chapter one

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."[1] 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.[2]

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.[3]

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.[4] 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.

At their admissions front doors, elite liberal arts schools are expected to be individualistic and universalistic simultaneously. This is why it seemed to me that an admissions office would be a good site for examining what happens when these two ideals are brought together routinely, with what advantages and costs to applicants and schools.

An additional thing that had long intrigued me about liberal arts colleges is that they are quintessentially American institutions. The liberal arts organizational ideal—of a small, residential campus, geared primarily, if not exclusively, to highly individualized undergraduate instruction—was invented and nurtured in the United States, and in stark contrast to our model of research universities, it has not traveled beyond national borders. One looks almost in vain for schools built on the liberal arts model anywhere else in the world. I began my inquiry suspecting that the national peculiarity of the liberal arts form might hold some larger lessons about culture, schooling, and social class in America. This book is my effort to work out those lessons. In the following pages I briefly sketch the scholarly traditions that inform my effort, as well as the overarching themes of this book. I also provide a tour of the office that was the setting for my fieldwork.

College and Class

College educations are now crucial components of our national class structure. Most people presume that a college degree is a prerequisite for a financially comfortable adulthood, and a large corpus of sociological research on the relationship between educational attainment and life chances largely confirms the conventional wisdom.[5] Attainment of the relatively secure, well-compensated jobs held by the affluent upper middle class virtually requires a college education. Those without college degrees increasingly are relegated to less lucrative and less stable work. But even though there is wide

agreement about the economic importance of college, there has been enduring controversy on the question of why educational attainment has come to play its now-pivotal role in the American class system.

One answer, often called the *reproduction* thesis, holds that variation in educational attainment essentially is a coating for preexisting class inequalities. The reproduction thesis was built from Karl Marx's insights about how powerful groups inevitably create social and cultural systems that legitimate their own class advantage. From this perspective college degrees, and the classroom time and schoolwork they represent, provide palatable justification for the tendency of privileged families to hand privilege down to their children. Adherents of the reproduction thesis support their argument by pointing out the obdurate correlation between parents' socioeconomic status and their offspring's school completion in general.[6] And of the Horatio Algers who do not fit this general pattern—the high academic achievers who graduate from prestigious colleges and go on to positions of wealth and influence, despite the odds—reproduction theorists explain that the exceptions are important in giving the education system its veneer of class neutrality. It is important for public acceptance of the whole enterprise that at least some of the less advantaged can make schooling work for them.

A second answer, which we might call the *transformation* thesis, makes different sense of the very same correlation between family privilege and educational attainment. This thesis argues that the replacement of traditional social hierarchies with educational ones is a definitive chapter in every society's progress toward modernity. German sociologist Max Weber, the first proponent of the transformation thesis, famously argued that as societies modernized, inequalities of family, caste, and tribe gradually give way to hierarchies predicated on individual achievement. In modern times individuals accumulate status and power as they move through the elabo-

rate bureaucracies that characterize all industrial societies: large corporations, centralized governments, highly bureaucratized religious organizations, and schools. These forms of organization tend to distribute rewards on the basis of demonstrated individual accomplishment, not inherited privilege.[7] The transformation thesis would have us see that the ultimate value of college degrees lies in their capacity to confer advantages independently of their recipients' social backgrounds. If the correlation between parents' privilege and children's educational attainment were exact—if accomplishment in school neatly paralleled class origins—then schooling would not be so coveted by people from humble backgrounds. As it is, education is broadly perceived by people from all social classes as an effective mechanism of social mobility, because it *is* capable of moving people up, and down, the class hierarchy.

During the 1960s and 1970s, social scientists became adept at assessing these ideas empirically, using statistical techniques to model the relationships between family background, educational attainment, and individual prosperity over the life course. Exploiting a growing cache of numerical data sets and ongoing advances in computer technology, researchers such as Peter Blau, Otis Dudley Duncan, and Christopher Jencks developed a rich tradition of empirical scholarship about the role of schooling in mediating social inequality. Although work in this tradition is vast and diverse, two of its findings have been remarkably consistent: formal schooling does indeed have independent effects on individual life chances, and, at the same time, parents tend to use formal education as a primary means of handing privilege down to their children. Educational transformation and educational reproduction, in other words, go hand in hand.[8]

