

## GETTING TO THE TOP

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# WHAT ROLE DO ELITE COLLEGES PLAY?

*Prestigious institutions have always had a reputation for producing top leaders.  
Why is this? Do they truly offer a superior education or simply connections and influence?  
And what about students who attend good, but not elite, colleges?  
Does everyone have a chance to make it to the top?*

BY KAREN D. ARNOLD

“DAVID PHILLIPS” GRADUATED as 1981 class valedictorian at a highly regarded public high school outside Chicago. Third-generation Ivy League, he completed his Harvard baccalaureate with distinction, studied abroad on a Fulbright, continued to an Ivy League law school, clerked for a federal judge, entered one of the nation’s premier law firms, and rose to partner. With his privileged background, stellar grades, high SAT scores, and genuine interest in learning, would David have achieved the same career prominence with an undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois?

Randall Kennedy also distinguished himself academically. The African American son of a postal clerk, Kennedy graduated in 1973 from the prestigious St. Albans high school. He then earned a baccalaureate from Princeton and attended Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship. He received a Yale Law School degree, clerked for Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, and is currently a Harvard Law School professor and famed writer on topics of racial justice. Were St. Albans and Princeton essential settings for the fulfillment of Randall Kennedy's intellectual promise?

David Phillips and Randall Kennedy are research participants in studies investigating the role of higher education in translating academic talent into adult leadership. The stories of their respective groups—high school valedictorians and Rhodes scholars—help answer a consequential, controversial question regarding American higher education: Beyond receiving a degree, does it matter whether one goes to a highly prestigious college?

At the top levels of occupations, it does make a difference where one earns the baccalaureate. After laying out some of the considerable evidence supporting the effects of prestigious college attendance on adult prominence, I will examine possible reasons why elite college graduates dominate national leadership ranks. Are students from the top-ranked institutions benefiting from the name of their alma mater? Are these undergraduates simply the brightest and most ambitious youth in the nation? Are they receiving a better education at prestigious colleges? Are students reaping the rewards of family social class privilege in the form of insider knowledge, social connections, and self-presentation skills? Each of these possibilities can be supported by research evidence, but each differs greatly in its view of higher education. Those who see higher education as an increasingly democratic engine of social mobility point to the vast expansion in postsecondary education enrollment and diversity since World War II. Other commentators argue that higher education does little to change existing patterns of social inequality in America. Today's mass higher education system is dominated by commuters, part-time students, older adult learners, and e-learning consumers. A small fraction of all college

students attend the country's most highly selective, residential colleges. Yet these elite college graduates dominate the top ranks of political, intellectual, and social leaders. The widening of access to higher education, I will argue, has resulted in a paradox in which institutional prestige is increasingly important in creating pathways to societal leadership for talented students.

## DOES UNDERGRADUATE PRESTIGE MATTER?

**B**EFORE TACKLING the mechanisms of elite production, it makes sense to look at the outcomes of highly selective college attendance. The research record indicates that baccalaureate origins matter at the top levels of professions. Most recently, the former presidents of Princeton and Harvard examined the legacy of affirmative action admission for African American students in a small set of highly selective institutions. In the *Shape of the River*, William Bowen and Derek Bok conclude that prestigious colleges provide symbolic and substantive benefits to students of color.

Minority students admitted to selective colleges under race-sensitive policies have, overall, performed very well. Moreover, the more selective the college they entered, the more likely they were to graduate and earn advanced degrees, the happier they said they were with their college experience, and the more successful they have been in their careers (judged by their earnings). These important findings hold for students at the lower end of the SAT distribution (among those who matriculated at these schools) as well as for students at the higher end (pp. xxxi–xxxii).

