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

Steven Brint, Komi T. German, Kayleigh Anderson-Natale, Zeinab F. Shuker, and Suki Wang (University of California, Riverside)

**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 2900 members of the U.S. cultural elite and compare these backgrounds to a sample of nearly 4000 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, those 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 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.

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 Passerson 1977; Cookson and Persell 1989; Domhoff 1967; Dye 1976, 2006; Khan 2011; Mills 1956; Rivera 2012, 2015). In this paper, 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 elites. Our analysis thus leads to an important specification of the role of highly selective higher education institutions in status transmission and elite formation and an important revision of status transmission theory. Instead of admission to highly selective colleges and graduate programs serving as a cover and legitimization for pre-existing social advantages and as a gateway into the corridors of power, we find that the most important feature of the 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 that they are a most important gateway mainly into those corridors of power that depend on the quick absorption and sophisticated manipulation of symbolic media.

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 office holders in federal and state government. These people wield substantially more power through their control of productive forces and legal instruments than the mass of ordinary citizens. In this paper we identify a third elite group, the cultural elite, 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, their 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 and/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.[[1]](#endnote-1) By contrast, popularity is measured by the size of audiences. Popular media figures and popular artists help to 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 and to make an impression primarily on the mind rather than the body. This definition excludes fashion designers, jewelers, chefs, tattoo artists, and many others whose work, however expressive and inventive, is performed primarily for and/or makes an impression primarily 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 the minds of consumers 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 those whose contributions have been to secular culture.[[2]](#endnote-2)

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.

[Insert Table 1 Here]

No previous scholars have 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 (Ladd and Lipset 1976; Gross 2013), 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 have gained prominence on 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 21st 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 two and four 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.

The attainment of elite status in American society is much rarer still. Of the nearly two million students who now graduate with baccalaureate degrees from U.S. colleges and universities every year (NCES 2017), only a small fraction of one percent will ever achieve elite status in business as senior leaders of top-ranking firms, in politics as top-ranking elected or appointed officials, or in the cultural domains we study here. The odds of ever attaining elite status for those graduating from highly selective institutions is much higher than for those graduating from less selective colleges (or not graduating at all), but almost certainly does not surpass one to two percent of all graduates of the top 39 undergraduate colleges in the country.

*Undergraduate Origins of Business and Political Elites*

Research by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) has raised questions about status transmission theory in so far 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 the undergraduate educational institutions attended by U.S. business and political leaders 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) were educated, as undergraduates, at one of the top 39 colleges and universities as identified by consistent appearance on the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings of national universities and liberal arts colleges.

The undergraduate origins of business and political elites also showed high levels of inter-industry and regional variation. Business leaders in industries primarily engaged in the manipulation of symbolic media (e.g., entertainment, finance, internet services) and, to a lesser extent, those in other industries employing comparatively high proportions of workers with advanced degrees (e.g., aerospace, health care, telecommunications) were much more likely to have attended elite undergraduate colleges than business leaders in industries primarily concerned with the transformation of the material world (e.g., construction, food production, energy, and motor vehicles). However, none of the industries studied showed as many as than one-third of executives with undergraduate degrees from the top 39 colleges, and in six industries the proportion was under 15 percent.

The study also established that among the two-thirds of executives and political leaders who took graduate degrees, higher proportions attended highly selective business or law schools than highly selective undergraduate colleges, 44 and 37 percent, respectively (ibid).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

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

The reasons to expect these strong associations have principally 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 those whose status is based on peer or expert recognition. The top colleges select, in large part, on the basis of the pre-existing academic and creative achievements of applicants (Espenshade and Walton 2009; Karabel 2005; Karen 1991). More than other postsecondary institutions, they provide challenging educational experiences (Babcock and Marks 2010; Campbell, Jimenez and Arrazol 2018) as well as ample opportunities to hone critical and expressive skills in student clubs and organizations (Brint 2018: 184-198). Professors in the most prestigious colleges and universities are primarily oriented toward research and creative contributions to their fields (Clark 1987: chaps. 1-2; Hermanowicz 2009) and are presumably experts at recognizing, supporting, challenging, and inspiring students who show promise in endeavors similar to those in which they have themselves excelled. Moreover, top schools offer opportunities for their students to learn from and to form lasting connections with other students who have been identified by admission officers as having high level academic and/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), as well as through signaling processes (Spence 1973: Bills 2003) 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 and/or expert recognition and those who gain prominence through popular acclaim. Highly selective colleges and universities are primarily oriented toward the 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, those who have achieved fame by attracting large public audiences are unlikely to gain as much of 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:

