

Binder, Amy J.; Abel, Andrea R.

Symbolically maintained inequality. An American case of elite higher education boundary-making

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Exklusive Bildung und neue Ungleichheit

**Ergebnisse der DFG-Forschergruppe
„Mechanismen der Elitebildung
im deutschen Bildungssystem“**

Herausgegeben von
Werner Helsper, Heinz-Hermann Krüger
und Jasmin Lüdemann

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Amy J. Binder/Andrea R. Abel

Symbolically Maintained Inequality

*An American case of elite higher education boundary-making**

Abstract: The study of elites is enjoying a revival at a time of increasing economic inequality. Sociologists of education have been leaders in this area, studying how affluent families position their children to compete favourably in a vertically stratified higher education system. However, scholars in the United States have done less research on both the horizontal stratification within the top tier of institutions and how students do symbolic work of their own to bolster elite status. In this study, we use qualitative interviews with 56 undergraduates at Harvard and Stanford Universities to explore how students construct the status hierarchy among elite campuses in the U.S. We find that Harvard and Stanford students value universities that offer a “well-rounded” liberal arts education while criticizing other selective institutions for being, alternatively, too intellectual, overly connected to the old-line status system, associated with partying and athletics, or having a student body too single-minded about career preparation. Our findings suggest that through constructing these nuanced perceptions of elite universities’ distinctiveness, students justify their rarefied positions and contribute to the on-going status distinctions among social elites more generally in the United States. Comments are offered in the conclusion for how this likely differs in countries with less horizontal stratification.

Keywords: Higher Education, Elites, Symbolic Boundaries, Inequalities

1. Introduction

This is a good time to be a member of the elite in the United States. Since the 1980s, American society has been marked by widening economic inequality, with contemporary elites – those who have a “disproportionate control over, or access to, a resource” (Khan, 2012, p. 362) – wealthier than at any time since before the Second World War (Piketty, 2013). Sitting atop the hierarchy in what is sometimes called the winner-take-all society (Frank & Cook, 1995) 21st century elites enjoy a future of socioeconomic gain that is far different from the stark reality faced by those below. Accompanying such financial assets are multiple forms of social separation from other Americans that create a distinctive class culture, including spatial segregation into neighborhoods, cities, and schools (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011).

* A slightly longer version of this article appeared in January 2019 under the title “Binder, A., & Abel, A. (2018). Symbolically Maintained Inequality: How Harvard and Stanford Students Construct Boundaries among Elite Universities” in *Sociology of Education* 92(1), 41–58.

Elite higher education has long been a central institution for securing the position of prosperous Americans, contributing to the reproduction of families' and social groups' high status (Mohr & DiMaggio, 1995). In the past, white Protestant elites could accomplish social closure by relying on boarding schools and private universities to predictably admit their children in high numbers (Karabel, 2005), and on churches, museums, and country clubs to further symbolically distinguish them from others (Beisel, 1998).

Today, wealthy families continue to have far greater access to highly selective colleges and universities than less affluent families (Espenshade & Radford, 2009). According to one report, more students attending "Ivy-Plus" colleges (the eight Ivy League institutions plus the University of Chicago, Stanford, MIT, and Duke) come from families in the top one percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half of the socioeconomic structure (Chetty, Friedman, Saez, Turner & Yagan, 2017). Yet, while affluent families still dominate private selective institutions, top-tier postsecondary education has become an increasingly anxious arena for current and aspiring elites. The most sought-after campuses now receive 30–40 000 applications each year, with schools such as Harvard and Stanford accepting only about five percent of those who seek admission (Pérez-Peña, 2014). Acceptance is no longer something to count on, and today's children of elites must meet the same "meritocratic" criteria as other applicants (Khan, 2011), requiring them to compete vigorously on standardized tests and other putatively neutral metrics for admission (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). Students must also signal achievement in extracurricular activities at incomparably high levels.

Given these changes, students admitted to private elite universities today – whether from the top of the socioeconomic structure or levels below – can be more confident than ever about the role their own merit plays in their educational attainments. They have exceeded on exams and demonstrated leadership skills in non-academic pursuits. Nevertheless, theirs is a shaky confidence, in which questions of deservingness and security of position abound (Khan, 2011; Warikoo, 2016) – not only for "legacy" students who are thought not to have earned their privilege (Stevens, 2009), but for other students as well. One characteristic of today's top-tier students is their fear of losing the reputational status they have gained via admission to a top university through missteps they may make in selecting the wrong majors or career pathways (Rivera, 2015; Binder, Davis & Bloom, 2016). While students at elite universities expect to leave a mark on the world, they are unsure and insecure about how to do it.

All of this points to a fascinating paradox, in which students at elite universities such as those in the Ivy League, arguably have the world at their feet – having beaten 95 percent of the competition in the admissions tournament – but whose sense of self is beset by concerns about their ability to maintain their status in a more competitive class system.

In this paper, we study students' peculiar combination of confidence and insecurity about becoming elites, as well as their general perspective on being at the top of the educational hierarchy, in a novel way: by analyzing how a select group of young people who have obtained the brass ring of elite college entrance compare themselves and their universities to students at other very highly selective campuses. While yearly annual

rankings by *US News & World Report* feed the college competition frenzy, sociologists know little about how students make everyday distinctions among institutions and engage in “tier talk” (Espeland & Sauder, 2016). Cultural sociologists have shown that for virtually all social phenomena – a sense of nationhood, consumption of cultural objects, estimations of excellence – individuals draw symbolic boundaries to separate people into groups, generating not only feelings of similarity and group membership, but also exclusion (Lamont, 1992). Examining the symbolic boundaries that students at elite colleges draw between educational institutions allows us to understand the dynamic dimensions of social relations among students, as they compete in the “production, diffusion, and institutionalization” of principles of classification and excellence (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 168). Furthermore, analyzing these boundaries can shed light on how young people on elite campuses see themselves fitting into the wider class system, which itself is structured by the highly differentiated institutions that compose the U. S. higher education system (Stevens, Armstrong & Arum, 2008).