In a series of influential writings in the 1970s, sociologist Randall Collins deftly integrated the two theses, creating a term so pithy and evocative that it has shaped public and scholarly conversations

about college ever since. Collins argued that the reproduction theorists were correct: the terms of social privilege are deeply contested in every modern society, and the haves perennially seek to translate their advantages into forms that render them legitimate in the eyes of have-nots. But he added that the transformation thesis also is true: privileged groups create educational institutions that have considerable independence from the people who pay for them. Schools function as quasi-autonomous third parties between haves who support them and have-nots. The academically accomplished kids who attend Harvard or Stanford on full scholarships, and the tuition-paying rich kids who flunk out of the same schools, are living embodiments of this institutional autonomy. Collins described this system of educational legitimation as *credentialism,* and the educationally stratified world it engendered *the credential society.*[9]

During the same decades that social scientists were developing this line of inquiry, the U.S. federal and state governments were actively building the largest higher education infrastructure in world history. Part of the justification for this expansion had to do with the more optimistic of social scientists' findings on education and individual life outcomes. If people's employment and earnings prospects were measurably improved through postsecondary schooling, the policy reasoning went, then a virtuous government would be right to expand opportunities for college attendance. In the decades following World War II, the U.S. state and federal governments did precisely that. Between 1945 and 1980 they dramatically grew the size and mission of public research universities, provided many millions of dollars in student grant and loan programs, and elaborately subsidized a whole tier of institutions—community colleges—to provide truly mass higher education opportunity.[10]

The United States was so successful at increasing the ranks of college graduates that as early as the mid-1970s social scientists were talking about "credential inflation"—the diminution of the value of

college degrees in a labor market that was being flooded with them. As with credentialing before it, the credential inflation idea caught on quickly with the general public. It helped people articulate their sense that a mere college degree might not be sufficient for the attainment of upper-middle-class comforts. Many came to presume that the optimal educational choices were to earn additional credentials in graduate school or to seek especially prestigious and supposedly more valuable undergraduate degrees.[11] This is the most prominent explanation for the recent growth of demand for seats at colleges with nationally recognized names.

Worries about credential inflation notwithstanding, policy makers and the general public have conceived of college so optimistically for so long that pointing out the very limited extent to which expanded college access has changed the distribution of privilege in this country remains an unpopular thing to do. Nevertheless it is true: higher education has not been the great American equalizer. To be sure, there are proportionally more college graduates in this country than in any previous era, but, with only a few exceptions, the overall distribution of educational attainment remains stubbornly correlated with socioeconomic background.[12]

This does not mean, however, that the expansion of higher education has been without consequence for the character of the national class system. My research suggests that one profound result of higher education's expansion has been the entrenchment of a complicated, publicly palatable, and elaborately costly machinery through which wealthy parents hand privilege down to their children. My intention in this book is to reveal this machinery and explain how it organizes American society more generally.

The pursuit of college credentials is the widest and most dependable path to the good life that American society currently provides, and the terms of college admission have become the instructions

families use when figuring out how to ensure their own children's future prosperity. The rise of the credential society has been accompanied by a value system in which the terms of college admission are also the goals of ideal child rearing and the standards of youthful accomplishment in American popular culture. These goals and standards are most explicitly depicted in the attributes elite colleges say they are looking for in applicants: measurable academic and athletic ability, demonstrated artistic accomplishment, and formally recognized philanthropic service.

Affluent families have a big advantage in meeting these goals and standards because they have relatively more resources to invest in doing so. Keenly aware of the terms of elite college admission, privileged parents do everything in their power to make their children into ideal applicants. They pay for academically excellent high schools. They shower their children with books and field trips and lots of adult attention. They nurture athletic talent through myriad youth sports programs. They encourage and fund early glimmers of artistic interest. They channel kids with empathic hearts toward exotic and traceable forms of humanitarian service. In the process of doing all of this, affluent families fashion an entire way of life organized around the production of measurable virtue in children.

On this line of thinking, the ever more frenzied activity surrounding selective admissions in the nation's most comfortable neighborhoods and school districts is essentially ceremonial. By the time upper-middle-class seventeen-year-olds sit down to write their applications, most of the race to top colleges has already been run and they already enjoy comfortable leads. For these kids the big question is not whether they will be admitted to an elite institution, but which particular schools will offer them spots. Nevertheless the intense final lap of the admissions race has profound importance as a ritual of just deserts. The simple fact that precise outcomes remain

uncertain for everyone up to the very end serves to assure us that admission prizes are never won without persistence, steady wits, and hard work.

