

Who Needs Harvard?

The pressure on smart kids to get into top schools has never been higher. But the differences between these schools and the next tier down have never been smaller.

By Gregg Easterbrook

Atlantic Monthly contributing editor Gregg Easterbrook on why the college-admissions process need not be a confidence-shattering ordeal.

Today almost everyone seems to assume that the critical moment in young people's lives is finding out which colleges have accepted them. Winning admission to an elite school is imagined to be a golden passport to success; for bright students, failing to do so is seen as a major life setback. As a result, the fixation on getting into a super-selective college or university has never been greater. Parents' expectations that their children will attend top schools have "risen substantially" in the past decade, says Jim Conroy, the head of college counseling at New Trier High School, in Winnetka, Illinois. He adds, "Parents regularly tell me, 'I want whatever is highest-ranked.'" Shirley Levin, of Rockville, Maryland, who has worked as a college-admissions consultant for twenty-three years, concurs: "Never have stress levels for high school students been so high about where they get in, or about the idea that if you don't get into a glamour college, your life is somehow ruined."

Admissions mania focuses most intensely on what might be called the Gotta-Get-Ins, the colleges with maximum allure. The twenty-five Gotta-Get-Ins of the moment, according to admissions officers, are the Ivies (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Penn, Princeton, and Yale), plus Amherst, Berkeley, Caltech, Chicago, Duke, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, MIT, Northwestern, Pomona, Smith, Stanford, Swarthmore, Vassar, Washington University in St. Louis, Wellesley, and Williams. Some students and their parents have always been obsessed with getting into the best colleges, of course. But as a result of rising population, rising affluence, and rising awareness of the value of education, *millions* of families are now in a state of nervous collapse regarding college admissions. Moreover, although the total number of college applicants keeps increasing, the number of freshman slots at the elite colleges has changed little. Thus competition for elite-college admission has grown ever more cutthroat. Each year more and more bright, qualified high school seniors don't receive the coveted thick envelope from a Gotta-Get-In.

But what if the basis for all this stress and disappointment—the idea that getting into an elite college makes a big difference in life—is wrong? What if it turns out that going to the "highest ranked" school hardly matters at all?

The researchers Alan Krueger and Stacy Berg Dale began investigating this question, and in 1999 produced a study that dropped a bomb on the notion of elite-college attendance as essential to success later in life. Krueger, a Princeton economist, and Dale, affiliated with the Andrew Mellon Foundation, began by comparing students who entered Ivy League and similar schools in 1976 with students who entered less prestigious colleges the same year. They found, for instance, that by 1995 Yale graduates were earning 30 percent more than Tulane graduates, which seemed to support the assumption that attending an elite college smoothes one's path in life.

But maybe the kids who got into Yale were simply more talented or hardworking than those who got into Tulane. To adjust for this, Krueger and Dale studied what happened to students who were accepted at an Ivy or a similar institution, but chose instead to attend a less sexy, "moderately selective" school. It turned out that such students had, on average, the same income twenty years later as graduates of the elite colleges. Krueger and Dale found that for students bright enough to win admission to a top school, later income "varied little, no matter which type of college they attended." In other words, the student, not the school, was responsible for the success.

Research does find an unmistakable advantage to getting a bachelor's degree. In 2002, according to Census Bureau figures, the mean income of college graduates was almost double that of those holding only high school diplomas. Trends in the knowledge-based economy suggest that college gets more valuable every year. For those graduating from high school today and in the near future, failure to attend at least some college may mean a McJobs existence for all but the most talented or unconventional.

But, as Krueger has written, "*that you go to college is more important than where you go.*" The advantages conferred by the most selective schools may be overstated. Consider how many schools are not in the top twenty-five, yet may be only slightly less good than the elites: Bard, Barnard, Bates, Bowdoin, Brandeis, Bryn Mawr, Bucknell, Carleton, Carnegie Mellon, Claremont McKenna, Colby, Colgate, Colorado College, Davidson, Denison, Dickinson, Emory, George Washington, Grinnell, Hamilton, Harvey Mudd, Haverford, Holy Cross, Kenyon, Lafayette, Macalester, Middlebury, Mount Holyoke, Notre Dame, Oberlin, Occidental, Reed, Rice, Sarah Lawrence, Skidmore, Spelman, St. John's of Annapolis, Trinity of Connecticut, Union, Vanderbilt, Washington and Lee, Wesleyan, Whitman, William and Mary, and the universities of Michigan and Virginia. Then consider the many other schools that may lack the *je ne sais quoi* of the top destinations but are nonetheless estimable, such as Boston College, Case Western, Georgia Tech, Rochester, SUNY-Binghamton, Texas Christian, Tufts, the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Texas at Austin, the University of Washington, the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and the University of California campuses at Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, and San Diego. (These lists are meant not to be exhaustive but merely to make the point that there are many, many good schools in America.) "Any family ought to be thrilled to have a child admitted to Madison, but parents obsessed with prestige would not consider Madison a win," says David Adamany, the president of Temple University. "The child who is rejected at Harvard will probably go on to receive a superior education and have an outstanding college experience at any of dozens of other places, but start off feeling inadequate and burdened by the sense of disappointing his or her parents. Many parents now set their children up to consider themselves failures if they don't get the acceptance letter from a super-selective school."