To explore this boundary-drawing, we use qualitative interviews conducted in 2013 and in 2014 with Harvard and Stanford undergraduate students and very recent graduates. Our interviewees come from different segments of the socioeconomic structure (from the lowest quintile to the highest), but all, in theory, are on a pathway to assume elite social positions if they so choose. We find that students who simultaneously think of themselves as the best of the best, but who are unsure of their passions and insecure about their futures (Deresiewicz, 2014), draw small yet incisive distinctions between themselves and others. They invest energy into thinking about what is favorable and unfavorable about their own campus while also comparing their school to other elite campuses. They describe their respect at the equivalency of some universities but, more often, their subtle and not-so-subtle disdain for what they perceive to be the deficits of others. They talk a lot about fit and comfort – perceived crucial aspects of the college experience for highly ambitious and anointed students such as themselves. By critiquing other campuses, they subtly elevate their own status and position.

By exploring this boundary-making, we observe how undergraduates at Harvard and Stanford engage in what we call “symbolically maintained inequality”, in which they use often-invidious comparisons to other schools to contribute to social separation even within the top one percent of college-goers who get to attend any of the Ivy-plus campuses. Understanding how students differentiate among universities is important because it shows how elites use higher education to make sense of themselves, both to fellow elites and to those down the class order.

2. Status Consturction and Elite Higher Education

Elite parents’ efforts to preserve their children’s status through college admissions and attainments is an old story in the United States. Yet in the latter half of the 20th century – since the “massification” of higher education in the years following World War II – the exact mechanisms by which families pass down privilege to their children have

changed. As rapidly expanding public universities began to offer educational opportunities to more segments of society (Gumpert, Ianozzi, Shaman & Zemsky, 1997), affluent parents realized that they would have to work harder to position their offspring to successfully compete both for college admission and, later, in the wider class system. One strategy that wealthier segments have engaged is “maximally maintained inequality,” in which parents encourage their children to seek higher-level degrees (such as master’s degrees on top of bachelor’s degrees) to stay ahead of lower groups catching up in educational credentials (Raftery & Hout, 1993). A second form of educational monopolization occurs when advantaged social groups participate in “effectively maintained inequality” (Lucas, 2001), by gravitating toward “more advantageous, selective, or prestigious segments” within the increasingly horizontally stratified higher education system (Davies & Zarifa 2012, p. 14; Gerber & Cheung, 2008). In recent decades, resource and prestige hierarchies have risen sharply within the postsecondary sector (Labaree, 2012), with top status groups fighting to place their children in private elite colleges and universities rather than in less selective public campuses or lower-ranked private institutions (Alon, 2009). Some scholars have suggested that the modern U. S. class system, itself, is constituted in large measure by the increasing organizational variety of college and university types (Stevens et al., 2008), with elites with the right class culture dominating the top of the horizontally stratified system to create social networks and ensure their legitimacy.

Since the 1980s, scholars have noted an explosion in family expenditures on social, cultural, and financial capital to improve their children’s chances to gain entrance to these selective universities (Reardon, 2013). Parents move to neighborhoods with good schools (Cucchiara, 2008), purchase test preparatory services for standardized exams (Byun & Park, 2012), take over school programs originally meant for lower-income families (Sims, 2017), and – using a practice unthinkable in earlier generations – provide their three- and four-year-olds with formal preparation to enter the right kindergarten.

At a more symbolic level, parents socialize their children to have cultural capital that is valued in educational settings (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Building verbal competence and high-status dispositions, they cultivate their children to stay busy, jump through hoops, and take leadership roles in extracurricular activities (Lareau, 2003). Lareau also finds that parents raise their children to articulate their needs and express opinions that distinguish them from everyone else – qualities that place them in advantageous positions to thrive in elite universities and beyond. Once in college, upper class parents are on stand-by to provide informational supports that schools lack (Hamilton, 2016), acting as the stopgap between institutional resources and students’ futures.

2.1 *Students’ Work to Position Themselves*

While contemporary sociologists have written widely on how parents seek to ensure intergenerational privilege for their children, they have paid less attention to what students do on their own to bolster their positions once admitted to elite colleges and universi-

ties. Yet, having been carefully cultivated for academic success (Calarco, 2014), we should expect students to be aware that their private elite education is a valuable asset for setting themselves apart from other social groups as the “best of the best” (Gaztam-bidé-Fernández, 2009). Young people, not just their parents, are motivated to maintain their status distinction and to ensure that whatever advantage they have accrued through admission to an elite campus is not squandered.

College students do practical things to safeguard their future success, such as selecting overall coursework and majors to advance their careers (Ciocca Eller, 2017) and building social capital with professors (Jack, 2016). They also use cultural markers to separate themselves from others, such as when a large proportion of graduating seniors from the highest ranked universities pursue a narrow band of first jobs that their peers deem “prestigious” (Binder et al., 2016). Graduates chase high-status jobs in banking, consulting, and high-tech companies not because they are uniformly excited about the work or even the salaries associated with these positions but, in large part, because these highly known career pathways offer a continued stamp of approval after graduation. Journalists call today’s elite undergraduates “organization kids” (Brooks, 2001) and “excellent sheep” (Deresiewicz, 2014) who fear making mistakes that will negatively affect their futures. A sense of continually having to compete for status in the next rung is palpable.

