INTERSECTIONS: READINGS IN SOCIOLOGY

A CUSTOMIZED SOCIOLOGY READER

COMPILED BY

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Introduction to Sociology

PEARSON CUSTOM PUBLISHING

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Cover Art: "Apartments in Buenos Aires, Argentina," Courtesy of Glen Allison/ Photo Disc, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 0536715718

PEARSON CUSTOM PUBLISHING
75 Arlington Street, Suite #300/ Boston, MA 02116
Pearson Education Group

Preface

The fascination of sociology lies in the fact that its perspectives make us see in a new light the very world in which we have lived all our lives . . .

Peter Berger

Pearson Custom Publishing and General Editors Ralph McNeal and Kathleen Tiemann are proud to bring you *Intersections: Readings in Sociology*.

Our highest goal in the creation of *Intersections* is that it does, in fact, assist you in capturing that 'fascination of sociology' Peter Berger refers to above and which so many of us, as teachers, want to impart to our students. A traditional way of doing this has been to expose students to central sociological ideas and examples of sociology in action through a book of readings. While *Intersections* is a reader, it is anything but traditional due to the way it is being provided to you.

With *Intersections*, we have endeavored to provide you with a rich and diverse archive of high quality readings in such a way that both professors and students will have easy and cost-effective access to the minds and ideas that illuminate and help explain some of the central ideas and issues of sociology. Within *Intersections* you will find over 300 readings and 19 topical introductions—both of which we will be updated and expanded yearly—from which you can choose *only* those readings and introductions that are germane to your particular course. No longer will you and your students have to be dependent on the standard large and expensive 'one-size-fits-all' college reader, which often includes more material than will be covered in the course, yet often also lacks those particular pieces that are viewed as essential by individual instructors. In addition, a classification system for each selection provides helpful information on how the selections might be organized to allow the various perspectives on the course to be pursued. Although the primary course for which *Intersections* was developed is the introductory sociology course, the size and quality of the database may also make it a good resource for a variety of other courses such as social problems, marriage and family, and gender studies.

However it is used, it is our ultimate hope that you will find *Intersections* to be an essential source of readings in sociology—a source noted for its depth, breadth, and flexibility—that meets the highest scholarly and pedagogical standards.

Acknowledgements

A project of this scope cannot be undertaken without the assistance and advice of our colleagues. We wish to thank the following people who helped us tremendously in the development of Intersections.

Andrew Scott Ziner (Cedar Crest College) edited the Health and Medicine and Life Course and Aging sections of Intersections; Charles M. Brown (Ohio University) edited the Religion section; David A. Merrill (University of Wisconsin) edited both Politics and Work and the Economy; and Donald Branson (University of Connecticut) edited the Environment section. Each of these fields required the back-

Preparing for Power: Prep Schools and Higher Education

PETER W. COOKSON, JR. AND
CAROLINE HODGES PERSELL

Boarding schools have always been perceived as reserved for the wealthy. Parents and other observers cite the network relationships formed with other families of affluence as a major benefit of attending such a school. However, in this article, Peter Cookson and Caroline Hodges Persell argue that boarding schools are more than just a place to meet fellow elites—they actually maintain the elite class in America. As you read the article, reflect on your own experiences applying to college. If you did not attend boarding school, ask yourself whether you had the same advantage as applicants who did attend such a school.

Like youths undergoing a tribal rite of passage in which the badge of manhood is killing their first lion, prep youths have historically sought to bag an Ivy League college acceptance. But, like lions, Ivy League acceptances have become more difficult to obtain. Their growing scarcity means that prep schools need to convince many students and parents that X, Y, and Z colleges are as good as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, and therefore as worthy a prize for undergoing the grueling period of preparation.

"Preparing for Power: Prep Schools and Higher Education," by Peter W. Cookson, Jr., and Caroline Hodges Persell, reprinted from *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools*, 1985, Basic Books. pp. 167–189.

