomly, the electronic survey was sent to student groups that were presumed to have a large percentage of low-income students. For this reason, only surveys from students identified to be from low-income backgrounds were included in the analysis and no claims are made about what the number or proportion of such students exist in the greater population of Wesleyan students.

From the 200 total surveys completed, 29 students were identified as low-income and were included for analysis (N=29). Students were systematically identified as low-income based on their answer to questions regarding family background and financial aid. Students who were eligible for a federal Pell Grant (given only to the most low-

income applicants in the country “some 90 percent of Pell recipients come from families earning less than \$40,000 a year” (Sacks-2, 178)) were immediately classified as low-income.

All students who were classified as low-income had crossed over and their responses are summarized in Table 7. The largest number of students who crossed

Class Year		Gender	
2009	9 (31%)	Male	13 (44.8%)
2010	7 (24.1%)	Female	14 (48.3%)
2011	6 (20.7%)	Race	
2012	6 (20.7%)	Asian	2 (6.9%)
Crossover Mechanism		Black	8 (27.6%)
CBO	14 (48.3%)	Hispanic	9 (31.0%)
Self	11 (37.9%)	Mixed	4 (13.8%)
Influencer	4 (13.8%)	White	4 (13.8%)
<b>Table 7</b> Summary of survey responses for students identified to be from low-income backgrounds. Not all students provided demographic information. (N=29)			

over did so through a community based organization (48.3%). Several interesting cases existed. For example, 3 of the 4 students who crossed over through an influencer had a Wesleyan graduate who

worked as their high schools’ college or diversity counselor. Those classified as “self” either did not mention an influencer or explicitly stated that their journey to Wesleyan was of their own impetus and volition.

There were many students (in the initial pool of respondents) who were not classified as low-income but they were very clearly on the fence. These students receive several thousand dollars a year in financial aid (under \$20,000) but they had parents who are professionals and they went to schools that routinely send students to elite colleges. It appears that, for these students, the minimal funds their parents had available were devoted to education and on purchasing access to the means for success.

Crossing over is not a meritocratic process. Its existence (and necessity) exemplifies the fact that the low-income students who are successful in the elite college admission process are those who have been socially scaffolded to overcome impediments to which they are burdened as a result of their social class. The ways that students have crossed over (and thus beaten the odds and overcome formidable social obstacles) is critical for shaping the way that the lack of socioeconomic diversity at top tier colleges is to be conceptualized. The next chapter will discuss certain (unrelated) reasons that colleges do not do more by way of admitting more low-income applicants and will also show admission officers' relationship with and understanding of crossing over. The paper will then conclude with a theory about how and why the nature of crossing over fundamentally shapes applicant pools and the potential for meritocracy and increased socioeconomic diversity. These implications are critical to understanding class-based access to elite education.

## **Chapter 5: Institutional Explanations**

Through crossing over, some low-income students overcome the obstacles to be viable candidates, submit an application, be accepted, and matriculate at America's top tier colleges and universities. In considering the procedural biases in the admission process exposed by the literature in conjunction with crossing over, it becomes clear that increasing socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges is far easier said than done. The tools necessary for low-income students to cross over (and be informed of the admission process and be viable candidates for admission) are inherently not accessible to all low-income students.

The previous chapter has shown what socioeconomic diversity at elite colleges looks like from the perspective of a low-income student. This chapter discusses the issue from the perspective of these institutions. It will show certain reasons that elite colleges may not want to increase their proportion of low-income students for the purpose of maintaining institutional legitimacy. This institutional desire is supported by certain attributes of race and class as well as by the reality of many public low-income high schools. The perspective of admission officers will also be introduced, and this perspective (as it intuitively would) is one where a strong desire for diversity is inhibited by institutional demands (that were previously alluded to and will be explained in this chapter) and the way crossing over and procedural biases work to shape applicant pools.

### The Conflicting Currencies of Prestige: Resources and Diversity

Despite the claims of welcoming and embracing socioeconomic diversity, the resources to accept students across the spectrum of socioeconomic status into elite

institutions with very high per-pupil expenditures are inherently finite. There is an “effect that potential students will have on helping the college meet its own institutional and financial needs” (Carnevale and Rose, 116), and therefore only so many low-income students can enroll because “colleges must enroll a reasonable percentage of full-pay students in order to balance the budget” (Sacks-1 2007).

These financial needs do not simply include maintaining facilities and keeping the lights on. Peter Sacks accordingly describes premier colleges and universities as being

part church and part car dealer. They often talk the talk of Martin Luther King Jr., but, as self-interested institutions focused on their own survival, they more often walk the walk of an investment banker. While corporations maximize profits for shareholders, private colleges are essentially in the business, not necessarily of imparting knowledge or contributing to the public good, but of maximizing their endowments. Yet, unlike corporations whose profits are a fairly straightforward result of some tangible production process, elite colleges’ endowments derive from something far more intangible: reputation and prestige. (Sacks-1 2007)

This infrastructure makes schools attractive to sought-after applicants as well as highly-regarded professors. With increased popularity, schools can increase admission selectivity which equates to quantifiable and demonstrative prestige. In the most simplistic reality, colleges cannot afford to be truly socioeconomically diverse in the sense of approximating the U.S. income distribution in their student bodies.