Retrospective studies of elites also show that career prominence is strongly associated with attendance at Ivy League colleges and a small set of highly selective liberal arts colleges and top research universities. "Elites" are generally defined as the minority of professionals who occupy the top positions in socially important economic, political, and cultural institutions. In a study published in 1998, Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff examined the family, educational, and career patterns of women and minorities in the "power elite,"

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defined as major corporate heads, political campaign financiers, and government and military leaders. These top achievers had been “filtered through a handful of elite schools in law, business, public policy, and international relations” (p. 6). Robert Lerner and colleagues’ survey of the social backgrounds, education, and ideologies of a dozen professional elites found respondents had clustered within the same small set of schools found by Zweigenhaft and Domhoff. E. Digby Baltzell, Peter Cookson Jr., and Caroline Persell related secondary education to prominent careers by examining the effects of prestigious college preparatory school attendance, identifying sixteen boarding schools as core socializing institutions for national elites.

David Phillips and Randall Kennedy are participants in research studies that corroborate the importance of baccalaureate prestige. David is a former valedictorian who graduated at the top of his high school class in 1981. He is among eighty-one men and women from that year whose lives are being examined as part of the Illinois Valedictorian Project, a longitudinal study conducted by Karen Arnold and Terry Denny in order to understand the role that academic achievement plays in future success. The former valedictorians come from widely varying backgrounds and high schools. Their intellectual ability, academic motivation, and strong work ethic enabled the group to excel in college academics. After college, three-quarters of the group obtained graduate degrees and professional employment. Earning high grades and advanced degrees was not sufficient for the former valedictorians to enter the highest levels of their professions, however. None, for instance, is listed in *Who’s Who Among Distinguished Americans*. Only four of the eighty-one participants in the Illinois Valedictorian Project attended schools at the top of the prestige hierarchy: David and another valedictorian at Harvard, and one Project member each at Stanford and Princeton. Each of the four elite-college attendees came from upper-middle-class families, each was a white male, and each earned a terminal graduate degree. The venture capitalist, psychologist, and two attorneys that make up this select sample are at the top of the valedictorian group in professional prestige and salary. David is the

only valedictorian to hold a position in a top-ranked law firm, university, or corporation.

Even though valedictorians are identified as the best in their schools, the result is that almost all, after fanning out across the country to attend diverse colleges, end with respectable but not prominent careers. What sets the top career achievers apart from other valedictorians is attending the most prestigious colleges—an apparently critical step in translating their academic excellence into adult occupational success.

Rhodes scholars, in contrast, are chosen at the point of leaving college as potential national leaders. Thirty-two U.S. Rhodes scholars are chosen annually to attend Oxford for two or three years. Selections among the approximately 1,200 applicants each year are made on the basis of intellectual and scholarly excellence, exemplary character, potential for leadership in public service, and physical vigor. Karen Arnold and Ted Youn are conducting a project titled “Generating Leaders,” an ongoing study of the educational and career paths of 1,000 American Rhodes scholars elected between 1947 and 1992.

When we look at the percentage of Rhodes scholars who attended prestigious colleges compared to the percentage of valedictorians, the difference is striking. From World War II to the present, one in three Rhodes scholars earned a baccalaureate from either Harvard, Yale, or Princeton. From the inaugural Rhodes scholarship class of 1903 until World War II, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton produced one in five Rhodes scholars. The concentration of Rhodes scholars in what we have come to call the Big Three universities is even more striking at the graduate school level: Harvard, Yale, and Princeton enrolled 46 percent of the Rhodes scholars who attended graduate school during the last half of the twentieth century. Adding the three national military

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academies, Stanford, and seven private, highly selective liberal arts colleges and research universities to the undergraduate tally brings the total to 53 percent of post World War II Rhodes scholars coming from a combined set of only fourteen institutions. Heavily concentrated in the East Coast private sector, the short list of top Rhodes scholar producers features top research universities, military academies, and academically intensive liberal arts colleges.