Status Counts and Status Rivals

How do all of the families with children in this race know just which colleges carry the most prestige? This is the puzzle to which much of my own inquiry attends, in large measure because the scholarly literature is virtually bereft of solutions. Rather than try to figure out what makes some schools more prestigious than others, social scientists typically rely on demand as prestige's proxy: the more people who apply to go there despite very low odds of admission, the more elite a school must be.[13] But remarkably, just where extraordinary desirability comes from is almost never directly considered.[14] Instead social scientists have relied on a tautology: the more people want to be admitted to a place, the more elite its diploma.

I will show that there is wisdom in this tautology, as long as we perceive of admissions statistics not as proxies of status but as status itself. In the absence of any definitive authority to decree which colleges and universities in America were to be the best, educators themselves worked out, over the course of the twentieth century, two systems of calibrating their status relative to one another. One system is admissions statistics. The measure of an institution's prestige has come to be defined, in part, by the proportion of each year's applicants it turns away. I take up this argument in detail in Chapters 2 and 3. Perhaps because status by numbers seemed too coldly calculative, perhaps because Americans have always been a little skeptical about academics and their ivory towers, educators also worked out a second system to mark institutional status: intercollegiate athletics. This system works much like the pecking orders that

develop in school lunchrooms and playgrounds, in which children's popularity is marked by the company they keep. As I will explain in more detail in Chapter 4, in U.S. higher education the prestige of any one school is determined in part by the prestige of the other schools it meets on its playing fields.

The importance of undergraduate admissions selectivity and intercollegiate athletics to institutional status goes far in explaining why colleges and universities care so much about these aspects of organizational life. Admissions and sports are not mere adjuncts to the main business of U.S. higher education. They are integral parts of the whole enterprise.

Physical Education

One of the many revealing documents in the College's archive is a survey report from the late 1930s titled "A Study of the Reasons Given by 145 Members of the Freshman Class for Their Coming to the College." It is impossible to know the degree of rigor with which this survey was carried out, but its figures tell an evocative story. The survey appears to have given respondents a choice of some sixty factors that may have influenced their decision to attend the school. The list ranges widely, from "Academic reputation" to "Fraternity connections" and "Infirmary care." The single most frequently cited reason for attending is an item under the category "Physical Aspects": *Attraction of the campus* garners 67 mentions, a virtual tie with *General advantages of small college* and *Academic reputation.* Little wonder, then, that a document titled "Tentative Publicity Program," filed alongside the survey results, includes *Beauty of the campus* high on its list of recommended emphases.

This beauty is an asset that the College carefully maintains and actively promotes. Many of the facilities put up in recent years pay homage to the structures surrounding the oldest central quadran-

gles. As if in defiance of cost, stone facades and slate roofs adorn even some of the newest and largest buildings. Tidy footpaths, immunized to mud by an intricate terra cotta drainage system, lace through terraced gardens so beguiling that they are favored sites for wedding photographers. Otherwise quiet summer afternoons rumble with the din of motorized maintenance as physical plant workers aerate, mow, and fertilize many acres of lawns. In a custom shared by many of its similarly spectacular peer institutions, the College annually produces a full-color calendar of the most favored campus views and distributes it free to the institution's many alumni and friends.

Yet despite the great care and pride with which colleges attend to their physical appearance, sociologists of education have almost entirely ignored campus aesthetics. It is as if we have presumed that the job of conferring credentials is the most, or even the only, important work elite schools do. This blindness to aesthetics is part of a larger myopia in the sociology of education, and in the scholarly literature on stratification more broadly, about the sensual aspects of class. While we have become ever more sophisticated in our appreciation of how educational credentialing works, we have given ever less attention to the myriad ways in which schools produce a whole range of social values: intellectual, physical, aesthetic, and emotional.

