UC San Diego
UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

Symbolically Maintained Inequality: How Harvard and Stanford Students Construct Boundaries among Elite Universities

Permalink

Journal

ISSN

Authors

Binder, Amy J
Abel, Andrea R

Publication Date

2019

DOI

Symbolically Maintained Inequality: How Harvard and Stanford Students Construct Boundaries among Elite Universities

Amy J. Binder[1] and Andrea R. Abel[1]

Abstract

The study of elites is enjoying a revival at a time of increasing economic inequality. Sociologists of education have been leaders in this area, researching how affluent families position their children to compete favorably in a highly stratified higher education system. However, scholars have done less research on how students do symbolic work of their own to bolster elite status. In this study, we use qualitative interviews with 56 undergraduates at Harvard and Stanford Universities to explore how students construct a status hierarchy among elite campuses. Students come to campus with a working knowledge of prestige differences between top institutions but then are influenced by others to refine their perceptions. We find that Harvard and Stanford students value universities that offer a "well-rounded" liberal arts education while criticizing other selective institutions for being, alternatively, too intellectual, connected to the old-world status system, overly associated with partying and athletics, or having a student body too single-minded about career preparation. Our findings suggest that through constructing these nuanced perceptions of elite universities' distinctiveness, students justify their rarefied positions and contribute to the ongoing status distinctions among social elites more generally.

Keywords

higher education, college life, symbolic boundaries, elites, class culture

This is a good time to be an elite. Since the 1980s, American society has been marked by widening economic inequality, with contemporary elites—those who have a "disproportionate control over, or access to, a resource"—wealthier than at any time since before the Second World War (Khan 2012:362; Pikkety 2013). Sitting atop the hierarchy in what is sometimes called our winner-take-all society (Frank and Cook 1995), twenty-first-century elites enjoy a future of socioeconomic gain that is far different from the stark reality faced by those below. Accompanying such financial assets are multiple forms of social separation from other Americans that create a distinctive class culture, including spatial segregation into neighborhoods, cities, and schools (Reardon and Bischoff 2011).

Private elite higher education has long been a central institution for securing the position of

[1]Department of Sociology, University of California-San Diego, San Diego, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
Amy J. Binder, Department of Sociology, University of California, 9500 Gilman Drive, La Jolla, CA 92093-0533, USA.
E-mail: abinder@ucsd.edu

prosperous Americans, contributing to the reproduction of families' and social groups' high status (DiMaggio and Mohr 1996). In the past, white Protestant elites could accomplish social closure by relying on boarding schools and private universities to admit their children in predictably high numbers (Cookson and Persell 1985; Karabel 2005) and on churches, museums, and country clubs to further culturally distinguish them from others (Beisel 1998).

Today, wealthy families continue to have far greater access to highly selective colleges than do less affluent families (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Massey et al. 2003), despite the fact that diversity in admissions is a priority for all top-tier institutions (Stevens 2009). According to one report, more students attending "Ivy-Plus" colleges (the eight Ivy League institutions plus the University of Chicago, Stanford University, MIT, and Duke University) come from families in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half of the socioeconomic structure (Chetty et al. 2017). However, while affluent families still dominate such institutions, selective postsecondary education has become an increasingly competitive and, therefore, anxiety-provoking arena for current and aspiring elites. The most sought-after campuses now receive 30,000 to 40,000 applications each year, with schools such as Harvard and Stanford accepting only about 5 percent of those who seek admission (Pérez-Peña 2014). Acceptance is no longer something to count on, and today's children of wealth must meet the same "meritocratic" criteria as other applicants (Khan 2011), requiring them to compete vigorously on standardized tests and other putatively neutral metrics for admission (Espeland and Stevens 1998). Students must also signal achievement in extracurricular activities at incomparably high levels.

Given these changes, students admitted to the nation's top private universities today—whether from the uppermost positions of the socioeconomic structure or levels below—can be more confident than ever about the role their own merit plays in their educational attainments. They have exceeded on examinations and demonstrated leadership skills in nonacademic pursuits. Nevertheless, theirs is a shaky confidence, in which questions of deservingness and security of position abound (Khan 2011; Warikoo 2016)—not only for "legacy" students, who are thought not to have earned their privilege (Stevens 2009), but for other students as well. One

characteristic of today's top-flight students is their fear of losing the reputational status they have gained via admission to a top university through missteps they may make in selecting the wrong majors or career pathways (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Rivera 2015). Although students at elite universities expect to leave a mark on the world, they are insecure and unsure about how to do it.

All of this points to a fascinating paradox, in which students at elite universities arguably have the world at their feet—having beaten 95 percent of the competition in the admissions tournament—but whose sense of self is beset by concerns about their ability to maintain their status in more competitive education and class systems.

In this article, we study students' peculiar combination of confidence and insecurity about becoming elites, as well as their general perspective on being at the top of the educational hierarchy, in a novel way: by analyzing how a select group of young people who have obtained the brass ring of elite college entrance compare themselves and their universities to students at other very highly selective campuses. Although online sites such as Niche.com and yearly annual rankings by *US News & World Report* feed the college competition frenzy, sociologists know little about how students themselves make everyday distinctions between universities and engage in "tier talk" (Espeland and Sauder 2016). Cultural sociologists have shown that for virtually all social activities—appreciating music genres, assessing the excellence of job candidates voting for a political party—individuals draw symbolic boundaries to separate people into groups of "us" and "them," generating not only feelings of similarity and membership but also exclusion (Lamont 1992). To extend this insight to higher education, looking at how students assign greater value to some universities over others allows us to understand how elites-in-the-making participate in the "production, diffusion, and institutionalization" of principles of classification and excellence (Lamont and Molnar 2002:168). Furthermore, analyzing these boundaries can shed light on how young people on elite campuses see themselves fitting into the wider class system which, itself, is structured by the highly differentiated institutions that compose the U.S. higher education system (Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum 2008).

To explore this boundary-drawing, we use qualitative interviews conducted in 2013 and in 2014 with Harvard and Stanford undergraduate students and very recent alumni and alumnae.

Our interviewees come from different walks of life (from the highest quintile of socioeconomic standing to the lowest), but all, in theory, are on a pathway to assume elite social positions if they so choose. We find that students who simultaneously think of themselves as the best of the best, but who are unsure of their passions and insecure about their futures (Deresiewicz 2014), draw small yet incisive distinctions between themselves and others. They invest energy into thinking about what is favorable and unfavorable about their own campus while also comparing their school with other elite campuses. These students describe their respect at the equivalency of some universities but, more often, express their subtle and not-so-subtle disdain for what they perceive to be the deficiencies of others. They talk a lot about fit and comfort—perceived crucial aspects of the college experience for highly ambitious and anointed students such as themselves. By critiquing other campuses, these students subtly elevate their own status and position.

Through exploring this boundary-making, we observe how undergraduates at Harvard and Stanford engage in what we call "symbolically maintained inequality," in which they use often invidious comparisons to other schools to contribute to social separation even within the top 1 percent of college-goers who attend any of the Ivy-plus campuses (Casselman 2016). Understanding how students differentiate among universities is important because it shows how elites use higher education to make sense of themselves, both to fellow elites and to those lower down the class order.

