THE PREDESTINATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION: HOW SOCIAL TRACKING LEADS STUDENTS TO THE IVORY TOWERS

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The Predestination of Higher Education: How Social Tracking Leads Students to the Ivory Towers

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Introduction

After a month of checking the mail every day, the day I had waited for had finally come. I remember seeing the white envelope sent from the Lehigh University Office of Admissions. Regardless of what the letter said inside, I was going to know where I was going to college in a few minutes. I had already been notified of acceptance to another school the week before, but Lehigh was my first choice. I anxiously opened the envelope and the first thing I read was “Congratulations on your acceptance to the Class of 2007!” I honestly couldn’t say what came after that, but it’s the first line that matters; I had gotten in. Out of the thousands of applications that had been sent in for review, mine had been selected.

My experience sounds like it could be one of any senior in high school. The reality is, however, that the experience of waiting to hear back from a college is not universal. It is something that only the most privileged students get to experience; there are many students who don’t even get to apply to college. The selection for these groups is not random and is something that I call “the predestination of higher education.” This, the central focus for my research, is the idea that before students begin looking at colleges, there is a set “track” for individuals based on who they are. Most research and literature on tracking in education focuses on primary and secondary schooling and students’ academic performance. Tracking is most commonly defined as “the practice of assigning students to instructional groups on the basis of ability” (Hallinan, 1994, p. 79). Social tracking is much different. In this thesis I argue that social tracking in college admissions is a process of “assigning” students to colleges and universities; a process not based on performance. I define social tracking as the process of assigning individuals to roles and conditions based on their social status. Social tracking can aide or inhibit individuals in
many facets of their lives, and it is very much a determining factor in an individual’s ability to
successfully pursue the American Dream

The idea of the American Dream is an ideal that people hold on to; “...it presumes that
despite inequalities in their circumstances each individual will have a fair chance, an equal
opportunity...” (Johnson, 2006, p.31). Even though success in the American Dream is tied
closely to hard work and determination, this ideological position is deeply rooted in our view of
education. It is education that is seen as the great equalizer since it is a guaranteed right for all
people, “…it is supposed to level out what is initially an uneven playing field” (Johnson, 2006,
p.31). From parents and teachers, children are taught to value their education from a very young
age.

The idea that education works as an equalizer leaves out at least two very important
points. First, the quality of education that students receive is not equal. Based on many factors
such as geographic area of the school, the school district, and even the teachers, different groups
of children get a different quality of education. The other point that is left out deals with the
access to education. Formal schooling is only guaranteed from kindergarten to twelfth grade
education. After students finish high school, they are no longer automatically offered a place in
school. If people would like to continue their education, they must prove themselves worthy to
admissions officers and are then selected to fill positions at America’s colleges and universities.
Admitting one student means that multiple students do not get in. A college education is very
important to long term success and financial mobility. A 2005 survey done by the U.S. Census
Bureau, for example, showed large discrepancies in income between those with a college degree
versus solely a high school degree; in every measure the median income for those with a
bachelor’s degree was reported to be around two thousand dollars higher than those with a high
school diploma (Bloom, 2005). Education, more specifically, a college education plays a major role in determining a student’s eventual class and status. I argue that social tracking that is aiding some and inhibiting others in admissions to colleges and universities. Though social tracking is driven by many outside forces, including schools, friends, and family, looking at it from the point of view of the college admissions office is important because ultimately they have the power to decide who gets into their school and who doesn’t.

Access to education is no longer controlled by academic achievement as it once was when students would be offered admissions based on their scores on entrance examinations when higher education in America first started through the late 1800’s (Karabel, 2005). Through the process of selective admissions which started at the turn of the century, Admissions offices have shifted to more subjective factors to evaluate applicants (Karabel, 2005). I will argue in this thesis that the current admissions trends of selective admissions give advantages to the advantaged. This is one way that education hinders the opportunity for attainment of the American Dream.

While the very practical idea of access to education is important, the larger topics of social class and opportunity for upward mobility are what drive my research. When admissions advantages are given to those who are already advantaged, the self-perpetuating cycle of social class is reinforced. A college education is very important for advancement in our society, both financially and socially (Bloom, 2005), and if the privilege to get a college of education is reserved for those who are already advantaged, it makes upward mobility near impossible. Getting into college, however, isn’t important if the student isn’t successful while in college. The key to a college education is getting a degree and current research shows that students aren’t as successful in college when they were given special consideration at the time of admissions.
The current practices of admissions, however, seem to not take this into consideration as advantages are still given out to certain students. As will be seen later in my work, advantages in admissions is a heavy debated topic. Very recently, the issue of affirmative action seems to be inundating the research on admissions advantages. This brings race to the forefront when talking about college admissions. The practice of Affirmative Action is heavily debated as to whether it is or is not a fair admissions practice. Preferential admissions of minority students does affect many students and I do discuss the topic, as it is brought up in a lot of the literature. However, in my research, I look beyond race in college admissions. Racial diversity is an important factor when talking about admissions, but it's not the only factor. My focus is on social status and socioeconomic status, which have been very much overlooked in research. Race, however, will not be ignored. Just as Jeannie Oakes and Annette Lareau point out in their research, lower socioeconomic groups are disproportionately made up of African Americans and other minorities, one must include race with socioeconomic status (Lareau, 2003 & Oakes, 2005).

The major goal of this thesis was to gain understanding of some of the factors in social tracking, that is, what about a person is considered to be an important factor in admissions to college, and what leads certain individuals to choose a college. Furthermore, I hoped to gain insight to how tracking plays out in the context of college of admissions. Current research and literature only shows the effects of academic tracking through primary and secondary education. I argue that it extends to into college and is especially prevalent in admissions.

In this thesis I show that the current system that is widely being used by colleges and universities is tracking certain students into higher education and leaving others out. While academic tracking does play a role, I propose that the social tracking plays a stronger role. The
tracking that is taking place is mainly social rather than academic. In other words, who the student is is being considered before what a student can do. I feel that this is especially true in the elite colleges and universities in this country.

My thesis begins with a review of current literature from some of the most prominent writers and researchers in the fields of education and sociology. To get a sense of overarching themes, I started with works in the general field of the sociology of education. From there, I went on to the topics of educational tracking and college admissions. It is here where I noticed the lack of work done between these topics. The literature on tracking ends when a student finishes high school and the literature on college admissions begins when students start to look at college. The current research shows no overlap between the two and portrays them as very separate and unrelated topics. Through my research, I pull together tracking and college admissions and show how related they actually are and how social tracking truly exists in the college admissions process.

I then present my research. The project started in July, 2006 and carried through March of 2007. I first discuss my experiences and observations working for a summer program designed to help students through the college admissions process. I also had the opportunity to interview the director of this program. What initially started as a summer job, turned into the foundation for the rest of my research. My research includes interviews with current admissions officers at Lehigh University, as well as students who are currently going through or who have recently finished searching and applying to schools. By interviewing students, admissions officers, and program directors, I was able to get a very comprehensive picture of what college admissions looks like. Including all of these different perspectives is critical for a full understanding of the admissions process.
The results of my research show that social tracking does exist in college admissions. The consequences of social tracking in college admissions are very similar to those of academic tracking. This can be seen in the results of my observations of the pre-college program as well as through my interviews with admissions officers and students. Students are clearly being led in different directions based on their social status. I also found discrepancies in the perspectives of the different parties involved in college admissions. Admissions officers had their own values and opinions on one thing, while the students felt completely different about the same subjects.

With the research I have completed, I have been able to make suggestions for a new and restructured system which can help make higher education more accessible to those who want it. More research needs to be done to show the connection between tracking and college admissions. I conclude the thesis with suggestions for further research on this topic.

My experience of opening a college admissions letter is not universal to all students in the country. What is universal is the inequality in the system. Since the early 1900’s, colleges and universities have turned to selective admissions as a way to keep certain students out of their schools (Karabel, 2006). Selective admissions is something that still the norm at many of our country’s most elite colleges and universities. It is through this system where those who are privileged are able to thrive and those who are not are held back. Colleges and universities have the power to end some of the most critical problems social class solely on the way they recruit, evaluate, and accept students. If our ideal of the American Dream is to be true, and everyone is entitled to equal opportunities to success, we must change our education system to provide the basis for that equality.
Literature Review

The literature used to form the basis of my research comes from the most prominent researchers and writers in the fields of sociology and education. The two fields of sociology and education draw a good balance, as sociology literature can be very theoretical and research-based, while the work coming from the field of education was much more applied and practical. I first provide an overview of the sociology of education as it relates to the ideas of social class inequality and access to education. I then focus in on literature and research done on academic tracking and college admissions. To conclude the review of the literature presented, I will draw connections between the three areas of literature. While both the work on tracking and college admissions are rooted within the sociology of education, those two fields are not connected, and it is my goal to show how related tracking and college admissions are.

