Status as Security: Students' Perceptions of the Value of an Elite College Education

Citation

Hampton, Jonathan. 2017. Status as Security: Students' Perceptions of the Value of an Elite College Education. Qualifying Paper, Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Permanent link

http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33797213

Terms of Use

Share Your Story

Accessibility

Status as Security:

Students' Perceptions of the Value of an Elite College Education

Jonathan Hampton[1]

Harvard University

Abstract: How do students at elite universities think about the economic and educational returns of their college education? Drawing on 29 interviews from first-year students at an elite university, I find that students think that attending an elite university will allow them to secure a high degree of social status, which they believe is integral to obtaining future professional opportunities. These students see the high status that they acquire through their association to an elite university as a safety net, which will enable them to maximize the economic and educational returns from their college education relative to their peers at less-selective universities which, in turn, solidifies internal and external perceptions of their elite identity.

Key terms: Higher education; status; horizontal stratification; culture; elites

QP Committee: Natasha Kumar Warikoo, Meira Levinson, Julie Reuben, and Roberto Gonzales

---

Introduction

"If you tell somebody you go to Linden, their perceptions of you shift. And, I see that as a very tangible mechanism by which people secure positions that they might want or sort of get in that first step of getting in the door to opportunities."

    -Vivian

    Every year, the most-ambitious students in the United States compete tirelessly for admission to the country's most-selective universities. Many strive to earn perfect grades and standardized test scores while participating in numerous leadership and extra-curricular activities to develop a college application that will impress admissions officers at elite universities. In recent years, journalists have documented a phenomenon that they have termed as a "college admissions mania," wherein students anxiously strive to gain admission to an elite university because they believe those institutions provide better educational and professional opportunities than less-selective universities (Bruni 2015). In 2016, Stanford University reported the nation's lowest college acceptance rate, admitting just 4.7 percent of the 43,997 students who applied for admission (Anderson 2016). By contrast, in 1974, Stanford received 8,025 total applications and accepted 31 percent of its applicants (Anders 2015). In other words, between 1974 and 2016 the applicant pool at Stanford increased by over 500 percent while the admissions rate declined by 85 percent. Many other elite universities have documented similar patterns as students vie for a limited number of spots on these campuses. Such trends suggest that many determined students believe that attending an elite university is increasingly important within today's educational landscape even though it has become more-difficult to enter these institutions than ever before.

    While most sociological research on elite higher education has examined the organizational dimensions that shape students' ability to enter these institutions (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Karabel 2006; Stevens 2009), scant attention has focused on students once they are on these campuses. In recent years, scholars have sought to address this lacuna by exploring

the role of elite campuses in influencing students' perspectives on issues such as diversity (Warikoo 2016) and social class (Stuber 2011) to shaping their political orientations (Binder and Wood 2013) and professional trajectories (Binder et al 2016). However, research on elite college students has yet to explore how they make sense of the educational advantages made available to them through their association to an elite institution. Such gaps in the empirical knowledge on educational advantage obscure our understandings of its symbiotic relationship to educational inequality (Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010; Khan 2012). Given that students continue to compete in record numbers for coveted spaces at these elite institutions, I ask the following: what advantages do students expect to receive through attending an elite university, and how do students think these advantages will be important for them both during and after college?

In this paper, I synthesize the developing literature on elite higher education, the largely quantitative and survey-based literature on horizontal stratification, and the organizational literature on status to explore how first-year college students at a highly-selective American university think about the educational advantages made available to them at an elite university, and how they hope to mobilize those privileges both during and after college. I focus particularly on how students evaluate and distinguish between the various advantages made accessible to them at an elite university, and how they think about leveraging these various advantages to maximize the returns of their college education. Through examining the experiences of a diverse range of first-year elite college students, I find that most students believe that going to an elite university will allow them to acquire a high degree of status, which they think will play an integral role in shaping their trajectories during and after college. Moreover, students identified three elements of status--1) institutional resources, 2) social connections, and 3) high external

evaluation-- that they largely-believed would shape that would beneficially influence their trajectories, and that were solely attainable within the context of an elite university.

Students who identified their institutional resources as being an important mechanism through which to acquire status discussed the ways in which their university provided unparalleled educational and pre-professional opportunities that would enhance the overall quality of their credential relative to those from other higher educational institutions. Those who believed that social connections developed in college would be influential in shaping their educational experiences and post-college outcomes talked about the importance of cultivating relationships with peers and mentors in college, as such connections would foster one's development in myriad forms. Lastly, students who labelled high external evaluation as a key element of status attainment during and after college suggested that their mere association with an elite university would be a sufficient-enough condition to gain access into desired educational and professional pathways because of the high-regard bestowed upon their educational credential by important gatekeepers. Many students identified multiple elements of status being significant since they believed these varied elements would work in constellation with one another to ensure that they would achieve personal and career satisfaction by going to an elite college. In other words, students saw the high-status they would ultimately attain from going to an elite university as a form of security which ensured that they would inevitably maximize the returns of their college education.

Background Literature

Horizontal Stratification in Post-Secondary Education

The extensive literature on educational inequality has largely focused on the social inequalities that emerge based upon differences in one's level of schooling (see, e.g., Card 1999;

Goldin and Katz 2007; Hout et al 2011). Much of this research has found that individuals with higher levels of education tend to have more economic security and personal satisfaction than those with less education. However, the expansion of American higher education created a unique stratification system between post-secondary educational institutions which has led to the development of research which examines the links between socioeconomic inequalities and the type of higher education received. In their review, Gerber and Cheung (2008) refer to these connections as the "horizontal dimensions of education-based stratification," otherwise known as horizontal stratification. Existing scholarship in this area has analyzed how factors such as the quality and type of college one attends, and various college experiences such as choice of college major and academic performance impact college students' labor market outcomes.