Without the income from tuition, premier colleges would be forced to cut funding to the programs and resources that create and bolster their prestige. Additionally, “it is the children of the established elite who are most likely not only to be the big donors of the future but also to supply the prominent alumni whose very success reinforces the prestige of the elite colleges” (Karabel, 545). The resources

that institutional income is used to purchase are useful to elite colleges because they help to afford their professors, research equipment, resources, etc. The rub is that a crucial component of elite school prestige is a commitment to social justice as exemplified by a diverse campus community.

Diversity “as measured by the numbers of students in sharply defined categories, is now an index of academic prestige” (Stevens, 182). In addition to the social justice component, potential students also seem to want to attend a diverse school so as to branch out and meet different kinds of people. At Amherst College, “two-thirds of white students, regardless of social class, felt that it was important to make a close friend who was black” (Aries, 69). This pressure is certainly felt by admission officers who

cared about minority admissions for several reasons...: because they thought that admitting minorities was the right thing to do; because the national reputation of the college was linked to its minority numbers; and because the schools’ typical students increasingly demanded a diverse student body. (Stevens, 181)

It is thus critical for schools to maximize prestige by keeping their budget and diversity at sufficient levels. These two pressures on schools are in conflict because they inherently place different demands on a school’s socioeconomic diversity; resource-based prestige requires funds (and would therefore demand money be spent on things other than financial aid) but diversity-based prestige requires low-income students (and considerable funds be devoted to financial aid).

Maximizing prestige is demanding for elite schools but additionally is quite competitive. Institutions compete

for the same high-scoring students. Increasingly, these most desirable students [come] from the relatively privileged backgrounds, with



families who had provided them with good schools, high-performing peers, and the best college preparation money could buy. (Sacks-2, 132)

This means that “prestige [is] a zero-sum game, because one institution’s gain in the prestige game [means] another’s decline” (Sacks-2, 137). The desire to balance the components of prestige is therefore certainly important to these schools and helps to explain the reason that low-income students are underrepresented on these colleges’ campuses.

#### Reliance on the Visibility of Race and its Conflation with Class

The data in Table 1 begin to elucidate that top tier schools boast diversity that is more representative of the United States population in terms of racial/ethnic diversity than in terms of socioeconomic diversity. There are “four times as many African American and Hispanic students as there are students from the lowest socioeconomic quartile” (Carnevale and Rose, 107). Because individuals in racial/ethnic minorities are disproportionately concentrated in low socioeconomic categories, race is often perceived as an indication of low SES. In this way, since race is inherently visible in a way that class is not, an illusion of SES diversity is created at top tier schools with racial diversity. Schools that are racially diverse (falsely) de facto can be seen by the public, visitors, and (in some cases) students as socioeconomically diverse as well.

Class also encompasses invisibility because of the character of student culture at many elite institutions. In an interview with a student, Sarah, she remarked “you can’t tell what students here are from what background. I watched a WestCo kid dressed like a hobo walking around and then watched him get into his Lexus SUV.”

After interviews with Amherst freshman soon after moving in, Aries (2008) reports that “most felt that social class could be disguised, and that students’ dress and possessions were not always accurate indicators of class” (43).

Because race and class are often conflated, and because class is somewhat invisible, there becomes an illusion of socioeconomic diversity insofar as a school is racially diverse. Additionally, the actual existence of socioeconomic diversity is somewhat difficult to “feel” on a campus because students’ social backgrounds are not readily visible. These characteristics of class are beneficial to elite schools, who have been previously explained as struggling to balance the conflicting currencies of prestige. They are able to maintain a perceived socioeconomically diverse atmosphere (in keeping with their desire for diversity) without necessarily expending the funds in financial aid that would be required for more genuine diversity.

Class invisibility does act as a disservice to students in a variety of ways. It can be difficult for students from low-income backgrounds to find a comfortable place at a top tier school; just as black students are assumed to be low-income, white students are assumed to be affluent. Wood (2008) outlines such difficulties, which are particularly poignant for (the few) low-income white students at these schools because at these schools very few people

realize that low-income students face considerable obstacles in meeting the extracurricular expectations more generally held for their wealthier peers...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. (Wood, 127)

Without prevalent discussions or understandings of class, the goals and potential of campus diversity outlined in Chapter 2 cannot be realized.

In forming cross-class relationships, students may get to know more about the lives and experiences of students from very different backgrounds than their own, but these relationships alone will not afford them a more analytic framework for understanding social class. (Aries, 63)

The visibility of race and its conflation with class work to maintain the current system of admission to elite colleges, in which socioeconomically-based inequality works to shape applicant pools. For the 170,000 that matriculate at these colleges, their expectations for a diverse atmosphere and the benefits they expect to derive from this atmosphere can be seen as thwarted by these same properties of race and class.

#### True Socioeconomic Diversity and the “They Wouldn’t Make it Here” Argument

This paper has extensively detailed that, for low-income students, formidable boundaries exist that require a student to cross over to be successful in obtaining admission to an elite college. These biases stem from hierarchical differences in academic preparation that are stratified by social class. The caliber and form that education can take in low-income areas (see “low income disadvantage” in Chapter 2) fundamentally differs from the classroom environment and rigor at prestigious institutions of higher education.