The Sociology of Education

The Sociology of Education is a subsection within the field of sociology. Studying all levels of education (from pre-school through higher education), this field looks at many different areas, such as, educational policy, social interactions within schools, the interaction between communities and schools, and equity in education. This is because a child's education is more than just schooling. One must consider the relationships between differences between factors, such as students' homes, students' inherited ability, and students' peer and social networks (Riordan, 1997). Schools are supposed to “ensure impartial, fair, just, and equal conditions for all students exhibit equality. Historically, equitable conditions have not existed in our schools.
Even as we begin the twenty-first century, many students have restricted opportunities” (Arends, 2007, p. 44). But as Cornelius Riordan points out, there are many other sources that cause opportunities to be restricted.

One of the leading researchers in the field of the sociology of childhood and the sociology of families is Annette Lareau. She has done much work comparing the lives of children growing up in different home environments and her research has shown how the home-life of children has an effect on their experiences in schools. Her book, Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life, presents research that was done by observing a total of six boys and six girls through their daily lives. Her sample included children from middle class homes, working class homes, and poor homes; and the children were white, black, or had one white parent and one black parent. Her research on these very different children showed that when children grow up in different types of families, their educational experiences will differ as well.

Differences in the interactions between child and school and parent and school have a major impact on a child’s life. Much of the child’s interaction with school is dependent on the parent’s interaction with schools. As Lareau says, “Across all social classes, parents pay close attention to their children’s education. Working-class and poor parents are no less eager than middle class parents to see their children to succeed in school. They take a different approach to helping them reach that goal, however” (2003, p.198). Lareau notes that success is defined differently by each family; to some it would be earning good grades in all subjects, while others hope that children excel in one subject, some don’t put a value on the actual grades and put emphasis on hard work (Lareau, 2003). Regardless of what parents do, they mean well (Lareau, 2003).
Throughout her book, Lareau points out how middle class parents know how to work different systems, and the way they work within the educational system is no different. Parents from the middle class are educated beyond high school. These parents know the set up meetings with teachers and administrators if they are not happy with their child’s education. These meetings question why their children are learning certain things in school or why their child got the grade that they did (Lareau, 2005). They also have the option of sending their children to a private school because they have the money to spend on tuition.

“Working the system” is something that doesn’t happen with working-class and poor families. While they do think that their child’s education is important, working-class and poor parents do not think making things work to their advantage is “appropriate when dealing with school or medical professionals” (Lareau, 2005, p. 199). Lareau points out that this could be in part because they do not have the education or vocabulary to discuss and challenge these officials (2005). They also tend to be more hands-off when it comes to their child’s education because they think that it those working in schools are professionals and that those professionals should make sure their children are progressing and learning (Lareau, 2005).

A particularly interesting part of Lareau’s research came at elementary school graduations. In the schools where families were working class and poor, the celebration looked more like a high school or college graduation. Parents came with gifts, all were dressed up in formal clothes, and the excitement of the families was evident as they yelled and cheered for their children as they received their recognition for completing elementary school (Lareau, 2005). Not knowing how far their children would be going in their educational career, it was important for the parents to celebrate when they could. The schools with middle class families, on the other hand, had much more reserved programs. While parents were excited and proud of their children,
they realized that this was just a small step for their children who were expected to go much farther. "The middle-class families had little doubt that their children would attend college" (Lareau, 2005, p.235). The idea that parents have little doubt that their children will attend college is very common and is a strong example of social tracking. The middle-class parents are raising their children with the expectation that their children will go to college. It is something that is ingrained into the children, and is something that doesn't necessarily happen with the lower-class families.

One of the aspects that has been controlling access to education is capital (Lareau, 2005 & Riordan, 1997). Annette Lareau and Cornelius Riordan have shaped the way that the idea of capital is seen in the education system. They note that there are different types of capital, which all play a different role in education.

Cultural capital is the ability to appreciate and have access to extra knowledge pastimes (Lareau, 2005). Examples of cultural capital include museums, concerts, libraries, and special talks and lectures. Cornelius Riordan argues that there is another type of capital which is closely related to cultural capital. He says that human capital is "generated by educating and training people to provide them with skills to increase their productivity...human capital is the possession of knowledge and skills" (Riordan, 1997, p.66). Cultural capital is having access to knowledge and ideas and being able to retain it. Human capital is also having knowledge, but requires that the knowledge be applied.

Social capital, on the other hand, is the ability to have access to a variety of people and the privileges that come with it (Lareau 2005). This is limited to people who’s positions are actually of value to others, for example, the people in high positions in companies, the government, and communities. It is the middle and upper class that have access to this while the
lower class goes without it. When parents have cultural or social capital, they use it for the betterment of themselves as well as their children. They make sure to include their children so that they too can reap the benefits of such capital. Knowing the right people is a major part of college admissions and will be discussed later in this paper.

The common theme among work in the sociology of education is that education and the opportunities presented through it are very much dependent on what one has. The major problem is still that fundamentally, people believe that through education, people can gain capital. However, the access to education is controlled by capital.

Tracking in Education

Within the sociology of education, there is a lot of work done on how students are separated. The separation that takes place can be between schools as well as within schools, and a major source of the separation within schools is tracking. Tracking is the grouping of students by ability level so that homogeneous classes are created or "the process whereby students are divided into categories so that they can be assigned in groups to various kinds of classes" (Oakes, 2005, p.3) or "the practice of assigning students to instructional groups on the basis of ability (Hallinan, 1994, p.79). Tracking is done in all schools whether or not people are aware of it. Oakes and Hallinan are both known for their work in the sociology of education and school organization, they offer two very different definitions for the same practice. While the general theme, that students are grouped into different classes is the same, the major difference is in the word ability. Hallinan defines tracking through grouping by ability, which Oakes doesn’t mention. Jeannie Oakes downplays the role of student ability and argues that the driving forces
behind tracking are social factors, even though academic ability tracking is fundamentally the goal for tracking programs.

Formal tracking usually starts with standardized testing and recommendations from teachers, administrators, and counselors. Jeannie Oakes has identified four assumptions that people use to support the practice of tracking. The first has to deal with student performance in the classroom and that they will actually learn more and perform better when they are grouped with other students close to their ability level (Oakes 2005, p.6). The second assumption is that the difficulties of certain students in various subjects can be more easily identified when other students in the class are moving at the same pace and may be having similar difficulties (Oakes 2005, p.6). Oakes' third assumption focuses on the attitudes of slower students and that they will be more positive about school in general when the pace of the class moves at a speed that they can handle (2005, p.6). Oakes' last assumption that has to deal with people in the classroom is about the teachers. She feels that people assume that it is easier for teachers to teach when everyone in the class is on a similar level (Oakes 2005, p.7). Finally, Oakes points out that a major assumption in the tracking process is that the full process is done fairly and actually reflects the abilities of the students.

What started as a solution to academic problems is, in many researchers' views, now causing social problems. One of those social problems is class segregation. Many students found in the lower tracked classes are minority students and those students who come from low income families (Hallinan, 1994). This causes classes that are socially segregated, and not just academically segregated. Another social problem that occurs is lower social status for the students in the lower track. Hallinan points out that "students who are assigned to the lower tracks are apt to receive less respect from their peers and to be assigned lower status in the
academic hierarchy” (1994, p.81). Many schools offer special advantages and extrinsic motivation for achieving students. The public display of approval and pride of the upper track students raises them up and lessens the esteem of those students in lower tracks. This can also affect the motivation of students which can then leads to lower performance outcomes for lower track students. This is also a negative consequence of tracking. The performance of students is reflected in how they are tracked (Hallinan, 1994). The students who are put in the upper track are performing well because partly because they are in the upper track, likewise, students who are put in the lower track are underperforming partly because they are in the lower track. This sets up a cycle where the students in the lower track are treated the way they are and kept in the lower track because of their poor academic performance, but because they are in this environment they are performing poorly. The same is true for all tracks in an educational setting.

One of the major problems with tracking is that it gives advantages to those students in the higher track. “Students who are assigned to the upper tracks enjoy a more optimal instructional environment than do those assigned to the lower tracks” (Hallinan, 1994, p. 83). Students in the upper tracks are taught in a learning-friendly environment. They are allowed to explore their own interests and for the most part, there are fewer disciplinary problems and distractions in that environment. Looking beyond their immediate school setting, these students are set up very well for admissions into college. As in Lareau’s book, the students in the upper classes are expected to go onto college and their environment reflects that. The goal for these students is to prepare them to enter college. Their classes are structured in such a way to make the transition easier, even get college credit for those classes. Those not included have futures that are left up in the air. The goal for teachers is to get the students through their current level of schooling as best they can.
Research for tracking ends when a student leaves secondary schooling because that is where formalized tracking ends. However, I believe that tracking continues beyond this point and well into the college years. This tracking that occurs is informal tracking, meaning there is no current policy or mandate about it. In fact, many people don’t even recognize that this is happening. To begin looking at post-secondary education tracking, I believe the best place to start is at college admissions.
College Admissions

College Admissions is the focus for my research. The literature presented on the subject shows a field with very universal practices. Though there are thousands of different colleges in the United States, the methods used to recruit, evaluate, and admit students are very similar; this is very true in our country's most elite schools. I begin by discussing the history of admissions beginning in the early 1900's. I then discuss the current trends and practices found in college admissions office's today. College in America is something that has been transforming over the past century, but the piece that has been held constant is that not everyone can get in. Further, some of the same practices used in the early 1900's are being used today to evaluate student applicants.