Most work on horizontal stratification has analyzed student differences in labor market outcomes based on the quality of the postsecondary institution attended to determine if going to a prestigious college does in fact lead to greater economic returns on the labor market. Foundational work found that differences in institutional quality can have an influence in shaping students' labor market outcomes (Bowen and Bok 1998; Brewer and Ehrenberg 1996; Weisbrod & Karpoff 1968). Four dominant hypotheses have been used by researchers to explain the differences in labor market outcomes that stem from the type of postsecondary institution attended: (1) *human capital*, in that schools with higher degrees of quality may be more effective at transmitting cognitive and non-cognitive skills to their students; (2) *signal effect*, in that high-quality schools may signal higher degrees of competency to employers than less-selective institutions; (3) *social capital*, as graduates of higher-quality schools may graduate with higher levels of valuable social capital that can impact their labor market outcomes; and (4) *selection effect*, whereby factors such as cognitive ability or social background may be playing an

exogeneous role in determining who attends more-selective institutions and how they fare on the labor market.

More recent research on horizontal stratification in postsecondary institutions has looked at the impact of selection effects on shaping students' post-college labor market outcomes. This research has suggested that the effects of going to an elite university are attributable in large part to the effects of a host of other factors, such as cognitive ability or social class background, that impact whether a student attends to begin with. Researchers have started to use quantitative techniques that enable them to compare the post-college outcomes of students who were admitted to similar universities but chose to attend institutions that varied significantly in terms of quality. Emergent findings from these studies suggest that students who got into a highly-selective university generally had similar post-college labor market outcomes upon graduation regardless of type of college they ultimately decided to go to (Black and Smith 2004; Dale and Krueger 2011). However, other researchers have disputed these findings, especially those who support a human capital hypothesis as they suggest that elite college students' labor market advantages become increasingly evident as they progress through their careers (e.g. Wise 1975). Such conflicting evidence has made it difficult for researchers to reach a consensus about the effects of attending an elite postsecondary institution.

In sum, the literature on horizontal stratification within higher education has confirmed that there is variation in labor market returns based on differences in the type of postsecondary institution a student gets into. However, there has been little consensus as to whether attending a highly-selective institution plays a causal role in shaping these differences or whether the differences are based on endogenous factors. Moreover, given that the work in this area is almost exclusively quantitative and survey-based, research on postsecondary horizontal stratification

hitherto has yet to examine the potential role of social and cultural processes in shaping these disparate outcomes within American higher education. In noticing this gap, researchers have suggested that qualitative research is needed to explore how students think about the role of institutional quality on shaping their post-college labor market outcomes (Gerber and Cheung 2008).

Elite Identity Construction in American Education

Sociological research on elite higher education is an emerging area that has focused chiefly on the institutional mechanisms that shape educational inequalities in the United States. Researchers have relied upon historical (Karabel 2004; Soares 2007), ethnographic (Stevens 2007), and quantitative (Espenshade and Radford 2009) methods to explain how organizational practices at elite universities play an integral role in perpetuating educational disparities by shedding insight on the various strategies adopted by elite universities to limit access to their campuses. In recent years, research on elite higher education has shifted its focus from the organizational dimensions to what Stevens and his colleagues (2008) refer to as the "experiential core of college life." A growing body of scholarship has begun to examine the role of elite universities in cultivating students' attitudes on issues such as politics (Binder and Wood 2013), social class (Stuber 2011), and diversity (Warikoo 2016).

While recent studies have begun to look at the socializing effect of elite colleges, research on elite college students has yet to focus on the social and cultural processes on university campuses that lead to the recognition and embodiment of one's elite identity. The lack of research in this area is surprising given the numerous studies on elite K-12 education that specifically focus on the construction of elite identity within elite schools (Bourdieu 1984;

Cookson and Persell 1985; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010; Khan 2011). Researchers who study elites have argued that elite schools transmit informal cultural knowledge and attitudes to their students through repeated rituals and practices that lead to the development of a shared elite identity. Furthermore, researchers on elites have suggested that developing deeper insights around the nature of educational advantage that elite schools foster can help us better-understand the relationship between privilege and disadvantages within the American educational system (Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010; Khan 2012).

Most work that has examined the role of elite schooling in developing students' elite identities has been ethnographic (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010; Khan 2012; Pope 2001). While participant-observation allows researchers to witness and document various types of social interactions, interviews are also important as they allow researchers to better understand how social actors make meaning around these social interactions, and how those meanings may govern one's actions within social interactions (Lamont and Swidler 2014). More research that leverages interviewing techniques is needed to refine our understandings around how elite students craft meaning around the various social processes that lead to the construction of their elite identity, and how they think about their privileged position as our society continues to become increasingly unequal (cf. Warikoo and Fuhr 2015).

Unpacking the Role of Status in Elite Higher Education

Sociologists generally define status as "the position in a social hierarchy that results from accumulated acts of deference" (Sauder et al 2012). In recent decades, organizational sociologists have looked at the various processes and factors that lead to varying degrees of status within a social hierarchy. Sociologists generally believe that there are two key

determinants of status: affiliations and arbiters. A core idea within the status literature is that an organization's status position is largely influenced by the status of those with whom that the organization is affiliated with. Foundational work on organizational status found that firms that affiliated with high-status actors and institutions were, in turn, assumed to have high status (Podolny 1993) while those that engaged with lower-status entities were evaluated negatively and assumed to have lower status (Blau 1964). Other research on status has looked at the role of evaluations of critics or gatekeepers in shaping an organization's status position. Work in this area suggests that the power of critics in shaping an organization's status doesn't lie in their power to determine the status position of an organization but instead to re-affirm others' pre-existing judgments about an organization. For example, Sauder (2006) found that magazine's school rankings influenced perceptions of status because the ranking conferred legitimacy to an existing status hierarchy between educational institutions that people already implicitly understood.

Some cultural sociologists have sought to bring together existing status scholarship with literature on evaluative practices. This is particularly true within the study of elite hiring practices. Lauren Rivera (2015) found that employers in high-paying employment sectors often used signals such as the selectivity of an applicant's higher education institution and their involvement in various types of social activities to assess the applicant's potential "fit" within their organization. Rivera found that these evaluations of merit were often self-referential, which she argued was problematic since many of the high-paying industries she studied were notoriously homogenous along both racial and socio-economic lines. The most important finding from this book was that elite employers tend to think of elite college graduates as being more competent than peers who attended less-selective institutions, which, in turn, led to a

bidirectional reification of the high-status positioning enjoyed by the elite job firms and the elite universities. Karen Ho's (2009) ethnography of Wall Street found similar patterns. In her book, she discovered that elite firms relied heavily on the educational prestige of their employees to signal their competence in a given industry and thus demand higher fees from their clients (cf. Benjamin and Podolny 1999).