STATUS CONSTRUCTION AND ELITE HIGHER EDUCATION

Elite parents' efforts to preserve their children's status through college admissions and attainments is an age-old story in the United States. Yet in the latter half of the twentieth century—since the "massification" of higher education in the years following World War II—the exact mechanisms by which families pass down privilege to their children have changed. As rapidly expanding public universities began to offer educational opportunities to people from more varied walks of life (Gumport et al. 1997), affluent parents realized that they would have to work harder to position their offspring to successfully compete both for college admission and, later, in the wider class

system. One strategy that wealthier segments engaged is "maximally maintained inequality," in which parents encourage their children to seek higher-level degrees (such as master's degrees on top of bachelor's degrees) to stay ahead of lower groups catching up in the educational credentials race (Raftery and Hout 1993). A second form of educational monopolization occurs when advantaged social groups participate in "effectively maintained inequality" (Lucas 2001) by gravitating toward "more advantageous, selective, or prestigious segments" within the increasingly horizontally stratified higher education system (Davies and Zarifa 2012:14; Gerber and Cheung 2008). In recent decades, resource and prestige hierarchies have risen sharply within the postsecondary sector (Labaree 2012), and top status groups fight to place their children in private elite colleges and universities rather than in less selective public campuses or lower-ranked private institutions (Alon 2009; Bowen and Bok 1998). Some scholars have suggested that the modern U.S. class system itself is constituted in large measure by the increasing organizational variety of college and university types (Stevens et al. 2008), with elites with the right class culture dominating the top of the horizontally stratified system to create social networks and ensure their legitimacy.

Since the 1980s, scholars have noted an explosion in family expenditures to improve their children's chances to gain entrance to the slice of schools that are most selective (Reardon 2013). Parents move to neighborhoods with good schools (Cucchiara 2008), purchase test preparatory services for standardized examinations (Byun and Park 2012), take over successful school programs originally meant for lower-income families (Sims 2017), and—using a practice unthinkable in earlier generations—provide their three- and four-year-olds with formal preparation to enter the right kindergarten (Otterman 2009).

At a more symbolic level undergirding such practices, parents socialize their children to have cultural capital that is valued in educational settings (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Building verbal competence and high-status dispositions, parents cultivate their children to stay busy, jump through hoops, and take leadership roles in extracurricular activities (Lareau 2003). Calarco (2014) found that parents raise their children to articulate their needs and express opinions that distinguish them from everyone else—qualities that place them in advantageous positions in the

selective admissions game. Once students are in college, upper-class parents are on stand-by to provide informational supports that schools lack (Hamilton 2016; Hamilton, Roksa, and Nielsen 2018), acting as the stopgap between institutional resources and students' futures.

Students' Work to Position Themselves

Although sociologists have written widely on how parents seek to ensure intergenerational privilege for their children, as well as on how elite universities try to stand out from peer institutions to attract a talented class (Friedman 2017), scholars have paid less attention to what students do on their own to bolster their positions once admitted to elite colleges and universities. Yet, we should expect that having been carefully cultivated for academic success, students would be aware that their private elite education is a valuable asset for setting themselves apart from other social groups as the "best of the best" (Gaztambidé-Fernández 2009). Young people, not just their parents, are motivated to maintain their status distinction and to ensure that whatever advantage they have accrued through participation on an elite campus is not squandered.

College students do practical things to safeguard their position, such as selecting overall coursework and majors to advance their careers (Ciocca Eller 2017) and building social capital with professors to perform well in class (Jack 2016). Students also use cultural markers to separate themselves from others, such as when a large proportion of graduating seniors from the highest-ranked universities pursue a narrow band of first jobs that their peers deem "prestigious" (Binder et al. 2016). As Binder and colleagues documented, graduates chase high-status jobs in banking, consulting, and high-tech companies not because these graduates are uniformly excited about the work or even the salaries associated with these positions but, in large part, because these highly known career pathways offer a continued stamp of approval after graduation. Journalists call today's elite undergraduates "organization kids" (Brooks 2001) and "excellent sheep" (Deresiewicz 2014), who fear making mistakes that will negatively affect their futures. A sense of continually having to compete for status in the next rung is palpable.

We should not suppose that students' competition for privileged positions is confined to selecting majors and seeking prestigious jobs. This process also occurs as students share ideas about the educational institutions they attend. Elite students, like elite social groups generally, make cultural distinctions in their more immediate environments to collectively think of themselves as a class—"defined by a particular set of tastes, values, and ways of being" (Khan 2012:368). This is a co-constructed affair that involves many others. Drawing symbolic boundaries around "who we are" is the result not merely of individualized cognition but also of collective processes and intersubjective meaning-making (Lamont, Beljean, and Clair 2014). Undergraduates attending elite universities come to understand who they are in the present, and who they should be in the future, from talking with one another. They learn how to inhabit appropriate styles that signal their refinement (Binder and Wood 2013; Mullen 2010). Peers, faculty, teaching assistants, and administrators are among those who shape students' feelings of similarity with one another and difference from others.

In the sections that follow, we show how students at Harvard and Stanford talk about their universities as offering a "well-rounded, liberal arts education," which compares favorably to other campuses. In deeming their schools to be more or less equivalent to one another (Harvard to Stanford, and vice versa), the students demonstrate the benefits of finding commonalities with an equally prestigious school, because the act of comparison to an exalted other enacts one's own status (Lifschitz, Sauder, and Stevens 2014). In contrast, the "preprofessional," "technical," "intellectual," "pretentious," or "fratty" experiences that students believe characterize other universities relegate those schools to a lower position. Although such comparisons may seem informal and inconsequential, making such judgments is emotionally, cognitively, and morally enriching (Lamont 1992). Harvard and Stanford students' preference for a cosmopolitan education—diverse, open, multifaceted—is part of a process of getting their eliteness just right; of figuring out what it means to be a good, educated person; and of setting themselves off—through merit and habitus—from people who attend slightly less all-around-excellent institutions.

DATA AND METHODS

To analyze how students draw symbolic boundaries among elite institutions, we use the comparative case study method, examining Harvard and Stanford Universities. These two institutions share a number of features, including their Carnegie Classification of having very high levels of research activity (RU/VH) and their perennially high positions in *US News & World Report*'s college rankings, which students and their parents use for guidance on top schools. They are both residential campuses, with nearly all students living on campus. Both universities are situated within vibrant local economies, boast strong alumni networks, have massive endowments in the $20 to $35 billion range, and generously fund student organizations serving a variety of student interests. The two universities also have student bodies from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The median family income at Stanford in 2013 was $167,500, with 66 percent coming from the top 20 percent, whereas the median family income at Harvard was $168,800, with 67 percent coming from the top 20 percent (Aisch et al. 2017). Important for our question about elite boundaries, both universities have similar and historically low admission rates. In 2016, Stanford's admissions fell to just 4.7 percent, making it the most competitive major university in the country (Anderson 2016). At 5.2 percent, Harvard's admission rate is the second lowest among colleges and universities. Putting these characteristics together, Harvard and Stanford are both classic examples of elite higher education institutions in the United States, but they are also culturally salient extreme cases.

Although the two universities share many common features, they differ along some lines. Harvard, a member of the Ivy League, has for centuries educated the children of the country's most well-heeled families and has sent generations to top leadership positions throughout the world. Stanford, a relative newcomer, has been celebrated (and pilloried) for being "Get Rich U" (Auletta 2012), the hub of innovation and riches. Bookending the nation's coasts, one has long stood for being quintessentially East Coast elite while the other embodies the ideals of California beauty and attitude. Additionally, the two universities vary in the dominance of majors on campus (Stanford has more students majoring in STEM fields) and in the dominant career pathways students take directly out of the undergraduate years.