The History of College Admissions and Selective Admissions

Colleges have been a part of America's education system for quite some time. Colleges in the late 1800's and early 1900's were operating very differently than they are today. Jerome Karabel paints a good picture of the history of higher education in America in his book The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admissions and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. In the early 1900's, colleges were WASPy, that is, their student body consisted of males who were white, Anglo-saxen, and Protestant (Karabel, 2005). As Jewish immigrants came to America from Europe, they started finding housing and jobs in cities. Students who were of age were also looking for places in colleges and universities. Selective admissions has been a very big part of the higher education picture in America and it all starts with anti-Semitism, in fact, it was this that started the office of admissions itself.
Entry into college was no longer about passing an exam or meeting minimum scholastic requirements. Rather, "it used subjective criteria in evaluation candidates as it attempted to create a favorable 'mix' in the student body. Through an emphasis on qualities such as 'character' and 'leadership,' which could not be quantified, as well as the strategic deployment of discretion in determining which candidates who had not passed all the exams might still be admitted" (Karabel, 2005, 129). College officials argued that this type of admissions was necessary for the good of the university. The reality is, the practice of selective admissions kept certain students, like Jewish students, out. Not all Jewish students were kept out; many of the institutions would weed out the "undesirable Jews" (Karabel, 2005). Ironically, many times, this was with the help of alumni who were Jewish. The undesirable Jewish students challenged the idea of what a college student actually was. They were mostly the immigrant students. What is so interesting is that the major factor of who a college man actually was came down to who was seen as a man.

The men that took places in colleges and universities were supposed to be exactly that, and many felt that the Jewish students (especially those who were immigrants) did not meet the standards for what a real man was supposed to be. Jewish students were seen to be very academic, which is why college admissions could not be based on academic testing alone. Also, Jewish students were thought to be physically weak and "distinguished by 'the furtive manner, the stoop, the hunted look and the martyr air.' Above all, the Jew allegedly lacked the courage to engage in violence in defense of the nation—perhaps the defining feature of 'manliness' in this era" (Karabel, 2005, 133). Even though academically, these Jewish students would have been qualified academically, the new criteria of character, leadership qualities, and other subjective factors, kept these students out of college.
This began selective admissions at colleges and universities. The elite club of higher education had to create rules and standards to limit who could attend (Karabel, 2005). Though it started with Jewish students, other groups like black students and women have also been discriminated against in admissions. As one can see, the goal of selective college admissions was to keep certain students out. Looking at current admissions trends, rather than focusing on keeping students out; I feel that the focus in college admissions is now giving advantages to let certain students in.

These students not only have advantages when the final decision to accept or reject is made, but they have advantages through the whole admissions process. Starting at the recruitment of certain students and carrying all the way through to matriculation events, various characteristics stand out to admissions officers. While the whole application is looked at and the whole student is evaluated, many of these characteristics put students over the edge to admittance. Because of this, admissions is not about what students can do, but rather who students are.

Sometimes, what sets students over the edge is the cultural or social capital as discussed earlier from Annette Lareau’s work on childhood social development. The major influence is social capital. Who students know and the families that these students come from play a major role in college acceptances. Nepotism is a clear factor of advantage for students who apply to college.
The most talked about group of name-based admits is the legacy group. A legacy in the sense of college admissions is a student who has had an older relative attended the same school. This older relative is usually a direct parent, but in many cases, multiple members of the same family have attended the same college. Students have also started to look for links with their older siblings. In fact, a very common question that is asked on any college application asks if the applicant has had any family members attend that college. If that wasn’t going to be taken into consideration, why would the college ask?

In his book *The Price of Admissions: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates* (2006), Daniel Golden takes an in depth look at many different types of students who are given advantages, and one of those groups is legacy students. In an interview, an admissions officer at Harvard is quoted saying “when their sons and daughters apply, we review their applications with great care and will give a ‘tip’ in the admissions process to them”(p.28). This, however, is not a big secret in the admissions world. Because the “great care” that is taken and the “tip” that is given is something that is commonly talked about and a well known issue in college admissions, students and parents are well aware of the fact that it helps to be a legacy. The students that Golden interviews can be split into two groups, the group that uses their legacy status to get into college, and a group that refuses to fall back on their legacy status to get into school. The first group is made up of those students who are using the legacy advantage to its full value. They understand that they don’t need to perform as well because their legacy status will pull them into college. In an interview with Golden, a legacy student who had gained admissions to Harvard said “definitely legacy was a factor, but I don’t feel like someone else should be here instead of me...I don’t feel guilty...”(2006, p.30).
Another student said that "legacy preference is a 'valid thing for a college to do. Any college has to be careful about the student it lets in from a social perspective...A lot more alumni children are well-rounded kids, probably because they come from more stable families'" (Golden, 2006, p.31). In what both of these students said, there is a clear sense to entitlement. Students who think this way truly believe that they deserve to be where they are because of who they are not because of what they have done.

The other group of students is made up of those who realize that their legacy status is an advantage, but that's not how they want to get into schools. A good example of this group is a student named Matthew. Matthew was an average student; his SAT scores were lower than most students accepted to Harvard and his grade point average was strong but not phenomenal (Golden, 2006). His father, however, is an alumnus of Harvard and "gave his alma mater at least $1 million in the mid 1990s" (Golden, 2006, p.28). When asked about his admissions to Harvard, Matthew said "I was qualified...at the same time, I do think legacy helped me" but then went on to say "I don't think legacy is a fair criterion for people to get into college. But for me, that was the way it was" (Golden, 2006, p.29). A student who was in a similar position to Matthew, Jessica, said, "I don't think I got into Harvard for my SAT scores...Hopefully it wasn't just legacy. More of what I did at Choate was being well rounded, captain of a lot of sports teams, president of the French Club" (Golden, 2006, p.29). She later says "It's really exciting for me to be here, but...I'm very torn. If I were born into a family that was less advantaged, I would feel very bitter about the legacy status" (Golden, 2006, p.29).

One thing that many legacy students have in common is family pressure. Whether it is something that is perceived or actual pressure put on by the parents, when there is a long-running family connection, students feel that they can't let their families down. Because many elite and
prestigious schools talk a lot of tradition, this is rubbed off onto families. To some, college is no longer about getting an education at an institution where a student feels comfortable and can get the best education possible, it is about carrying on a family tradition. Sometimes, this family tradition takes precedent over academics.

No matter what the opinions of the students were, the parent’s ideas of why their children got into college were all similar. It didn’t matter how much money the parents donated to the school or how much time the parents had invested in helping the school, to the parents, what they did was not the reason why their children were admitted to college (Golden, 2006). Even when multiple students had also applied to other schools and had been rejected and then applied to Harvard and were accepted, in the opinions of the parents, the student’s name had little to do with their acceptance. This isn’t saying that parents didn’t think the name helped, they just didn’t acknowledge it as a deciding factor. It could be argued that parents just didn’t want to admit to that so they lied during their interview, but repression of the thoughts that their children wouldn’t be qualified for something would be natural. At the same time, however, when looking at the students who felt entitled to getting into Harvard, where did those ideas come from? If the children are being brought up in environments where parents tell them that because of their last name, they deserve things, then those ideas will obviously stick.

Peter Schmidt brought up an interesting perspective on legacy admits getting special treatment in college admissions. In an interview with Barmak Nassirian, the associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Nassirian said “in fairness to institutions, it is important to note that they are engaged in a very important form of cost-benefit analysis” (Schmidt, 2007, A28). Nassirian points out that goodwill between the university and their alumni do bring in a lot of money and that the money
they bring in can go towards students who need it (Schmidt, 2007). Even though admissions standards are being lowered for legacy students, it results in “the donation of money that colleges can use to help ‘the very students we want to support-meritorious but needy students’” (Schmidt, 2007, A28).

The fact that legacy students are given admission advantages over other students is a definite way to a self-perpetuating cycle of giving advantages to the advantaged, especially in the most elite schools. Those parents who graduated from a certain elite college have obviously come from a privileged background, and because of the degree that they have obtained, they are given certain advantages both socially and professionally. When their children apply to the same college, they are given advantages and held to different standards than the rest of the playing field. This is why there aren’t a lot first generation college students attending elite colleges and universities. As said before, this is not only a social class issue, but it turns into a race issue as well.

