

# Where Ivy Matters: The Educational Backgrounds of U.S. Cultural Elites

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## Abstract

Status transmission theory argues that leading educational institutions prepare individuals from privileged backgrounds for positions of prestige and power in their societies. We examine the educational backgrounds of more than 2,900 members of the U.S. cultural elite and compare these backgrounds to a sample of nearly 4,000 business and political leaders. We find that the leading U.S. educational institutions are substantially more important for preparing future members of the cultural elite than they are for preparing future members of the business or political elite. In addition, members of the cultural elite who are recognized for outstanding achievements by peers and experts are much more likely to have obtained degrees from the leading educational institutions than are those who achieve acclaim from popular audiences. By focusing on the extent to which industries and cultural domains depend on quickness and facility in the absorption and manipulation of complex and sophisticated symbolic media, our analysis leads to an important specification of the role of highly selective colleges and universities in elite formation.

## Keywords

elites, higher education, academe, media, arts

Status transmission theory argues that leading educational institutions prepare individuals from privileged backgrounds for positions of prestige and power in their societies (see, e.g., Baltzell 1964; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Cookson and Persell 1989; Domhoff 1967; Dye 1976, 2006; Khan 2010; Mills 1956; Rivera 2012, 2015). In this article, we provide evidence that the leading U.S. educational institutions are substantially more important for preparing future members of the cultural elite than they are for preparing future members of the business or political elite.

Our analysis leads to an important specification of the role of highly selective higher education institutions in status transmission and elite formation and to an important revision of status transmission theory. Instead of admission to highly selective colleges and graduate programs serving

as a cover and legitimization for preexisting social advantages and as a gateway into the corridors of power, we find that the most important feature of leading educational institutions, from the perspective of elite formation, is that they select for and enhance the capacities of students who are intellectually able. We find they are a most important gateway mainly into the corridors of power that depend on the quick absorption and sophisticated manipulation of symbolic media.

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Elites are composed of individuals in positions of power and prestige in consequential domains of social activity. The business elite is constituted by the senior executives and members of the governing boards of the most highly capitalized corporations. The political elite is constituted by the top elected and appointed officeholders in federal and state government. These people wield substantially more power through their control of productive forces and legal instruments than do the mass of ordinary citizens. A third elite group, the cultural elite, is defined by its prominence in the domain of symbolic action.

We define the cultural elite as composed of three major sectors and as divided between two distinct types of recognition. The three sectors are (1) academe, (2) the media, and (3) the arts. The ideal-typical institutionalized purposes of work in the three sectors are, respectively, to produce deeper and truer knowledge-based understandings of the natural, social, and cultural worlds (academe); to provide engaging, informative, and thought-provoking communications to the public (the media); and to create powerful expressive works and performances (the arts). In each case, this work relies on the skilled manipulation of symbolic media: words, equations, images, and sounds. The two forms of recognition that divide these sectors are (1) recognition based on prestige and (2) recognition based on popularity. Prestige in academia, the media, and the arts can be identified by the esteem accorded to individuals by peers or expert judges in their fields. This esteem is typically externalized in the form of awards for accomplishments or election for membership in prestigious honorary societies.<sup>1</sup> Popularity, in contrast, is measured by the size of audiences. Popular media figures and popular artists help shape (or reinforce) the cultural landscape by virtue of the number of people who follow their work.

To be a member of the cultural elite, as we define the term, one's work must be performed primarily for the mind rather than the body. This definition excludes fashion designers, jewelers, chefs, tattoo artists, and many others whose work, however expressive and inventive, primarily makes an impression on the body rather than the mind. We recognize that this distinction is not entirely unambiguous. Composers, for example, hope to make an impression on and through the body as well as on and through the mind, even if their work practice is highly cerebral. And fashion designers certainly hope to engage consumers'

minds even if their work is intended primarily for bodily adornment. Our distinction is based not on a rigid delineation but on a judgment about the relative predominance of the mind, as opposed to the body, as the anticipated object of engagement. In addition, we focus exclusively on individuals whose contributions have been to secular culture.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 provides a schematic representation of the sectors and forms of recognition that constitute the cultural elite, as we define it, and examples of types of individuals who fit in each of the coordinate categories.

No previous scholarship has attempted to define or map the contours of the secular cultural elite stratum. Instead, sociologists have examined narrower groups within it, such as the scientific elite (Zuckerman 1977), intellectuals (Kadushin 1974), Ivy League professors (Gross 2013; Ladd and Lipset 1976), and the media elite (Barton 1980; Lichter, Rothman, and Lichter 1986). In addition to their narrower scope, many of these studies are now out of date. Nor have any more recent studies included samples of individuals who gained prominence in the new media, such as social media platforms and podcasts. To our knowledge, our research is the first that attempts to define and map the stratum as a whole, as it exists in the early-twenty-first-century United States, and to analyze educational and demographic data on a sizable sample of its members.

## THE POPULATION CONTEXT OF SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS AND ELITE FORMATION

It is important to contextualize the size of the populations in which we are interested. The proportion of young people who attended highly selective colleges and universities ranges between 2 and 4 percent during the period of time members of our study attended college (see Brint and Yoshikawa 2017). For older cohorts, the higher proportion is more accurate due to the smaller number of students who attended college during the time of their undergraduate studies. For younger cohorts, the lower proportion is more accurate because of the expansion of college attendance and graduation.

Attainment of elite status in U.S. society is much rarer still. Of the nearly 2 million students who now graduate with baccalaureate degrees from U.S. colleges and universities every year (National Center for Education Statistics 2017:

**Table 1.** Typology of Cultural Elites Source of Acclaim.

Nature of work	Peers/experts	Popular audiences
Knowledge based, truth seeking	Members of national academies Nobel Prize winners	—
Engaging, informing publics	Pulitzer Prize winners in journalism Public intellectuals	Network television anchors
Creating expressive works/ performances	Academy Award winners Conductors of leading orchestras	Podcast hosts Highest-paid actors Best-selling recording artists

Table 322.20), only a small fraction (less than 1 percent) will ever achieve elite status in business, politics, or the cultural domains we study here. Graduates of highly selective institutions have a greater chance of entering the elite than do graduates of less selective colleges (or those without a degree). Yet, graduates of the top 39 colleges in the country still have only a 1 to 2 percent chance of entering the elite.

### *Undergraduate Origins of Business and Political Elites*

Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) raised questions about status transmission theory insofar as it applies to the educational backgrounds of U.S. business and political leaders. Their study of nearly 4,000 top executives in 15 industries (including government) showed that U.S. business and political leaders' undergraduate degrees are not heavily concentrated among the most prestigious colleges in the country. To be sure, the odds of attaining elite positions after graduating from a leading undergraduate college were four or five times higher than for the population of college graduates at large. But in absolute proportions, the concentrations were not impressive. Fewer than one in five (18 percent) business and political elites had undergraduate degrees from one of the top 39 schools, as identified by consistent appearance on the rankings of national universities and liberal arts colleges by *U.S. News and World Report (USNWR)*.