H1: Members of the cultural elite will be significantly more likely than members of the business or political elite to have received their undergraduate degrees from the leading undergraduate colleges.

H2: Individuals whose membership in the cultural elite is based on peer and/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.

H3: Leading academics will be more likely than any other occupational segments in the cultural elite stratum to have received their undergraduate degrees from the leading undergraduate colleges.

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H4: Members of the cultural elite will be significantly more likely than business and political leaders to have received graduate degrees from the leading graduate research universities offering degrees in their fields.

H5: Individuals whose membership in the cultural elite is based on peer and/or expert recognition will be significantly more likely to have received their graduate degrees from the leading graduate research universities than those whose membership is based on popularity with mass audiences.

H6: Leading academics will be more likely than any other occupational segments in the cultural elite to have received graduate degrees from the leading graduate 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 have sampled from this population with a view to representing adequately the three major branches of this elite and the two major forms of recognition that attest to prominence. We have 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 can be explicitly identified as American due to birth, citizenship, current employment, current residence, or any combination of these four criteria.[[3]](#endnote-3)

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 cases of influential newspaper columnists, top-selling recording artists, and winners of prestigious literary awards.

Our sample consists of 2,909 individuals.[[4]](#endnote-4) It is divided as follows:

Prestigious Academics. This category includes 870 individuals. We drew a one-in-ten sample of members of the National Academy of Science and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. We also drew a one-in-four sample of members of the much smaller National Academy of Education. We coded winners of the Nobel Prizes in science, medicine, and economics, and the Pulitzer Prizes won by academics in history and general non-fiction. We also coded the presidents and provosts of the top research universities in the United States as indicated by their 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 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 the 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, and national reporting. We also coded the winners of the Pulitzer Prizes for feature and breaking news photography over the same period. We coded the awarded correspondents for News and Documentary Emmys for the years 2007-2017 in the regularly scheduled newscast 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 in the years from 2007 through 2018, as identified by the editors of *Foreign Policy* magazine.

Prestigious Artists. This category includes 527 individuals. We coded the winners of Academy Awards (film) for directing and acting between 2007 and 2018. We coded the winners of the Emmy Awards (television) for directing and acting over the same period. We coded the winners of Tony Awards (drama) for directing, lyrics, score, and acting over the same period. We coded the winners of Grammy Awards (music) for best record, best album, and best song over the same period. We coded the winners of the American Institute of Architects Gold Medal since 2007. We coded the winners of the leading prizes in literature (the Man Booker Award, the National Book Awards, the Neustadt Award, and the Nobel Prize) over the same period. We also coded the 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, as determined from multiple sources. We coded 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 above as prestige newspapers), as identified by the circulation statistics. We coded the executives of the top seven news-collecting broadcast networks, as measured by viewership. We also coded 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 as of July 2018. We also coded up to 50 people with the largest number of current Instagram and Twitter followers, or, in the case of You Tube, the largest number of subscribers, using multiple sources as of July 2018. We also coded the leadership of the top commercial publishers and executives of the ten 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, as determined by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) based on units sold. We also coded the living recording artists with best-selling albums, according to RIAA. We coded the highest-grossing film directors, according to multiple sources. We coded the highest-paid film actors and actresses for the year 2017. We supplemented this list by coding the highest-grossing living actors and actresses of all time. We coded the highest-paid television actors and actresses from 2007 through 2017, based on multiple sources. We also coded 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 2011-2016, according to Artnet. We also coded the 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 the Kennedy Center honorees for the years 2007 through 2018. Nearly all of these people were honored for their contributions to the 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. We also coded the presidents and senior staff of the 50 leading think tanks, according to multiple metrics used in the ranking of think tanks by Best Schools.com.

