

Downside UP

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Higher Education, Class, and Politics: Struggling with the Past, Choosing Democracy and Opportunity

Although American ideology would have us believe otherwise, the United States has always had a ruling class. Call it an elite or even an aristocracy, there has always been a small group of people who have wielded social, economic, and political power primarily as a result of birth and out of proportion to their accomplishments. Even when individually hard-working and worthy, most of its members have had a leg up from inherited wealth and connections by family, school, and college. When not born with a silver spoon in their mouths, some have gained entrance to the ruling class by way of the schools, colleges, and universities they attended, and perpetuated their new status by wealth, family, and connections for their children.

Recently, one of the major symbols of the country's ruling elite, and my alma mater -- Amherst College -- was made prominent in the news by a [Business Week](#) article on the college's president and his proposal to radically restructure college admissions in favor of lower income families. This effort comes out of a long history of elite colleges like Amherst, Harvard, Yale, Williams, Princeton and perhaps 20 or 30 others playing a fundamental role in molding the class of people who have ruled the country, its businesses and its government.¹

Though no longer affiliated with the churches of their origins, these elite colleges and universities, along with some private secondary schools, for the most part began as old-line Protestant institutions. While they have acted more often than not in the self-interest of their class, and often by discriminating against women and minorities, they have also maintained some sense of duty and social responsibility. At their best, as they have largely done since the civil rights movement of the 1960's, they have led the country in defining its obligation to women and minorities.

They have not, however, played a significant role in the education of lower and working class families. Now, as the country moves farther and farther away from being a society of equal opportunity, and political power has shifted significantly towards a once primarily New South model of low taxes, minimal social infrastructure, and oil baron corporate greed, the place which these colleges and universities play in the life of the nation may be more important than ever. The question is whether they can – or will – step up to the plate and do the right thing.

¹ All of the above were originally called “colleges” not “universities.” Over time, especially when they have added master's and doctoral degrees, some have changed their titles to “university.” But in the vernacular, most people still refer to people going to “college” so I use both “college” or “colleges” and “colleges and universities” to refer to these elite institutions.

I think they should. I hope they do. This possibility sure beats the current alternative laid out for us on the political Right today.

Noblesse Oblige and the Protestant Elite

Inevitably in any historical summary, there are a lot of generalizations which do not apply specifically in every instance. At the same time, generalizations are what make sense out of history. Without them we get lost in a sea of unfathomable details.

The best-known and most prestigious colleges and universities in the United States today are predominately in the Northeast, most frequently founded as old, mainline Protestant institutions before the Civil War, often to train men for the Protestant clergy, usually to educate “young gentlemen.” While some were founded to educate poor but worthy young men, their purpose soon evolved into the education of the Protestant elite which would, presumptively, run the country. It was, after all, in their eyes the duty and responsibility of the best elements of society to be in charge, take care of things – *noblesse oblige*² -- and, in that era, there were no contenders for that mainline Episcopalian-Congregational-Unitarian-Presbyterian-Quaker mantle! Almost all of these old, elite schools were products of religious inspiration and action. Harvard (1636) was Congregational. Princeton (1746) was Presbyterian. Amherst (1825) was Unitarian. Columbia (1754) was Anglican (Episcopalian). Swarthmore (1860) and Haverford (1833) were Quaker. Williams (1791), Bowdoin (1794), and Yale (1701) were Congregational. The University of Pennsylvania (Penn) stands out for its non-sectarian founding, directed to be so by its founder, Benjamin Franklin. Brown (1764), following Roger Williams, the renegade founder of Rhode Island, was Baptist. Wesleyan (Connecticut, 1831) was Methodist.³

Until John F. Kennedy, every president of the United States was Protestant or of Protestant origin.⁴ And JFK went to Harvard. Congress was a Protestant club until well into the 20th century. There has never been a Jewish president. Out of our 42 presidents, 11 have been Episcopalian, 8 Presbyterian, 4 Unitarian, 2 Quaker, and 1 Congregational for a total of 26. Of the rest, 2 are Dutch Reformed (in Dutch originated New York and close to Presbyterian), 4 Methodist, 4 Baptist, 2 Disciples of Christ, 1 Roman Catholic, 1 Deist, and 2 with no denomination. Considering that Baptists, Methodists, and Roman Catholics are by far the largest denominations and the mainline denominations very small, the skewing of presidential religions is striking. George W. Bush was born Episcopalian though he is now Methodist and included above as a Methodist. Even for the 20th century or the post-World War II era, the old-line denominations are way over-represented.