We should not suppose that students’ competition for privileged positions is confined to job-seeking processes. Elite students, like elite social groups generally, make cultural distinctions in their more immediate environments to collectively think of themselves as a class – “defined by a particular set of tastes, values, and ways of being” (Khan, 2012, p. 368). Students, like others, engage in boundary work, constructing typification systems of similarities and differences both to define who they are and “to categorize objects, people, and practices” (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, p. 171). While such comparisons may seem informal and inconsequential, making such judgements is emotionally, cognitively, and morally enriching (Lamont, 1992; Binder & Wood, 2013). Through these processes, students attribute worth to both low- and high-status groups, and tie their own self-worth to the meanings associated with various group identities. Furthermore, these shared classification systems are not just things in themselves, sorting people into this or that mental category. In using classifications as resources to separate themselves from others, students reproduce existing inequalities (Lamont, Beljean & Clair, 2014).

In the sections that follow, we show how students at Harvard and Stanford perceive their schools to offer a well-rounded, liberal arts education, which compares favorably to other campuses. In deeming their schools to be more or less equivalent to one another (Harvard to Stanford, and vice versa), they demonstrate the benefits of finding commonalities with an equally prestigious school, for the act of comparison to an exalted other enacts one’s own status (Lifschitz, Sauder & Stevens, 2014). In contrast, the “pre-professional”, “technical”, “intellectual”, “pretentious”, or “fratty” experiences they believe to characterize other universities relegates those schools to a lower position. Harvard and Stanford students’ preference for a cosmopolitan education – diverse, open, multi-faceted – is part of a process of getting their eliteness just right; of figuring out

what it means to be a top educated person; and of setting themselves off – through merit and habitus – from people who attend slightly less all-around-excellent institutions.

As we explore students' boundary-drawing, we combine insights from cultural sociology and the sociology of higher education. First, we show that students are not just positioned by their parents or their universities to reproduce high status; they actively *do* status reproduction through acts of cultural distinction. Second, while sociologists of higher education have long attended to the vertical stratification of undergraduate degrees by measuring institutions' level of selectivity and its effects on student access and outcomes, they have paid little attention to within-tier distinctions made by students and their families. We suggest that this horizontal distinction is not epiphenomenal, but rather is part of how elite culture in the United States is developed and sustained. In terms of the life chances sociologists typically care about and measure, students' boundary work between elite universities may seem like little more than noise; such symbolically maintained distinctions may or may not ever lead to actual financial or occupational payoffs, relative to graduates of other institutions. But in terms of upper class formation and reproduction, it may matter a lot. These students have the symbolic power to define true elite preeminence, to set the agenda for students in institutions lower in the hierarchy to try to imitate, and to motivate parents and aspiring students to continue to grasp for a berth in each new entering class.

3. Data and Methods

To analyze how students draw symbolic boundaries among elite institutions, we use the comparative case study method, examining Harvard and Stanford Universities. These two institutions share a number of features, including their Carnegie Classification of having very high levels of research activity (RU/VH) and their perennial high positions in *US News & World Report's* college rankings, which students and their parents use for information on top schools. They are both residential campuses, with nearly all students living on campus. Both universities are situated within vibrant local economies, boast strong alumni networks, have massive endowments in the \$20–35 billion range, and generously fund student organizations serving a variety of student interests. The two universities also have student bodies from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The median family income at Stanford in 2013 was \$167,500, with 66 percent coming from the top 20 percent, while the median family income at Harvard was \$168,800, with 67 percent coming from the top 20 percent (Aisch, Buchanan, Cox & Quealy, 2017). Important for our question about elite boundaries, both universities have similar and historically low admission rates. In 2016, Stanford's admissions fell to just 4.7 percent, making it the most competitive major university in the country (Anderson, 2016). At 5.2 percent, Harvard's admission rate is the second-lowest among colleges and universities. Putting these characteristics together, Harvard and Stanford are both classic examples of elite higher education institutions in the United States, but also culturally salient extreme cases.

While the two universities share many common features, they differ along some lines. Harvard, a member of the Ivy League, has for centuries educated the children of the country's most well-heeled families and has sent generations to top leadership positions throughout the world. Stanford, a relative newcomer, has been celebrated (and pilloried) for being "Get Rich U" (Auletta, 2012), the hub of innovation and riches. Bookending the nation's coasts, one has long stood for being quintessentially East Coast elite while the other embodies the ideals of California beauty and attitude.

This paper is based on 56 semi-structured interviews with current students and recent graduates of the two universities – 27 of them at Harvard and 29 at Stanford. Of the total sample, 39 respondents were currently in school at the time of our interviews, ranging from freshman to senior year, and 17 were recent college graduates who had been out of school no more than three years. We initially recruited interviewees through emails and postings in pre-professional organizations, but then asked students to refer us to other students they knew from class and their dorms. As a result, we talked with students with a range of career interests, and several who were still undecided about what they might do after graduation. Our sample features a near equal number of men and women across the two campuses, racial and ethnic diversity, and diversity in majors and social class backgrounds. Although our sample includes few individuals from historically under-represented groups, its percentages of representation come reasonably close to the student population at each university (see table 1).

The semi-structured interviews lasted from one to two hours and were conducted either in person or via Skype. Our respondents' reflections about their home campus and other colleges came mostly in response to our questions about the college application process, although they also arose in other parts of the interview, such as when we asked interviewees about their internships or first jobs. To maximize transparency, we reminded students that we would mask their personal identities to maintain confidentiality, but that we intended to include the real name of their university in any written or presented work. The decision to use the real names of our case study campuses is not completely novel (see for example Mullen, 2010), but it is uncommon. We believe it is justified in this case. Harvard and Stanford have unique and distinguishing reputations that cannot be easily camouflaged and which contribute to how students perceive them. We recorded all interviews and had them professionally transcribed. After reading through the interviews multiple times, we used ATLAS.ti qualitative data analysis to code them inductively.