This article is based on 56 semistructured interviews with current students and recent graduates of the two universities—27 students at Harvard and 29 at Stanford. Of the total sample, 39 respondents were currently in school at the time of our interviews, ranging from freshman to senior year, and 17 were recent college graduates who had been out of school no more than three years.[1] Because we were initially interested in elite career pathways, we began by recruiting interviewees through e-mails and postings in preprofessional organizations, but then we asked students to refer us to other students they knew from class and their dormitories. As a result, we talked with students with a range of career interests and several who were still undecided about what they might do after graduation. Our sample features a near-equal number of men and women across the two campuses, racial and ethnic diversity, and diversity in majors and social class backgrounds, the last of which were taken from self-reports of family income and parents' education and occupation. Although our sample includes few individuals from historically underrepresented groups (we did not oversample any one demographic category), its percentages of representation come reasonably close to the student population at each university (Table 1).[2]

In addition to asking respondents about their work plans, we were interested in what their earlier educational experiences had been, how they perceived their own and other institutions, how they came to construct an understanding of "fit" with particular campuses, and what types of future personal relationships they envisioned for themselves. Their reflections about their home campus and other colleges—the subject of this article—came mostly in response to our questions about the college application process ("Can you tell me about your application process to college, for example, how did you pick [Stanford/Harvard]?" "Where else did you apply?" "Can you tell me about these other schools and why you decided to come here?" "Could you see yourself at these schools?") Boundary-drawing among universities also occurred in other parts of the interview, such as when we asked interviewees about their internships or first jobs and about the students they had met from other universities in those positions. Once respondents named particular campuses, we made it a point to "Get beyond the superficial here, and really dig deep, [to find out] how they are different from one another," as our written probe on the interview

Table 1. Interviewee Background Characteristics Compared with University Demographic Data.

	Harvard University				Stanford University			
	Current Sample		Total Undergraduates[a,b]		Current Sample		Total Undergraduates[a,b]	
Characteristics	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Race[c]								
White	17	63.0	2,989	44.9	8	27.6	2,584	37.0
African/African American	0	0.0	443	6.7	1	3.4	440	6.3
Asian/Asian American	7	25.9	1,253	18.8	11	37.9	1,332	19.1
Latino/Hispanic	2	7.4	630	9.5	4	13.8	1,178	16.9
Two or more races	1	3.7	403	6.1	5	17.2	753	10.8
Class background								
Highest quintile	14	51.9			13	44.8		
Second highest quintile	6	22.2			7	24.1		
Middle quintile	3	11.1			5	17.2		
Second lowest quintile	4	14.8			3	10.3		
Lowest quintile	0	0.0			1	3.4		
Share of students from[b]								
Top 0.1 percent				3.0				4.0
Top 1 percent				15.0				17.0
Top 5 percent				39.0				9.0
Top 10 percent				53.0				52.0
Top 20 percent				67.0				66.0
Bottom 20 percent				5.0				4.0
Gender[c]								
Male	17	63.0	3,445	51.7	11	37.9	3,706	53.1
Female	10	37.0	3,214	48.3	18	62.1	3,274	46.9
Year in school								
First year	0	0.0		25.0	1	3.4		25.0
Second year	0	0.0		25.0	2	6.9		25.0
Third year	9	33.3		25.0	3	10.3		25.0
Fourth year	11	40.7		25.0	14	48.3		25.0
Alumnus (1 year out)	1	3.7			6	20.7		
Alumnus (2 years out)	3	11.1			2	6.9		
Alumnus (3 years out)	3	11.1			1	3.4		
N	27		6,659		29		6,980	

[a]Total number of undergraduate students enrolled in 2013 and 2014.

[b]Compiled from data from Common Data Set Report (2013-2014) from Harvard and Stanford and the New York Times College Mobility Project. The Common Data Set includes additional dimensions of race that we have not included (i.e., nonresident aliens, unknown, etc.). As a result, the racial demographics for the undergraduate classes will not combine to 100%.

[c]Retrieved from The New York Times College Mobility Project parental income comparisons, which are based on students born in 1991, approximately the class of 2013. The Mobility Project does not report socioeconomic status background data by quintile but rather the percentage of students from the upper and lower wealth distributions. A student represented in the top 0.1 percent is also counted as a student in the top 20 percent. As a result, the class demographics for the undergraduate classes will not combine to 100%.

instrument reminded us to do. We asked them about how their parents and peers had influenced their opinions about colleges and how they now thought about various schools.

The semistructured interviews lasted from one to two hours and were conducted either in person or via Skype. To maximize transparency, we reminded students that we would mask their

identities to maintain confidentiality but that we intended to include the real name of their university in any written or presented work. The decision to use the real names of our case study campuses is not completely novel, but it is uncommon. We believe it is justified in this case. Harvard and Stanford have unique and distinguishing reputations that cannot be easily camouflaged and that contribute to how students perceive these schools.[3] All interviewees demonstrated an interest in speaking openly about their experiences, although some opted to go off the record for some answers.

We recorded all interviews and had them professionally transcribed. After reading through the interviews multiple times, we used ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis to code them inductively. We identified 150 themes during a process of individual and shared coding. Following this process, we used ATLAS.ti to identify trends and generate concrete empirical claims about our findings. This allowed us to generate and apply new codes as needed.

There are limitations of our sample. The first is that although we are interested in how students who attend elite universities make distinctions among institutions, we clearly privilege the perspectives of those who attend Harvard or Stanford. We cannot generalize what students' boundaries look like at other private elite colleges and universities, let alone at highly selective public universities. Doubtless there are differences—students at other universities likely do not hold Harvard and Stanford in such high esteem as Harvard and Stanford students do. Second, we recruited initially through preprofessional student organizations, which may have attracted a particular type of student, although as noted, we expanded our sample to gain greater representativeness on campus. Third, we talked with students about their own and other colleges well after they had decided to enroll at Harvard or Stanford. This means that we cannot know in all cases which aspects of these boundaries had been drawn prior to arriving on campus and how much had been elaborated once there. However, past research shows the strong influence of campus context on students' ideas about themselves and others (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013), and several of our interviewees clearly stated how they had learned more about other campuses once they were in college. Therefore, we argue that our respondents had preexisting conceptions about different universities— derived from media sources, college advisors,

family, and peers—which were then amplified in different ways once students interacted with college classmates and others on campus. Finally, our one-time data collection provides just a snapshot view of these boundary processes; we cannot know whether they affect status maintenance over the long term. We return to these issues in the conclusion.

FINDINGS

Harvard and Stanford: High-prestige, Well-rounded Education

To provide a baseline for students' comparisons to other institutions, we begin by looking at what they had to say about their own college. We found that although they pointed to differences in character between Harvard and Stanford, most students perceived the two schools to be equivalently prestigious. Interviewees generally expressed an affinity for the school they attended.

Nathan, a middle-class, Latino, Harvard alumnus whose parents had not attended college, conveyed a tone of self-evidence when asked about why he chose to attend Harvard—a "why would I go elsewhere?" level of facticity about its place in the field of other elite universities.[4] When "people actually think about schools, and they think about number one? It's Harvard," he said, noting that Harvard students had once made T-shirts for a football game with their traditional rival that read, "'No one ever says they want to go to Yale when they grow up.' Culturally, it's Harvard! . . . so we feel pretty reassured by having attended." Students also cited the mystique of their college. Halton, an Asian American senior who came from the lowest socioeconomic tier, pointed to the aura of his university, saying, "When I was applying to college, you know, the perception I had of Harvard was of some of the greatest minds, most brilliant people, most accomplished individuals coming together and sharing four years together." The "sense of euphoria" he had when he was admitted only strengthened through his interactions with peers and faculty on campus and "followed me all throughout freshman year and I think still follows me to this very day."