Business and political elites' undergraduate origins also showed high levels of interindustry and regional variation. Business leaders in industries primarily engaged in manipulation of symbolic media (e.g., entertainment, finance, internet

services) and, to a lesser extent, those in industries employing high proportions of workers with advanced degrees (e.g., aerospace, health care, telecommunications) were much more likely to have attended elite undergraduate colleges than were leaders in industries primarily concerned with transformation of the material world (e.g., construction, food production, energy, motor vehicles). However, in none of the industries studied did more than one-third of executives have undergraduate degrees from the top 39 colleges, and in six industries the proportion was under 15 percent.

Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) also found that among the two-thirds of executives and political leaders with graduate degrees, higher proportions attended highly selective business or law schools than highly selective undergraduate colleges, 44 and 37 percent, respectively.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

In contrast to these findings for business and political elites, we expect to find strong associations between membership in the cultural elite and graduation from top undergraduate colleges and graduate universities.

The main reasons to expect these strong associations have to do with the affinities between the primary purposes of the institutions and the prerequisites for success in academe, the media, and the arts—at least among individuals whose status is based on peer or expert recognition. Top colleges select, in large part, on the basis of applicants' preexisting academic and creative achievements (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Karabel 2005; Karen 1991). More than other postsecondary institutions, they provide challenging

educational experiences (Babcock and Marks 2011; Campbell, Jimenez, and Arrazol 2018) as well as opportunities to hone critical and expressive skills in student clubs and organizations (Brint 2018). Professors in the most prestigious colleges and universities are primarily oriented toward research and creative contributions to their fields (Clark 1987; Hermanowicz 1998), and they are presumably experts at recognizing, supporting, challenging, and inspiring students who show promise in endeavors similar to those in which they themselves have excelled. Moreover, top schools offer opportunities for their students to learn from and form lasting connections with other students who have been identified by admission officers as having high-level academic or creative abilities. Finally, having a degree from a highly selective college may help open doors into the cultural elite through personal friendships made in college (see, e.g., Rivera 2015) and through signaling processes (Bills 2003; Spence 1973) based on educational pedigrees that have strong resonance within the cultural sphere.

In addition, we expect wide differences in educational background between those in cultural fields who achieve prominence through peer or expert recognition and those who gain prominence through popular acclaim. Highly selective colleges and universities are primarily oriented toward recognition of scientific and scholarly achievement, and it therefore seems likely that concentrations of elite college graduates will be strongest among those who have achieved distinction in scholarly and scientific fields, as judged by peers (cf. Burris 2004). By contrast, individuals who have achieved fame by attracting large public audiences are unlikely to gain as much career value from institutions that self-consciously insulate themselves, to a greater or lesser degree, from popular tastes.

Our hypotheses, three each related to undergraduate and graduate education, follow directly from this reasoning:

**Hypothesis 1:** Members of the cultural elite will be significantly more likely than members of the business or political elite to have received undergraduate degrees from the leading undergraduate colleges.

**Hypothesis 2:** Individuals whose membership in the cultural elite is based on peer or expert recognition will be significantly more likely to have been educated at the

leading undergraduate colleges than those whose membership is based on popularity with mass audiences.

**Hypothesis 3:** Leading academics will be more likely than any other occupational segment in the cultural elite stratum to have received undergraduate degrees from the leading undergraduate colleges.

**Hypothesis 4:** Members of the cultural elite will be significantly more likely than business and political leaders to have received graduate degrees from the leading research universities offering graduate degrees in their fields.

**Hypothesis 5:** Individuals whose membership in the cultural elite is based on peer or expert recognition will be significantly more likely to have received graduate degrees from leading research universities than those whose membership is based on popularity with mass audiences.

**Hypothesis 6:** Leading academics will be more likely than any other occupational segment in the cultural elite to have received graduate degrees from the leading research universities.

## THE CULTURAL ELITE SAMPLE

The population of people who belong in the U.S. cultural elite stratum undoubtedly numbers in the tens of thousands. We sampled from this population with a view to representing the three major branches of this elite and the two major forms of recognition that attest to prominence. We also sampled with an eye to representing important subdivisions within the worlds of academe, media, and the arts. Because we are concerned here with the U.S. cultural elite, we coded only individuals who could be explicitly identified as American due to birth, citizenship, current employment, current residence, or any combination of these four criteria.<sup>3</sup>

Random sampling was not possible for most sectors, because the universe of members of the cultural elite is unknown. However, because we collected data on large samples of individuals in each of the main sectors of the cultural elite, we are confident that the estimates are close to the true population proportions. This is especially likely for the many categories that include a census

or near census of the leading figures, as in the case of influential newspaper columnists, top-selling recording artists, and winners of prestigious literary awards. Our sample consists of 2,909 individuals,<sup>4</sup> divided into prestigious academics, prestigious media figures, prestigious artists, popular media figures, popular artists, and leaders of philanthropies and think tanks.

### **Prestigious Academics**

This category includes 870 individuals. We drew a 1-in-10 sample of members of the National Academy of Science and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. We also drew a 1-in-4 sample of members of the much smaller National Academy of Education. We coded winners of Nobel Prizes in science, medicine, and economics and academic winners of Pulitzer Prizes in history and general nonfiction. We also coded presidents and provosts of the top research universities in the United States, as indicated by schools' consistent representation among the top producers of research over a 30-year period (Brint and Carr 2017).

### **Prestigious Media Figures**

This category includes 499 individuals. We coded the publishers, principal editors, and columnists of the four leading newspapers in the country, as measured by the number of Pulitzer Prizes received: the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. We coded the editors in chief and main departmental or deputy editors of 12 leading magazines of ideas, culture, and politics, such as the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*. We coded editorial directors of the eight leading academic presses (e.g., the University of Chicago Press and Princeton University Press). We coded all winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Journalism since 2007 in the categories of breaking news, commentary, criticism, feature writing, explanatory reporting, international reporting, investigative reporting, national reporting, feature photography, and breaking news photography. For 2007 to 2017, we coded correspondents who won news and documentary Emmys in the following categories: outstanding coverage of a breaking news story, outstanding continuing coverage of a news story, outstanding feature story, outstanding investigative journalism, and outstanding business and economics reporting. We coded

the leading public intellectuals (excluding politicians) influencing foreign policy from 2007 through 2018, as identified by the editors of *Foreign Policy* magazine.

### **Prestigious Artists**

This category includes 527 individuals. We coded the winners from 2007 to 2018 of Academy Awards (film) for directing and acting; Emmy Awards (television) for directing and acting; Tony Awards (theater) for directing, lyrics, score, and acting; and Grammy Awards (music) for best record, best album, and best song. We coded the winners of the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal since 2007 and the winners of the leading prizes in literature (the Man Booker Award, the National Book Awards, the Neustadt Award, and the Nobel Prize). We also coded winners of the Pulitzer Prizes for drama, literature, music, and poetry since 2007. We coded the directors and major departmental curators of the 14 leading art museums, as determined from multiple sources. We coded the music directors and conductors (if these were different individuals) of the top 14 orchestras and the directors and lead choreographers (if these were different individuals) of the 19 leading dance companies, as identified from multiple sources.