The students whose families are seeking their socialization for power, however, are skeptical. Virtually everyone in prep school is going to college, so whether or not one goes is not the critical question; *where* one goes is what matters. Going to the right college is "part of the formula for their lives," as a Select 16 college advisor phrased it. As we shall discuss in this chapter, the students' collective identity functions in their collective aspiration for similar colleges, including those with relatively modest academic or social backgrounds.

Many students come to boarding school with the hope that it will enable them to get into a better college. The prep schools know that this promise poses certain problems for them, given the changes that have occurred in college admissions during the last twenty-five years. In the past most of their graduates could easily get into the college of their choice, but today it is not so easy. Prep schools have responded by honing their very professional college advisory operation and by exercising what political clout they can in relation to the colleges. The result is a higher—though not perfect—payoff for elite prep school graduates, compared to other applicants.

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How Elite Colleges Make Admissions Decisions

In the early 1920s, admission to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton was by examination. Virtually all of those who passed the exam were admitted, those who failed were not. While the exam tested mastery of a traditional curriculum, including Latin, and therefore favored graduates of private preparatory schools, increasing numbers of public schools, especially in the Northeast, began offering such a curriculum. But in a 1926 letter sent to 4,000 secondary schools, Harvard announced that it would consider "character, personality and promise as well as scholarly attainments" (Karabel, 1984, pp. 6–7). Since that time the Ivy League colleges, as well as other highly selective pri-

vate colleges, have weighed both academic and personal factors in their decision to admit candidates.

Every college is not as explicit as Princeton, which says that "our current admission policy gives equal weight to the candidate's academic and nonacademic strengths,"[1] but they all consider both sets of factors. At Princeton, candidates are ranked from one to five (one being the highest) on academic and personal qualities. Harvard readers assign numerical ratings to several important elements, including academic potential, personal promise, and demonstrated character, extracurricular activities, athletics, staff-alumni interview(s), teacher recommendations, and the counselor report (Fitzsimmons and Reed, 1982, p. 8).[2] Journalist Evan Thomas sat in on Brown's admissions committee:

> The committee passes around a thick application from "Mary." "Whoops!" says Rogers. "A 'Pinocchio'!" In Brown admissions jargon, that means her guidance counselor has checked off boxes rating her excellent for academic ability but only good or average for humor, imagination and character. On the printed recommendation form, the low checks stick out from the high ones like a long, thin nose. "A rating of average usually means the guidance counselor thinks there is something seriously wrong," explains Admissions Officer Paulo de Oliveira. Mary's interview with a Brown alumnus was also lukewarm, and worse, she has written a "jock essay," i.e., a very short one. Rogers scrawls a Z, the code for rejection, on her folder. (Thomas, 1979, p. 73)

. . .

Being a legacy—having one or more parents or other relatives who attended the college to which one applies—is a decided bonus for admission. Seventeen percent of the Princeton class of 1983 were alumni children. The applications from all Princeton children are personally reviewed by the director of admissions, as well as by one of six regional admissions directors. Thus, they are considered more thoroughly than other candidates, and are more likely to be accepted.

Several college advisors said that legacies were two to two-and-one-half times as likely to be admitted to Ivy League colleges as nonlegacies.

The legacy advantage seems to increase substantially in the middle ground, where most applicants fall:

> In a process where very fine lines must be drawn, the advantage Princeton children receive can perhaps be best appreciated when one analyzes the admission ratios of candidates with certain ratings. For instance, of all candidates with 3/2 ratings, only 21% were admitted. However, 100% of the Princeton children with this combination of ratings gained admission. Similarly, 29% of all candidates with 2/3 ratings were admitted, as compared to 89% of all Princeton children in this category. Finally, only 6.7% of all applicants with 3/3 ratings were offered admission, as compared to 28.8% of the alumni children. (Wickenden, 1979, p. 3)

. . .