There are limitations of our sample. The first is that while we are interested in how students attending elite universities make distinctions among institutions, we are clearly privileging the perspectives of those who attend Harvard or Stanford. We cannot generalize what students' boundaries look like at other private elite colleges and universities. Second, we recruited initially through pre-professional student organizations, which may have attracted a particular type of student, although as noted, we expanded our sample to get greater representativeness on campus. Third, we talked with students about their own and other colleges well after they had decided to enroll at Harvard or Stanford. This means that we cannot know in all cases which aspects of these bound-

aries had been drawn prior to arriving on campus and how much had been elaborated once there. Finally, our one-time data collection provides just a snapshot view of these boundary processes; we cannot know if they have effects on status maintenance over the long term. We return to these issues in the conclusion.

4. Findings

4.1 *Harvard and Stanford: High-Prestige, Well-Rounded Education*

To provide a baseline for students' comparisons to other institutions, we begin by looking at what they had to say about their own college. We found that although they pointed to differences in character between Harvard and Stanford, most perceived them to be equivalently prestigious. Interviewees generally expressed an affinity for the school they attended.

Nathan, a middle class, Latino Harvard alumnus whose parents had not attended college, conveyed a tone of self-evidence when asked about why he chose to attend Harvard – a “why would I go elsewhere?” level of facticity about its place in the field of other elite universities.¹ When “people actually think about schools, and they think about number one? It’s Harvard,” he said, noting that Harvard students had once made T-shirts for a football game with their traditional rival that read, “No one ever says they want to go to Yale when they grow up.’ Culturally, it’s Harvard! (...) so we feel pretty reassured by having attended.” Students also cited the mystique of their college. Halton, an Asian-American senior who came from the lowest socioeconomic tier, pointed to the aura of his university, saying, “When I was applying to college, you know, the perception I had of Harvard was of some of the greatest minds, most brilliant people, most accomplished individuals coming together and sharing four years together.” The “sense of euphoria” he had when he was admitted was strengthened through his interactions with peers and faculty on campus and “followed me all throughout freshman year and I think still follows me to this very day.”

Many of our interviewees spoke about the opportunities for a well-rounded course of study they could find at Harvard. Fiona, a white junior from an upper class family, indicated that the decision became clear during her admissions interview when she was counseled, “You have to go to Harvard because a lot of these other schools are just not going to expand your experience enough.” Students also reflected on their school’s fit with a range of academic interests they thought they could not find elsewhere. For Nancine, a white senior from a lower socioeconomic background, it was combining research in her concentration² (biomedicine) and being able to delve more deeply into the study of Arabic in one place. More often than not, though, descriptions of Harvard

1 Nathan and all other names are pseudonyms. We have changed some details to protect confidentiality.

2 Majors are called concentrations at Harvard.

	Harvard Sample n = 27	Harvard Undergraduate Students (enrolled student population in 2013, 2014) n = approximately 6,650	Stanford Sample n = 29	Stanford Undergraduate Students (enrolled student population in 2013, 2014) n = approximately 7000
Race				
White	17	2989	8	2584
African/African-American/Asian/Asian	0	443	1	440
American Latino/Hispanic	7	1253	11	1332
Two or more races	2	630	4	1178
	1	403	5	753
Class background				
Upper quintile	14	Share of Students from*** Top .1 percent 3%	13	Share of Students from*** Top .1 percent 4%
Second highest quintile	6	Top 1 percent 15%	7	Top 1 percent 17%
Middle quintile	3	Top 5 percent 39%	5	Top 5 percent 9%
Second lowest quintile	4	Top 10 percent 53%	3	Top 10 percent 52%
Lowest quintile	0	Top 20 percent 67%	1	Top 20 percent 66%
		Bottom 20 percent 5%		Bottom 20 percent 4%
Gender				
Male	17	3445	11	3706
Female	10	3214	18	3274
Major/Concentration				
Social Science	12	Degrees Conferred 39.0%	11	Degrees Conferred 42.0%
STEM	11	36.0%	12	40.6%
Humanities	4	25.0%	6	17.4%
Year in school				
First year	0	***	1	****
Second year	0	***	2	****
Third year	9	***	3	****
Fourth year	11	***	14	****
Alum (1 year out)	1	***	6	****
Alum (2 years out)	3	***	2	****
Alum (3 years out)	3	***	1	****

Notes: ~ Indicates cells where the column adds to 99.9 percent due to statistical rounding. * Data for race, gender, and majors are compiled from the Common Data Set Report (graduating class of 2014); data for social class background are compiled from the New York Times College Mobility Project (graduating class of 2013). ** The Common Data Set includes additional dimensions of race that we have not included (i.e. nonresident aliens, unknown, etc.). As a result, the racial demographics for the Undergraduate Classes do not combine to 100 percent. *** Retrieved from The New York Times College Mobility Project parental income comparisons which are based on students born in 1991, approximately the class of 2013. The Mobility Project does not report SES background data by quintile, but percent of students from the upper wealth and lower distributions. Students in the Top .1 percent will also be counted as a student in the Top 20 percent, and the middle quintiles are missing. As a result, the class demographics do not add up to 100 percent. **** The Common Data Set does not include information on class or number of students per year in school.

Tab. 1: Interviewee background characteristics compared to university demographic data

offered less detailed articulations of specific study and, instead, focused on the overall feel, reputation, and little-known traditions of the school. According to Martha, a white, upper class alumna, “It was very, just, idyllic.” Between times when the “leaves were changing” and the Yard was beautiful, and “weird traditions that you have – like our dorm had a Dr. Seuss performance during the holidays,” Harvard provided students with a legendary experience.

Stanford interviewees also were enthusiastic about their campus and, like Harvard’s Nathan, occasionally pointed to Stanford’s high rankings and prestige. Rahim, an Asian social sciences major from a bottom quintile socioeconomic background, mentioned that Stanford now has “a lower acceptance rate” than Harvard – although he was quick to add that Stanford students “don’t take much notice of such things.” Also like their Harvard counterparts, Stanford interviewees spoke of their school’s magic, but with different elements folded into their descriptions. Olivia, an Asian-American computer science alumna from an upper-class family, mentioned that

Stanford was the least pretentious of all the schools I visited (...) and it was a beautiful campus. I went in expecting a very academic, theoretical four years, but Stanford is very entrepreneurial. It’s very creative and a little bit hipster, which was the perfect combination that I came to love.

