



THE ELITE SCHOOLS

by Martin Kaplan

There are perhaps 50 "elite" colleges and universities among the 3,000 institutions of higher education in the United States. They are, as their brochures plainly admit, highly selective; 3 out of 4 applicants for admission regularly fail to pass through the needle's eye. They are also expensive: \$8,000 or more for a year in collegiate heaven. A few of them (such as the University of California at Berkeley) are public schools, the flagship campuses of state institutions. But most are private in governance and finance—"independent" is the word their Washington lobbyists prefer to use—although many now receive more than half of their support from tax dollars.

These elite schools are not homogeneous. Some of them (like Swarthmore) are almost exclusively for undergraduates, but more often (as at the University of Chicago) the college belongs to a complex that also includes graduate and professional schools, laboratories, research institutes, and libraries. Some, like Emory and Vanderbilt, have traditionally strong regional ties; others, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, have built exceptionally high reputations in particular fields. Still others have strong religious ties, such as Brandeis (Jewish) or Georgetown (Catholic). Often their faculties are internationally known and get regular invitations to government powwows and intellectual spas—Aspen, Bellagio, Woods Hole, L'Arcouest. And there are self-conscious sub-clubs within the 50—the Ivy League, the Little Three, the Seven Sisters, the Council of Twelve medical schools—to promote further recognition of their special relationship with excellence.

Such are the elite colleges and universities—"this incredible Disneyland," as one Harvard student aptly put it. The family resemblance that unites them springs partly from common resources (bright students, residential campuses, Nobel laureates), partly from common values.* Their ideology, articulated by college presidents with staggering frequency, is consistent with the enlightened liberalism of the larger society's

*One man's elite university or college may be another man's borderline case, but there is little argument among academics over the elite status of schools named in this essay.—ED.

elite culture. Academic freedom, the marketplace of ideas, a pluralism of approaches, the glorious lack of utility of the liberal arts, the intrinsic worth of knowledge—no anthropologist of the elite university would fail to collect these proud slogans.

But patient field work would also uncover another cluster of attitudes, notably a deep condescension toward the less privileged universities, whose tragic dependence on attracting students (“clienteles”) enforces a putative dilution of standards and pollution of the curriculum. As Joseph Epstein, editor of the *American Scholar*, put it recently, “Nearly everyone who teaches in a contemporary [non-elite] university has seen transcripts of students whose course lists read like the table of contents of *Harper’s* or the *Atlantic*; or, worse, *Psychology Today*. Undergraduate education is fast coming to resemble nothing so much as a four-year magazine—and, like a magazine, once one has completed it, one might as well throw it away.”

A New Diversity

But elite universities tacitly extend a long-term promissory note to their students: an elite *outcome* that lasts a lifetime. This is perhaps their most marketable distinction. The famous Grant Study of the “normal boy,” begun jointly at Harvard in 1940 by philanthropist William T. Grant and the university’s hygiene department, has doggedly followed with interviews and questionnaires the lives of several hundred Harvard men. In 1977 the director of the Grant Study published the check list he uses to sort alumni into “best outcomes” and “worst outcomes.” The average *worst* outcome, one learns, involved a chap who “graduated from college, often with honors, had won a commission and good officer-fitness reports from the Army, had married and raised children who also completed college, was steadily employed as a professional or upper-echelon business executive, enjoyed an average income of more than \$25,000 in 1967, surpassed his father’s occupational success, and at 45 was still in good physical health.”

Not a bad prospect, then, for the elite university student. Graduates of such institutions take in, on the average, about 20 percent more income during their lifetimes than their counterparts (of comparable Scholastic Aptitude Test scores) holding less hallowed sheepskins. Bigger bucks are not the only satisfaction; the young elite graduate is encouraged to measure his—and increasingly, her—career success in intangible terms as well: “influence,” “creativity,” “prestige,” “job satisfaction.” Not to mention the warm, inner sensation that one is somehow

better, more sophisticated, more *worthy*.

Managing alumni affairs—and raising money—requires full-time, year-round staff at many elite institutions. Old Boys—tailored and tweedy, as well as the post-1960s design-research-and-good-dope variety—are notoriously keen to exercise university oversight and to carouse with their peers every fifth spring. The alumni magazines detail the good life to be had after graduation; their advertisements for Cunard cruises, “asset management,” and Oriental rugs confer consumer solidity on the Cardinal Newman boilerplate of the undergraduate years. As for editorial content, the “Stress and How to Cope With It” article seems to be the thriving genre in alumni publications. Better stressed and from Stanford, one infers, than “laid back” and from Contra Costa Community College.