The representation of presidents by college and university appears more broadly-based, even democratic. Nine did not go to or graduate from college – all in the Civil

² French referring to the obligation of the nobility to take care of the rest of society on the assumption that it was obviously the only appropriate part of society to take on this responsibility.

³ Some were officially sponsored by organized church groups, others by members; not all mention their affiliation clearly on their web pages. The heirs of Roger Williams are today best identified with the small denomination of “American Baptists,” something quite different from the “Southern Baptists” now associated with the Radical Right. Methodists were from the beginning more oriented to the middle and working classes.

⁴ In my source, www.americanpresidents.org, compiled in association with CSPAN, Jefferson is listed, as I am sure he would be content, as a “deist,” and Lincoln and Andrew Johnson as having no specific denomination.

War era or earlier -- and 15 went to 15 different colleges of varying prestige and age. But 5 went to Harvard, 3 to Yale, 2 to Princeton, and one each to Amherst, Williams, and Bowdoin. The remainder includes three Virginians (Jefferson, Monroe, and Tyler) before the Civil War who went to William and Mary (Episcopalian as chartered, like Columbia, by the King of England) and 2 who went to West Point (Grant and Eisenhower). George W. Bush went to Andover Academy, Yale, and the Harvard Business School.

The State Department and the CIA have both long drawn a wildly disproportionate percentage of their personnel from elite colleges and universities. After all, these people need to be smart and cultivated – heavens, even speak a foreign language. It just wouldn't do to have US foreign policy run by common folk! Since World War II, three directors of the CIA have been Amherst graduates and Princeton was long considered a virtual prep school for the CIA.

Molding a Ruling Class

Long-time readers of Downside Up know the importance I attribute to Protestantism in the history of American society.⁵ A superb description and analysis of this whole process of molding and maintaining the American ruling class through its Protestant colleges and universities is described in a new book by Jerome Karabel focused on the three premier elite US universities and called The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. For my own summary in this section, I quote heavily and draw ideas from a review of this book by Jeffrey Kittay (my class at Amherst!) appearing in the November 14 – 20, 2005 issue of the Washington Post National Weekly Edition (pp. 32-33).

Until World War I, there was no selectivity to admissions at the nation's elite colleges and universities because their role was not honing intellect but “welcoming the well-bred, athletic, public-spirited and sociable scions of the privileged...destined to be the leaders of the next generation.” It was assured that they were Protestant because the only requirement for admission was a classical education, including Greek and Latin, and this education was provided almost exclusively by a small number of elite Northeastern private schools – like George W. Bush's Andover -- which only admitted Protestants from privileged families. “By the 1890's, 74 percent of Boston's upper class and 65 percent of New York's sent their sons to either Harvard, Yale, or Princeton,” and I will bet almost all the rest went to Columbia, Brown, Dartmouth, Amherst, Williams and the like.

The first change in this pattern occurred when Harvard presidents Charles Eliot and Lawrence Lowell, concerned that their colleges were only educating the wealthy, dropped the Greek and Latin requirement and sought to attract more boys from “good public schools.” It would be nice to think that this change represented a crisis of conscience, but I suspect it had more to do with a concern that some able young men were breaking through into positions of national leadership and it would hardly do for another Andrew Jackson to become president without benefit of an elite Northeastern Protestant education!

The problem for these schools was that this change in admissions requirements led immediately to an increase in the number of Jews, to “historic highs of 4 percent at Princeton (1918), 9 per cent at Yale (1917) and a distressing 20 per cent of the

⁵ See Downside Up, “It Really Is About Religion,” parts I, II, and III; volume IV, issues 4, 5, and 7; May, June, and September, 2004.

freshman class at Harvard (1918).” I hasten to add that the horrified reaction to these numbers is not deduced from statistics and ensuing events but stated and recorded in meetings of college officials. They feared that Jews would “poison the [gentlemanly Protestant] social experience” and the Protestant elite would turn away from them as New York’s had turned away from Columbia in the first decade of the century.

Lowell’s solution was to limit the size of the entering class and incorporate into the admissions process an evaluation of each candidate’s “nonacademic qualities.” The key word according to Karabel was “character,” a quality “thought to be frequently lacking among Jews but present almost congenitally among high-status Protestants.” The prejudice exhibited by heads of admission was blatant – and shocking to a 21st century ear. One commented that the names of some recently admitted students read like “some of the “begat” portions of the Old Testament” or a “roll call at the Wailing Wall.”

