

Mitchell L. Stevens

CREATING A

# CLASS

College Admissions and the Education of Elites



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Education of Elites

Mitchell L. Stevens

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For the College



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If parents, having achieved a desirable status,  
can *ipso facto* do nothing to make comparable achievement  
easier for their offspring, we may have “equal opportunity.”  
But we will no longer have a family system—at least not  
in the present understanding of the term.

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Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan,  
*The American Occupational Structure*,  
1967



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## INTRODUCTION

Without a tour guide to point them out, visitors to the College would have a hard time finding the classrooms. The buildings housing many of them are architecturally indistinguishable from the residence halls. One classroom is in the chapel. Several are in the library. More than a few classes take place over lunch, or in professors' homes. In nice weather they often convene outdoors.

The nation's most distinguished colleges and universities have long prided themselves on integrating formal instruction seamlessly with the rest of students' lives. Social scientists who study education, however, have long tried to pull formal schooling and the rest of life apart. They have done so with noble intentions. Aware of how consequential formal schooling is to the distribution of jobs, income, and social prestige in modern societies, they have worked hard to discern how school completion is related to other aspects of young people's biographies. Their work often gets done through statistical models that specify a numerical association between particular features of students' backgrounds (the income and education level of parents, say) and the number of school years or degrees students

complete. These models often are elegant and persuasive, and they often misrepresent what they purport to explain.

Formal schooling is only part of a much larger and more complicated process called social reproduction: the transfer of knowledge, cultural perspective, and social position from one generation to the next.<sup>1</sup> Social reproduction takes place in classrooms, but it also happens in family rooms and on playgrounds, at parties, and in bed. It includes all the things parents do to ensure that their children will have good lives. It includes all the things that schools and congregations and summer camps do to ensure that their charges are safe and happy. Formal schooling is the infrastructure that organizes this varied process and lends it cultural legitimacy. Think of the many different kinds of things people do for kids that sound better when they are described as “educational,” and you get a sense of how this legitimation process works.

In the course of doing the research for this book I became convinced that, however well intended, social scientists’ statistical pictures of formal schooling inhibit our appreciation of how fundamentally schooling organizes American society. The organization of formal schooling in this country influences where people live and how they raise their children. It influences how they spend their money and go into debt. It dictates the rhythms of daily, weekly, and annual calendars. It gives people authoritative directions about how to plot their futures. It tells people what achievements their society most values. It helps people figure out who they are in relation to others. It influences when and with whom they fall in love. Social scientists are not unaware of these things—they are citizens and parents and lovers themselves, after all—but their affection for numbers often makes it difficult for them to squeeze the big picture into their research designs.<sup>2</sup>

In a sense this book draws an exceedingly small picture. It is about how admissions officers at a private liberal arts college make

decisions. Hoping to learn about admissions officers and their work up close, I spent eighteen months as a participant observer in the office of a highly selective liberal arts college in the northeastern United States in 2000–2001. When I began, I was interested primarily in what I thought was a generic evaluation problem: how organizations make fine distinctions between people who are on paper quite comparable. At the beginning it barely occurred to me that there might be a big story to tell from that work. At the beginning I did not appreciate how that office might be a good perch from which to survey the broader landscape of formal schooling in America. I learned fairly quickly, however, that in order to understand how admissions officers made their decisions I needed to look carefully at the social machinery that delivered applications to admissions offices in the first place. I needed to figure out why people at a school with one of the most competitive admissions profiles in the country spent many weeks each year on the road, like traveling salesmen, drumming up applications. I needed to figure out why a proudly academic institution cared so much about applicants who were better at football and hockey than they were at English and math. I needed to figure out why a school with a traditionally Anglo, eastern-seaboard clientele so eagerly courted applicants who were U.S. minorities and applicants from all over the world. I needed to figure out why it seemed to matter so much that the school I studied was a physically beautiful place. In the process of figuring all of this out—and reading and talking and traveling and filing, alongside the people who did it all for a living—I became convinced that this little office offered a keyhole glimpse into the larger workings of a distinctively American stratification system.