Many of our interviewees spoke about the opportunities for a well-rounded course of study they could find at Harvard. Fiona, a white junior from an upper-class family, indicated that the

decision became clear during her admissions interview when she was counseled, "You have to go to Harvard because a lot of these other schools are just not going to expand your experience enough." Students also reflected on their school's fit with a range of academic interests they thought they could not find elsewhere. For Nancine, a white senior from a lower socioeconomic background, it was combining research in her concentration (biomedicine) and being able to delve more deeply into the study of Arabic in one place.[5] More often than not, though, descriptions of Harvard offered less detailed articulations of specific study and, instead, focused on the overall feel, reputation, and little-known traditions of the school. According to Martha, a white, upper-class alumna, "It was very, just, idyllic." Between times when the "leaves were changing" and the Yard was beautiful, and "weird traditions that you have—like our dorm had a Dr. Seuss performance during the holidays," Harvard provided students with a legendary experience.

Stanford interviewees also were enthusiastic about their campus and, like Harvard's Nathan, occasionally pointed to Stanford's high rankings and prestige. Rahim, an Asian social sciences major from a bottom quintile socioeconomic background, mentioned that Stanford now has "a lower acceptance rate" than Harvard—although he was quick to add that Stanford students "don't take much notice of such things." Also like their Harvard counterparts, Stanford interviewees spoke of their school's magic but with different elements folded into their descriptions. Olivia, an Asian American computer science alumna from an upper-class family, mentioned that "Stanford was the least pretentious of all the schools I visited . . . and it was a beautiful campus. I went in expecting a very academic, theoretical four years, but Stanford is very entrepreneurial. It's very creative and a little bit hipster, which was the perfect combination that I came to love." Still others emphasized the school's eccentricities, marveling at the fun vibe on campus. Beatrice, a recent graduate from a white, upper-class background, said, "There are certain quirky things . . . [at] graduation they have neon, they're wearing bikinis. At graduation!"

Examining how students talked about each other's campuses also provides insights. First, Harvard students tended to have an image of Stanford that aligned quite well with Stanford students' understanding of their university. Levi, a white

Harvard senior from an upper-class family, said, "The sort of classic Stanford student in my head would be a little bit more relaxed. And I don't mean that in a less rigorous or a less smart or intense way. Just a little bit more chill." He added, "because Harvard, in my head, is sort of the extreme of things. You get a lot of people who are really, really intense—I mean, almost to a neurotic extent." Harvard students who wished to be engineers described Stanford as an ideal campus—better than Harvard in its course offerings and also preferable to MIT which, as we describe in a later section was demoted for being too narrow. Harvard students tended to respect Stanford for offering a balance of amenities and academics.

Stanford students were less glowing about Harvard. Although they regarded it as a top school, as when Bailey—a white, upper-class sophomore—said, "Harvard, I guess, would be, I don't know, like the closest thing to Stanford, I guess"—complementarity to Stanford was often overshadowed by dimmer views. Stanford students tended to cite Harvard's reputation for having unhappy, highly competitive students. Whereas for Harvard students, Stanford stood apart as a unique institution for having a laid-back aura, Stanford students tended to lump Harvard together with other top East Coast schools for having fundamentally East Coast qualities.

Ultimately, Harvard and Stanford students recognized both schools for being academically rigorous and highly renowned. Stanford offered an easygoing image which, whether true or not, Harvard students appreciated from afar and to which Stanford students professed deep commitment. In both cases, however, interviewees felt they had made it to the top of the educational system and none had serious regrets about the school they attended. Students held up their well-rounded experience as ideal, and they were able to point to the various ways that other institutions failed to live up to this standard.

The Problem of Vocationalism

One of the strongest boundaries Harvard and Stanford students drew was between their own universities, which they thought encouraged students' exploration of their interests and passions, and other universities, which they considered to be too vocational or, in students' words, "preprofessional." Students valued a "well-rounded"

liberal arts education because it exposed them to different histories and perspectives. Izzy, a graduating senior at Stanford from a white upper-middle-class family, said that her campus "really supports undergraduates doing all types of things. . . . They support us to explore." Harvard junior Katherine, a white upper-class student, said similarly about her campus, "Here, everyone kind of wants something a little different, and there's plenty of opportunity for everyone to excel and do really well." Finding what interests you is an important component of an exceptional college experience, according to our interviewees.

Students thought such opportunities to explore were far superior to universities that were laser-focused on preparing students for the world of work. If a university was found to be preprofessional, it meant that "it was very isolated and there wasn't really a focus on anything else," as stated by Deb, a Harvard junior from a Chinese American, upper-class family. This negative assessment of career focus was particularly striking since Deb, herself, had participated in one of the student-run finance clubs throughout her years at Harvard, was on a path to take an investment banking job directly out of college, and planned to apply to an elite business school two years later and then return to Wall Street with her MBA in hand. Yet Deb, who was clearly preprofessional in her own right, was not alone in drawing the distinction between her path at Harvard and what she considered to be overly vocational pathways found at other top schools.

More frequently than any other school, the University of Pennsylvania—particularly its undergraduate program at the Wharton School of Business—fell on the wrong side of the liberal arts/preprofessional boundary. Harvard students who were considering finance or consulting jobs were particularly prone to condemn Penn for being preprofessional because they often faced withering criticism on their own campus for following this highly structured route out of school (Binder et al. 2016). Nathan, the recent alumnus of Harvard, singled out Wharton this way:

Wharton—don't get me wrong: Wharton's a very good school and very prestigious. If you want to do banking, it's a great place to go. But all the opportunities that are available to you at Wharton are also at Harvard, and I really question . . . not question but I would say I think that, I think people

who pursue just a[n undergraduate] business degree, it's like a signaling effect saying, "I don't value learning for learning's sake; I value education as a means to an end.

When pressed to say why this mattered to him, since he, too, ended up on the finance track, Nathan said, "*You* made a conscious decision to go to a[n undergraduate] business school, whereas *I* made a decision to get a liberal arts education that was less tailored and more open-ended."

Stanford students sounded much like their Harvard peers in criticizing the culture of careerism at other institutions. Billy, a freshman at Stanford from an upper-class, mixed-race background, said, "I'm not a big fan, well, of preprofessional education. And Penn is very preprofessional." Georgetown University also fell into the category of preprofessional, as when Stanford senior Olivia reflected on students she had met at her summer internship at a top investment firm: "The kids from Georgetown, I think they were really intense finance. They lived and breathed finance. So, like, getting into Goldman Sachs is probably the zenith of their career."

Although Penn and Georgetown helped Harvard and Stanford students construct a boundary separating their own "well-rounded, liberal arts education" from a preprofessional college career, a few of our interviewees painted their own schools with the same negative brush. Dino, a white, upper-class, recent graduate of Harvard, said that at his university, "You would see so many students going off into these kind of preset tracks . . . like consulting or I-banking, or trading. . . . It was following this linearity and this kind of security, or set course, on how you would get to your eventual career position." Stanford's Omar, a Latino male from the lowest socioeconomic quintile, criticized Stanford for a similar problem, albeit in a different occupational sector, saying, "This place is too conservative for me. And also, it's not as humanities-focused and philosophy-focused as I would have liked. . . . There's just too much emphasis on start-ups."

All of these students frowned upon too much preprofessionalism in college and, as we see in the last two comments, Harvard and Stanford were not immune from critique. Yet, when drawing this distinction, our interviewees argued for the higher status of their own universities compared with campuses that were strictly vocational.

Such "better than" comparisons allowed many students to have their cake and it eat, too: the boundary assuaged sneaking concerns that in some ways they were like every other vocationally minded student in private elite universities, but both during college and in the labor market after, they could argue that they were not.