In 1922, Harvard began to pose a new set of questions about race, color, religious preference, previous surnames, and – think of this the next time your credit card company asks you – your mother’s maiden name! Letters of recommendation began in that era as criteria for admission, as did extracurricular activities and a checklist of physical characteristics. Personal interviews, especially with local alumni, virtually guaranteed perpetuation of the status-quo ante. “As late as 1951, Harvard admitted an astonishing 94 percent of its legacies” – meaning sons of alumni.

As more and more qualified applicants applied, limiting admissions according to academic ability would have been an obvious solution but in fact intelligence was denigrated as leading to the admission of “neurotics,’ ‘effeminates,’ ‘sophisticates,’ ‘esthetes,’ and ‘introverts.’” It was, to the contrary, assumed that the future leaders of business and government would be “well-bred students of average intelligence,” a self-fulfilling prophecy since much of Big Business into the 1960’s routinely excluded Jews and Catholics from higher level positions, and money even then played a big role in politics. “Most university leaders made no bones about limiting the ‘super bright’ to only 10 percent of each class.”

Public Higher Education and the “New South”

Virginian presidents Jefferson, Monroe, and Tyler went to the College of William and Mary which, dating from the end of the 17th century, is apparently the second oldest college in the country after Harvard.⁶ Founded with public funds from the King and the General Assembly, its primary advocates were clergy but its purpose was more generally the “improvement” of youth rather than specifically to train the clergy. There were other pre-Civil War colleges, including Thomas Jefferson’s University of Virginia, the University of North Carolina, and the College of Charleston (South Carolina). But, historically, the Southern elite was closely linked to the Northeastern elite no matter how distinct their cultures nor how divisive issues of race and slavery. Many Southern planters before the Civil War had their sons tutored in the Classics and sent to elite Northeastern colleges or just sent first to the same Northeastern private schools.

After the Civil War, it was not “carpetbaggers” who fashioned the South’s new ruling class. Rather, already established members of the planter class joined forces with,

⁶ For those of you wondering where James Madison, the third member of the Virginian trio of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe went, he went to Princeton.

and invested in, commerce and industry, and welcomed Northern capital. As historians do today, Southerners themselves referred to this emerging capitalist society as the “New South,” but it did not represent as sharp a break with the past as one might assume. The Southern elite's close ties to the North before the Civil War were not only through education but also in trading raw materials like raw cotton for manufactured goods like cotton fabric, furniture, and machinery. It included marriages in both directions.

Now the Southern elite, like the elites of the Midwest and West, created new colleges and built upon older ones, public and private, to serve and mold their own – while often also still sending many of their sons to Northeastern colleges.⁷ Duke, which began just before the Civil War as Trinity College (Methodist), Vanderbilt (1873, Methodist), and Davidson (1837, Presbyterian) in the South, Oberlin (1833), Stanford (1891), and the Universities of Michigan (1817), Wisconsin (1848), and California (1855) in the Midwest and West were important representatives of this trend.⁸

What was different about the South was the playing out of both race and class. The North-South alliance was, from the founding of the country, forged on the backs of Southern African Americans. As the compromises of the Constitution first sacrificed their right to be citizens, the “Compromise of 1877,” which ended Reconstruction and the Northern military occupation of the South, sacrificed them all over again.⁹ Northern elite colleges and universities were hardly bastions of racial equality. Although Oberlin, in Ohio, and Amherst, in Massachusetts, for two, admitted African Americans before the Civil War, *de facto* segregation reigned throughout the North.

To create an alliance between the Southern elite and the Northern elite was for the North to do much more than merely accept discrimination. It meant even more than buying into the Southern tyranny of rigid, legal racial segregation backed by physical violence, including the threat and the reality of thousands of lynchings. The North-South alliance meant the acceptance of an equally rigid class tyranny inflicted almost as much upon poor whites as poor blacks. The Southern tradition is not just about race. It is about class because it includes a society-wide hostility to taxes and their use to support a social infrastructure, including schools.

As noted above, the planter class before the Civil War was long used to educating its sons at home with tutors or sending them to Northeastern private schools. They had no interest in public schools and did not fund them. Apologists for the South have

⁷ It was about this time also that the elite women's colleges were founded. Mary Lyon, a chemist who founded Mt. Holyoke College in 1837, was determined to prepare women for excellence in a male-dominated world. She instituted “rigorous academic entrance requirements and a demanding curriculum” emphasizing the natural sciences and “conspicuously free of instruction of domestic pursuits.” Bryn Mawr (1885) was perhaps even more militantly dedicated to academic excellence equal – indeed superior – to that offered men. It established the first Ph.D. program at a women's college and today still prides itself on “intense intellectual commitment.” While this commitment may make the elite women's colleges academically superior to the men's even today, to the degree that society continues to limit women's access to the highest echelons of business and government, they are not molding the ruling class. (See their web sites.)