Table 2 provides an overview of the number of individuals from each of the organizations and lists we used in the major categories we coded. Appendix 1 (available online) provides a detailed discussion of the sources we used to identify the individuals in our sample.

[Insert Table 2 Here]

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 the 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, the degree, and the 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, 40-60, over 60). We used pictures, names, and self-identifications to code race-ethnicity. We were interested in the family socio-economic backgrounds of the individuals in our sample, but too little data existed in public sources to code this variable.

Following Brint and Yoshikawa (2017), we used *US News and World Report* (*USNWR*) as our primary source for ranking undergraduate institutions. Because *USNWR* is highly correlated with the academic qualifications of incoming freshmen classes (Kuh & Pascarella, 2004), it provides a good guide to college selectivity. *USNWR* began to rank the undergraduate colleges of the Top 25 national research universities in 1988, and it began to rank the Top 25 national liberal arts colleges in 1990. Our sample of the top undergraduate colleges includes every national research university and every 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 yielded a group of 19 research universities whose undergraduate colleges were consistently on the *USNWR* list of national universities and 20 liberal arts colleges that were consistently on the *USNWR* list of national liberal arts colleges. Together, these 39 institutions form our elite undergraduate colleges list. The roster of leading undergraduate institutions is included in Table 3.

A different approach is required for ranking graduate programs, because *US News* ranks by discipline rather than by the 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 the analysis of Brint and Carr (2017). 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 the educational backgrounds and socio-demographic characteristics of individuals from a variety of sources, including individuals’ websites, Wikipedia, LinkedIn, Bloomberg executive profiles, press coverage, college magazine interviews, announcements of speeches and performances, and other media.[[5]](#endnote-5)

*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 H1 and H4.

We then analyzed cross-tabulated data to determine whether individuals in any sectors or strata were significantly more likely to be educated at the leading colleges and universities, either as undergraduates or graduate students. In particular, we examined differences between prestige and popular sectors and between academics and all other sectors. These analyses test H2, H3, H5 and H6.

Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) compared the proportion of business and political leaders who attended the top 39 *USNWR* undergraduate colleges and 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 non-executive, major field of study, gender, race-ethnicity, and age on the likelihood of obtaining degrees 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 that 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.[[6]](#endnote-6)

RESULTS

*Undergraduate Degrees*

As indicated in Table 2, one-third (33.5%) of the sampled individuals were educated as undergraduates at one of the top 39 undergraduate colleges. This is nearly double the proportion (18%) 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%) when we eliminate individuals who were educated abroad as undergraduates, again nearly double the proportion found in Brint and Yoshikawa for U.S.-educated business and political leaders (20.2%).

[Insert Figure 1 Here]

We found sizable and statistically significant differences by sector and source of acclaim. As Table 2 shows, more than 40 percent of prestigious academics and media figures were educated at the leading undergraduate colleges. When we eliminate academics and prestigious media figures who were educated abroad, we found that more than half of the sampled individuals in those two groups were educated at the top 39 colleges in the United States, a remarkable concentration given that these institutions educate no more than four percent of all American four-year college students (see Table 2). Similarly, nearly 40 percent of senior staff at philanthropies and foundations were educated at the top 39 undergraduate colleges – and more than 40 percent if one eliminates non-US educated foundation and think tank executives. Only in the ranks of popular artists do we find proportions below those found by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) for business and political leaders (see Figure 2).

