Book Reviews

Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites

By Mitchell Stevens, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007; ISBN: 067402673X; 320pp

International Journal of Educational Advancement (2008) 8, 101–104.
doi:10.1057/ijea.2008.11

Several years ago, a New Yorker with strong ties to the field of education was given an opportunity granted to few outsiders: spend a year among those in the admission office of an elite New England-area institution and document what he observed, shedding light on both the process and people that meant so much to high school seniors and their parents. The result was a sympathetic introspective that tried to inform said students and parents, inasmuch as the topic itself stirred their anxieties. Readers were introduced to students from across the country, the infamous “committee” meetings by which applicants were evaluated, and the many institutional pressures facing Deans and Directors of similar institutions across the land. All the while, the author added commentary about society at large, how class and race and athletics and so many other factors may impact students’ candidacies—and how,

sometimes, even those students with everything going for them *still* don’t “get in.” The book was as much social critique as it was “tell-all” of a watershed point in the lives of students and parents.

The above summary refers to Jacques Steinberg’s popular *The Gatekeepers*—a gripping story of his time in Wesleyan University’s admission office during 1999–2000, and in the libraries of many a parent of a rising high school senior since its release. It also, however, describes the newest entrant into the “Admissions Exposé” genre: *Creating A Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites*, by Mitchell Stevens. Unlike Steinberg, who adopted an “a-day-in-the-life-of” approach by closely shadowing one admission officer and a handful of applicants, Stevens keeps more of a distance between himself and his subject matter by bringing discussions out of the admission office

and into a general public forum. In fact, he goes to great lengths to keep both the institution he studied and the people he encountered anonymous—though he now teaches at NYU’s Steinhardt School of Education, and he has altered so many details about the institution and various people he encountered, it’s easy enough to find out where his previous appointment was in 2000–01 (in the spirit of his book, however, the institution will not be revealed here).

Stevens also was fully integrated into the office of “the College” in ways that Steinberg was not: whereas the latter was more an observer and wrote in a narrative style, the former was given plum duties to perform as one of the staff—conducting information sessions, organizing a group guidance counselor visit to campus, interviewing prospective applicants, and even representing the college “on the road” were among critical tasks to which he was assigned. Stevens spent eighteen months in the office of “the College,” and he fondly mentions many of those whose lives were absorbed in the work of wooing and admitting a student body—it’s clear that he appreciates the unique position he was granted and the enormous trust engendered by those operating in such perceived secrecy.

So many interested parties have a stake in the curious process of college admission, and many will use any influence for their own gains, even when in direct conflict with others’ interests or larger institutional goals such as diversity and keeping within budgetary constraints. Stevens goes deeper, however, than just these players, to the “game” itself—providing context and historical

perspective that a lay reader (read: parent or student) might not possess. Why, for instance, were colleges founded in the first place, and what was the nature of higher education—and has that mission changed? And of the influence in athletics and race, respectively, in college admission, Stevens examines the timeline of how they became such critical driving forces in education in general over the last century—and not just as they relate to college admission.

It’s here that Stevens’ work diverges most starkly from Steinberg’s: time and again, within each chapter, he pulls back from “the College”—specific to the greater society, to two overarching themes: status and class. He spends a great deal of time throughout the book returning to these central themes (“someone *else* has to confer it,” he accurately notes of the former), and the book’s last chapter—titled “The Aristocracy of Merit”—digs not-so-subtly into why our nation, especially, covets and protects class so fiercely, and why college admission is so inextricably tied to both. “Credentialism,” the term to which he refers frequently at the beginning (coined by sociologist Randall Collins in the 1970s), is echoed in subsequent pages: why do college degrees matter, and why is the value of a *prestigious* institution’s degree even more important—especially as a legitimizing agent of the already-privileged “haves?”

His tone is as serious (and perhaps gloomy) as it is honest; for those who hope that this book, like Steinberg’s, paints an optimistic appraisal, he offers this final assessment at the end: “...however we write the rules of admission, there will never be room for everyone.” It all comes back to

class for the sociologist Stevens, and he uses several analogies to hammer this point home: families who are born into upper (or upper-middle) classes benefit from a system that favors those classes, and despite programs that attempt to balance the scales—affirmative action, for instance, and the umbrella of “diversity”—they continue to have, and *will* continue to have, almost every advantage in the college admission process. Excellent guidance from connected counselors at well-heeled public and private high schools are part of the deal, along with SAT-prep courses; access to extraordinary athletic facilities and programs, and support from all directions are also advantages of the upper classes, and they help to enhance a student’s academic and extracurricular profile. Stevens examines these facts, and his resignation to its inevitable conclusion will dampen the spirits of many families who are embarking with their children on the challenge of college applications this year. His points are literally illustrated on the book’s jacket: a clean-cut white male, lazily flopped on the grass, sporting a Brooks Brothers-esque tie under his graduation gown, diploma in one hand and cell phone in the other... the latter of which is displaying a picture of a white female in *her* graduation attire.

Thankfully, however, as with Steinberg’s work there is also humanity in this book, which this former admission officer (at a rival institution of “the College”) appreciates. Admission officers fee for these students who apply, and “fall in love” more than a few times each year, especially with those who ultimately may fall short in the process—either

because of or despite the aforementioned inequities of the system. Northern New England applicants, for example, who are great classroom students and athletic team captains but poor test takers, shine in their rural environments; compared to the national pool they are, however, merely average—and geographic diversity (that nebulous word) is an important component to which college officials have paid attention for many years. Admission personnel are conscious of students they can admit but for whom there will be no financial aid available, and thus families are not the only ones disappointed in the outcomes. Stevens also notes the importance of what he calls “evaluative storytelling,” both by the guidance counselor advocating for his or her charge (from which many students from “have-not” schools do not benefit, as noted above) and the admission counselor, responsible for presenting a student’s candidacy to the mythical “committee.”

One side effect of Stevens’ distancing, that readers might not pick up on, is that some of the key players of his book are no longer with “the College”—and this is an important point: like Steinberg, Stevens spent one “cycle” in one admission office of one specific college, and many of the most important variables, goals, people, and statistics have changed in the ensuing five years since his time there, however, insignificant those shifts might seem. It is a snapshot, rather than a portrait of the process and people shrouded in such mystique, and hopefully the public drawn to these kinds of books will recognize that subtle but important truth.

Those who might learn the most from the lessons Stevens tries to teach

in his book might feel misled by the title, as they hope for more insight as to how a class is created—and how one can “get in”—at the most prestigious institutions. His messages, though, are just as important for everyone involved with college admission to ponder: that class begets class; parents are central to the equation, but societal forces in place for decades come into play more often than not; and yet the person matters just as much on every level as his or her statistics (but in the end, it’s better

for all to realize that it’s almost always the application, not the *applicant*, that ultimately is accepted or denied). The classes of the elite have already been created, and are perpetuated in all our educational systems, not just the post secondary ones and *that’s* a more constructive way to focus our attention.

Michael Montgomery
*Vanderbilt University’s Peabody
College Nashville, Box 514 GPC,
230 Appleton Place, TN 37203, USA*