Insights of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu provide a useful corrective to American sociologists' narrow focus on credentials as the primary produce of schools. Bourdieu argued that social class is about much more than where people fall in a society's distribution of wealth. It also entails particular patterns of aesthetic production, consumption, and sensual experience. What a society calls beautiful, for example, and what it makes beautiful in turn, are every bit as important to marking class distinctions as wealth and credentials are. On this line of thinking, it is no accident that in the schools to

which they send their children, as much as in the neighborhoods they live in and the museums they patronize, the upper classes in every society go to great lengths to define what is beautiful and then surround themselves with the material embodiments of those definitions.[15]

On this line of thinking about class distinction, the physical appearance of human bodies matters as much as that of the physical worlds those bodies inhabit. Aspects of our corporeal bodies—how we carry them through space and attend to their shape, adornment, and longevity—also are important ways through which we mark class differences. Because bodies are such visible and consequential embodiments of class, parents go to great lengths to maintain and improve their children's physical health and appearance: through clothing, diet, and personal hygiene, and, significantly for purposes here, through sport and exercise. This, I will argue, is how the institutional status interests supporting college athletics and the class interests of families come together. The rigors of team athletics serve to maintain inter-organizational status clubs and, at the same time, to develop physically impressive men and women.

Hard Choices

Because social scientists have so long been interested in the role of schooling in social stratification, they have developed a large body of knowledge about those factors that, in the aggregate, predict admission to and graduation from elite schools. We know that admission to elite schools is highly correlated with parents' socioeconomic standing—in large measure because affluent parents translate their privilege into educational opportunities, which in turn produce the academic achievement rewarded by selective colleges. We know also that wealthy parents invest heavily in the extracurricular enrichments through which extraordinary athletic and artistic talents are

developed. Considerable evidence makes it clear that athletic talent, especially, is systematically rewarded by selective college admissions offices. We know that elite schools systematically favor applicants who are children of their own alumni—presumably because these so-called "legacy" admissions will curry favor with alumni and make them more generous donors to their alma mater. And we know that since the 1970s, selective colleges have given systematic preference to members of certain minority groups—presumably in response to public demands for the racial integration of elite higher education in the wake of the civil rights movement.[16] Yet for all of the quantitative evidence social scientists have amassed about who in general is admitted to elite schools, we know very little about how admissions officers go about the business of making decisions.[17] Even though we know that selective colleges favor the academically and athletically accomplished, the children of alumni, and members of particular racial groups, we have relied almost entirely on inference to explain how *particular* decisions are made. To wit: we have not looked carefully at how admissions officers know what they do about applicants, how they organize and make sense of that information and assess its validity, and how they adjudicate between what might be regarded as competing attributes of applications. We know almost nothing about how officers balance incentives to reward high academic accomplishment, athletic skill, legacy or minority status, and the ability to pay full tuition. We have not looked carefully at the many exigencies faced by real admissions officers in their day-to-day work, or at the strategies officers have devised to manage these exigencies.

Sociologists have learned a lot about how decisions are made in complex organizations generally, however. We know that for any consequential choice, evaluative authority tends to be dispersed among multiple parties. We know about the difficulties inherent in getting all of the relevant parties to a decision onto the same page or

even into the same room at the same time. We know that the amount and kind of information available to decision makers is crucial to what decisions ultimately get made.[18] I here put these insights into the service of understanding elite college access in particular, and the organization of elite schooling in America more broadly.

Oft-repeated wisdom in admissions circles is that officers do not evaluate applicants; they evaluate applications. The distinction is important. Officers may never meet the people represented in the files. Instead they assess what they call the "admissibility" of applicants on the basis of the information at their disposal: test scores and grade point averages; the academic profile of the sending high school; the content and detail of recommendation letters; assessments of athletic talent logged by college coaches; standardized assessments of financial need. Assembling a strong application file is a crucial step in any bid for admission to an elite college, because decisions often are made exclusively on the basis of the information inside the file.

However, as I will explain in detail, the ability to assemble a strong application is not evenly distributed across the population. Those without an inkling of how decisions are made by admissions officers are at a distinct disadvantage. Those who do have such inklings develop them at various points in their or their children's academic careers. If one gets wise to the system only when the student in question is a junior in high school, it is too late to remake choices that could have been made to better advantage years before. Even if parents are wise to the system on the day their children are born, their knowledge is of little consequence if it is not matched by the resources required to put it into practice: the means to live in a community with excellent schools, expert college guidance, and a student culture with a forward orientation toward college; the time and cash to invest in after-school sports leagues, summer music camps, private tutors, and horizon-expanding travel.