⁸ Not even Oberlin of this latter group indicates any religious connection behind its founding. That it was co-educational is notable for the period.

⁹ The Constitution failed to abolish slavery yet counted slaves as 3/5's of a citizen for the purpose of state populations to establish electoral college votes for president and representation in the House of Representatives. The Union army occupied the South after the Civil War to educate and enforce the rights of newly-freed slaves as prescribed in the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution. By the turn of the century, all but slavery had been reestablished and even the right to vote denied.

often pointed out that under Northern control and the Freedman's Bureau after the Civil War, state budgets in the South spiraled “out of control,” implying, or stating, that this was *prima facie* evidence of the corruption and mismanagement of Northern carpetbaggers and “nigras.”¹⁰

Not so. Yes, budgets soared. Yes, there was corruption – but no more than in the North or the rest of the Western world at the time. But the primary reason budgets soared was that the South began building schools, schools for whites as well as blacks! To the extent it built colleges and universities, then and for long afterward, it did so to educate the elite, especially in the private colleges and universities and to a large extent in the public as well. The Southern tradition is anti-tax because it is anti-social infrastructure from schools to roads to sewers to parks to libraries to swimming pools – except, in some instances, if the beneficiaries are at least white, and better, rich.

The recent rape case at Duke echoes this past. All the students charged with rape are graduates of Northeastern private schools. All are white. The woman stripper accusing them is black. She attends historically black – and underfunded -- North Carolina Central University. All but one lacrosse player at the house where the alleged rape occurred are white.¹¹

The Public Sector Challenge, Civil Rights, and the Protestant Conscience

Clearly, the North was no paragon of equality or social justice for working class whites any more than for African Americans. Catholics as well as Jews were largely excluded not only from the Northeastern private schools but also from the colleges to which the schools' graduates were tracked. My father-in-law¹² testified to me that no Catholic – and I presume no Jew -- was allowed onto any Boston-based corporate board of directors until well after World War II. While the rest of the country, including the South, was building large public university systems to educate the middle, and even lower, classes, the Northeastern states, dominated by their Republican elites, left their public higher education sectors bereft of funding. When I was at Amherst in the early 1960's, there were fewer than 5,000 students at the University of Massachusetts on the other side of town. The State University of New York, where I taught in the 1990's, was largely a creation of Nelson Rockefeller in the 1970's.

Elsewhere, money was poured into public higher education from North Carolina to California. Top faculty were hired out of elite universities. Some of the world's best research has been conducted at North Carolina, Wisconsin, Michigan, and the University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles. They have developed reputations placing them on par with some of the most prestigious private universities. All of them, plus many small state colleges, I would say offer educational opportunities – opportunities for learning – equal or better than those offered at even the most elite private colleges and universities. The Evergreen State

¹⁰ Please note that, contrary to the myths of Southern apologists, no Southern legislature ever had a black majority. The South even under Reconstruction was run by its elite, including Republican planters!

¹¹ DeWayne Wickham, *USA Today*, April 18, 2006, p. 13A

¹² Stanley F. Teele was dean of the Harvard Business School and a director of several major corporations.

College in Olympia, Washington, where I was for 15 years, is even recognized, with others, in US News & World Report's annual survey, “America's Best Colleges.”¹³

It is said that the Northeastern states didn't do anything about public higher education until admissions limitations at the elite colleges and universities began cutting into the admissions of the middle and upper middle classes – though not the true elite of the wealthy classes who can still get in, even today, with no more than “average” intelligence.¹⁴ I would add that at the same time, states like Michigan and Wisconsin began placing higher tuition on out-of-state students from Massachusetts, New York, and the like which did not provide for public higher education.

Starting in the 1960's, across the country, private colleges and universities responded both to the challenge of a large, high-quality, public higher education sector and to the civil rights movement. In part, I think they were responding, however consciously or unconsciously, to the classic notion of the founders of the original elite colleges that it was their duty and responsibility to educate the future leaders of the country. How much better it would be to have them educated by “us” than by someone else, especially by the rabble at public colleges and universities!