Harvard has realized that because there is an expectation for special treatment, to keep their alumni happy and donors happy, they had to reciprocate in some way, even when students were definitely not academically qualified. This is why they created what they call the Z-list. It was originally created in the 1970s to encourage students who were seen as not ready to attend Harvard to take a year off (Golden, 2006). Currently, the Z-list is a list of students who are academically unqualified to attend Harvard but have a name that should be kept around. It “consists of twenty-five to fifty well-connected but often academically borderline applicants accepted on the condition they defer enrollment until the following fall…” (Golden, 2006, p.37). For a student with less social connections but the same academic records, there would be no chance to attend Harvard. Although “The Harvard Crimson reported in 2002 that 72 percent of
students on the ‘Z-list’ are alumni children,” (Golden, 2006, p.38), Harvard gives a much different explanation. In an interview with Daniel Golden, William Fitzsimmons said that “the idea is that when we finally run out of spaces every year, we’ll offer twenty, thirty, forty people the chance to come a year from now” (2006, p.38). The Z-list, according to Harvard is open to everyone who has sent in an application and been deferred. They account for the large number of alumni children on the Z-list as a result of the family’s dedication to Harvard (Golden, 2006).

Even so, because Harvard evaluates the dedication to their school before putting a student on the Z-list, it is still giving advantages to the legacy students.

The students being who aren’t admitted because their places are taken by legacy students are not the only people harmed by legacy preference during admissions. When students are academically well qualified but granted admissions, their performance in college suffers. The students who are being hurt most by this are the legacy students. This is very interesting because as previously discussed; these students are most likely very privileged. A very recent study done by Princeton University researches has shown that legacy students “are far more likely than minority students or athletes to run into academic trouble in college if admissions preferences got them in the door.” An important aspect of this research to note is that it does not single out all legacy students. There are legacy students who perform very well academically, but most likely, the legacy status of those students is not what go them into college. Rather, it is the students who were given the special preference who are underperforming once they got in. The study that was completed was based on data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshman (Schmidt, 2007). “It contains data from about 3,900 students who entered 28 public and private selective colleges in the fall of 1999” (Schmidt, 2007, A28). The study found that legacy
students were very at risk of earning lower grades than other students at their university as well as dropping out of school (Schmidt, 2007).

-Development Admits-

Having the right last name, however, does not guarantee admissions advantages. As Golden points out, when looking at admissions statistics, a major driving force behind college admissions is financial status of the family (2006). Statistics show that while Harvard does give admissions advantages to legacy students, those advantages are reserved for those who have parents that went on to professions that make a lot of money—doctors, lawyers, and business people. When legacy students had parents that were in more service oriented professions like education, social work, or ministry, they were not given the same advantage than the other legacy students (Golden, 2006). Going further, these legacy students are given less of an advantage than students whose parents did not go to Harvard but went to college and are in money making professions (Golden, 2006). The reality is, to a university where private donations are in integral part of the endowment, it doesn’t matter who is giving the money. This shows that it’s not just family commitment to an institution that matters to colleges. There are also many examples of families who just happen to donate large sums of money to a school during the same year that their children are applying to that school. These can be people who went to that institution and people who did not. This happens because of the close relationship between the Development Office and the Admissions Office at many schools. The job of the Development Office is to raise money for the university, and many times the way to do this is to recruit the students of potential donors. Golden addresses the “cardboard box” that is used at Duke University. This cardboard box contained applications of students
whom the admissions office planned on rejecting but who were on a list of students to be given special consideration from the president. “He had chosen them not because they showed academic promise he feared might otherwise go unnoticed but because they were the children of corporate titans, expected, in the event that a favorable decision, to contribute to the university endowment” (Goldman, 2006, p. 51). Even if students with similar poor applications were rejected, these students would be given the extra push just based on the fact that their parents were able to donate money. The former Director of Admissions at Duke, Jean Scott said “there were certainly students who got in because they were a high priority for fundraising. I would have been very pleased to have the best class as determined by the admissions office. But the world isn’t like that” (Goldman, 2006, p.52). A former Duke president said that “University presidents are under greater pressure than ever to raise money. I suspect that many of them have turned to admissions to help that process” (Goldman, 2006,p.52). A good example of a development admit student that Goldman interviewed is Maude Bunn.

According to Goldman, Maude had wanted to go to Duke ever since she could remember; she was not as qualified to attend as other people, and she didn’t have any obvious advantages during the application process (Goldman, 2006). “She was not a minority, a recruited athlete, or legacy…”(Goldman, 2006, p.53). Duke did, however, see the wealth of her family and how they had donated money to various organizations in the past. Maude was accepted to enter Duke with the class of 2005, and her parents have donated around $20,000 to the school (Goldman, 2006). When Goldman interviewed Maude’s mother, much like the parents who had legacy students admitted, she didn’t feel that it was the families financial situation that got her into school; she instead felt that the money that the family gave to Duke was a way to thank them for accepting the daughter (Goldman, 2006). Again, no one wants to buy their child’s place in the university.
It is important to note that this sets up a self perpetuating cycle of social class just as the advantages for legacy students did. Those students who come from families with the money to donate are given a college education and are given the ability to hold money-making professions. Further, because the large majority of these families are white, the students who are getting a major push forward are also white.

-Diversity Recruitment-

Recognizing the fact that many students in higher education are white, colleges and universities have begun to push for diversity recruitment. They try to give extra support to those students from underrepresented communities so that they can get a college education. Underrepresented communities include racial minorities, members of lower socio-economic communities, or underrepresented regional communities to their college. This quest to find students is one that admissions officers take very seriously. Jacques Steinberg wrote about such an event in his book, *The Gatekeepers: Inside the Admissions Process of a Premier College*. This book follows Ralph Figueroa, an admissions officer at Wesleyan University, as he works to recruit students and works with his admissions colleagues in the decision making process. While this work gives a very good idea of what being an admissions officer actually entails, Steinberg and Figueroa talk very openly and honestly about the recruiting of some students.

One student who stands out as a student from an underrepresented community is Migizi, or Mig, as he is referred to in the book. Ralph Figueroa traveled all the way to New Mexico to the Native American Preparatory School because he wanted to be the first counselor at Wesleyan to recruit a Native American student (Steinberg, 2002). He did so with the idea that Wesleyan should try to recruit more students from different cultures rather than the current groups being
focused on despite what his colleagues said about students not wanting to be so far removed from their own culture (Steinberg, 2002). Mig was a very sub-par student in high school, a student with a C average who also earned D’s and F’s is not the type of student that an elite and challenging school like Wesleyan would normally recruit. He did pull up his grades to have a B average by his senior year and his SAT scores put him at the ninetieth percentile of the Native American students who took the SAT’s that year, even though that is still below the average SAT score of Wesleyan (Steinberg, 2002). Mig was accepted to Wesleyan but had to leave after one semester due to poor grades (Steinberg, 2002).

Mig acts as a good example for many students who are in a similar situation. An admissions officer was seeking a type of person. When Ralph was recruiting Mig, he was not focused on the fact that his grades were not up to the standards of Wesleyan or that socially, he may have a hard time fitting in. It is safe to assume that a student with Mig’s records would go unnoticed by many elite colleges and universities, but because adding diversity to the student body is now a priority of admissions, students are being reconsidered. As a whole however, statistics show that minority students’ academics aren’t usually jeopardized by extra consideration from admissions officers (Schmidt, 2007). Two Princeton University researchers, Douglas Massey and Margarita Mooney, have researched minority students affirmative action and have formed what they call “the social-subversion hypothesis” (Schmidt, 2007, A28). This hypothesis states that “a large gap between minority students and others at an institution challenges the legitimacy of their presence on campus, thereby creating a social climate within which it is difficult for them to function effectively” (Schmidt, 2007, A28).

Diversity recruitment doesn’t work for everyone the same way, and as a student pointed out in an interview with Daniel Goldman, “...they value a multicultural community. If they
want to be multicultural, there’s only so many of one culture they can take” (2006, p. 212).

Asian students are having a harder time getting into college because of admissions practices that they are being compared to Jewish students at the turn of the century. The stereotype of Asian students from an admissions point of view is very similar to that of the Jewish students. They are seen as very book smart and excel in academics, especially math and science. They are in a hard situation because Asian students are not given minority preference like other ethnic groups, and as a whole they do not get preference from legacy status or extremely wealthy families like many white students do (Golden, 2006). Admissions officers look at this group of students as very homogeneous. Although Asian students are scoring equal to and in many cases better than most, they are rated lower by admissions officers in more subjective categories; even high school counselors say that it is hard to write a college recommendation for an Asian student because it is difficult to make them stand out (Goldman, 2006). The Dean of Admissions at MIT, Marilee Jones, told Daniel Goldman in an interview about why a certain Asian student was rejected that, “it’s possible that Henry Park looked like a thousand other Korean kids with the exact same profile of grades and activities and temperament…my guess is that he just wasn’t involved or interesting enough to surface to the top” (2006, p.201). One should notice that the same admissions practices used at the turn of the century in an effort to keep Jewish students out are the same admissions practices being used today which are keeping Asian students out. Many of the best schools are the ones keeping Asian students out and what is interesting is that these very top-notch students are then going to second-tier schools and helping the academic standing of those institutions (Goldman, 2006).

With no other group of people do we have such a large clumping of individuals. Saying Asian students completely ignores the various ethnic groups that make up the Asian super-class.
Chinese students, Japanese students, Korean students, Thai students, Pilipino students, and many others make up the Asian category, and statistically, each of these smaller groups perform very differently. There needs to be more work done breaking down the Asian group into the smaller groups that make it up.

