

## **Abstract :**

This paper explores the ways in which secondary education at elite boarding schools affects its attendees' sense of meritocracy, privilege and attainment of success. Stemming primarily from Pierre Bourdieu's theories of capital and Shamus Khan's work concerning how the elite use meritocracy as a way to support the social inequality between the socially elite and non-elite, this study explores how prep school attendees perceived their time at prep school, and how they believe it affected their success later on in life. In order to gain an understanding of how attendees interpreted their time at boarding schools, I conducted interviews with twelve students from three elite New England boarding schools. The information from these interviews was then used to interrogate the previous literature concerning elite boarding schools.

In this project, I argue that while previous literature has begun to address the issue of elite culture at boarding schools, it fails to account for how students consciously experience boarding school, in terms of how they acknowledge privilege and account for their own success. By contextualizing each participant's experience with how they ended up attending boarding school, what they signified as the most important parts of their time at their respective schools, and how they planned to gain opportunities and earn success in the future, this study gained a deeper understanding into the elite culture of prep schools. In particular, the findings of this study demonstrate that while the majority of prep school students hold awareness of their privilege, they differ in the ways in which they knowingly utilize it.

# **The Effects of Elite Prep School Education on Society**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Methods.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Chapter One: The Path to Prep School .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Preparing Students for Elite Futures.....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Privilege and Meritocracy .....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Chapter Four: The Utilitarian Perspective: The Conscious Use of Privilege .....</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Using Privilege to Gain Success .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Appendix .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>89</b>

## **Introduction**

Each year, hundreds of adolescents begin their careers at independent boarding schools. These students have been selected to be a part of the exclusive world of boarding “prep schools.” These schools offer college-level resources, such as observatories, state-of-the-art fitness centers, and library collections that house tens to hundreds of thousands of volumes. Students spend their four years housed in dormitories where they are supplied with all the necessities, and their meals are prepared for them at dining halls where they have almost unlimited access to food. In addition to these resources, students attend classes where the average class size is twelve, and the teachers typically hold at least a Master’s degree in their field. The cost of all of this? Somewhere around \$45,000 per year.

Attending a prep school is a distinct experience from the typical public high school career. By attending a prep school, students are immediately cast into an exclusive group of individuals who have the opportunity and/or the means to attend these institutions. Not all students come from elite families; but, being at a prep school offers them access into an elite world that in turn results in their assimilation into elite culture if they were not already a part of it.

Prep schools have been argued to perpetuate elite culture for a number of reasons, the largest being that a high percentage of prep school attendees go on to attend elite universities and in turn earn high-paying jobs, thereby ending up in the upper class. In order to explore the issue of elite culture at prep schools, this study examined the experiences of prep school attendees, and how they reflected on their time at prep school.

Over the course of several months, I conducted a dozen interviews with individuals who had either attended or were still attending prep school. These interviews asked participants to reflect on their prep school experience and how it affected their lives both directly and indirectly. By surveying a group of prep school attendees who varied in race, socioeconomic background and gender, this study broaches the effects of elite prep school culture, and begins to offer an understanding as to how recent prep school attendees regard their experience.

Before continuing, I must clarify the ways in which I am using the terms “elite” and “privilege.” Throughout this paper, I refer to prep schools as elite institutions, and therefore to their attendees as members of an elite group. Elite institutions are those in which select members are exposed to resources and opportunities that are considered superior. Privilege plays two roles, as it can allow an individual access to an elite institution and it is afforded to all members of elite groups. In general, when referring to the subjects of this study, I determine whether or not they acknowledge their privilege, which allows me to examine both the path to the elite institution and the effects of being part of an elite group.

Instead of assuming that prep school perpetuates elite culture (and that attendees of this institutions take this as truth), I began by verifying that the experiences of the participants did in fact indicate an elite culture at prep schools. This understanding is outlined in the first two chapters. The first chapter in this paper details the methods in which individuals end up attending prep schools and establishes that individuals attend prep school for the “opportunity,” otherwise understood as prep school’s path to elite colleges.

The following chapters delve into the individual experiences of students and offer an analysis of how their stories can grant us a deeper insight into prep school culture and its effects. Each of these sections offer a look into the background of the participant, the path that led them to prep school, what their experience at the prep school was like, life after prep school, and their opinions on it all. The second chapter details the story of an international student, and confirms that the “opportunity” that prep schools offer lies in cultural and social capital benefits that one acquires at these institutions. The third chapter follows the story of a white upper-middle class girl whose experience at prep school aligns with the current literature. This chapter verifies the basic arguments of current literature, and demonstrates the significance of privilege, meritocracy and self-awareness when it comes to understanding the effects of elite culture.

Some of the literature suggests that prep school students have privilege, but fail to acknowledge it (Khan 2011, Deresiewicz 2008), and instead attribute their success exclusively to meritocracy. Chapters four and five challenge this notion, by detailing the experiences of three prep school attendees who indicated a conscious use of their privilege and capital to reach success. These chapters elaborate on the ways in which this study has offered insights that complicate the current literature. Ultimately, the findings in this paper just scratch the surface of this topic; however, this study does reveal that past literature and studies have failed to account for the individual’s perception of elite culture, and therefore have also failed to offer a conclusive understanding as to how elite culture affects the individual.

## Selection of Schools

Prep schools and boarding schools are not inherently one in the same, and many prep schools do not fit the description given above. Prep schools are typically understood as private institutions that are of high academic rigor. These schools often are focused on preparing students for admittance to highly competitive colleges, hence the term “college preparatory school.” Both day schools and boarding schools can be considered prep schools. For the purposes of this work, however, this study focused exclusively on independent boarding secondary schools in New England.

Boarding prep schools are different from day schools in that they require the students to become fully immersed in the community. Students study, live and play on one campus where faculty members often live. This study was interested in the effects of culture on the development of the individual, and therefore focused on environments in which students were deeply embedded within a specific culture. Boarding prep schools, however, are not all of the same caliber. In order to examine elite culture at the secondary school level, the selection of schools was further narrowed by looking at “elite” schools.

In order to differentiate “elite” boarding prep schools, this study used a variety of factors. Each of the schools in this study have acceptance rates below twenty percent, were founded over one-hundred years ago, and consistently end up on lists promoting the “most elite boarding schools in US” (Browning n.d.).<sup>12</sup> The schools graduate students that have average SAT scores above 2000 and consistently have members of each class

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<sup>1</sup> These schools were also all on E. Digby Baltzell’s list of “The Select 16,” which detailed the 16 most socially prestigious U.S boarding schools, published in *Philadelphia Gentleman – The Making of a National Upper Class*, and used in other studies concerning prep schools.

<sup>2</sup> The schools are also all a part of an association called the “Eight Schools,” which was informally founded in the 1970’s and became official in 2006. These eight schools formed the foundation to create a similar grouping to that of the ivies.



matriculating to Ivy League schools.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, within the community of boarding prep schools, external rankings are mirrored as these three schools were consistently identified as being in the top echelon.<sup>4</sup> For the sake of being clear and concise, this paper will refer to the selected schools as prep schools.

### **The Selected Schools: A History**

Using the criteria above, and a personal network that would allow for snowball sampling, this study explored the experiences of students that attended St. Paul's School (SPS), Phillips Exeter Academy (PEA) and Choate Rosemary Hall (CRH). Founded in 1781, Phillips Exeter Academy, is one of the oldest prep schools in the nation. In 1778, Samuel Phillips founded Phillips Academy Andover with the assistance of his uncle, John Phillips (Academy History, Exeter.edu). After moving to Exeter, New Hampshire, John Phillips decided to found a similar institution to Andover, and thus PEA was formed. The school's emblem reads, "Finis Origine Pendent," (the end depends upon the beginning) and "Χάριτι Θεοῦ" (by the grace of God). These two mottos reflect the values that John Phillips intended for the school, as he believed that young men must be educated to contribute to the world (Academy History, Exeter.edu). From its founding, Exeter aspired to educate "youth from every quarter"(Academy History, Exeter.edu). The school has a long history of its students matriculating to Ivy Leagues, with 28 students between the years of 2014-2016 attending Harvard University (College Matriculation, Exeter.edu). Exeter is known for its use of the "Harkness method," a seminar-like

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<sup>3</sup> Out of a 2400 scale

<sup>4</sup> As determined through interviews with attendees of prep schools. While each interviewee typically named their own school when describing the top prep schools (as would be expected), they consistently named the other institutions included in this study.

teaching style that is used in every class. In this teaching style, students are taught to have an equal voice to the teacher, who instead of standing and lecturing students from the front of the classroom, sits at a round table with the class. The current acceptance rate for Exeter is 16%. Classes average out at 12 students per class, and the student to faculty ratio is 7:1 (Phillips Exeter Academy, [boarding-schools.startclass.com](http://boarding-schools.startclass.com)).

St. Paul's School, founded in 1856, was established with similar values to Exeter. Unlike Exeter, St. Paul's has a religious founding, and to this day is still considered an Episcopal school (SPS History, [SPS.edu](http://SPS.edu)). Located in Concord, New Hampshire, St. Paul's was created with the intention to educate young men in a rural area, which would foster their love of nature and their ability to develop academically (SPS History, [SPS.edu](http://SPS.edu)). The school's motto, "Ea discamus in terris quorum scientia perseveret in coelis" (Let us learn those things on Earth the knowledge of which continues in Heaven), reflects the school's religious affiliation along with its dedication to the acquirement of knowledge (SPS Facts, [SPS.edu](http://SPS.edu)). Unlike the other schools in this study, St. Paul's is a 100% boarding community. This means that all students live in dorms, and all faculty reside on campus.<sup>5</sup> St. Paul's boasts a number of notable alumni, including six senators and congressmen, and has had 128 students attend an Ivy League school in the past four years (SPS Facts, [SPS.edu](http://SPS.edu)). The student to faculty ratio is 5:1, and the average class size is 12 (SPS Facts, [SPS.edu](http://SPS.edu)).

Unlike Exeter and St. Paul's, Choate Rosemary Hall was founded as two separate institutions: a boys' school and a girls' school. Rosemary Hall, the school for girls, was founded in 1890, and its brother school, Choate, was founded in 1896 (History, [Choate.edu](http://Choate.edu)). The schools were originally established in Wallingford, CT, and while the

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<sup>5</sup> The other two schools have both boarding and day students, although they are majority boarding

location shifted to different parts of Connecticut, the current school is in Wallingford. In 1974, the schools merged together as one (History, Choate.edu). The school's seal reads, "Fidelitas et Integritas" (fidelity and integrity), and depicts three swords that represent an "early Choate ancestor's" service to King Henry III (History, Choate.edu). Choate's list of alumni includes President John F. Kennedy, Jamie Lee Curtis, and a variety of professional athletes (Notable Alumni, Choate.edu). The current acceptance rate is 19%, and the average class size is 12 (Choate Rosemary Hall, Boarding-schools.startclass.com). 142 students matriculated to Ivy League colleges in the past 5 years (College profile, Choate.edu).

While each of these schools have different identities, acceptance rates and histories, they can be understood as similar institutions. They are all prestigious schools with a high matriculation to Ivy League colleges. Furthermore, while the fine details are different, the schools each have similar founding histories, acceptance rates, and all have the same average class size. Faculty members at all three institutions typically hold subject-specific Masters or PhD degrees, and most humanities classes are conducted seminar style (Harkness) (Choate.edu, Exeter.edu, SPS.edu). Finally, each of these institutions offers above average resources. Phillips Exeter has the largest secondary school library in the country, St. Paul's School has a 95,000-square foot athletic center (including a boathouse off-campus), and Choate has a state of the art Arts Center that includes a 770-seat theater (Exeter.edu, SPS.edu, Choate.edu). All the aspects of these three schools come together to foster an elite culture at the institution for the students, and for individuals in society who recognize the school name.

While the histories of the institutions are interesting in it of itself, in order to explore the culture and impact of these institutions, this study focuses on the experiences of students. Alumni and students from all three of these schools were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding as to how students at these schools view their experiences. Given that the schools are similar in nature, and this study did not seek to analyze the differences between SPS, PEA and CRH, all data and interviews were considered to be information concerning prep schools at large, rather than the specific prep school that the participant had attended. In order to prevent identification of the participants, pseudonyms will be used for each of the schools in the following chapters.<sup>6</sup>

## **Existing Literature**

There is little literature in the field of sociology concerning how prep school students perceive their own experiences. Current research concerning elite education has mainly examined the effects of elite education on future outcome, largely including career and graduate education paths, without regard to how the subject interprets their elite-ness and elite environment. Despite not working directly with the perceptions of prep school attendees, the current literature still offers an understanding as to how prep school, and its elite culture, ultimately affects the outcomes of individuals' college and professional careers. Therefore, it must be used to contextualize and analyze how individual's experience the effects of prep school educations.

The majority of literature concerning elite education draws some influence from the work of Pierre Bourdieu. Throughout his extensive career, Bourdieu published a

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<sup>6</sup> The pseudonyms for the schools remain consistent in that if participant A and participant B attended the same school, the same pseudonym will be used

variety of works concerning elite culture. Bourdieu's interest in elite culture stemmed from his belief that it perpetuated itself; this, he argued could be understood through an analysis of capital in its various forms. In 1983, Bourdieu published an article titled, "The Forms of Capital." While Bourdieu spent his entire career developing his theory surrounding capital, in this piece, he offers his readers an extensive definition, yet concise compared to his other works, of capital and its different forms. He argues that all capital stems from its original and most simplistic form, which is economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). Economic capital can be converted into cultural, social and symbolic capital as it can provide the means through which to accumulate the other forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986: 243). While each of these types of capital can be understood as connecting to economic capital, as they are sometimes the direct product of having economic capital (i.e. enough money to join an association that grants access to an elite social network, or the financial backing to attend cultural opportunities such as dance or art classes that results in cultural capital acquisition), in many ways, cultural and social capital differ from economic capital. Both of these forms of capital manifest in different ways than economic (i.e. not as strictly quantitative), and can have a different impact on the social status of an individual.

Bourdieu first outlines cultural capital, which he defines as having three states: embodied, institutionalized and the objectified (Bourdieu 1983). Cultural capital can be understood as capital that indicates that an individual has some type of cultural access that others do not. In the embodied state, this can take the form of actions that distinguish class such as having a working knowledge about high-end art or being able to use a certain type of vernacular that indicates that you are educated (Bourdieu 1983:

245). Bourdieu points out that the acquisition of cultural capital most often occurs for the “offspring” of families who already have cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983: 246). Institutionalized cultural capital is defined as the, “objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications” (Bourdieu 1983: 247). An individual’s ability to lay claim to attending an elite institution would grant him or her cultural capital in the eyes of his or her audience. The final form, objectified cultural capital, is comprised of physical representations of cultural capital: art, books, etc.