This book is largely about privileged families and the impressive organizational machinery they have developed to pass their comfortable social positions on to their children. Studying privileged people is important, because they create the ladders others must

climb to move up in the world. Nowhere is this more true than in schools, which have been official ladders of mobility and opportunity in U.S. society for a hundred years. We do a disservice to the ideal of educational opportunity, I think, if we keep the highest rungs of these ladders obscure.<sup>3</sup> Poking around upstairs is not without risk to those one studies, however. As will become clear in subsequent pages, admissions protocols at selective private schools are intimately entwined with institutional reputations, and the upper echelon of American higher education is a small world. As I moved through this world, I consistently made my status as a researcher explicit; I also committed to protect the privacy of people I met. I have obscured the identity of the College, its personnel and applicants, and virtually all of the other people and organizations in any way represented here.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fogged specifics, I have tried to make the character of settings and people vivid.

It took longer to complete this book than I had thought it would. Academics often say this, but their excuses vary. Mine is that this book appears in the wake of many recent and excellent studies about higher education by scholars across the social sciences. I wanted my work to be fully informed by the best of this scholarship, whatever its field. I am not a quantitative sociologist or an economist or a historian, but my thinking relies heavily on insights produced through these other methods and disciplinary frames. Those who track higher education scholarship in any field may wish to keep a finger in the notes, but I have written the main text for general readers. A great many people are interested in places like the College, and their interest is not misplaced. These institutions are central to the machinery of social opportunity and social distinction in America. My hope is that these pages sufficiently honor that fact and explain it clearly.

## A SCHOOL IN A GARDEN

Set at a high elevation overlooking farmland, sleepy towns, and hardwood forests, the College enjoys a geographical prominence commensurate with its stunning campus. Lovely old buildings from the early campaigns resemble pieces of a giant chess set, carefully positioned around shady quadrangles. Slate roofs and mullioned windows convey a sense of history. A few of the facades are illuminated in the evenings, making them visible for miles into the surrounding valleys. The most impressive route of arrival carries drivers through a sweeping lawn dotted with perennial beds and specimen trees. Lovingly tended, the trees are a special point of pride. Many employees can name a favorite. Each trunk gets an annual skirting of fresh mulch. The sycamores near the chapel receive special medications.

The campus is an important constant in the College's history. Like many private schools throughout the northeastern United States, this one was built by Protestant churchmen at what was once a cutting edge of American frontier. Hilltops were school builders' preferred sites for hygienic as well as symbolic reasons. Higher elevations were presumed to enjoy cleaner air, a notable advantage in a coal-burning industrial society, and also encouraged flattering allu-

sions to Athens and Zion. The virtues of this particular hill have long been touted by College boosters. An information pamphlet for prospective students published in 1917 promises tidy walks crisscrossing under “fine old trees, which form the backdrop for the brown-grey buildings.” “In a situation so beautiful and naturally healthful,” explains another passage, “the College is further safeguarded by a modern sanitation system and its own water supply from spring fed reservoirs.” Later literature describes the physical plant in other terms but continues to praise its beauty. A 1973 viewbook quotes a student’s enthusiastic description: “This is a beautiful campus. In the fall especially, it’s the most gorgeous place I ever hope to see. The air is clean and you are just totally removed from all the things that are making it so hard to live in cities these days.”<sup>1</sup> Technological advances in color photography and the luminous capacities of computer screens would give subsequent advocates ever more vivid tools for disseminating their news. Surveys of admitted students throughout the College’s history would confirm the campus as a prominent factor in many matriculation decisions.

Schools like this one—private, lush, residential, and with selective undergraduate admissions—constitute only a tiny fraction of the colleges and universities in the United States, yet they enjoy historical and cultural influence in great disproportion to their number. They are among the nation’s most enduring and most emulated organizations. Early Americans built schools to train religious leaders of many different faiths, to gain an edge over neighboring towns and denominations, and to put particular towns and cities on the map. A school on a hill could be a light in the darkness, a glimmer of intellectual sophistication, a sign that a community was going places, making progress, looking up. As the frontier moved westward, the older institutions became models for school founders in every corner of the country. Colleges in the northeastern United States became benchmarks of excellence in virtually all things: cur-

riculum, faculty, athletics, admissions, aesthetics. Even today, with the thousands of U.S. colleges and universities, degrees conferred by a relative handful of private, highly selective, affluent colleges and universities “back East” bear a subtle but unmistakable cachet.<sup>2</sup>

For eighteen months in 2000 and 2001, I lived and worked at one of these schools as a researcher. I resided in an apartment on its campus, ate often in its cafeterias, borrowed books from its library, and took my exercise on its wooded trails. I spent most of my working hours in the College’s Office of Admissions and Financial Aid, where I tried to get as close as I could to the people who made decisions.