More recent scholarship in cultural sociology has sought to integrate the literatures on status, college student experience, and horizontal stratification by focusing on the institutional and social processes by which students at elite universities are funneled into a finite range of elite career paths (Binder et al 2016). Emerging findings have shown that as elite students progress through college, they begin to construct rigid boundaries between desirable and undesirable career paths and that these conceptions are heavily influenced by the institutional knowledge students receive from their college campus, thus confirming our existing understandings about the socializing effect of college (cf. Stevens et al 2008).

Data and Methodology

Research Setting

I conducted the research for this project at Linden University[2], a highly-selective university in the United States with a long tradition of educating students from wealthy families. Linden also consistently ranks very highly on many college rankings charts, which research has found to have an influencing effect on students' college preferences (Griffith and Rask 2007). Linden accepts fewer than 10 percent of its applicants, most of whom have exceptionally high grades and standardized test scores. Well-to-do students make up the majority of the student

---

[2] Linden University is a pseudonym.

body, with more than half of students coming from families that earn more than $100,000 per year, including 10 percent from families that earn more than $500,000 per year. In recent years, Linden has sought to diversify its student body through its support of progressive need-blind admissions and no-loan financial aid policies, which minimize the financial barriers for students from middle and low-income families. When I collected data for this project, nearly one-tenth of first-year students came from families that earned less than $40,000 per year and roughly 15 percent were the first in their family to attend college. Linden is an exclusively residential campus, in which all undergraduate students live together on campus for all four years of college, wherein they gain exposure to the implicit and explicit social and cultural norms that shape campus life. Additionally, Linden has a vast institutional endowment, exceeding $2 billion, that enables the university to commit a deluge of resources to develop programming centered around nurturing students' learning and development. Given the university's strong institutional commitment to the success of their students, the graduate rate at Linden exceeds 90 percent and many alumni report earning above-average starting and mid-career salaries.

Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted semi-structured interviews with 29 freshmen students at Linden University in spring 2016. I chose to limit my recruitment exclusively to freshmen students since I was interested in understanding what new students expected or hoped to achieve from their elite college experience. I believed first-year students would have the widest range of expectations and hopes from their college experience since they were the least socialized into their new educational setting. I recruited students through e-mails which were disseminated by residential advisors, non-resident academic advisors, and graduate students who worked closely with

freshmen students through extra-curricular activities at Linden. All the students in my sample were born, raised, and educated in the U.S.

In the first wave of data collection, most of my participants were from affluent backgrounds. To capture a broader range of perspectives, I reached out to an on-campus student organization that worked with first-generation students in the second and third waves of interviews during the semester. Of the participants in my sample, 11 were White, 5 Asian, 7 Latino, 2 Black, 3 biracial, and one who identified as "Other." 10 respondents received partial financial aid, 8 received full financial aid, and 11 students did not receive any financial aid from the university.[3] 7 of the 29 respondents in my sample were the first in their families to go to college. Lastly, the students also had a wide range of intellectual interests with 15 students intending to major in the social sciences, 11 in STEM fields, 4 in the arts and humanities, and 4 students were undecided about their college major at the time of the interview.[4]

Before participating in the interview, I requested that all interviewees complete an online pre-interview survey (see Appendix A). In the survey, I provided an overview of their rights as research participants per IRB and institutional guidelines, and asked for information about their financial aid status, intended college major, racial background, and parents' educational background. Upon completing the survey, I invited students schedule a time to meet for an in-person interview, after which I compensated them with a $15 Amazon.com e-gift card. During the data collection process, I immersed myself in the institutional culture by attending various academic and social events on-campus. At these events, I engaged in informal conversations with students to gain more insight about student life at Linden. This was very helpful in terms of

---

[3] Given the vast institutional resources at Linden, some students who qualified for full financial aid came from families that earned equal or more than $53,291, the median family income in the U.S.
[4] These figures do not equal 29, since some respondents expressed an interest in double-majoring in the pre-interview survey.

learning more about the academic and social climate at Linden, which was helpful for building rapport with respondents during the interviews. However, since I did not complete my undergraduate training at Linden, I had to grapple with an interesting outsider social dynamic which I strategically leveraged to allow students to explicitly describe their academic and social contexts, and unpack social codes and processes that shaped students' experiences at Linden.

I conducted all the interviews on-campus at Linden University and audio recorded them. The average length of each interview was roughly 90 minutes. I constructed the interview guide to understand students' lives before and during college as well as their lives on-campus, both inside and outside of the classroom. To do so, I divided the interview guide into three parts (see Appendix B). In the first part, I adopted a targeted life history approach which probed participants' descriptions of their hometowns and high schools as well as their family life before college. In the second part, I asked respondents about their experiences applying to college and how they came to their decisions about where to attend college. I also asked them about their conceptions around the purpose of college and how they envisioned Linden meeting those purposes. The third part of my interview guide focused on students' experiences once they arrived at Linden. In this section, I queried students about their academic, residential and extra-curricular experiences, and asked questions about what they hoped to achieve during their four years at Linden.

After each interview, I began my analysis by listening to the audio recording and writing analytic notes or memos. I aggregated the main ideas from these notes and memos and sent them to my advisor every week in the form of brief analytic reflections. Within these reflections, I summarized some of the main ideas that emerged from the interviews and ideas that I planned to probe further in future interviews. This process enabled me to develop an evolving coding

scheme based on the steps suggested by Walker and Myrick (2006). Upon completing the interviews, I transcribed and analyzed them with NVivo qualitative coding software. The primary data source for this paper came from participant responses to the question: "How do you think going to Linden will be important for you in the future?" and instances where respondents discussed the benefits or privileges they had or anticipated to receive based on their affiliation to Linden University. In the initial wave of coding, I created a "status" code[5] which I used to categorize student responses around how they thought going to Linden would be beneficial to them both during and after college (Weiss 1995). Upon further coding, I deferred to the existing empirical literature on status to look for the various ways in which participants discussed the role and function of status in their responses which led to the generation of three sub-codes: "institutional resources", "social connections", and "high external perception."