Social capital, Bourdieu argues, is similar to cultural capital in that much of it relies on the family in which one is born in to. Social capital is made up of one’s social network, and the amount of social capital that one holds is determined by the amount of cultural capital and economic capital that each of the connections has (Bourdieu 1983: 243, 249). An individual’s social capital can be recognized by the ways in which their personal connections can aid them in gaining access to certain opportunities. An individual getting their foot in the door with a company because of a personal connection would be considered an enactment of social capital. Bourdieu argues that the very realization of social capital reinforces its power and increases the amount of capital that comes from a certain connection. Bourdieu writes, “The reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociality, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (Bourdieu 1983: 250). The affirmation of the power of a social connection is inevitable whenever that social connection is used to meet an end.

While Bourdieu used his theories of capital to understand every facet of the elite, and society at large, he took a special interest in how capital related to elite

education. In 1996, Bourdieu, published the book *State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Throughout the book, Bourdieu (1996) breaks down the role of the elite school system in the establishment of the upper class. While *State Nobility* focuses on the role of elite schools in French culture, Bourdieu's theories concerning education, elite culture and capital can all be applied to American institutions as well. In the introduction of the book, Bourdieu depicts the education institution as "an immense cognitive machine which continually redistributes students submitted to its examination according to their previous positions in the system of distributions" (Bourdieu, 1996: 1-2). Herein lies the basis of Bourdieu's argument: elite institutions serve as a social institution in which "eliteness" is perpetuated. The very fact that private schools are for only those who can afford the institution and/or gain admission automatically renders their attendees as part of an exclusive group. Bourdieu contends that elite schools serve as an institution that both grants and fosters social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1996: 5).

In terms of the cultivation of elite capital, Bourdieu points towards the curriculum of these institutions. Bourdieu argues that the subjects for which students are most often recognized or praised for are subjects that are part of elite culture, meaning that "the possession of inherited cultural capital," aids in an individual's success within that subject (Bourdieu 1996: 11, 17). The subjects that are heavily weighted in these institutions are those that do not require purely skill, but those which a student can have greater success with if they come from a family of higher cultural capital (such as philosophy). The fact that these subjects are praised in these institutions perpetuates the capital that they hold, and society therefore continues to use them as a measurement for

an individual's intelligence and success. This cyclical nature, is what Bourdieu argues is at the core of elite educational institutions. Bourdieu writes:

But most importantly, when the process of social rupture and segregation that takes a set of carefully selected chosen people and forms them into separate group is known and recognized as a legitimate form of election, it gives rise in and of itself to symbolic capital that increases with the degree of restriction and exclusivity of the group so established. The *monopoly*, when recognized, is converted into a *nobility*. This is confirmed and strengthened by the fact that each of the members of the group of the chosen people, in addition to sharing in the symbolic capital collectively held and concentrated in their title, also shares, in a logic that is truly one of *magical shareholding*, in the symbolic capital that each member of the group holds as an individual. Thus an extraordinary *concentration of symbolic capital* is effected (1996: 83).

The elite attend elite institutions, and these schools educate them not only academically, but also culturally, in a way that supports the elite status of the student, while simultaneously perpetuating society's understanding of what is elite. This grants the institution an increased amount of cultural capital, therefore again, contributing to the cyclical nature of elite institutions.

In terms of American prep schools, Bourdieu's work offers a lens through which to understand both how people end up at these institutions and how the institutions contribute to the perpetuation of the elite. Much like elite French schools, boarding schools have historically served the upper-class and have come to offer and represent "elite education." Those who had the social and economic capital to attend prep schools, crafted them into what they are today. Although the use of capital is different from what it once was, as prep schools are no longer exclusively for the ultra-elite, prep school applicants and attendees still must use forms of capital to gain access. Then, once they are at the school, the students are treated to an enhancement of their various



forms of capital. Attending the school itself grants the student cultural capital, and the connections they are given contribute to their social capital.

While the actual enactment and attainment of capital is more complex than having/not having and getting/not getting, Bourdieu's theories about elite education and capital allows us a basic structure through which to begin to analyze prep schools and their effects. If prep schools are a social product of the elite educating their children, the historically elite have in effect affected the contemporary elite at prep schools. The contemporary elite is likely not what Bourdieu would have considered the elite, as class and elite-ness is less defined and strict than it has been in the past, but they can still be considered to rely on and use Bourdieu's forms of capital.

In the early 1990's, Richard L. Zweigenhaft completed two studies that looked at the life paths of Yale and Harvard graduates (Zweigenhaft 1992, 1993). Zweigenhaft was specifically interested in how the experiences of Ivy-league students who attended public secondary schools differed from those who went to elite secondary schools. The basis of Zweigenhaft's study was constructed around Bourdieu's theory of capital. Bourdieu argues that the more capital an individual has, the more elite status they hold. Zweigenhaft used this argument to hypothesize that individuals who came from elite backgrounds would have more capital than their less privileged counter-parts. Specifically, Zweigenhaft believed that individuals who attended elite prep schools in the 1960's were more likely to have more cultural capital than those who attended public schools (Zweigenhaft 1992, 1993). As a result, Zweigenhaft predicted that secondary school background would affect how individuals sought to acquire capital in college. Students from elite prep schools, who already had cultural capital, would

prioritize social capital, and students from public schools would focus on gaining cultural capital (Zweigenhaft 1992, 1993).

To consider the differences between public secondary school attendees and elite secondary school attendees, Zweigenhaft looked at graduates of Yale and Harvard at their 25th reunion. Zweigenhaft took data about whether the alumni had attended public or private secondary school, what groups they had been a part of during college (both academic and social), and their post-graduate experiences (jobs, graduate school) (Zweigenhaft 1992, 1993). Zweigenhaft found that public school attendees were more likely than their elite secondary school counterparts to work to gain cultural capital during their time at an Ivy league college, and that this import on acquiring cultural capital would continue in their future endeavors. The Ivy league alumni who had attended elite secondary school, however, had acquired a certain degree of cultural capital from their secondary school education and from their typically elite family background. As a result, elite secondary school attendees were more likely to acquire social capital during their time at Harvard or Yale, and were also more likely to continue using social capital in the future (Zweigenhaft 1992, 1993).

Zweigenhaft's data showed that public school graduates were more likely to have academic success in their time at Yale, and ultimately were more likely to go on to receive their doctorate degree. Their elite school counterparts were more likely to be a part of social clubs throughout their undergraduate career and later life (Zweigenhaft 1992). In his study of Harvard graduates, Zweigenhaft found that those who attended public secondary school were more likely to earn Phi Kappa Beta, pursue a doctorate, etc. On the other hand, private school graduates were more likely to be in exclusive

societies such as Skull and Bones and to continue establishing social club membership throughout their life (Zweigenhaft 1993).

Zweigenhaft attributed the two different groups' uses of capital as a result of their secondary school education, and therefore socioeconomic background (Zweigenhaft 1993).<sup>7</sup> This finding, can be thought of as a complication of Bourdieu's theories of capital. While Bourdieu's arguments about elite-ness were largely imbued with the understanding that capital was related to family and that those with the most capital at birth will continue to have the most capital throughout their lives, Zweigenhaft's studies suggest that capital is not exactly linear. Social and cultural capital each offer different benefits, and the acquirement of each, as demonstrated by Zweigenhaft, can depend on the background of the individual. Zweigenhaft's work invites us to consider how individuals consciously and subconsciously use different forms of capital.

Given that individuals from more elite backgrounds are more likely to use social capital, we might wonder why this is. Are they more likely to use social capital because they have seen demonstrated success? Or because they have more of it? One of the ways in which this study seeks to build on Zweigenhaft's (1992, 1993) work, and explore how individuals use enact their capital, is through their college applications. By asking students how they approached the college process, what they attribute acceptance and rejections to, and how they continue to approach other opportunities such as jobs and internships, we are able to see whether or not they acknowledge the working social systems that contribute to their successes.

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<sup>7</sup> Conducted with subjects who had attended high school in the 1960's, Zweigenhaft's elite secondary school subjects were more likely to be from affluent backgrounds than today's prep school attendees.

Similarly to Zweigenhaft, Annette Lareau's work in her book *Unequal Childhoods*, explores the impact of culture on the ultimate success of individuals in society (2011). Instead of looking directly at elite institutions, Lareau focuses on the socioeconomic status of the family, and how this affects the upbringing of the child. Through extensive ethnographic studies with subjects of different races, and classes, Lareau indicates the ways in which the childhoods of middle-class children better prepares them for social systems such as school and the work force, and therefore privileges them above their peers in lower socioeconomic classes (Lareau 2011).

In her first chapter, Lareau notes, "inequality permeates the fabric of...culture" (Lareau 2011: 3). This understanding is demonstrated throughout her book as she details the experience of her subjects. In Lareau's study, she finds that middle-class children are more likely to be raised by parents who, "adopt a cultural logic of child rearing that stresses the concerted cultivation of children" (Lareau 2011: 3). In terms of Bourdieu, this concerted cultivation allows children to develop their cultural capital as their parents supply them with opportunities to experience a spread of extracurricular activities. Ultimately, these children are encouraged to put time and effort into the activities in which they excel, while still cultivating other skills (Lareau, 2011). In addition to concerted cultivation, Lareau contends that middle-class children are more likely to be trained in how to interact with institutions and authority in a way that benefits them (Lareau, 2011). In contrast, working-class children are more likely to be raised by parents who have what Lareau calls a "natural growth" mindset (Lareau 2011: 3). These children are less likely to challenge authority and typically spend less time in structured activities such as organized athletics (Lareau 2011: 63). This results in

working-class children being disadvantaged in certain institutions. For example, compared to a middle-class child, a working-class child may be less likely to approach teachers if they do not understand instructions. If a child is unable to advocate for him or herself in a classroom where other students do ask for assistance or modification, they are likely to underperform compared to their peers.

While Lareau offers a great deal of insight into the ways in which socioeconomic status affects life paths, her theories of concerted cultivation are most relevant to this study. The role of class has significance in this study as the participants came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. By taking Lareau's findings into account, we can begin to contextualize the experience of the subjects with their upbringing and can explore the ways in which their socioeconomic background might affect their perceptions of prep school. Furthermore, although parents are not present at prep schools, and therefore have little control over the day-to-day choices and activities of their children, we might consider these institutions to encourage the same type of concerted cultivation in its students.

In their article, *Chartering and Bartering: Elite Education and Social Reproduction*, Caroline Persell and Peter Cookson (1985) explore the relationship between prep schools and admission to Ivy league colleges and other elite, competitive institutions. Persell and Cookson focus on twelve elite secondary schools and analyze the college matriculation of the graduates. These schools were selected from the pool of the "select 16," which are a part of a core set of New England prep schools determined by Baltzell as "truly socially elite" (Persell and Cookson 1985: 116). The main goal of

this research was to establish whether or not there is a true system of mobility within our private college system, with a focus on how elite prep schools affect this.

When looking at college admission, Persell and Cookson looked at a variety of factors, the main three being private prep secondary education versus public secondary education, socioeconomic status (SES) and SAT scores. When controlling for SES and SAT, they found that select 16 students were more likely to be admitted to Ivy League institutions (Persell et al. 1985). Persell and Cookson attributed this difference largely to the college advisor system. College advisors at Prep schools were more likely to create an established relationship between elite secondary schools and elite colleges. Persell and Cookson noted that it wasn't unusual for a college counselor to spend 25 years in one college counseling office, indicating that a consistency in the relationships between counselors and colleges worked for the students positively (Persell et al. 1985). This relationship works symbiotically: the colleges using the counselors as a method through which they can "weed out" weak students and identify strong candidates and the counselors using the colleges to benefit their students (and the high school's own ranking due to college matriculation).

In addition to the import of the college counselor, Persell and Cookson noted that students at prep schools were more likely to have social capital. This, they argued, would help "smooth the process," granting students the opportunity to network through legacy networks, etc. (Persell et al. 1985: 126). This argument is consistent with other research that demonstrates that elite prep school graduates are more likely to attain social capital throughout their undergraduate career. Persell and Cookson's findings

allow us to move forward with the knowledge that at the time of the study, prep schools had a demonstrated effect on admissions to highly selective colleges.

If we take Persell and Cookson's results to mean that prep schools do in fact influence college admissions, we can then use this information to explore how prep school attendees conceive their successes. Prep school attendees who acknowledge the role of their elite secondary schooling in their college admissions are likely more aware of the advantages they have been afforded. We might consider these individuals to be more cognizant of the ways in which Bourdieu's forms of capital assist them in moving up in the world. Furthermore, if an individual is able to see and consciously acknowledge the way in which prep school affects college admission, they may be more likely to exhibit a conscious knowledge of how these institutions advantage their students beyond college.

In his article entitled, "Exhortation: The Disadvantages of an Elite Education: Our best universities have forgotten that the reason they exist is to make minds not careers," William Deresiewicz (2008) explores the limitations/disadvantages of an elite education. Deresiewicz argues that once students are admitted to elite institutions, the administration works to make students feel like they have achieved something by attending the elite institution. Deresiewicz points out that these institutions often prime their students by labeling them as the "best and brightest" (Deresiewicz 2008: 22/23]. He determines that students of elite institutions develop a sense of entitlement based on an illusion/ideal of meritocracy. He explains that the mentality of these institutions is: "You deserve everything that your presence here is going to enable you to get" (Deresiewicz 2008: 23). This sense of entitlement comes from the fact that students

attribute their acceptance to the elite institution as a product of their own hard work, and therefore they are entitled to certain benefits and experiences at the institution.

Deresiewicz writes that this sense of entitlement continues well throughout students' undergraduate careers, and that it shapes their experience in totality. In one example, Deresiewicz compares the experience of a student at a large university versus that of Yale students. He writes that the former experienced non-negotiable consequences for turning in assignments late, while students of elite institutions are used to being able to barter for second chances (Deresiewicz 2008). This, Deresiewicz argues, exemplifies the idea that elite institutions are preparing their students for the "life of upper class" (2008: 24). By this, Deresiewicz means that upper class individuals lead their life with a sense of entitlement that leads them to make the system work for them, instead of working within the system. Here, Deresiewicz's findings echo those of Lareau in that he contends that upper-class individuals are better trained to work within an elite system. Arguably, this is similar to Lareau's explanation for how socioeconomic status can affect the ways in which individuals are trained to interact with institutions.

Academically, Deresiewicz argues that this sense of entitlement further leads students to what he calls, "entitled mediocrity" (Deresiewicz 2008: 25). Deresiewicz points to the positive shift in average student GPA's in the past fifty years, particularly noting that of elite institutions (Deresiewicz 2008). He argues that students at elite institutions are driven towards quantitative success, not qualitative (Deresiewicz 2008: 28). This, coupled with their expectation that through their "hard work" they will achieve success (an A- or A), leads to the entitled mediocrity. He argues that students



only work as hard as they need in order to receive a certain mark or earn the respect of a professor (Deresiewicz 2008: 28).

Deresiewicz argues that prep schools prepare students to not work as hard as their non-prep school counterparts while also conditioning these students to expect success as long as they work the system properly. This research is relevant to this study as it encourages us to look at how prep school attendees define their own success. Deresiewicz's work suggests that the culture of prep schools breeds students who have little awareness of the elite culture in which they exist, and therefore the attendees are unlikely to acknowledge how their privilege advantages them.