Parents who had the opportunity and money to attend an elite college are able to increase their child's chances for admission to that college. Strong athletes also possess desired personal qualities that increase their chances for admission. Ivy League coaches may obtain information on a candidate's athletic prowess by observing players when they have scrimmages with certain prep schools. A number of colleges make depth charts, "listing athletes by sport, the position they play and ranking by Brown coaches, usually on a scale of one to six" (Thomas, 1979, p. 73). . . .

Personal sparks of other kinds are sought in applicants. Harvard says it reads folders looking for:

> The relative personal promise of the candidate. "Personality," "character," "pizzazz," "inner strength," are all phrases to describe this variable. Pulling together the impressions conveyed by the reports in the folder, only sometimes with direct personal contact, the admissions officer tries to assess whether a candidate who has been personally outstanding in

the high school context will continue to be so in college and beyond. (Fitzsimmons and Reed, 1982, p. 8)

. . .

Professionalism and Private Politics

The college advisors at most elite boarding schools are well attuned to the world of private college admissions. They organize the process so as to smooth as many kinks as possible out of it and to present their students in the most favorable light. They have responded to the increasingly competitive college admissions scene with two major strategies—professionalizing their operation and using their political networks.

The resources most leading boarding schools devote to college advisement are considerable, and they enable advisors to manage the process in a competent and effective manner. Advisors at most of the leading schools are savvy and highly organized. Most do not teach because of their travel schedules, frequent visits by college admissions officers, and numerous phone calls. Especially at the Select 16 schools, they have been doing the job for a number of years, and learned the ropes by assisting an experienced college advisor for several years. Many have visited 60, 70, or more colleges.

Each advisor is responsible for from 65 to 140 students, a contrast to many public high schools in which college advisors may have as many as 400 to 500 students in their care, although the average is 323 (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore, 1982, p. 179). Most boarding schools have substantial clerical and, increasingly, computerized support services. All college advisors seem to have unlimited long-distance telephone access. With fewer facilities, big public high schools often limit students to a fixed number of college applications, say six or seven. Boarding school students may file as many as 15 or 20 applications, although the average number is 4.8.

The contrast between the professional operations of the elite schools which are socializing their students for power and the more relaxed attitude of, for example, a progressive school is dramatic. For example, in one of the latter schools, the college advisor was new, and had not visited any colleges, and had himself attended a minor state college. His office was located in a remote building a good distance from the center of campus. The office was a single room, with one counselor, a secretary who came in two half days per week, a typewriter that was shared with several other departments, and a filing system that reposed in a single desk drawer.

The difference in the focus of the college advisory program in a girls' school was also apparent. The advisor said, "There is almost more anxiety about the process of applying to college than the result." At a boys' or coed school, no one would suggest that there was no anxiety about the result.

The highly professional operations of the prep schools engaged in socializing their students for power is evident in three activities: the organization of the timetable, written materials, and letters of recommendation. College advisors at these schools have rationalized the admissions process through time and can readily rattle off the timetable of events in the process. A typical timetable is presented in Exhibit 1. It is designed to assuage the worries of students and parents about the process. Don't worry, the message is, everything is under control; there is a time and a place for all the necessary steps, and we will guide you through the process.

Many college advisors prepare voluminous materials to help students and their families through the process. Many have questionnaires for students and parents to obtain information about what they want in a college; particular colleges they are considering; where relatives attended college (to know what legacy factors they have); whether or not they need financial aid; and what summer work, travel, volunteer, athletic, student government, club, publications, or debate activities they have been involved in. Other questionnaires ask what books they have read in the last six months, what musical, artistic, or theatrical involvement they have had, and ask about inde-