Findings

In this section, I focus on how students describe the educational advantages they expect to acquire during their time at Linden University. Many students said that the consideration of these educational advantages was important in shaping their decision to attend Linden over the other universities that offered them admission. Students identified three major educational advantages—institutional resources, social connections, and high external perception—that they saw as being important both during and after their time at Linden. I will discuss how students constructed meaning around each of these advantages and I will provide examples of how students imagined these advantages shaping their experiences at various points within their educational and professional trajectories.

---

[5] This code was labelled status since many of the student responses dealt with issues of status.

Institutional Resources

22 of 29 respondents (75 percent) thought that going to Linden University enabled them to obtain a high quality education because of the numerous educational and professional opportunities available on-campus. Students believed that having the opportunity to immerse themselves in many different activities would allow them to make the most of their time in college. As Phillipe, an upper-middle class student whose family has been attending Linden for multiple generations, states: "I think that [Linden] has endless resources. It is the best education in the country, and maybe the world. So, you'll be ready for whatever you need. I mean, in terms of those resources, those opportunities, the people here…the money to send you wherever you need to go. The classes, the flexibility of creating what it is you want and finding it. Just the breadth of options available." Luisa, a first-generation college student, expressed a similar attitude when asked about the opportunities available on Linden's campus:

> I've noticed that we have a lot of resources to be successful. For [example], I'm doing an internship this summer, and that's not something that is common for my friends who go to other institutions that are public universities at home. They're not doing that this summer…Linden made it very hard for you not to do something this summer.

Phillipe and Luisa both agree that it is a privilege to attend Linden because of the many resources available on-campus. Both students seem to be fascinated by the wide array of resources that the university was willing to commit to its students. Phillipe said that when he was deciding where he wanted to go to college he ultimately chose Linden since he "just knew that [Linden] would be a place of endless opportunities. Because I really didn't know concretely what I wanted. But I knew that I wanted as many doors opened to me as possible." As first-year students, most respondents were either unsure of what they hoped to do after college or they were open to exploring many opportunities. As Phillipe noted, there was a common belief among

students that a Linden education would open up many opportunities regardless of what path

students chose to take. Many of Phillipe's peers repeated his thoughts when they spoke to me

about the endless opportunities that they could take advantage of through their association to

Linden. Such perspectives corroborate existing research in the status literature which posits that

high-status social actors enjoy "high-status dominance" which gives the social actor more

latitude in their decision-making because they can better control how others perceive their

actions (Gould 2002). In other words, by going to Linden students felt more comfortable in not

having concrete ideas about what they wanted to do in the future because engaging in many

different activities would be generally perceived as exploring one's options rather than floating

about aimlessly.

Students often expressed hesitation about embarking upon a specific path too early in

their college career because it would not allow them to explore the various paths available to

them as students at Linden. For example, Alex, an affluent student whose parents met while

going to Linden, told me that he felt that "the [institutionalized] structure of the education"

played a large role in enabling students to embark upon paths that were personally meaningful

because there were "so many resources and so many routes you can take". Other students agreed

with the idea that being able to immerse oneself in many different things and take non-traditional

pathways was an innate advantage of a Linden education. For example, Chloe, an affluent

student who chose to attend Linden over another highly prestigious university in Europe, argued

in support of this idea when she explained to me why she decided to go to Linden:

> [A Linden education] prepares you to go into the world and not approach it as every other
> person. If you can take advantage of it in the right way, I think that [Linden] allows you
> to be a leader and not in the clichéd sense like, "I'm gonna be a leader." But in the sense
> that you aren't obligated to follow any specific path…it gives you the opportunity to go
> into the world and find your niche and where you are the most productive, despite

potentially that not being some pre-drawn path. And maybe it is, maybe you are meant to be a consultant at Bain, and that's fine.

Some respondents were initially ambivalent about going to Linden but decided to enroll once they realized how abundant the resources were on Linden's campus. For example, Taylor, a student from a single-parent working-class family, had gotten into many top colleges and was most excited about going to another institution but she ultimately declined their admissions offer because they were too "stingy," and didn't offer what she believed to be enough financial aid. She said that she was very reluctant about deciding to attend Linden because she had always wanted to go college further from home. When I asked her how she felt about being a student at Linden she said: "It's pretty 'meh.' [But the good thing is] the resources that are provided…when you're on Linden's campus. There are a lot of resources here." Vivian, an affluent student whose father had gone to Linden for college, also discussed her initial hesitance about going to Linden. She said that she had planned to attend a small liberal arts college because she worried that Linden and other universities like it would be "too big" and "more competitive." However, she said that she decided to enroll at Linden because "there were obviously a lot of opportunities in going there." Students acknowledged that the institution's abundant resources were important in shaping their decision to enroll since they believed the institutional resources would, by extension, provide them with unique opportunities to make the most out of college.

Other students thought one of the benefits of Linden's educational structure was that it cultivated a broad base of general competency. For example, Samantha, an affluent student from Texas, says: "I think a Linden degree...indicates that you have some sort of work ethic or attention to detail or that you are generally intelligent and can use your knowledge and apply it in multiple different situations." Samantha said that although she planned to work in business after

college, she preferred Linden's liberal arts education model as opposed to a more rigid business school education because she felt that her exposure to many different academic subjects could help her be a more strategic thinker when put into real-world business scenarios. She went on to say that it is important to be able to "use critical thinking skills in multiple different ways, not just follow set steps to get something done." Unlike Samantha, Allison, a student from Southern California, did not know what she wanted to do but she also thought that the educational structure would be beneficial since it would allow her to find something that she truly cared about and have the knowledge to do it. She said: "This semester a lot has already opened up so many doors that I'd never considered before, and so I feel like I'm going to really appreciate that down the road, that I was able to explore these ideas and figure out whether those issues and causes are something that I care deeply about."