Surely more consciously but not contrarily, they were also responding to recognition of their and the nation's betrayal of responsibility to the African American community which they had by then betrayed twice over in the Constitution and post-Reconstruction. For either reason, they might be seen as primarily self-interested, even hypocritical: it would seem unlikely that those whom you educated and for whom you opened the door to the ruling class would turn upon you once in that class. Yet I would give them the benefit of the doubt enough to say that the civil rights movement galvanized their Protestant consciences, making clear their historic duty and social responsibility to the poor and the oppressed.

The great irony in Karabel's account of elite, private higher education's history of admission and exclusion, an irony he well recognizes, is that the same tools developed to exclude Jews and other undesirables could be used just as well to include groups previously excluded. And that is exactly what happened. Lyndon Johnson may have created affirmative action law but it was higher education, the elites of both the private and public sectors, which implemented it, if perhaps not more systematically than anyone else, I believe with more philosophical commitment than anyone else, corporate or governmental. They admitted women and they sought out minorities in numbers never imagined.

While rarely able to draw an African American population comparable to their percentages in the total population (Wesleyan one possible exception), they drew large numbers of Asian Americans and transformed the visual human appearance of

¹³ The reason to go to Amherst, Duke, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and their like is not to obtain the best possible education as compared to hundreds of other less prestigious colleges and universities. The reason to go is, even more than for the extraordinary human and material resources, the self-perpetuating reputation, esprit, and connections which open doors other schools cannot. It is, on the whole correctly, assumed that if you went to these schools, you at least had something going for you – family if not brains. As I have often noted in conversations with Amherst people and others, these elite colleges and universities do a lot of boasting about the accomplishments of their graduates but it means little when they only admit a tiny percentage of the population already most likely to succeed.

¹⁴ Not to be cruel, but our current president is no genius. I have explained before how he is probably dyslexic, and certainly didn't score high on his SAT's – unless, as would not be unusual, he had someone else take them for him. What he is is a Yale legacy of I don't know how many generations.

most every elite campus. While legacies – admission of the children of graduates – is still by far the single most significant form of affirmative action in higher education – well ahead even of athletes -- it no longer promises admission. Not even the Northeastern prep schools are pipelines to the elite colleges and universities. And since academic merit was never the primary criterion of admission, it did not require that much reworking of criteria to make the change.

Class: the Problem Unresolved

Unfortunately, the problem of class remains unresolved. African Americans and Hispanics – we need not even talk about American Indians -- remain underrepresented in elite private colleges because they are disproportionately poor and very poor. Almost by definition, the elite colleges are so rich that they can – and do -- offer “need-blind” admission, that is they guarantee that if you are admitted, you will receive a financial aid package which will allow you to attend. The richest of the rich make their admission decisions independent of financial information and limit even the amount which students must take out in loans. If you can get in, this often makes the cash layout cost of attending the most elite colleges less than going to most public colleges and universities – even community colleges -- despite what can be a \$20,000 or more difference in their overall price tags. Yet, Karabel notes, “the children of the working class and the poor are about as unlikely to attend the Big Three today as they were in 1954.”

Once the bastion of the middle class, public higher education is, in turn, beset with financial crisis. The cost of going to public colleges and universities has soared even faster than the cost of going to private institutions and way out of proportion to the increases in median family income. This development is not because public institutions have become profligate or wasteful. To the contrary, it is because per student state funding of public colleges and universities has plummeted, forcing them to raise their direct charges to students even faster than private colleges and universities.

A good friend of mine in the State System of Higher Education (SSHE) in Pennsylvania where I was an academic vice president in the 1980's tells me that since 1990, their state funding has dropped from 60% to 38%. There are various ways of calculating the data and the ranges vary considerably but they all suggest that the percentage cost of a college education born by students in the public sector has nearly doubled since 1980.¹⁵ At a time when median family income adjusted for inflation has risen only 5.8% from 1990 to 2005, the total cost of going to a four-year private college has risen 47% and a four-year public college, 63%.¹⁶ Just in the past five years, costs have risen 17% in the private sector and 28% in the public, again all adjusted for inflation. A typical student today graduates from college with \$20,000 in student loans. The median debt-to-income ratio is now 8% with a quarter of college graduates paying more than 12% of their income.

¹⁵ See the SHEEO (State Higher Education Executive Officers) web site (dev.sheeo.org) and some data at dev.sheeo.org/finance/shef/shef_data.htm. This data shows an increase of student share in Pennsylvania from 32% to 55%, California 7.5% to 18%, Massachusetts 23% to 41%, New York 20% to 33%, North Carolina 17% to 26%. Of those I checked, Washington has the lowest increase, from 20% to 25%. Nationally, the increase is 21% to 37%.