Following their prestigious college attendance, Rhodes scholars became more professionally prominent than valedictorians. By any measure, Rhodes scholars are an occupationally successful group in society. For example, current and former positions held by the thirty-two members of Bill Clinton's Rhodes scholar class of 1968 include: President of the United States; Cabinet and sub-Cabinet members; judges; elected state and city officials; professors at Harvard, Cornell, the University of Virginia, and other leading universities; research scientists; high-ranking military officers; corporate CEOs; a prominent arts administrator; senior law partners in influential law firms; the former Washington Bureau chief of *Time* magazine; the President and General Manager of the *Washington Post*; and a prize-winning senior reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. A third of Rhodes scholars in five cohorts from 1947 to 1992 have biographies in *Who's Who*, a listing of prominent achievers. Removing the cohorts of Scholars in their thirties and early forties raises the *Who's Who* representation to nearly half of all Rhodes scholars.

Just the fact of receiving a Rhodes scholarship indicates exceptional early achievement and positions the recipient for a top career. However, even among this highly select group, undergraduate origins are the strongest predictors of adult professional prominence. Attending Harvard, Yale, or Princeton increases the odds of a Rhodes scholar appearing in *Who's Who*, even after taking into account social origins, high school prestige, and SAT scores. Taken together with other studies of elites, this finding supports the claim that attending a highly prestigious undergraduate institution increases graduates' chances of adult prominence.

## CHANNELS TO SUCCESS

**I**F UNDERGRADUATE degree origins matter, in what ways do they matter? Is it the name of a prestigious institution that makes the difference? Or perhaps Harvard, Yale, and Princeton students simply recruit the brightest undergraduates in the country, and these students would succeed anywhere. Alternatively, maybe top universities offer a distinctive educational experience that uniquely prepares students for occupational prominence. Or possibly, connections and insider knowledge are what really counts. Each of these explanations merits consideration.

In our media-saturated, image-driven culture, name does matter. Sociologist John Meyer used the term "charter" to describe the ways in which the public recognizes certain institutions as legitimately producing specific kinds of products. For instance, society at large holds beliefs and stereotypes about the kinds of students a particular university or college should and does produce. If, for example, there is widespread agreement that Harvard prepares professional leaders, this belief can translate into the kinds of opportunities a Harvard graduate might have. As Bowen and Bok found, top graduate and professional schools tend to assume that graduates of highly selective baccalaureate institutions have what it takes to succeed because these students have previously been admitted and screened by elite-chartered institutions. Students lacking prestigious undergraduate credentials might still be admitted but will have to present flawless records in order to prove they can compete. This mechanism also operates when law firms or investment banks concentrate on a small set of professional schools for job recruiting. The ways in which college name might boost career success cannot be studied directly because they operate subtly, for instance by influencing the seriousness with which an applicant is viewed or affecting insiders' interactions with potential protégés. Nor does this explanation account for the many successful graduates from outside elite higher education or the many Big Three graduates who do not achieve notable careers.

**Institutional prestige is increasingly important in creating pathways to societal leadership for talented students.**

So what about the role that student merit, not institutional reputation, plays in differential adult attainment? After all, aren't grades and SAT scores sorting the brightest and most motivated students into the most competitive colleges? Perhaps the dominance of selected institutions in producing Rhodes scholars and other prominent Americans is a result of top universities' success in attracting the most talented students in the country to study at their campuses. With sufficient funding for need-blind financial aid, national recruiting patterns, commitment to diversity, and unparalleled yield among admitted students, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton have their pick of the very top high school students. In this meritocratic view, the best students disproportionately attend the most prestigious universities and are therefore disproportionately successful in winning Rhodes scholarships and becoming prominent in occupations. As Roger Geiger and Caroline Hoxby have pointed out, the past half-century has seen top universities develop national recruiting markets. In a single integrated postsecondary market, those "super students" with the highest grades and test scores have tended to cluster more and more in a small set of highly selective institutions.