[Insert Table 2 Here]

[Insert Figure 2 Here]

The chi-square test showed a significant difference in the educational backgrounds of U.S.-educated cultural elites compared to 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 (*x-*square=350.1; p <.0001), supporting H1. Individuals in the sample whose achieved acclaim through peer and/or expert recognition were significantly more likely to have graduated from top undergraduate colleges than those whose achievements were recognized by popular audiences (*x-*square=57.6; p<.0001), supporting H2. Academics in the cultural elite sample were the most likely to have attended top undergraduate colleges. The chi-square test showed that they were significantly more likely to have graduated from leading colleges compared to members of the cultural elite at large (*x-*square=17.3; p <.0003), supporting H3. We offered no hypothesis about prestige media figures but the chi-square test showed that, like academics, they were significantly more likely to have graduated from top 39 colleges than members of the cultural elite at large (*x*-square=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 as compared to the sample of business and political leaders studied by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017). Twenty-two colleges and universities appeared on both lists for our sample of cultural elites, compared to the 14 found in Brint and Yoshikawa 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 most of the private liberal arts colleges on the *USNWR* list. The same was true of 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.

[Insert Table 3 Here]

*Graduate Degrees*

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

Members of the culture elite sample as a whole did not obtain graduate degrees from leading graduate universities in significantly higher proportions than the business and political leaders studied by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) (*x-*square=.41; p=.52), leading us to reject H4.  However, individuals in the cultural elite sample who achieved acclaim through peer and/or expert recognition were much more likely to have graduated from top graduate universities than those whose achievements were based on acclaim by popular audiences (*x-*square=194.8; p<.0001), supporting H5, and suggesting an important reason for the rejection of H4.  The chi-square test showed 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 (*x-*square=89.2; p<.0001), supporting H6.

More than two-thirds of the members of the cultural elite sample who obtained graduate degrees (67.6%) were awarded the degrees most relevant to their careers at one of the top 32 graduate universities.[[7]](#endnote-7) By contrast, 44 percent of those in Brint and Yoshikawa’s (2017) sample who had obtained graduate business degrees graduated from one of the top 18 business schools, and 37 percent of those who had 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, and the next most common path was to have attended a non-elite college and an elite graduate program. Together, these pathways accounted for 36 percent of the individuals in our sample. These findings differ greatly from those found for business and political leaders by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017); these pathways accounted for just 20 percent of the executive educational careers in their sample. By contrast, the most common pathways for their sample of business and political leaders were non-elite college and no graduate school and non-elite college and non-elite graduate degree, together accounting for more than 50 percent of the educational careers in their sample. The members of the cultural elite sample followed these pathways just 24 percent of the time (see Table 4). [Insert Table 4 Here]

*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 by members of our sample. We used prestigious artists, a category in the middle, as our 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. We used social sciences as our reference category for undergraduate majors. Once we controlled major field, only popular artists remained less likely to have attended a highly selective undergraduate college than members of our reference category. Those who majored in business, journalism, and 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, though not by a statistically significant margin at 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 those who majored in occupational subjects and the *USNWR* top 39 colleges.

We might expect that minorities and women would be more likely to require prestigious credentials to make their way into the cultural elite, because prestigious credentials vouchsafe for disadvantaged groups in a way that advantaged groups may not need. However, we found no significant differences by race-ethnicity in the likelihood of graduating from a top 39 college, and women in the sample were significantly less likely to have done so. In in all likelihood, the latter finding is a result of the exclusion of women from the most selective private institutions prior to the late 1960s (Malkiel 2016).

[Insert Table 5 Here]

Among those who obtained graduate degrees, leading academics were significantly more likely, net of covariates, to have taken degrees from the top 32 graduate universities, relative to our reference category of prestigious artists, and popular artists were significantly less likely to have done so. Those who took degrees in arts fields and, surprisingly, life sciences were significantly less likely than our reference category of social scientists to have taken degrees from one of the top 32 graduate universities. Net of covariates, we found no statistically significant variation by age,[[8]](#endnote-8) race-ethnicity, or gender in likelihood of taking advanced degrees from one of the top 32 graduate universities.[[9]](#endnote-9)

DISCUSSION

*Empirical Contributions of the Study*

In addition to providing a mapping of the U.S. cultural elite, this paper 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 members of the business and political elite studied by Brint and Yoshikawa (2017). Second, it shows 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 in Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) 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, the research shows similar, but more pronounced patterns for those in the sample who obtained graduate degrees, including very high levels of concentration of degrees from the top graduate research universities for the members of the cultural elite sample who obtained graduate degrees.