### **Popular Media Figures**

This category includes 409 individuals. We coded the publishers, editors, and columnists of 10 high-circulation newspapers (other than the four listed previously as prestigious newspapers), as identified by circulation statistics. We coded executives of the top seven news-collecting broadcast networks, as measured by viewership, as well as the prime-time news anchors from these networks. We coded the 12 current radio personalities with the largest audiences, as measured by their reported incomes. We coded the hosts of the 50 most popular podcasts and up to 50 people with the largest number of current Instagram and Twitter followers or, in the case of YouTube, the largest number of subscribers, using multiple sources as of July 2018. We also coded the publishers and executives of the 10 top social networking firms: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Reddit, Twitter, Tumblr, Yahoo!, Yelp, and YouTube.

## Popular Artists

This category includes 370 individuals. We coded the best-selling authors in 2016 and 2017, the only years available online, as determined by *Publishers Weekly* based on units sold. We coded the living best-selling recording artists, based on units sold, as well as living recording artists with the best-selling albums, as determined by the Recording Industry Association of America. We coded the highest-grossing film directors, according to multiple sources, and the highest-paid film actors for the year 2017. We supplemented this list by coding the highest-grossing living actors of all time. We coded the highest-paid television actors from 2007 through 2017, based on multiple sources, and the highest-paid comedians in 2017, according to *Forbes*. We coded the most popular visual artists based on highest prices at auction for the years 2011 to 2016, according to Artnet. We also coded developers of the 20 most popular video games in 2018, according to IMPd. We coded the highest-paid photographers for 2017, the only year available, according to Alux.com. We also coded Kennedy Center honorees for the years 2007 through 2018; nearly all of these people were honored for their contributions to popular arts. We coded the four who contributed to classical music, dance, and opera in the prestige arts category.

## Leaders of Philanthropies and Think Tanks

This category includes 234 individuals. Although leaders of philanthropies and think tanks are not, strictly speaking, members of the cultural elite, as we conceive it, we consider them here in separate analyses. The leaders of philanthropies and think tanks bridge several worlds; they have one foot in the world of intellectual work and one foot in the worlds of policy and politics (see, e.g., Zunz [2011] on philanthropies and Medvetz [2012] on think tanks). They are important as intermediaries and advocates. We coded the presidents and senior staff of the 25 leading philanthropies, according to the National Philanthropic Trust, and the presidents and senior staff of the 50 leading think tanks, according to multiple metrics used in the ranking of think tanks by TheBestSchools.org (<https://thebestschools.org/features/most-influential-think-tanks/>).

Table 2 provides an overview of the number of individuals from each organization and list we used in the major categories we coded. Online Appendix 1 provides detailed discussion of the sources we used to identify the individuals in our sample.

## DATA AND METHODS

### Coded Variables

In addition to cultural sector and stratum (the latter based on form of recognition), we coded the last undergraduate institution attended and up to two major fields of undergraduate study. We also coded whether individuals dropped out before completing their degrees. We coded the highest graduate degree awarded, if any; the institution conferring the degree; and field of study. In cases of two high-level degrees, we coded the degree most closely related to the person's career. We also coded any other graduate degrees relevant to the person's work, including the field of study, degree, and institution conferring the degree. For individuals whose degree(s) were conferred outside the United States, we coded the country in which they received their degree(s). We coded the gender, race-ethnicity, and age of each individual, the latter within broad bands (under 40, 40 to 60, over 60). We used pictures, names, and self-identifications to code race-ethnicity. We were interested in individuals' family socioeconomic backgrounds, but too few data existed in public sources to code this variable.

Following Brint and Yoshikawa (2017), we used *USNWR* as our primary source for ranking undergraduate institutions. Because *USNWR* is highly correlated with the academic qualifications of incoming freshmen classes (Kuh and Pascarella 2004), it provides a good guide to college selectivity. *USNWR* began ranking undergraduate colleges of the top 25 national research universities in 1988, and it began ranking the top 25 national liberal arts colleges in 1990. Our sample of the top undergraduate colleges includes every national research university and national liberal arts college that was ranked by *USNWR* as a top 25 college in every year the top 25 rankings were published. This procedure yields 19 research universities whose undergraduate colleges were consistently on the *USNWR* list of national universities, and 20 liberal arts colleges that were

**Table 2.** Overview of the Cultural Elites Sample.

Category	Organization/list	<i>n</i>
Prestige academe	American Academy of Arts and Sciences	458
	National Academy of Education	53
	National Academy of Sciences	218
	Nobel Prize winners	50
	Pulitzer Prizes in history and general nonfiction	23
	Presidents and provosts of the leading research universities	68
Prestige media	Publishers, editors, and columnists of prestigious newspapers	54
	Editors of prestigious periodicals	13
	Editorial directors of the leading academic presses	8
	Emmy Awards for news and documentaries	31
	<i>Foreign Policy</i> "Top 100"	303
	Pulitzer Prize winners for journalism	75
Popular media	Pulitzer Prize winners for photography	15
	Commercial publishing executives	29
	Editors and columnists of high-circulation magazines	39
	Podcast hosts	41
	Primetime television anchors	56
	Publishers, editors, and columnists of high-circulation newspapers	120
	Radio personalities	10
	Television network executives	25
	Social media executives	26
	Social media personalities	63
	Prestige arts	Academy Award winners
American Institute of Architects gold medalists		10
Choreographers and directors of the leading dance companies		17
Conductors and music directors of the leading orchestras		23
Directors and head curators of leading museums		175
Emmy Award winners		96
Grammy Award winners		23
Winners of the leading literary prizes (other than Pulitzers)		10
Pulitzer Prizes for literature, drama, poetry, and music		43
Tony Award winners		98
Popular arts	Authors	62
	Comedians	9
	Film stars	74
	Kennedy Center honorees	36
	Photographers	6
	Recording artists	39
	Television stars	13
	Video game directors and developers	37
Bridging organizations	Visual artists	94
	Presidents and senior staff of leading philanthropies	99
	Presidents and senior staff of leading think tanks	135
Total		2,909

consistently on the *USNWR* list of national liberal arts colleges. Together, these 39 institutions form our elite undergraduate colleges list.

A different approach is required for ranking graduate programs, because *USNWR* ranks by discipline rather than by overall quality of graduate

programs. We included the same number of leading graduate programs (32) as Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) used in their combined tally of leading business and law schools. We identified the 32 leading graduate universities by examining the R&D expenditures, publications, and citations of faculty over a 30-year period based on Brint and Carr's (2017) analysis. We selected the 30 institutions that ranked in the top 40 during each decade of this period, and we added two institutions, the California Institute of Technology and Princeton University, whose faculty consistently produced very high levels of research given their relatively small size.

We obtained information on individuals' educational backgrounds and sociodemographic characteristics from a variety of sources, including their websites, Wikipedia, LinkedIn, Bloomberg executive profiles, press coverage, college magazine interviews, announcements of speeches and performances, and other media.<sup>5</sup>

## Methods

We first analyzed frequency distributions to determine the proportion of people in our sample who were educated at highly selective private colleges and universities and the leading graduate schools. We compared these distributions to those found in Brint and Yoshikawa's (2017) sample of business and political leaders. These analyses test Hypotheses 1 and 4.

We then analyzed cross-tabulated data to determine whether individuals in any sectors or strata were more likely to be educated at leading colleges and universities as undergraduates or graduate students. We examined differences between prestige and popular sectors and between academics and all other sectors. These analyses test Hypotheses 2, 3, 5, and 6.

Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) compared the proportion of business and political leaders who attended the top 39 *USNWR* undergraduate colleges versus the empirical top colleges based on where individuals in the sample graduated. We replicated this analysis for our sample of the cultural elite. We also replicated their analysis of the major educational pathways—by level of educational attainment and graduation from elite or non-elite institutions—by which individuals reached positions of prominence.

Finally, we conducted logistic regressions to compare the influence of individuals' sectoral

location (academe, media, or arts), mode of acclaim (prestige or popular), position as an executive or nonexecutive, major field of study, gender, race-ethnicity, and age on the likelihood of obtaining a degree from the leading undergraduate and graduate institutions as compared to less prestigious institutions. The regressions allow us to compare the influence of sector and mode of acclaim relative to other variables that elite theorists have associated with the probability of degree attainment from undergraduate or graduate institutions (see, e.g., Zweigenhaft and Domhoff [2006] on race and gender and Dye [2006] on chief executive officers). Major field of study has not been discussed in the literature, but it is clear individuals who study practical fields, like engineering and business, will have a lesser chance of obtaining degrees from highly selective institutions, many of which do not offer degrees in these fields.<sup>6</sup>

## RESULTS

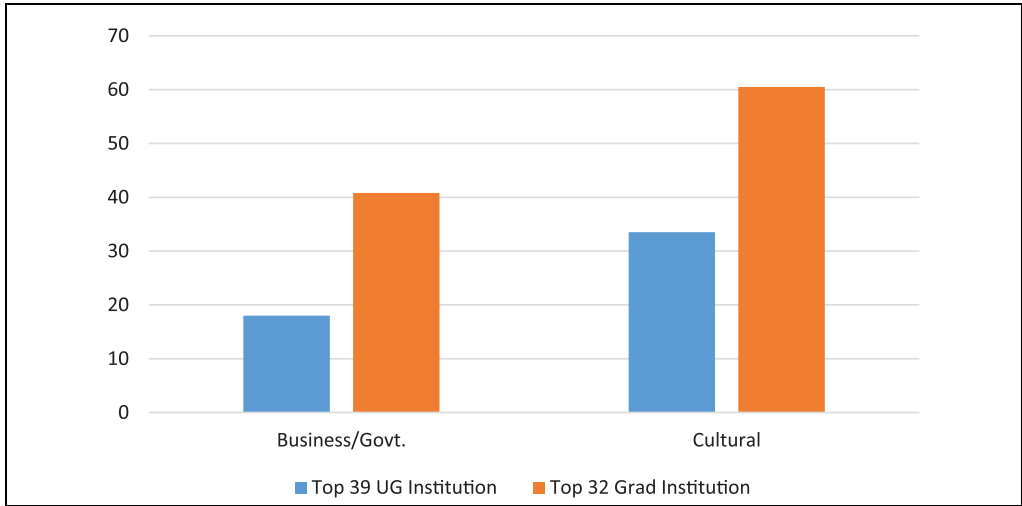
Figure 1 shows differences between cultural elites' and business and political elites' undergraduate and graduate origins. In both cases, cultural elites were significantly more likely to have graduated from one of the most prestigious higher education institutions in the country.

### *Undergraduate Degrees*

As shown in Table 3, one-third (32.8 percent) of the sampled individuals were educated as undergraduates at one of the top 39 undergraduate colleges. This is nearly double the proportion (18 percent) found by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) for their sample of business and political leaders (see Figure 2). The proportion jumps to nearly two-fifths (38.8 percent) when we eliminate individuals who were educated abroad as undergraduates, again nearly double the proportion Brint and Yoshikawa found for U.S.-educated business and political leaders (20.2 percent).

We found sizable and statistically significant differences by sector and source of acclaim. As Table 3 shows, over 40 percent of prestigious academics and media figures were educated at leading undergraduate colleges. When we eliminate academics and prestigious media figures who were educated abroad, over half of the sampled individuals in those two groups were educated at the top 39 U.S. colleges, a remarkable concentration given





**Figure 1.** Proportions graduating from highly selective undergraduate colleges and highly selective graduate programs by sector.

Note: Two-thirds of business and government leaders in Brint and Yoshikawa’s (2017) study had graduate degrees, compared to three-fifths of our sample of cultural elites. Brint and Yoshikawa’s sample of 3,909 business and political leaders was collected in 2014.

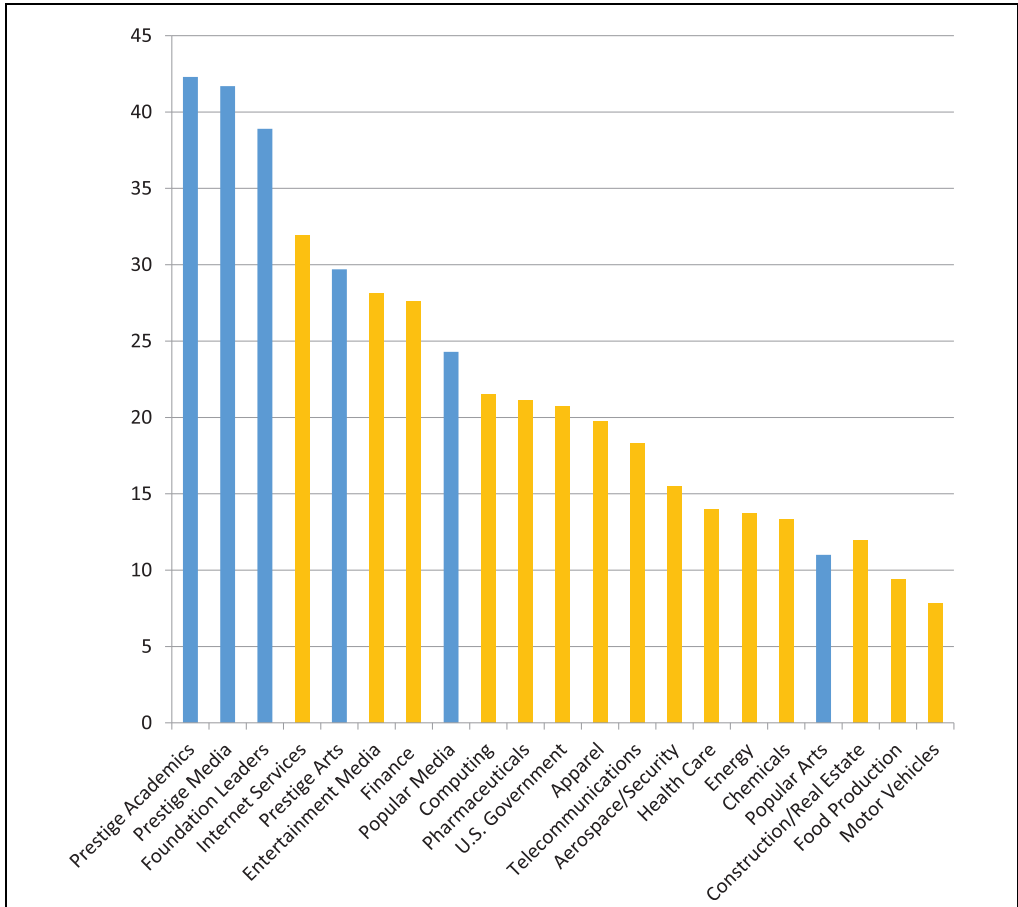
**Table 3.** Educational Backgrounds of U.S. Cultural Elites by Sector and Stratum.

