

The Private School Network: Recruiting Visits to Private High Schools by Public and Private Universities

ABSTRACT

1 Introduction

During the 2017 calendar year, we tracked off-campus recruiting visits made by 14 selective private universities, 12 selective private liberal arts colleges, and 15 public research universities.¹ We are still trying to figure out what happened.

Autumn is college recruiting visit season at Harpeth Hall, a non-sectarian private school for girls located in the affluent Green Hills neighborhood of Nashville, Tennessee. Founded in 1951, Harpeth is an “A+” school ranked 337 in the nation according to the 2020 *Best Private High Schools in America* by Niche. Enrollment patterns at Nashville-area private schools reflect broader regional patterns, whereby “efforts by the courts to desegregate public schools in the South resulted in White flight to private schools” (Murnane & Reardon, 2018, p. 14). In Fall 2017, about 85% of Harpeth students were white and less than 5% were Black or Latinx (Author calculations).

From September 6th through October 17th, Harpeth received recruiting visits from 11 private universities in our sample (Northwestern, Boston College, Tufts, Villanova, Case Western Reserve, University of Denver, Emory, Tulane, Baylor, Texas Christian University), and three private liberal arts colleges (Harvey Mudd, Scripps, and Sewanee). Previous scholarship observes strong connections between private schools and selective private universities (Khan, 2011; Stevens, 2007). However, Harpeth also received visits from six out-of-state public research universities, the University of Cincinnati, University of South Carolina, the University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, University of Georgia, and CU Boulder.

The nonsectarian University School of Nashville was founded in 1975 and is located next door to Vanderbilt University. It is an “A+” school, ranked 127th in the nation, and is more racially diverse than Harpeth (64% white, 11.5% Black, 3.5% Latinx, 10.0% Asian). From September 11th 2017 through October 18th, the University School received visits from nearly the same set of 11 private universities that visited Harpeth (Notre Dame visited and Baylor did not) and five liberal arts colleges (including Williams and Middlebury), but only two public research universities from our sample (University of Cincinnati, CU Boulder).

¹NAME THE UNIVERSITIES

Father Ryan High School is a Catholic school founded in 1925. Father Ryan is predominantly white (86%, 7% Black or Latinx) and received an “A” grade from Niche, meaning it is not ranked in the top 1,000 US private schools. In fall 2017, Father Ryan received visits from nine of the 14 private universities in our sample (including all the Catholic universities) and the same six public universities that visited Harpeth Hall, including two visits by the University of Alabama. Meanwhile, Christ Presbyterian Academy – also not ranked in the top 1,000 private schools – received visits from five private universities in our sample (including the three Christian universities Baylor, Texas Christian University, and Southern Methodist University). It also received visits from the University of Cincinnati, the University of South Carolina, the University of Alabama, University of Arkansas, and CU Boulder. Christ Presbyterian Academy was founded in 1985 and 94% of its students are white.

Theories of organizational behavior suggest that university recruiting behaviors – those that require significant expenditure – are indicators of organizational enrollment priorities. Large, public-facing organizations are beset by multiple, competing pressures from the external environment, but organizations have difficulty pursuing multiple goals (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Thompson, 1967). Thus, organizations respond by symbolically adopting some goals and substantively adopting others (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Under symbolic adoption, organizations adopt policies and structures that send signals to external constituents but do not substantively affect resource allocation inside the “technical level” of the organization.² Under substantive adoption, organizations direct resources in the technical level towards achieving the goal. Off-campus recruiting visits to local high schools and college fairs was the top-ranked recruiting expenditure item for both public and private universities, according to Noel-Levitz (2020). Therefore, analyses of which schools a university visits – and which schools they ignore – can yield insights about university enrollment goals.

