

Getting In

The social logic of Ivy League admissions.



By [Malcolm Gladwell](#)

I applied to college one evening, after dinner, in the fall of my senior year in high school. College applicants in Ontario, in those days, were given a single sheet of paper which listed all the universities in the province. It was my job to rank them in order of preference. Then I had to mail the sheet of paper to a central college-admissions office. The whole process probably took ten minutes. My school sent in my grades separately. I vaguely remember filling out a supplementary two-page form listing my interests and activities. There were no S.A.T. scores to worry about, because in Canada we didn't have to take the S.A.T.s. I don't know whether anyone wrote me a recommendation. I certainly never asked anyone to. Why would I? It wasn't as if I were applying to a private club.

I put the University of Toronto first on my list, the University of Western Ontario second, and Queen's University third. I was working off a set of brochures that I'd sent away for. My parents' contribution consisted of my father's agreeing to drive me one afternoon to the University of Toronto campus, where we visited the residential college I was most interested in. I walked around. My father poked his head into the admissions office, chatted with the admissions director, and—I imagine—either said a few short words about the talents of his son or (knowing my father) remarked on the loveliness of the delphiniums in the college flower beds. Then we had ice cream. I got in.

Am I a better or more successful person for having been accepted at the University of Toronto, as opposed to my second or third choice? It strikes me as a curious question. In Ontario, there wasn't a strict hierarchy of colleges. There were several good ones and several better ones and a number of programs—like computer science at the University of Waterloo—that were world-class. But since all colleges were part of the same public system and tuition everywhere was the same (about a thousand dollars a year, in those days), and a B average in high school pretty much guaranteed you a spot in college, there wasn't a sense that anything great was at stake in the choice of which college we attended. The issue was *whether* we attended college, and—most important—how seriously we took the experience once we got there. I thought everyone felt this way. You can imagine my confusion, then, when I first met someone who had gone to Harvard.

There was, first of all, that strange initial reluctance to talk about the matter of college at all—a glance downward, a shuffling of the feet, a mumbled mention of Cambridge. “Did you go to Harvard?” I would ask. I had just moved to the United States. I didn't know the rules. An uncomfortable nod would follow. Don't define me by my school, they seemed to be saying, which implied that their school actually could define them. And, of course, it did. Wherever there was one Harvard graduate, another lurked not far behind, ready to swap tales of late nights at the Hasty Pudding, or recount the intricacies of the college-application essay, or wonder out loud about the whereabouts of Prince So-and-So, who lived down the hall and whose family had a place in the South of France that you would *not* believe. In the novels they were writing, the precocious and sensitive protagonist always went to Harvard; if he was troubled, he dropped out of Harvard; in the end, he returned to Harvard to complete his senior thesis. Once, I attended a wedding of a Harvard alum in his fifties, at which the best man spoke of his college days with the groom as if neither could have accomplished anything of greater importance in the intervening thirty years. By the end, I half expected him to take off his shirt and proudly display the large crimson “H” tattooed on his chest. What is this “Harvard” of which you Americans speak so reverently?

In 1905, Harvard College adopted the College Entrance Examination Board tests as the principal basis for admission, which meant that virtually any academically gifted high-school senior who could afford a private college had a straightforward shot at attending. By 1908, the freshman class was seven per cent Jewish, nine per cent Catholic, and forty-five per cent from public schools, an astonishing transformation for a school that historically had been the preserve of the New England boarding-school complex known in the admissions world as St. Grottlesex.

As the sociologist Jerome Karabel writes in “The Chosen” (Houghton Mifflin; \$28), his remarkable history of the admissions process at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, that meritocratic spirit soon led to a crisis. The enrollment of Jews began to rise dramatically. By 1922, they made up more than a fifth of Harvard’s freshman class. The administration and alumni were up in arms. Jews were thought to be sickly and grasping, grade-grubbing and insular. They displaced the sons of wealthy Wasp alumni, which did not bode well for fund-raising. A. Lawrence Lowell, Harvard’s president in the nineteen-twenties, stated flatly that too many Jews would destroy the school: “The summer hotel that is ruined by admitting Jews meets its fate . . . because they drive away the Gentiles, and then after the Gentiles have left, they leave also.”

The difficult part, however, was coming up with a way of keeping Jews out, because as a group they were academically superior to everyone else. Lowell’s first idea—a quota limiting Jews to fifteen per cent of the student body—was roundly criticized. Lowell tried restricting the number of scholarships given to Jewish students, and made an effort to bring in students from public schools in the West, where there were fewer Jews. Neither strategy worked. Finally, Lowell—and his counterparts at Yale and Princeton—realized that if a definition of merit based on academic prowess was leading to the wrong kind of student, the solution was to change the definition of merit. Karabel argues that it was at this moment that the history and nature of the Ivy League took a significant turn.