Of the 11 million American undergraduates paying tuition at some sort of college today, perhaps 3 percent enjoy the special dividends of elite institutions. As always, their campus activities—newspapers, theaters, radio stations—are likely to be semiprofessional in quality. Their professors have probably contributed their surnames to “seminal” papers in their fields; the graduate students who actually do most of the teaching have survived innumerable byzantine screenings by the professoriat; and the undergraduates are not only bright but, for the first time in history, reflect the social diversity of the world outside.

Before World War II, elite institutions were largely WASP bastions with tacit quotas for Jews, Catholics, commuters, and urban public-school whiz kids. Women (except in colleges of their own) and blacks were largely absent. Nearly all that has changed. At Princeton, for example, both co-education and minority recruitment have arrived. Between 1972 and 1976, the proportion of “Hispanic-surname” undergraduates there increased sevenfold, and the proportion of total minority enrollment in the college rose by nearly 60 percent. Over the last decade, Stanford has more than doubled the number of blacks in the university while its Chicano enrollment rose by a factor of 10. Minorities (not including “Asian-Americans”) today account

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for 10 percent of its student body, four times what the figure was a decade ago.

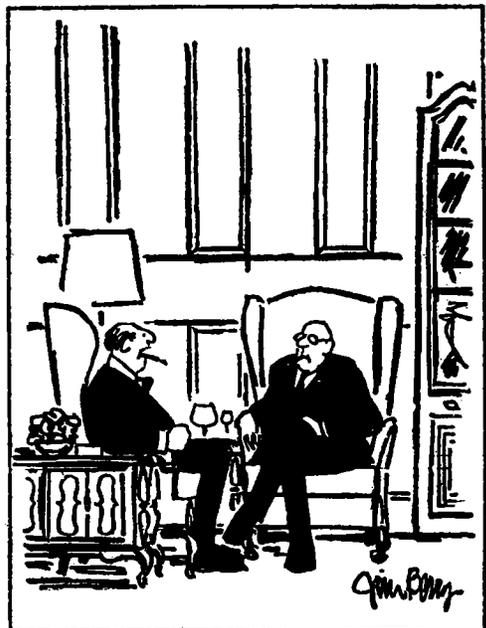
As for women, although affirmative action policies at the graduate school and faculty level are as yet far from effective, undergraduate co-education has been widely applauded as another forward step, even if some Old Boys grumble. Yet, as a way to maintain a unique institutional identity, some elite women's colleges—such as Smith, the largest, with 2,500 students—have resisted co-education. Some academic advantages may in fact follow from sex segregation: While few women at co-educational institutions major in the hard sciences and mathematics, at all-female Smith, 30 percent choose to spend their college years with graph paper and Bunsen burners.

Farewell to Activism

A decade ago, one fine spring morning, a Boston newspaper ran a headline screaming, "Rebels Maul Harvard Dean." Student strikes, campus bombings, and classroom disruptions were part of the elite university landscape from Berkeley to Columbia; so, too, were administrative trysts with local police squads, a persistent faculty willingness to seek federal contracts, and student loathing for the "best and brightest." But by nearly all accounts, today's elite undergraduates are busily reverting to more traditional outlets for their energies. Old-style fun has returned to the campus, albeit without the patrician gloss of yesteryear. A few years back, Dartmouth's Winter Carnival was languishing; this year, a snow sculpture graced nearly every dormitory and fraternity house. Fraternity pledging at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville is booming, and Yale's senior societies, though shorn of much mystique, are thriving; the formal dinner dance has returned unself-consciously to Princeton.

Careers and salary prospects are addressed by students with the kind of calculating sobriety one expects from a Morgan Guaranty Bank officer. Forty percent of Harvard's Class of '77 intended to continue their education in some sort of graduate school, the lowest percentage in the last 20 years; the other 60 percent said they were dubious about the rewards to be gained from graduate study. A recent list of the most popular courses at Harvard was led by the introductory "Principles of Economics," with nearly 1,000 students. The rest of the top 10, in order: "Oral and Early Literature" and "Cosmic Evolution" ("outrageous guts," or nondemanding courses, as one undergraduate describes them); then "Automatic Computing," "Organic

"CONFUSED—
of course, I'm confused!
I have a son at Vassar
and a daughter at Yale!"