-The Pell Grant and Financial Aid-

With the increasing cost of a college education, many of the students who are left out are those who can't afford it. Colleges offer need-based financial aid to certain students that they would like to have at their school. The problem is, the amount of money that schools make available and the number of students who need this money do not match up. This results in students taking out student loans or seeking other financial aid packages, scholarships, and grants that are not given out by the school. One such grant is the Pell Grant. This grant is from the federal government and takes into account the size of the family, income, and other assets that could be used to pay for education (2003). Generally, the students who are awarded this grant have family incomes that are lower than $35,000 a year and "more than one half of all Pell Grant recipients come from families that have incomes under $15,000" (Staff, 2003, p.123). The Pell Grant will give students up to $4,050, and although this does defray college costs, with tuition prices around $45,000 at most elite and private institutions, students can't attend college on the Pell Grant alone. Regardless, by accepting these students, the University is not spending any money, schools will even tell students to "exhaust all other available federal aid before the institution will offer any financial help from university funds" (Staff, 2003, p. 123).

Using the Pell Grant as an indication for low-income students accepted at a particular school, The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education conducted a study and found that Ivy League
schools are admitting very few low-income students. This is a somewhat surprising finding to researchers because of James Conant. Conant, the former president of Harvard, started the Ivy League’s commitment and outreach to low-income students and that has carried on to the support of affirmative action from many Ivy League schools (Staff, 2003). To support this, people have looked at the fact that schools like Yale, Columbia, Princeton, and Harvard have very quality black studies programs (Staff, 2003). There are two major flaws in this thinking. First of all, black students are not the only ones who are taking African American studies course. The second flaw is the connection between being black and being low-income. Black does not mean low-income. Although a disproportionate number of those who are low-income are black, there is not a one hundred percent causation between them. As Henry Louse Gates Jr., who chairs the African and African-American studies department at Harvard said, “The black kids who come to Harvard or Yale are middle class. Nobody else gets through” (Staff, 2003, p. 122). Out of all the undergraduate students in the United States, about twenty-two percent have been awarded the Pell Grant (2003). So, about one quarter of all students who attend college are getting this federal aid. However, if one looks at Ivy League schools and elite schools, the number drops significantly. “Of the nation’s 25 highly rated universities, Princeton had the lowest rate of Pell Grant recipients at 7.7 percent” (2003); the highest percentage of Pell Grant recipients can be found at Columbia University, and they have 17.2 percent (2003). When averaging the Ivy League and elite schools together, 11.8 percent of students in Ivy League schools are Pell Grant recipients (2003). This number is still well under the national average.

This is not necessarily showing a causal relationship. It’s not that college admissions officers see that students are Pell Grant recipients and are then not accepting because of it. A major reason for this disparity is that “more than three quarters of the 14 million college students
in the United States are educated at the large state universities which draw huge numbers of students from moderate and low-income families” (Staff, 2003, p. 124). This all comes back to the idea of elitism. Just as being black does not automatically make someone have a low-income, having a low-income does not automatically make someone academically unqualified to attend elite schools. But, students from low-income families have many other disadvantages when it comes to college admissions. They are most likely not legacy students, and further, they may be first generation college students and their parents may not value a college education. They do not have parents who can donate large sums of money to the school. They have very few opportunities to gain social and cultural capital, which play a clear role in college admissions. Their parents can’t spend money on extra things like SAT preparation classes. This mixed with the fact other students are given advantages and preference when it comes to many different factors as previously discussed puts students from low-income families at a clear disadvantage. Those who work with students, want students to have lofty goals, and because of this college is presented as something that is very attainable. But for far too many of these students, because the cost of education is so high, higher education is out of reach. “We ask those who can least afford to take risks to take the most; we ask those who can least afford to pay for college to pay significantly more for their education” (Bloom, 2005, p.81).
A current practice of college admissions that is currently being called into question is early admissions. Early admissions is a way for students who have a first choice school to apply to that school in early fall and will be notified of acceptance, rejection, or deferral in December. An acceptance, however, is binding. When a student applies early to a school and gets in, he must go there. There are variations on early admission, such as early action, which offers the same benefits of early admission, but the acceptance is not binding. Besides the stress relief for senior year since they find out earlier, there are also other advantages for students to apply earlier. One advantage is that even if rejected, the application can be resubmitted for acceptance in the regular admissions pool, also if rejected, the student has time to get applications together for other schools. The biggest advantage to applying early is that because there are fewer applicants, the admissions rate increases, even at the most elite school. The biggest drawback is that financial aid packages are significantly lower in early admissions. The higher admissions rate and the lower financial aid packages are being looked at as unfair. The largest group of students hurt by early admissions is the students who come from low-income families.

For students to get all of their application materials in on time, they need to have started to college search process very early to be set on a school, take the SATs during their junior year, and have competitive grades during the junior year of high school, because that is what is going to be on the transcripts that get sent to colleges. Because this is before the time that most schools begin to have students look at colleges, this takes a lot of parental involvement and help, some families even hire private college counselors. This privilege of starting early is saved for those
who are financially able to do so. Also, because financial aid packages are lower, students who need that money need to choose between a better chance at getting into a school but with less financial aid, and applying to a school during regular admissions and getting a financial aid package that they need. For the most part, students in this predicament choose to not apply during early admissions. This leaves financially well-off students applying to schools with better admissions rates, creating unfair advantages for students who are already advantaged.

Schools have started to realize the unfair aspects of the early admissions program and very recently have started to do away with their early admissions program. Schools like Harvard and Princeton have gained the most attention for ending early admissions citing that it "puts low-income students at a disadvantage...and hopes that other universities would do the same" (Finder, 2006, p. 16). Other small schools like Amherst, Williams, Swarthmore, and Barnard are also going to be discussing ending the program (Finder, 2006). The largest school that is ending early admissions is the University of Delaware (Finder, 2006). School officials from all of the colleges and universities that are ending early admissions say that they hope to make the process fairer for all students applying (Finder 2006).

Review

While the sociology of education field provides a good base to look at college admissions, the idea of school tracking and college admissions may seem a little disjointed. This is mainly because research in tracking ends with high school, which is really the last place that students are formally tracked. If one looks further, it becomes clear that an informal tracking system is set up for students who are applying (and not applying) to college. Oakes defines the beginning of tracking with recommendations from school personnel and standardized testing.
The clear link here would be the SAT test and when teachers and counselors write recommendations for admissions to schools. This starts earlier and on a much more informal level. Before students take the SAT test, they are given the PSAT which is supposed to serve as an indicator for how one will do on the SAT and also, colleges begin to send out information to students based on how they do. The recommendations from school personnel also take place but are made to the students. Many people in schools will offer advice to students and tell them where they should look to apply to college. The advice given parallels a student’s educational track. For example, a student in the remedial track will not be advised to look at Harvard, while a student in the honors track will not be advised to look at the local community college.

As students get into the college search and application process, the factors for tracking become social. As seen in the research on college admissions, certain students are given advantages and those who get them are attracted to those schools. If one knows he has an admissions advantage at a very elite private school because of who he is, the student will most likely look to apply there, where those who are less advantaged tend to stay away from looking at those schools. In academic tracking in schools, many people assume that this creates a more functional environment where students can achieve their full academic potential. Oakes, however, pointed out that it only helps the top students while it holds many students back (2005). In the context of college admissions tracking, the same is true. A system has been created where those who are already advantaged in society are given advantages. One could argue that schools are separated by the students’ academic prowess and that a school in the Ivy League would only take the best and the brightest students. This is definitely not the case when one considers all of the special exceptions that schools give to students based on their social standing. Also, while it is true that students who come from underrepresented communities, are given advantages in the
admissions process, as seen in the research done on the Pell Grant, those students are clearly not being let in at the same rate as other more affluent students.

The result of this is an educational system which provides opportunities for privileged members of society. Students who are in need of the most support and the most help to achieve are the ones who are being put at a disadvantage. Through selective admissions, colleges and universities are limiting the access to higher education to very few students, and the factors for selecting students are not academic. I argue that this is where one can turn to social tracking, which is one of the driving forces behind selective admission and inequality in the higher education system.
Research Methods

The literature on tracking ends where the literature on college admissions begins. They are held very separately, but it the goal of my research to show how connected these two ideas really are. To do this, I conducted a qualitative study of elite colleges and universities in the United States through the ideas and perceptions of college counselors, admissions officers, and students. This began in July, 2006 and ended in March, 2007.

My research, under the supervision of Professor Heather Johnson in the Sociology and Anthropology Department at Lehigh University has been approved by the Lehigh University Office of Research Human Subjects Board. After completing all necessary paperwork and a tutorial about human subjects ethics through the National Institute of Health, my research proposal was submitted on November 1, 2006 for full review by the Institutional Review Board. All interviews and field studies were cleared through this board and approval was granted on December 7, 2006. To comply with their standards, all names of subjects will be changed and some college and university names will be omitted in the presentation of my work.