While the majority of the research literature that was used in this study dealt with prep schools, none of the previously mentioned works examined how prep school attendees view their experiences and prep school. Shamus Khan's book *Privileged* (2011), offers an insight specifically into the world of modern-day prep school and how students are shaped by their experiences within the institution. Similarly to much of the previously discussed literature, the basis of Khan's work stems from Bourdieu's theories on elite culture. At the beginning of his novel, Khan asserts in the introduction of his book that there is a "new elite" (Khan 2011: 14). This elite, he argues, trades entitlement for privilege and believes that the majority of their privilege is attained through their own merit (Khan 2011: 9). This blind belief in meritocracy results in a failure to acknowledge to social privilege that has been granted by family background and/or the student's existence at an institution like St. Paul's.

While Khan's book serves as an ethnographic study of St. Paul's School, his research can be applied to prep schools in general. Khan points out the importance of

community and character development in these institutions (Khan 2011: 33). Khan writes, “Educational institutions function to prepare students for their future social and cultural positions.... Boarding schools, in this formulation, are ‘total institution,’ regulating their members’ lives so as to generate a particular character” (Khan 2011: 33). Unlike their public or day school counterparts, these prep schools become the life of the student and the faculty. Their home, friends, work/school, play and extracurricular activities all exist on one campus. This creates a heightened sense of import on the development of morality and character.

Khan argues that this culture creates a setting in which students (regardless of their “starting” point) can “climb” the social/cultural ladders in order to ascend to the elite culture that dominates the campus. He uses the phrase, “hierarchies become ladders” (Khan 2008: 15). Here, Khan differentiates himself from Bourdieu, as social hierarchies are flexible and he suggests that prep school students are able to ascend these “ladders” throughout their time at the institution. While Khan doesn’t go so far as to say that students consciously acknowledge the ladders, he does argue that prep school attendees learn that by existing within the system, they will reach the top (Khan 2011). By ingratiating themselves into the culture, and finding ways in which they can work the system to their advantage, students gain more social capital within the school itself, and then perpetuate the illusion of meritocracy and the elite culture (Khan 2011).

In addition to contending that hierarchies become ladders, Khan argues that the experience of prep schools “[is] more important than innate or inherited responses” (Khan 2011: 194). By living the prep school experience, individuals are able to demonstrate through their behavior that they are part of the elite group of attendees.

This finding gives rise to Khan's final argument: that prep school students are taught to perform comfortability when discussing both high culture and lower-brow culture (Khan 2011). Throughout his interviews, Khan found that students were encouraged to discuss and analyze a wide-breadth of subjects. One instance he mentions is a class in which students are asked to write a comparison of *Beowulf* and "Jaws" (Khan 2011: 161). Ultimately, Khan argues that part of prep school culture is learning how to approach almost any situation and/or conversation with "ease," and therefore demonstrating an abstract elite-ness (Khan 2011: 192).

Khan's book acts as the closest sociological work to this study, and has served as a launching point for much of this study. By completing an ethnographic study of St. Paul's School students, Khan was able to explore how students experienced prep school and how they spoke about this experience. This information grants a basic understanding of how students place or do not place import on meritocracy. Khan's arguments connect with Bourdieu's theories of elite-ness and capital as he demonstrates that the students at prep school signify their social and cultural capital in order to gain personal and academic success. Khan complicates Bourdieu with his final argument, as Khan breaks from the traditional definition of elite as he describes the "ease" that students must have at different cultural levels (Khan 2011: 192). Here, Khan pulls from Richard Peterson's theory of "cultural omnivores" (Khan 2011: 151). Khan writes, "[Elites] no longer define themselves by what they exclude, but rather their power now comes from including everything" (Khan 2011: 151). This is significant as it redefines how we consider elite-ness, and it encourages us to keep Peterson's theory of cultural

omnivores in mind when analyzing the experiences of prep school attendees (Peterson 1992).

Khan's work connects to that of both Zweigenhaft (1992, 1993) and Deresiewicz (2008) as he demonstrates the ways in which prep school attendees are trained for an elite lifestyle as they are educated in how to function within an elite institution, not necessarily to work hard (Khan 2011). Overall, *Privileged*, allows us to see the ways in which prior literature can be applied directly to the contemporary prep school experience. This work, however, has its limits. While Khan explores the journeys of a variety of students, and examines how they view life at St. Paul's, he does not explore how they consciously or subconsciously deal with the acquirement of capital. Furthermore, his work does not explain how the students view their prep school experience through the context of future achievements such as colleges and jobs. Khan would likely assume that while not all prep school students would be "the best of the best," they would continue to contribute their successes to their own merit, and would ignore the privilege that a prep school education afforded them. That being said, the perceptions post-prep school are missing from Khan's research.

These pieces of literature offer a solid foundation for the study of effects of elite boarding school culture. Lareau (2011) and Bourdieu's (1983, 1996) work grant an understanding of how an individual's background and familial upbringing can affect their social standing in the world, and how they navigate social systems such as schools. Furthermore, Bourdieu's (1983) work provides the language of capital, which enables us to have a conversation about the ways in which elite prep schools contribute to a

student's status as elite. Throughout their time at prep schools, students gain social and cultural capital, which are arguably the largest benefits of these types of institutions.

The studies that use Bourdieu's theories as a framework, provide an understanding of how Bourdieu has already been used to understand elite culture. Additionally, they provide examples of how elite academic institutions fit into the framework of Bourdieu, and they provide examples of how capital affects an individual's professional and academic trajectory. By using the work of Zweigenhaft (1992, 1993), Persell and Cookson (1985), Deresiewicz (2008), and Khan (2008), this study was able to focus on already established lines of thought, such as college admissions, to explore the effects of prep school culture.

Finally, all this literature calls into question how much awareness graduates of these institutions hold. These theories and studies have primarily studied the effects of prep schools without using the interpretation or perception of the students. While Khan's work does deal directly with students of prep schools, he has a strict understanding of students' sense of meritocracy and privilege. Throughout his book, Khan demonstrates that he believes that the majority of prep school students have little awareness of the impacts that their secondary school experience has on their future and their understanding of success and privilege. This encourages us to explore whether or not attendees of these institutions consciously use or do not use this privilege.

Zweigenhaft and Deresiewicz might argue that individuals have a working knowledge of their capital and privilege, and that prep schools encourage their students to use this knowledge to their advantage, both consciously and unconsciously. Persell, Cookson and Khan, however, would predict that students of prep schools work within

the systems of success that they are put into, with little awareness of how their privilege at these institutions affects their success. In order to explore this discrepancy, this study sought to address these issues directly.

## Methods

The data used in this study was collected through a survey, and semi-structured interviews. Each subject participated in an interview in-person or via video chat. Before completing the interview, each individual was requested to fill out a demographic survey. The survey and interview questions were created to gain a deeper understanding into each participant's background, experience and opinions concerning their time at prep school and immediate time after.

In order to ensure that both the survey and the interview yielded pertinent responses, several versions of both materials were drafted. The earlier versions of the interview and survey were piloted with graduates of prep schools who were not eligible to be included in the study.<sup>8</sup> After each test run, both the survey and the interview questions were edited for clarity and focus.

The survey served two purposes. While each interview allowed for the participant to give ample information about his or her background, the use of the pre-interview survey allowed for uniformity concerning certain demographic information. In addition to this, the survey allowed for a more personalized interview. Instead of phrasing interview questions generally, I was able to tailor the language in each interview to the subject. For example, instead of asking the participant about his or her guardian's participation in the application to prep school, I could ask specifically about a subject's mother.

Overall, the survey asked participants a combination of demographic and academic background questions. The first part of the survey consisted of questions

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<sup>8</sup> While all three of the test participants were graduates of private secondary schools and were within the proper age range, only two of the participants went to institutions that were being used in this study. The original points of contacts were immediate connections to the main researcher in this study.

concerning age, race and ethnicity and gender. While these questions were largely intended to add to the personalization of the interview, having this demographic information allowed for some analysis concerning the potential effects of race and gender on the boarding school experience. Participants were then asked to answer basic information about their academic careers such as year of graduation from secondary school and what the subject did post-graduation. Once this information was given, each individual was then requested to give information about his or her family and home, both currently and during his or her time in secondary school.

Responses from the next section of the survey revealed the profession, academic history and ethnicity of the parents of each subject. Having information about the guardians of each individual, and their professions, allowed me to gain some insight into the socioeconomic status (SES) of the participant. By using the data from this section alongside the geographic location of the family and whether or not the participant was on financial aid while at secondary school, I was able to acquire a general sense of each participant's SES in relation to society at large, as well as in relation to the other participants of the study.

The final section of the survey asked for information about the experience at secondary school. Each individual provided information about their extracurricular activities, grade point average (GPA), college admission standardized test scores and college decisions. This information mainly served as a supplement to the interview questions about academics and the college application process. Furthermore, by asking the participants to fill out this information on an electronic survey, I hoped to decrease



the discomfort that might come with sharing personal information such as testing scores and grades. A copy of the survey may be found in Appendix 1.

Within two weeks of filling out the survey, each participant took part in an interview. Interviews were either conducted in-person or via video chat, with preference given to in-person opportunities. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for flexibility when talking about each individual's experiences. The interview begins with general questions concerning how the participant ended up attending their secondary school, and continued with specific questions about their experiences academically and socially. The interview culminated in questions about the individual's college application experience, how the participant looks for professional opportunities and how they see the prep school experience as affecting their lives.

Participants for this study were recruited via personal social networks, with a snowball sampling technique. Three alumni known to the researcher, one from each institution, were asked to provide contact lists of individuals that they attended secondary school with. Contacts provided by interviewees were then invited to participate in the study. Additionally, a faculty member from one of the institutions volunteered contacts after hearing about the study. In order to encourage a large pool of participants, all contacts were sent a personalized email requesting their participation and detailing the study. In order to qualify for the study, the potential participant had to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five and a graduate of Phillips Exeter Academy (PEA), St. Paul's School (SPS) or Choate Rosemary Hall (CRH). The age parameters allowed this study to focus on the experience of individuals who had

attended these institutions between the years of 2007 and 2017, which allowed this study to focus on the experiences of attendees from this decade.

Once an individual was identified, contacted and agreed to participate, he or she was sent the pre-interview survey, and a time for the interview was established. In total, I reached out to twenty-six people, and ultimately eighteen contacts responded, with 12 participating in the full interview. Out of the final 12 respondents, five attended Phillips Exeter Academy, two attended Choate Rosemary Hall and five attended St. Paul's School. Fifty-percent of the participant pool identified as Female. In terms of race identification, 5 participants identified as "white/Caucasian," while three identified as "Black," one identified as "Black/Caucasian," one subject identified as "Asian," and one individual identified as "Asian/Caucasian." Eight of the respondents were on some type of financial aid during their time at their secondary school. In terms of post-secondary school, all the participants immediately attended a four-year institution with five of the participants attending an Ivy League school. Only two of the participants attended public universities. Six of the participants attended schools with an acceptance rate under 20%. All but one of the participants were domestic students, and nine of the respondents were from the Northeast. For a conclusive representation of the participant demographics, see Table 1 in appendix.

## CHAPTER I: The Path to Prep School

Each March, the top prep schools in the United States release their admissions decisions. Prospective students are notified via email or web portal, in which the decision is typically accompanied by a video that explains to the student that they have been *selected* from a highly competent and competitive pool of applicants. Almost immediately, the student is showered with some sort of school pride, which brands them as an exclusive member of the institution to which they have just been accepted.

Much like college applications, the world of prep school admissions has shifted over the past two-hundred years. Whereas prep school students were once all from extraordinarily similar demographics (white, wealthy and male), today, the student bodies are more diverse. While this diversity means different experiences at prep school, it also implies that there are a multitude of paths that can bring one to these institutions. Throughout this study, I was able to speak with a dozen prep school attendees. While this is not a representative sample of prep school students, the stories of these twelve participants illustrated a variety of ways in which an individual can get to the elite world of prep schools.

Overall, each subject fit into one or more of the following prep school-bound trajectories: legacy/immediate exposure, middle-class academic focus, or diversity recruitment. Legacy students are traditionally students who have a family member who attended the institution before them. The legacy path, however, can also be understood as equivalent to an immediate exposure track, which includes individuals who have prep schools as a normalized part of their life. Individuals who fit into the category of middle-

class academic focus are from middle to upper-middle class families in which the parents place a large import on academics and the world of academia. These students often have no connection to prep schools, instead they gain their access through opportunities that are afforded by their economic status. Examples of this would be individuals who have the financial means to participate in certain athletic activities that might offer them a social connection that exposes them to prep school, or individuals who have enough money to look at non-public schools (i.e schools that have some type of tuitions). The final form of prep school-bound paths, diversity recruitment, could be considered the opposite of the two other trajectories, as these individuals often end up at these institutions because they are an underrepresented demographic. These students are often from lower socioeconomic classes, and sometimes have assistance from non-profit organizations that pair with prep schools to increase diversity at elite institutions.

### *Legacy/Immediate Exposure*

Prep schools are a comparatively small and specialized sector of secondary schools in the United States. Many adolescents think of prep schools as something on television or movies; however, if a child is in some way exposed to this exclusive world, prep school then becomes a realistic option. For some individuals, this comes in the form of being a legacy student to prep schools. While legacy is typically defined as having a family member go to the same institutions, I would argue that due to the exclusivity of prep schools, that having a family member go to any prep school serves the same purpose. Having a family member that attended prep school offers a type of exposure and understanding of the elite culture of prep school that would not be otherwise available.

Immediate exposure is similar to legacy in that it involves the individual having some sort of connection to prep schools. For some, this comes in the form of a family member working at a prep school in a staff or faculty position. For others, it may be as simple as living in the same town of a prep school. These less personal connections to prep schools still place it in the subject's purview, and therefore make it more likely that this individual will consider prep school as an option.

This type of exposure served as the point of access for multiple participants in this study. Max Carter, a black middle-class student from Washington D.C had two forms of legacy in her family. In the 1970's, Max's grandfather had worked at Tolerton Prep for a few years. Later, her mother attended Tolerton. Although she had very little physical exposure to Tolerton when she was a child, by the time she was in middle school, her mother had begun to talk about Max's attendance to a prep school as a given. "I'd been hearing about Tolerton my whole life because my mother was a student there and my grandfather taught there," Max explained. "In seventh grade...my mother said, 'you should go to Exeter.'"

For Max, her family's experiences had demonstrated the merit of prep school. Furthermore, her family had spent much of her life speaking about Tolerton fondly. This established a normalization of prep school, and instilled in Max a sense that Tolerton could be understood as a pathway to success. Overall, Max's experiences with Tolerton seemed to match that of her mother and grandfather. During her time at Tolerton, Max participated in a multitude of extra-curricular activities including, but not limited to, the track team, gospel choir, and Afro-Latino Society. Ultimately, her time at

Tolerton culminated in acceptance to a highly selective university.<sup>9</sup> Unlike other study participants, however, Max did not see her time at Tolerton as a means to college.