The admissions office at Harvard became much more interested in the details of an applicant's personal life. Lowell told his admissions officers to elicit information about the "character" of candidates from "persons who know the applicants well," and so the letter of reference became mandatory. Harvard started asking applicants to provide a photograph. Candidates had to write personal essays, demonstrating their aptitude for leadership, and list their extracurricular activities. "Starting in the fall of 1922," Karabel writes, "applicants were required to answer questions on 'Race and Color,' 'Religious Preference,' 'Maiden Name of Mother,' 'Birthplace of Father,' and 'What change, if any, has been made since birth in your own name or that of your father? (Explain fully).'"

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At Princeton, emissaries were sent to the major boarding schools, with instructions to rate potential candidates on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 was "very desirable and apparently exceptional material from every point of view" and 4 was "undesirable from the point of view of character, and, therefore, to be excluded no matter what the results of the entrance examinations might be." The personal interview became a key component of admissions in order, Karabel writes, "to ensure that 'undesirables' were identified and to assess important but subtle indicators of background and breeding such as speech, dress, deportment and physical appearance." By 1933, the end of Lowell's term, the percentage of Jews at Harvard was back down to fifteen per cent.

If this new admissions system seems familiar, that's because it is essentially the same system that the Ivy League uses to this day. According to Karabel, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton didn't abandon the elevation of character once the Jewish crisis passed. They institutionalized it.

Starting in 1953, Arthur Howe, Jr., spent a decade as the chair of admissions at Yale, and Karabel describes what happened under his guidance:

***{: .break one} ** The admissions committee viewed evidence of “manliness” with particular enthusiasm. One boy gained admission despite an academic prediction of 70 because “there was apparently something manly and distinctive about him that had won over both his alumni and staff interviewers.” Another candidate, admitted despite his schoolwork being “mediocre in comparison with many others,” was accepted over an applicant with a much better record and higher exam scores because, as Howe put it, “we just thought he was more of a guy.” So preoccupied was Yale with the appearance of its students that the form used by alumni interviewers actually had a physical characteristics checklist through 1965. Each year, Yale carefully measured the height of entering freshmen, noting with pride the proportion of the class at six feet or more. ***

At Harvard, the key figure in that same period was Wilbur Bender, who, as the dean of admissions, had a preference for “the boy with some athletic interests and abilities, the boy with physical vigor and coordination and grace.” Bender, Karabel tells us, believed that if Harvard continued to suffer on the football field it would contribute to the school’s reputation as a place with “no college spirit, few good fellows, and no vigorous, healthy social life,” not to mention a “surfeit of ‘pansies,’ ‘decadent esthetes’ and ‘precious sophisticates.’” Bender concentrated on improving Harvard’s techniques for evaluating “intangibles” and, in particular, its “ability to detect homosexual tendencies and serious psychiatric problems.”

By the nineteen-sixties, Harvard’s admissions system had evolved into a series of complex algorithms. The school began by lumping all applicants into one of twenty-two dockets, according to their geographical origin. (There was one docket for Exeter and Andover, another for the eight Rocky Mountain states.) Information from interviews, references, and student essays was then used to grade each applicant on a scale of 1 to 6, along four dimensions: personal, academic, extracurricular, and athletic. Competition, critically, was

within each docket, not between dockets, so there was no way for, say, the graduates of Bronx Science and Stuyvesant to shut out the graduates of Andover and Exeter. More important, academic achievement was just one of four dimensions, further diluting the value of pure intellectual accomplishment. Athletic ability, rather than falling under “extracurriculars,” got a category all to itself, which explains why, even now, recruited athletes have an acceptance rate to the Ivies at well over twice the rate of other students, despite S.A.T. scores that are on average more than a hundred points lower. And the most important category? That mysterious index of “personal” qualities. According to Harvard’s own analysis, the personal rating was a better predictor of admission than the academic rating. Those with a rank of 4 or worse on the personal scale had, in the nineteen-sixties, a rejection rate of ninety-eight per cent. Those with a personal rating of 1 had a rejection rate of 2.5 per cent. When the Office of Civil Rights at the federal education department investigated Harvard in the nineteen-eighties, they found handwritten notes scribbled in the margins of various candidates’ files. “This young woman could be one of the brightest applicants in the pool but there are several references to shyness,” read one. Another comment reads, “Seems a tad frothy.” One application—and at this point you can almost hear it going to the bottom of the pile—was notated, “Short with big ears.”