Given findings like these, future scholars of American cultural elites may be tempted to focus solely on those 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 the most popular 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 evaluations than in popular tastes (cf. Lamont 2009).[[10]](#endnote-10) It is for this reason that we have 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 for either 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, it is necessary to 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 processes of selection.

Highly selective educational institutions seek “well-rounded” candidates, those who have cognitive ability and conscientious work habits, but also high level interpersonal skills, community-mindedness, and, in some cases also, unusual accomplishments at young ages (such as becoming a grand master in chess or writing a first novel) (Espenshade and Walton 2009; Karabel 2005: chaps. 17-18; Karen 1991; Steinberg 2002; Stevens 2009). In addition, they 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 Walton 2009; Karen 1991; Karabel 2005: chaps. 17-18).

Karabel (2019) estimated that just 10 percent of classes at Harvard University going back to 1952, are admitted primarily on the basis of their academic aptitudes 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 Walton 2009; Stevens 2007). Moreover, the academic qualifications of students have improved markedly since the mid-20th century when the 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: chap. 2).

Highly selective graduate programs in business and law provide more direct training for leadership than undergraduate colleges do. Moreover, those who are admitted to highly selective programs have typically been top students as undergraduates and have achieved high marks on the relevant graduate admissions tests. The evidence suggests that 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 have graduated from top undergraduate colleges. (Posselt 2016; see also Lamont 2009 on professors’ values).

In sum, although academic accomplishments are only one factor in college and graduate school admissions, the research evidence suggests a movement over time toward the 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. Among the characteristics that are relevant to exceptional success in business are the following: 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 have also been found in some studies to be correlated with advancement in business (Boudreau, Boswell, and Judge 2002: MacCrimmon and Wehrung 1990). Studies of political leaders are not as extensive. Political leaders are oriented more to public-regarding 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: chaps. 3 and 4).

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 linkages between graduation from highly selective colleges and the attainment of top executive positions in business and government. Nor is it surprising that they found that industries based on the sophisticated manipulation of symbolic content select more heavily from graduates of leading higher education institutions than do those 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, the arts, and to obtain senior positions in foundations and think tanks. Highly selective colleges admit undergraduates largely on the basis of interpersonal skills and 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 (Espanshade and Walton Radford 2009; Karen 1991; Karabel 2005: chaps. 17-18; Steinberg 2002; Stevens 2009). 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 have examined, at least in those arenas in which recognition and acclamation is 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 exist to further refine explanations for the strong associations between highly selective educational institutions and elite status in selected cultural fields. These include: pre-existing family cultural capital; the competencies signaled by graduation from a highly selective institution, which may be stronger in cultural than business or political fields; the stronger interests of leading professors 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 business or political domains; and the stronger signaling power of prestigious degrees in cultural than 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 have 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, attainment of degrees at 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 (1985) hinted at difficulties with the unilinear model. Many recent sociological treatments have nevertheless shown a lingering attachment to it (see, e.g., Binder, Davis and Bloom 2016; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2011; Rivera 2012; 2015). By contrast, our evidence, when combined with that of Brint and Yoshikawa (2017), leads to a specification of the links between selective institutions and elite positions. Instead of admission to highly selective colleges and graduate programs serving as a cover and legitimation for pre-existing social advantages and as a gateway into the corridors of power, we find that the most important feature of the leading educational institutions, from the perspective of elite formation, is that they select for and enhance the capacities of students who are intellectually (as well as 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 those 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 at work for 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 media, whether as 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 or 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 relevant to a greater degree than they are in industries with more predictable information environments and/or slower moving technologies. In the domain of cultural achievements, the same principle applies, but with more force, for those who are recognized by peers and experts for the depth and sophistication of their work. The symbol manipulating industries and the prestige cultural sectors thus are the natural habitats of individuals who have been successful in gaining admission to highly selective undergraduate colleges.