The mentality is quite prevalent that admitting low-income students who have not crossed over to elite colleges students from these backgrounds would be superfluous and can be termed the “they wouldn’t make it here” argument. By this ideology, admission officers at schools see themselves as doing a dual disservice (to the school and to an applicant) by admitting academically underqualified students

with academic experiences that are incongruent with the academic environment at elite colleges.

The literature in this paper described that standardized tests can be better conceptualized as assessment of social background than of genuine intellect. The reality is that social background is related to high school academic caliber, and therefore low-income students (regardless of their intellect) would encounter difficulty at elite colleges.

Poor students, among whom blacks and Hispanics are overrepresented, average lower test scores than their wealthy and nonminority counterparts because they are significantly more likely to attend underperforming, resource-poor schools. Consequently, they are also underrepresented at selective institutions and would be even more so in the absence of affirmative action. (Alon and Tienda, 491)

Though these tests engender biases, the low-income and nonwhite students who fare poorly on them do encounter disproportional difficulty in college. Though top tier colleges “do not admit many students with SAT-equivalent scores below 1000, those who do enroll are not nearly as successful as students with higher scores” (Carnevale and Rose, 137).

Not all low-income students, though, express candidacy through conventional means. A pertinent example is the experience of poor black students

at Northampton East High School in rural North Carolina. They took their physics and chemistry lessons and built an electric car that in national competitions bested entries from many of the country’s elite high schools, whose students typically score far higher on standardized mental tests. Although Northampton East made the best car, any of their competitors who scored a perfect 1600 on their SAT’s are deemed by cultural norms to have won the meritocratic contest that really counts. (Sacks-1 2007)

The students from Northampton East were not given the same reception from college admissions officers as were the students from low-income backgrounds who are able to perform well on the methods of assessment used in college admissions. Why do the students from Northampton East fare worse in the college admission process than their competitors with perfect standardized test scores?

The conventional view is that students from low-income families, especially those with low levels of parental education, do not enroll in college, fail to persevere to graduation, or shy away from enrolling in selective colleges because they are not academically suited for the rigors. (Carnevale and Rose, 138)

It can follow that the students from Northampton East High School, despite their conceptual success in chemistry and physics, would most likely not be successful were they to be admitted to a top tier institution.

To be truly diverse with regard to socioeconomic status would require these schools to accept and embrace the genuine diversity that encapsulates the high school experience for students from different social classes. For elite colleges to embrace this “truer” socioeconomic diversity is unrealistic and arguably undesirable. Thus, the “they wouldn’t make it here” argument is not a criticism of admission policies, it is a realistic acknowledgement that the classroom at Wesleyan or Amherst resembles that at Choate or Exeter far more than it does Northampton East.

The ability to be academically successful at a top tier school requires a degree of preparation for academic rigor that is generally assumed must be experienced prior to matriculating at a college. In following with Lareau (2003), the way in which affluent children are reared (including their academic setting) is more representative

of the academic settings at elite colleges and exposes yet another way that affluent children are cultivated and predisposed for success in society.

Wood (2008) concludes her thesis with a variety of ways for elite colleges to compensate for the obstacles faced by low-income potential applicants that exclude them from access to the information they could use to succeed in the admission process. By identifying “inadequate encouragement, lack of counseling and as Bourdieu might contend, a lack of ease with the standards established for admission” (Wood, 156) she claims that elite schools could pick up the slack of which social oppression and underfunded schools deprive low-income high school students. But the proposed “personal telephone calls from current students and [creation of] specially-designed marketing materials to cater to [low-income students’] specific needs and situation” (Wood, 156) will not translate to success at one of these schools.

The facets of an attractive application (such as good performance on the SAT, extracurricular involvement, rigorous academics) require cultural capital and expensive preparation that a phone call cannot provide. More difficult to prepare for is the ability to perform well post-matriculation at a top tier school, and the classroom experience in high school can be invaluable preparation for college. The reality is that without sufficient development of these attributes and abilities before college (as students who have crossed over have), these students *wouldn't* make it here.

Phone calls to low-income students and/or the establishment of relationships between admission offices and high school guidance counselors in low-income high schools inherently cannot increase the caliber of the education in said schools. If an applicant to an elite school does not present a rigorous academic experience in high

school, it would simply be irresponsible for an admission officer to admit him or her. The “they wouldn’t make it here” argument seems a necessary evil given the current academic disparity between schools serving low-income and affluent students. Phone calls cannot hire better teachers or better prepare students for the experience within the gates of top tier colleges and universities.

### The Admission Office: Ideology, Role, and Social Position

As has been extensively detailed thus far in this essay, students have drastically different experiences with pre-college education as well as with access to and success with the college admission process as a function of their socioeconomic background. Additionally, the reality exists that the number of applicants far exceeds the 170,000 freshman seats at elite colleges. Admission officers’ perspective on this process is invaluable. Do they truly strive for socioeconomic diversity? Do they realize the disproportional difficulties students from low socioeconomic groups encounter with the admission process? Are they socially situated such that they can address the underlying mechanisms that create the problem?