Luisa also thought that going to Linden would enable her to engage in her various educational opportunities that would nurture her personal growth. She said that going to Linden would be important for her because the university "would cultivate [important skills] in you and they would encourage you because they would give you so much individual attention." She said that if she had attended a less prestigious university, it was likely that she "would be in very large classes with a lot of students and wouldn't necessarily get that hands-on attention or necessarily the hands-on encouragement to do things, to change the world." At the time of our interview, Luisa imagined herself working in the public sector after college, and as she says, she thought that Linden's hands-on educational environment would prepare her to be a leader and effect change. She agreed with many of her peers and was that the resources made available at Linden made her feel very assured that she would be able to fulfill her goals. She says:

> [If you want] to do something, you're very much so probably doing something, because they give you so many resources. So I think that in doing that…[t]he boost [of going to

Linden] comes from them giving you so much support and resources as an undergrad, to make you competitive for the job market or for whatever path that you wanna take in life.

Cassie expressed similar feelings about Linden while discussing the ample resources related to professional development that she had already had the chance to learn about as a first-year student. When I asked her about the different types of pre-professional resources available on-campus she said:

> There are many different job seminars that are like, 'Here's how your resume should be,' and if you want to go to the CIA, there's a seminar for that. It's kind of like the iPhone, there's an app for that. Anything that you want to do here, Linden will offer a way for you to do it.

In sum, the students who thought that the institutional resources they would acquire by going to Linden would be an important aspect of their college experience talked about the ways in which the university enabled students to nurture their passions by providing them with various types of support. Students thought that taking courses in a wide-range of subjects would enable them to see larger connections to the world and perhaps spark an interest in an unexpected subject or topic. Students generally thought that their college experience was abound with plenty of pathways which could lead to self-discovery. The wealth of options available on-campus was an integral component of a Linden education and led students to think that the quality of their education was superior to what other universities could offer. Rather than feeling disoriented by the multitude of paths one could take, students sought to apply their existing skills and knowledge as broadly as possible to cultivate skills that transferred across various fields of knowledge. In doing so, students thought that they would be better equipped to pursue many things after college compared to students who went to universities that didn't encourage such intellectual wandering. In addition to the coursework, Linden also had student programming which helped students apply their knowledge in more-concrete ways by developing their work

experience. Some first-year students were already beginning to take advantage of these resources since they wanted to apply their skills and knowledge to real-world situations. One could easily compare Linden students to Goethe's Faust, as their enduring quest for knowledge and self-discovery led them down many paths.

Social Connections

19 of the 29 respondents (65 percent) thought that the social connections that they developed at Linden were an important aspect of the education. These students believed that having the opportunity to learn from accomplished professors and extremely ambitious peers would be important in shaping their personal development both during and after college. For example, Greg, a middle-class student from the Midwest, gave the following response when asked why he chose to attend Linden over the flagship university in his home state: "I figured Linden would have more connections." When I asked him to further explain why he thought the connections at Linden would be important for him he said:

> All my classmates, obviously, at Linden, have some sort of prestige to them. They got in, so they all are either very smart, or they're going places. So no matter who I meet, I'm going to meet people who will be high-up, eventually, somewhere. That'll be beneficial if I want to get somewhere where they've been, or things like that. And I'll meet professors who will be able to help me get places.

Greg believed that going to Linden would provide him with social connections that would be more difficult to obtain at his state's flagship university. He expresses a belief that anyone he meets during his time at Linden is likely to play an important role in shaping his intellectual and professional development since they are all likely to be intelligent and ambitious. Kayla gave a similar response to Greg when asked how she thought the social connections that she cultivated at Linden would be an important aspect of her college education. She said:

"Somebody I'm in class with right now, 20 years from now could be a presidential candidate, or it could be the next great researcher in a developing field. So, being able to make those connections and have those connections for your career [is important]." Students like Greg and Kayla think that there is a high possibility that most of their classmates will lead very successful lives after graduation, and so it is important to build connections with as many people as possible on-campus. They believe that these their college friendships will naturally transition into important professional connections.

While Greg and Kayla think that their peers will likely play important roles in their professional development in the future, Ketch told me that he was already beginning to think about how he could leverage these social ties as a first-year college student. Like Greg, Ketch was from the Midwest and had been admitted to his state's flagship university campus with a full-ride scholarship. He opted instead to attend Linden, even though it required taking out student debt, because he thought that a Linden degree would ultimately be more valuable due in large part to the social connections that he would develop on campus. When asked how he thought these connections would be important to him during his time at Linden he gave the following response:

> If I'm interested in working for a Wall Street firm for example, I probably know somebody who knows somebody that works for a Wall Street firm. I know a student that's gonna work for Morgan Stanley this summer and I know in the physics realm my best friend is gonna work for SpaceX this summer and if I was interested in one of those companies later, I could ask that person to put me in touch with somebody, and most jobs come through that kind of networking. So, just having those connections is really important.

Ketch acknowledges that it is important to have social connections to gain access into high-status professional fields. He also recognizes the importance of leveraging those social connections early on since prestigious summer internships often play an important role in

shaping one's ability to find high-status employment upon graduation. Students appeared to have a clear sense of the role of social connections in determining one's position in society. Some students acknowledged that such factors could be unfair to those who are equally talented but do not have the social ties to have their abilities recognized. However, students felt that if they had access to valuable social connections that it was important to utilize them to their advantage. For example, Samuel, an upper-middle class[6] student, says the following when talking to me about how social connections can impact a person's ability to achieve success in today's society: "Unfortunately, in the world we are living in today, there's still a lot of other factors that go into where people end up, not just their talent and skills, it's connections and who you know, and who has the money, and a lot of things like that."

While acknowledging that he has an unfair advantage by going to Linden, Samuel justifies his educational privilege by saying that the advantages of going to an elite college are bound to a broader social system over which he has little to no control. Samuel states that Linden contributes to these broader inequalities through its use of a holistic admissions model that doesn't exclusively look at a student's grades and standardized test scores when determining admissions eligibility. He said that if Linden were to espouse complete meritocratic ideals then the institution would be very different since it would not be able to offer students the important social connections in the same way that it is current able to. He says: "If it was straight test scores then [Linden] wouldn't be the same place, because you couldn't go to school with the [President's] son, or a Kennedy." Many of Samuel's peers had shared the idea that the social

---

[6] Upper-middle class students are those who received partial financial aid. Given the income thresholds for financial aid at Linden, this categorization seemed most-appropriate. Affluent student, on the other hand, are identified as those who do not receive any financial aid.

connections that one would develop at Linden was one of the most important aspects of going to such an elite institution.