We have 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, steel and electronic components into motor vehicles. Industries in which production primarily involves transformation of the material world may depend on complex technologies, but these technologies typically change relatively slowly and incrementally. Most workers are machine tenders or manual laborers and a “down-to-earth” outlook consistent with the materiality of the enterprises may, in addition, be as highly valued in upper management as capacities 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 in order to connect at a deep level with popular audiences; and indeed an education in these intellectualized and rarefied environments may constitute something of an impediment for this purpose.

The framework also helps to explain the stronger connections between highly selective graduate programs and elite recruitment. The research evidence suggests that 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 that contribute disproportionately 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 American 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.[[11]](#endnote-11)

E**thics Statement**

This research has been approved by the authors’ campus IRB 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 ASA’s Code of Ethics.

1. **Endnotes**

   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 is based on their media activities rather than their academic achievements, including especially their large numbers of followers on social media. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. We do not contend that the individuals we have 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
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, 2007-2018. For members of honorary societies, popular artists, and media personalities, we relied on identifying data for the most recent year(s) available. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. More than 200 individuals appeared more than once in our sample population. Where individuals were coded in more than one of the major sector and stratum categories, we placed them in the category on 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Each of five coders volunteered for categories of individuals to code. To improve the accuracy of coding, we conducted independent cross-checks on five-percent samples of individuals coded by each coder and required recoding when error rates exceeded five 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 five percent of cases. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Family socio-economic status has been consistently identified as an important determinant of attendance at highly selective undergraduate colleges (Karabel 2005: chap. 18; Karen 1991; Soares 2007: chap. 7) and graduate universities (Torche 2011) and indirectly, therefore, as a gateway to the leading positions in American society (see, e.g., Domhoff 1967; Mills 1951; Useem and Karabel 1985). However, we were able to obtain socio-economic background information for only a relatively small subset of members of our sample (under 20 percent), preventing us from using parental SES or any SES-related components as variables in the regressions. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Two other universities, New York University (50 individuals) and the University of Chicago (43 individuals), were also very important graduate training institutions for members of the cultural elite sample, but did not appear in the list of 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. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Some sectors, and especially the prestige categories, skew toward late-career individuals. Age, however, was not strongly related to the likelihood of obtaining degrees from highly selective undergraduate and graduate institutions. The younger individuals in these subsamples were just as likely as the 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, 44 percent of those between ages 40 and 60 graduated from a highly selective college, and 45 percent of those over age 60 did so. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. A table with regression results for graduate degrees is available in the supplemental materials on the journal’s website. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
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 those people whose work continues to be regarded as of unusually high quality and consequently has longer-lasting influence. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 11 Another important question for the future is whether the political right’s outcry against “liberal elites” can be interpreted as aproject 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 American life.

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    *women and minorities reached the top?* New Haven: Yale University Press.

    **Figure 1**

    **Typology of Cultural Elites**

    **Source of Acclaim**

    |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- |
    | **Nature of Work** | Peers/Experts | Popular Audiences |
    |  |  |  |
    | Knowledge-based, | Members of National |  |
    | Truth-seeking | Academies | **----** |
    |  | Nobel Prize Winners |  |
    |  |  |  |
    | Engaging, Informing | Pulitzer Prize Winners | Network Television |
    | Publics | in Journalism | Anchors |
    |  | Public Intellectuals | Podcast Hosts |
    |  |  |  |
    | Creating Expressive | Academy Award | Highest-paid Actors |
    | Works/Performances | Winners |  |
    |  | Conductors of Leading | Best-selling Recording |
    |  | Orchestras | Artists |

    **Table 1**

    **Overview of the Cultural Elites Sample**

    |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- |
    | **Category** | **Organization/List** | **N** |
    | 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 Non-Fiction | 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 |
    |  | Foreign Policy “Top 100” | 303 |
    |  | Pulitzer Prize Winners for Journalism | 75 |
    |  | Pulitzer Prize Winners for Photography | 15 |
    | Popular Media | 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 | 32 |
    |  | 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 |
    |  | Visual Artists | 94 |
    | Bridging Organizations | Presidents and Senior Staff of Leading Philanthropies | 99 |
    |  | Presidents and Senior Staff of the Leading Think Tanks | 135 |
    | Total |  | 2909 |