Social scientists distinguish between what are known as treatment effects and selection effects. The Marine Corps, for instance, is largely a treatment-effect institution. It doesn’t have an enormous admissions office grading applicants along four separate dimensions of toughness and intelligence. It’s confident that the experience of undergoing Marine Corps basic training will turn you into a formidable soldier. A modelling agency, by contrast, is a selection-effect institution. You don’t become beautiful by signing up with an agency. You get signed up by an agency because you’re beautiful.

At the heart of the American obsession with the Ivy League is the belief that schools like Harvard provide the social and intellectual equivalent of Marine Corps basic training—that being taught by all those brilliant professors and meeting all those other motivated students and getting a degree with that powerful name on it will

confer advantages that no local state university can provide. Fuelling the treatment-effect idea are studies showing that if you take two students with the same S.A.T. scores and grades, one of whom goes to a school like Harvard and one of whom goes to a less selective college, the Ivy Leaguer will make far more money ten or twenty years down the road.

The extraordinary emphasis the Ivy League places on admissions policies, though, makes it seem more like a modelling agency than like the Marine Corps, and, sure enough, the studies based on those two apparently equivalent students turn out to be flawed. How do we know that two students who have the same S.A.T. scores and grades really are equivalent? It's quite possible that the student who goes to Harvard is more ambitious and energetic and personable than the student who wasn't let in, and that those same intangibles are what account for his better career success. To assess the effect of the Ivies, it makes more sense to compare the student who got into a top school with the student who got into that same school but chose to go to a less selective one. Three years ago, the economists Alan Krueger and Stacy Dale published just such a study. And they found that when you compare apples and apples the income bonus from selective schools disappears.

“As a hypothetical example, take the University of Pennsylvania and Penn State, which are two schools a lot of students choose between,” Krueger said. “One is Ivy, one is a state school. Penn is much more highly selective. If you compare the students who go to those two schools, the ones who go to Penn have higher incomes. But let's look at those who got into both types of schools, some of whom chose Penn and some of whom chose Penn State. Within that set it doesn't seem to matter whether you go to the more selective school. Now, you would think that the more ambitious student is the one who would choose to go to Penn, and the ones choosing to go to Penn State might be a little less confident in their abilities or have a little lower family income, and both of those factors would point to people doing worse later on. But they don't.”

Krueger says that there is one exception to this. Students from the very lowest economic strata do seem to benefit from going to an Ivy. For most students, though, the general rule seems to be that if you are a hardworking and intelligent person you'll end up doing well regardless of where you went to school. You'll make good contacts at Penn. But Penn State is big enough and diverse enough that you can make good contacts there, too. Having Penn on your résumé opens doors. But if you were good enough to get into Penn you're good enough that those doors will open for you anyway. "I can see why families are really concerned about this," Krueger went on. "The average graduate from a top school is making nearly a hundred and twenty thousand dollars a year, the average graduate from a moderately selective school is making ninety thousand dollars. That's an enormous difference, and I can see why parents would fight to get their kids into the better school. But I think they are just assigning to the school a lot of what the student is bringing with him to the school."

Bender was succeeded as the dean of admissions at Harvard by Fred Glimp, who, Karabel tells us, had a particular concern with academic underperformers. "Any class, no matter how able, will always have a bottom quarter," Glimp once wrote. "What are the effects of the psychology of feeling average, even in a very able group? Are there identifiable types with the psychological or what-not tolerance to be 'happy' or to make the most of education while in the bottom quarter?" Glimp thought it was critical that the students who populated the lower rungs of every Harvard class weren't so driven and ambitious that they would be disturbed by their status. "Thus the renowned (some would say notorious) Harvard admission practice known as the 'happy-bottom-quarter' policy was born," Karabel writes.

It's unclear whether or not Glimp found any students who fit that particular description. (He wondered, in a marvellously honest moment, whether the answer was "Harvard sons.") But Glimp had the realism of the modelling scout. Glimp believed implicitly what Krueger and Dale later confirmed: that the character and performance of an academic class is determined, to a significant extent, at the point

of admission; that if you want to graduate winners you have to admit winners; that if you want the bottom quarter of your class to succeed you have to find people capable of succeeding in the bottom quarter. Karabel is quite right, then, to see the events of the nineteen-twenties as the defining moment of the modern Ivy League. You are whom you admit in the élite-education business, and when Harvard changed whom it admitted, it changed Harvard. Was that change for the better or for the worse?