EXHIBIT 1 *Advisors' College Preparation Timetable for Prep School Students*

Ninth Grade	Students choose the right curriculum. Build reading and vocabulary skills.
Tenth Grade	Students take PSAT (a two-hour version of the SAT) for practice. Talk with students after the test results are in. Speak to students and parents about the college application process. Encourage the development of good homework and study habits, reminding them that sophomore year counts equally.
Eleventh Grade	Schedule panel on colleges for parents and students. Students take PSAT. Encourage students to keep studying. January, take SAT. Start building a preliminary list of colleges, including some that are not certain, some with about a 50/50 chance for admission, and some with more than a 75% chance for admission. Give copies of this list to student, mail one to parents, keep one for school file. Encourage student to read college catalogues and decide which colleges they want to visit that summer.
Twelfth Grade	Meet individually again with each senior once or twice before Christmas. Perhaps schedule a college night with parents or have a college day during Parents' Weekend in the fall. Early admissions decision applications are due in November, National Merit Scholarship Applications are due, collect faculty comments on students for that term. Regular applications need to be in by January, including school letters of recommendation.
Between April 15 and May 1	After acceptances, students decide which colleges they will attend.

pendent study and research. Often advisors ask students to prepare a written autobiography or self-evaluation. They might ask students to say how they are unique, what they do best, or how particular experiences have affected them.

Some advisors at elite schools prepare guidebooks for students to help them make their college selections. Aside from providing the timetable for tests, early admissions, application deadlines, and so forth, they may suggest factors to consider about colleges—such as

their size, location, program, quality of undergraduate life, facilities, instruction, or financial factors. The guidebook will explain how to arrange visits and interviews, what might be asked in an interview and ways to respond, how to dress, how to prepare questions to ask the interviewer, and how to complete an application, including checking the spelling. The guidebook is an effective way of sharing the advisor's experience and wisdom.

College advisors also use their knowledge when writing letters of recommendation. All secondary schools are asked to write letters of recommendation for their applicants, but differences exist in the effort and backup support that various schools are able to provide. Given the small number of students boarding school advisors have to supervise, they are able to write a well-reasoned letter for each student.

At one boarding school, where about half the graduating class goes to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, the advisor interviews the entire faculty on each member of the senior class. He tapes all their comments and has them transcribed. This produces a "huge confidential dossier which gives a very good sense of where each student is." In addition, housemasters and coaches write reports. Then the advisor interviews each senior. After each interview, he makes verbal notes on a dictaphone. After assimilating all these impressions of each student, the college advisor writes his letter of recommendation, which he is able to pack with corroborative details illustrating a candidate's strengths. The thoroughness, thought, and care that goes into this process insures that anything and everything positive that could be said about a student is included, thereby maximizing his or her chances for a favorable reception.

Some advisors include their assessment of the difficulty of the academic course load a student is taking in their letters of recommendation. Where possible, they may try to compare the applicant with others from the school who have attended the college and been successful there.[3]

We saw some of the letters of recommendation, without the students' names on them. They were beautifully crafted, one-page pre-

sentations. One advisor said his goal in the letter was "to present the student as accurately and fully as possible to the college." He was relatively new to the job and wanted to be seen as "trustworthy and holding nothing back," to establish credibility for future dealings with the colleges. College admissions officers had told him that "the quotes from the teachers are the things they respected most" in his letters.

The importance of well-designed letters of recommendation is underscored by James W. Wickenden, Jr., director of admissions at Princeton University, in his letter to Princeton alumni:

> In evaluating each applicant the admission staff also takes into account the supporting documents from college counselors and teachers. These materials can vary greatly in quality: while most are good, and some exceptional, about 2.5% do little to help the applicants. For example, the entire secondary school report on one applicant was: "Real fine candidate." Another teacher prepared the same report for all applicants, made a xerox copy of the report with blank spaces left for the names of students who might ask for recommendations, and simply filled in the blanks before sending these statements off to the various colleges. Obviously, candidates with this type of counseling and support are at a real disadvantage in the admission race. (Wickenden, 1979, p. 1)

Such a policy indeed favors schools with the resources and personnel to write good letters.

The help the elite prep schools give their students extends beyond the curriculum and teaching they offer and the highly professional formal procedures they follow in getting them into college. Their help reaches into the informal, interpersonal world of "horse-trading" that exists in friendly phone calls, beers, and dinner with college admissions officers.