Still others emphasized the school’s eccentricities, marveling at the fun vibe on campus. Beatrice, a recent graduate from a white, upper-class background said, “There are certain quirky things (...) [at] graduation they have neon, they’re wearing bikinis. At graduation!”

Examining how students talked about each others’ campuses also provides insights. First, Harvard students tended to have an image of Stanford that aligned quite well with Stanford students’ understanding of their university. Levi, a white Harvard senior from an upper-class family, said, “The sort of classic Stanford student in my head would be a little bit more relaxed. And I don’t mean that in a less rigorous or a less smart or intense way. Just a little bit more chill.” He added, “because Harvard, in my head, is sort of the extreme of things. You get a lot of people who are really, really intense – I mean, almost to a neurotic extent.” Harvard students who wished to be engineers described Stanford as an ideal campus – better than Harvard in its course offerings, and also preferable to MIT which, as we describe later, was demoted for being too narrow. Harvard students tended to respect Stanford for offering a balance of amenities and academics.

Stanford students were less glowing about Harvard. Although they regarded it as a top school, as when Bailey – a white, upper-class sophomore – said that “Harvard, I guess, would be, I don’t know, like the closest thing to Stanford, I guess” – complementarity to Stanford was often overshadowed by dimmer views. Stanford students tended to cite Harvard’s reputation for having unhappy, highly competitive students. Whereas for Harvard students, Stanford stood apart as a unique institution for having a laid-back aura, Stanford students tended to lump Harvard together with other top East Coast schools for having, fundamentally, East Coast qualities.

Ultimately, Harvard and Stanford students recognized both schools for being academically rigorous and highly renowned. Stanford offered an easygoing feel which, whether true or not, Harvard students appreciated from afar and Stanford students professed deep commitment to. In both cases, however, interviewees felt they had made it to the top of the educational system and none had serious regrets about the school they attended. Students held up their well-rounded experience as ideal, and they were able to point to the various ways that other institutions failed to live up to this standard.

4.2 *The Problem of Vocationalism*

One of the strongest boundaries Harvard and Stanford students drew was between their own universities, which they thought encouraged students' exploration of their interests and passions, and other universities, which they considered to be too vocational or, in students' words, "pre-professional." Students valued a "well-rounded" liberal arts education because it exposed them to different histories and perspectives. Izzy, a graduating senior at Stanford from a white upper-middle-class family, said that her campus: "Really supports undergraduates doing all types of things (...) They support us to explore." Harvard junior Katherine, a white upper class student, said similarly about her campus: "Here, everyone kind of wants something a little different, and there's plenty of opportunity for everyone to excel and do really well." Finding what interests you were important components of an exceptional college experience, according to our interviewees.

Students thought such opportunities to explore were far superior to universities that were laser-focused on preparing students for the world of work. If a university was found to be pre-professional, it meant that "It was very isolated and there wasn't really a focus on anything else," as Deb, a Harvard junior from a Chinese-American, upper-class family, said. This negative assessment of career focus was particularly striking since Deb, herself, had participated in one of the student-run finance clubs throughout her years at Harvard, was on a path to take an investment banking job directly out of college, planned to apply to an elite business school two years later, and then return to Wall Street with her MBA in hand. Yet Deb, who was clearly pre-professional in her own right, was not alone in drawing the distinction between her path at Harvard and what she considered to be overly vocational pathways found at other top schools.

More frequently than any other school, the University of Pennsylvania – particularly its undergraduate program at the Wharton School of Business – fell on the wrong side of the liberal arts/pre-professional boundary. Harvard students who were considering finance or consulting jobs were particularly prone to condemn Penn for being pre-professional because they often faced withering criticism on their own campus for following this highly structured route out of school (Binder et al., 2016). Nathan, the recent alumnus of Harvard, singled out Wharton this way:

Wharton – don't get me wrong: Wharton's a very good school and very prestigious. If you want to do banking, it's a great place to go. But all the opportunities that are

available to you at Wharton are also at Harvard, and I really question (...) not question but I would say I think that, I think people who pursue just a[n undergraduate] business degree, it's like a signaling effect saying 'I don't value learning for learning's sake; I value education as a means to an end'.

When pressed to say why this mattered to him, since he, too, ended up on the finance track, Nathan said, "*You* made a conscious decision to go to a[n undergraduate] business school, whereas I made a decision to get a liberal arts education that was less tailored and more open-ended."

Stanford students sounded much like their Harvard peers in criticizing the culture of careerism at other institutions. Billy, a freshman at Stanford from an upper-class, mixed race background, said, "I'm not a big fan, well, of pre-professional education. And Penn is very pre-professional." Georgetown also fell into the category of pre-professional, as when Stanford senior Olivia reflected on students she had met at her summer internship at a top investment firm: "The kids from Georgetown, I think they were really intense finance. They lived and breathed finance. So, like, getting into Goldman Sachs is probably the zenith of their career."

While Penn and Georgetown helped Harvard and Stanford students construct a boundary separating their own "well-rounded, liberal arts education" from a pre-professional college career, a few of our interviewees painted their own schools with the same negative brush. Dino, a white, upper-class, recent graduate of Harvard, said that at his university

You would see so many students going off into these kind of preset tracks (...) like consulting or I-banking, or trading (...) It was following this linearity and this kind of security, or set course, on how you would get to your eventual career position.

Stanford's Omar, a Latino male from the lowest socioeconomic quintile, criticized Stanford for a similar problem, albeit in a different occupational sector, saying, "This place is too conservative for me. And also, it's not as humanities-focused and philosophy-focused as I would have liked (...) There's just too much emphasis on start-ups."