Category	% (n) educated in top 39 colleges	% (n) of U.S.-educated who graduated from a top-39 college
Prestige academe	42.3 (875)	52.1 (710)
Prestige media	41.7 (515)	48.6 (442)
Prestige arts	29.7 (308)	34.0 (246)
Popular media	24.3 (453)	25.5 (431)
Popular arts	11.0 (308)	13.8 (246)
Leaders of think tanks/ philanthropies	38.9 (229)	39.5 (224)
Total cultural elites	32.8 (2,909)	38.8 (2,515)
Business/political leaders <sup>a</sup>	18.0 (3,990)	20.2 (3,543)

<sup>a</sup>Data for business and political leaders adapted from Brint and Yoshikawa (2017).

that these institutions educate no more than 4 percent of all four-year college students in the United States (see Table 3). Similarly, nearly 40 percent of senior staff at philanthropies and foundations were educated at the top 39 undergraduate colleges—and over 40 percent if one eliminates non-U.S.-educated foundation and think tank executives. Only in the ranks of popular artists are proportions below those found by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) for business and political leaders (see Figure 2).

The chi-square test shows a significant difference in the educational backgrounds of U.S.-educated cultural elites compared to the U.S.-educated business/political elites studied by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017); the former were significantly more likely to have graduated from a top-39 college ( $\chi^2 = 350.1, p < .0001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 1. Individuals who achieved acclaim through peer or expert recognition were significantly more likely to have graduated from top



**Figure 2.** Graduation from top 39 undergraduate colleges by industry and cultural sector.

undergraduate colleges than those whose achievements were recognized by popular audiences ( $\chi^2 = 57.6, p < .0001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2. Among the cultural elite sample, academics were the most likely to have attended top undergraduate colleges. The chi-square test shows academics were significantly more likely to have graduated from leading colleges compared to members of the cultural elite at large ( $\chi^2 = 17.3, p < .0003$ ), supporting Hypothesis 3. We offered no hypothesis about prestigious media figures, but the chi-square test shows that, like academics, they were significantly more likely to have graduated from a top-39 college than members of the cultural elite at large ( $\chi^2 = 6.2, p < .0126$ ).

The correspondence between the *USNWR* top 39 and the empirical top 39 undergraduate

colleges is higher for members of the cultural elite stratum than for Brint and Yoshikawa’s (2017) sample of business and political leaders (see Table 4). In our sample of cultural elites, 22 colleges and universities appeared on both lists, compared to the 14 Brint and Yoshikawa found for business and political leaders. As in the case of business and political leaders, public research universities, here led by the University of California campuses in Berkeley and Los Angeles, played a larger role in the production of cultural leaders than did most of the private liberal arts colleges on the *USNWR* list, as did several private universities that have not been ranked consistently high by *USNWR*, including Boston University, Carnegie-Mellon University, Georgetown University, Tufts University, and the California Institute of Technology.

**Table 4.** Comparison of *USNWR* Top 39 Colleges and Empirically Derived Top 39 Undergraduate Colleges.

<i>USNWR</i> top 39	<i>n</i> (%) of cultural elite stratum	Empirical top 39	<i>n</i> (%) of cultural elite stratum
Harvard University	184 (6.3)	Harvard University	184 (6.3)
Yale University	94 (3.2)	Yale University	94 (3.2)
Princeton University	68 (2.3)	Princeton University	68 (2.3)
Stanford University	52 (1.8)	Columbia University	50 (1.7)
Columbia University	50 (1.7)	Massachusetts Institute of Technology	49 (1.7)
Massachusetts Institute of Technology	49 (1.7)	Stanford University	46 (1.6)
Brown University	45 (1.5)	Brown University	45 (1.5)
Cornell University	40 (1.4)	University of California–Berkeley	44 (1.5)
University of Michigan–Ann Arbor	39 (1.3)	Cornell University	40 (1.4)
University of Chicago	35 (1.2)	University of California–Los Angeles	40 (1.4)
University of Pennsylvania	28 (0.9)	University of Michigan–Ann Arbor	39 (1.2)
University of Virginia	23 (0.8)	New York University	35 (1.2)
Northwestern University	22 (0.8)	University of Chicago	32 (1.2)
Swarthmore College	22 (0.8)	University of Pennsylvania	28 (0.9)
Williams College	21 (0.7)	University of Virginia	23 (0.8)
Dartmouth College	21 (0.7)	Northwestern University	22 (0.8)
Oberlin College	19 (0.7)	Swarthmore College	22 (0.8)
Wellesley College	18 (0.6)	Williams College	21 (0.7)
Duke University	17 (0.6)	Dartmouth College	21 (0.7)
Wesleyan University	17 (0.6)	University of Southern California	20 (0.7)
California Institute of Technology (Cal Tech)	13 (0.4)	Boston University	19 (0.7)
Amherst College	12 (0.4)	Oberlin College	19 (0.7)
Smith College	11 (0.4)	Carnegie–Mellon University	18 (0.6)
Vassar College	10 (0.3)	University of Missouri	18 (0.6)
Johns Hopkins University	9 (0.3)	Duke University	18 (0.6)
Pomona College	7 (0.2)	Rutgers University	17 (0.6)
Grinnell College	6 (0.2)	Wellesley College	17 (0.6)
Middlebury College	6 (0.2)	Wesleyan University	17 (0.6)
Rice University	6 (0.2)	Brandeis University	14 (0.5)
Washington University in St. Louis	6 (0.2)	Georgetown University	14 (0.5)
Colby College	5 (0.2)	Julliard School	14 (0.5)
Bowdoin College	4 (0.1)	Syracuse University	14 (0.5)
Haverford College	4 (0.1)	Tufts University	14 (0.5)
Bryn Mawr College	3 (0.1)	University of Illinois–Urbana/Champaign	14 (0.5)
Carleton College	3 (0.1)	University of Washington	14 (0.5)
Claremont McKenna College	3 (0.1)	California Institute of Technology	13 (0.4)
Colgate University	3 (0.1)	Amherst College	12 (0.4)
Davidson College	3 (0.1)	University of Minnesota–Twin Cities	12 (0.4)
Washington and Lee College	0	University of California–Santa Barbara	12 (0.4)
Total	975 (33.5)		1,213 (41.7)

Note: *USNWR* = *U.S. News and World Report*.

## Graduate Degrees

In Brint and Yoshikawa's (2017) study, two-thirds of the business and political leaders who attended college also obtained graduate degrees, compared to a little more than three-fifths (60.5 percent) of those in the cultural elite sample. Only academics (97.5 percent) and leaders of think tanks and foundations (77.7 percent) were more likely than business and political leaders to have received graduate degrees. Prestigious media figures obtained graduate degrees in nearly the same proportion as business and political leaders (60.8 percent). By contrast, graduate degrees were uncommon among popular media figures (34.7 percent) and popular artists (20.8 percent).