The close social relationships between college advisors, especially those in Select 16 schools, and admissions officers, particularly those in Ivy League colleges, rest on social similarities, frequent contact

over an extended time, a sense of trust, shared information, and mutual cooperation. The existence and operation of these ties may well improve a boarding school student's chances for admission to a highly desired college. College advisors at Select 16 prep schools are much more likely to be Harvard, Yale, or Princeton graduates than other schools' advisors. Among the 11 Select 16 school college advisors on whom data were available, ten were Harvard, Yale, or Princeton graduates, while among the 23 other schools' advisors on whom data were available, only three were Ivy League graduates, and none were from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, suggesting that the Select 16 prep schools consider such a connection to be important.

The close personal relationships between Select 16 college advisors and college admissions officers have been built up over a considerable number of years. College advisors at Select 16 schools tend to have longer tenures (ten, fifteen, or even more years is not unusual) than college advisors at other schools (who are more likely to have recently assumed the job). Given the "importance of continuity on both sides of the relationship" that was stressed by an advisor at one Select 16 school, the greater continuity at Select 16 schools is one of several factors in their favor.

Often prep school college advisors are invited to sit in on admissions committee decisions, to see how a college puts its class together. By doing this, they can see the makeup of the applicant pool. Such information helps them to see the competition their students face and may suggest strategies they can use in putting their candidates forward. They learn other useful information from personal contacts as well, such as which colleges are having an "admissions pinch," and hence might be receptive to somewhat weaker candidates, and that it is important for a student who has taken a year off between high school and college to document what was done during that year.

One advisor knew of a student who had enhanced his chances for admission to an elite college by writing a journal of a trip to Mozambique. Another knew that a borderline student could try for admission in February rather than September at an elite college, and might have a better chance then. This kind of inside lore about the

admissions process helps boarding school college advisors sell their students more effectively than advisors without such knowledge can.

The close relationship between elite schools and colleges is reflected in another indicator. At least one Ivy League college (Harvard) puts the applications from certain boarding schools into different colored folders (Karen, 1985). Hence, the admissions committee knows immediately which applicants are from certain boarding schools. Moreover, sociologist David Karen found that being from one of those select boarding schools was positively related to admission to Harvard, even when academic and personal factors were comparable.

College advisors cooperate with the colleges in several ways. They try to screen out hopeless prospects, or as one advisor tactfully put it, "I try to discourage unproductive leads." They also "try to shape up different applicant pools for different colleges." They push students to choose which of the Ivy League colleges they want, rather than applying to all of them. A student's first choice is information they often use in their bartering sessions with colleges to clinch the promise of an acceptance. In these ways, college advisors anticipate the colleges' reactions and do some of the pre-screening of applicants for them.

In addition to cooperating with the colleges, a group of Select 16 school college advisors cooperate among themselves, sharing information and developing common strategies for dealing with colleges. They meet together regularly and share college admissions statistics within their group. This organization began as an informal group of friends that played poker together. As they were comparing statistics and discussing common problems, they agreed that the practice of class ranking hurt their students, since most of them were in the top quarter of their class before coming to boarding school, but invariably half of the students ended up in the bottom half of their prep school class.[4]

Colleges had indicated to them that "it didn't look good on their profiles to have students who ranked low in their class." The group of Select 16 school advisors agreed to stop providing an absolute class

rank to colleges, but instead to indicate the decile or quintile rank of each student. Colleges can put such students in a "not ranked" category or can report the decile or quintile rank. No entering student from such a secondary school is labeled as the bottom person in the class. No other eight schools in the country would have had the political clout to modify admissions rules like this.