All of these students frowned upon too much pre-professionalism in college and, as we see in the last two comments, Harvard and Stanford were not immune from critique. Yet, when drawing this distinction, our interviewees argued for the higher status of their own universities compared to campuses that were strictly vocational. Such "better than" comparisons allowed many students to have their cake and eat it, too: the boundary assuaged sneaking concerns that in some ways they were like every other vocationally minded student in the Ivy League, but both during college and in the labor market after, they could argue that they were not.

4.3 *The Overly Technical Campus*

The problem of pre-professionalism was related to another boundary: universities that are too narrowly technical in their offerings. Students associated being overly technical with limiting their intellectual and social development – bad outcomes for elites-in-the-making. MIT was the main school that students demoted on this basis, despite getting nods of approval for attracting very smart students. Kevin, a Harvard senior from an upper-class background, was not the only person who thought, “If you want like pure academic credentials, a Cal Tech or an MIT might objectively have a better student pool.” Yet, brain power alone, associated with “technical schools,” was not what Harvard and Stanford students were after. Being truly elite requires a *habitus* beyond technical skill sets.

More Harvard students – particularly those interested in engineering but who had not gained entry to Stanford – talked about what was lacking at MIT. One critique we heard was that MIT was an academic grind in a way that Harvard was not – which favored going to Harvard. Louis, a senior from a mixed race, upper-class family who was interested in engineering told us, “I got into MIT and Harvard. That was a tough decision. My dad went to MIT and he said it was kind of rough. Very, very hard academically, very grueling (...) so he sort of pushed me away from that.” Another critique focused on social narrowness at MIT, such as when Harvard’s Foster – a junior from a white, upper-class family – said, “I think more than anything, what I’ve appreciated is having lots of friends that are not engineers. I feel like they really help to broaden my perspective, whereas if I went to MIT, the only people I would hang out with would be engineers.” Varied social networks and opportunities for time away from intensive studying feel like a good fit.

Stanford, despite its reputation for being an engineering powerhouse, did not fall into the same “technical school” category as MIT for most students we interviewed. Students interested in engineering said that Stanford provided the best of both worlds, a world-class liberal arts education with a strong science program. If Harvard’s Foster had gained admission to Stanford, he would have gone there rather than to Harvard or any “of the less well-known of the more technical schools that I got into.” When the Stanford students we interviewed recalled getting into MIT they were faced with minimal decision-making: they picked Stanford. Thad, a white male from an upper-class, academic family, reported,

I had no idea what I wanted to major in. So I was really looking for colleges with widespread academic strengths because I thought there was a good chance I would be an engineer, but there was a good chance I would be humanities (...) I applied to MIT because of my dad mostly, but it wasn’t really my number-one choice.

There is much discussion in both the scholarly literature and popular media (Rampell, 2011; Deresiewicz, 2014) of how “careerist” students at elite universities such as Harvard and Stanford students have become. Yet, several of our interviewees who wanted

to be engineers chose Harvard (a school with a less than stellar engineering reputation) over MIT, and students on the path to Wall Street disparaged the University of Pennsylvania – the school that leads most visibly to the banking sector. It mattered to students’ sense of self that they could get a “well-rounded” education while pursuing prestigious careers; they did not gravitate toward their best vocational prospects, alone. In this sense, students’ college assessments were not strictly “vocational”; they were also about shoring up symbolic status and an ontological sense of eliteness. Harvard and Stanford have the marquee names, which students can point to for the rest of their lives. As Rivera (2012) and Collins (1979) have pointed out, elite careers are not the result merely of students’ human capital acquisition, but of matching and credentialing. Bundling vocationalism (while not calling it that) and prestige is a strategy for verifying one’s elite status.

Harvard and Stanford students’ boundary work did not stop at devaluing pre-professional or strictly technical education. They also had negative opinions about schools that over-emphasize intellectualism or the social scene. Below, we provide details on how students further differentiated the truly top elite from the merely elite.

4.4 *The Overly Academic Campus – Where fun goes to die*

Harvard and Stanford students believed that a small number of schools offered a more purely academic, or intellectual, climate than what they could find at their own university. As we saw above, some students pointed to MIT and the California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech) as campuses for students with the most impressive raw talent. However, the University of Chicago was the campus that students most frequently mentioned as representing a pure experience in intellectualism. Harvard’s Kevin summed it up when he said, “Harvard kids are scared of the Chicago kids because the Chicago kids actually really are intellectuals and they really love learning (laughs).” By contrast, he said, “the Harvard kids are great at maximizing outcomes, (...) really good at playing the system, (...) building a more complete package.” Other students also pointed to Chicago’s intellectual pre-eminence. Edward, a Latino student at Harvard whose family is in the second lowest class quintile, remembered his campus visit when he was a prospective student: “The people I saw at U Chicago came out as very, very intellectual (...) Within five minutes, someone was trying to talk to me about Kant and, sort of, philosophy.”

If Chicago scored points as an academically superior campus, many interviewees simultaneously lowered its status for not offering a social experience that could benefit them. Stanford’s Bailey recalled that when she was filling out applications, “University of Chicago: everyone was like, ‘that’s the place where fun goes to die’, (...) so I didn’t even apply there.” Bailey’s interest in Chicago later was piqued once she started classes at Stanford, saying, “Based on like what my professors had mentioned, I think University of Chicago students, I think they have a really good humanities program, and I think (...) it would actually be a very good place intellectually.” Nevertheless, while

she now “admire[s] the education there, I don’t think necessarily I would be happy with the social climate.” Just as with McCabe’s (2016) discussion of “balance” between academic and social life, students in our study sought to be successful both academically and socially.

Chicago was an interesting institution that Harvard and Stanford interviewees used to sort out status differences. On the one hand, they understood that it offered a more classically rigorous curriculum than their own schools did. On the other hand, it was not good enough to go to. According to Stanford’s Sara, Chicago is hardly a peer to the very top schools: “I wouldn’t say it was – not to be arrogant or anything – but I don’t think people generally perceive it at the same level.”