The fact that elite colleges make admissions decisions primarily on the basis of applicants' documented accomplishments is a triumph of meritocracy. The days when old-school connections were enough to get through the doors of top schools, and when dark skin or a Jewish surname were enough to be excluded, are over. In their place has arisen an information-based evaluative regime that nevertheless systematically favors the wealthy, well educated, and well connected. The mechanisms of preference have changed. Measurable accomplishment is the baseline criterion selective colleges now use to sort applications. But in general, only the relatively wealthy are able to afford the infrastructure necessary to produce that accomplishment in their children. Upper-middle-class Americans have responded to the triumph of educational meritocracy by creating a whole new way of life organized around the production of measurably talented children and the delivery of news about kids to the right places at the right times. This system is expensive and time-consuming. Consequently, the distribution of elite college acceptance letters is as skewed by class as it has always been.

That admissions statistics and athletic competitions are primary mechanisms of status differentiation in our national higher education system; that elite colleges are sensual and emotional organizations as much as academic ones; and that the machinery producing the talent and information now demanded by elite colleges is elemental to the class structure of American society—all are rather large arguments for a small book about a small school. My goal in making them is to suggest new solutions to enduring puzzles about schooling and inequality in the United States. The importance of those puzzles makes them worth a reach.

The Study and Its Setting

I studied this particular school in part because I believed that the College's position in the firmament of U.S. higher education would

make lessons learned there especially revealing. The College is not the most elite school of its kind. It is highly selective—far less than half of its applicants are offered admission each year. However, the College admits a larger proportion of applicants than the most prestigious private institutions in the country. The College's position near, but not at, the top of the institutional status hierarchy probably makes it even more sensitive to the pecking order than schools at the very top. As the member of any club well knows, provisional members are especially attentive to terms of admission. I suspected that the College was a good place to study selective admissions because, unlike its most prestigious peers, it does not have the luxury of making or breaking the rules.[19]

It was my great good fortune to find an admissions office whose people were willing to welcome a long-term visitor with a long list of questions. Their generosity introduced me to a whole world of the academy about which, despite many years as a student and professor, I knew virtually nothing. In a busy office I tried to make myself useful, figuring I would get in the way less often if I kept moving and that I would learn more about the work by actually doing some of it. I tried to say yes whenever I was offered a task: making coffee, helping out during parent receptions, interviewing applicants, proofreading drafts of admissions literature, shoveling snow. As I developed a track record on smaller jobs, people gradually offered me larger ones. In time I was monitoring part of the College's Web presence, conducting information sessions for visiting families, drafting promotional literature, reading applications, and, eventually, going off-campus on my own to recruit for the College. I did my best to record in written fieldnotes all of what I saw and heard and did. My hundreds of pages of typewritten notes are the evidentiary spine of this book.

To fill out my research I interviewed athletics coaches and human resources personnel at the College, as well as guidance counselors, admissions officers, and admissions consultants elsewhere. I also as-

sembled a large archive of memos, forms, statistical reports, and promotional literature generated by the College's various offices. Finally, I made multiple visits to the College's own archive, housed in its library, in an effort to place my contemporary findings in the context of the school's history.

My status as a researcher was always explicit. I made it a habit to tell people I encountered at the College, and on the road, about my two hats: that I was working for the admissions office but that I also was a sociologist and a college professor—a professional student of the admissions process. I was pleasantly surprised to encounter virtually no skepticism about my dual role. If anything, I was humbled that most high school guidance counselors, parents, and prospective students seemed not to much care much about my status as an academic and tended to get on with their own business pretty quickly. Of course I was not a "real" admissions officer, and because of that I consistently was careful to refrain from contributing to final admissions decisions. This was fairly easy to do. My own opinion about particular applicants was only occasionally, and usually ceremonially, solicited. I suspect this was one of the ways that officers reminded themselves that, however routine my presence may have become, I ultimately was a guest on their terrain.