The Overly Technical Campus

The problem of preprofessionalism was related to another boundary: universities that are too narrowly technical in their offerings. Students associated being overly technical with limiting their intellectual and social development—bad outcomes for aspiring elites. MIT was the main school that students demoted on this basis, despite getting nods of approval for attracting very smart students. Kevin, a Harvard senior from an upper-class background, was not the only person who thought this: "If you want like pure academic credentials, a Cal Tech or an MIT might objectively have a better student pool." Yet, brain power alone, associated with "technical schools," was not what Harvard and Stanford students were after. Being truly elite requires cultural competency beyond technical skill sets.

More Harvard students—particularly those interested in engineering but who had not gained entry to Stanford—talked about what was lacking at MIT. One critique we heard was that MIT was an academic grind in a way that Harvard was not—which favored going to Harvard. Louis, a senior from a mixed-race, upper-class family who was interested in engineering, told us, "I got into MIT and Harvard. That was a tough decision. My dad went to MIT and he said it was kind of rough. Very, very hard academically, very grueling . . . so he sort of pushed me away from that." Another critique focused on social narrowness at MIT, such as when Harvard's Foster—a junior from a white, upper-class family—said, "I think more than anything, what I've appreciated is having lots of friends that are not engineers. I feel like they really help to broaden my perspective, whereas if I went to MIT, the only people I would hang out with would be engineers." Varied social networks and opportunities for time away from intensive studying felt like a good fit.

Stanford, despite its reputation for being an engineering powerhouse, did not fall into the same "technical school" category as MIT for most students we interviewed. Students interested in engineering said that Stanford provided the best of both worlds, a world-class liberal arts education with a strong science program. If Harvard's Foster had gained admission to Stanford, he would have gone there rather than to Harvard or any "of the less well-known of the more technical schools that I got into." When the Stanford students we interviewed recalled being accepted to MIT, they were faced with minimal decision making: They picked Stanford. Thad, a white male from an upper-class, academic family, reported, "I had no idea what I wanted to major in. So I was really looking for colleges with widespread academic strengths because I thought there was a good chance I would be an engineer, but there was a good chance I would be humanities. . . . I applied to MIT because of my dad mostly, but it wasn't really my number-one choice."

There is discussion in both the scholarly literature and popular media (Rampell 2011) of how "careerist" students at elite universities such as Harvard and Stanford students have become. Yet, several of our interviewees who wanted to be engineers chose Harvard (a school with a less than stellar engineering reputation) over MIT, and students on the path to Wall Street disparaged the University of Pennsylvania—the school that leads most visibly to the banking sector. It mattered to students' sense of self that they could get a "well-rounded" education while pursuing prestigious careers; they did not gravitate toward their best vocational prospects, alone. In this sense, students' college assessments were not strictly "vocational"; they were also about shoring up symbolic status and an ontological sense of eliteness. Harvard and Stanford have the marquee names, which students can point to for the rest of their lives. As Rivera (2012) and Collins (1979) pointed out, elite careers are the result not merely of students' human capital acquisition but also of matching and credentialing via affiliation with prestigious institutions.

Harvard and Stanford students' boundary work did not stop at devaluing preprofessional or strictly technical education. They also had negative opinions about schools that overemphasize intellectualism or the social scene. Below, we provide details on how students further differentiated the truly top elite from the merely elite.

The Overly Academic Campus—Where Fun Goes to Die

Harvard and Stanford students believed that a small number of schools offered a more purely academic, or intellectual, climate than what they could find at their own university. As we saw above, some students pointed to MIT and the California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech) as campuses for students with the most impressive raw talent. However, the University of Chicago was the campus that students most frequently mentioned as representing a pure experience in intellectualism. Harvard's Kevin summed it up when he said, "Harvard kids are scared of the Chicago kids because the Chicago kids actually really are intellectuals and they really love learning (laughs)." By contrast, he said, "the Harvard kids are great at maximizing outcomes, . . . really good at playing the system, . . . building a more complete package." Other students also pointed to Chicago's intellectual preeminence. Edward, a Latino student at Harvard whose family is in the second lowest class quintile, remembered his campus visit when he was a prospective student: "The people I saw at U Chicago came out as very, very intellectual. . . . Within five minutes, someone was trying to talk to me about Kant and, sort of, philosophy."

If Chicago scored points as an academically superior campus, many interviewees simultaneously lowered its status for not offering a social experience that could benefit them. Stanford's Bailey recalled that when she was filling out applications, "University of Chicago: everyone was like, 'that's the place where fun goes to die,' . . . so I didn't even apply there." Bailey's interest in Chicago was piqued once she started classes at Stanford, saying, "Based on what my professors had mentioned, I think University of Chicago students, I think they have a really good humanities program, and I think . . . it would actually be a very good place intellectually." Nevertheless, while she now "admire[s] the education there, I don't think necessarily I would be happy with the social climate." Just as with McCabe's (2016) discussion of "balance" between academic and social life, students in our study sought to be successful both academically and socially.

The University of Chicago was an interesting institution that Harvard and Stanford interviewees used to sort out status differences. On one hand, participants understood that the University of Chicago offered a more classically rigorous curriculum than their own schools did. On the other hand, it was not good enough to attend. According to Stanford's Sara, an upper-middle-class Asian American graduating senior, Chicago is hardly a peer to the very top schools. "I wouldn't say it was—not to be arrogant or anything—but I don't think people generally perceive it at the same level."

A handful of students mentioned Yale as potentially offering a better academic experience than their own. Franklin, a white, upper-class rising senior, pointed out that some of his classmates had made him reconsider his choice of having gone to Harvard:

> I've heard a lot of good things lately about Yale, so I wonder if Yale would have given me a more fulfilling experience. . . . I mean, one thing about Harvard . . . is that a lot of kids are less focused on academics and more focused on how many extracurriculars they're in. . . . When you go to the dining hall, kids are talking about, I don't know, things that seem uninteresting to me: movies or gossip or whatever. So that's kind of disappointing to me just because I think there's a missed opportunity to have a great academic experience.

Nevertheless, for several students, Yale remained a second choice, as in the T-shirt Nathan mentioned, or when Harvard's Halton said, "I actually applied to Yale early option and was lucky enough to have gotten in." But he turned down the offer once "April came around and I had gotten into Harvard." Yale, in many ways, seemed to represent merely "an elite school"—as in, "Stanford, Yale, and Princeton," according to Habib, a middle class student—but for him, "Stanford resonated with me better."

The message here is that being uber-intellectual is noteworthy, but being at Harvard or Stanford is better—at least according to students attending Harvard or Stanford.

The Socially Distinct and Intense Country Club

Several interviewees noted that Princeton University offers an excellent undergraduate-centered curriculum that might rival Chicago's or Yale's

reputation for academic excellence. However, the feature of Princeton's that students mentioned most often, and more negatively, was its reputation for being a "country club"—an exclusive social scene that Harvard and Stanford students found disagreeable. Stanford's Bailey, the student who told us that the University of Chicago is where "fun goes to die," offered the opposite assessment of Princeton: "Princeton would be a great education, but the *social* scene just seems too intense." Going on, she noted that Princeton seems "like, pretty cut-throat. Princeton people are very intense. They study very hard, they play very hard, they have these eating clubs and like a very rigorous social order. That to me is, just, I can't deal with that. I had enough of that in private school." Princeton also scored poorly with Tamara, a first-generation, middle-class college student who had recently graduated from Stanford, who stated, "I guess from all the rumors from undergrad, Princeton—everybody drinks too much. . . . I don't know if staunch is the right word?—It's *stiff*."