    **Table 2**

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

    |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- |
    |  | Proportion educated | Proportion of U.S.- |
    |  | in top 39 colleges | educated only |
    |  | (n of category) | educated in top 39 |
    |  |  | colleges (n of category |
    |  |  |  |
    | Prestige Academe | 42.3% | 52.1% |
    |  | (875) | (710) |
    | Prestige Media | 41.7% | 48.6% |
    |  | (515) | (442) |
    | Prestige Arts | 29.7% | 34.0% |
    |  | (308) | (246) |
    | Popular Media | 24.3% | 25.5% |
    |  | (453) | (431) |
    | Popular Arts | 11.0% | 13.8% |
    |  | (308) | (246) |
    | Leaders of Think Tanks/ | 38.9% | 39.5% |
    | Philanthropies | (229) | (224) |
    |  |  |  |
    | Total Cultural Elites | 32.8% | 38.8% |
    |  | (2909) | (2515) |
    | Business/Political | 18.0% | 20.2% |
    | Leaders1 | (3990) | (3543) |
    |  |  |  |

    **Note**

    1 Data for business and political leaders adapted from Brint and Yoshikawa (2017).

    \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

    **Figure 1**

    **Proportions Graduating**1 **from Highly Selective Undergraduate Colleges and Highly Selective Graduate Programs by Sector**

    **Notes**

    **1** Two-thirds of business and government leaders in Brint and Yoshikawa (2017) took graduate degrees compared to three-fifths of the members of the sample of cultural elites who took graduate degrees. Brint and Yoshikawa’s sample of 3,909 business and political leaders was collected in 2014.

    **Figure 2**

    **Graduation from Top 39 Undergraduate Colleges by Industry and Cultural Sector**

    **Table 4**

    **Comparison of *USNWR* Top 39 Colleges and Empirically Derived Top 39**

    **Undergraduate Colleges**

    |  |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- | --- |
    | **USNWR Top 39** | **# and (%) of Cultural Elite Stratum** | **Empirical Top 39** | **# and (%) 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 & Lee College | 0 | University of California, Santa Barbara | 12 (0.4) |

    Total 975 (33.5%) 1213 (41.7%)

    **Table 5**

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

    |  |  |
    | --- | --- |
    | **Pathway** | **Sample proportion (*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-US college/Non-US graduate degree | 4.7% (137) |
    | Non-US college/No graduate degree | 3.7% (109) |
    | Non-US college/Elite graduate degree | 3.7% (108) |
    | Elite college/Non-elite graduate degree | 2.8% (81) |
    | Elite college/Non-US graduate degree | 1.5% (43) |
    | Non-US college/Non-elite graduate degree | 1.3% (37) |
    | Non-elite college/Non-US graduate degree | 1.1% (31) |

    >

    **Table 6**

    **Predictors of Graduation from a *USNWR* Top 39 Undergraduate College**

    **(U.S.-educated college graduates only)**

    |  |  |  |  |
    | --- | --- | --- | --- |
    |  | **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 Major1 | .266 | .521 | .011 |
    |  |  |  |  |
    | Under Age 40 | 1.298 | .205 | .202 |
    | Age 40-60 (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 Ethnicity2 | .407 | .506 | .076 |
    |  |  |  |  |
    | Male (REF) | **----** | **---** | **---** |
    | Female | .697 | .111 | **.**001 |
    |  |  |  |  |
    | Constant | .310 | .196 | .113 |

    N=1915; chi-square (24)-192.8 p < .00001; Psuedo-R2 = 0.128; Cox-Snell R2 = .096;

    Nagelkerke R2 = .128; McFadden R2 = .073.

    **Notes**

    1 Other occupational majors include, among other majors, education, public policy/public administration, and theology. Architecture is included with arts. Religious studies majors are included with the humanities.

    2 Other ethnicity includes mainly individuals of Middle Eastern descent and those self-identified as multiracial. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)