The simple equation of "best student reaching top university and joining elite" fails to account for much of what we know about the sorting of students into higher education institutions. Illinois Valedictorian Project members, for example, chose colleges on the basis of ethnicity, social class, and geographic origins. No rural valedictorian in the study chose to attend an out-of-state college. The majority of the African American and Latino participants in the Illinois Valedictorian Project, unaware of scholarship opportunities for top minority students, chose commuter institutions and narrowly vocational majors. Most of the female valedictorians formed their college and career aspirations on the basis of choices about how to combine family and work, not according to their academic standing. As further evidence that strong students are distributed beyond the Ivy League, Rhodes scholars' SAT scores differed only

slightly across Big Three and other colleges. Moreover, students who attended Harvard, Princeton, or Yale were more likely to achieve career prominence than Rhodes scholars with the same SAT scores who attended other colleges. The sorting of students into colleges according to merit is far from exact; many talented students do not attend the most selective institutions that might admit them. Exceptional motivation is also no guarantee of elite college attendance; again, social class, gender, ethnicity, and geography strongly determine where students pursue their undergraduate degree.

If highly prestigious institutions attract only a portion of the most able undergraduates yet provide the best chance of career prominence, does it have anything to do with the education they are providing? Are the most prestigious institutions providing a distinctly different undergraduate experience to their students? Although top colleges do not enroll all the nation's best students, they do assemble an unparalleled concentration of highly able, full-time, residential undergraduates. Undoubtedly, the clustering of "super students" means that a talented student population is itself part of the undergraduate experience at highly selective campuses. Extraordinary classmates can act as intellectual foils, spurs to achievement, and dispensers of inside information. In addition, top-ranked institutions perpetuate cultures of academically intensive liberal learning. Elite colleges and their students do not reflect the growing national trend toward vocational majors. Most of the high school valedictorians attended moderately selective universities, where they majored most often in vocational areas such as business, engineering, health sciences, and education. Rhodes scholars, in contrast, completed undergraduate majors in traditional liberal arts and sciences disciplines and in individualized, honors, and general humanities programs. Liberal arts study, scholarly discourse, and learning for its own sake are particularly valued at highly prestigious colleges and universities. Paradoxically, these nonvocational approaches lead to the apex of adult vocations.

Nearly all Rhodes scholars noted extremely positive, academically intensive college experiences, includ-

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ing 90 percent who said they developed a close, personal relationship with at least one faculty member. Like the larger group of Rhodes scholars, Big Three students reported undergraduate experiences that conform very closely to higher education research findings on optimal learning conditions. Nine in ten graduates of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton wrote a senior thesis, as compared with half of non-Big Three Rhodes scholars. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton graduates reported small, discussion-centered, heavily theoretical courses, extensive writing, and participation in faculty research. Increased exposure to public personalities (government official, cultural figures, journalists, and business leaders) was the strongest positive difference favoring Big Three undergraduates. Such exposure can boost aspirations, provide the beginning of useful professional networks, and reinforce identities as future members of elites. Greater faculty encouragement for volunteerism and community service hints at Big Three messages expecting students to become future national leaders. At the same time, as compared with other Rhodes scholars, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton graduates reported less faculty interest in students, more lecture classes, and more teaching by graduate students and part-time instructors. They were modestly less likely than other Rhodes scholars to report a close personal relationship with at least one faculty member and were less likely than non-Big Three graduates to have discussed their future with a professor.

Though statistically significant, reported differences in undergraduate experiences between Big Three and other Rhodes scholars were relatively modest. Nearly all of the Rhodes scholars reported exemplary college experiences, painting a picture of campus environments featuring intensive liberal arts study, engagement with faculty, undergraduate research, and extracurricular engagement. Rhodes scholars' undergraduate experiences were atypical among all U.S. college students. However, their relatively similar experiences across institutional type do not seem to explain why attending Harvard, Yale, or Princeton should result in increased career prominence.

Elite colleges' big names, accomplished students, and intensive academics contribute to their graduates' accomplishments. However, these factors alone do not explain why almost no valedictorians became professionally prominent while half of the Rhodes scholars did.