Pre-College Program

From July 10, 2006 through August 4, 2006, I had the opportunity to work with a college search program that brought in students from all over the world to assist in the college search process. These students covered a large demographic, but there were two distinct groups. The first group was made up of students who were set on going to college, they were mostly white students who were performing very well academically and had taken the SATs at least once.
They came with a list of colleges that they were planning on applying to and schools that they and their parents agreed they should spend time working on getting into. Also in this group were four international students. These four students from Japan, Egypt, Haiti, and Belarus all had parents who were either ambassadors or high ranking government officials. They had taken the SATs before coming to this program and their parents were very set on what schools they wanted their children to visit. In either case, these students came from families who had the means to spend around $3,000 to send their children to this summer program. The second group of students was from San Antonio, Texas. These students were participating in an Upward Bound program for the summer. Our program was just one activity that they were doing over the summer. These students were mostly Hispanic. They were academically very competitive, but because many of their parents did not go to college, higher education wasn’t a serious consideration for them. Most of them had not taken the SATs before and were just starting to look at schools.

There were two parts to this program. The first part was classroom based. All students participated in a math class, a writing class, and an SAT skills class. They were grouped by ability based into three academic groups on a comprehensive test that they were given at the start of the program. Though many would think that there would be a correlation between class grouping and student grouping, there was not. About an equal number of students in Upward Bound and not in Upward Bound were found in all of the academic groupings. The second part of the program was college visits. Every week day, the staff members would take groups of students to visit colleges, take campus tours, and attend information sessions.

Through this program, I worked closely with Lisa, a professional college counselor who also directed this summer program. I wanted to interview Lisa because she sits on the other side...
of the desk from the admissions officers. She is a professional who works with prospective college students, but doesn’t make judgments about students. It is her job to help any student in the college admissions process. My observations of the students and the program along with the interview of Lisa provide very good evidence of social tracking.

Lehigh University

Lehigh University is a private, non-affiliated school in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Its current undergraduate enrollment is 4,679 (Admissions, 2006). The most recent admissions statistics show that more than 10,689 students sent in their applications to enter in the fall of 2006 (Admissions, 2006). Of those 10,689 applicants, 4,183 were accepted and 1,215 of those students accepted admissions (Admissions, 2006). The admissions office reports that the middle fifty percent of students that we admitted had SAT scores were between 610 and 690 on verbal and between 650 and 740 for math and that the students who applied had very strong grade point averages in the B+ to A range and these students took many honors, advanced placement, and International Baccalaureate classes (Admissions, 2006). Geographically, a majority of the students are from the eastern States, particularly New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania and about five hundred students are from international countries (Admissions, 2006). Like many similar institutions, many students are legacy students, some of multiple generations. The total tuition for undergraduate students including room and board and the technology fee totals just under $45,000, a price that has increased about $2,000 each year. Besides merit-based, Lehigh does award about half of the students some amount of financial aid (Admissions, 2005). By these standards, Lehigh University can be considered a second tier
school. While not in the Ivy League, it is still a very elite school that is very well regarded in the academic community.

I was able to interview the senior associate directors of the Lehigh University Admissions office individually, Justin, Katie, and Naomi. These three professionals have spent at least ten years in the admissions office at Lehigh and also have multiple years experience working at other institutions including Cedar Crest College, Pennsylvania State University: Lehigh Valley Campus, Colgate University, and Wilkes College. At Lehigh, each of them is assigned a geographic region where they recruit students. Justin recruits in Georgia, Kentucky, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee. Katie has Northern California, Central Pennsylvania, and area surrounding Lehigh. Naomi recruits in Northern New Jersey, and Northern Pennsylvania.

Choosing to interview admissions officers is helpful when researching college admissions for multiple reasons. First, these people are experts in their field. They could explain why certain parts of the process are done and how they are carried out. Second, people rarely think about college admissions as people. Getting to know the people behind the desk gives a very complete idea of college admissions. Finally, because the people in college admissions are all individuals, interviewing them can show how their own personalities affect how they approach their work in college admissions.

It was also important to me to include the perspectives of students. Michael, a first generation college student, is currently a freshman at Lehigh University whom I met when he was a prospective student at Lehigh University. Michael looked at a lot of schools including Bucknell, Lafayette, University of Connecticut, Rochester Institute of Technology, and Carnegie Mellon. Krista is a high school senior who is currently a prospective student and has sent her
application in to enter Lehigh in the fall of 2007. She is also a first generation college student applying to an elite university but was aided by an alumnus of Lehigh when applying. The interviews of these two students compliment each other very nicely. The reactions and the responses that Krista gives are very much based in the moment. She has no other context to put her ideas and feelings besides the present situation. Michael, on the other hand, could be more reflective. It has been a year since he has completed all of the college admissions work. Since getting in, he has been able to look back and draw connections to different pieces of the process.

All of these people have a different view of the process. I do not think that it would be possible to get a complete idea from the process by interviewing only students, or only admissions officers, or only college counseling professionals. If one was doing research about student behavior in the college admissions process, then it would be acceptable to work only with students. My research, however, is more comprehensive and ties together the views and ideas from all of these different social forces to show how they interact in college admissions.
Results

Although the observations and interviews allowed me to look at individual experiences, between the pre-college program and the Lehigh University interviews that I conducted, there are many common responses and themes. I will present in two parts; the first being results of my observations at the pre-college program, and then second being my interviews through Lehigh University. Some of the ideas and topics presented are different than the ones found in current literature on college admissions. This is because the approach I took to research college admissions was through the idea of social tracking as opposed to strictly admissions advantages as much of the current work is.

Pre-College Program

In the weeks that I spent working at the pre-college program, I was completely immersed in college admissions. Every day was spent introducing the college search process to students and visiting various schools. The program strives for variety in the colleges and universities to which it takes the students. Lisa, the director of the program, said “we offered a variety of schools including large state schools, small private schools, military academies, very elite schools in the Ivy League, and schools that had a mix of students in it’s population. We try to offer as many different types of college as possible to appeal to different students…not every student appreciates the same type of college and we need to make sure that this time is well spent for all of the students we have here.”

It is very true that students find different schools appealing, but what I noticed while working in this program was the difference between the Upward Bound and the non Upward
Bound students in the schools that the chose to visit. Far more Upward Bound students would choose to visit large public schools, where the non Upward Bound students would be more apt to visit a more elite school. Even those students who were part of Upward Bound and were in the highest level academic class were turning down opportunities to visit schools like University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins. Academically, these students were right in line with where they needed to be to get into schools some of the best schools in the country, but something was holding them back from considering schools like this. When I asked Lisa about this, she said that it was something that happened very frequently. “The students who come to this program from more affluent backgrounds take full advantage of the very high quality schools that we visit. One of the challenges I have is encouraging the other students, who are doing very well academically, to consider looking at these schools too.” The opposite was also true. The students who were not a part of the Upward Bound group who were in the lowest academic class at this program and who had SAT scores that were not as strong, were taking the opportunity to visit the better and more elite schools, even though it would be a reach for them academically.

While taking the college visits was how different the admissions representatives were in the presentation of their school and how it mirrored the type of school that it was. A very good example was when we were visiting a very well-known school in Virginia. This school has a long tradition of being one of the best in the country and has a very solid academic reputation. In the information session, the representative who was wearing a suit was telling prospective students about the very selective admissions process and how students should feel very special if they are chosen to come to this institution because of how much of a challenge it is to get in. This was then reinforced when he told the prospective students the average SAT score and how many students were in the top five percent of their graduating class in high school.
This can be contrasted to one of the large state schools that does not have the elite status or academic reputation of the first school that we visited. While still a good school, it's on a very different level than the first. At this school's information session, also presented by a professional, looked much different. Information was presented in very informal way. The presenter was dressed more casually and spent most of the time fielding questions from the students. They also showed a video with current students at that university talking about their sometimes difficult transitions into college life. The session leader also handed her business card out to the students attending and encouraged them to contact her with any questions that they had.

In both of these scenarios, it was definite marketing, especially for the first school. Because of its reputation, a certain type of student will look at that school. Because the admissions office makes their school sound like an elite club, the students who find that sort of environment appealing will apply to that school. Those students who have that sense of entitlement about their education and think that they deserve to study at that institution will seek them out. On the other hand, it intimidates some students, much like students in the Upward Bound program that were present. To a student where going to any college may not seem attainable, he won't want to take the chance on trying to get into an elite school. The second school had a more welcoming approach. It made applying to college seem much more manageable and something that can be a very positive experience. The other message that the second school sent was that they wanted students to come there. Again, this attracts a certain type of student.

The examples and observations from the pre-college program act as a good example for how social tracking leads students to certain schools. A school's reputation attracts certain
students to come look at that school, regardless of the students' academic standing. Ideally, a student with strong academic credentials should be encouraged to look at academically challenging schools. However, as seen in the case in the pre-college program, students' social status will influence what schools they look at. One of the reasons for this is how the school is presented by university representatives.