I have concealed the identities of the people of the institution I studied and given pseudonyms to all of the people and most of the organizations that appear in this book. Especially telling details about the school where I did my fieldwork, such as its size, the number of faculty, and the most telling admissions statistics are either not reported or slightly altered to protect institutional anonymity. I have blurred identities in this way for two reasons. First, the College exists in an exquisitely competitive organizational world in which institutional identity and status are gauged largely by numbers, and in which admissions offices routinely vie with their peers for the affections of the very same applicants. It has not been my intention to write an exposé on the practices of one particular college,

and I am eager to protect the well-earned integrity of the school I studied. Second, I believe this study reasonably represents patterns of practice throughout the whole little world of elite private higher education in the United States. In other words, this book's object is a single school, but its subject is selective private colleges and universities generally.[20]

The Office and Its People

The College's Office of Admissions and Financial Aid was located in an old house, a rambling colonial near the main entrance to campus. The building was tidily maintained. Groundskeepers planted flowers each spring along the walkway leading up to the main entrance. In December there were evergreen wreaths on the front doors. Inside, the public front rooms were tastefully appointed with subtle wallpaper and slightly worn furniture in a period style. Hardwood floors creaked benignly beneath sturdy carpets. Heavy curtains were left open to frame tranquil, tree-shaded views. It was the sort of place to which one might imagine going home for an idyllic Thanksgiving holiday—if "home" were in one of the well-heeled suburbs of New York's Westchester County, up Chicago's North Shore, or out Philadelphia's Main Line, the sorts of places where many of the College's students and alumni resided.

The office was open to visitors during regular working hours Monday through Friday and for half days on Saturdays. Just off the entry foyer arriving guests found a receptionist's desk, often a hub of activity. Here was where each new visiting party was greeted, where volleys about the character of the weather and the length of drives just completed were exchanged. Here was where campus interviews were scheduled and confirmed, and directions were given to an adjacent waiting room, a large and comfortable space that sprawled back along the entire length of the building.

A usually closed door at the back of the main entry hall afforded

passage to a markedly different realm, the clerical office, where overhead fluorescent lights and a modular partition system signaled administrative territory. This was where each year's thousands of application files were carefully tended by three full-time employees. Open shelves covered one long wall where active files were kept in alphabetical order. A fourth full-time staff member with a desk here devoted most of her workdays to managing the office's relentless current of outgoing mail. By custom any walk through this long narrow room was a pleasant gauntlet of mutual hellos. Behind this room was a functional kitchen often put into the service of official entertaining and the less formal staff parties that lightened moods each season. The popsicles and bottled water that student tour guides offered free to visitors in the summertime were kept cold there. Back farther still were two large rooms where bushels of literature—viewbooks, calendars, forms and mailers and inserts of all kinds—were stored. Also in these rooms was a bank of weary old cabinets housing the files officers dutifully maintained on all of the high schools with which their office had had any connection.

A flight of stairs adjacent to the kitchen led up to Financial Aid, a department whose work had some autonomy from Admissions even while it was functionally and architecturally subordinate to it. Financial Aid had its own receptionist and its own long shelves of applicant folders. All applicants who requested consideration for financial aid from the College were "packaged" by this department and had separate files kept on them there. Two financial aid officers did the packaging, a task in which aid applications were assessed according to two sets of criteria, one backed by the U.S. Department of Education and the other by the large and vastly influential nonprofit corporation, the College Board. Another full-time staff person administered the multiple government loan programs that were part of many students' aid packages. Still another employee oversaw the disbursement of government grants and endowed scholarships.

A corridor running the entire length of the second floor connected the financial aid offices at the back of the building to the upper landing of the front stairs. Most of the rooms off of the hall were devoted to office space for admissions officers. Even the most junior officer (the entry-level title was "assistant dean") had her own physical space, with windows and a door that closed—real estate indicative of a higher status than all of the clerical staff. In addition, because they represented the school in public and had ultimate authority over the fate of applications, admissions officers' positions had more glamour than officer-level posts in Financial Aid. Primarily because I had come to study admissions decisions—but doubtless too because I fell for the local status game—I spent most of my time with admissions officers and came to know them best.

The junior officers all had several things in common. All of them were in their twenties and thirties. All of them were good conversationalists, capable of easy smiles and clever turns of phrase. None of them anticipated careers in corporate America. None of them were hard to look at. With the exception of two officers who had graduated from large public universities, all had completed their college educations at schools very close in character and prestige to the College. There were no Ivy League degrees among them, but there were no low-status credentials either.

Conventional wisdom in the admissions world holds that junior positions in admissions are great first jobs: that they hone interpersonal and organizational skills; that a short stint in the profession is no detriment to a résumé; and that many parts of the work are fun. But seasoned officers also confessed that the job had a significant burnout factor, that the work could become repetitive and the extensive travel a chore. There also is limited room at the top of the field. In admissions the status of a job is tied directly to the selectivity of the employer, and because fewer than a hundred colleges and universities in the country are selective, the number of senior-level

administrative positions in the occupational hierarchy is very limited.[21] In this sense the College, with its three full-time senior officers, had a fat top tier.