Max did not want to play into the stereotypical “steps,” which she defined as attending “a good high school, to go to a good college, to get a good job.” Max contended that many of her peers, in fact too many in her opinion, let this ideology determine all their decisions. When asked how her life would have been different had she not attended Tolerton, she said she, “probably would have been happier.” Max remembered Tolerton as a high-stress environment, and while she valued her experience and would not choose to go to another high school, she had moments where she was “unhappy” due to the stress and work. Max contended that if she had gone to another school that was slightly easier, she likely would have been happier throughout her high school years. Nonetheless, when asked whether or not she would want her children to attend Tolerton Prep, she responded without hesitation: “Yes.”

Max’s experience at Tolerton demonstrate how having prep school normalized throughout one’s life can affect one’s perception of prep school. By refusing to regard prep school as a “step,” Max demonstrates that she appreciated her time at Tolerton as an experience independent of future endeavors such as college. When contextualizing this mentality with Max’s life-long exposure to the idea of Tolerton, it could be argued that Max’s normalization of prep school enabled her to view her experience as just high school, not a path to college. While I would not say that Max took her time at Tolerton for granted, her comments about not being happy at the school and not “using” it indicate that she placed a different type of value on her experience than other subjects.

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<sup>9</sup> An acceptance rate of 26%

Jeff Simmons had no familial connection to the Cart School, however, he lived within a thirty-minute drive to the campus. While attending Cart was not something that everyone did, Jeff was familiar with the school. When a fencing friend began attending Cart and talking about how great their experience was, Jeff became interested in the school. When Jeff found that he was bored with his classes at the public middle school, he knew that he had alternatives to the public high school. Unlike other prep school attendees, Jeff did not apply to other prep schools. He was interested in attending Cart, not in attending a boarding prep school. While Jeff was able to acknowledge the unique opportunities he had as a student at Cart, he said, “It wasn’t a life-changing experience.” Despite not seeing anything extraordinary about his time at Cart, Jeff acknowledged that it likely contributed to his acceptance to a university with an acceptance rate below 16%.

Jeff and Max attended prep schools and ended continuing their careers in elite academia by attending selective universities. Neither of these individuals, however, actively sought out prep school. They simply applied because it was such a normalized option. Had Max’s family not had a connection with Tolerton, it is unlikely that she would have applied to prep school in general. Furthermore, Jeff would not have attended any prep school had he not been admitted to the one directly in his town. While both Max and Jeff voiced appreciation for their time at their respective schools, they also suggested that their experiences at prep school were nothing extraordinary. I would argue that their perception of their experiences were largely determined by the fact that to some degree, prep school, and the prospect of attending one, had been normalized before they began their time at Tolerton and Cart.

### *Middle-Class Academic Focus*

Children who are born into the middle-class or higher are born with more privilege, compared to those who are born into families of lower socioeconomic status (SES). They have more economic flexibility in their family, which allows them access to more opportunities, and often their parents support them financially and emotionally in academic and extra-curricular endeavors as the parents have the financial means to do so (i.e take off time to bring kids to activities or go see games or concerts). Furthermore, parents who are a higher socioeconomic status (SES) are likely to condition their children to be parts of upper-classes. In her book, *Unequal Childhoods*, Annette Lareau (2011) establishes the advantage that middle-class children have over lower SES children. Using this information allows us to see how children of middle-class are more able to access prep schools. The children of middle class families are more likely to be pushed towards opportunity by their parents, and furthermore, will be taught how to behave properly in settings such as prep schools. While Lareau's (2011) theory of concerted cultivation may be considered to apply less to boarding school students, as the parents are removed from the student's immediate day-to-day life, the effects of a middle-class upbringing in the years leading up to prep school can be used to understand how some students end up attending prep school.

Middle-class academic focus includes individuals who come from families who value academics and therefore seek out opportunities to increase the academic success of their children. This can include, but is not limited to, middle class families, and who gain access to prep schools due to their SES. Some of these individuals end up at prep school purely because of their parents do research about secondary school



options and offer the opportunity to their children, while others apply because they gain access to an individual who proposes the opportunity (typically through the opportunity that has been afforded to the student due to the socioeconomic standing of his or her family). For example, a child who is provided the opportunity to explore athletic or musical endeavors and is supported with lessons to develop their skills, is more likely to become exposed to teachers who want to foster the child's development and may suggest a prep school. Overall, children of middle-class families often are raised in a culture that values education and places a high import on success in academia to lead to success later on in life. Children of these socioeconomic classes are expected to go to college, and are often expected to go to highly ranked colleges. As a result, some of these children attend private high schools in the hope that this will aid them in college applications.

Kim Wang serves as an example of a middle-class child whose parents served as the driving force behind their attendance at prep schools. Kim identifies as Asian, and both her parents immigrated to the United States from China. While they spent the beginning of her childhood establishing themselves in America, by the time Kim was in high school, they had enough understanding of the American education system to encourage their daughter to transfer from her public high school. Kim's father had told her that he wanted her to attend prep school, as he understood prep schools to be a place where she could have opportunities socially and academically. "My dad really wanted me to go to boarding school.... He sent me to Watchill not so much to study, more rather to meet people and make connections." Kim was unsure where her father's value of prep school came from, but he had a clear understanding that prep school would give

Kim access to relationships, resources and opportunities that she would not have at her public high school.

Similarly to Kim, Jamal Walker attended a high school that had sub-par academic opportunities. He comes from a middle-class family, and by the time he was in high school, Jamal's family, worried about his wellbeing and academic development, suggested that he apply to boarding schools. Jamal is from Washington DC. His mother works as a secretary and his father as a mechanic, which likely makes his family lower-middle or upper-middle working class. This means that Jamal does not fit into the "middle-class" bracket, however, his family shares the middle-class import of academia. Despite being from a lower SES, the Walker family's import on academics resulted in Jamal attending a boarding school. In addition to in-class experiences, Jamal was interested in the athletic opportunity that he would have at prep school. Attending a prep school would allow him access to resources on campus such as a training center, coaches and facilities on which to practice. Jamal's athletic skill on the field and the track likely assisted in his admittance to Tolerton Prep, as it did in his college acceptances.<sup>10</sup>

Kim and Jamal's background demonstrate the ways in which parents and family values can encourage individuals to attend prep schools. The Wang's socioeconomic status allowed them to send their daughter to prep school when public school was not affording her the proper opportunities academically and in her extracurricular activities. Furthermore, Kim's father demonstrated an acute awareness of the social capital that his daughter could earn by attending a prep school. Jamal's

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<sup>10</sup> Jamal went through a pseudo-recruiting process when looking at colleges. Pseudo in that he did not officially sign anything or apply early to institutions with the promise of admission due to athletic performance, but still recruiting-like in that he corresponded with coaches.

family, while from a lower class, valued academics, and therefore had the foresight to seek out different options for Jamal when public school was not working out.

### *Diversity Recruitment*

In the world of academia, “diversity” is a buzzword. It is often used on admissions catalogues and school statements to demonstrate that the institution is forward-thinking, and that it offers its resources to all academically successful individuals, regardless of background. At prep schools, diversity often means people of color, including those who come from lower socioeconomic families. For prep school admissions teams, the challenge is to find individuals from these backgrounds who are qualified and able to attend these institutions. Some people that fit into this category find their own way to prep school, and they are able to meet the standards of the school. Others, however, use organizations that work specifically with high performing students from high-risk areas in order to prepare them to attend prep schools and elite colleges.

Theresa White was recruited into the world of prep schools through a non-profit program. In fifth grade, Theresa was identified by NJSeeds as a high-performing student. She was invited to be a part of their program. While some of her peers in NJ SEEDS (NJS) had been placed in private boarding schools in middle school, Theresa began her career at a day school and was sent to a private middle school. Each morning she spent an hour on the train to get to school, and she would take the train back each night. NJS continued to work with her as she attended this school to begin priming her for high school applications. NJS helped Theresa identify which prep schools to apply to, and how to craft her application. Once admitted to Watchill Academy, NJS

continued to work with Theresa by supporting her in her academic development and assisting her with finding summer opportunities. The program ultimately carried into her college application process, and still assists her with finding internships.

Without Prep for Prep and NJ SEEDS, it is highly unlikely that Aaron and Theresa would have gained access to the world of prep schools. Both programs helped prepare the students for the academic rigor of prep school, and they taught Aaron and Theresa how to write their applications. Additionally, programs like these establish relationships with the schools that allow them to advocate on the behalf of the students. Prep for Prep, for instance, has one universal application process for all prep schools, and the organization decides which schools the student will apply to. Prep determines which schools the student applies to, and ultimately tells the student which school they will attend (pending on admission from the school itself). Programs such as Prep and NJS surely help increase the diversity at prep schools. They are able to increase diversity by offering access into an elite world, that their clients have absolutely no connection to.

From the beginning of her application, Theresa demonstrated a different type of mentality than the other subjects. She recalled her mother editing her essays and encouraging her to make sure it was her “best,” as this was going to be her “one chance to attend a place [like Watchill].” Unlike students in the immediate exposure track, prep school was something completely out of the ordinary for Theresa. By the time she got on campus, she was careful to take advantage of every opportunity before her, as she explained it was different from what she would have been exposed to at home. This mentality is similar to that which Khan found with students of color from

underprivileged backgrounds who put an import on capitalizing on the once in a lifetime opportunity of prep school (Khan 2011: 74). Understanding this path, and the other two, is significant because it encourages us to contextualize how people experience prep school by taking into account their background and in what state they enter prep school.

### *The Effect on Prep School Experience*

While this study did not initially intend to focus on the familial background and SES of the participants, through the interviews, it became evident that this was a large part of the prep school experience. The way in which an individual ended up at prep school colored their experience, and set them up to have certain expectations of the school and themselves. By looking at the path that led an individual to prep school, we can use this knowledge in tandem with their experiences to ascertain how background perhaps influences the individual's awareness of privilege.

The first to methods of access to prep school largely address the experiences of individuals who are likely already a part of elite families as they are of a certain SES, or have family members who had experiences in elite prep schools. Knowing this, we are able to explore how Bourdieu's forms of capital come into play when an individual already has capital due to their background. Furthermore, if an individual is normalized to the culture of prep schools, we can see how this affects their perception of the elite culture. The diversity path offers us the opposite perspective. If an individual's first exposure to prep school is due to some recruitment method, and their time a boarding

school is drastically different from their background, we are then able to see how this potentially affects the prep school experience.

While this study is unable to offer a conclusive understanding of these questions due to the size of the project, and the fact that the interview did not yield a large amount of information concerning familial background, the interviews did offer insight into the backgrounds of the participants. Using this information with the rest of the data from the interviews and surveys allows us a deeper comprehension of how capital can be used to understand success, and how this affects the individual's prep school experience.

## CHAPTER II: Preparing Students for Elite Futures

### *Ruslan Basilive*

Ruslan Basilive began his career at the Cart School during his junior year. The year prior, Ruslan had completed schooling in his home country, the Ukraine, and his next step was to gain access to the American education system. Ruslan's mother, a Ukrainian university professor, had spent his childhood encouraging him to attend college in the United States as she believed that this would offer him the best education.<sup>11</sup> With this in mind, and the encouragement of a teacher, Ruslan applied to USA/USA. USA/USA is a non-profit that caters to high performing students in the Ukraine to assist them in their applications to prep schools and Universities in the U.S. Once accepted to the program, Ruslan was instructed to apply to prep schools as the program advised him that this would greatly benefit him in university applications. With the assistance of the program, and his mother, Ruslan gained admittance to the Cart School.

During his two years at Cart, Ruslan spent his time in a variety of clubs and courses. A typical week for Ruslan would include a cappella rehearsal, training with the math team, meeting with the chess club, and participating in intramural sports. Despite

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<sup>11</sup> While Ruslan listed his father as a guardian as well, he spoke mainly of his mother as the primary care giving force during our interview. Furthermore, he listed his mother's ex-boyfriend and current husband as significant adults in his childhood, but as these two individuals were not consistent throughout his upbringing, I decided not to consider them as primary caregivers

participating in over twenty hours of extracurricular activities a week, Ruslan prioritized his academics. After completing the required math courses, Ruslan took math electives in theory and advanced calculus. Ruslan advanced beyond the typical math courses at Cart, and ultimately ended up in specialized classes where he worked one on one with teachers. By the end of his two years, he had earned a GPA of 4.1, and won several academic awards in the math and economics departments.<sup>12</sup> In his extra-curricular activities, Ruslan excelled. By his second year at Cart, Ruslan was chess club president, a position to which he applied to. Ruslan did not hold any other formal leadership positions in his clubs, but he mentioned performing well in math and chess competitions.

While Ruslan immersed himself in the Cart community, his time at the school was also spent adjusting from his previous education and life in the Ukraine. Culturally, Ruslan had entered a much more socially liberal environment. Ruslan recounted having to re-adjust the ways he thought and spoke about same-sex relationships, as Cart accepted homosexuality more than his hometown in the Ukraine. Additionally, Ruslan adjusted to the ways in which the Cart faculty interacted with the students.

The faculty members at Cart had a largely positive impact on Ruslan's acclimation to the U.S education system. Throughout our interview, Ruslan spoke fondly of his advisor.

[Advisors] did things for me beyond the classroom. One advisor helped me select a chair, a more comfortable chair. They would drive me to the store and we would just pick a chair. They would help me to put the board on my wall that I would write stuff on. I was really lucky, some people might have a very different experience if they don't get a good advisor.

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<sup>12</sup> Out of a 4.3 scale



Over his two years, Ruslan estimated that he took about 6 classes with his advisor. He noted that their close relationship stemmed from their similarity in age. Between them there is only a seven-year age gap, and they share common interests. While this was clearly Ruslan's most significant faculty relationship, he also noted other teachers who aided him in his transition and development as a scholar. For Ruslan, these relationships allowed him to feel comfortable and supported at Cart. Despite being thousands of miles away from his family, Ruslan had adults who helped him with everything from decorating his dorm room to his college applications.

After graduating from Cart, Ruslan attended one of the big three Ivy League colleges. He earned admittance to all three of them. When explaining why he thought he had been admitted to these schools, Ruslan said “[I] Had some good looking accomplishments, Chess tournaments at the national level in the Ukraine, and economics. I had high grades, and I was taking some difficult choices.”

Ruslan had achieved what most prep school graduates would consider “the dream.” After attending college, he spent his first year in the work force working at Goldman Sachs. By the time we spoke, Ruslan had just begun a new job in Connecticut. After living and working in New York City, Ruslan decided that he wanted a change of pace. He wanted to have a more hands-on role at a smaller financial consulting company. Although Ruslan lamented that there was not as much to do in Stamford, Connecticut he appreciated that it was a short commute to his work in Greenwich.

### *The Prep School as A Prep School*

While some individuals claim that they attend prep school for the experience, Ruslan was candid about his use of Cart as a tool to get into college. Although he clearly appreciated and benefited from his time at Cart, regardless of college admissions, Ruslan intentionally used the school and his experiences to prepare him for US universities. In short, Ruslan truly treated attending prep school as a preparatory experience for college.