Two deans of admission at Wesleyan were interviewed for this essay to discern their views about diversity, to detail the efforts that are taken to diversify Wesleyan’s classes (in terms of racial/ethnic and socioeconomic diversity) and to see how they conceptualize the structure of access to elite schools for low-income students. The interviews were conducted independently in the Office of Admission and the deans’ names have been changed for the purposes of anonymity.

In the most simplistic of senses, it is the deans of admission at elite schools who decide how diverse a school’s incoming class will be. But the view that the

power rests in their hands and they have the ability (by admitting more low-income students) to rectify the underrepresentation of low SES students at elite schools is misguided. One dean, Jennifer, explained that individuals have the idea that they understand the admission process and criteria, and “when I say things that we look for or what we don’t people don’t believe me, even though I have the personal experience.” She insists, and is corroborated by the other interviewed dean, Claire, that diversity is one such thing that is extensively “looked for.”

It was very clear that both of these deans and the Office of Admission in general perceives campus diversity to be an exceptionally worthy goal, with diversity defined in numerous dimensions. Jennifer said that “we want to have a diverse class. We want to have students of color in our class. We want first generation [college] students, and students who don’t meet need.” Claire said that

it may seem that we care more about racial/ethnic background but I think that’s mostly because it’s hard to really nail down SES background. I don’t get a copy of the parent’s income tax return with an application. It’s easier to see someone’s racial/ethnic background because, for the most part, it’s checked off.

Jennifer was very clear that socioeconomic diversity is important and that “each of the deans – in terms of travel and recruitment – targets first generation and low-income students regardless of race.” It is clear that with recruitment and admission, socioeconomic status is a category of diversity that is identified and sought by the office.

The two deans recognize that their applicant pool contains a high concentration of affluent applicants and proposed explanations for this occurrence. Jennifer claimed that it is “an expectation by affluent families that you’re going to go



to college. It's never questioned." Claire claimed that "kids who have parents who have had educational experiences similar to this one are the ones that find a place like Wesleyan; it's a component of their family already. This type of experience and place is something that their family already understands." For individuals on the other end of the spectrum, the conversation is quite different. Jennifer said that when "traveling to visit with a bunch of community-based organizations we started with a very basic conversation: 'what is a liberal arts college?' There's a misconception that these schools are just for art and theater or that not going to a pre-professional school is foolish."

Both acknowledged difficulties recruiting low-income students who are performing well in high school but are not involved with a community-based organization. In discussing these difficulties Jennifer exclaimed

we want to get you! How do we get your application in this office? We bang our head against the wall trying to figure out how to reach these low-income kids. We go to high schools that are socioeconomically diverse, and who comes to see us? It's the kids that come from highly-educated backgrounds.

Claire added that cost is a huge component and that

no matter how many times you say 'Financial aid! Financial aid! Need blind! Full need!', the bottom line is you don't know how many students you are losing when you say \$52,000. I think that sticker shock is a real thing, I think that some families don't understand the financial aid process, especially families where this is the first person in the family to attend college. That is a big reason that students don't throw their hat into the ring in the first place.

Both made points similar to Claire's that "the biggest challenge is how to get to those students. I don't know if anyone's figured out the answer to that question yet. I think

that's a big reason why the more elite places don't see the SES diversity they would probably like."

Claire emphasizes that it is very difficult for low-income students to make their way to Wesleyan. She claimed that "most of these kids come through a CBO and those who don't have a guidance counselor or someone else who believed in them." The majority of the recruitment efforts and understanding of the experience of low-income students pertained to CBOs. Claire explained how being a part of such an organization is exceptionally taxing and difficult, as

these kids have to be super motivated. A lot of CBOs require extra hours of school and a ton of extra work. And not every kid in a program like that has a parent who gives a crap, in all honesty. It takes a certain amount of personal motivation; every ABC [A Better Chance] kid I've talked to said that they made the decision that they wanted to get out of wherever they were and go. And I think for a 13/14 year old to make that decision is huge.

To support low-income students via these organizations Wesleyan holds a conference for CBO leaders every February that Claire says is "not to sell Wesleyan to them, but to help them and help them to network with and grow from each other."

The recruitment efforts made by Wesleyan use these kinds of groups and organization to spread the word. The areas and high schools to which the deans travel are expanding to include more low-income and students of color (SOC). They communicate with as many of the "over 400 CBOs that [they] have been able to track down – some for low-income, some SOC, each has a different mission." The office sponsors a TAP (transportation assistance program) that pays for flights and transportation to campus for low-income students during open houses in the fall. Additionally, Claire added, "new financial aid policies are aimed to help recruit SOC

and low-income students...to show that we are committed to diversity on our campus.”

During these interviews it was somewhat shocking that both the deans’ understandings of low-income students and their recruitment efforts for such students were focused on CBOs almost exclusively. They were well able to explain how these organizations prepare students and described meeting with these students and with the directors of their programs during their recruitment season. They were far less aware of the process by which other low-income students get their hat in the ring. Their confusion about how to get the “unhooked” students (those without a CBO) to apply to Wesleyan exemplifies both the need for low-income students to cross over as well as the essential impossibility of success in the admission process without having done so.