How do high-achieving college students parlay their records into adult occupational status? Questioning whether connections and insider knowledge translate academic talent into career attainment raises the possibility that cultural forces determine achievement pathways in contemporary America. The late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu articulated a powerful explanation for the ways in which education reinforces and extends childhood social class advantages. According to Bourdieu, individuals are socialized into the cultural capital of their families and social milieu, including modes of expression, aesthetic tastes, general cultural awareness, and facility with symbols and objects (like books and scientific instruments). Cultural capital that is characteristic of dominant groups in society, such as verbal facility, knowledge about high-status institutions, and preference for so-called “high culture” forms of art and leisure, results in ways of perceiving and presenting oneself (“habitus”) that are rewarded in formal education. In particular, a certain style of fluent speaking and writing is highly valued in schools. Students' social origins also determine their expectations about what they are likely to achieve and therefore shape educational and professional aspirations. Students from privileged social backgrounds are able to exchange their cultural capital for high grades, superior verbal SAT scores, prestigious educational credentials and—ultimately—entrance into high-level professional circles.

Do valedictorians and Rhodes scholars bear out the view of higher education as social reproduction? Twenty years after graduating at the top of their high school classes, male valedictorians and students of color are indeed separated professionally on the basis of social origins. (Gender roles trumped social class for many white female valedictorians, as they made career choices around anticipated family/work configurations.) As

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Bourdieu might have predicted, cultural capital translated into prestigious educational and career attainment through the mechanism of tacit knowledge, in which first-generation college students never understood the full range of opportunities open to them or how to actualize their ambitions.

Rhodes scholars tell a more complicated story. Rhodes scholars' family social origins and related cultural capital do not directly determine their career outcomes, but privileged students were more likely to attend Harvard, Yale, or Princeton and therefore become more likely to achieve career prominence. Bourdieu's insistence on the importance of upper-class verbal style is also supported in the Rhodes scholar study. Verbal SAT score (but not mathematics) was the second-best predictor of appearance in *Who's Who* (after attendance at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton). Furthermore, Rhodes scholars were far more likely than the general college population to come from homes with college-educated, professionally employed parents. Half of the Post-WWII cohort of Rhodes scholars (1947–1952) had college-educated fathers; by the early 1990s, two-thirds of Rhodes scholars had parents with graduate degrees. The Rhodes scholar selection process requires written essays, college recommendations, two intensive interviews by a group of former Rhodes scholars, and a mandatory cocktail party. Surviving this gauntlet calls for verbal fluency, general cultural knowledge, social poise, and precisely the right level of assertiveness. Students acquire this unwritten recipe from their cultural capital, polished and extended by elite education and by their college's fellowship grooming apparatus.

Although selective admission processes favor students with abundant cultural capital, one role that prestigious colleges play is to help students acquire this cultural capital. Some members of the elite have managed to acquire upper-class cultural capital through education. Those students who come to prestigious colleges from disadvantaged backgrounds are the ones poised to see the most dramatic gains. As Princeton economist Alan B. Krueger and his colleague Stacey Berg Dale found, only students from disadvantaged backgrounds

reaped salary benefits from attending more prestigious colleges. Some Rhodes scholars, such as Randall Kennedy, came from modest social origins. For these students, elite higher education is imperative in opening doors to top-level careers.

Still, newcomers to elites typically come from the middle and upper-middle class, and not from working-class backgrounds. William Bowen and Derek Bok, for instance found that the highly selective schools they studied provide upward social mobility to African American students. "However, they do so today primarily by giving excellent educational opportunities to students from middle class backgrounds" (p. 50). Richard Zweigenhaft and G. William Domhoff similarly noted that women and people of color in the power elite, although seemingly diversifying leadership groups, resemble existing elites in their social class backgrounds and values. "The pattern of socialization into the power elite ensures that the people who enter the higher circles do not differ significantly from those who are already there. Those who can 'fit in' best are most likely to get there . . ." (p. 27).

Prestigious college graduates, this explanation theorizes, are either born into families with high cultural capital or (less frequently) obtain upper-class habits, tastes, and styles as a result of education. Once obtained, cultural capital can be converted into a chain of opportunities, connections, and socialization into elite social and professional circles. Prestigious institutions attract students with high culture capital, select among students according to embodied forms of cultural capital, reinforce and increase this form of capital, and provide bridges to post-college circles where cultural capital can be converted into high-status careers.