College advisors, especially those at the Select 16 schools, use their close personal relationships with college admissions officers to lobby for their students. "We want to be sure they are reading the applications of our students fairly, and we lobby for our students," said one Select 16 school college advisor. "The colleges make their best decisions on our students and those from [another Select 16 school], because they have the most information on these students." "When I drive to the [Ivy League] colleges, I give them a reading on our applicants. I let them know if I think they are making a mistake." Another Select 16 school college advisor reported, "I try to make the case for a particular student if I think the college is making a mistake." Another said, "I don't very often tell a college they are making a mistake, but when I do, that case is often reconsidered."

Select 16 school advisors do not stop with simply asking elite college admissions officers to reconsider a decision, however. They try to barter, and the colleges leave this possibility open when they say, "Let's talk about your group." One Select 16 school college advisor stresses that if his school recommends someone and he or she is accepted, that student will come. While not all colleges heed this warranty, some do and it may help the process.

Another Select 16 school advisor said, "It is getting harder than it used to be to say to an admissions officer, 'take a chance on this one,' especially at Harvard which now has so many more applications." But it is significant that he did not say that it was impossible to make such a statement. If all else fails in a negotiation, a Select 16 advisor said, "We lobby for the college to make him your absolute first choice on the waiting list." Such a compromise represents a chance for both parties to save face.

Most public high-school counselors do not know elite college admissions officers, nor do they have the resources to call them up or drive over to talk with them. One counselor from the Midwest, however, did come to an eastern Ivy League college to sit in on the admissions committee decision for his truly outstanding candidate—SATs in the 700s, top in his class, class president, star athlete, and nevertheless a friendly, modest person. An advisor from an elite eastern prep school was also there, lobbying on behalf of his candidate—a nice, undistinguished fellow with SATs in the 600s, middle of his class, average athlete, and no strong signs of leadership. After hearing both the counselors, the Ivy League college chose the latter candidate. The public school counselor walked out in disgust. Afterwards, the Ivy League admissions officer said to the prep school advisor, "We may not be able to have these open meetings anymore." Even in the unusual case where a public school counselor did everything that a Select 16 boarding school college advisor did, it was not enough to help the applicant to gain admittance. Despite today's competitive admissions environment, the elite prep school advisors are still listened to more closely by college admissions officers than public school counselors, suggesting that the prep school advisor is known to consistently offer the colleges a steady supply of socially elite and academically prepared students.

"You have to go to one of those prep schools. . . ."

The collegiate destinations of prep school students are very different from those of high-school students in the United States. Nationally, only seven out of ten eighteen-year-olds graduate from high school (Plisko, 1984, p. 13). Of those seven, less than three have taken a strong academic curriculum (Fiske, 1983, p. C8) and are prepared for four-year liberal arts colleges in the country. So by the time they reach the starting block for college, three-quarters of American young people are already considerably behind prep school students.

Even among American young people who go to college, vast differences exist; 78% go to public institutions and 38% attend two-year colleges or universities (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1984, p. 161). Nationally, only 2% of all college students attend the most highly selective colleges in the United States (that is, those whose entering freshmen have an average combined verbal and mathematics SAT score of 1,175 or better, as determined by Astin, King, and Richardson 1981), and much less than 1% nationally attend one of the eight eastern Ivy League colleges.

Almost all boarding school students attend four-year colleges immediately after graduation. Three-quarters of them attend private colleges or universities, half attend the most highly selective colleges in the United States, and one in five attends an Ivy League college. The colleges they attend are heavily concentrated on the East Coast and in California.[5]

Prep school students are also likely to attend colleges that have large numbers of their graduates from the upper class or who have otherwise achieved high status. A college's social prestige and social achievement were measured by Gene R. Hawes in his *Comprehensive Guide to Colleges* (1978); the more graduates a college has listed in the *Social Register,* the higher its social prestige, and the more graduates it has listed in *Who's Who,* the higher its social achievement. Thirty-seven percent of the seniors in our sample were bound for colleges in the top two social prestige categories established by Hawes, and 59% of the seniors were bound for colleges in the top two categories for social achievement.