Ruslan offers us a clear example of students who use prep schools to acquire some sort of capital in order to gain access to elite universities, and ultimately elite opportunities and lifestyles. Before attending Cart, Ruslan had little capital in U.S society. He was from a middle-class family, with no social connections in the States.<sup>13</sup> Although he was a proficient student, and had already been acclaimed for his chess skills in the Ukraine, Ruslan did not have the skills to navigate the U.S education system successfully at an elite university level. By the time he graduated from Cart, however, Ruslan had gained admission to three colleges with an acceptance rate below 10%, and felt confident in how to navigate academia.

Before, during and after attending Cart, Ruslan placed import on the ways in which the school prepared him for college. While at Cart, Ruslan was able to gain cultural capital, in that he learned how elite schools in America function. He was able to work with faculty members who gave him individualized attention, and who established personal relationships with him. These experiences offered Ruslan cultural capital, as they granted him the skills to be able to work within the cultural system of academia

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<sup>13</sup> The average yearly salary of a Ukrainian university professor is significantly less than the United States equivalent, as a result, Ruslan's family (when looking at only his mother's salary) can be considered to be part of the middle class

when he entered college. Additionally, Ruslan's time at Cart afforded him the opportunity to learn American behavioral norms (how to interact with American students, how to decorate his dorm room, how to deal with politics, etc.). Furthermore, Cart offered Ruslan a myriad of opportunities that would bolster his cultural capital outside of academics.

Chess club, Math team, Economics/Federal reserve challenge, tennis, these are all activities that allowed Ruslan to develop certain skills that he likely otherwise would not have had. The significant part of the prep school experience, in terms of cultural capital, is that it allows attendees to develop a "rounded" sense of cultural capital. Ruslan was able to simultaneously foster his academic, athletic and artistic cultural capital in two short years. Non-boarding prep schools are less likely to offer these opportunities as the students leave campus, and therefore have less time for these activities. Additionally, schools of less means cannot offer the same caliber of extra-curricular activities.

When asked to describe the most valuable part of his experience at Cart, Ruslan pointed towards the preparation for college. Ruslan noted that USA/USA had advised him to attend a prep school to better prepare him for college applications and college life, and upon reflecting, he said that he agreed with this decision. Despite mirroring Shamus Khan's subjects when he accounted his college acceptances to his own merit, Ruslan had an acute awareness that Cart did have an impact on his success in college, and afterwards. Ruslan said that his time at prep school made his "transition to college smoother." By the time he got to university, Ruslan was comfortable communicating with faculty members, and he was more prepared to connect with his American peers.

Ruslan's story allows us to observe the ways in which prep schools can offer students Bourdieu's forms of capital. While Bourdieu would argue that capital cannot be gained in this way, this argument is consistent with Zweigenhaft (1992, 1993) and Deresiewicz's (2008) works, which suggest that prep schools do in fact offer their attendees the opportunity to build capital that they do not get from their families.

Ruslan's time at Cart allowed him to acclimate to an elite American academic culture, and allowed him to cultivate both his social and cultural capital. It is important to note that Ruslan arrived at prep school through the diversity recruitment path. This is significant as it offers us context for Ruslan's awareness of Cart's effects when he talks about how it prepared him for university. When Ruslan arrived on campus, he knew he was in a privilege environment (compared to home), and he was interested in actively taking advantage of it.

If Ruslan had been the from the typical born and bred in Fairfield county type of family, none of his experiences would be out of the ordinary. In fact, they would be expected at minimum. Ruslan, however, was born and raised in a different culture. The contrast between Ruslan's life before Cart and his life after Cart, allows us to easily see the effects that prep school can have on the academic success of an individual.

Furthermore, it demonstrates that this success is generally made up of the cultural and social capital that prep schools grant its students to prepare them for elite universities. With this understanding of prep schools established, we can now explore how other participants in this study used their acquirement of capital at prep schools.

### CHAPTER III: Privilege and Meritocracy

#### *Grace Carey*

For the majority of her life, Grace Carey has danced. At the age of three, Grace's parents enrolled her in a dance class at a studio near her Minnesota home. While her father worked full-time in finance, Grace's mother spent her time as a homemaker, taking care of her two children until the eldest (Grace) was in seventh grade. When Mrs. Carey returned to work, she taught biology at a private high school near their home. After moving to New England, at the age of thirteen, Grace began attending a summer intensive at a prestigious dance school over 7 hours away from home.<sup>14</sup> In order to gain admission into the summer program, Grace had to complete an extensive audition process that demonstrated her skill as a dancer.

While Grace's parents had both attended traditional boarding prep schools, when it came time for Grace to make secondary school plans, she wanted to attend the dance school she had been to over the summer. After attending the summer intensive, Grace had been offered a position at the year-round program at the dance school. Although Grace was thrilled with the offer, her father was less enthusiastic. Grace explained, "I [begged] for weeks straight. [When my father decided I could go, he came into my room and said,] So, I was thinking, if you're going to be living away from home you're going to need your own laptop.' He hadn't told me yet that I was going to

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<sup>14</sup>Summer dance intensives are typically periods of five to eight weeks where dancers work with a different company or school (other than home) to gain experience and improve upon technique. The schedule is full of different technique classes such as pointe, ballroom, partnering, jazz, and modern and often choreography. Students go through audition season, send photos, and often apply to many schools to find the best financial and technical fit.

be going away.” This offer, however, came with conditions. Grace explained that her father and mother said that she had to consider other schools as well, and that ultimately if the academics were not up to par, that she would need to go to a different secondary school.

Within a couple of months of starting at the dance school, Grace began her applications for her “other options.” Grace described herself as complying but not really believing that she would ultimately have to transfer schools. When deciding which schools to apply to, Grace identified the Watchill School. This school was of particular interest to Grace as they had a fairly reputable ballet program. Ultimately, Grace applied to two prep schools in New England. By the March of her freshman year, Grace learned she had gained admission to Watchill. Although Grace still wanted to attend her dance school, her parents called her to inform her that she would be going to Watchill. The decision, according to Grace, was largely based on the fact that her father considered Watchill to be a good school, and that it would ultimately set her up for success in the future. Grace also noted external pressures from extended family who had learned of her admission to the prestigious prep schools. “They would say,” she explained, “Why *wouldn't* you go there?”

When Grace arrived on Watchill’s campus at the beginning of her sophomore year, she was determined not to like it. “I hadn’t let go of the fact that I hadn’t wanted to return to [my dance school].” This, however, quickly changed. Once Grace moved on from the fact that she had not returned to the dance school, she began to enjoy the community aspect of Watchill. She developed close friendships, and forged relationships with the faculty members who lived in her dorm.

At Watchill, Grace danced, was in choir, participated in a weekly cartoon club and occasionally helped a close friend with a therapeutic horse riding club. While she found the ballet company to be “gossipy”, and “two-faced,” she found friends that were as she described, “more grounded.” This, she attributed to the fact that they came from less privileged areas. In terms of how she compared to the average Watchill student, Grace described herself as on the “poorer end of [the socioeconomic] spectrum,” despite, “never having a want for money.” Although Grace identified as “poorer,” she still did not have to pay any financial aid at the institution, meaning her parents paid over \$40,000 a year for her to attend Watchill. Grace self-identifies as a WASP, and although she was raised in a preppy environment, she does not see herself as “stuck up.”

Although dance was important, Grace described herself as working hard academically. She estimated that she spent about three to five hours a night on homework, and she “did everything in [her] power to finish assignments.” Grades were important to Grace, but she was satisfied with grades that were lower than A’s. Due to the rigor of the academics, Grace explained that a “B” was actually quite challenging to get, and therefore she was satisfied with “B’s”. Although Grace explained that Watchill did not have a traditional GPA system, she estimated that her average was around a “B.” Grace explained that the non-traditional grading system meant less pressure for the students, which she appreciated. She also pointed out that, “teachers rooted for students to do well.” Throughout her time at Watchill, Grace felt supported academically, and was pleased with her performance.

Overall, Grace enjoyed her experience at Watchill. She acknowledged that the school offered her a lot of opportunities that other high school students do not have.

Grace, however, saw her presence and performance at the school as fairly run of the mill. She argued that individuals are more likely to attend prep school if their parents attend a prep school, and that that likely contributed to how she ended up attending a prep school. That being said, Grace rarely indicated that there was anything outstanding about her experiences at Watchill. When asked what would be most different about her life had she not attended Watchill, Grace commented that she would have different friends that would likely be less diverse as they would not come from all over the world.

When applying to colleges, Grace had a great deal of support. Grace used resources from Watchill, working with a college counselor and doing research on online databases. She ultimately earned admission to seven schools, which she described as satisfying as she had, “no first choice.” Grace attributed her college acceptances to the fact that she had gone to an academically rigorous school, which had prepared her for college. Furthermore, she explained that she had “done a good job with the application process.” Overall, Grace described her college application process as if there were very little stress involved. Even three years later, she was happy with how she constructed her applications.

Grace currently attends a small liberal arts college in New England. She still dances, and she keeps in touch with her friends from Watchill. When we spoke, Grace was overloading in credits (the typical student at this college takes 16 credits, Grace was taking 24.) She described her work ethic, however, as “procrastinating a lot.” Nonetheless, Grace seemed to be satisfied with her performance at school, even if she



did do things last minute. When speaking about her successes, Grace mentioned learning how to write well at Watchill and having strong support systems in her friends.

Outside of school and dance, Grace works in a lab at another college nearby. The professor, whose lab she works in, was once a student of her mother's. When Grace expressed an interest in working in a science lab, her mother connected them. In addition to this, Grace spent her last summer working at her dad's company in order to get professional experience. In the future, she plans to continue to find jobs and opportunities through networking and family connections. She also mentioned potentially using Alumni connections from her college.

### *Unconscious Meritocracy*

Much like Shamus Khan describes in his book *Privileged*, Grace, and her outlook on her Watchill experience, encapsulate elements of the "new elite." Although Grace took time throughout our interview to acknowledge the fact that she had less struggles than some of her peers, she did not demonstrate a belief or understanding that her successes were rooted in her privilege as a white, upper-middle class, prep-school attendee. Grace framed many of her experiences as "opportunities," not privileges. While I will not go as far to say that Grace is unaware of her privilege, her story does indicate that she has little appreciation for the weight of her privilege.

Unlike the other participants in this study, Grace was not interested in attending a prep school. She had the alternative of a boarding dance school, and she preferred that over the academic opportunity and challenge of a prep school. While this preference is likely the result of many factors, it demonstrates young Grace's disinterest in the cultural and social capital that prep schools offer. Although her dance school

offered her an intense type of cultural capital in dance, she had little interest in having wide-spread cultural capital that an elite boarding school might offer her. While this might be argued to be a product of her young age, all the other individuals in this study cited a desire to go to a prep school for academic opportunity, which would lead to admission at a prestigious college. Grace, however, was interested in pursuing the track of dance, and demonstrated little concern or worry about the instability of that path. This can be considered as a product of Grace's privilege. Unlike adolescents who come from lower socioeconomic classes, Grace was potentially able to reject the opportunity of prep school due to her background.

This could also be seen as a demonstration of an element Zweigenhaft's (1992, 1993) argument that elite prep school attendees are more likely to acquire and use social capital in future endeavors. Grace had little interest in attending a school that would offer her immense cultural and social capital, as she already had that from her upper-middle class upbringing. While Zweigenhaft might contend that Grace does not fit into the pattern of his study as she does not seek social capital, but instead cultural capital in the form of dance, I argue that her elite upbringing (similar to that of Zweigenhaft's (1992, 1993) participants who had attended prep school) offered her so much capital that she was able to seek a very specific type of cultural capital as she already had a sturdy foundation of social and cultural capital from her parents.

Throughout her time at Watchill, Grace seems to have maintained this mentality. She took advantage of some opportunities at the school, but she had little interest in performing highly in terms of academics. Being average, was satisfactory to Grace as she knew that being average at Watchill still put her above some of the highest

performers in non-academically rigorous high schools. This mentality may be considered to be oppositional to Khan's (2011) depiction of prep school students, however, Grace's ability to settle for averageness relies on a nuanced sense of meritocracy. Grace "earned" her way into Watchill, and as a result, even an average performance at this prestigious institution would demonstrate that she was a hard worker, worthy of future opportunities. Additionally, this mentality can be considered to be an example of Deresiewicz (2008) arguments that prep school attendees are conditioned to work only as hard as they need to gain "success", and no harder.

Furthermore, Grace's use of social and cultural capital can be seen in her accumulation of professional opportunities. Grace's acknowledgement of her social ties does not disprove a sense of meritocracy in her life; it simply demonstrates that she utilized her social networks to get ahead. Grace still takes credit for her own work in the lab, and her ability close the deal on the opportunity, even if her mother got her foot in the door. In part, this demonstrates the effects that Grace's middle-class upbringing had on her future. The social capital of her family, in a traditional Bourdieu-sian format, afforded her an opportunity that will ultimately contribute to Grace maintaining her family's "elite-status."

## **CHAPTER IV: The Utilitarian Perspective: The Conscious Use of Privilege**

*James Wheaton*

By the time he was twelve years old, James Wheaton had decided he wanted to be on the Supreme Court. While this aspiration might seem normal for a middle-class child who has been exposed to the judicial system by a parent or family member, James lived in a world that he described as full of crime and violence. James, however, was determined to reach beyond what he knew. “I didn’t like the environment that I was in at home. I thought it was unhealthy and [that] there was a strain on resources. So, I wanted to go to a place that would allow me to thrive, and I saw that historically, a lot of successful people had gone to [prep] schools. So, that’s where I wanted to be.” James’ interest in prep schools specifically stemmed from reading the biography of President John F. Kennedy. After establishing boarding prep schools as his goal, James applied to Prep for Prep, a non-profit organization in New York City that works exclusively with students of color to get them prepared for and admitted to prep schools. After being rejected after his first application, James reapplied and was granted admission to the program while he was in middle school.

In the late spring of his eighth-grade year, James learned that he was admitted to Tolerton Prep on full financial aid. Thanks to the assistance of Prep for Prep, James found his way into environment that was drastically different from the one in which he lived. When speaking about Queens, New York, James said, “[Being in Queens] held students back because everyone had this mindset that education or opportunity wasn’t a

priority. [The community's priority, was] more of a survival instinct, where you had to do what you had to do to make it." James was determined to approach the world with a different perspective, he wanted to do more than just "survive" in Queens.

When James arrived at Tolerton Prep, he took advantage of the resources by joining the rowing team, taking advanced math courses and two clubs: Afro-Latino Society and Young Men's Forum (a club designated to talking about issues that are especially pertinent to young men). Unlike public schools in Queens, Tolerton offered advanced classes that allowed James to learn about subjects that he otherwise would have had to wait to learn about in college. Additionally, public schools rarely offer rowing opportunities as the equipment for a rowing team is highly expensive.<sup>15</sup> Finally, while other schools may have offered James the chance to be part of cultural clubs, they likely would not have had the access to resources such as guest speakers, and extensive funding for events. Despite being at an elite prep school, however, James still had a multitude of familial responsibilities placed on him that kept him rooted in Queens.