Beyond the Krueger-Dale research, there is abundant anecdotal evidence that any of a wide range of colleges can equip its graduates for success. Consider the United States Senate. This most exclusive of clubs currently lists twenty-six members with undergraduate degrees from the Gotta-Get-Ins—a disproportionately good showing considering the small percentage of students who graduate from these schools. But the diversity of Senate backgrounds is even more striking. Fully half of U.S. senators are graduates of public universities, and many went to "states"—among them Chico State, Colorado State, Iowa State, Kansas State, Louisiana State, Michigan State, North Carolina State, Ohio

State, Oklahoma State, Oregon State, Penn State, San Jose State, South Dakota State, Utah State, and Washington State. Or consider the CEOs of the top ten Fortune 500 corporations: only four went to elite schools. H. Lee Scott Jr., of Wal-Mart, the world's largest corporation, is a graduate of Pittsburg State, in Pittsburg, Kansas. Or consider Rhodes scholars: this year only sixteen of the thirty-two American recipients hailed from elite colleges; the others attended Hobart, Millsaps, Morehouse, St. Olaf, the University of the South, Utah State, and Wake Forest, among other non-elites. Steven Spielberg was rejected by the prestigious film schools at USC and UCLA; he attended Cal State Long Beach, and seems to have done all right for himself. Roger Straus, of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, one of the most influential people in postwar American letters, who died last spring at eighty-seven, was a graduate of the University of Missouri. "[Students] have been led to believe that if you go to X school, then Y will result, and this just isn't true," says Judith Shapiro, the president of Barnard. "It's good to attend a good college, but there are many good colleges. Getting into Princeton or Barnard just isn't a life-or-death matter."

That getting into Princeton isn't a life-or-death matter hit home years ago for Loren Pope, then the education editor of *The New York Times*. For his 1990 book, *Looking Beyond the Ivy League*, Pope scanned *Who's Who* entries of the 1980s, compiling figures on undergraduate degrees. (This was at a time when *Who's Who* was still the social directory of American distinction—before the marketing of *Who's Who in Southeastern Middle School Girls' Tennis* and innumerable other spinoffs.) Pope found that the schools that produced the most *Who's Who* entrants were Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Chicago, and Caltech; that much conformed to expectations. But other colleges near the top in *Who's Who* productivity included DePauw, Holy Cross, Wabash, Washington and Lee, and Wheaton of Illinois. Pope found that Bowdoin, Denison, Franklin & Marshall, Millsaps, and the University of the South were better at producing *Who's Who* entrants than Georgetown or the University of Virginia, and that Beloit bested Duke.

These findings helped persuade Pope that the glamour schools were losing their status as the gatekeepers of accomplishment. Today Pope campaigns for a group of forty colleges that he considers nearly the equals of the elite, but more personal, more pleasant, less stress-inducing, and—in some cases, at least—less expensive. Institutions like Hope, Rhodes, and Ursinus do not inspire the same kind of admissions lust as the Ivies, but they are places where parents should feel very good about sending their kids. (A list of the well-regarded non-elite colleges Pope champions can be found at www.ctcl.com.)

The Gotta-Get-Ins can no longer claim to be the more or less exclusive gatekeepers to graduate school. Once, it was assumed that an elite-college undergraduate degree was required for admission to a top law or medical program. No more: 61 percent of new students at Harvard Law School last year had received their bachelor's degrees outside the Ivy League. "Every year I have someone who went to Harvard College but can't get into Harvard Law, plus someone who went to the University of Maryland and does get into Harvard Law," Shirley Levin says. For *Looking Beyond the Ivy League*, Pope analyzed eight consecutive sets of scores on the medical-school aptitude test. Caltech produced the highest-scoring students, but Carleton outdid Harvard, Muhlenberg topped Dartmouth, and Ohio Wesleyan finished ahead of Berkeley.