Members of the cultural elite sample as a whole did not obtain graduate degrees from leading universities in significantly higher proportions than did the business and political leaders studied by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) ( $\chi^2 = 0.41, p = .52$ ), leading us to reject Hypothesis 4. However, individuals in the cultural elite sample who achieved acclaim through peer or expert recognition were much more likely to have graduated from a top university than those whose achievements were based on acclaim by popular audiences ( $\chi^2 = 194.8, p < .0001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 5 and suggesting an important reason for the rejection of Hypothesis 4. The chi-square test shows that prestigious academics were significantly more likely to have obtained graduate degrees from one of the 32 leading research universities compared to members of the cultural elite at large ( $\chi^2 = 89.2, p < .0001$ ), supporting Hypothesis 6.

More than two-thirds of the members of cultural elite sample who obtained graduate degrees (67.6 percent) received the degree most relevant to their careers at one of the top 32 graduate universities.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, 44 percent of those in Brint and Yoshikawa's (2017) sample who obtained graduate business degrees graduated from one of the top 18 business schools, and 37 percent of those who obtained law degrees graduated from one of the top 14 law schools (see Figure 1).

## Pathways into the Cultural Elite

The most common pathway into the cultural elite stratum was to have attended an elite college and an elite graduate program; the next most common path was to have attended a non-elite college and an elite graduate program. Together, these

pathways account for 36 percent of the individuals in our sample. This finding differs greatly from Brint and Yoshikawa (2017), who found that these pathways accounted for just 20 percent of the educational careers of the business and political leaders in their sample. The most common pathways for their business and political leaders were non-elite college and no graduate school, and non-elite college and non-elite graduate degree, together accounting for over 50 percent of the educational careers in their sample. Members of the cultural elite sample followed these pathways just 24 percent of the time (see Table 5).

## Multivariate Analysis

The multivariate analysis indicates that the distribution of major fields is responsible for much of the variation in graduation from top undergraduate colleges among the members of our sample. Prestigious artists, a category in the middle, is the reference category in our logistic regressions. When we did not control for major field, leading academics and prestigious media figures were significantly more likely than prestigious artists to have graduated from a top-39 undergraduate college, and popular media figures and popular artists were significantly less likely to have done so. Social sciences is our reference category for undergraduate majors. Once we control for major field, only popular artists remain less likely to have attended a highly selective undergraduate college than members of our reference category. Individuals who majored in business, journalism, or miscellaneous other occupational fields were significantly less likely to have attended a top-39 college, and those who majored in engineering or computer science were also less likely to have done so, although not by a statistically significant margin ( $p < .05$ ; see Table 5). The majority of highly selective undergraduate colleges emphasize the liberal arts and basic sciences (Astin 1999). This strong curricular orientation can explain the lack of connection we found between individuals who majored in occupational subjects and the *USNWR*'s top 39 colleges.

We might expect minorities and women would be more likely to need prestigious credentials to make their way into the cultural elite, because prestigious credentials vouchsafe for disadvantaged groups in a way that may not be necessary for advantaged groups. However, we found no significant differences by race-ethnicity in the

**Table 5.** Educational Pathways into the U.S. Cultural Elite Stratum.

Pathway	% (n)
Elite college/elite graduate degree	20.1 (586)
Non-elite college/elite graduate degree	16.4 (478)
Non-elite college/no graduate degree	16.2 (471)
Elite college/no graduate degree	8.8 (256)
Non-elite college/non-elite graduate degree	7.8 (226)
Non-U.S. college/non-U.S. graduate degree	4.7 (137)
Non-U.S. college/no graduate degree	3.7 (109)
Non-U.S. college/elite graduate degree	3.7 (108)
Elite college/non-elite graduate degree	2.8 (81)
Elite college/non-U.S. graduate degree	1.5 (43)
Non-U.S. college/non-elite graduate degree	1.3 (37)
Non-elite college/non-U.S. graduate degree	1.1 (31)

likelihood of graduating from a top-39 college, and women in the sample were significantly less likely to have done so. The latter finding is likely a result of women's exclusion from the most selective private institutions prior to the late 1960s (Malkiel 2016). (See Table 6.)

Among individuals who obtained graduate degrees, leading academics were significantly more likely, and popular artists significantly less likely, net of covariates, to have a degree from a top-32 graduate university, relative to our reference category of prestigious artists. Individuals with degrees in arts fields and, surprisingly, life sciences were significantly less likely than our reference category of social scientists to have degrees from one of the top 32 graduate universities. Net of covariates, we found no statistically significant variation by age,<sup>8</sup> race-ethnicity, or gender in likelihood of having an advanced degree from one of the top 32 graduate universities.<sup>9</sup>

## DISCUSSION

### *Empirical Contributions of the Study*

In addition to providing a novel, theory-based mapping of the U.S. cultural elite, this article makes three empirical contributions. First, the research shows that members of the cultural elite stratum were much more likely to have been educated at the top undergraduate colleges than were members of the business and political elite studied by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017). Second, we found that the level of concentration of degrees from top colleges was much higher for prestigious academics, prestigious

media figures, and leaders of philanthropies and think tanks than for others in the cultural elite stratum. Each of these sectors had concentration levels near or above 40 percent; by contrast, the industrial sector with the highest concentration of degrees from top colleges in Brint and Yoshikawa was internet services, at 32 percent, and six industries showed concentration levels under 15 percent, including under 10 percent in food production and motor vehicles (see Figure 2). Third, we found similar but more pronounced patterns for individuals in the cultural elite sample who obtained graduate degrees, including very high levels of concentration of degrees from the top 32 research universities.

Given our findings, future scholars of U.S. cultural elites may be tempted to focus solely on individuals whose prominence derives from peer or expert evaluation rather than popular acclaim. We think this would be a mistake. If the goal is to identify people who have had an impact in cultural domains, the most popular media figures and artists are certainly much better known and exercise a much wider immediate influence than, for example, even the most renowned academics. We need only compare the influence of a Rachel Maddow or a Sean Hannity, to name two television anchors with large audiences, to that of Terence Tao, who many mathematicians consider to be the most important living mathematician. Although popular tastes are the sine qua non of breadth and immediacy of impact, it seems to us equally true that evaluations based on the perceived degree of sophistication, refinement, depth, originality, and long-range import of works figure much more prominently in peer and expert

**Table 6.** Predictors of Graduation from a USNWR Top-39 Undergraduate College (U.S.-Educated College Graduates Only).

Predictor	Odds ratio	Standard error	$p > z$
Prestige academic	1.283	.189	.188
Prestige media	1.335	.189	.196
Prestige arts (ref.)	—	—	—
Popular media	.759	.205	.178
Popular arts	.467	.272	.005
Philanthropy/think tank leaders	.860	.213	.477
Cultural executives	1.153	.232	.539
Humanities major	1.056	.143	.705
Social science major (ref.)	—	—	—
Life sciences major	.716	.194	.085
Physical sciences/math major	1.008	.174	.962
Engineering/CS major	.659	.239	.081
Arts major	.612	.200	.014
Business major	.249	.350	.000
Journalism/communication major	.114	.294	.000
Other occupational major <sup>a</sup>	.266	.521	.011
Under age 40	1.298	.205	.202
Age 40 to 60 (ref.)	—	—	—
Over age 60	.735	.294	.008
White (ref.)	—	—	—
African American	1.190	.223	.436
Hispanic	.626	.457	.307
East Asian	1.657	.367	.169
South Asian	1.830	.424	.154
Other ethnicity <sup>b</sup>	.407	.506	.076
Male (ref.)	—	—	—
Female	.697	.111	.001
Constant	.310	.196	.113

Note:  $N = 1,915$ ;  $\chi^2(24) = 192.8$ ,  $p < .00001$ ; pseudo  $R^2 = .128$ ; Cox-Snell  $R^2 = .096$ ; Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .128$ ; McFadden  $R^2 = .073$ . USNWR = *U.S. News and World Report*; ref. = reference; CS = computer science.