Beyond being turned off by various forms of "intensity" at Princeton, both Harvard and Stanford students pointed to status elitism as the key factor contributing to their lower assessment of the campus. Harvard's Nathan compared his school with Princeton, stating, "I think it's definitely more socially elite than Harvard. I would say Harvard is probably more meritocratic." According to Stanford's Omar, "My impression of Princeton is that it's much more like class focused, and I mean class, like social class. . . . So people would, like, buy things that would clearly show how much money they had, whereas at Stanford you don't really do that."

Harvard and Stanford students emphasized that Princeton could not be as excellent as their own schools because it emphasized existing social orders and particularism, favoring old-line elites. Although a few students pointed a finger at their own schools for not valuing merit as much as they should—such as when Kevin said he "was surprised by the extent to which Harvard is still an old boys club rather than like truly the 1,600 best students in America"—most students used Princeton as the negative example compared with their own campus's greater diversity, which is a valuable feature of elite cosmopolitanism (Warikoo 2016).

The Other Side of Social: The Frat Party That Looks Too Much Like a "Typical College"

The same rivalry could not be said to exist with Duke University, whose reputation as a national elite institution really only began to rise in the 1980s, but since then has been a regular fixture in a variety of rankings. For most of our interviewees, Duke did not figure much into their consciousness, such as when Harvard upper-class senior Aiden said, "Really to be honest, other than like I know that they're good at soccer and we've had some overlap in the past of other things, but other than that I really don't know much about Duke." When students did have strong opinions about Duke, the most salient boundary was that it offered too much fun and sociability. But rather than being a country club like Princeton, Duke was perceived to be the home of fraternity parties and more "typical" college fun—a too-close cousin to big-sport public universities.

Although Harvard's Deb, the junior economics student, told us that she "applied to Duke and I got in," she added that, "I didn't visit" during admissions weekend. She admitted that "it sounds awesome; it sounds like a lot of fun. There's a lot of school spirit obviously, I mean . . . it's a very good balance of very good academics, but also good social life and things like that." But after going over its positives, Deb served up its negatives, "Like it's a very, I guess, typical school. It has a very big Greek life." Adding insult to injury, she added, "It's technically, like, a Southern school." The same imagery came through in Izzy's comments: "The frat scene, the Greek scene, seems big to me there. And the kind of Southern scene in terms of, I don't know, I'm feeling like I want to say more 'materialistic,' but I don't really know if that's true. Obviously good academics. Like more sporty, rah-rah. I don't know. I have no idea. I'm like spewing stereotypes."

Engaging in stereotypes was not a barrier for our interviewees, who acknowledged that much of what they knew about Duke and other schools could be based on faulty information. In fact, the accuracy of the information did not seem central to the boundary work. What mattered was that students could demarcate their school relative to others in the horizontal stratification system of elite higher education. Taken together, Princeton

and Duke represented the wrong side of the boundary in different ways than the University of Pennsylvania (which in its preprofessionalism was neither stodgy nor fratty), MIT (too "technical"), or Chicago or Yale (overly intellectual). Harvard and Stanford students used all of these schools to identify the sweet spot their university occupied: a well-rounded college experience that added to their sense of being elite.

The Ultimate Boundary: Universities That Don't Make the Cut

Finally, it is worth noting that some schools in *US News & World Report's* Top 10 received little comment. No one mentioned Johns Hopkins; Cornell was downgraded for being part Ivy and part state school; and only a few who were interested in banking mentioned Columbia University. World-renowned public universities, such as those in California or Michigan, were regarded as back-up schools to private elites. Harvard's Aiden, a California native, recalled his thought process: "If I don't get into Stanford, I'm not getting into those schools, so I'll go to Cal or UCLA."

Other students reported having eccentric love affairs with schools where they thought they could "have fun in college. Like, I wanted to apply to a very chill, not-so-competitive school where I can really have a good work-life balance, which maybe I didn't have in high school," recalled Stanford's Opal, a mixed-race, upper-middle-class STEM major. Her own peculiar crush was on Tufts. "It was my dream school for a long time. . . . Yeah, it's kind of weird. My parents of course were like, 'Oh no, we're paying all this money; you're going to go to the best school possible. Tufts is great, but Stanford is like one of the best in the world, you have to go.'" Interviewees did not view schools such as Tufts as actual options if they had better choices. For some, they were "safety" schools. For others, they were so far below the boundary of elite status that, although they were worth applying to, they were not worth considering seriously. Students had heard their whole lives about Harvard and Stanford, and these distinctions were continually reinforced by parents, peers on campus, and the outside world.

CONCLUSION

We found that when asked to tell us about the universities they had considered when applying to college, or whose students they had met during internships or other social experiences, Harvard and Stanford students drew highly convergent symbolic boundaries between the country's most prestigious universities. They attempted to do so generously, with many making an argument that "there's a great school for everyone." But they also provided critical and, often, cutting observations that distinguished their schools from others, thereby bolstering their own status.

Using excerpts from interviews to inductively build our case, we show what these symbolic boundaries look like, providing several dimensions of difference. We show that if a university screams "career preparation" or "technical training"—both of which limit undergraduates' access to liberal arts topics—then it fails to win truly elite status. The value of a university goes down if it is the home of intellectualism above all else, for such a campus cannot create the well-rounded, socially skilled person who interacts with a wide variety of people. An elite school loses cachet if it is connected to the old-world status system, since this is a sign that the university does not sufficiently appreciate individual merit or offer opportunities to learn from a diverse student body. Elite universities should provide platforms for socializing, but if a campus cannot be distinguished from "typical college" partying—much as one would see at a Big 10 school—then it is not a fit. Overall, a university should offer balance, have a marquee name gained through low admissions and historical reputation and, ideally these days, give the optics of being laid back. At least among our interviewees, Stanford University had captured the imaginations of Harvard and Stanford students on this last feature.

Why is this important? First, we demonstrate that students are not simply positioned by their parents or their universities to reproduce high status. Rather, students actively *do* status reproduction of their own through acts of cultural distinction or symbolic boundary-drawing. Second, we suggest that students' boundary-drawing is a consequence of the acute sense of anxiety they feel in today's highly competitive higher education

landscape. Raftery and Hout (1993) argued that in the face of educational "massification" following World War II, parents and students adopted a strategy of investing in ever more schooling to stay ahead in the labor market, resulting in what those authors called "maximally maintained inequality." Lucas (2001) and Alon (2009) argued that in the increasingly competitive higher education field that followed, higher-positioned parents and students gravitated toward more selective institutions, resulting in "effectively maintained inequality." With our concept of "symbolically maintained inequality," we reveal the cultural processes that Harvard and Stanford students use to maintain the privileged position they have gained from attending a school at the apex of prestige. Our project suggests that men and women, and students from all social class positions and racial-ethnic backgrounds—not just students from elite backgrounds—access the same symbolic boundaries offered by their schools. This means that a key offering at institutions like Harvard and Stanford is not merely preparing students to compete in the labor market, or making them more intellectual or more skilled, but also helping them build the sense of entitlement and confidence in occupying positions within elite social circles.

As Lamont and Molnar (2002) have written, people use symbolic boundaries as a cultural resource to help constitute their identities as belonging to a particular group. Having worked much of their young lives to earn a spot on one of these campuses, Harvard and Stanford students seek to shore up any doubt they may have about their place in the world by asserting that they have participated in something special, and they attempt to carry that privileged experience forward. As students, they enjoy the mark of high status through their association with a high-status university even within a set of super-elite campuses. The cultural work that goes into learning the boundaries of who is most like me and who is not is recursive.