While numerous students thought that the social network they would develop at Linden would be important for professional purposes, some students thought that these connections were important because of their ability to enrichen one's intellectual development. For example, when I asked Greta, a first-generation student, about what she saw as being the most valuable aspect of going to Linden she said:

> I understand now it's the connections you make. For example, we have so many amazing speakers and people who just come here because of the name [Linden].…I get to interact with the big leagues, the people who are making these decisions, people who I couldn't even dream of meeting. And I get to see their trajectories. I get to see what they learn, what's going on in the world in a more nuanced manner than just watching TV or just reading a book. I think the connections part of [Linden] is just so amazing. I never realized how important it was until I got here, to have the access to people who know so much and who are experts in their fields. And to be able to speak with them, and create your own ideas.

Greta thinks that the connections she can foster at Linden will allow her to see herself as a leader because of her frequent exposure to people who are well-accomplished. She thinks that being able to talk to successful people makes her see them as equal, and it also makes success seem more attainable. Eddie, a wealthy student whose father taught at Linden, also thought that the social connections were important in shaping his intellectual growth. When speaking about the importance of bonding with peers in college he said: "You get a lot of connections here, but you shouldn't think of those connections as people who can help you get jobs. You should think of your peers as people who are going to help you grow." He recognizes that many Linden students see the connections they build with their peers as potential professional contacts after college but Eddie believes that he can learn important lessons from those peers during his time in college.

Students who thought that the social connections they developed at Linden would be important for them talked about the ways in which they sought to learn from their peers and professors to achieve their personal goals. For many of these students, they thought that acquiring social connections would be important because their friends would eventually turn into important professional contacts that would help them get jobs in the future. A small number of students who were already beginning to leverage their social connections to get internship opportunities or to learn about career fields that interested them. Other students thought that gaining a close-knit group of friends in college would help them grow intellectually and socially. There was a strong sense that the people with whom they interacted with each day were going to accomplish great things and students wanted to connect with their peers because they thought that they would push one another to become successful.

High External Perception

22 of 29 respondents (75 percent) thought that going to Linden would be important because of the external perception of the university. These students believed that many people thought highly of their university and that they could be strategically leverage those perceptions to gain access to numerous opportunities. Students who were interested in pursuing a wide variety of paths after college believed thought that important gatekeepers would be more likely to extend opportunities to them because of their association to an elite university, which added immeasurable value to their Linden education. For example, Samuel and I had the following exchange when I asked him why he thought going to Linden would be important for him in the future:

> **Samuel:** In the future, obviously, in the job search, having a degree from [Linden] is pretty important, but more so than that I think... I'm, actually, [more of a] believer than most...that there are a lot of colleges where you get a similar level of education, but its

name, and a lot of other factors are a big thing. If you got a [Linden] education at South Dakota State, it's not worth as much as an education from [Linden].

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Samuel: What's that we learned in Economics? It's called signaling.

Samuel disagreed with his peers who thought that there an inherent value in going to Linden because of its educational model and institutional resources. Instead he says that his college education is likely to be very similar to other institutions experientially but that one of the core benefits of attending Linden is the signaling power attached to the educational credential he will obtain by going there. Students felt that other people tend to view them more positively solely because of the fact that they were affiliated with an elite university. Several students told me about encounters that they had with others who were noticeably impressed upon learning that they were talking to someone who was a student at Linden. For example, Cassie told me: "[When] people hear that I go to [Linden] and their eyes light up. And they listen more, I feel, to what I say. And people just like, they have this idea of the type of people who go to these colleges."

Some students were keenly aware of the doors that could open through going to Linden. For example, Ketch said: "I think going to [Linden] will mean that anyone will read any email that I send them. They'll at least read it. If I apply for a job, I'll automatically be on the top of the list, and then if my application's bad then I could fall, but I'll start at the top." His comment suggests that he believes that by going to Linden he will likely be perceived as the most-qualified candidate unless he makes a personal error which might prove otherwise. Greg echoes Ketch when talking to me about the importance of the Linden name on his resume. He said: "If I were to go back to my community and try to apply for a job saying [Linden], versus saying [my state school], it would just be like, "Wow, this [Linden] kid obviously must be better because he went

to [Linden].'" While many students recognized that they could leverage external perception in their favor, some students were uneasy about the power afforded to them solely from their association to an elite university. For example, Kayla said: "I knew that that was definitely a perk, just being able to use that name. Although something you don't know before coming, I think most anyone can speak to that, you don't know how powerful it is or how scary that name can be until you have it."

Students who expressed hesitance about using the name of their university to gain opportunities thought that it would be more honest to rely upon the name of their university once they proven to themselves that they were worthy being able to use the name to their advantage. Sasha spoke to me about her reticence to take the least rigorous pathway through college and rely on the name of her school to open up opportunities for her. She said: "I didn't choose [Linden] for the name, but I know it would be naïve to think that the name doesn't carry weight. But, I don't know, I don't wanna rely on that, because I have to prove that I earned that name. Not in a bad way, but just to show people that I'm not just hiding behind the name of my school." Sasha's sentiments are similar to those of the elite students studied by Shamus Khan and Colin Jerolmack (2013), many of whom adopted a meritocratic frame in order to justify the privileges that they had unique access to.

While some students thought that it would be better to rely upon the name of the university once they had proven to themselves that their skills and intelligence were up to a standard that was worthy of being associated to the university, others were already using the name of their university to gain access to summer internships and other work opportunities during their first few months on-campus. For example, Chloe spoke to me about how she was able to get an internship in Paris in the upcoming summer. She said:

I'd reached out to a connection that I had from [my boarding school], asking if she had any suggestions for setting me up with an internship in Paris and she got me in touch with the current ambassador, who had worked with the [university]. And so, she was like, 'Oh, I'm so excited that you're an undergraduate at [Linden], I absolutely love the university.' And she's like, 'I know all about the school, so I know how impressive your GPA is.' And she set me up with an interview with somebody else in government in Paris.