The elites still lead in producing undergraduates who go on for doctorates (Caltech had the highest percentage during the 1990s), but Earlham, Grinnell, Kalamazoo, Kenyon, Knox, Lawrence, Macalester, Oberlin, and Wooster do better on this scale than many higher-status schools. In the 1990s little Earlham, with just 1,200 students, produced a higher percentage of graduates who have since received doctorates than did Brown, Dartmouth, Duke, Northwestern, Penn, or Vassar.

That non-elite schools do well in *Who's Who* and in sending students on to graduate school or to the Senate suggests that many overestimate the impact of the Gotta-Get-Ins not only on future earnings but on interesting career paths as well. For example, I graduated from Colorado College, a small liberal arts institution that is admired but, needless to say, is no Stanford. While I was there, in the mid-1970s, wandering around the campus were disheveled kids whose names have since become linked with an array of achievements: Neal Baer, M.D., an executive producer for the NBC show *ER*; Frank Bowman, a former federal prosecutor often quoted as the leading specialist on federal sentencing guidelines; Katharine DeShaw, the director of fundraising for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; David Hendrickson, the chairman of the political-science department at Colorado College; Richard Kilbride, the managing director of ING Asset Management, which administers about \$450 billion; Robert Krimmer, a television actor; Margaret Liu, M.D., a senior adviser to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and one of the world's foremost authorities on vaccines; David Malpass, the chief economist for Bear Stearns; Mark McConnell, an animator who has won Emmys for television graphics; Jim McDowell, the vice-president of marketing for BMW North America; Marcia McNutt, the CEO of the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute; Michael Nava, the author of the Henry Rios detective novels; Peter Neupert, the CEO of Drugstore.com; Anne Reifenberg, the deputy business editor of the *Los Angeles Times*; Deborah Caulfield Rybak, a co-author of an acclaimed book about tobacco litigation; Ken Salazar, the attorney general of Colorado and a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate in 2004; Thom Shanker, the Pentagon correspondent for *The New York Times*; Joe Simitian, named to the 2003 *Scientific American* list of the fifty most influential people in technology; and Eric Sondermann, the founder of one of Denver's top public-relations firms.

In terms of students who went on to interesting or prominent lives, Colorado College may have done just as well in this period as Columbia or Cornell or any other Gotta-Get-In destination. Doubtless other colleges could make the same claim for themselves for this or other periods; I'm simply citing the example I know personally. The point is that for some time the center of gravity for achievement has been shifting away from the topmost colleges.

Fundamental to that shift has been a steady improvement in the educational quality of non-elite schools. Many college officials I interviewed said approximately the same thing: that a generation or two ago it really was a setback if a top student didn't get admitted to an Ivy or one of a few other elite destinations, because only a small number of places were offering a truly first-rate education. But since then the non-elites have improved dramatically. "Illinois Wesleyan is a significantly better college than it was in the 1950s," says Janet McNew, the school's provost, "whereas Harvard has probably changed much less dramatically in the past half century." That statement could apply to many other colleges. Pretty good schools of the past have gotten much better, while the great schools have remained more or less the same. The result is that numerous colleges have narrowed the gap with the elites.

How many colleges now provide an excellent education? Possibly a hundred, suggests Jim Conroy, of New Trier; probably more than two hundred, Shirley Levin says. The improvement is especially noteworthy at large public universities. Michigan and Virginia have become "public Ivies," and numerous state-run universities now offer a top-flight education. Whether or not students take a public university up on its offer of a good education is another matter: large, chaotic campuses may create an environment in which it's possible to slide by with four years of drinking beer and playing video games, whereas small private colleges usually notice students who try this. Yet the rising quality of public universities is important, because these schools provide substantial numbers of slots, often with discounted in-state tuition. Many families who cannot afford private colleges now have appealing alternatives at public universities.

One reason so many colleges have improved is the profusion of able faculty members. The education wave fostered by the GI Bill drew many talented people into academia. Because tenured openings at the glamour schools are subject to slow turnover, this legion of new teachers fanned out to other colleges, raising the quality of instruction at non-elite schools. While this was happening, the country became more prosperous, and giving to colleges—including those below the glamour level—shot up. When the first GI Bill cohort began to die, big gifts started flowing to the non-elites. (Earlier this year one graduate bequeathed Pitt's law school \$4.25 million.) Today many non-elite schools have significant financial resources: Emory has an endowment of \$4.5 billion, Case Western an endowment of \$1.4 billion, and even little Colby an endowment of \$323 million—an amount that a few decades ago would have seemed unimaginable for a small liberal arts school without a national profile.