The overwhelming image of the admission process (at Wesleyan) that was presented by the deans is that it functions to look deeply at each application to consider each applicant’s candidacy and what he or she will be able to bring to the class. Jennifer said “there are priorities and there are things that we want to see in the class, but when it comes down to it it’s all based on the strength of your application in the context of your high school or background.” The office responded similarly when interviewed by a “shock blog” representative posing as the representative of a wealthy father of a potential Wesleyan applicant. As discussed fully below, the admission office’s response to this (prank) interview, in an unguarded moment, reveals its genuine commitment to a holistic review of each application irrespective of social background.

The interviewer claimed to represent Mr. Quiznos (the CEO of Quiznos Subs) to arrange for a private visit to campus for Mr. Quiznos and his son Jake (a prospective Wesleyan student). His conversation with a representative in the Wesleyan Office of Admission is transcribed and posted online<sup>24</sup> and indicates the office's policy about preferential admission and about the role of socioeconomic status at Wesleyan. The interviewer very clearly presented Jake as an underqualified student (low grades and SAT scores, no extracurriculars) with a history of delinquency (shoplifting problem and moving around to many high schools) and psychological troubles (seeing a therapist, the only person he can share his poetry about his woes with). He also implies that Mr. Quiznos is exceptionally wealthy and not opposed to making sizable donations to Wesleyan; in asking for a lunch with the University's president, the interviewer mentions that "Mr. Quiznos is a big fan of the arts. He donated the Quiznos Performing Arts Center in Minneapolis and is interested in any artistic support."

The admission representative informed the interviewer that Jake would not receive preferential treatment at Wesleyan by stating that the faculty cares "about what your intellect is and what you're making of yourself. You don't have a choice of what family you're born into, and people are cognizant of that here." The representative went so far as to say that affluent students at Wesleyan are not visually detectable.

We're not that kind of school. We have many affluent students who don't even have a car on campus, even though they could. It's one of those places where students are very conscious about the influences of wealth, and they don't want that to be a factor to their college experience here. We're very well known as a campus where you don't know who's who, because students don't care.

The kind of treatment indicated by the interviews with the deans, that students are considered in their context, was also expressed about Jake's candidacy. Particularly in regards to the shoplifting, the interviewer was told that the admission process is very holistic.

We look at you from your grades to your recommendations to what you've shown that you're capable of doing. We don't see it as a one-factor kind of thing. If you want to say, "I want a second chance to prove that I'm a better person than what my records show," then I think they're willing to look at you in that sense and say, "Okay, we're gonna give you this chance."

It seems that the admission process, at least at Wesleyan, strives to consider each applicant in his or her context, with affluence not necessarily serving as a bonus or detriment.

The role of the admission office in the college admissions process is intuitively critical. The interviews with the two deans as well as the Quiznos interview makes clear that the office views merit as a dynamic concept, "measured not only by the applicants' academic achievements but by how many obstacles they had to surmount to achieve them" (Carnevale and Rose, 115). The difficulty that low-income students encounter is considered in context just as much as it that for an affluent applicant. Though the deans at Wesleyan certainly strive for socioeconomic diversity it is important to remember that they are a cog in a machine that shapes the educational process but they themselves are *not* this machine. They devote an inordinate amount of time and money to recruiting low-income students and the primary means by which they do so is through community-based organizations and charter schools.

The recruitment focus on crossover organizations (CBOs and charter schools) is intuitively the best course of action for the Office of Admission when considering the responsibilities of these deans and their social position. As has been previously mentioned, crossover organizations do not provide for genuine high-school level academic meritocracy, as only the selected students are able to reap the benefits of these programs and organizations. Can admission officers realistically fuel the enormous social overhaul that would be required for meritocracy? Of course not. They can work with organizations that provide the admission office with well-qualified low-income applicants and boost the visibility and perceived attainability of a Wesleyan education for low-income students.

From the perspective of an admission office at an elite school that strives for a socioeconomically diverse class, CBOs are intuitively the best way to recruit low-income students. These organizations already exist in communities and are therefore best situated to assist and prepare low-income students for college. The structural impediments that low-income students face (i.e, bad high schools, ignorance of the college admission process, low test scores) are remedied for motivated students involved in CBOs because the organizations cross these students over and make success feasible. They offer an institutionalized means by which selected students can acquire the cultural and social capital needed for admission to and success at a top tier school. The implications of these organizations at a societal level will be discussed in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6: The “Just Enough” Premise

The information presented thus far in this paper can be synthesized and streamlined into what will be termed the “just enough” premise. When considering the disparate structure of access for affluent and low-income students, the need for low-income students to cross over and the ways in which they do so, as well as the institutional perspective of universities and admission officers, it appears that elite colleges are not very socioeconomically diverse because, as the various social systems currently function, *just enough* low income applicants find their way to elite college applicant pools to render reform unlikely and maintain the status quo.

If schools were to allocate more money to financial aid they would suffer a decrease in prestige and if they were to admit students from low-income, under-resourced high schools that do not meet the criteria for admission it would not be in the best interest of the student or the school. Becoming more accommodating to these two factors would be exorbitantly expensive, if even possible. If multitudes of low-income students were to recognize the injustice of the system as it currently stands and seek an equal chance, schools would be bombarded with applicant pools unable to afford tuition. By increasing the percentage of students on financial aid, school resources would suffer drastically. Of course, the occurrence of such an event – the collective awakening of low-income students to their marginalization – is unlikely, given that society’s mechanisms systematically disempower these individuals. The point is that low-income individuals are being excluded from the process of elite college attendance (for the most part) on account of their social class, and if they believe this type of exclusion to be unjust they may rebel.