Chloe displayed a very deft way of using the external perceptions of her university to her advantage. To get her summer internship, Chloe relied upon both her pre-existing social capital from her elite boarding school and the external perceptions of her elite university; compounding her privileges to acquire a prestigious summer job opportunity. In speaking further about the power of external perceptions in opening up opportunities, she said that she noticed that many people were willing to offer her opportunities if she subtly clued them in on where she attended college. She said: "If you're talking to someone for five seconds and you're networking at an event per se and you can give them your name and say they go to [Linden], sometimes that's enough. And there are few schools that are like that. And it doesn't feel very clean to use it, it's like, 'Is that sleazy, is that under the table?' But I'm also not ashamed enough to not use it." Like Greg and Ketch, Chloe knew that important gatekeepers would view her more favorably if they knew that she was studying at Linden. She thought that it was important to exploit these perceptions to acquire work experiences and other opportunities that would indeed make her the most qualified applicant for a job position by the time she graduated from college.

In conclusion, many students thought that they would acquire status from their mere association to Linden University because of the external perceptions their elite education. Students recognized that people outside of the university responded positively to the institution and those positive assessments could be exploited to get access to desired opportunities. This finding substantiates the argument made by Shamus Khan (2011) which suggests that non-elites reinforce the power of elites because of their high regard of elite practices. As Khan notes, elite

students in the U.S. often normalize their practices and institutions, eschewing boundaries between high and low culture, whereas non-elites tend to endow elites with disproportionate amounts of symbolic capital because their practices are believed to be more-refined or inaccessible. While a small number of students expressed hesitation about taking advantage of the skewed perceptions of their elite university, many others capitalized on the unequal privileges afforded to them. By taking advantage of the unique pportunities made accessible to them based on *prima facie* judgments about Linden, students believed that they could actually cultivate themselves into the individual that people believed they were on paper.

Discussion

Through an examination of a diverse range college students, this study shows the various ways in which students think about the value of an elite college education. In this paper, I found that students thought that going to an elite university would enable them to acquire a high degree of social status which they could use to gain access to further educational and professional opportunities. Additionally, I found that students identified three mechanisms—1) institutional resources, 2) social connections, and 3) high external perception—that would lead to the acquisition of high status during their time in college. Many students saw the three elements of status that they would gain from their time at Linden as forms of security which would guarantee that they would be able to maximize the returns of their college education.

Due to the various elements of status that students believe to be more readily attainable within an elite educational context, I argue that the university plays an integral role in the fashioning of elites. However, since this project only looked at the experiences of first-year students it is outside of the scope of this project to ascertain the degree to which the university's

influence shapes students' perspectives and how durable the institution's influence is in this regard, as some students might become more or less susceptible to the university's influence the longer they are there. However, in light of my emerging findings on the socializing role of the university on shaping students' perspectives, I suggest that more research is needed to better understand the nature of this influence.

This paper also sheds insights on the potential role of social and cultural processes within the literature on horizontal stratification. My findings, as well as those from other cultural sociologists (e.g. Rivera 2015), suggest that there are intricate social dynamics at play which may impact students' post-college labor market outcomes. For example, I found that students were well aware the ways that they could leverage their elite credentials to gain access to prestigious and lucrative professional opportunities. More research is needed to understand how these social processes unfold. Interestingly, some respondents in my sample implicitly referenced status hierarchies within and between elite institutions, suggesting that Linden was a type of elite institution within an elite hierarchy. While this was not the focus of my project, further research could explore whether employers or other gatekeepers and critics also construct status hierarchies among elite institutions, and examine how their individual assessments of quality may impact their decision-making.

Lastly, as elite social organizations become more diverse along a broad array of demographic characteristics, there is a need to better understand elite identity and its role in shaping processes of social stratification (Khan 2012). The erosion of universal barriers of entry into the elite suggest that social group membership is contingent upon a variety of social and cultural factors. As the experiences of the respondents in this study show, although the students come from a diverse range of backgrounds their shared experiences lead them to have common

conceptions about the value of their elite education. To that end, we must develop further

knowledge on the social and cultural contingencies upon which elite group membership is

constructed to better understand how elites are implicated within the production and reproduction

of inequality.

Works Cited

Anders, G. (2016) "What If Stanford Admitted 31%? A Journey Back To The 1970s." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 17 Nov. 2016. Web. 22 Feb. 2017.

Anderson, N. (2016) "Stanford Dean: School's Ultra-low Admit Rate Not Something to Boast about." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 05 Apr. 2016. Web. 20 Feb. 2017.

Benjamin BA & Podolny JM. (1999). Status, quality, and social order in the California wine industry. *Admin. Sci. Q.* 44: 563–89

Binder, A. J., & Wood, K. (2013). *Becoming right: How campuses shape young conservatives*. Princeton University Press.

Binder, A. J., Davis, D. B., & Bloom, N. (2016). Career Funneling: How Elite Students Learn to Define and Desire ''Prestigious''Jobs. *Sociology of Education*, *89*(1).

Black, D. A., & Smith, J. A. (2004). How robust is the evidence on the effects of college quality? Evidence from matching. *Journal of Econometrics*, *121*(1), 99-124.

Blau PM. (1964) *Exchange and Power in Social Life.* New York: Wiley

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Harvard University Press.

Bowen, W. G., & Bok, D. (1998). The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions. Princeton University Press.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America* (Vol. 57). New York: Basic Books.

Brewer, D. J., & Ehrenberg, R. G. (1996). Does it pay to attend an elite private college? Evidence from the senior high school class of 1980. *Research in labor economics*, *15*(2), 239-271.

Bruni, F. (2015). *Where You Go is Not who You'll be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*. Grand Central Publishing.

Card, D. (1999). The causal effect of education on earnings. *Handbook of labor economics*, *3*, 1801-1863.

Cookson, P. W., & Persell, C. H. (1985). *Preparing for Power: America's Elite Boarding Schools*. Basic Books.

Dale, S., & Krueger, A. B. (2011). *Estimating the return to college selectivity over the career using administrative earnings data* (No. w17159). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Espenshade, T. J., & Radford, A. W. (2009). *No longer separate, not yet equal: Race and class in elite college admission and campus life*. Princeton University Press.

Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2009). *The Best of the Best*. Harvard University Press.

Gerber, T. P., & Cheung, S. Y. (2008). Horizontal stratification in postsecondary education: forms, explanations, and implications. *Annu. Rev. Sociol*, *34*, 299-318.