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Chemistry," "Introduction to the History of Art" (to allay cocktail-party paranoia), "Organismic and Evolutionary Biology," "Introduction to the Calculus," "Introduction to Chemistry," and "Financial Accounting."

Pre-business and pre-medicine, with a bit of alleged academic excelsior: Faculty reverence for liberal arts and excellence notwithstanding, the elite curriculum's recent convergence with the community college's more candid identification with students' career goals is too dramatic to go unnoticed. Among many elite undergraduates such material aspirations take their toll. University psychiatric counseling centers are more popular on campus than even the Merrill Lynch recruiter. The mental health center at Princeton is heavily booked, with quick appointments for all but emergencies nearly impossible to obtain. The director of Harvard's health services describes his establishment's strategy this way: "We try to guide students into seeking self-esteem in their relations with others rather than through their achievements." He adds, "You shouldn't have to get accepted to law school or medical school to get self-esteem."

While careerism has flourished, political activism has been largely dormant since the September after Kent State. The uni-

versities' indirect investments in faraway South Africa have stirred the only notable campus political action. At Stanford, 294 students were arrested at an investment policy sit-in, and 58 were hauled in at Berkeley. Amherst and Harvard each decided to dump \$600,000 worth of their South Africa-related portfolios, and Citibank—sniffing a trend—has decided against future loans to Johannesburg.

But these episodic eruptions are the exception. Conservative intellectuals may argue that elite education's Disneyland now serves as an incubator for a facile, fashionable, and ultimately pernicious radicalism; but early returns suggest the opposite. "We are veterans of the Battle of Harvard," declared one senior speaker at Harvard's Class Day last year. "All too often the wounds inflicted here do not inform us, but rather frustrate or deaden us. We abandon social and personal ideals once held. We lose the confidence to take the road less traveled." What has been lost, in my view, is more than the youthful radicalism of the 1960s; the critical spirit itself seems to have been anesthetized by the narcissism of "let it be."

At best, as a University of Chicago graduate student put it, one sees "a longing for a moral issue"—that is, a galvanizing moral issue. Sociologist Martin Duberman's assessment of political life on campus is probably the most sanguine analysis coming from the academic Left:

The challenge to patriarchy and the challenge to capitalism are the only two radical games in town (the challenge to racism having long since receded). Currently [the players] view each other (with individual exceptions) with deep suspicion. Both have made significant gains in the past few years, with the feminist momentum more pronounced. But neither feminists nor socialists have captured the allegiance of the campus majority. Nor, unlike previous minorities (SDS, say, or the hippies), have they succeeded in setting a generation's agenda or style.

The only issue to galvanize Harvard students recently has been President Derek Bok's cost-cutting plan for the dining halls. A spring protest march through the Yard—"We like it hot," read one placard opposing the introduction of cold, Continental breakfasts—was staged as self-conscious parody of 1960s-style activism. (A "Stop Bombing Hanoi" sign was also spotted in the crowd.) Today John Connally and William Colby lecture on campuses without incident. Instead of issues (or villains), students focus on procedures: "We have a lot more Joe College

types serving on advisory boards," says one Stanford faculty member. Stagnant, smug, grade-grubbing, bored, quietist, tired: Relevant exceptions acknowledged, these are nevertheless the most common words one hears to describe student life on elite campuses today. Few would suggest, of course, that radicalism per se is a measure of worth; nor would everyone agree that the '60s activists were the best and brightest students of any recent generation. Yet the current lack of spark and spirit on campus suggests the absence of other qualities as well. Imagination? "Commitment"? A sense of the absurd?

While a melancholy fringe of young faculty and graduate students looks back at the '60s with nostalgia, elite university administrators also think longingly of those times—not for their almost seasonal confrontations, of course, but for the financial cushion the pre-OPEC, pre-inflation, Wall Street go-go years provided. Enrollments were still growing; portfolios were expanding; alumni felt good about giving. Administrative success could be measured by new buildings erected, juicy foundation and federal grants snagged, eminent scholars seduced away from rival institutions, and radical groups neutralized.