¹⁶ See Susan Berfield, “Thirty & Broke: The real price of a college education today,” Business Week, November 14, 2005, p. 77.

Even after grants and tax benefits, the net cost of attending the average four-year private college is \$19,000 a year, a lot for any family but for a poor family, 83% of its annual income. As Business Week notes in an October 31, 2005 editorial, as “aid is shifting toward loans, so today’s education sticker shock and the prospect of decades of college-debt repayment is causing many bright, poor students to seek cheaper two-year community college schooling – or simply to eschew higher education altogether.”¹⁷ To many poor kids, the idea of taking on \$20,000 or more in debt to pursue something which no one else in their family may have ever done so you can get a higher income sometime in a vague future is simply incomprehensible.¹⁸

Now, Robert Woodbury – yeah, my brother! and retired Chancellor of the University of Maine system – argues that US News & World Report’s annual ratings of “America’s Best Colleges,” far from promoting socially responsible admissions serving a more democratic society, exacerbates the already serious problem of admitting students who represent an economically more diverse population: “Whether the measuring stick used...is test scores or persistence of first-year students or average time-to-degree or percentage of alumni giving, the system is stacked against colleges that enroll part-time, commuter, older, at-risk, [lower income], or more ethnically and racially diverse student bodies.”¹⁹

It is bad enough, says Woodbury, that US News measures only “inputs” such as class size without any consideration of whether these inputs measure “what the college or university actually accomplishes for students.”²⁰ “Values that we used to claim were important to the integrity and social value of our colleges and universities are being eroded.” He notes that the emphasis on test scores – which, I note and he knows, have been found again and again to have little relation to either college success or success in later life -- frustrate “the deeply held commitment to educational opportunity for lower-income students, people of color, nontraditional, and part-time students.” The rankings “denigrate the enormous value-added achievements of ‘lesser’ colleges and universities that make an enormous difference in students’ lives.” They deny any place for what was actually a reasonable original objective of the elite private colleges: civic education of the future leaders of business and government.

The “top” 146 colleges in the United States enroll 74% of their students from the highest socioeconomic quartile and only 3% from the lowest quartile. “By age 24, only 8% of these bottom-quarter students have earned a BA from any U.S. college, vs. 46% of those from top-quarter families.” A full 64% of lowest quartile students never go to college at all.²¹

¹⁷ “Higher Ed’s Higher Costs,” p. 116.

¹⁸ And even then the rewards of a college degree are declining. It is still the minimum requirement for a satisfying and financially rewarding job, it no longer guarantees job security, health insurance, or a retirement plan, and “real earnings for college graduates without an advanced degree have fallen four years in a row, for the first time since the 1970’s.” (Business Week, November 14, 2005, p. 78)

¹⁹ New England Board of Higher Education, Connection, Spring 2003, p. 18.

²⁰ Woodbury notes amusingly that what US News does would be like Consumer Reports evaluating a car by the amount of steel in it – meaning, for example, as opposed to how it did in crash tests.

²¹ William C. Symonds, “Campus Revolutionary,” Business Week, February 27, 2006, p.66-67. This article, starting on page 64, is the source for much of the discussion, in the next section, of Amherst and its president’s proposed new admissions program.

Indeed, People like Woodbury and William Bowen, president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and co-author of Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education emphasize that there is a lower percentage of low income students at the elite colleges today than in the 1960's, and students with family incomes of \$200,000 or more are as common at the elite public universities as the elite private institutions.²² Affirmative action has attracted better off minorities rather than benefiting low income students. Bowen and his co-authors argue that selective colleges need to put their “thumb on the scale” for low income students as they already do for “children of alumni, athletes, and underrepresented minority students.”²³ Ironically, according to Woodbury, the need-blind admissions process of which places like Amherst are so proud is a major cause of low income applicants with 1350 on their SAT's not being accepted. The admissions departments don't know they are turning down low income students. “Amherst needs to institute need-conscious, affirmative action for low income students.”

Enter Amherst

Straight into the middle of this imbroglio comes Anthony Marx, the new president of Amherst College, one of the country's 20 or 30 colleges rich enough to successfully break through the class divide. Amidst considerable controversy but significant support from the Board of Trustees, Marx proposes to raise the percentage of low income students – usually meaning a family income of under \$40,000 – to as high as 25%.