Public high-school students do not fare so well, even when they have similar aspirations. An article in the *New York Times* captured the poignant case of a very strong public school applicant (eleventh in his class, 790/800 on his SATs) who was rejected by Harvard. After hearing the news his father said, "To get into Harvard . . . you have to go to one of those prep schools" (Winerip, 20 April, 1984, p. B4).

The father's perceptions are not completely off the mark. When four sets of application pools to Ivy League colleges are compared (see Table 1), the acceptance rate is highest for Select 16 boarding

school applicants, followed by other leading boarding school applicants, then by students who graduate from an academically selective public high school,[6] and finally by the entire national application pool.

Is this higher rate of acceptance due to the superior academic credentials or the higher social family backgrounds of prep school students compared to public school students? Cookson (1981) addressed this question when he compared the college destinations of prep school students with those of suburban high-school students. He found that public school students who were similar to prep school students in terms of their SAT scores and family backgrounds were accepted at less selective colleges and generally planned to attend less prestigious colleges than their prep school peers. He also found that in the transition from secondary school to college, public schools had much less organizational clout than did prep schools. This was indicated by the fact that the personal qualities (for example, SAT scores and family backgrounds) of public school students play a larger role in where they go to college than do the personal qualities of prep school students, who apparently benefit from the reputations of their schools when college admissions officers select freshmen. In effect, prep schools themselves are able to place "floors" under their less able students and thus insure that in the transition from school to college there are fewer casualties.

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A second group of students benefit from what might be called the "knighting effect" of attending an elite prep school. As Table 2 indicates, 89% of students who scored between 1,220 and 1,580 on their SAT exams, and who came from families in the bottom third of the socioeconomic status range in our sample, were accepted by a highly selective college. For the academically talented but less affluent student, prep schools provide a route for upward mobility. A similar trend is evident for minorities and girls. Ralph Turner's belief (1966) that private schools offer no special mobility opportunities to students is not supported by these findings. In fact, for a few outstanding individuals, attending a prep school may be a critical first step in

TABLE 1 *Acceptance Rates of Ivy League Colleges from Four Application Pools*

College	Select 16 Boarding Schools (1982–83)[a]	Leading Boarding Schools (1982–83)[a]	Other Public High School (1984)[b]	Selective National Group of Applicants (1982)[c]
Brown University				
% accepted	35	20	28	22
Number of applications	95	45	114	11,854
Columbia University				
% accepted	66	29	32	41
Number of applications	35	7	170	3,650
Cornell University				
% accepted	57	36	55	31
Number of applications	65	25	112	17,927
Dartmouth				
% accepted	41	21	41	22
Number of applications	79	33	37	8,313
Harvard University				
% accepted	38	28	20	17
Number of applications	104	29	127	13,341
Princeton University				
% accepted	40	28	18	18
Number of applications	103	40	109	11,804
University of Pennsylvania				
% accepted	45	32	33	36
Number of applications	40	19	167	11,000
Yale University				
% accepted	40	32	15	20
Number of applications	92	25	124	11,023
Overall % accepted	42	27	30	26
Total number of applications	613	223	960	88,912

[a]These 836 applications from prep school seniors were made by the 1,035 seniors in our sample who applied to one or more Ivy League colleges.

[b]Based on data supplied by college advisor at the school.

[c]Figures available as of November 1984, *National College Databank*.

TABLE 2 *Acceptances at Most Highly Selective Colleges by Socioeconomic Status and SAT Scores*

	SATs (Combined Scores)		
Socioeconomic Status	**1,220–1,580**	**1,060–1,216**	**540–1,050**
Top Third (%)	83	74	57
N	(126)	(109)	(64)
Middle Third (%)	85	81	38
N	(128)	(112)	(69)
Bottom Third (%)	89	75	42
N	(97)	(83)	(82)

upward mobility. These findings give credence to Digby Baltzell's claim (1964) that prep schools integrate new brains with old wealth to revitalize the upper classes.