With Special Gravity

Leaner times have sired leaner styles. In 1967 the Ford Foundation gave \$71.8 million to higher education, including \$33 million in challenge grants alone. A decade later, Ford's university total had fallen to \$17.3 million. Between 1974 and 1978, the Danforth Foundation's higher-education grants were cut by 90 percent, and the number of prized graduate fellowships it awarded annually was reduced from 180 to 100. Government is now probably the most important single contributor to elite higher education's income through student aid and research grants; it has nevertheless become their public enemy No. 1. Today's annual reports by elite university presidents—complete with dark warnings of Washington intervention and the murderous costs of compliance with affirmative action and other regulations—could *mutatis mutandis* have come from any General Motors chairman fed up with bureaucratic meddling. While university administrators gird for battle with HEW, a vocal alliance of minorities, feminists, and their sympathizers among graduate students and professors is making common cause with Washington, seeing aggressive enforcement of civil-rights and sex-discrimination laws as the best hope for social progress in university policies.

Few episodes better illustrate more garishly the plight of

today's elite university administrators than last year's somewhat Romish search for a new president of Yale, whose money managers apparently thought the go-go years would go on forever.

First, Yale's financial problems were discussed with the special gravity once associated with deathbed reports on popes and prime ministers. During the 1977-78 Yale search, the provost of a distinguished West Coast university—a man otherwise known for his sobriety and judgment—was asked about Yale's multimillion-dollar deficit at a dinner party. "God," he exclaimed, "I hope that place doesn't go down."

A New Mission?

Second, with money tight, the ascendant model of the perfect elite administrator is the fiscal-expert-*cum*-hatchetman. One Yale candidate—with long experience as top administrator of a prestigious public university—was asked during an interview how Yale might have to change in the 1980s. After he had replied, speaking mainly of the need for vision and for adapting to new social challenges, a member of the search committee commented, "You know, you're the first candidate not to talk to us about installing a new computer management system."

Third, running an elite university is no longer the obvious top job for American academics aspiring to greatness. After five people had withdrawn from consideration for the Yale post or had turned down the job outright, Clark Kerr, former University of California president, told the *New York Times*, "It's the thinnest market I've ever seen for college presidents," and William P. Bundy, the Yale search committee chairman, admitted, "It's not a glamorous period for higher education. It's hard to be a great Olympian."

Fourth, the professors are restless. When A. Bartlett Giamatti, a respected Yale Renaissance scholar, was finally named Eli's 18th president,* his academic well-wishers leapt to the *New York Times* op-ed page to warn him that (a) he would have to achieve distance from his former faculty colleagues, thrive on bureaucratic pressure, and do time at the Washington front; and (b) that he would inherit a Yale faculty "near the end of its patience," chomping "to reclaim the authority and power it has lost, and regain its deserved share in the university budget."

Elite universities help to shape their times and are shaped

*Harvard's Dean Henry Rosovsky had turned down the job because, he said in effect, he wanted to continue to be involved in education.

by them. If they wish to contribute intelligence and leadership to America's third century as they did, at their best, to its first and second, their success will depend in large measure on their power to address the ways this brave new world differs from the more comfortable one just left behind. The greatest challenge facing elite universities today is not providing the nation's luckiest, brightest, most ambitious teen-agers with even more advantages; it is not pushing already breathtaking research even further into the ionosphere, or shaping public policy and taste even more effectively. It is not even sheer survival (so far). The greatest challenge is to help all of higher education reinvent its mission in the face of the largest, most diverse, and academically least-prepared college-going population in American history.

For a few public elite institutions, this new heterogeneous student body may require a radical transformation of purpose. A recent survey of "America's intellectual elite" found that more than one-third of them had (a generation or two ago) attended four colleges: Harvard, City College of New York, Yale, and Columbia, in that order. Not long ago the City University of New York disclosed that its single biggest remedial (reading and writing) program in 1976 was conducted at City College. As the *Times* reported, 37 percent of 14,500 undergraduates were "taking remedial classes at what used to be called the 'proletarian Harvard.'" Where CCNY requires money and vision to adapt to its new tasks, enlightened liberals instead extend their sympathy, and privately scratch City College off the approved list.

But most elite institutions will not have to endure the agony of losing their Michelin stars. For them, the challenge is to help all of higher education learn to serve the other 97 percent of American students without snobbism, condescension, or despair. One victory the elite institutions have largely achieved in our status-conscious society, alas, is convincing many of the students, faculty, and administrators of some 3,000 colleges and universities that their work is at best second-rate, faddish, essentially remedial, and often hopeless. With the lecture rooms and student aid for mass American higher education now in place, a new mission for that challenging enterprise needs to be born—though whether it will come out of Stanford, Chicago, and Cambridge, Mass., is far from clear.