Reputation, merit, education, and culture all interact to the advantage of students enrolled at top colleges. Institutions at the very top of the prestige hierarchy, it seems, possess a powerful name, exceptionally able students, and intensive intellectual experiences. These colleges attract students with high cultural capital attraction, which is then reinforced and extended. Elite higher education draws from all these qualities to pro-

vide its students with optimal opportunity to enter the highest possible social positions. Prestigious college baccalaureates do not guarantee such attainment, however, nor are elites restricted to graduates of the very top institutions.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY

**W**HAT DO THESE findings suggest about higher education's role in a democracy? The expansion of postsecondary education, the rise of a specialized knowledge-based economy, and the spread of equality movements are among the most pronounced forces shaping America since World War II. In the midst of rising social equality, however, our studies and others show an apparent paradox at the pinnacle of society. On the one hand, the ideal of meritocracy has come to be practiced through success in democratized education, particularly higher education. On the other hand, the composition of American elites and the channels to prominence in our society have remained highly concentrated among individuals from privileged social origins who were educated at a handful of prestigious undergraduate institutions.

The interplay of macro and micro forces can be seen across cohorts. The last half of the twentieth century was a period of expansion of the higher education system. The commonly told story of this expansion features increased access and pluralism: more places at more kinds of institutions for more kinds of students. Across colleges and universities, students gain content knowledge, critical-thinking skills, and enhanced adult professional status and earnings. For these and other desirable outcomes, Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini conclude, it matters whether one attends college, not which college one chooses.

The Rhodes scholar findings tell a somewhat different story of the interplay between institution and life course. Along with ideals of democracy and meritocracy, greatly widening access to higher education implies increased routes to social mobility. Yet the baccalaureate origins of Rhodes scholars have not broadened appreciably

over the past half-century. In fact, Rhodes scholars have become even more heavily concentrated in the few most prestigious universities and colleges in the United States since World War II. Three dominant institutions are now quite stable in their share of Rhodes scholar production. Moreover, Rhodes scholars continue to receive today's equivalent of a "classical" education: nonvocational, intellectual, research oriented, and socially intensive. As Alexander Astin noted a quarter-century ago, the ideal conditions for learning occur in small, residential, liberal arts colleges. The irony, of course, is that a tiny and decreasing fraction of the college population is educated under such conditions. High school valedictorians, in contrast, were largely unable to translate their exceptional scholastic achievement in high school and college into the highest-level professional positions. Like the bulk of their national peers, valedictorians did not attend the most prestigious colleges nor follow academically intensive liberal arts curricula.

The Rhodes scholar and valedictorian stories seem to show that the rise of mass higher education in the United States has led to increased stratification of institutions. Prestige becomes more important in a more competitive environment. Although more diverse in terms of ethnicity and gender, the range of Rhodes scholars' social origins, baccalaureate institutions, and undergraduate experiences has remained consistent or even narrowed since World War II. Their increasingly anomalous college experiences point to the real possibility that future members of elites are buffered from some effects of macro social change. In other words, Rhodes scholars have been insulated from most of the negative effects of mass higher education by their presence in a few, very prestigious institutions. From widely varying social origins, valedictorians are far more representative than Rhodes scholars in their college experiences and career outcomes.

On the road to national leadership, it does matter where one goes to college. An individual's life course is constructed at the border of structure and agency, history and individual action. It is the institution of higher

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education that stands at the crossroad of the life passage to adulthood. The shape of the undergraduate life passage for Rhodes scholars and valedictorians highlights the paradoxical role of contemporary higher education as an egalitarian gateway to mobility and a meritocratic screener of elites.

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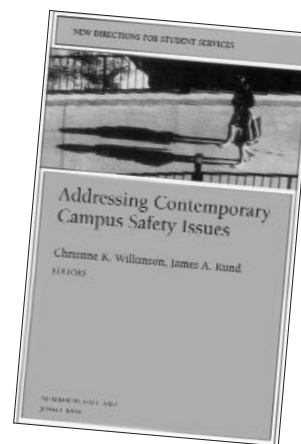
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