I was not alone in my interest. Selective admissions policies have been the object of increasing public fascination and debate in recent years. Courts, legislatures, and college presidents argue over the appropriate criteria selective schools should use when figuring out who they will admit. Magazines rank “the best” institutions by how many applicants they turn away. Growing numbers of private consultants make their livings off of the anxieties of people facing the elite college search.<sup>3</sup>

Despite all of the attention being paid to selective admissions, however, we know remarkably little about how admissions officers go about making decisions about real applicants in real time. I wanted to know how the decisions got made, and with what consequence for those who hoped to someday attend schools like the College. There are many excellent historical studies, and quite a few workplace memoirs by admissions officers themselves, but almost no reports based on critical scholarly observation.<sup>4</sup> Also remarkable is that, despite all the hype about selective college access, apparently no scholar in any field has taken a stab at explaining the hype itself. Many parents, especially those of the affluent upper middle class, worry ever more and ever earlier about their children’s fate in the selective college admissions game, but it is not clear why. Why, in a

society where a decent college education has become almost as accessible as a good cup of coffee, when virtually every state in the union underwrites at least one good research university, has admission to a handful of very expensive, often geographically remote private schools grown ever more competitive in recent years? What, if anything, has changed that makes attendance at particular institutions, and not just any college, seem so important to so many? I suggest an answer to these questions by looking out on the landscape of contemporary America through the front door of a highly selective private college.

I went to this place with a long-standing interest in two features of our national culture that are as influential as they are contradictory. On the one hand, Americans place very high value on the appraisal of people as individuals. Whether in schools, workplaces, or department stores, we believe that individualized consideration is better than standardized care. We like personalized attention, first names, and custom made. On the other hand, we put great faith in the fairness of universal standards. In our schools, workplaces, and courts of law, we tend to believe that everyone should be evaluated on the same terms. We tend to be suspicious when institutions make exceptions to their officially universal rules, using terms like *special preferences* and *discrimination* to call foul on the deviations. We might in theory settle the contradiction between universalism and individualism by making a clear choice between them when we build our institutions, creating systems for the management of human beings in which either the rules apply to absolutely everyone, or in which there are no hard-and-fast rules at all. But we don't choose. Instead, and despite the contradictions, we tend to create institutions that mix the two ideals together.

Nowhere is the commingling of individualism and universalism more apparent than in schools. On the one hand, we tend to view personalized instruction as the sine qua non of educational excel-

lence. We sing the praises of small classrooms and “individualized education programs.” We are understanding when people demand choices about where their children will go to school. Many parents and teachers alike cry to the heavens when school officials ask that standard curricula be taught in standardized ways. On the other hand Americans are zealous educational universalists. On the political left, progressive reformers have long and quite successfully championed a dream of universal schooling—initially to the point of literacy, next to the completion of high school and, in recent years, to college degrees. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* U.S. Supreme Court decision, considered by many to be a sacred event in our national history, preaches a gospel of educational universalism, making explicit the notion that public schooling should be apportioned equally to all citizens. On the political right, reformers have recently, and also quite successfully, pressed for universal measures of students’ academic accomplishment and school performance. The centerpiece of the Bush administration’s No Child Left Behind Act, for example, is the obligation that schools receiving federal funding demonstrate the progress of their students through standardized tests. It is difficult to imagine a more universal measure of individual performance than machine-graded, multiple-choice exams backed by the authority of the national government. Rather than making a choice between individualism and universalism in our schools, then, we pursue the virtues of both ideals at the same time.

Highly selective liberal arts schools like the College also embody the commingling of individualism and universalism. On the one hand, their signature organizational characteristics are their intimate size and their mission of service to students as whole persons. On the other hand, the competition for admission means that these schools also are beholden to powerful cultural expectations that they evaluate every applicant according to universal standards of merit.