Due to a traumatic brain injury, James' mother was unable to work full-time throughout his childhood. This meant that James and his five siblings were financially supported by his mother's Social Security. Although he was hours away from his younger siblings, James felt that he was the paternalistic figure for them. When returning home from breaks, James would take care to address the needs of his mother, who struggled with drug addiction, his autistic brother, and the other two younger children, six and ten years younger than James. The dual-nature of James' life affected his experiences at prep school.

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<sup>15</sup> Rowing teams require sites where the team can row, which also requires a location to house boats. Boats cost over \$20,000, and on average are about \$35,000. Oars and other equipment are hundreds of dollars.

While at Tolerton, James was acutely aware that his upbringing had been drastically different than that of the majority of his peers. When describing his average classmate, James said, “[They] were upper-middle class or rich, white, from the northeast, WASPy, but not extremely preppy like people at other prep schools.” In order to keep up and fit in, James said he “worked harder to catch up” to the lifestyle of his peers. For James, catching up meant acclimating to an environment where academics were a priority, financial needs were not the norm and individuals were accustomed to having individualized attention in the classroom.

Ultimately, James felt as though he successfully fit in with most aspects of the prep school life. He cared deeply about his academics and was willing to work hard for success. James believes that these two characteristics are the keys to being successful at Tolerton, and to enjoying your time there. Individuals who do not have the ability to prioritize their academics and to work for success would likely fail to perform well, and therefore would be likely to be unhappy and unfulfilled during their time at Tolerton. James went so far as to say that if he had not been hard working, he would have been “depressed” at Tolerton. Throughout the interview, especially when reflecting on his time at Tolerton, James indicated that academic success was one of the most important parts of the school, and that the work ethic developed at Tolerton ultimately contributed to his later successes.

By the end of his time at Tolerton, James graduated with high honors, an ACT score of 33 and had earned admission to one of the “big three” Ivies. When James and I began corresponding about his participation in this study, he showed all the trademarks of being educated. The first email I received from James requested a copy of the letter

of consent, which he wanted to see before committing to being interviewed. When we met in person, James invited me on to his school campus to meet him in one of the libraries on campus. He had reserved a private study room in advance, which students had to request and then swipe into with their school ID card.

During our interview, James maintained a professional disposition, sitting up straight, dressed in business-casual attire. He was careful to answer each question with a direct concise answer, and often needed to be asked to expand upon more personal aspects of his life. James had clearly put conscious thought into his experience at prep school, as he classified Tolerton as a “pipeline to success.” In James’ opinion, attending Tolerton gave you every opportunity to succeed in life. While at Tolerton, he identified himself as being the “antisocial friend,” as he often opted to focus on studies instead of social opportunities. James stated that this, “reinforced” his individualism. “[You learn] to love what you care about, and not care what people think.” Other than interacting with close friends, James rarely took part in other social experiences, which were only “important if [they helped] advance [his] résumé for college.” Although James placed little import on the social, he was able to establish strong relationships with several faculty members. James recounted being able to talk with these teachers when he was struggling with managing his workload, or if he needed a reference for college applications.

When speaking about college applications and other forms of success, James had confidence in his understanding of working the “system.” He framed his college application process as a form of “selling” himself to the schools. James attributed his

college acceptances to his ability to create a distinct image of himself for the decision committees.

Being from where I am from, I thought I did a really good job illustrating where I'm from, with a single mother who kind of fell off the deep end with drugs and stuff like that. And the whole painting that up to the point where I was at Tolerton, and my ambitions beyond that. My role on the application was to show the college that I was striving to be somebody who would one day be on their notable alumni list, that way at the very least they would remember me.

Instead of attempting to completely assimilate to a new culture and dissociate himself from his background, James capitalized on ways in which this would make him stand out. James held a strong belief that if he stood out as being part of the “top 10% from where [he came from],” that he would stand out.<sup>16</sup> This, he believed, helped contribute to his admission to prep school, and ultimately also served as one of the primary sources of his college acceptance. James had made the best of what he had been given, and he had gone above and beyond to attain as much success as possible.

James defined his approach to the world as “utilitarian.” Everything that he did during high school was a means to an end, the end being acceptance to a prestigious college that would offer him further opportunity. When selecting extra-curricular activities, courses and structuring his time, James would always envision his goals for the future, and would determine how he could best reach them. For James, success occurs when you have a clear strategy: “Once you have a good strategy, if you just stick to it, I think that it's very hard to not come out decently well.” When it comes to strategy, however, he notes the importance of adaptability. “[It's important to be adaptable because] the externalities are always random, and you just have to be able to

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<sup>16</sup> While James did not explicitly mention the work of W.E.B Du Bois and his arguments concerning the “Top Talented Tenth,” it is worth noting that this echoes the sentiments of Du Bois's theory.



pivot when necessary.” Throughout his life, James was attentive to being flexible and to making the best of each opportunity that came his way, whether it was Prep for Prep, leadership positions in clubs or using college applications to paint a specific image of himself.

In the future, James plans to continue to his utilitarian approach. Similarly to when he was younger looking for opportunities to attend prep school, James does ample research concerning the fields he is interested in. He plans to use networking through both his college and high school to find future opportunities. Furthermore, he has very specific strategies to continue his “pipeline to success.” Whatever options come his way, James will use a “cost-benefit analysis” to get where he wants to be. When he pitches himself to jobs, of course only ones in which he sees opportunity for growth, he plans to frame himself as an “entrepreneur.” Much like choosing extra-curricular activities and applying to college, James will consciously craft his resume with impressive jobs and achievements to help him to get to the next level. Additionally, his branding at “entrepreneur,” will convey to future employers that he will be innovative and hard-working in whatever task he works at.

### *Caroline Harvey-Jones*

44 miles north of James, Caroline Harvey-Jones spent an idyllic childhood in Fairfield County. Caroline and her younger sister were raised by both of her parents. Her father worked as in software development and her mother worked in publishing until Caroline went to high school, which is when her mother stopped working. When Caroline was two years old, her parents enrolled her in a small private day school that had about 25 students per grade. While at her day school, Caroline engaged in the

academic offerings while also pursuing dance at a local studio. Throughout her childhood, her parents shuttled her back and forth between their home, school and her studio.

By the time Caroline began middle school, her family began treating the secondary school application process as an equivalent to applying to college. For Caroline, “public school was never considered.” Both of Caroline’s parents played a role in her search for the perfect prep school, and contributed to her application. One of Caroline’s primary reasons for applying to boarding school, was that she wanted more freedom. “Boarding school allows you the freedom to argue to do what you want.” In Caroline’s mind, there is far less flexibility at public schools as students must adhere to overarching school rules, which are often dictated by rules implemented by superintendents and so on. Private schools, however, can be, and are, more tailored to the individual students, which allows to students to advocate for their wants and desires. While at her day school, Caroline had found it challenging to maintain a rigorous academic career and to dance competitively with all the travel between school and the studio. Ultimately, Caroline sought an environment that would provide her with the opportunity to dance, challenge her academically and prepare her for the future. In short, she wanted to have it all.

In her eighth-grade year, Caroline was admitted to Watchill Academy, a prep school in New England with an acceptance rate of 13%. Over her four years, Caroline eagerly took advantage of every opportunity that crossed her path. In her own words, she “took everything.” On average, Caroline took six classes each term, the average student takes five. By her senior year, Caroline was taking advanced classes such as

“Human Anatomy and Physiology,” and “Linear Algebra.” In addition to her academics, Caroline spent all four years as a part of the prestigious Watchill Ballet Company, for which individuals had to audition. Caroline also spent four years on the debate team, as a tour guide, in the robotics club and three years on the school newspaper. As a senior, Caroline was elected as captain of the ballet company, dormitory prefect<sup>17</sup>, captain of debate, editor of the school newspaper, and head of robotics club.

As demonstrated by her intense course load, and involvement in extra-curricular activities, Caroline was an active member of Watchill’s community. Similarly to James, Caroline was determined to take advantage of every opportunity before her, and taking advantage meant being excellent. Caroline described herself as recognizing her privilege in attending Watchill. “I would think, ‘I’m actually really lucky to go here, and I want to make the most of it’” Caroline explained. When it came to grades, Caroline had the utmost confidence that she could earn high marks. “It’s not okay to not be your best,” she said. “And, I knew I could do really well...I had the capacity to do well if I [studied].” If Caroline struggled with assignments, she would be sure to speak with the teacher for assistance. For Caroline, there were, and are, no limits. She believes that success is demonstrated when one makes the absolute best of what they have; regardless of what kind of resources they have. When talking about college acceptances, Caroline contended that her college decisions would have been the same had she gone to public school. If she had attended a school with less opportunities, she still would have “[done] the most, and [been] the best.”

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<sup>17</sup> School’s equivalent of college RA’s

Socially, Caroline spent the majority of time with her close friends. She placed a high importance on developing her friendships and being “seen.” Although she categorized herself as, “not popular,” she spent her time in high school wishing she was. Overall, her social circle consisted of individuals from her dorm and extra-curricular activities. The only group that she did not socialize with was the robotics team. Caroline described them as, “science nerds...who lived and breathed robotics.” Despite having an interest in science, Caroline was not interested in spending time with the robotics team outside of group meetings and competitions. Caroline cited her reasoning as being that she had enough friends by the time she was really involved in the robotics team.

In Caroline’s case, her belief in diligence and drive did end up “paying off.” By the time we spoke, she was in her final year at an Ivy League college. When applying to colleges, she had a top choice, and for her, that was the only option. She of course applied to back up schools, however, she earned a spot at her top choice. Caroline described herself as lucky, as many “good and smart students,” had applied during the same application pool. She attributed her acceptance to “writing good applications.” Caroline crafted her application so that it would show that she had taken advantage of every opportunity before her. Much like her application to secondary schools, Caroline’s mother played a large role in helping her daughter navigate the process. When writing essays, Caroline was able to send her drafts to both her mother and her college counselor.

During Caroline’s four years in college, she continued taking part in everything that she could. In her earlier years at the school, she reached out to professors to get experience in their labs. She currently works with her college’s admissions office,

interviewing students from Watchill. Additionally, she networked her way into a job at a large pointe shoe company, where she has worked for the past couple of years.

Caroline's has remained an active member of Watchill community. This past year, she spoke at one of the largest fundraising alumni events that Watchill hosts.

According to Caroline, Watchill enabled her to perform well in college, and taught her how to enjoy her time. “[At Watchill], you learn how to do work, when you need to push yourself, and when you need to hold back so you don’t kill yourself,” said Caroline when explaining the most valuable part of her experience at Watchill. Despite being fiercely competitive during her time at the school, and still identifying as a high-achieving individual who would do anything to be the best, Caroline saw herself as becoming more comfortable with being not the best at everything as a result of her time at Watchill. In college, Caroline has been able to accept, “not being the best.” In her opinion, natural ability plays into academic success, therefore, she cannot be the best at things in which others have a higher natural ability.

Given that “not being the best,” is the opposite of how Caroline identified herself in high school, Caroline’s argument about natural talent might be considered to be a way for her to reconcile not being the best at everything she tries to do. This mentality, however, can be considered a representation of both Deresiewicz (2008) and Khan’s (2011) work. In the latter study, Deresiewicz (2008) contends that students of elite institutions only do what they need to do get by. While Caroline defies this in that she typically goes above and beyond, her concession that she cannot be the best at *everything* allows her to fall into a similar mentality of only doing things that she succeeds at and can reap benefit from. Furthermore, Caroline echoes the experience of

some of the students that Khan (2011) observed in that she seems to have shifted to a mentality that allows her to capitalize on what she has “natural talent” for. That being said, she is still driven by the desire to be “good;” she wants to as well as she can and get as far as she go. And as far as Caroline is concerned, there are few limits to her future.

### *Meritocracy Founded in Use of the System*

Although James and Caroline are from opposite sides of the tracks, they share a deep belief in meritocracy. Throughout their elite academic careers, both individuals have managed to attain some of the highest levels of success. Both individuals earned leadership roles in their extra-curricular activities, were nominated for academic awards, earned high GPA’s, received high standardized test scores, and were admitted to Ivy League colleges. Similar to the other participants in this study, these two individuals acknowledged the amount of opportunity they had been given. They both hold a staunch belief that their work ethic is the most significant factor in their success; and, they believe that if others were to follow their methodology, that they too would earn success.

At first glance, James and Caroline seem to fit directly into the current research and literature. Caroline’s upper middle class parents took every opportunity they could to foster opportunity and privilege for both of their daughters. Throughout her time in prep school, Caroline practiced and developed skills that would ultimately prepare her for a continued elite lifestyle. She unabashedly reached out for assistance when necessary and actively worked to be the best at whatever she did to create future

opportunities for herself. This can be considered as a representation of Lareau's (2011) theory of concerted cultivation.

Just as Bourdieu would predict, Caroline reproduces the elite nature of her family and education by using her forms of capital to her own advantage to position herself in elite opportunities. When applying to college, Caroline was careful to use her cultural capital in terms of knowing how to present herself to the colleges, and further used her social capital by tapping into the connection of a college counselor to advise her. Caroline continues to her social capital as she used personal connections to find her job at the pointe shoe company, and she plans to network in the future as she looks for a full-time job. Caroline's competitive nature, can also be understood as a form of her tapping into cultural capital. By doing everything in her power to take advantage of opportunities, Caroline demonstrates a working knowledge that in order to impress society, she must earn titles, awards and do well.

James works his capital in a similar manner. While James has not been granted social capital from his family, and Bourdieu would be likely to argue that he therefore does not have very much cultural capital, I would argue that he accumulated social capital during his time at Tolerton. While at Tolerton, James was able to forge connections with faculty members and students who were able to assist him in his learning of the world and in his development as an intellectual. This social capital enabled him to see the import of networking, and therefore propelled him to continue to develop and enact his social capital throughout college.

As noted when describing our interview, when interacting with people, James is careful to present himself in a way that comes off as composed and professional. This

demonstrates his acute awareness of how individuals perceive him, and how he can control and manipulate that perception. This could be considered an enactment of his cultural capital that I would argue he learned during his time at Tolerton. James knows how to talk, walk and act like an alum of a prep school, and therefore as a member of the elite. James' time at Tolerton conditioned him into elite behaviors, that are likely drastically different from the behaviors that he would have developed had he been educated in the public school system in Queens.

These two individuals offer us a more complex understanding of elite culture and how prep schools figure into the larger picture of the elite. Both James and Caroline share a "utilitarian" ideology. They both *actively* make choices that they know will put them out ahead. While they are similar to Khan's subjects, in that they place a large amount of import on their own hard work, they are not blind to the ways in which they are using the system to get out ahead. They consciously use every opportunity possible at their privileged institutions to continue being a part of the elite. Take for instance Caroline's insistence that she would have had the same college results had she gone to public school. Caroline did not bring up the fact that she would have had high marks or high test scores, she simply said that she would have demonstrated that she knew how to take advantage of what was before her. "Taking advantage," in this instance, I would argue, means consciously making choices that play into social systems in a way that results in success for the individual. Just like the newspaper at Watchill, Caroline likely would have taken part in other activities that would bolster her application, with the knowledge that it would ultimately help her earn admission to a top school. James



blatantly articulated this methodology when speaking about his own extra-curricular choices.