In the wake of the Jewish crisis, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton chose to adopt what might be called the “best graduates” approach to admissions. France’s École Normale Supérieure, Japan’s University of Tokyo, and most of the world’s other élite schools define their task as looking for the best students—that is, the applicants who will have the greatest academic success during their time in college. The Ivy League schools justified their emphasis on character and personality, however, by arguing that they were searching for the students who would have the greatest success *after* college. They were looking for leaders, and leadership, the officials of the Ivy League believed, was not a simple matter of academic brilliance. “Should our goal be to select a student body with the highest possible proportions of high-ranking students, or should it be to select, within a reasonably high range of academic ability, a student body with a certain variety of talents, qualities, attitudes, and backgrounds?” Wilbur Bender asked. To him, the answer was obvious. If you let in only the brilliant, then you produced bookworms and bench scientists: you ended up as socially irrelevant as the University of Chicago (an institution Harvard officials looked upon and shuddered). “Above a reasonably good level of mental ability, above that indicated by a 550-600 level of S.A.T. score,” Bender went on, “the only thing that matters in terms of future impact on, or contribution to, society is the degree of personal inner force an individual has.”

It’s easy to find fault with the best-graduates approach. We tend to think that intellectual achievement is the fairest and highest standard of merit. The Ivy League process, quite apart from its dubious origins, seems subjective and opaque. Why should personality and athletic ability matter so much? The notion that “the ability to throw, kick, or

hit a ball is a legitimate criterion in determining who should be admitted to our greatest research universities,” Karabel writes, is “a proposition that would be considered laughable in most of the world’s countries.” At the same time that Harvard was constructing its byzantine admissions system, Hunter College Elementary School, in New York, required simply that applicants take an exam, and if they scored in the top fifty they got in. It’s hard to imagine a more objective and transparent procedure.

But what did Hunter achieve with that best-students model? In the nineteen-eighties, a handful of educational researchers surveyed the students who attended the elementary school between 1948 and 1960. [The results were published in 1993 as “Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up,” by Rena Subotnik, Lee Kassan, Ellen Summers, and Alan Wasser.] This was a group with an average I.Q. of 157—three and a half standard deviations above the mean—who had been given what, by any measure, was one of the finest classroom experiences in the world. As graduates, though, they weren’t nearly as distinguished as they were expected to be. “Although most of our study participants are successful and fairly content with their lives and accomplishments,” the authors conclude, “there are no superstars . . . and only one or two familiar names.” The researchers spend a great deal of time trying to figure out why Hunter graduates are so disappointing, and end up sounding very much like Wilbur Bender. Being a smart child isn’t a terribly good predictor of success in later life, they conclude. “Non-intellective” factors—like motivation and social skills—probably matter more. Perhaps, the study suggests, “after noting the sacrifices involved in trying for national or world-class leadership in a field, H.C.E.S. graduates decided that the intelligent thing to do was to choose relatively happy and successful lives.” It is a wonderful thing, of course, for a school to turn out lots of relatively happy and successful graduates. But Harvard didn’t want lots of relatively happy and successful graduates. It wanted superstars, and Bender and his colleagues recognized that if this is your goal a best-students model isn’t enough.

Most elite law schools, to cite another example, follow a best-students model. That’s why they rely so heavily on the L.S.A.T. Yet there’s no

reason to believe that a person's L.S.A.T. scores have much relation to how good a lawyer he will be. In a recent research project funded by the Law School Admission Council, the Berkeley researchers Sheldon Zedeck and Marjorie Shultz identified twenty-six "competencies" that they think effective lawyering demands—among them practical judgment, passion and engagement, legal-research skills, questioning and interviewing skills, negotiation skills, stress management, and so on—and the L.S.A.T. picks up only a handful of them. A law school that wants to select the best possible lawyers has to use a very different admissions process from a law school that wants to select the best possible law students. And wouldn't we prefer that at least some law schools try to select good lawyers instead of good law students?

This search for good lawyers, furthermore, is necessarily going to be subjective, because things like passion and engagement can't be measured as precisely as academic proficiency. Subjectivity in the admissions process is not just an occasion for discrimination; it is also, in better times, the only means available for giving us the social outcome we want. The first black captain of the Yale football team was a man named Levi Jackson, who graduated in 1950. Jackson was a hugely popular figure on campus. He went on to be a top executive at Ford, and is credited with persuading the company to hire thousands of African-Americans after the 1967 riots. When Jackson was tapped for the exclusive secret society Skull and Bones, he joked, "If my name had been reversed, I never would have made it." He had a point. The strategy of discretion that Yale had once used to exclude Jews was soon being used to include people like Levi Jackson.