Colleges and universities that present themselves as elite institutions of higher learning will appeal to students who feel entitled to a good education. Through the pre-college program, I observed that it is the most privileged students who feel this entitlement, regardless of the academic credentials. The expectations of students are reinforced through their interactions with university representatives. It is the elite schools that will attract the most privileged students, and those students will make up a majority of their student body.

Lehigh University

Through the school profile and statistics presented, one can see that Lehigh University is an elite school, which is one of the reasons why I chose to focus my research there. From the individual interviews with admissions officers, Lehigh was presented much differently than the elite schools like Harvard and Duke that were mentioned in the Literature Review. The students that I interviewed were characteristically different than the students that the literature on college admissions focused on; they were not as overtly advantaged. However, some of their ideas and responses that they gave in their interview with me were very similar to the other students in the books. Through this, Lehigh is portrayed as a more typical elite school. By using the
perspectives of both the admissions officers and the students, one can gain a more complete picture of the process that Lehigh uses.

I was able to interview the three senior associate directors of admissions. All of them got into college admissions to work with people and to help families. Naomi said that one of the major reasons she got into college admissions was to “make higher education accessible to underrepresented communities”. Justin echoed this when he stressed the importance of making admissions very personable. When asked what the overall goal for college admissions should be, all three felt that it should be to help students find a college or university where they fit the best, even if it’s not the school were the admissions counselors work. Justin did mention that it is a challenge to balance this helping aspect with marketing the university. It is also important to note that Justin, Naomi, and Katie did not attend Lehigh. Many schools, especially elite schools, will hire alumni to work in the admissions office. According to Justin, the Lehigh admissions office is about fifty percent alumni and fifty percent non-alumni. The senior staff members, including the Dean of Admissions and the three associate directors of the admissions officer are not Lehigh alumni. After getting a general idea of their positions in the admissions office, I went into questions that related to the areas of legacy students, diversity students, and early admissions as it related to Lehigh University. Although the interviews were conducted separately, many common themes surfaced in their responses.

Because of Lehigh University’s history, many legacy students to apply and matriculate into the university. One of the first events that the admissions office holds in the fall is the legacy open house. During this weekend, alumni are invited to bring their children to participate in information sessions, tours, and a picnic at a football game. According to Katie, it’s a great way for alumni to return and “see how much campus has changed” as well as introduce
prospective students Lehigh's campus. Justin stated that it is important for alumni to know that they are valued at the school and that Lehigh is happy that their children are interested in attending Lehigh, but that a student's legacy status is not an automatic "rubber stamp for acceptance." Naomi reinforced this by saying that "a student with legacy status on their application just gets another check mark." I then questioned the weight of the legacy check mark, wondering if it is more meaningful than other pieces of the application. Naomi said that a check mark for being a legacy student carried the same weight as an outstanding essay or a unique hobby. They all shared that the parents expect a lot from the university, from personal interviews with administrators to expecting that their students will get into the school. Justin shared the experience he had during an information session where an alumnus of Lehigh asked directly about the advantages that legacy students get. He also reported being contacted by parents and students from families that he had worked with in the past when another child and sibling is applying to Lehigh.

Family connections are obviously very strong in admissions at Lehigh, but to me, it seemed to be downplayed by the admissions officers that I talked to. Even if it is just another positive check mark on someone's application, they still host special events just for prospective legacy students and their families.

Recently at Lehigh, diversity recruitment through admissions has been a major focus, like it has been at many colleges and universities across the country. Justin, Katie, and Naomi all feel like this is a very positive thing. Both Katie and Naomi got into admissions to make higher education more accessible to families. Justin was quick to point out that Lehigh is looking at diversity in more than a racial and ethnic sense. Lehigh is trying to expand the student population to include more students from more diverse regions and reach out to those in lower
socio-economic statuses. Recruiting students who come from low-income families is definitely a challenge now that tuition at Lehigh is just under $45,000 a year. Naomi said that she would like to see the admissions office and financial aid office do more to help “make college financially feasible” for prospective students. Lehigh, however, still tries to put together a student body that is racially and ethnic diverse. The class of 2010 was the most diverse class that Lehigh has ever had.

Much like the legacy students, Lehigh holds special events to recruit these students. One event that they hold is the Diversity Life Weekend. During this spring weekend, Lehigh brings together the accepted students to the incoming freshman class who are minority students. These prospective students stay in dorms with their Lehigh hosts and participate in events that are both informative and socially based in hopes that these students will choose to come to Lehigh. This event has recently been criticized for grouping students together. Some students say that rather than incorporating these minority students into the larger student body, a clique is formed. The major argument is that it creates an unrealistic picture for minority students. When I asked Naomi about this, she said that they make sure to tell the students how it will be a challenge to be at Lehigh. She said that “we don’t put up any mirrors when students come to visit; we try to show them a picture that is as accurate as possible.” Justin acknowledged how new this push for diversity recruitment actually is. He said that it was something that picked up over the last five years and he is happy how Lehigh has responded to the changes. He thinks that the most important thing for Lehigh to do is “sustaining the energy” as time goes on. For change to truly happen there needs to be a long term investment in the cause.

While schools have begun to end early admissions programs, Lehigh has actually added one. Lehigh has two early admissions rounds. For the first round of early admissions, students
need to apply by November 15 and will be notified by December 15. The second round of early admissions has a January 15 deadline and students will find out by February 15. Both rounds of early admissions are binding for students accepted. Because of the added round of early admissions, I consider Lehigh a “scooper” school. By this I mean that if students get rejected from top tier schools when they apply early, they can still send their application to Lehigh for consideration in the second round of early admissions. I asked all three admissions officers if they thought that Lehigh would eventually do away with early admissions, and all of them said no. The fact that early admissions puts certain students at a disadvantage didn’t not come across as a major concern when talking to these admissions officers, which is ironic because they spoke so positively about making college accessible and more financially feasible to students.

Overall, the interviews with the admissions officers at Lehigh did leave me less cynical about admissions in general. Katie introduced the idea that many people have about “the game of admissions,” this idea that if you play the right way and work different people over, you can get into the college of your choice. She felt that even though it did exist, admissions officers shouldn’t buy into it. While Lehigh is a very elite school, I got the idea from the interviews that the admissions officers try not to make it elitist, which is a hard balance to maintain. While many practices, such as the legacy open house and early admissions are clearly giving advantages to advantaged students, they it seems as though the admissions office is trying to create a positive change at Lehigh and in the field of admissions.

The students that I interviewed had a much different approach to admissions. As one can see from their profiles, they are very different than the students that were presented in the literature. Both of these students are first generation college students and have no overt advantages at the schools that they applied to. They did not have legacy status or come from
families who were able to donate large sums of money to the school. They are also not minority students, so they were not given the advantages that come with that status. Their very candid responses to my interview questions show how the average students approach college admissions.

Both Krista and Michael admitted that their grade point averages and SAT scores were below the Lehigh average. This did not stop them from applying. Michael said that he knew a college would look at more than just his grades and test scores, so he tried to highlight other aspects of his credentials on his application. Krista tried the same method. Michael and Krista reported trying to make their involvement in extracurricular activities stand out, especially the performing arts and community service. Krista said “colleges like well-rounded people, I remember hearing that in at a college night presentation at my high school.” Both Michael and Krista had the idea that they could not just present their grades and test scores on the application and send it in to Lehigh. They felt that they had to highlight information that would make themselves more appealing to admissions officers. As Krista said, students are told to do this by their parents, teachers, counselors, even college admissions officers.

Another way that both Michael and Krista tried to make themselves appealing to admissions officers was to network. Even though they didn’t have anyone in their immediate family that could help them get into Lehigh, that doesn’t mean that they couldn’t use other people. Michael, an avid violinist, said that he got in touch with the director of the university orchestra very early on in his college search. He also used what he called “the suck up factor.” With the advice of his parents and school counselors he kept in touch with the admissions officer for his region. Michael said that he would make telephone calls and send emails and letters with questions, even if he already knew the answers to them. The point of this was to make his name
known with the admissions officers. He said that he hoped a connection here would help him get into Lehigh. He told me, “I’m under the impression that this is the best way to gain an edge these days...you’ve got to get to know someone on the inside, as unfair as it is, I guess that’s how it works.”

Krista, while still networking, chose to network outside of the university. An alumnus of Lehigh, who is also a friend of her family, wrote Krista a letter of recommendation. The letter was not sent to the admissions office with the rest of her recommendation letters, but to Lehigh’s Director of Alumni Affairs. This man then hand delivered to the Dean of Admissions. While Krista did not expect this from her family friend, when the offer was made, she said “there was no way I could turn down that type of help.”

Both Michael and Krista were offered admissions to Lehigh; Michael for the class of 2010 and Krista for the class of 2011. Michael enrolled and is currently completing his first year at Lehigh. Krista decided to accept admissions at Bucknell University, and will begin classes in the Fall of 2007.