Money may be the least of the challenges for a college with a \$1.2 billion endowment, equivalent to \$712,000 per student. Because alumni donations subsidize the admission of low income applicants, colleges like Amherst cannot afford to reduce the number of their alumni legacies.²⁴ Amherst is now completing a \$120 million renovation that will make room for 100 more students and, if Marx has his way, allow the college to increase overall enrollment by as many as 120 above the current 1,650, without cutting into legacies. An additional \$400-500 million fund-raising campaign would enable not only more “full-ride” scholarships including travel home, books, and other expenses on top of tuition, room, and board, but also the purchase of computers, additional academic assistance, and money for low-income student families to come to campus for parents' weekends.

A far tougher nut to crack is a faculty accustomed to thinking of “athletic admits” as “dumb jocks” because they might have combined scores of 1300 on the SAT tests – about what I had in 1961 and only 100 points below what my children had before graduating near the top of their classes at two of the most elite colleges. Surely self-identified in the majority as “liberal,” the faculty are portrayed -- I would bet pretty accurately -- in the Business Week article as needing to practice a little of what they preach.

²² This is a product of not only less and less state support and higher and higher public tuition, but also reduced access by the wealthy who are unable to go to the private elite because of their enrollment limitations and special emphases on minorities, athletes, and legacies.

²³ www.insidehighered.com and “Brookings Briefing: Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education,” www.brookings.org/comm/events/20050429.htm All of this is not even to address the problem of the elite schools drawing potential leaders away from predominately minority colleges and universities.

²⁴ The 53% of Amherst parents who pay, out of their own pockets, the full \$40,000+ cost of going to Amherst, also indirectly subsidize students from low income families. Those parents who are alumni are likely quite happy to do so.

That SAT scores are used at all as a yardstick for admission is testimony to not only the distorting effects of US News & World Reports' annual college rating, but also the astounding ignorance of this country's higher education leadership, including faculty who are supposed to be rational thinkers. Yes, low income students come mostly from weak high schools concentrated in low income communities and they do score lower on standardized tests. They are likely to be less well prepared for the academic work of the elite colleges.

But the primary correlation of high test scores is with more high test scores, not with achievement in college and certainly not with achievement in the world, however achievement is defined. Bowdoin and Bates, which abandoned the SAT requirement 20 years ago, confirm what other research already showed: by senior year of college, student performance correlates highly with high school grades and little, if at all, with SAT scores.²⁵ The faculty should be thirsting after 1300 SAT score students from poor high schools because it means those students know how to work harder to reach their goals.

As a college teacher who devoted his entire career to mainstream public higher education, teaching four courses per semester, I have incredibly little sympathy for the highly paid, whining faculty of an elite college where they typically teach only two courses a semester, mostly to students who ranked in the top 2% of their high school classes and scored in the top 5% on their SAT's. To this day I can remember from my senior year the response from one classmate when I remarked on how pleased I was with the personal attention I received from the faculty at Amherst: “But you are in the top 10% of the class; they look on you as a future colleague; they don't pay that kind of attention to me.”

From the looks of the Business Week article and other discernments, the situation has not changed to this day. The kind of students the faculty are moaning about have “straight A's [in high school] but SAT's as low as 1360,” meaning they may not upon arrival be ready to do Amherst work but still in at least the top 10% of all SAT scores. Wow, what a hardship for the faculty! Out of a class of 40 first year students at SUNY Potsdam (where the average SAT score was around 1,000), I would typically have no more than three or four already able to do first-quality college work. Faculty are represented in the article as saying that the college, with a 8 or 9 to 1 student-faculty ratio “will have to hire more professors to handle additional low-income kids.” Give me a break! What are faculty for, after all. Work a little harder! Learn some real teaching skills! Real teaching is about what students have become after four years in college not what they are when they arrive.

An even more serious obstacle to success for Marx and Amherst is likely its rich student-poor student culture. The BW article focuses on the social and class divide between work-study students and other students in Amherst's common dining hall. Long a point of pride that the common dining hall brought all students together, student seating in fact divides along lines of race, jock, and class. The article mentions the student who arrived with two BMW's, the convertible for sunny days! My children remember the feeling of discrimination and diminished status felt by those who had to work in the dining hall as part of their financial aid package. (One of mine landed a prestige job in the computer center and escaped the status dichotomy.) The fact is that rich kids can be terribly insensitive – as poor kids can

²⁵ If you are interested in the SAT issue, you must go to www.bates.edu/ip-optional-testing-20years.xml The real surprise is grades no more than SAT scores correlate with success after college!

be sensitive in reacting to rich kids – often without intention, indeed without even knowing it. Given that more than half of Amherst's parents are able to pay the full-ride out of pocket, the biggest problem may just be overcoming a hostile class environment. Minority students have understood this challenge for years. The question is whether Amherst and its elite cohort does.