<sup>a</sup>Other occupational majors include, for example, education, public policy/public administration, and theology.

Architecture is included with arts. Religious studies majors are included with the humanities.

<sup>b</sup>Other ethnicity includes mainly individuals of Middle Eastern descent and individuals who self-identified as multiracial.

evaluations than in popular tastes (cf. Lamont 2009).<sup>10</sup> It is for this reason that we theorized two types of influence, one related to size of audience and immediacy of impact, the other related to perceived depth of contribution and long-range import. It seems to us unwise to choose exclusively one or the other when discussing cultural prominence and influence.

### Implications for Theories of Elite Formation

To draw out the implications of our findings for status transmission and elite formation theories,

one must understand first the bases of selection into prestigious higher education institutions; second, how individuals make their way into elite positions in different institutional sectors; and third, the relationship between educational and organizational selection processes.

Highly selective educational institutions seek “well-rounded” candidates: Applicants must have cognitive ability and conscientious work habits but also high-level interpersonal skills, community-mindedness, and, in some cases, unusual accomplishments at young ages (e.g., becoming a grand master in chess or writing a first novel) (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Karabel 2005; Karen 1991; Steinberg 2002; Stevens 2007). In

addition, these schools must find students who can ably fill positions in such campus activities as intercollegiate sports, musical ensembles, and theatrical troupes. Legacies, private school candidates, athletes, and minorities typically receive additional weight in the admissions process once grades and test scores are taken into account (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Karabel 2005; Karen 1991).

Karabel (2019) estimated that just 10 percent of incoming students at Harvard University, going back to 1952, are admitted primarily on the basis of their academic aptitude and potential. Although intellectual ability is only one influence on admissions (and not, statistically, the most important one), nearly all admitted students have excellent grades and test scores (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Stevens 2007). Moreover, students' academic qualifications have improved markedly since the mid-twentieth century, when institutions were mainly concerned with admitting the sons of prosperous East Coast Protestants and the "gentleman's C" was an entirely acceptable mark (Baltzell 1964; Karabel 2005).

Highly selective graduate programs in business and law provide more direct training for leadership than undergraduate colleges do. Moreover, individuals who are admitted to these highly selective graduate programs were typically top students as undergraduates and achieved high marks on the relevant graduate admissions tests. The evidence suggests quantitative measures of academic accomplishments and perceptions about applicants' intelligence count more heavily in admissions to top graduate programs, even if the meanings of merit and intelligence vary from field to field. Admission is competitive even for students who graduated from top undergraduate colleges (Posselt 2016; on professors' values, see Lamont 2009).

In summary, although academic accomplishments are only one factor in college and graduate school admissions, the research evidence suggests a movement over time toward establishment of a higher academic bar for selection into leading undergraduate colleges and an even higher academic bar for selection into leading graduate programs.

Turning to success factors in business and government, the research literature indicates that the qualities selective colleges look for and seek to develop are different from those most important for business or political success. Characteristics

relevant to exceptional success in business include a strong interest in pecuniary matters; taking initiative and succeeding in big, visible organizational projects; creation of value in units for which one is responsible; impressing one's superiors; well-timed career moves; and careful maintenance of networks with other upwardly mobile executives (Kanter 1987; Ng et al. 2005; Polodny and Baron 1997). Personality characteristics, such as extroversion and risk tolerance, are also correlated with advancement in business (see Boudreau, Boswell, and Judge 2001; MacCrimmon and Wehrung 1990). Studies of political leaders are not as extensive. Political leaders are oriented more toward public contributions than private pecuniary gain, but otherwise, characteristics associated with business success have analogies in the political domain (see, e.g., Constantini and Craik 1980; Putnam 1976).

Given the divergence between selection criteria used by the leading undergraduate colleges and the qualifications for high-level business and political success, it is not surprising that researchers such as Brint and Yosikawa (2017) have found relatively weak links between graduation from highly selective colleges and attainment of top executive positions in business and government. Nor is it surprising that they found industries based on the sophisticated manipulation of symbolic content select more heavily from graduates of leading higher education institutions than do industries based on transforming the material world. The stronger links between graduate education and leading positions in business and politics can be explained by the more direct training for leadership found in these educational institutions and the stronger academic qualifications required for admission.

By contrast, the admission criteria used by selective colleges align closely with the qualifications used to bestow honors and awards in academe, the media, and the arts and to obtain senior positions in foundations and think tanks. Highly selective colleges admit undergraduates largely on the basis of interpersonal skills, a well-rounded profile as indicated by interview ratings, perceived intellectual ability as indicated by standardized test scores, conscientiousness as indicated by high grades, evidence of creativity and follow-through, and a public-regarding outlook as indicated by service activities (Espenshade and Radford 2009; Karabel 2005; Karen 1991; Steinberg 2002; Stevens 2007). Unlike the characteristics

associated with business or political success, most of these selection criteria are *prima facie* related to later-life success in the cultural domains we examined, at least in arenas in which recognition and acclamation are based on perceived quality of work rather than size of audience.

Although the affinities are evident, the exact mechanisms at work in status attainment in these cultural domains remain outside the scope of this study. A number of possibilities could further explain the strong associations between highly selective educational institutions and elite status in prestige cultural fields, including preexisting family cultural capital; competencies signaled by graduation from a highly selective institution, which may be stronger in cultural than in business or political fields; professors' interests in identifying individuals who have talents in areas closely aligned with their own interests; social network ties made on campus that are stronger in cultural than in business or political domains; or the stronger signaling power of prestigious degrees in cultural than in business or political domains. Future research on cultural elites may be able to adjudicate the relative importance of the various possible mechanisms underlying the associations we identified.

What we can say at this time is that the dominant sociological framework for examining the role of status transmission in the study of elite formation requires revision. A long line of social scientists dating from Mosca (1939) in Italy through Mills (1956) and Domhoff (1967) in the United States and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in France have theorized a direct line between privileged family socioeconomic circumstances, graduation from highly selective undergraduate colleges, and subsequent attainment of leading positions in the "command posts" of society. As early as the mid-1980s, Useem and Karabel (1986) hinted at difficulties with this unilinear model, yet many recent sociological treatments still show a lingering attachment to it (see, e.g., Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2010; Rivera 2012, 2015). By contrast, our evidence, when combined with that of Brint and Yoshikawa (2017), specifies the links between selective institutions and elite positions. Instead of admission to highly selective colleges and graduate programs serving as cover and legitimation for preexisting social advantages and as a gateway into the corridors of power, we find that the most important feature of leading

educational institutions, from the perspective of elite formation, is that they select for and enhance the capacities of students who are intellectually (and interpersonally) able. Based on their educational pedigrees and contacts made in college and graduate school, these intellectually able students have higher odds of obtaining elite positions in the industries and cultural sectors in which these aptitudes and skills are most important.