If this hypothetical scenario were to happen, though, it would be hard for top tier schools to manage; their stated goals of diversity and need for financial resources in order to persist would come into conflict. They would also need to accept unqualified applicants or be perceived as not truly valuing diversity in the way that they purport to.

The just enough premise observes that, in the current situation, just enough low-income students apply to these schools such that the schools are able to safely preach diversity without having to navigate the repercussions of a student body requiring extensive financial aid and potentially performing at a lower academic level. Were schools to have less socioeconomic diversity than they do now they would be overtly falling short of their stated principles, and were they to have more socioeconomic diversity they would not be able to manage the drain on their financial resources. Additionally, the backlash from privileged families who expect success with the elite college admission process would likely be unimaginable.

The analysis in the “reliance on the visibility of race and its conflation with class” section of Chapter 5 partly demonstrates the just enough premise. The false perception of socioeconomic diversity (that results from racial diversity) can be seen as inhibiting an image of homogeneity. This provides a sensation that a school is just diverse enough and that future efforts for diversification are not necessary.

The primary mechanism that feeds and sustains the just enough premise is crossing over. The fact that approximately 50% of the low-income students surveyed at Wesleyan had crossed over by way of a crossover organization speaks to how these kinds of organizations shape and constrain the applicant pools that elite colleges



receive. Since these organizations have been shown not to be meritocratic (they increase the candidacy of only some low-income students) they select, sift, and groom a small portion of low-income high school students to be aware of and successful in the elite college admission process. This keeps the number of qualified low-income applicants at a low enough level that schools do not need to compromise their resource-based prestige. They have just enough low-income applicants, though, that they do not need to compromise their diversity-based prestige either. In other words, they have enough diversity of social class that they can purport to value diversity in all its forms but they are not forced to open the doors of recruitment any wider than they already are.

The just enough premise is invisible, and is certainly not something of which the deans of admission are cognizant. They focus low-income recruitment on crossover organizations because of their accessibility. This does not show ignorance of the scope and depth of the difficulties faced by low-income high school applicants in this process, it only shows ignorance of the just enough premise. The interviews with the admission deans did not show any understanding that by admitting low-income students through these channels the attainability of access for other low-income students becomes incredibly unlikely.

It is this notion, that these types of organizations do make the attainability of an elite college education unlikely for the majority of low-income high school students, that is the closest this paper comes to policy recommendations. This notion follows that these organizations artificially imbue low-income students with the cultural and economic capital that grants them access to the means for success. The

majority of low-income students in public high schools do not have such access and thus a system of genuine meritocracy does not exist. This is harmful in the greater social sense, though, because the presence of (albeit few) low-income students at elite colleges can serve to legitimate the admission process (and the criteria therein) as based in meritocracy.

In reality, many of the low-income students that are able to be successful have needed external social support in the form of a crossover organization. Though these organizations have great outcomes for the students that they are able to help, the fact that they make America's educational system look more meritocratic than it is becomes problematic. The remainder of low-income high school students, who may be capable of showcasing exceptional academic merit, do not receive the tools with which to do so.

## Chapter 7: Concluding Remarks

One of the hardest things for me to listen to in the dialogue before the 2008 presidential election was middle class students at Wesleyan and schools like it talking about voting for McCain. Many claimed that they expected to make a lot of money in their anticipated professions and did not feel as though members of the working class were worthy recipients of their tax dollars. They seemed to ignore the fact that the ability to succeed at a top tier school rests critically on the working class individuals who clean their dorms, pour their coffee and processed their application to college. This indicates that the degradation and exploitation of the working class is clearly not fully understood; a major contributor to the invisibility of this hegemony is the archetypal notion in society of a meritocracy. The schools these students attend are perpetrators of this myth.

It is structural impediments that create socioeconomic inequality in the form of admission criteria and it is institutional reality that prohibits these obstacles to realistically be overcome. “The inequalities of social class...permeate and largely define the American education system” (Sacks-2, 159). Most low-income kids will not know about the SAT/fee waivers/financial aid or be well positioned for success at the nation’s premier schools. Part of this is almost unchangeable; Wesleyan’s classroom will perhaps always require the preparation that low-income schools cannot provide (the they wouldn’t make it here argument). But part of it is not. CBOs and other crossover mechanisms that feed “just enough” low-income applicants to Wesleyan to assuage the pressure for more socioeconomic diversity while simultaneously making the social actors who are most likely to see the scope

and nature of the disadvantage low-income students are under in the admission process (the deans of admission) unable to do more. There is only so much they can do, and with the system structured as it is (just enough) they are not pressured to do more.

It is clear that on some level elite colleges and universities want to boast truly diverse campuses and that socioeconomic diversity is a recognized and addressed component of diversity. A Harvard president said that these schools must provide

opportunities to hear different views directly – face to face – from people who embody them. No formal academic study can replace continued association with others who are different from ourselves, and who challenge our preconceptions, prejudices, and assumptions, even as we challenge theirs. (Aries, 3)

The Office of Admission at Wesleyan certainly does a lot of work recognizing and recruiting low-income students. However, since CBOs and Charter schools exist, exceptionally well-qualified low-income students apply to elite schools, and, perhaps more importantly, many have the academic record/experiences to be admitted. This works to Wesleyan's benefit, because these groups and organizations get them ready by giving them resources and opportunities that society normally does not.