In the 2001 book "The Game of Life," James L. Shulman and William Bowen (a former president of Princeton) conducted an enormous statistical analysis on an issue that has become one of the most contentious in admissions: the special preferences given to recruited athletes at selective universities. Athletes, Shulman and Bowen demonstrate, have a large and growing advantage in admission over everyone else. At the same time, they have markedly lower G.P.A.s and S.A.T. scores than their peers. Over the past twenty years, their class rankings have steadily dropped, and they

tend to segregate themselves in an “athletic culture” different from the culture of the rest of the college. Shulman and Bowen think the preference given to athletes by the Ivy League is shameful.

Halfway through the book, however, Shulman and Bowen present what they call a “surprising” finding. Male athletes, despite their lower S.A.T. scores and grades, and despite the fact that many of them are members of minorities and come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds than other students, turn out to earn a lot more than their peers. Apparently, athletes are far more likely to go into the high-paying financial-services sector, where they succeed because of their personality and psychological makeup. In what can only be described as a textbook example of burying the lead, Bowen and Shulman write:

***{: .break one} ** One of these characteristics can be thought of as drive—a strong desire to succeed and unswerving determination to reach a goal, whether it be winning the next game or closing a sale. Similarly, athletes tend to be more energetic than the average person, which translates into an ability to work hard over long periods of time—to meet, for example, the workload demands placed on young people by an investment bank in the throes of analyzing a transaction. In addition, athletes are more likely than others to be highly competitive, gregarious and confident of their ability to work well in groups (on teams). ***

Shulman and Bowen would like to argue that the attitudes of selective colleges toward athletes are a perversion of the ideals of American élite education, but that’s because they misrepresent the actual ideals of American élite education. The Ivy League is perfectly happy to accept, among others, the kind of student who makes a lot of money after graduation. As the old saying goes, the definition of a well-rounded Yale graduate is someone who can roll all the way from New Haven to Wall Street.

I once had a conversation with someone who worked for an advertising agency that represented one of the big luxury automobile brands. He said that he was worried that his client’s new lower-priced line was being bought disproportionately by black women. He

insisted that he did not mean this in a racist way. It was just a fact, he said. Black women would destroy the brand's cachet. It was his job to protect his client from the attentions of the socially undesirable.

This is, in no small part, what Ivy League admissions directors do. They are in the luxury-brand-management business, and "The Chosen," in the end, is a testament to just how well the brand managers in Cambridge, New Haven, and Princeton have done their job in the past seventy-five years. In the nineteenthcenties, when Harvard tried to figure out how many Jews they had on campus, the admissions office scoured student records and assigned each suspected Jew the designation j1 (for someone who was "conclusively Jewish"), j2 (where the "preponderance of evidence" pointed to Jewishness), or j3 (where Jewishness was a "possibility"). In the branding world, this is called customer segmentation. In the Second World War, as Yale faced plummeting enrollment and revenues, it continued to turn down qualified Jewish applicants. As Karabel writes, "In the language of sociology, Yale judged its symbolic capital to be even more precious than its economic capital." No good brand manager would sacrifice reputation for short-term gain. The admissions directors at Harvard have always, similarly, been diligent about rewarding the children of graduates, or, as they are quaintly called, "legacies." In the 1985-92 period, for instance, Harvard admitted children of alumni at a rate more than twice that of non-athlete, non-legacy applicants, despite the fact that, on virtually every one of the school's magical ratings scales, legacies significantly lagged behind their peers. Karabel calls the practice "unmeritocratic at best and profoundly corrupt at worst," but rewarding customer loyalty is what luxury brands do. Harvard wants good graduates, and part of their definition of a good graduate is someone who is a generous and loyal alumnus. And if you want generous and loyal alumni you have to reward them. Aren't the tremendous resources provided to Harvard by its alumni part of the reason so many people want to go to Harvard in the first place? The endless battle over admissions in the United States proceeds on the assumption that some great moral principle is at stake in the matter of whom schools like Harvard choose to let in—that those who are denied admission by the whims of the admissions office have somehow been harmed. If you

are sick and a hospital shuts its doors to you, you are harmed. But a selective school is not a hospital, and those it turns away are not sick. Élite schools, like any luxury brand, are an aesthetic experience—an exquisitely constructed fantasy of what it means to belong to an élite—and they have always been mindful of what must be done to maintain that experience.

In the nineteen-eighties, when Harvard was accused of enforcing a secret quota on Asian admissions, its defense was that once you adjusted for the preferences given to the children of alumni and for the preferences given to athletes, Asians really weren't being discriminated against. But you could sense Harvard's exasperation that the issue was being raised at all. If Harvard had too many Asians, it wouldn't be Harvard, just as Harvard wouldn't be Harvard with too many Jews or pansies or parlor pinks or shy types or short people with big ears. ♦



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