

The Elites

The “Elites” in society have many advantages granted to them from birth. They attend elite high schools, then go on to get accepted into elite colleges, which leads them to begin very successful careers. While many college students struggle to find internships the elite are able to give their children many different options for internships. Many college students must work throughout college to support themselves, unlike the elite whose children are free from debt. The elites are established early on from the attendance at elite private schools, thus creating a domino effect of advantages when applying to prestigious colleges. Through the “glass floor”, nepotism, and opportunity hoarding the elites have major advantages when starting their careers.

So, who are the elites? Elites are the people in society with disproportionate control over or access to a resource (Khan, 2012). As Shamus Khan states, in a healthy society, new members join the elites because of their talents that make them “elite” because of a certain skill or ability. However, in society today, elite status is protected and passed down through social institutions (Khan, 2012). This has made the concept of elites in society more of a moral issue to many, as the existence of elites and injustice go hand-in-hand.

Economically, we know that there are inequalities in wealth distribution, because there is an extreme concentration of income increasing among the top 1% of the population, and tax data shows that income inequality is mirroring level seen between 1913 and the 1940s, when the elites were at their peak (Khan, 2012). Research shows that children strongly inherit the economic situation of their parents (Khan, 2012). This points to the generational protection of elite status in the United States. Elites use culture to build their own identities, and simultaneously use boundary-drawing to exclude others. Cultural capital significantly shapes educational and social outcomes (Khan, 2012). This economic and cultural exclusivity

perpetuates elite privilege and limits mobility. The valuing of ideas and knowledge is one reason that the elite work so hard to get their kids into the most prestigious prep schools and universities.

Philosopher Antonio Gramsci wrote about cultural hegemony, which is the idea that the dominant ruling classes, the bourgeoisie, use cultural knowledge to maintain wealth and power above the dominated (Khan, 2012). As described in *The High Status Track: Studies of Elite Schools and Stratification*, these schools historically emphasized discipline and exclusivity, preparing students for leadership roles while isolating them from broader societal issues (Kingston 1990). Richard Reeves expands on this in *Dream Hoarders*, highlighting how elites use exclusive educational institutions to "hoard opportunities" and pass privilege to the next generation (Reeves 2018). This cultural training sustains elite privilege across generations, aligning with Gramsci's idea that controlling cultural institutions is central to maintaining power.

The way that these resources are distributed is largely due to three organizations: clubs, families, and schools. While social clubs and families are distinctly responsible for elite reproduction, educational institutions play a role in both the reproduction of the elites and the increase in social mobility for other groups. However, they like to hide the role they play in compounding inequality, often using the language of talent, merit, and hard work, to "obscure the systemic inequality they help produce" (Khan, 2012). In a longitudinal study of the accumulation of social and cultural capital, Richard Zweigenhaft follows prep school and public school graduates of Harvard and finds differences in class, academic performance, and aptitude. He found that elite prep school students are some of the least academically qualified students to enter Harvard—and yet they still earn more in their post-grad careers (Zweigenhaft, 1993). He also concluded that "public school graduates seem to be more committed to the accumulation of

cultural capital through academic achievement, both as undergraduates and afterwards” (Zweigenhaft, 2012). Educational inequality plays a huge role in the protection of elite status in the United States.

In her 2021 doctoral dissertation, “Shaping Elite College Pathways: Mapping the Field of Feeder High Schools in the United States, Kristen Glasener examines the relationship between elite colleges and the “feeder” secondary schools that historically provide them with a large number of their students. Glasener defines a “feeder school” as “a school that consistently sends applicants to a particular institution” (154). Glasener reports that of the 27,000 public secondary schools and 13,000 private secondary schools, there exist 3,200 secondary schools that consistently feed their students into the same colleges (121). She offers several reasons for this feeder system, including the idea that university admissions officers have trust in the culture and curricula that shaped the students from these feeder schools. Admissions officers have built solid relationships with the college counselors at these schools, so they have a tradition of making visits to the schools to meet applicants and get to know them. Affluent secondary schools have the budget to hire college counselors beyond the school’s guidance counselors. These college counselors carry out “activities that facilitate college-going, including contacting college representatives on students’ behalf and facilitating college visits” (29). This also demonstrates Mark Granovetter’s explanation in *The Strength of Weak Ties*, as he states “individuals with few weak ties will be deprived of information from distant parts of the social system and will be confined to the provincial news and views of their close friends” (1370). College counselors and admissions teams act as the “weak ties” which give students distinctive access to the selective colleges that students from other high schools do not have.

Glasener found that the median family income of students who attend these feeder schools is higher than 92% of high schools in the United States (119). These students are born into privilege, and are given all the resources to carry that privilege into the next generation. Granovetter's work also explains how these students maintain their social advantage and privilege. The students are not the ones with direct ties to the college admissions office- but their schools position and resources, such as counselors, are the intermediaries that connect them to the elite college admissions procedure. Granovetter describes weak ties as "indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities" (1378). This privileged connection is the bridge that provides affluent students access to elite universities.

Students that attend elite universities have a massive advantage when pursuing a career after university. In the article "The most successful and influential Americans come from a surprisingly narrow range of 'elite' educational backgrounds" statistics from the study show that almost 40% of CEOs are from one of the "elite thirty four" universities, and around 50% of billionaires are also from one of the "elite thirty four" (Wai, et al. 2024). The term "Extraordinary Achievers" is used in the article to denote people who have accomplished great things like becoming president, being CEO of a fortune 500, a nobel prize winner, etc (Wai, et al. 2024). According to the article around 50% of America's "Extraordinary Achievers" come from one of the "elite thirty four" (Wai, et al. 2024). These statistics alongside the article show the huge advantage that college graduates from elite universities have. Attending elite universities opens up many different doors for students that are not available to students of the general public who attend other universities. They attended elite private schools or "feeder schools" and were given many advantages in order to gain acceptance into an elite university. The advantages from attending an elite high school continue to compound when attending an elite university and

pursuing a career after graduation into opening up many pathways to “elites” that are closed to others.

Glasener spells out many advantages of attending an elite university, including the fact that students “accumulate less debt, on average, and subsequently enjoy more favorable treatment in elite job markets,” as well as having “access to socioeconomically-advantaged marital partners, membership in powerful alumni networks, and the social prestige associated with high status institutions” (9). Granovetter highlights the importance of weak social ties, explaining they are more likely to connect members across different groups, unlike string ties, which usually are concentrated within the same group (1376). These connections provide graduates with unique job opportunities. Glasener found that “Harvard University and Columbia University both have feeder reliance rates that exceed 14%, suggesting that more than 1 in 7 of their incoming, first-year students come from feeder high schools” (99). Glasener’s research illustrates that there is a historical bias in our educational system of favoring the privileged. Access to resource-rich secondary schools sets a clear advantage to acceptance at an elite college or university, which sets a clear advantage to forging a career.

These advantages are systemic and deeply ingrained in economic, cultural, and social structures that make privilege self-reproducing. As thinkers like Gramsci, Reeves, and Granovetter have pointed out, it is the gatekeeper institutions that, masquerading as a meritocratic process, legitimize inequality and restrict mobility for the others. A system as deeply entrenched as this must have critical inquiry into the manner of distribution of resources as well as cultural norms perpetuating the same. Until then, the self-reinforcing circle of elite privilege and systemic inequality will continue, squeezing out any hope of broad social mobility.

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