The overwhelming point is that schools like Wesleyan that want to be really diverse are in some way getting sufficient numbers to show diversity (even socioeconomically). Since crossover organizations exist that feed elite schools just enough low-income students so that they do not appear to be entirely homogenous, there is limited pressure put on the rest of society to strive for meritocracy. This would mean removing cultural biases on the SAT, getting better teachers in low-

income schools, and making sure college counselors in low-income areas know what they are talking about and are not each burdened with 900 students.

The kind of large-scale change necessary to make higher education a meritocratic institution is incredibly over-idealistic and unlikely. The purpose of this paper is not to propose a solution to such a serious and deep-rooted problem, it is to expose the mechanisms that produce the lack of socioeconomic diversity that exists at elite colleges. These mechanisms include the causal mechanisms (procedural biases in the admission process) and those that maintain these inequalities (i.e., the just enough premise, the they wouldn't make it here argument, and crossing over). Additionally, this paper intends to shift the focus and reframe the problem such that the extent and nature of these structures are more directly understood. Though making genuine social change in this area seems somewhat unlikely, it can only be possible if theory and policy recommendations take into account the process as it actually exists.

It is also critical to mention that having socioeconomic diversity in the way that it currently exists is beneficial to elite colleges. By the just enough premise, these schools do not lack low-income students such that they would need to initiate massive recruitment efforts in low-income areas. They are able to maintain their currency of prestige in both resources and diversity. Additionally, socioeconomic inequality is perhaps the most poignant component that works to limit the size of the applicant pool vying for the 170,000 seats at the nation's elite colleges. If higher education were to become a true meritocracy (unmediated by social class) the work for admission officers and the backlash from the affluent would be exceptionally

daunting. The system currently works in such a way that it sustains itself by appearing true to its values, continuing to admit those who are socially positioned to crave admission, and by maintaining the institutional desires and requirements of elite schools.

When sociologists criticize the admission process it seems that their criticisms are misguided. In reality, each applicant seems to get a fair shake (as evidenced by the interviews with admission deans and with the Quiznos prank call). The bigger issue is that the problem does not start in the admission office, the problem exists in the rest of the country and prevents so many worthy applications from ever being filled out.

There is certainly more work that could be done by elite schools to marginally increase their socioeconomic diversity. Stevens (2007) claimed that when he traveled as an admission dean he was encouraged

to visit schools from which we had seen interest in the past. Where had we gotten applicants? Good ones? Matriculations? Aha, I thought, here was the systemic bias: the College favored schools that had sent it business before. How on earth, I thought to myself, could it cultivate a larger or more diverse applicant pool if it kept recruiting at the same schools year after year? (Stevens, 78-9)

Additionally, divisions exist between students as a function of social class even after low-income students overcome the candidacy and access impediments.

Lacking economic capital in some cases meant that lower-income students were excluded from trips planned by affluent students for the summer. Nor could lower-income students afford to take unpaid internships that would provide not only important intellectual experiences to those that could afford them, but credentials and connections for the future. (Aries, 76)

Elite schools could work more to find and facilitate unpaid internships such that low-income students could afford housing and/or transportation to these opportunities. Also, Wesleyan provides transportation home during break only to New York and Boston,<sup>25</sup> making it very difficult for a low-income student from a rural area to be able to travel home for breaks.

The problem of socioeconomic diversity at elite college campuses is exceptionally complex and can be understood by the intertwining of numerous social systems. By seeing socioeconomic diversity as simultaneously in and against the desires of elite institutions, and by recognizing the dual role that crossover organizations play, the direction for reform and improvement can be clearly understood as needing to exist at the societal level, not in the admission office. The ultimate goal is certainly for higher education, particularly elite colleges and institutions, to someday open their gates on the basis of genuine merit.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: COFHE Schools

Amherst College  
Barnard College  
Brown University  
Bryn Mawr College  
Carleton College  
Columbia University  
Cornell University  
Dartmouth College  
Duke University  
Georgetown University  
Harvard University  
Johns Hopkins University  
MIT  
Mount Holyoke College  
Northwestern University  
Oberlin College  
Pomona College  
Princeton University  
Rice University  
Smith College  
Stanford University  
Swarthmore College  
Trinity College  
University of Chicago  
University of Pennsylvania  
University of Rochester  
Washington Univ. in St.Louis  
Wellesley College  
Wesleyan University  
Williams College  
Yale University

**Appendix 2: Survey** (see page 90)  
(Condensed to fit binding margins)

## Educational Background Survey

*I am doing research for my sociology senior essay about socioeconomic diversity on college campus and how students from different backgrounds make their way to Wesleyan.*

*All information is 100% anonymous.*

### Getting Here

How did you hear about Wesleyan? \_\_\_\_\_

*Was your high school college/guidance counselor familiar? Did you have a teacher/parent who was invested in your success?*

Do a lot of students from your high school go to schools like this? YES / NO

If not, how did you find out about it? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you involved with a community-based college access/prep program? YES / NO  
*(such as prep-for-prep, ABC, NJ seeds)*