A handful of students mentioned Yale as potentially offering a better academic experience than their own. Franklin, a white, upper-class rising senior, pointed out that some of his classmates had made him reconsider his choice of having gone to Harvard:

I’ve heard a lot of good things lately about Yale, so I wonder if Yale would have given me a more fulfilling experience (...) I mean, one thing about Harvard (...) is that a lot of kids are less focused on academics and more focused on how many extracurriculars they’re in (...) When you go to the dining hall, kids are talking about, I don’t know, things that seem uninteresting to me: movies or gossip or whatever. So that’s kind of disappointing to me just because I think there’s a missed opportunity to have a great academic experience.

Nevertheless, for several students, Yale remained a second-choice, as in the T-shirt Nathan mentioned, or when Harvard’s Halton said “I actually applied to Yale early option and was lucky enough to have gotten in.” But he turned down the offer once “April came around and I had gotten into Harvard.” Yale, in many ways, seemed to represent merely “an elite school” – as in, “Stanford, Yale, and Princeton,” according to Habib, a middle class student – but for him, “Stanford resonated with me better.”

The message here is that being uber-intellectual is noteworthy, but being at Harvard or Stanford is better – at least according to most students attending Harvard or Stanford.

4.5 *The Socially Distinct and Intense Country Club*

Several interviewees noted that Princeton University offers an excellent undergraduate-centered curriculum that might rival Chicago’s or Yale’s reputation for academic excellence. However, the feature of Princeton’s that students mentioned most often, and more negatively, was its reputation for being a “country club” – an exclusive social scene that Harvard and Stanford students found disagreeable. Stanford’s Bailey, the student who told us that the University of Chicago is where “fun goes to die,” offered the opposite assessment of Princeton: “Princeton would be a great education, but the *social* scene just seems too intense.” Going on, she noted that Princeton seems,

like, pretty cut-throat. Princeton people are very intense. They study very hard, they play very hard, they have these eating clubs and like a very rigorous social order. That to me is, just, I can't deal with that. I had enough of that in private school.

Princeton also scored poorly with Tamara, a first-generation, middle class college student who had recently graduated from Stanford, who stated, "I guess from all the rumors from undergrad, Princeton – everybody drinks too much (...) I don't know if staunch is the right word? – it's *stiff*."

Beyond being turned off by various forms of "intensity" at Princeton, both Harvard and Stanford students pointed to class inequality as the key factor contributing to their lower assessment of the campus. Harvard's Nathan compared his school to Princeton, stating, "I think it's definitely more socially elite than Harvard. I would say Harvard is probably more meritocratic." According to Stanford's Omar:

My impression of Princeton is that it's much more like class focused, and I mean class, like social class (...) So people would, like, buy things that would clearly show how much money they had, whereas at Stanford you don't really do that.

Harvard and Stanford students emphasized that Princeton could not be as excellent as their own schools because it emphasized existing social orders and particularism, favoring old-line elites. While a few students pointed a finger at their own schools for not valuing merit as much as they should – such as when Kevin said he "was surprised by the extent to which Harvard is still an old boys club rather than like truly the 1600 best students in America" – most students used Princeton as the negative example compared to their own campus's greater diversity, which is a valuable feature of elite cosmopolitanism (Warikoo, 2016).

4.6 *The Other Side of Social: The frat party that looks too much like a "typical college"*

The same rivalry could not be said to exist with Duke University, whose reputation as a national elite institution really only began to rise in the 1980s, but since then has been a regular fixture in a variety of rankings. For most of our interviewees, Duke did not figure much into their consciousness, such as when Harvard upper-class senior Aiden said: "Really to be honest, other than like I know that they're good at soccer and we've had some overlap in the past of other things, but other than that I really don't know much about Duke." When students did have strong opinions about Duke, the most salient boundary was that it offered too much fun and sociability. But rather than being a country club like Princeton, it was perceived to be the home of fraternity parties and more "typical" college fun – a too-close cousin to public universities.

While Harvard's Deb, the junior economics student, told us that she "applied to Duke and I got in," she added that, "I didn't visit" during admissions weekend. She ad-

mitted that “it sounds awesome; it sounds like a lot of fun. There’s a lot of school spirit obviously, I mean (...) it’s a very good balance of very good academics, but also good social life and things like that.” But after going over its positives, Deb served up its negatives, “Like it’s a very, I guess, typical school. It has a very big Greek life.” Adding insult to injury, she added, “It’s technically, like, a Southern school.” The same imagery came through in Izzy’s comments:

The frat scene, the Greek scene, seems big to me there. And the kind of Southern scene in terms of, I don’t know, I’m feeling like I want to say more ‘materialistic’, but I don’t really know if that’s true. Obviously good academics. Like more sporty, rah-rah. I don’t know. I have no idea. I’m like spewing stereotypes.

Engaging in stereotypes was not a barrier for our interviewees, who acknowledged that much of what they knew about Duke and other schools could be based on faulty information. In fact, the accuracy of the information did not seem central to the boundary work. What mattered was that students could demarcate their school relative to others in the horizontal stratification system of elite higher education. Taken together, Princeton and Duke represented the wrong side of the boundary in different ways than the University of Pennsylvania (which in its pre-professionalism was neither stodgy nor fratty), MIT (too “technical”), or Chicago or Yale (overly intellectual). Harvard and Stanford students used all of these schools to identify the sweet spot their university occupied: a well-rounded college experience that added to their sense of being elite.

5. Conclusion

We found that when asked to tell us about the universities they had considered when applying to college, or whose students they had run into during internships or other social experiences, Harvard and Stanford students drew highly convergent symbolic boundaries among the most prestigious universities in the United States. They attempted to do so generously, with many making something like a “there’s a great school for everyone” argument. But they also provided critical and, often, cutting observations. Just as Lynn and Ellerbach (2017) found that more highly educated respondents make finer-grained assessments of occupational prestige than do those with lower education levels, we found intricately detailed assessments of universities’ prestige among those who attended two of the most selective institutions in the postsecondary system.