Val Marin, senior associate dean, had come to town when her husband took a job at a prominent regional arts institution. She had been the director of college guidance at a private day school before moving to the small hamlet in which the College is located. Val had responsibility for recruiting applicants at many of the most fashionable private schools along the Atlantic seaboard. She also directed the office's recruitment of international students, a job she clearly loved: traveling literally all over the world and cultivating relationships with families wealthy enough to send their children to a costly American private school. Val was an expert in the blood sport of cocktail conversation, and she was an enthusiastic hostess. When officers wanted to hold work-related social events in an intimate setting, they often were granted access to Val's home. Favorite recipes could be requested for the menus. Wine glasses were never empty.

Susan Latterly, director of admissions, was the administrative head of all the admissions personnel. Because her formal responsibilities included office management, she served as an important bridge between the admissions officers upstairs and the clerical staff down below. She was a consummate diplomat. People respected Susan's intelligence, her unflagging work ethic, and her two decades of experience in the orbit of the College. You had the sense that anything on Susan's desk would get done well and on time.

Liam Rizer, dean of admissions and financial aid, had been recruited in the mid-1990s with a specific mandate to improve the College's admissions selectivity. He was wooed away from a position comparable to Susan Latterly's at an elite private research university. Liam often said that what he liked about the College was that you "can really put your arms around it." And he did. On a small but often contentious campus, Liam was widely held in high esteem. He

was a gifted communicator. He knew how to convey good news humbly and bad news strategically—so that people found themselves admiring his candor even when they did not like what he was saying. Liam was genuinely charitable, too. When I made my first inquiry about the possibility of doing this research, he did not respond with suspicion. Instead he invited me to a meeting with his senior officers and asked us all to think about how my presence might be an asset to the work of the office.

In his generally affirmative occupational outlook Liam was not alone. Wherever I went in that rambling old house, I found people who seemed favorably disposed toward their work and toward the College. This was true even after I had been on the premises for months, long after the instinct to make nice before a stranger would have eroded. It was almost as if people's employment contracts had stipulated good moods, as if some baseline optimism had been ordered by decree. This is not to say that the office was free of unhappiness. It was clear that limitations of the place, the job, and the colleagues often got under people's skins. The low pay, the long winters, and the often-heavy workloads were talked about, but the conversations rarely ended on notes of sheer complaint and they invariably took place at some remove from the public front rooms. Although I imagine I was excluded from airings of the dirtiest laundry, I do not think that impressions were managed just for me. In fact I quickly learned that this management was expected of me also. I found myself maintaining a cheery demeanor during my hours at the office, especially in front of guests.

The official good mood in Admissions did not always sit well with faculty, many of whom were quite vocally grumpy about the College and its various purported sins: that it was too conservative, too provincial; that it cared too much about varsity sports and too little about diversity; that it genuflected too shamelessly to trustees and wealthy alumni. Perhaps because they believed they were wiser

to the College's problems, faculty sometimes derided admissions officers for the remarkable consistency with which they saw sunshine behind rain. In time I came to understand that faculty grumpiness was a luxury of their insulation from the school's most crucial resource flows. With very few exceptions, professors dealt with prospective students and their families only after they already had fallen in love with the College, already had sent first checks to the bursar and signed on to four years at the place. For the most part trustees and big donors were, to the faculty, abstractions—caricatures to be gossiped and speculated about when puzzling decisions got made upstairs. Given their comfortable positions at the core of the organization, faculty could choose to ignore how important outsiders' impressions of the College could be.

As a group the faculty enjoyed much cushier jobs than those who were hired to mind the front door. There was no tenure in Admissions. With the exception of Liam Rizer, Admissions personnel had no consequential role in college governance. Salaries for junior officers were something over half those of assistant professors. Yet it was the people in Admissions who most viscerally embodied the school for the outside world. As one of the junior officers, Danesha Adams, put it, "I've come to think of Admissions as the mouth of the College. . . . We represent it. That's our job." Liam Rizer once said to me that the receptionist who answered the phones in Admissions was one of the most important people on campus. Another time he talked about the people who mowed the lawns.