If so, what is it called? \_\_\_\_\_

### Family Income

Which of the following would you describe your family as: low / middle / high income  
*Keep in mind that the cut-off for the top 50% is \$64,000 and the top 25% is \$90,000 (annual household income)*

What is/are your parent's occupation(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
*(please include a parent who is not currently working as "unemployed" or "stay at home parent")*

Approximately what percent of your graduating H.S. class attends a 4-year school? \_\_\_\_\_

### Affording Wesleyan

Are you on financial aid? YES / NO

Do you have a non-Wesleyan scholarship? YES / NO

What is your package/aid? \_\_\_\_\_

Were you eligible for a federal Pell grant? YES / NO / UNSURE

### Basics

Gender: M / F / O Year: '09 / '10 / '11 / '12 Race: \_\_\_\_\_

High School G.P.A.: \_\_\_\_\_ SAT Math \_\_\_\_\_ Verbal \_\_\_\_\_ Writing (SAT I or II) \_\_\_\_\_

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*Thanks so much for your participation! If you feel that you have a cool story about your journey to Wesleyan and would like to be interviewed for my paper I would really appreciate it!!! Please tear this part off of the sheet of paper and contact me!*

*Phone: 914-552-6241*

*E-mail: bfinder@wes*

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> <http://emt.askadmissions.net/wesleyan/ask.aspx?did=2&cid=2123&quser=diversity>
  - <sup>2</sup> <http://www.commondataset.org/>
  - <sup>3</sup> [http://projectonstudentdebt.org/pc\\_institution.php](http://projectonstudentdebt.org/pc_institution.php)
  - <sup>4</sup> <http://www.amherst.edu/media/view/36999/original/Book4.pdf>
  - <sup>5</sup> [http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Institutional\\_Research/documents/Brown\\_CDS07\\_08.pdf](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Institutional_Research/documents/Brown_CDS07_08.pdf)
  - <sup>6</sup> <http://dpb.cornell.edu/documents/1000395.pdf>
  - <sup>7</sup> [http://www.hamilton.edu/college/institutional\\_research/CDS2007\\_2008.pdf](http://www.hamilton.edu/college/institutional_research/CDS2007_2008.pdf)
  - <sup>8</sup> [http://www.middlebury.edu/NR/rdonlyres/CDB2CFC8-96F4-403D-BAC3-6BC8920B93AE/0/CDS2007\\_2008.pdf](http://www.middlebury.edu/NR/rdonlyres/CDB2CFC8-96F4-403D-BAC3-6BC8920B93AE/0/CDS2007_2008.pdf)
  - <sup>9</sup> <http://www.pomona.edu/institutionalresearch/collegedata/CDS0708.htm>
  - <sup>10</sup> <http://ucomm.stanford.edu/cds/>
  - <sup>11</sup> <http://www.wesleyan.edu/ir/cds/cds2007-08.pdf>
  - <sup>12</sup> [http://www.williams.edu/admin/provost/ir/CDS2007\\_2008.pdf](http://www.williams.edu/admin/provost/ir/CDS2007_2008.pdf)
  - <sup>13</sup> <http://www.yale.edu/oir/cds.pdf>
  - <sup>14</sup> [http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFPeople?\\_event=&geo\\_id=01000US&\\_geoContext=01000US&\\_street=&\\_county=&\\_cityTown=&\\_state=&\\_zip=&\\_lang=en&\\_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&\\_useEV=&\\_pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&\\_submenuId=people\\_10&ds\\_name=null&\\_ci\\_nbr=null&qr\\_name=null&reg=null%3Anull&\\_keyword=&\\_industry=\)](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFPeople?_event=&geo_id=01000US&_geoContext=01000US&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&_pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&_submenuId=people_10&ds_name=null&_ci_nbr=null&qr_name=null&reg=null%3Anull&_keyword=&_industry=))
  - <sup>15</sup> <http://www.ed.gov/programs/fpg/index.html>
  - <sup>16</sup> <http://www.bea.gov/bea/regional/reis/scb.cfm>
  - <sup>17</sup> <http://www.bea.gov/newsreleases/regional/spi/2008/spi0308.htm>
  - <sup>18</sup> [http://projectonstudentdebt.org/pc\\_institution.php](http://projectonstudentdebt.org/pc_institution.php)
  - <sup>19</sup> <http://www.wesleyan.edu/administration/securingthefuture/>
  - <sup>20</sup> <http://www.questbridge.org/>
  - <sup>21</sup> <http://www.abetterchance.org/>
  - <sup>22</sup> <http://www.prepforprep.org/>
  - <sup>23</sup> [http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=oZDmtlhjEC6iGzOyR7iuKA\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=oZDmtlhjEC6iGzOyR7iuKA_3d_3d)
  - <sup>24</sup> [http://www.radaronline.com/features/2008/05/nepotism\\_prank\\_george\\_lucas\\_wolfgang\\_puck\\_frank\\_lautenberg\\_0\\_1.php](http://www.radaronline.com/features/2008/05/nepotism_prank_george_lucas_wolfgang_puck_frank_lautenberg_0_1.php)
  - <sup>25</sup> <http://www.wesleyanargus.com/article/6972>