After I talked to Krista and Michael about what they did to get in to Lehigh, I asked them if they felt like they deserved to be accepted to the school. They were honest that their grades and test scores alone did not meet Lehigh’s averages and that they had to find other ways to get into the school, but both of them felt that they deserved to be accepted. Michael said he did ask himself the same thing and he said, “even though I did not have high grades or score well like other people at Lehigh, I’m a really hard worker. I’m also not riding on my admissions; I’m getting involved on Lehigh’s campus and working really hard.”
Krista had very similar feelings to Michael. She felt that she definitely deserved to be at Lehigh despite the advantages she had. Like Michael, Krista said, "even though it may seem unfair, so many people are given special treatment in admissions, I had to find a way to get in."

The experiences of Michael and Krista are very stereotypical ones of students trying to get into college. It is no longer good enough to simply present oneself on the application. People try and find advantages and use those to their full potential. College admissions has clearly turned into a game for many students.

At Lehigh University, social tracking is definitely a factor in admissions. The admissions officers revealed that there are types of students that Lehigh looks to admit. This, along with preferential treatment of legacy students and an extra early admissions round, very privileged students are encouraged to apply to the school. As seen through the interviews with Michael and Krista, Lehigh may value high academic records, but grades are not the only thing looked at. Even when students are not of an advantaged group like legacy students or development admits, students are able to find ways to make themselves appealing to the admissions officers.
Conclusion

The goals of my research were to understand if social factors led certain students to college, and if they did, what those factors were. I also wanted to introduce the concept of social tracking through its role in the college admissions process. In review of the current literature and my own research, it is clear that students are socially tracked into colleges and universities, and the tracking that takes place works in favor of only some students. My research has also presented questions for further research to better understand social tracking and the applied effects on college admissions.

Even though the research on tracking ends with secondary education, it happens after a student leaves high school and well into the college admissions process. Good evidence for that is the presence of the same negative consequences of academic tracking presented by Maureen Hallinan. She argued that tracking students would result in segregation, low social status, and heterogeneous tracks (Hallinan, 1994). The consequences are not only attributed to higher education but can also been seen in the set up of our society.

The segregation of students seen in our primary and secondary schools as a result of education tracking is also a consequence of social tracking in our higher education system. As seen in the history of selective admissions, the goal was to keep a student body that was white, Anglo-Saxon, and protestant (many call this being WASPY) (Karabel, 2005). When students who are legacy children and children of those who can donate large amounts of money are given special advantage in the college admissions process, it allows a large number of white students into the college. Also seen through research was that students of a higher socio-economic status are more likely to gain admissions to colleges and universities. This could be seen though the
numbers of Pell Grant recipients at elite schools as well as the research on early admissions. Students of higher socio-economic status also have the access to special services like SAT prep classes and private admissions counselors. Elite schools are creating student bodies that are very homogeneous, and because admitting a student means not admitting other students, left are a large number of non-white, lower socio-economic status students.

The second consequence, low social status for students in the lower track, can be seen within higher education and in society as well. By just looking at the language of higher education; schools are elite, schools are prestigious, schools are exclusive. In the social order of college, these are the top schools, and not ironically, the schools that have the most homogeneous and WASPY student population. A current marketing slogan for Lehigh University is “Not All Degrees are Created Equal.” This is very true. Even when the bachelor’s degree is in the same field, one from a more elite and prestigious school carries more weight to it, it looks better to others. Because the admissions officer at the elite school in Virginia presented his school as a very elite and prestigious institution, the students there will feel as though they are better than other students who do not go to that school. Looking outside of higher education, college admissions can be considered a driving force behind social class because they control who gets a college degree or not. From the survey done by the United States Census Bureau, one can see the importance of a college degree in the work force. People earn more money when they have one (Bloom, 2005). With the current system, when colleges and universities give advantages to those who are already advantaged, they create a perpetuating cycle of social class.

The creation of a performance and placement cycle is also a very true consequence in college admissions, and is very strongly connected with the mentality of students when they are
applying to schools. Good evidence for this can be seen in the pre-college program where I worked. The students who were participating in the Upward Bound program were not likely to attend the trips and information sessions at the very elite schools. A major cause for this is that minority and first generation college students usually aren’t found at elite schools. Because other students are given more advantages, minority and lower social track students get the idea that it’s pointless to apply because that’s not where they belong.

Higher education is an integral part of one’s future, and there should not be a system in place which favors some students over others. One of the biggest causes for this problem is the privatization of higher education. The large majority of private schools in this country are the most elite and private schools. These schools look out for the best interest of their university. If higher education was to become public, and if we lived in a country where higher education was guaranteed, less social tracking place. While ending private higher education in America is not the most practical idea, my research shows that changes can be made to the college admissions system than can alleviate the problems presented.

First, schools are heading in the right direction by ending early admissions programs. I do suggest that schools should shift to early action programs. In an early action admissions program, students apply early and find out about acceptance early but are not held in a binding agreement to attend the university. This means that students who have a clear first choice school and show very strong interest in a university can apply early, but students could decline an acceptance if another school offers a better financial aid package.

In the admissions process itself, schools need to use more objective information when evaluating students. The practice of selective admissions started as an effort to keep Jewish students out of schools. Because Jewish students were scoring just as well, and in many cases
better, than non-Jewish students on college entrance exams, admissions officers started evaluating characteristics such as leadership qualities and character (Karabel, 2005). The same practices that were used at the turn of the twentieth century are still being used today, and while not directed at Jewish students, it is still keeping students out of higher education. Admissions officers should look at standardized test scores and academic records more than extracurricular activities and family history. This would end a lot of the social tracking that takes place. By making college admissions about academics, the social aspect would go away. The problem is that to truly create a fair system that is open to all students based on academics, the primary and secondary education systems in the country need to improve too, because the quality of education students receive across the country varies greatly. Those students in lower income areas do not have access to good education. If colleges begin to look at academic records, these students would still be at a disadvantage. Jonothan Kozol said it best in a recent speech to college administrators when he said, “Until the problems with our public education system are corrected, colleges can do little more than reward the product of meritocracy.” (Kozol, 2007).

The students that colleges are admitting are the students who have been able to advance and achieve while in school; an opportunity that far too few students have. Colleges, however, shouldn’t wait for the changes in lower education to happen to reevaluate their own practices.

More research also needs to be done on college admissions. When originally planning my research, I chose to define the college admissions time frame starting with the initial recruitment of certain students and ending with the final decision of acceptance or rejection for the students that applied. When I was interviewing the admissions officers, I realized that I the time frame I was focusing on was not long enough. A common idea that came up in the interviews was matriculation. I did not consider special matriculation programs and events, and I
think that that could be a very interesting area for further research. By looking at the matriculation events at Lehigh University, they have very specialized open houses for certain students; Diversity Life Weekend is one of them. Others include Music and Engineering Day, The Business Open House, and the Arts and Sciences Open House. Even though the admissions officers at Lehigh said that they did not create any false images of the school, it would be beneficial to see if there are different events planned for the students as they try and encourage them to attend based on the group of students they are hosting. I also believe that this is a common occurrence at schools; this is not something that is unique to Lehigh.

Another piece of research that could be beneficial would be to look at the students who do not have any outright advantages in college admissions. When looking at the literature review, one can see that to research admissions advantages, the students that were interviewed were the students who had the right last name, came from a wealthy family, or were minority students. For these students, it was clear that they were going to get an edge in admissions. I interviewed two students who didn’t have those advantages, but still tried to create advantages for themselves. Doing this turns college admissions into a game.

Throughout my research, I did find myself coming back to the idea of the admissions game, and it is a major theme in previous research. Students and their families are always trying to find advantages when they are applying to school. They send their application into the early admissions pool, they use their name or financial situation to help them, and they build personal relationships with faculty and staff members of the university. The challenge is, the current practices of college admissions officers promote this admissions game. Students are told that to get into a school, they need to stand out from the rest of the applicants. They are also told that good grades alone will not get them into college. Students then highlight things about
themselves; that they play an unusual musical instrument, that they have visited the school many
times and had personal interviews with admissions staff, or that they have built a relationship
with a member of the staff or faculty at that school.

By researching what students do to create advantages for themselves, one could gain a
good perspective about students think will help them get into a school. The advantages that
students try to create for themselves aren’t ones that are obvious to the public like legacy and
minority status; these are completely made up. But this type of interaction is a two way street;
admissions officers play a very important role in the admissions game. It would be interesting to
see how admissions officers react to these advantages students try to create for themselves. I
can’t say for certain that they do or do not recognize what students and families are doing in
order to gain the edge in admissions (although I think some of the techniques used are pretty
obvious), but based on the presented admissions figures, it’s working. Because admissions
officers are reinforcing the perception that one must be advantaged to get into college, I argue
that the process students creating their own advantages stems from social tracking.

Janice Bloom said, “there was a time in our history—not very long ago—in which the
nation committed to helping young people gain access to higher education. It is a commitment,
however, that is yet to be fulfilled” (2005, p. 81). America has been committed to helping young
people gain access to higher education, but only some young people. Because of selective
admissions, students need to prove themselves worthy of attending a school. Many times, the
way they do that is through social connections and status. Education, though seen as a right, is
actually a privilege that many do not get. The great equalizer of our country is one of the driving
forces behind social class inequality and a main process through which it is being perpetuated.
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