When speaking about extra-curricular activities, James said that he would likely only participate if he saw it as benefitting him in college applications. Otherwise, James would rather allocate the time towards academics. James' cost-benefit analysis in regard to all of his secondary school choices demonstrates that he had a working knowledge of how the system of admission to elite colleges goes: get top notch-grades, be able to sell yourself to admissions, and bolster your resume with the appropriate activities, but only ones in which your status will be somehow enhanced. This indicates that James sought to attain cultural capital, and arguably social capital through some networking opportunities that occurred in extra-curricular activities, in a conscious manner that would assist him in college admissions.

There are slight differences between James and Caroline. Caroline talks about manipulating systems, but she does not explicitly say that she is doing things to meet a certain end. In her mind, it is because she is naturally competitive. Her drive to be the best, is innate. James, however, comfortably labels himself as utilitarian and is quite open about being driven towards quantitative success. The slight nuance between the two likely derives from their different upbringings. While Caroline is reproducing her own capital and elite-ness, handed down from her parents and upbringing, James is cultivating something new for himself, that is greatly different from what he saw when he was growing up. James is consistently reminded that the world he currently lives in is different from that in which he was raised, and he is actively determined to remain in his new world.

Both of these individuals complicate previous work concerning elite academic culture as they demonstrate an intense awareness of the system, how it works and how they plan to use it to their advantage. In some ways, Caroline and James fit into Khan's (2011) framework as their actions perpetuate elite culture because they see no issue with a system that works in their favor. Caroline and James, however, do not blindly claim all they have achieved is because of their own merit. They both pride themselves on being hard workers, but they were hard workers in the places that they knew it would count. They consciously take advantage of privileges afforded to them from their prep schools (such as college counselors and elite extracurricular activities like crew) in order to gain future success. In other words, they actively seek out ways to enhance their capital.

James and Caroline also complicate Zweigenhaft's (1992, 1999) work. While Zweigenhaft's (1992, 1993) study focuses on older individuals, it can still be applied to those who are entering private high schools from different middle school backgrounds. They each come from drastically different backgrounds, and therefore entered into the elite institution (prep school), with different levels of capital. Both, however, sought to acquire a balance of cultural and social capital in order to help them towards college admissions. The acquirement of capital, is not as simple as looking at the amount of capital that an individual enters an elite institution with. Instead, one must take into consideration how the system has or has not reinforced itself within the individuals life, and to a certain extent, the individual's disposition.

## CHAPTER V: Using Privilege to Gain Success

### *Drew Johnson*

Drew Johnson is the quintessential prep school student: white, upper-middle class, male, well-spoken, and athletic. The only thing that differentiates Drew from the stereotypical Tolerton student is his Southern upbringing.<sup>18</sup> Throughout his childhood, spent in North Carolina, Drew's parents ensured that he and his siblings had the best opportunities. Drew's father served as CEO and President of a telecommunications company, while his mother chose to stay at home with their children to act as what Drew called, "the family planner." All three of the Johnson children spent their childhood with both parents at home attending to their needs. Drew's father, although he worked full time and supported the five-person family, spent weekends shuttling Drew to his lacrosse and football games, tournaments and practices.

Although Drew was unimpressed with his educational experiences before attending Tolerton Prep, throughout his childhood, he had attended private school. Each Johnson child attended a local day school in North Carolina. The school caters to students from pre-k to high school, and boasts an average class size of 12 students with teachers who have an average of 19 years of experience in the classroom. The price for the school is between \$12,000 and \$20,000, depending on the grade level.

In addition to the children's schooling, the Johnson parents took care to supply their children with ample extracurricular opportunities. Drew's older sister, three years his senior, spent much of her youth training as a gymnast. By her high school years, she

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<sup>18</sup> While participants largely identified "stereotypical prep school students" as white and rich, they often described them as coming from New England.

was on track for the Olympics, and was offered a spot training with the US National Team coach; however, she opted to have a normal high school and college career and ended up attending a large public university in the south. Similarly to his sister, Drew's childhood was filled with athletic experiences afforded by his parents. Although one does not need to come from a wealthy background to play sports, Drew's young athletic career was filled with supplemental camps and training opportunities that would not be available to families of much lower incomes. While he dabbled in a variety of sports as a child, by high school, Drew participated in football, ice hockey and lacrosse. The youngest of the three Johnson children, Drew's younger brother, took interest in computer design and cinematography. While this endeavor is not athletic like the two older Johnson children, it is still a fairly elite extracurricular activity as it necessitates access to electronic devices and expensive software.

By the time Drew was in middle school, he was competing on the varsity lacrosse team with high schoolers and he wanted to be part of a competitive athletics program. During one of his lacrosse training camps, he met a friend who attended a prep school in New Jersey. This prompted Drew to get online and search boarding schools. When recounting his application to boarding schools Drew said, "I Googled, 'top three boarding schools in the U.S.' and I applied to those three." Unlike other students who apply to prep schools, Drew took charge of his own search. According to Drew, his parents were not aware that he was planning on apply to boarding schools until he asked for a ride to go take the Secondary School Admissions Test (SSAT's), a standardized test that costs over \$100 to take. While Drew's parents were, "shocked,"

at his desire to attend a boarding school, they ultimately conceded that it would be the best choice for him as it would offer him a better education than his current school.

Despite being admitted to a school that has an acceptance rate below twenty percent, Drew described himself as being less than intelligent. “I wouldn’t say I’m dumb, but I wouldn’t say I’m smart. You know, I get passable grades here. I have a 9.4. I think that’s my [cumulative GPA] right now. But you know, I always thought of [sports] as the tool for myself to get into a college,” Drew explained when talking about his time at Tolerton.<sup>19</sup> This mentality seemed to color Drew’s high school experience, as he spent much of his time prioritizing his athletics. Unlike his peers who spent time building their resume for college applications, Drew spent the majority of his non-academic time on the field.

To best prepare myself for college that meant working out a lot, playing a lot of lacrosse and football during my free time, trying to get myself in front of college coaches on weekends and during the summer and during breaks, time when people would be doing internships or ya know volunteering and stuff like that, I’d spend it playing my sport trying to get myself seen and get myself an opportunity to play for a college that I’d love to go to

When speaking about his time at Tolerton, Drew demonstrated an acute sense of self, as he often talked about his work ethic in the sphere of athletics. While Drew consciously focused on his athletics and argued that he wasn’t a strong student, his GPA and test scores tell a different story. By the time of our interview, Drew had earned a GPA of 9.4, and a SAT score of 2200, both above the average for Tolerton and the nation.

Drew spent all four years boarding at Tolerton. While he began his career at Tolerton as a traditional boarder, his family still based in North Carolina, he currently

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<sup>19</sup> 9.4 at Tolerton is equivalent to a 3.5 (between a B+ and an A-)

exists as a hybrid between boarding and day-student. After seeing Drew's success at Tolerton, his younger brother decided to apply. Once he was admitted, Drew's parents moved up north. When explaining how it all occurred, Drew included himself as part of the conversation, saying that his parents wanted to see him in his final year of high school while also supporting his brother. The Johnsons now live in the same town as Tolerton, less than a quarter mile from the campus on a street that houses many faculty members. The houses in this area are typically worth anything from half a million to a million dollars.

Typically, students who live within a half-hour drive from Tolerton are required to be day-students. When Drew's family moved North, this put Drew's status as a boarder into question. Unwilling to give up his life in the dorm, Drew found a way to negotiate with the school. When asked how he managed to continue living in the dorm, Drew said, "Oh, I threatened [the school], by saying that I would declare my grandparents as my educational guardians.... Since I'm eighteen, I'm allowed to do that myself without the permission of my parents. And, when faced with all that paperwork, the school just said, 'No, no, no, no. You just stay.'" Drew explained that he figured out this strategy by looking up on the internet, as he did not want to resort to begging the school to allow him to live in the dorm.

In Drew's junior year, he was voted by his dorm-mates and the faculty in his dorm to be a proctor.<sup>20</sup> This was unusual, as this position typically goes to seniors. Drew, however, characterized the choice as natural as he cited himself as being very close to all the individuals in his dorm. Drew re-earned this title in his Senior year. In addition to residential duties, Drew joined a student organization against sexual assault.

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<sup>20</sup> Student proctors act as the high school equivalent to student residential advisors (RA's) in colleges.

The club had been started in response to the recent increase of sexual assault reports on prep school campuses, and Drew said that his role on the board fulfilled a need for a male perspective, as most of the board members were female. Athletics, however, remained his top priority.

Drew's entire college application process centered around sports. By the spring of his junior year, he began speaking with division III schools in the Northeast about playing lacrosse. When describing college applications, Drew used one word: simple. He approached the entire process by asking potential schools and coaches, "What do you have to offer me?" Ultimately, by the time Drew and I spoke, he was in his senior year at Tolerton, and had finished the college application process. Drew had been recruited to a small liberal arts college with an acceptance rate of 26% to play on their lacrosse team.

### *A Conscious Use of Capital*

Drew's story offers us a different view of the prep school experience than James and Caroline. Similarly to those two, Drew had an acute focus on the future, and how he would use the system to get there. Drew's focus on athletics demonstrates a large amount of cultural capital, as he had a thorough understanding and belief that his athletic ability would aid in his college admission process. By explaining that he spent his summers and breaks training instead of doing internships in jobs, Drew exhibits an awareness that he needed to make concerted choices to best use his capital in order to gain success.

In addition to displaying a large amount of cultural capital through his athletics, Drew indicated his privilege when detailing his experiences negotiating with the Dean's office about housing. By doing his own research on the topic and approaching the deans directly with what he defined as a "threat," Drew acted with entitlement. Instead of following the system, Drew ignored rules and not only proposed an alternative, but insisted upon an alternative that suited him. This could be argued to exhibit the effects of Drew's middle-class upbringing, in terms of Lareau (2011), as Drew demonstrated that he had comfortability negotiating with the institution to best suit his needs. On the surface, this instance appears to have short-term effects and benefits as it only directly affected his senior year, however, it serves as evidence of a type of cultural capital that will benefit Drew throughout the rest of his life. By demanding to maintain his boarder status, Drew used his knowledge of several social and organizational structures to find a solution that would get him what he wanted. Furthermore, he used his cultural capital to navigate the communication with the Dean's office. He clearly knew who to talk to, and how to talk to them. As shown through his college application mentality of, "What can you offer me?" Drew continues to enact this cultural capital for his own benefit.

Interestingly, despite acknowledging his privileged background, Drew is unable to address how his SES granted him the capital necessary to succeed at Tolerton and to be a successful athlete. Drew did not indicate any acknowledgement of how his father's trips to games fostered his love of the sport; nor did he note how his parent's income allowed him to attend training camps and "get in front of coaches." Drew consistently situated himself as the main actor in all of his decisions and successes. According to Drew, he was the driving force in being able to maintain his boarding status at Tolerton,



he initiated his application to prep schools, and he had all the agency when it came to applying to prep schools.

Drew's experiences and reflections offer an alternative view to capital, meritocracy and privilege. Instead of blindly believing in meritocracy, Drew acknowledged that there are certain social systems that one must play into to gain success. He, however, still put himself as the main player in everything he did. This seems to suggest that there is a middle-ground between the Khanian view of prep school students and individuals who are meta-aware of all to social systems in place. An individual can acknowledge that success does not occur out of pure merit, but perhaps they can take pride and credit in figuring out what social systems offer paths to success, and using those systems to their advantage.

This argument would suggest that Deresiewicz's (2008) work might need to be more heavily considered when analyzing individual's understanding of meritocracy. While Drew certainly does not fit into the Deresiewiczian framework of not working hard, he does exhibit a strict desire to work hardest in the areas that he believes will result in the most success. Drew's intense focus on athletics in place of typical professional opportunities such as internships and jobs, combined with his blatant admission that he believed only sports would gain him access to high caliber school, demonstrates Drew's version of the utilitarian perspective.

## **Conclusion**

Prep schools are considered to breed the “leaders of tomorrow.” Between the faculty, money and facilities, these institutions do indeed offer their students the resources to become “leaders.” As demonstrated by each of the participants of this study, many of the graduates of these institutions go on to find great success in terms of what colleges they attend, how they perform in college and what kind of profession opportunities lie ahead of them. This study attempted to address how students of prep schools both attain success, and how they conceptualize the process of attainment. Specifically, I sought to explore how students consciously and unconsciously use privilege to address their past successes, and to work towards future accomplishments. With this goal in mind, I hoped to better understand how prep school culture affects the individual’s concept of meritocracy and how they planned to gain success post-prep school.

Overall, this study offered three main findings. First, while boarding school can be considered an elite environment that serves the elite, the path to boarding school is no longer exclusively for the upper class. The experiences of the twelve participants demonstrate that even within a small pool, there can be a fair amount of diversity in terms of how one ends up attending a prep school. The subjects came from different geographic locations, different socioeconomic backgrounds and all ranged in regards to how they were or were not connected to prep schools. This understanding is significant, as it pairs with both Bourdieu (1986, 1999) and Laureau’s (2011) work to grant us a look into how an individual’s background may affect how they interact with elite

culture. The second finding concerns how prep school attendees unconsciously use their capital to navigate their way through prep school itself, and how this continues post-secondary school. Similar to Khan's (2011) work, this finding demonstrates that prep school attendees represent a new elite that uses an intense focus on the individual experience to promote a sense of meritocracy. Prep school attendees offer little indication that they are aware of the elite-ness that prep school's offer, nor do they acknowledge how their own status as elite. The third finding, complicates past literature, as it explores the conscious ways that prep school attendees navigate elite culture. Unlike Khan, I argue that individuals have an acute sense of the systems in which they are working, and therefore they are not blindly attributing their success to traditional meritocracy. I would argue that despite failing to accredit their successes to the privilege they have been afforded, many prep school attendees have conscious ways in which to leverage their success.

At the beginning of this study, I outlined three paths through which the participants ended up attending prep school: legacy/immediate exposure, middle-class academic focus and diversity recruitment. These three methods of attending prep schools grant us a foundational understanding of how each individual accessed the elite culture, and therefore allow us to better interpret their time at the school by signifying the social and cultural capital with which the subjects began prep school. While this list of entry methods could be argued as not exhaustive, all of the participants in this study did fit into one of these three options, and I would argue that the majority of prep school attendees would as well.

The students who fit into the legacy/immediate exposure or middle-class academic focus were typically from upper-middle class families. When I began analyzing the data from the interviews and surveys, Annette Lareau's theories concerning child-rearing offered a framework through which to understand how these paths worked. Subjects who had parents of a certain socioeconomic status or background, were more likely to be exposed to prep school, and have parents who fostered "well-rounded" resumes for their children. Take for instance some of the middle-class subjects, like Kim Wang or Grace Carey: both of their parents focused their energy on a concerted cultivation of their child as they provided and encouraged extra-curricular activities that would boost capital. Their anecdotes about their dance careers and their parent's prompting to apply to prep school exhibit Lareau's (2011) theory of concerted cultivation.