Salazar, Jaquette, & Han (2021) analyzed recruiting visits to public high schools made by 15 public research universities in 2017. the authors found that 12 of the 15 universities made more visits to out-of-state schools than in-state schools. These out-of-state visits

²Contingency theory states that organizations consist of “technical levels” responsible for processing inputs and producing outputs and “managerial levels” responsible for directing the technical level and tending to demands from the external environment (Thompson, 1967). The technical level achieves effectiveness by focusing on a small, stable set of goals.

focused on affluent, predominantly white public schools. Set against the scholarship about declining state appropriations and growing nonresident enrollment (Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Jaquette, Curs, & Posselt, 2016), these results suggest that many public research universities prioritize enrollment from wealthy out-of-state students who can afford to pay nonresident tuition price.

Within scholarship on social mobility and social stratification, a multidisciplinary literature analyzes the relationship between private school and college [CITE]. This research observes strong links – and student flows – between private high schools and selective private universities [CITE]. To date, scholarship on nonresident enrollment by public universities has progressed in isolation from scholarship on links between private school and college. We argue that these two stories have become connected because public research universities increasingly target out-of-state private schools, schools that have been the domain of selective private universities.

This study analyzes recruiting visits to private high schools made in the 2017 calendar year by a sample of 15 public research universities and 14 selective private universities. We conceptualize recruiting visits as an indication the university and the school have a social relationship. This conceptualization motivates the use of social network methods, which analyze networks defined by “network ties” (i.e., visits) between actors (universities and schools). Comparing the recruiting networks of public research universities and selective private universities yields novel insights about the competition for affluent, “full-pay” students. Analyses are informed by three research questions:

1. How does the scale of visits to private high schools by public research universities compare to the scale of visits to private high schools by selective private universities?
2. How do the characteristics of private high schools visited by public research universities compare to the characteristics of private high schools visited by selective private universities?
3. To what extent do public research universities and selective private universities visit overlapping sets of private high schools?

[KARINA STOP READING HERE]

Both private and public universities in our sample made a disproportionate number of visits to private high schools. For public research universities, visited private schools were much more likely to be out-of-state than visited public schools. Although universities visited a large number of private schools in their home region, most universities also visited a large number of private schools in the South. Private schools that received visits were predominantly white. Although partially a function of our analysis sample, public universities tended to visit lower ranked private high schools than private universities. Surprisingly, several public universities visited sectarian private high schools at a rate similar to sectarian private universities. Network analyses revealed substantial overlap in the recruiting networks of public and private research universities.

This manuscript is practically important because it provides insight about which schools universities view as “feeder schools” and – to a limited extent – the characteristics of students they want to enroll. Prior research finds that university recruiting efforts affect the enrollment decisions of students [CITE]. In turn, the composition of enrolled students affects the campus culture experienced by students. Scholarship and the popular press reports that underrepresented minority students and low-income students at public flagship universities feel isolated amidst affluent, predominantly white student bodies. Racial and socioeconomic isolation negatively affects student development outcomes for isolated students and for the entire student body [CITE]. State policymakers and institutional leaders should recognize that the enrollment composition at public research universities is not the consequence of exogenous student demand, but rather the consequence of recruiting efforts that seek to grow nonresident enrollment by systematically targeting affluent, predominantly white public high schools (Salazar et al., 2021) and affluent, predominantly white private high schools. [NOTE: THESE IMPLICATIONS HAVE TO DO ABOUT TARGETING PRIVATE SCHOOLS BUT NOT TARGETING SAME SET OF SCHOOLS TARGETED BY SELECTIVE PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES]

[PUT THIS IN THE DISCUSSION SECTION] Finally When both private and public universities are targeting private schools, competition for these students is likely to increase. This

could be an explanation for why many private universities are struggling to meet enrollment goals

student bodies that predominantly affluent, white student bodies.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Nonresident Enrollment at Public Universities

We situate this study vis-a-vis scholarship on enrollment management behavior by public research universities and particularly the pursuit of affluent nonresident students, a population also targeted by selective private universities. The so-called “iron triangle” of enrollment management states that universities pursue the broad enrollment goals of access, academic profile, and revenue generation (Cheslock & Kroc, 2012; DesJardins & Bell, 2006). Because resources are scarce, the imagery of the iron triangle suggests that the pursuit of one enrollment goal may involve trade-offs with other goals. Cheslock & Kroc (2012, p. 221) state that “most enrollment management policies...do not advance all three objectives; instead they lead to gains in some areas and declines in others.” Scholarship argues that selective private universities prioritize academic profile and revenue generation, with funds generated from tuition and donation feeding the arms race for prestige (Killgore, 2009; Stevens, 2007; Winston, 1999). Historically, public research universities prioritize enrollment of high-performing state residents, often with an emphasis on social mobility for students who cannot afford private universities (Rudolph, 1962). However, scholarship on privatization argues the public research universities increasingly emphasizing tuition revenue and rankings and de-emphasize access for state residents (Priest & St. John, 2006; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