Table 2 also indicates that a high percentage of those with weak SATs (540 to 1,050 combined scores), do manage to gain admission to the highly selective colleges. Fifty-nine percent of the high socioeconomic status—low SATs group gain acceptance to a selective college, an indicator that the schools not only serve mobility functions, but maintenance functions as well. These are the students who have had floors placed under them by attending prep school.

When we view the college admissions process in general, it becomes clear that prep schools, especially the Select 16 schools, offer strong and relatively weak students alike a tremendous boost in gaining acceptance to the colleges of their choice. For girls, minorities, and students from modest family backgrounds, the schools provide educational mobility, and for upper- and upper-middle-class students with good academic records, the schools help with their connections to prestigious colleges.

The organizational support that the schools offer to students is matched by few, if any, public schools, or, for that matter, matched by few private day schools. From the moment prep school students enter their schools, they know they are expected to enter a selective college, and they have been given the tools to gain acceptance. They also know that the college admissions environment is highly competitive.

To fail to go to a selective college is considered by most prep school students a serious detour on the road to social and economic success. Where you go to college defines in good measure who you are, and the days when preps could automatically expect to go to an Ivy League or other highly selective college are over. They have to earn their way—or at least part of their way. Prep schools open doors for students, but then they must know how to walk through the doors themselves. Yet compared to their public school peers, prep school students start the race for college with substantial advantages. The safety net of organizational support is wide and strong, and should a student fall from academic grace there is somebody to help them get up.

In a college admissions system that stresses merit, the advantages prep school students enjoy raise some complex and disturbing issues. How fair is it to public school students to allow prep school students to be consistently given the competitive edge so that they win a disproportionately high number of coveted acceptances? What is really being rewarded when students are accepted at the best private colleges—personal achievement or institutional affiliation? For the prep school student, the first major dividend that he or she collects from surviving the prep rite of passage is acceptance to a suitable college, and the feeling that the acceptance is a deserved one.

Endnotes

[1]Letter to all Princeton alumni from James W. Wickenden, Jr., '61, Director of Admissions, October 1979.

[2]Brown uses a 1–6 rating for personal qualities and academic promise (Thomas, 1979, p. 73), and Dartmouth uses a scale of 1–9 for academic and personal attributes, with 18 being a perfect rating (National Public Radio, 1981, p. 9).

[3]This assumes they know how their graduates do once they get to college. The Ivy League colleges used to send transcripts back to the prep schools so they could see how they did, but recent concerns about privacy have stopped that practice. Several college advisors said they had sent a questionnaire to their graduates, or would like to do one, to see

how they were faring. In general, this is an area where many feel they could do more than they are doing.

[4]Seniors at some of the elite schools suggested their awareness of this situation when they said, in effect, "if only I'd stayed home in my public school, I would have gotten into Harvard easily."

[5]The top six states, in order, where more than 50 preps attended college are: Massachusetts (129), New York (127), California (93), North Carolina (61), Connecticut (58), and Pennsylvania (55).

[6]To be admitted to this particular science high school, which is in large northeastern city, students must be recommended by their junior high school and score high on math and verbal admissions tests.

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Questions

1. How different are the acceptance rates into elite colleges for students from prep schools and those from public schools? How much of this difference stems from "objective" academic standards? How much from "subjective" components such as personality and other intangibles?

2. How do the efforts of college counselors vary between the high school you attended and the elite prep schools that Cookson and Persell describe?

3. How do the educational qualifications and skill levels of the college counselors at elite prep schools differ from those of most public-school college counselors?

4. To what degree are the advantages that accrue to prep-school graduates race specific?

5. In Peterson's guide (or some other similar book), look up the colleges you applied to. How "competitive" were the schools? How did your experiences in interacting with the more competitive schools differ from your experiences with the less competitive schools, if at all?

6. How important is the social network between college counselors and colleges? How extensive do you think these networks are for most public-school college counselors? To what degree does this article reinforce the perspective that it is not "what you know" but "who you know" that counts in applying to colleges? Explain.