The background of the individual, however, seemed to have little correlation with the quantitative success of the student at prep school. Some of the most socially privileged participants went to the least elite colleges and earned the lowest GPA's in high school, while other subjects that fell into this category went to highly prestigious colleges with nearly perfect GPAs. The same could be said from individuals of lower socioeconomic statuses.

Despite having no discernable impact on quantitative success in secondary school, background did have an effect on experience at the prep school. While the middle to upper-class students arrived on prep school campuses feeling liberated and acting with ease because they could now fit in all their extra-curricular activities without wasting time on travel, the participants from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds. Similar to Khan's (2011) finding with students of color, James Wheaton went so far as to say that he needed to spend time "catching up," to his peers that as children, had had access to the elite culture that prep schools provide. Ruslan Basileve also spent much of his time in prep school adjusting to and learning about the culture. As a result of their backgrounds, each individual approached the prep school culture with a different degree of familiarity.

Socioeconomic background did not predict how individuals would reflect on and interpret the effects of their prep school experience. Caroline Harvey-Jones and James Wheaton came from opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum. Nonetheless, Caroline and James both left prep school with a deep belief that if they worked the system of academia, they would foster success for themselves. The experiences of these two individuals prompts us to question assumptions about how prior exposure to elite culture affects future elite experiences. The findings of this study demonstrate that understanding how an individual ended up attending prep school has a significant impact on how they experience prep school. An individual's socioeconomic background, however, does not offer a clear prediction as to how prep school culture impacts an individual's sense of meritocracy and privilege.

To gain insight into the impact of prep school culture, we must look towards the moments that the participants noted as significant, how they defined and perceived success, and how they believed that they got there. Although each participant did clearly put an effort into achieving success at their respective prep schools and colleges, we are interested in the forms of privilege that enable them to reach success more easily than their less-elite counterparts. Much like Khan (2011) argues in *Privilege*, all the

participants in this study pointed towards their own work ethic when accounting for their success. When describing their time at prep school, each subject described him or herself as a hard-worker, and explained that their grades and successes were a result of their effort. While the participants did credit parents, teachers and other support systems, the majority took primary responsibility for their success. Furthermore, while some subjects spoke of their privilege, they always immediately disqualified it in some way. Drew Johnson, for instance, explained that he, “never had to worry where [his] next meal was coming from,” but assured me that he wasn’t extraordinarily rich like some of his peers. Similarly, although she had attended private school her entire life, and presented as one of the wealthiest participants in the study, Caroline Harvey-Jones separated herself from her ultra-elite peers. When speaking about how wealthy her classmates were, Caroline pointed to the fact that she would see students wearing designer dresses worth hundreds of dollars.

When asked if the phrase the “best and the brightest” accurately described prep school students, many of the participants noted that the “best” did not exclusively attend prep schools, as some people do not have the opportunity. That being said, only one individual directly mentioned their prep school attendance as a significant factor when explaining their successes post-secondary school (college, internships). This indicates that although the participants could see the privilege of attending a prep school, they failed to note the advantages it gave them over their non-prep school counterparts. While nearly all of the participants fit into this framework, Grace Carey served as the primary example in this paper. Grace’s story is significant because in comparison to the other participants, Grace was complacent in regard to how she used her privilege.

Whether it was attending prep school, having a prestigious dance career for an adolescent or getting a position in a professor's lab, Grace indicated little conscious effort on her part to use her social or cultural capital. Overall, Grace seemed to see her life experiences to date as ordinary.

Prep school attendees' inability to see themselves as part of an elite culture, inhibits their awareness of their own elite-ness. In American culture, this could be argued as a reason for the perpetuation of the American Dream. Those who have privilege largely credit their success to their own work, and therefore the failures of others as a lack of effort. Khan (2011) argues that this is the downfall of meritocracy, and Deresiewicz (2008) points out that this is the issue with elite educational institutions. The alums of prep schools have both social and cultural capital as a result of their experience, and therefore are advantaged in the future, regardless of whether or not they are putting effort into their professional and academic endeavors. Understanding the effects of elite secondary education, however, is not as simple as saying that it has a positive impact and that all attendees are blind to their privilege.

Past literature assumes that a belief in meritocracy equals a complete disregard of privilege. This study, however, indicates that attendees of prep schools consider using their privilege as a form of merit. The majority of participants explained that they had taken advantage of every opportunity before them, and that that was how they would continue to find success in the future. This concept is reminiscent of Peterson's (1992) theory of cultural omnivorousness, as the subjects are intensely focused on knowing everything, and doing everything. While the subjects in this study mainly cultivated "high-brow" knowledge, they are similar to Peterson (1992) and Khan's

(2011) assertions about “ease” in all situations, in that they wish to gain a comfortability dealing with different types of cultures to signify their success. This desire, however, goes beyond just signifying elite-ness. For the participants, skillfully consuming every resource and using it to their advantage is a form of working towards the future. Although the individuals did not explicitly use Bourdieu’s (1986) language, many of the participants demonstrated that they were consciously capitalizing on both their social and cultural capital throughout prep school and beyond.

Looking again at Caroline and James, we can see how individuals use their privilege as a way to work towards success. These two participants had a distinct utilitarian perspective in which they actively used every elite resource possible. James was unabashed when explaining his strategies when applying to college: present people with what they want to hear, show them that you have made the best out of your situation, and indicate that you will continue to do so. James openly referenced his high-need, high-risk background as an advantage in his application, because he had gotten himself to a better place, and therefore could be considered to be in the “top 10%,” from where he had grown up. He, however, did not consciously note all the working parts that had to come together to get him from Queens to his prep school, and ultimately to an Ivy League. Prep for Prep had a clear impact, and James acknowledged this, but he did not discuss his privilege in having access to the program, or the capital that attending Tolerton prep had afforded him. The focus was on *his* ability to take action.

Caroline was similar to James in that she attributed her successes to her desire to be “the best.” This manifested itself in Caroline’s obsession with, “doing the most.” One of the most notable parts of Caroline’s story is her belief that her college



acceptances would have been the same had she gone to another institution. Caroline contended that she would have made the most of any school she had attended, and therefore she would have been appealing to admissions committees even if she hadn't gone to a prestigious secondary school. Throughout her secondary school career and college, Caroline has taken advantage of both her social and cultural capital to gain professional opportunities and to find success. Caroline strategizes the use of her capital by identifying the most beneficial ways to use it, and ultimately credits this as her own merit. Take for instance, her college acceptance. Caroline used each resource the school gave to her (college counselor, databases, etc.), but took all the credit for the simplicity and success of her applications. In Caroline's mind, her ability to take advantage of what she was given demonstrates that she is intelligent, and hardworking.

Drew Johnson serves as another example of this form of meritocracy. Much like other participants, Drew centered himself as the main protagonist in his success. From his prep school attendance to his fight to maintain boarder status, Drew always placed himself as the actor in the situation. He failed to acknowledge his cultural capital in these situations. Unlike Caroline and James, Drew did not focus on "doing everything." Instead, Drew worked on his athletic skills as a way to access an elite future. Drew's ability to identify his "strength," and using the system to get recruited indicates a high cultural capital. For the most part, Drew quantified his hard work by pointing towards the hours he put in on the field, but he also pointed towards his dedication to getting in front of coaches. In some ways, Drew acknowledged that he was working the system, and this very act was his way of "working" towards an elite future.

The inclusion of privilege awareness when looking at meritocracy is significant because it offers us an understanding as to how prep school attendees view their experiences, and perhaps the ways in which they perpetuate elite culture post-graduation. Understanding social systems and navigating them successfully is surely a form of cultural capital. If we can also regard this as a type of social “work,” then Drew, Caroline and James’ meritocracy becomes more complex than just saying they believe they worked hard for their quantitative successes. Ultimately, this makes the conversation about privilege and meritocracy less black and white, because the elite consider their use of privilege as their own work towards success.

The findings of this study suggest that we need to reconsider how elites see themselves and how they attain success. While this study focuses on elite prep schools, and their attendees, this could be argued to apply to other elite groups. In order to expand on this work, future studies should include extended research. Ideally, there would be more participants, from more institutions. Furthermore, an addition of interviews with attendees of non-elite secondary schools would be beneficial as we could begin to compare the experiences and identify the differences in outcomes, and participant perceptions of merit.

Although prep school students represent a fairly small percentage of society, by exploring their experiences we can gain a deeper insight into elite cultures at large. The elite exist in contrast to the non-elite, and often elite institutions perpetuate inequality between the two groups. The findings of this study encourage us to deal more directly with the experiences and perceptions of individuals who are a part of elite institutions to better understand how the elite reflect on their elite-ness. A

comprehensive understanding of how members of elite groups conceive their own experiences allows us a to examine why the gap between the elite and non-elite continues to widen in American society from a different perspective.

## Appendix

### Survey

Name

Age

Which best describes your gender identity?

Female

Male

Non-binary

[Other]

Which racial/ethnic groups do you belong to? (select all that apply)

Asian

Black

Latinx

Hispanic

Pacific Islander

White/Caucasian

Where did you go to high school (private boarding secondary school)?

How many years did you attend?

What year did you graduate?

Did you go to college immediately after high school?

If no:

What did you do after high school?

Did you ultimately attend college?

Where do/did you attend college and what is your expected year of graduation?

Where is your permanent residence? (Town and State)

Where was your permanent residence during High School? (Town and State)

Check off who lived at home with you for the majority of your childhood (infancy-18 years)

Mother

Father

Step-Mother

Step-Father

Brother

Sister

Grandparents

Mother (second)

Father (second)

[Other]

Do you have siblings?

Yes, sisters

Yes, brothers

Yes, both

No

If yes sisters:

How many sisters do you have?

If yes brothers:

How many brothers do you have?

If yes, both:

How many sisters do you have?

How many brothers do you have?

How many guardians did you have between the ages of 12 and 20? (Guardian meaning individuals who you consider to have had financial and legal responsibility of you, and or

significant emotional influence in raising you)

What was your guardian's job while you were in Middle School?<sup>21</sup>

What was your guardian's job while you were in High School?

What is your guardian's current job?

What is the highest degree that your primary guardian has earned?

What racial/ethnic groups does your guardian belong to?

What extra-curricular activities were you a part of during high school, and for how long were you a part of each one?

Were you on financial aid at your secondary school?

Yes

No

Prefer not to answer

What colleges did you apply to, and what were the decisions?

What was your final high school GPA?

What were your testing scores? ACT/SAT

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<sup>21</sup> This question, and the following four questions, was adjusted to plural when there were multiple guardians identified by the participant

**Interview Questions**

How did you decide to go to [School Name]?

What role did your parents play in the process?

Were you interested in going to a boarding school? Why?

What did application process entail?

Did you apply to other boarding schools?

Where would you have attended school/What type of school would you had attended if you did not go to [School Name] or a similar type of institution?

What was your life like at [School Name]?

Were you a boarding or day student?

What type of non-academic activities did you take part in?

\*remind res-life, etc.

How many hours per week did you spend on extra-curriculars (clubs, etc.)?

How many hours per week did you spend on athletics?

How many hours per week did you spend on music for academic credit?

Did you have any leadership positions in any of these activities?

What about residential or academic leadership?

How did you select courses?

What were the school requirements for course selection?

What would you classify as your most advanced courses at [School Name]?

Was it typical for students to take these types of courses?

What was the class schedule like? (Meaning, did each class meet every day? Or did classes meet three times a week, etc.?)

How many hours a night did you spend on homework?

How many hours a night were you expected to spend on homework?

Were there any instances where you were confronted with a social/political ideology that was drastically different than your own?

What environment did this occur in?

Was there space for these types of conversations to occur at [School Name]?

How would you describe the average (realistic, current, your peers) [School Name] student?

How do you compare to this?

How would you describe the stereotypical (what the admissions catalogue puts out) [School Name] student?

How do you compare to this?

Who would you recommend to apply to [School Name]? Who would fit in best at [School Name]?

Who would be most successful at [School Name]?

If you have children, would you want them to attend [School Name]? Why or why not?

Do you want them to attend a private secondary school?

What was the most valuable part of your experience at [School Name]?

What was your relationship with the staff like at [School Name]?

Your relationship with the faculty?

Deans?

What would you do in the following situations?

If you anticipated that you were not going to finish an assignment in time?

What would you expect to happen?

If you showed up to a class unprepared?

What would you expect to happen?

Having a hard time personally?

How would you navigate assignments if you did not understand them?

How important were grades to you? Why? To the school?

How important was it to you to be a part of social experiences?

What were some examples of this? (clubs, dorms, etc. [natural and organized settings])

Were you ever featured in newspapers or alumni magazines?

Did you ever receive any awards?

What type of awards did you receive?

How did you get chosen for the award?

What do you think of the phrase, “the best and the brightest,” in relation to [School Name]?

Did anyone use this when describing the student body at [School Name]?

Do you think this describes the student body at [School Name]? Is this an accurate description/phrase to use?

What was your college application process like?

Did you have a college counselor?

How many people did your college counselor work with?

Did your college counselor advise you to apply or not to apply to certain schools?

How would you say your college counselor affected your application process?

How would your college application process look different without a college counselor?

When learning College decisions, were you happy with the outcome? Why or why not?

If you did not get into the top school of your choice, why do you think this was the case?

What would you attribute your college acceptances to? (If interviewee struggles, offer: essays, recommendation letters, grades, school, connections, etc.)

Who did you ask for recommendations? Was it easy to ask these people?

What did you write your common app essay on? How did you choose this subject?

When giving advice about how to get accepted to college, what would you say? What about to a fourteen year old?

Had you not attended [School Name], do you believe you would have had the same



experience applying to college?

Had you not attended [School Name], how do you believe you and your life would be different?

How would you describe your work ethic?

What do you attribute your work ethic to? What do you attribute your academic successes to?

What do you attribute your personal successes to?

How do you currently find opportunities? (jobs, internships, etc.)

In the future, how do you plan to find a job? Would it be alright if I contacted you with some follow up questions if necessary?

Do you have any recommendations as to who I should talk to next?

### Participant Demographics

	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Secondary School</b>		
CRH	2	16.7%
PEA	5	41.7%
SPS	5	41.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	6	50%
Male	6	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Race</b>		
Asian	2	16.7%
Black	3	25%
White	5	41.7%
Black/Caucasian	1	8.3%
Asian/Caucasian	1	8.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Financial Aid</b>		
No	4	66.7%
Yes	8	33.3%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>College</b>		
Ivy League	5	41.7%
Non-Ivy League (acceptance range <20%)	1	8.3%
Non-Ivy League (acceptance range >20%)	6	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Hometown (during secondary school)</b>		
Non-US	1	8.3%
Northeast	9	75%
Other	2	16.7%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>SES</b>		
Lower/Working	2	16.7%
Middle	4	33.3%
Upper	6	50%
<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100%</b>

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