We suggest that symbolically maintained inequality is not epiphenomenal but rather is a central part of how elite culture in the United States is developed and sustained. In terms of the life chances sociologists typically care about and measure, students' boundary work between elite universities may seem like little more than noise; such symbolically maintained distinctions may or may not ever lead to actual financial or occupational payoffs, relative to graduates of Princeton, Chicago, or other institutions. But in terms of upper-class formation and

reproduction, it may matter a lot. In fact, such cultural distinctions may be a hallmark of how elites throughout the life course now constantly discern status through higher education. Mullen (2010) showed how undergraduates at Yale thought a lot about self-fashioning in college in ways that mass-college students at nearby Southern Connecticut State University did not. Mullen's findings—demonstrating the active, questing, refining pursuits of students at elite institutions—suggest that the "who am I" project at the center of upper-class subjectivity may be a real driver of school selection at the very top in ways it is not further down.

In some respects, students' hierarchicalization among peer schools seems at odds with contemporary American elites' pattern of consumption for more widely available cultural objects, which is marked by an omnivorous disposition (Johnston and Baumann 2009; Peterson and Kern 1996). Appreciating both low-brow and high-brow music, or the humble meatloaf alongside haute cuisine, today situates elites as cosmopolitan, above others who prefer just one genre or who do not know how to elevate the common to the sublime. In contrast, when it comes to elite universities, a clear pecking order comes into view. When the stakes are very high (when a student's place in the class system seems to depend on it) and barriers to entry are extraordinarily steep (when less than 5 percent have a chance to be admitted), competition may create a personal sense of honor and status that leads to snobbishness about one's school over eclecticism for all others. It is one thing to appreciate a wide variety of music to display one's cosmopolitanism. It is quite another thing to grant equal status to other colleges, even those within the same tier.

While prevalent in the United States, this form of status distinction is not universal. Nations that have flatter, less horizontally stratified systems of higher education, such as Germany or Canada, likely do not produce such acute boundary-drawing between institutions. In Canada, Davies and Hammack (2005) showed that elite status comparison was likelier to come in the form of selection of major, not institutional origin. This means that our findings from Harvard and Stanford are organizationally contingent: We should expect variation in how elites construct themselves with the tools available in different educational systems. Our findings are also historically specific: Although we suspect that centuries-old rivalries have always called forth invidious comparisons among students at Harvard, Princeton,

and Yale, the particular themes we have discovered are attuned to today's social class anxieties about vocationalism, cosmopolitanism, and so on.

As we have noted, our research is limited because we interviewed only Harvard and Stanford students, and it is unlikely that students at Yale or Duke would use precisely the same parameters of judgment to lump and split elite institutions (Zerubavel 1991). Future researchers could do a more comprehensive study, using interviews at additional universities or—using a computational approach—analyzing a large number of college newspapers, websites, alumni magazines, and other digital sources for students' perceptions of prestige. Longitudinal qualitative interviews with alumni several years after graduation would be useful for seeing how graduates have, or have not, maintained these cultural distinctions and whether they have resulted in forms of social closure.

Our findings also may be limited due to initial recruitment through professional clubs, which only the most competitive or status-conscious students may join; perhaps the members of our sample draw more salient boundaries than do their classmates. We also do not differentiate students' boundary-drawing by class background, race, gender, or type of high school attended (private, boarding, public) although, as we demonstrate, historically underrepresented students, by class and race, engaged in boundary-drawing alongside everyone else. With a larger sample or different methods, it may be possible for future researchers to get greater leverage on how status boundary-making works for students with different background experiences. For the time being, however, we have put another mechanism of status distinction on the mental map of higher education researchers. Engaging in symbolically maintained inequality, elite students do their own cultural work to separate themselves from close-peer competitors.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Our research protocol was reviewed and approved by the University of California-San Diego institutional review board. All human subjects gave their informed consent prior to their participation in the research, and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTES

1. Although one may wonder whether recent graduates differ from current students in their perceptions of other universities—whether because of more exposure to fellow elite graduates in the labor market or because they look back on their alma mater with nostalgia—we did not see significant differences in the opinions of students and recent graduates. This is likely because current students have considerable contact with peers at other colleges in a variety of settings: through summer jobs, high school friends, study abroad, fellowships, and so on. It is true that if graduates are employed in a high-prestige occupation in a large firm, they are likely to have more contact with alumni and alumnae from other schools. However, we did not discern that these early career students were any more impressed (or unimpressed) with other schools than the current students.

2. We have a total of 38 data excerpts in our Findings section, having quoted 26 separate individuals in this article (out of a total sample of 56)—some of them twice—to build our argument. This does not mean that the other 30 students had nothing to say about the topics at hand; rather, we used quotations that are best suited to show the patterns in our data. This is a classic strategy for inductively analyzing qualitative research.

   Of the 26 interviewees whose quotations appear in this article:

   • 8 (or 31 percent of our total quoted students) are middle-class, second-lowest-class, or working-class/poor students, whereas 18 (or 70 percent of our total quoted students) are upper-middle-class and upper-class students. This compares well with the institutional data from both Harvard and Stanford presented in Table 1, where 67 percent and 66 percent of students, respectively, come from homes in the top quintile of the social class structure.
   • 11 (or 42 percent of our total quoted students) are women and 15 (or 58 percent of our quoted students) are men. This underrepresents the proportion of women at these schools (see Table 1).
   • We quoted 14 white (56 percent), 6 Asian or Asian American (23 percent), 3 Latino (12 percent), and 3 mixed-race (12 percent) students or recent graduates. Compared with the institutional data in Table 1, our interview

data overrepresent white students, provide a reasonable approximation of Asian, Latino, and mixed-race students, and underrepresent African American students at the two schools.

3. In addition to receiving IRB approval from University of California-San Diego, we consulted IRB officers at both Harvard and Stanford. On neither campus did officers require additional approval beyond our institution's IRB.
4. Nathan and all other names are pseudonyms. We have changed some details to protect confidentiality.
5. Majors are called *concentrations* at Harvard.

REFERENCES

Aisch, Gregor, Larry Buchanan, Amanda Cox, and Kevin Quealy. 2017. "Some Colleges Have More Students from the Top 1 Percent Than the Bottom 60. Find Yours." *New York Times*, January 18. Retrieved March 22, 2017 (https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/projects/college-mobility/harvard-university).

Alon, Sigal. 2009. "The Evolution of Class Inequality in Higher Education: Competition, Exclusion, and Adaptation." *American Sociological Review* 74(5): 731–55.

Anderson, Nick. 2016. "Applied to Stanford or Harvard? You Probably Didn't Get In." *Washington Post*, April 1. Retrieved September 19, 2017 (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/04/01/applied-to-stanford-or-harvard-you-probably-didnt-get-in-admit-rates-drop-again/?utm_term=.ef75f57d9f4a).

Armstrong, Elizabeth, and Laura Hamilton. 2013. *Paying for the Party: How College Maintains Inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Auletta, Ken. 2012. "Get Rich U." *The New Yorker*, April 30. Retrieved September 18, 2017 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/04/30/get-rich-u).

Beisel, Nicola. 1998. *Imperiled Innocents: Anthony Comstock and Family Reproduction in Victorian America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Binder, Amy, and Kate Wood. 2013. *Becoming Right: How Campuses Shape Young Conservatives*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Binder, Amy, Daniel Davis, and Nick Bloom. 2016. "Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire 'Prestigious' Jobs." *Sociology of Education* 89(1):20–39.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Jean-Claude Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bowen, William, and Derek Bok. 1998. *The Shape of the River: Long-Term Consequences of Considering Race in College and University Admissions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Brooks, David. 2001. "The Organization Kid." *Atlantic Monthly*, April. Retrieved April 21, 2017 (https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2001/04/the-organization-kid/302164/).