As colleges below the top were improving, the old WASP insider system was losing its grip on business and other institutions. There was a time when an Ivy League diploma was vital to career advancement in many places, because an Ivy grad could be assumed to be from the correct upper-middle-class Protestant background. Today an Ivy diploma reveals nothing about a person's background, and favoritism in hiring and promotion is on the decline; most businesses would rather have a Lehigh graduate who performs at a high level than a Brown graduate who doesn't. Law firms do remain exceptionally status-conscious—some college counselors believe that law firms still hire associates based partly on where they were undergraduates. But the majority of employers aren't looking for status degrees, and some may even avoid candidates from the top schools, on the theory that such aspirants have unrealistic expectations of quick promotion.

Relationships labeled ironic are often merely coincidental. But it is genuinely ironic that as non-elite colleges have improved in educational quality and financial resources, and favoritism toward top-school degrees has faded, getting into an elite school has nonetheless become more of a national obsession.

Which brings us back to the Krueger-Dale thesis. Can we really be sure Hamilton is nearly as good as Harvard?

Some analysts maintain that there are indeed significant advantages to the most selective schools. For instance, a study by Caroline Hoxby, a Harvard economist who has researched college outcomes, suggests that graduates of elite schools do earn more than those of comparable ability who attended other colleges. Hoxby studied male students who entered college in 1982, and adjusted for aptitude, though she used criteria different from those employed by Krueger and Dale. She projected that among students of similar aptitude, those who attended the most selective colleges would earn an average of \$2.9 million during their careers; those who attended the next most selective colleges would earn \$2.8 million; and those who attended all other colleges would average \$2.5 million. This helped convince Hoxby that top applicants should, in fact, lust after the most exclusive possibilities.

"There's a clear benefit to the top fifty or so colleges," she says. "Connections made at the top schools matter. It's not so much that you meet the son of a wealthy banker and his father offers you a job, but that you meet specialists and experts who are on campus for conferences and speeches. The conference networking scene is much better at the elite universities." Hoxby estimates that about three quarters of the educational benefit a student receives is determined by his or her effort and abilities, and should be more or less the same at any good college. The remaining quarter, she thinks, is determined by the status of the school—higher-status schools have more resources and better networking opportunities, and surround top students with other top students.

"Today there are large numbers of colleges with good faculty, so faculty probably isn't the explanation for the advantage at the top," Hoxby says. "Probably there is not much difference between the quality of the faculty at Princeton and at Rutgers. But there's a lot of difference between the students at those places, and some of every person's education comes from interaction with other students." Being in a super-

competitive environment may cause a few students to have nervous breakdowns, but many do their best work under pressure, and the contest is keenest at the Gotta-Get-Ins. Hoxby notes that some medium-rated public universities have established internal "honors colleges" to attract top performers who might qualify for the best destinations. "Students at honors colleges in the public universities do okay, but not as well as they would do at the elite schools," Hoxby argues. The reason, she feels, is that they're not surrounded by other top-performing students.

There is one group of students that even Krueger and Dale found benefited significantly from attending elite schools: those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Kids from poor families seem to profit from exposure to Amherst or Northwestern much more than kids from well-off families. Why? One possible answer is that they learn sociological cues and customs to which they have not been exposed before. In his 2003 book, *Limbo*, Alfred Lubrano, the son of a bricklayer, analyzed what happens when people from working-class backgrounds enter the white-collar culture. Part of their socialization, Lubrano wrote, is learning to act dispassionate and outwardly composed at all times, regardless of how they might feel inside. Students from well-off communities generally arrive at college already trained to masquerade as calm. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may benefit from exposure to this way of carrying oneself—a trait that may be particularly in evidence at the top colleges.

It's understandable that so many high schoolers and their nervous parents are preoccupied with the idea of getting into an elite college. The teen years are a series of tests: of scholastic success, of fitting in, of prowess at throwing and catching balls, of skill at pleasing adults. These tests seem to culminate in a be-all-and-end-all judgment about the first eighteen years of a person's life, and that judgment is made by college admissions officers. The day college acceptance letters arrive is to teens the moment of truth: they learn what the adult world really thinks of them, and receive an omen of whether or not their lives will be successful. Of course, grown-up land is full of Yale graduates who are unhappy failures and Georgia Tech grads who run big organizations or have a great sense of well-being. But teens can't be expected to understand this. All they can be sure of is that colleges will accept or reject them, and it's like being accepted or rejected for a date—only much more intense, and their parents know all the details.

Surely it is impossible to do away with the trials of the college-application process altogether. But college admissions would be less nerve-racking, and hang less ominously over the high school years, if it were better understood that a large number of colleges and universities can now provide students with an excellent education, sending them onward to healthy incomes and appealing careers. Harvard is marvelous, but you don't have to go there to get your foot in the door of life.

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