The revised model we propose thus takes educational institutions' expressed purposes seriously. It also takes the criteria for high-level achievements in different elite sectors seriously. The underlying principle linking educational institutions and elite positions can be interpreted as a heightened expectation for quickness and facility in the absorption and manipulation of sophisticated symbolic content, whether text, equations, images, or sounds. Our contention, following Brint and Yoshikawa (2017), is that some sectors of the economy depend to a greater degree on individuals who are selected for these capacities, which are tested and honed in highly selective educational institutions.

We emphasize that these are not the only qualities, nor the most important qualities, that count in recruitment to top executive positions in industries like entertainment, finance, internet services, or government service—only that they are more relevant in such arenas than in industries with more predictable information environments or slower moving technologies. In the domain of cultural achievements, the same principle applies, but with more force, for individuals who are recognized by peers and experts for the depth and sophistication of their work. Symbol-manipulating industries and prestige cultural sectors are thus the natural habitats of individuals who were successful in gaining admission to highly selective undergraduate colleges.

We referred to another set of industries as primarily involved in the transformation of the material world. These industries turn hydroelectric power into energy, grains into food, and steel and electronic components into motor vehicles. Such industries may depend on complex technologies, but these technologies typically change relatively slowly and incrementally. Most workers in these fields are machine tenders or manual laborers, and a "down-to-earth" outlook consistent with the materiality of the enterprises may be as highly valued in upper management as the capacity to deal with uncertainties and new



opportunities. Several other industries, such as telecommunications and health care, employ many highly educated workers but are nevertheless engaged primarily in transformations of the material world. Not surprisingly, their recruitment of executives from highly selective colleges tends to fall halfway between the two poles (see Brint and Yoshikawa 2017). Structurally, popular artists stand in an analogous position to executives in material-transforming industries. Degrees from highly selective colleges and universities are not necessary to connect at a deep level with popular audiences; indeed, an education in these intellectualized and rarefied environments may constitute something of an impediment for this purpose.

This framework also helps explain the stronger connections between highly selective graduate programs and elite recruitment. Research evidence suggests graduate schools give more weight in selection to academic merit criteria and perceptions of intelligence (Posselt 2016). Moreover, the leading graduate programs select from among the top applicants from both public and private undergraduate institutions. It follows that associations between prestigious educational programs and elite positions should be stronger at the graduate level than at the undergraduate level. It also follows that the association between highly selective graduate programs and career success in academe and other prestige-based cultural domains would continue to be greater than in industry: Quickness and facility in work with complex and sophisticated symbolic media is a foundational requirement for achievement in the former fields but, arguably, only one among many factors contributing to career success in the latter.


We invite colleagues to consider our revised model of elite formation as an alternative to the unilinear status transmission model. We also invite colleagues to add data on the socioeconomic backgrounds of individuals in elite positions so that status transmission from families into elite positions in the various sectors of U.S. society can be more fully described, analyzed, and explained—and so, too, the extent of social mobility from middle- and working-class families into these positions.<sup>11</sup>

## RESEARCH ETHICS

This research has been approved by the authors' campus institutional review board and has therefore been

performed in a way that is consistent with the ethical standards articulated in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments and Section 12 ("Informed Consent") of the American Sociological Association's Code of Ethics.

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## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental material is available in the online version of this article.

## NOTES

1. Except in rare cases, academics are recognized for excellence in scholarship and science, not for the size of the audiences they command. Those who reach large audiences have in some cases also won academic renown, but they would fall into the media category in our coding because their popularity (e.g., their large numbers of followers on social media) is based on their media activities rather than their academic achievements.
2. We do not contend that the individuals we identified as members of the cultural elite cohere as a group. Both the broad divisions by sector and form of recognition—and the narrower subdivisions within the three worlds of academe, media, and the arts—can contribute to distinctive professional interests and outlooks. In this respect, we do not consider the cultural elite to be qualitatively different from business or political elites. Business leaders are divided by industry, the degree of diversification of their firms, global as opposed to national market presence, and in many other ways. Political leaders are divided by branches of government, political party and ideological affiliations, and agency interests.
3. We identified leading organizations from multiple sources, and in the case of leading intellectually oriented periodicals, we also consulted expert judges. For award winners, we collected data over the most recent 12-year period, 2007 to 2018. For members of honorary societies, popular artists, and media personalities, we relied on identifying data for the most recent year(s) available.
4. More than 200 individuals appeared more than once in our sample population. Where individuals were coded in more than one major sector and stratum category, we placed them in the category in which their reputation was primarily built. For example, we coded the singer-songwriter Bob Dylan as a popular recording artist rather than as a Nobel Laureate.

5. Each of five coders volunteered for categories of individuals to code. To improve the accuracy of coding, we conducted independent cross-checks on 5 percent samples of individuals coded by each coder, and we required recoding when error rates exceeded 5 percent. Through internet searches and personal communications with sampled individuals who maintained personal email accounts, we were able to reduce the amount of missing data. Our final sample includes missing data on any variable in fewer than 5 percent of cases.
6. Family socioeconomic status has been consistently identified as an important determinant of attendance at highly selective undergraduate colleges (Karabel 2005; Karen 1991; Soares 2007) and graduate universities (Torche 2011). Family socioeconomic status is thus, indirectly, a gateway to the leading positions in U.S. society (see, e.g., Domhoff 1967; Mills 1956; Useem and Karabel 1986). However, we were able to obtain socioeconomic background information for only a relatively small subset of our sample (under 20 percent), preventing us from using parental socioeconomic status (SES) or any SES-related components as variables in the regressions.
7. New York University (50 individuals) and the University of Chicago (43 individuals) were also important graduate training institutions for members of the cultural elite sample, but they did not appear in the list of the top 32 graduate universities based on consistently high levels of research expenditures and output over three decades. Metrics based on faculty honors and awards would likely place them among the top 32.
8. Some sectors, and especially the prestige categories, skew toward late-career individuals. Age, however, is not strongly related to the likelihood of obtaining degrees from highly selective undergraduate and graduate institutions. Younger individuals in these subsamples were just as likely as older individuals to have obtained their degrees from highly selective institutions. For the sample of individuals who graduated from college, 46 percent of those under age 40 graduated from a highly selective college, compared to 44 percent of those between ages 40 and 60, and 45 percent of those over age 60.
9. A table with regression results for graduate degrees is available in the online supplement.
10. We cannot discount the possibility that educational backgrounds serve as status cues to expert judges, quite apart from the quality of the individual's work (see, e.g., Rivera 2015). It is also true, of course, that only time can tell if expert opinion accurately predicts which people's work will continue to be regarded as of unusually high quality and consequently have longer-lasting influence.
11. Another important question is whether the political right's outcry against "liberal elites" can be

interpreted as a project funded and amplified largely by business executives whose work is involved in transforming the material world—and whether the opposition to this project is funded and amplified primarily by executives and culture producers in industries whose work involves the creative manipulation of symbolic media. If so, the struggle for admission into prestigious colleges takes on a larger meaning: as a feature of the political struggle over the fundamental values and future direction of life in the United States.

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