Byun, Soo-yong, and Hyunjoon Park. 2012. "The Academic Success of East Asian American Youth: The Role of Shadow Education." *Sociology of Education* 85(1):40–60.

Calarco, Jessica McCrory. 2014. "Coached for the Classroom: Parents' Cultural Transmission and Children's Reproduction of Educational Inequalities." *American Sociological Review* 79(5):1015–37.

Casselman, Ben. 2016. "Shut Up about Harvard: A Focus on Elite Schools Ignores the Issues Most College Students Face." *FiveThirtyEight*, March 30. Retrieved August 27, 2017 (https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/shut-up-about-harvard/).

Chetty, Raj, John Friedman, Emmanuel Saez, Nicholas Turner, and Danny Yagan. "Mobility Report Cards: The Role of Colleges in Intergenerational Mobility." *The Equal of Opportunity Project*. Retrieved May 9, 2017 (http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/papers/coll_mrc_paper.pdf).

Ciocca Eller, Christina. 2017. "Curricular Diversity and Intensity: The Role of Detailed Postsecondary Curriculum in Social Stratification." Department of Sociology, Columbia University, New York. Unpublished manuscript.

Collins, Randall. 1979. *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. Cambridge, MA: Academic Press.

Cookson, Peter, and Caroline Hodges Persell. 1985. *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools*. New York: Basic Books.

Cucchiara, Maia. 2008. "Re-branding Urban Schools: Urban Revitalization, Social Status, and Marketing Public Schools to the Upper Middle Class." *Journal of Education Policy* 23(2):165–79.

Davies, Scott, and Floyd Hammack. 2005. "The Channeling of Student Competition in Higher Education: Comparing Canada and the U.S." *Journal of Higher Education* 76(1):89–106.

Davies, Scott, and David Zarifa. 2012. "The Stratification of Universities: Structural Inequality in Canada and the United States." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 30(2):143–58.

Deresiewicz, William. 2014. *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

DiMaggio, Paul, and John Mohr. 1996. "The Intergenerational Transmission of Cultural Capital." Pp. 167–99 in *Research on Social Stratification and Mobility* edited by M. Wallace. Greenwich: JAI Press.

Espeland, Wendy, and Michael Sauder. 2016. *Engines of Inequality: Academic Ranking, Reputation, and Accountability*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Espeland, Wendy, and Mitchell Stevens. 1998. "Commensuration as a Social Process." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24:13–343.

Espenshade, Thomas, and Alexandra Radford. 2009. *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Frank, Robert, and Phillip Cook. 1995. *The Winner-take-all Society: Why the Few at the Top Get So Much More Than the Rest of Us*. New York: Free Press.

Friedman, Jonathan. 2017. "The Global Citizenship Agenda and the Generation of Cosmopolitan Capital in British Higher Education." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39(4):436-450.

Gaztambidé-Fernández, Ruben. 2009. *The Best of the Best*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gerber, Theodore, and Sin Yi Cheung. 2008. "Horizontal Stratification in Postsecondary Education: Forms, Explanations, and Implications." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:299–318.

Gumport, Patricia, Maria Iannozzi, Susan Shaman, and Robert Zemsky. *Trends in United States Higher Education from Massification to Post Massification*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1997.

Hamilton, Laura. 2016. *Parenting to a Degree: How Family Matters for College Women's Success*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hamilton, Laura, Josipa Roksa, and Kelly Nielsen. 2018. "Providing a 'Leg Up': Parental Involvement and Opportunity Hoarding in College." *Sociology of Education* 91(2):111–32.

Jack, Anthony. 2016. "(No) Harm in Asking: Class, Acquired Cultural Capital, and Academic Engagement at an Elite University." *Sociology of Education* 89(1):1–19.

Johnston, Josee, and Shyon Baumann. 2009. *Foodies: Democracy and Distinction in the Gourmet Foodscape*. New York: Routledge.

Karabel, Jerome. 2005. *The Chosen*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Khan, Shamus. 2011. *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Khan, Shamus. 2012. "The Sociology of Elites." *Annual Review of Sociology* 38:361–77.

Labaree, David. 2012. *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-sum Game of Public Schooling*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lamont, Michele. 1992. *Money, Morals, and Manners: The Culture of the French and the American Upper-middle Class*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lamont, Michele. 2012. *How Professors Think*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lamont, Michele, and Virag Molnár. 2002. "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28:167–95.

Lamont, Michele, Stefan Beljean, and Matthew Clair. 2014. "What Is Missing? Cultural Processes and Causal Pathways to Inequality." *Socio-Economic Review* 12(3):573–608.

Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: The Importance of Social Class in Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Lifschitz, Arik, Michael Sauder, and Mitchell Stevens. 2014. "Football as a Status System in U.S. Higher Education." *Sociology of Education* 87(3):204–19.

Lucas, Samuel. 2001. "Effectively Maintained Inequality: Education Transitions, Track Mobility, and Social Background Effects." *American Journal of Sociology* 106(6):1642–90.

Massey, Douglas, Camille Charles, Garvey Lundy, and Mary Fischer. 2003. *The Source of the River: The Social Origins of Freshmen at America's Selective Colleges and Universities*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

McCabe, Janice. 2016. *Connecting in College: How Friendship Networks Matter for Academic and Social Success*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mullen, Ann. 2010. *Degrees of Inequality Culture, Class, and Gender in American Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Otterman, Sharon. 2009. "Tips for the Admissions Test . . . to Kindergarten." *New York Times*, November 20. Retrieved May 15, 2017 (http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/21/nyregion/21testprep.html).

Pérez-Peña, Richard. 2014. "Best, Brightest and Rejected: Elite Colleges Turn Away up to 95%." *New York Times*, April 8. Retrieved May 15, 2017 (https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/09/us/led-by-stanfords-5-top-colleges-acceptance-rates-hit-new-lows.html).

Peterson, Richard, and Roger Kern. 1996. "Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore." *American Sociological Review* 61(5):900–7.

Pikkety, Thomas. 2013. *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Raftery, Adrian, and Michael Hout. 1993. "Maximally Maintained Inequality: Expansion, Reform, and Opportunity in Irish Education 1921–75." *Sociology of Education* 66(1):41–62.

Rampell, Catherine. 2011. Out of Harvard and into Finance,'' *New York Times*, December 21. Retrieved May 10, 2017 (https://economix.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/21/out-of-harvard-and-into-finance/).

Reardon, Sean, and Kendra Bischoff. 2011. "Income Inequality and Income Segregation." *American Journal of Sociology* 116(4):1092–153.

Reardon, Sean. 2013. "The Widening Income Achievement Gap." *Educational Leadership* 70(8):10–6.

Rivera, Lauren. 2012. "Hiring as Cultural Matching: The Case of Elite Professional Service Firms." *American Sociological Review* 77(6):999–1022.

Rivera, Lauren. 2015. *Pedigree: Elite Reproduction in Hiring*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sims, Christo. 2017. *Disruptive Fixation: School Reform and the Pitfalls of Techno-Idealism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Stevens, Mitchell. 2009. *Creating a Class*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Stevens, Mitchell, Elizabeth Armstrong, and Richard Arum. 2008. "Sieve, Incubator, Temple, Hub: Empirical and Theoretical Advances in the Sociology of Higher Education." *Annual Review of Sociology* 34:127–51.

Warikoo, Natasha. 2016. *The Diversity Bargain and Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Zerubavel, Eviatar. 1991. *The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Author Biographies

Amy J. Binder is a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of California-San Diego.

Andrea R. Abel is a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of California-San Diego.