Class and Politics: Choosing Democracy and Opportunity

According to its web page, Amherst was created “for the education of indigent young men of piety and talents for the Christian ministry.” Amherst and its 30 or so elite, Ivy League-type institutions have often strayed from such noble objectives. Most of them can easily be seen as most of the time doing no more than using the language of merit, democracy, and duty to rationalize their own social, economic, and political dominance. Their anti-Semitism – and anti-Catholicism – was horrific. The notion that they were serving society by educating white, Protestant gentlemen to fulfill their destiny as the leaders of the country was clearly self-serving. Karabel quotes sociologist Max Weber as saying, “The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune.” And Kittay, Karbel's reviewer, adds that “Karabel argues that meritocracy merely deflects attention from the real issues of poverty and inequality of condition onto a chimerical quest for unlimited social mobility.”

I have long been at the front of the line in criticizing my alma mater and its ilk. Yet, given where our country is today, progressive people have to consider our options realistically. Our country is in full flight from democracy and equal opportunity. The shift of the Republican Party from my father's New England Protestant (Congregational) *noblesse oblige* to George W. Bush's Texas-style oil baron corporate greed does not seem to me felicitous. I am the first to admit the irony of the Protestant elite receiving its just desserts for 200 years of elite rule under the guise of real democracy. There is an important way in which the new Republican Party has furthered democracy by drawing in and giving power to millions of white lower and middle class Fundamentalist Christians. These are people who were largely ignored by the Democratic Party “playing the race card” in the South and catering to minorities and urban and industrial workers in the North. Those outside the South were in turn taken for granted by an old Republican Party in thrall to the old money, old-line Protestant elite in both the North and the South.

But the result today is a “New South” Republican leadership which looks a lot like the alliance between Southern planters and Northern capitalists which took over the South after the end of Reconstruction. As the New South Democratic leadership once played the race card to draw poor whites in and break their developing alliances with African Americans, the New South Republican leadership plays the religion card to draw in what is largely the same group of people. The same old boys are still running the show with the same old Southern elite agenda: Low taxes. Fewer social services. Lousy schools. No unions. Hostility to equal opportunity for racial minorities and women. The New South regime no more serves the social and economic interests of most whites today than it did in 1890. It is not Lyndon Johnson's and Jimmy Carter's South. It is not the South of the Grange (ordinary farmers as opposed to corporate farmers), Populists, and Progressives. It's the New South creating a New United States. It is the New Republicans, now under the guise of “productivity” and the “ownership society,” pushing the whole country towards greater and greater inequality and less and less equal opportunity.

Weighed against what is happening now, the elitism of the old-line Protestant ruling class looks not so bad. At least they had some idea of duty and service to society, of responsibility for the well-being of others, of education as the foundation of democracy. As I have noted in previous issues of Downside Up with respect to New Deal compromises between capital and labor and the Marshall Plan's reaching out to capitalist Europe, it may have had a lot to do with self-interest but it was enlightened self-interest. The problem now is that, despite their best intentions, the elite colleges have themselves created class-divided institutions which mirror a New South political structure by discriminating against poor whites as much as poor minorities.

This country and its top colleges need to do better. I wish Tony Marx and Amherst College all the best. I hope the elite schools can start a trend which extends into society as whole. It is time for them to fulfill the destiny they presumed to fill when they began.

Web Site: Downside Up has had a web site, and will have one again, but since I changed internet service providers, I have not set up a web site on the new server. When set up, once again all previous articles will be there and can be read and printed out with a few clicks of your computer. In the meantime, if you need a back issue, email me at downsideup2@bellsouth.net.

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Ronald Woodbury is the publisher, editor, and general flunkey for all of Downside Up. While publication benefits from the editorial advice of one of his daughters, a friend, and occasional other pre-publication readers, they will, for their own privacy and sanity, remain anonymous. The web spinner's name is also best left anonymous.

Woodbury has a B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in history and economics from Amherst College and Columbia University. In addition to many professional articles, he has published a column, also called Downside Up, in the Lacey, WA, Leader. After a 36 year career as a teacher and administrator at six different colleges and universities, he retired with his wife to St. Augustine, FL, where he continues to be active in church and community. He has two daughters, one a physician and one an anthropologist, and six grandchildren.