In some respects, this hierarchicalization among peer schools seems at odds with contemporary American elites’ pattern of consumption for more widely available cultural objects, which is marked by an omnivorous disposition (Peterson & Kern, 1996; Johnston & Baumann, 2009). Appreciating both low-brow and high-brow music – or the humble meatloaf alongside haute cuisine – situates elites as cosmopolitans today, above others who prefer just one genre, or who do not know how to elevate the com-

mon to the sublime. In contrast, when it comes to elite universities, a clear pecking order comes into view. When the stakes are very high (when people's place in the class system seems to depend on it), and barriers to entry are extraordinarily steep (when less than five percent have a chance to be admitted), competition may create a personal sense of honor and status that leads to snobbishness over eclecticism. It is one thing to appreciate a wide variety of music to display one's cosmopolitanism. It is quite another thing to grant equal status to other colleges, even those within the same tier.

Is this boundary-drawing among students consequential for students' future pursuits and positions? Although our snapshot data collection limits us from knowing about later outcomes, secondary sources indicate that future effects may be non-negligible. Beyond higher education settings, Lizardo (2008) has shown that cultural consumption of high-brow objects has a positive effect on strong-tie social networks. So, when Harvard and Stanford students point to fine distinctions within this stratum of the higher education field (what one might consider a high-brow object), they may be building rarefied social networks that can serve to exclude others as potential colleagues, friends, or love interests. Rivera (2015) has demonstrated that elite employers judge students' "match" for jobs on the basis of where they went to college and which recreational pastimes they enjoy. It is possible to imagine that as the current cohort moves into occupational positions of power, their selection of new employee hires might narrow even further than is done today. But we admit that it is impossible to know from talking with these students at this one point in time.

Closer to our data, we find that this kind of distinction elevates students' sense of self-worth. As Lamont and Molnar (2002) have shown, drawing symbolic boundaries is a cultural resource used to help constitute people's identities as belonging to a particular group. Having worked much of their young lives to earn a spot on one of these campuses, Harvard and Stanford students seek to shore up any doubt they may have about their place in the world by asserting that they have participated in something special, and they attempt to carry that privileged experience forward through what we call "symbolically maintained inequality". As students, they enjoy the mark of high status through their association with highly prestigious organizations even within a set of super-elite campuses. This means that a key offering at institutions like Harvard and Stanford is not merely preparing students to compete in the labor market, or making them more intellectual or more skilled, but in helping them to feel the entitlement of elite status and to confidently occupy positions within these social circles.

While this may be prevalent in the United States, this form of status distinction is not universal. Nations that have flatter, less horizontally stratified systems of higher education, such as Germany or Canada, likely do not produce such boundary-making between institutions. In Canada, Davies and Hammack (2005) show that elite status comparison is likelier to come in the form of selection of major, not institutional origin. This means that our findings from Harvard and Stanford are organizationally contingent: We should expect variation in how elites construct themselves with the tools available in different educational systems. Our findings are also historically specific: Although we suspect that centuries-old rivalries have always called forth invidious comparisons among stu-

dents at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale, the particular themes we have discovered are attuned to today's social class anxieties.

As we have noted, our research is limited because we interviewed only Harvard and Stanford students. Future researchers could do a more comprehensive study, using interviews at additional universities or – using a computational approach – analyzing a large number of college newspapers, websites, alumni magazines, and other digital sources for students' perceptions of prestige. Longitudinal qualitative interviews with alumni several years post-graduation would be useful for seeing how graduates have, or have not, maintained these cultural distinctions, and whether they have resulted in forms of social closure. Despite the limitations in our data, we have put another form of advantage on the mental map of higher education researchers: elite students' own cultural work to symbolically separate themselves from close-peer competitors.

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Zusammenfassung: Untersuchungen zu Eliten erleben einen Aufschwung in Zeiten steigender ökonomischer Ungleichheit. Die Bildungssoziologie trägt entscheidend dazu bei, indem sie untersucht, wie wohlhabende Familien ihre Kinder im vertikal stratifizierten Hochschulsektor positionieren, um möglichst vorteilhaft konkurrieren zu können. Dennoch existieren in den USA nur wenige Untersuchungen zur horizontalen Stratifizierung zwischen den höchstrangigen Institutionen auf der einen Seite und andererseits zur Frage, wie Studierende selbst daran beteiligt sind, den Elitestatus symbolisch herzustellen. In der vorliegenden Untersuchung nutzen wir 56 qualitative Interviews mit Studierenden der Universitäten Harvard und Stanford, um nachzuvollziehen wie Studierende Statusunterschiede zwischen Eliteuniversitäten konstruieren. Dabei konnte herausgefunden werden, dass Student*innen von Harvard und Stanford solche Hochschulen wertschätzen, die eine „ausgewogene“ geisteswissenschaftliche Ausbildung bieten, während sie andere selektierende Institutionen beispielsweise dafür kritisieren, zu intellektuell oder zu konservativ zu sein, beziehungsweise in Verbindung mit Partys und Sport zu stehen, oder dass diese eine Studierendenschaft aufweisen, die zu sehr auf Karrierevorbereitung bedacht ist. Unsere Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass die Studierenden durch Konstruktion solcher nuancierter Wahrnehmungen der Besonderheiten elitärer Universitäten ihre exklusiven Positionen begründen und im großen Maße zu den fortlaufenden Statusunterscheidungen sozialer Eliten in den USA beitragen. Im Fazit dieses Artikels finden sich Anmerkungen, wie sich dies von nationalen Bildungssystemen mit geringerer horizontaler Stratifizierung unterscheidet.

Schlagnworte: Hochschulbildung, Eliten, Symbolische Grenzziehungen, Ungleichheiten

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