Jaquette & Curs (2015) draw from resource dependence theory to conceptualize the relationship between state appropriations and nonresident enrollment. Organizations are dependent on external resources that are important for organizational survival/stability and cannot be easily replaced. Public universities depend on state appropriations but these funds became increasingly uncertain in the 1980s and 1990s (Delaney & Doyle, 2011). Resource dependence

theory states that one response to resource decline or uncertainty is to seek alternative, substitute resources [CITE]. Tuition revenue is a potential substitute for state appropriations. Most states cap resident tuition price, but not nonresident tuition price. Therefore, Jaquette & Curs (2015) argued that public universities have a financial incentive to grow nonresident enrollment in response to declines in state appropriations. Analyzing panel data from 2002-03 to 2012-13, Jaquette & Curs (2015) found that a 10% decline in state appropriations was associated with a 2.7% increase in nonresident enrollment at all public universities and a 5.0% increase in nonresident enrollment at research-extensive universities.

Other studies of nonresident enrollment examine university enrollment composition. Using data from NPSAS 2011-12, Jaquette et al. (2016) show that compared to resident students at public research universities, nonresident students generate higher net tuition revenue, are more affluent, are less likely to be Pell recipients and are less likely to be Black or LatinX. Institution-level panel models reveal that growth in the share of nonresident students was associated with a decline in the share of Pell recipients and a decline in the share of Black and LatinX students. Curs & Jaquette (2017) examine whether growth in the number of nonresident students causes resident enrollment to decline. They find that nonresident enrollment “crowds out” resident enrollment at prestigious public research universities, but not at less prestigious public research universities.

How did public research universities go about attracting all these nonresident students? One mechanism is financial aid, a lever to increase applications and affect matriculation decisions. Many public research universities have developed institutional aid policies for nonresident admits, typically offering larger awards for higher achieving students (Curs & Singell, 2002, 2010; Leeds & DesJardins, 2015).

Earlier in the “enrollment funnel,” universities utilize marketing and recruiting interventions to attract nonresident applicants. One widely utilized intervention is off-campus recruiting visits by admissions counselors to local high schools. Salazar et al. (2021) analyzed off-campus recruiting visits to public high schools by 15 public research universities. Recruiting visits to in-state high schools tended exhibit modest racial and socioeconomic bias. However, 12 of the 15 universities made more visits to out-of-state high schools than in-state high

schools. These out-of-state visits focused on public schools in affluent, predominantly white communities. Salazar (2022) conducted geo-spatial analyses of out-of-state recruiting visits to Los Angeles and Dallas by four public research universities. She found that universities engage in “recruitment redlining – the circuitous avoidance of predominantly Black and Latinx communities along recruiting visit paths” (p. X). Although Salazar et al. (2021) and Salazar (2022) focused on visits to public high schools, they noted a surprising number of visits to out-of-state private high schools.

2.2 Linkages Between Private Schools and Private Universities

Separate from scholarship on nonresident enrollment at public universities, scholarship from economics and sociology analyzes linkages between private schools and colleges.

Murnane & Reardon (2018) set the stage by describing long-term trends in private school enrollment. The percentage of American (elementary school) students attending private school declined from 15% in the mid-1960s to 10% in the mid-1970s, and declined gradually from 11% in 1999 to 9% in 2015. The private school enrollment rate for high-income families and for low-income families has remained relatively stable over time at about 17% and 4%, respectively. The enrollment rate for middle-income families declined from 12% in 1968 to 6% in 2013. This decline was driven by shrinking Catholic school enrollment, which represented 89% of private school enrollment in 1965 and 42% of enrollment in 2013. Moreover, contemporary Catholic school students tend to be more affluent compared to prior decades. There has been a long-term increase in private school enrollment in the South, with middle-income families increasingly attending Christian schools and high-income families increasingly attending nonsectarian schools. With respect to race, 11% of white students attended private school in 2013, compared to 5% of Black students, and 3% of Hispanic students.