Goldin, C., & Katz, L. F. (2007). *The race between education and technology: the evolution of US educational wage differentials, 1890 to 2005* (No. w12984). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Gould, R. V. (2002). The origins of status hierarchies: A formal theory and empirical test 1. *American journal of sociology*, *107*(5), 1143-1178.

Griffith, A., & Rask, K. (2007). The influence of the US News and World Report collegiate rankings on the matriculation decision of high-ability students: 1995–2004. *Economics of Education Review*, *26*(2), 244-255.

Ho, K. (2009). *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street*. Duke University Press.

Hout, M., Levanon, A., & Cumberworth, E. (2011). Job loss and unemployment. *The great recession*, 59-81.

Howard, A., & Gaztambide-Fernández, R. A. (2010). *Educating elites: Class privilege and educational advantage*. R&L Education.

Karabel, J. (2006). *The chosen: The hidden history of admission and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Khan, S. R. (2011). *Privilege: The making of an adolescent elite at St. Paul's school* (p. 00248). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Khan, S.R. (2012). The sociology of elites. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *38*, 361-377.

Khan, S., & Jerolmack, C. (2013). Saying meritocracy and doing privilege. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *54*(1), 9-19.

Knight, P., & Yorke, M. (2004). *Learning, curriculum and employability in higher education*. Psychology Press.

Lamont, M., & Swidler, A. (2014). Methodological pluralism and the possibilities and limits of interviewing. *Qualitative Sociology*, *37*(2), 153-171.

Podolny, J. M. (1993). A status-based model of market competition. *American journal of sociology*, 829-872.

Pope, D. C. (2001). Doing school: How we are creating a generation of stressed out, materialistic, and miseducated students. Yale University Press.

Rivera, L. A. (2015). *Pedigree: How elite students get elite jobs*. Princeton University Press.

Sauder, M. (2006). Third parties and status position: How the characteristics of status systems matter. *Theory and Society*, *35*(3), 299-321.

Sauder, M., Lynn, F., & Podolny, J. M. (2012). Status: Insights from organizational sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *38*, 267-283.

Soares, J. A. (2007). *The power of privilege: Yale and America's elite colleges*. Stanford University Press.

Stevens, M. L. (2009). *Creating a class*. Harvard University Press.

Stevens, M. L., Armstrong, E. A., & Arum, R. (2008). Sieve, incubator, temple, hub: Empirical and theoretical advances in the sociology of higher education. *Annu. Rev. Sociol*, *34*, 127-151.

Stuber, J. M. (2011). *Inside the college gates: How class and culture matter in higher education*. Lexington Books.

Walker, D. and Myrick, F. (2006). "Grounded Theory: An Exploration of Process and Procedure" *Qualitative Health Research* 16(4): 547-559.

Warikoo, N. K. (2016). *The Diversity Bargain: And Other Dilemmas of Race, Admissions, and Meritocracy at Elite Universities*. University of Chicago Press.

Warikoo, N. K., & Fuhr, C. (2014). Legitimating status: perceptions of meritocracy and inequality among undergraduates at an elite British university. *British Educational Research Journal*, *40*(4), 699-717.

Weisbrod, B. A., & Karpoff, P. (1968). Monetary returns to college education, student ability, and college quality.

Weiss, Robert S. 1995. *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Wise, D. A. (1975). Academic achievement and job performance. *The American Economic Review*, *65*(3), 350-366

Appendix A

Purpose of College Pre-Interview Survey

1. What in your intended concentration at Harvard College?
   - Open Response.

2. What type of high school do you attended?
   - Public. Private. Home School. Other (please specify).

3. Have either of your parents/guardians graduated from a four-year university?
   - Yes. No.

4. If yes, did either of your parents graduate from Linden University?
   - Yes. No. N/A.

5. Do you receive financial aid from Linden University?
   - Yes. No.

6. If yes, does your financial aid package cover the full or partial cost of attendance?
   - Yes. No. N/A.

7. Please select your race.
   - White. Black. Asian. Latino. Native American. Biracial. Other. Decline to State.

8. Name.
   - Open Response.

9. E-mail address.
   - Open Response.

10. If you are not selected to participate in the interview study in the first round, is it okay to contact you at this e-mail address to request for you to participate in the interview at a later time?

    - Yes. No.

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide
Biographical
I'd like to start by learning a little bit more about your background.
- Where did you grow up?
- What was your high school like?
- What type of person were you in high school?
- What do your parents do for a living?
- Do you have any siblings?
    - If so, what do they do?

Purposes
- How did you end up at Linden? Tell me about your decision to apply and ultimately enroll here.
    - [Probe, if needed:] What were some of the other schools you were strongly considering?
- What do you see as the purpose of college?
    - What were your main considerations when you were applying to colleges? Why? [Further probing question, if needed: Why did you think Linden would be the best choice for you given those reasons?]
- What do you think is the most valuable aspect of going to college? [probe for views on social and intellectual climate] Why?
- How do you think going to Linden will be important for you in the future? [Probe for the ways in which value is ascribed to the formal and informal characteristics of the university.]
- What do your family and friends from home think about you going to Linden?
    - Have your relationships with them changed since coming to Linden? In what ways?

Experience
In the survey, you mentioned that your intended concentration was (_____).
- How did you become interested in this field of study?
- What kinds of things could you see yourself doing after you graduate? [Probe, if needed:] What is a career you could see yourself pursuing in the future?
- What was Linden like once you got here? Was it different from what you expected? The same? better?
- How do you generally spend your time on-campus?—Walk me through a typical day for you.
- What is the relationship between your academic experience and social, work, or residential experiences in the College?
    - Tell me about the organizations that you participate in, why did you decide to engage in those activities? Were there others that you opted not to participate in? What led to that decision?
- Thinking about all the things you do at Linden, where do you feel like you are learning the most since you've been here? Why do you think that is?
- Many people say that the most important aspect of college is getting to know other students? What are your thoughts about that? Do you find that to be true for you?
- When you imagine yourself at your 10th reunion, what do you think will be the things or experiences that will be most valuable about your undergraduate experiences?

Broader Questions
- Is there anything you would like to add that wasn't discussed in the interview?
- Were there any surprising questions, or questions you thought I would ask?