A robust empirical literature finds that attending private school positively affects college access and college selectivity [e.g.,] (Clark & Del Bono, 2016; Falsey & Heyns, 1984; Jerrim, Parker, Chmielewski, & Anders, 2016; Persell, Catsambis, & Cookson, 1992). Scholarship from the 1980s and 1990s focused on the effects of attending Catholic school (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Eide, Goldhaber, & Showalter, 2004; Neal, 1997).

More recent scholarship tends to find that attending a nonsectarian private school has larger effects on college access than attending a Catholic school (Chetty, Deming, & Friedman, 2023; Hill, 2008; Klugman, 2012).

The High School Longitudinal Survey of 2009 (HSLs) tracks the postsecondary destinations of students who were in ninth grade in 2009. Simple descriptive statistics are eye-opening (Author calculations).³ About 93% of students attended a public high school and 7% attended a private high school, including 3.6% attending a Catholic school, 1.6% attending a nonsectarian school, and 1.8% attending a Christian school. Of public high school students, 5.0% attending a public university ranked in the top 100 by US News and World Report (USNWR) and 1.9% attended a private university ranked in the top 100. Of private high school students, 10.9% attended a top 100 public university and 16.8% attended a top 100 private university. For Catholic school students, 12.8% attended a top 100 public university and 11.7% attended a top 100 private university, while for Christian schools these percentages were 8.2% and 8.2%, respectively. However, for nonsectarian private school students, 11.3% attended a top 100 public university and 39.8 percent attended a top 100 private university. Focusing on the institutional composition of private universities in USNWR top 100, 39.8% attended a private high school (compared to 7% of all high school students who attended a private high school) and 21.2% attended a nonsectarian private high school (compared to 1.6% of all high school students who attended a nonsectarian private high school).

Scholarship has been particularly interested in the relationship between attending a prestigious private school and attending an ultra selective university (Cookson & Persell, 1985, 1985; Levine, 1980; Reeves, Friedman, Rahal, & Flemmen, 2017). Chetty et al. (2023) acquired unprecedented data – application files and admissions decisions linked to income tax records – to investigate why high income families are over-represented at “Ivy Plus” colleges. Conditioning on SAT and ACT scores, applications from high-income families (top 1%) received the same academic rating as applications from lower-income families. However,

³Analyses consist students who met the following conditions: completed the 2012 follow-up survey; obtained high school transcript data; and completed the 2016 followup survey. The survey weight variable used was W4W1W2W3STU. After weighting, these 14,020 (unweighted) students represent a population of 3.93 million U.S. ninth graders in 2009. Data on college rankings come from the 2020 U.S. News & World Report *Best Colleges*. Data on high school control come from the HSLs school file and from the Private School Survey.

applications from high-income families received higher non-academic ratings (extracurricular activities, leadership traits) than applications from lower-income families. In turn, the higher non-academic ratings for high-income applicants was driven by the fact that these students tended to attend elite private high schools that devote substantial resources to teacher recommendations and guidance counselor letters.

Scholarship from sociology has examined organizational connections that catalyze the flow of students between private schools and selective private colleges (Khan, 2010, 2011; Persell & Cookson, 1985; Stevens, 2007). Stevens (2007) provides an ethnography of the admissions office at a selective private liberal arts college. The College is sensitive about its position in U.S. News Rankings and enrollment priorities tend to focus on academic profile and revenue generation. Stevens (2007) highlights the relational function of off-campus recruiting visits, stating that “the College’s reputation and the quality of its applicant pool are dependent upon its connections with high schools nationwide” (p. 54) Therefore, during the autumn “travel season,” admissions officers visit selected high schools across the country “to spread word of the institution and maintain relationships with guidance counselors” (p. 53-54) because counselors who view a college favorably will steer students to that college. The College tended to visit the same “feeder” schools year after year because recruiting depends on long-term relationships with high schools. The high schools they visited tend to be affluent schools – in particular, private schools – that possess the resources to host a successful visit and enroll high-achieving students who can afford tuition.

Khan (2010) analyzed recruiting from the perspective of an elite private boarding school in order to understand “how such schools continue to get comparatively under-qualified students into top colleges and universities” (p. 98). Guidance counselors at these schools capitalize on the fact that selective colleges are concerned about their acceptance and yield rates. Therefore, admissions offices value credible information about which applicants will accept or decline an admissions offer. This desire for intelligence creates an opportunity for high school counselors to advocate on behalf of their students. Guidance counselors tell admissions counselors which highly-sought-after applicants are likely to decline an offer, while lobbying for an applicant who has relatively weak academic credentials but is sure to matriculate

and has “character” and extracurricular activities the university values. Khan (2010) states that such horsetrading depends on guidance counselors having personal relationships with university admissions offices and on having small enough caseloads to advocate for each student individually.

2.3 Synthesis

Our review of two literatures – (1) nonresident enrollment by public research universities and (2) linkages between private schools and private colleges – suggests the opportunity to make a bridging contribution to both literatures.

Public universities historically received most of their revenue from state funding and enrollment goals prioritized opportunities for in-state students. As state funding became uncertain, public research universities began to prioritize tuition revenue and sought affluent, out-of-state students who paid high nonresident tuition price. Salazar et al. (2021) show that recruiting visits by public research universities targeted out-of-state public schools in affluent, predominantly white communities. Resource dependence theory suggests that as public research universities become more tuition reliant, they will start behaving more like selective private universities in targeting private schools which tend to enroll affluent students that can to pay high tuition prices. However, prior research has not investigated visits to private schools. For example, which sorts of private schools are public research universities visiting and at what scale?

Scholarship on linkages between private high schools and private universities often focuses on elite high schools and ultra selective universities (Chetty et al., 2023; Cookson & Persell, 1985; Kingston & Lewis, 1990). we know less about linkages between private schools and (merely) select private universities. These universities are self-conscious about their reputation. Despite being relatively affluent, they are much more resource constrained than Ivy Plus universities. Thus, they cannot pursue all enrollment goals with equal vigor. Prior research shows that selective but not elite colleges prioritize academic profile and tuition revenue, potentially at the expense of access [CITE]. Many private high schools enroll students that satisfy both enrollment goals. Aside from the single-institution ethnography by

Stevens (2007), prior scholarship provides little insight about which private schools have relationships with selective private universities.

We argue that a recruiting visit from a university to a private high school is an indicator of a social relationship. Empirically, Stevens (2007) finds that off-campus recruiting visits are important for the maintenance of strong relationships between a college and a high school. Logically, the fact that the college made the effort to visit suggests that the college wants to enroll students from the high school. Similarly, the fact that the high school hosted the visit suggests that the high school likely views the college as a desirable destination for some of its students. Moreover, the presence of the recruiting visit suggests the probability of additional interactions (e.g., phone calls) between the organizations. Conceptualizing a recruiting visit as an indicator of a relationship between a college and a high school motivates the use of social network methods, which analyze the network defined by “network ties” (i.e., visits) between actors (universities and schools).

Because nonresident enrollment is a relatively new phenomenon for most public research universities [CITE], visits to out-of-state private schools are encroachments on territory that was previously the domain of selective private universities and in-state public flagships. These visits suggest that public research universities are competing with selective private universities for private school students. This may be direct competition for the same student or vying to be the second choice for students who are rejected by their top choice. By analyzing the network of recruiting visits, we can determine the extent to which public research universities are visiting the same or similar sets of private high schools. [IN CONTRAST TO LITERATURES THE TWO LITERATURES ABOVE] These analyses provide a novel lens into the nature of competition between public research universities and selective private universities. [ONE MORE SENTENCE TO SHARPEN THE BRIDGING CONTRIBUTION?]

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