Gender Puzzles
How the humanities
Are Elite Colleges WORTH IT?

Kurt Vonnegut's son, Mark, wrote in his memoir The Eden Express that the best thing about graduating from college is that you can say what a pile of crap college is and "no one can accuse you of your grapes."

Mark attended Swarthmore College. I did too, graduating in 1988. I got a Ph.D. from Yale seven years later. My education might brand me as an "elite" today—the word has become an insult. But since I didn't come from privilege, money, power, or connections, my story is a variation of what we used to celebrate, not ridiculous, as upward mobility.

In my high school, I was one of a few "highly selective college" aspirants. My best friends and I went through the Baltimore City public school system, attending one of the two remaining historically single-sex public high schools in the country. Some of our parents were connected to Baltimore's cultural institutions, such as The Baltimore Sun, or to city politics, and it would have been gauche for them to send their kids to private schools. So the student body of my high school was an all-female microcosm of Baltimore—overwhelmingly African-American, with a smattering of white and Asian-American students; a preponderance of lower-middle-class students, with a smaller group of middle-class or upper-middle-class urbanites. Rich kids were hard to come by.

In my junior year, I scored well on the PSAT's and became a semi-finalist for a National Merit Scholarship. That landed me on mailing lists for glossy brochures from colleges where it's always a New England autumn and the buildings look like castles and the students laugh in small classes with animated professors.

Those brochures were so perfect. They captured some genteel ideal of college that I'd internalized, even though it wasn't native to my family. My parents were the first on both sides to attend college. They valued a college education profoundly, but in the generic, not according to what struck them as a snooty, then-germinal taxonomy of college rankings.

It wouldn't be exaggerating to say that I fonder those brochures.
I looked forward to the mail every day, because my potential future selves were crammed into that box, and I developed fleeting crushes on them. I coveted Wellesley for a week or two, because I wanted to be one of the pretty women congregating on the lawn under a Gothic clock tower in a catalog photo.

In 1983 the admissions game was just beginning to accelerate; it wasn't as ruthless or entrepreneurial as it is today. My best friend E. and I were self-directed and intellectually precocious, and our parents weren't overinvolved. I was my own tiger mother to myself, and my parents correctly worried that my self-tiger-mothering was causing me a lot of angst for questionable ends.

I worked hard, got SAT scores in the top 1 percent in verbal and the top 20 percent in math, and I didn't take SAT prep courses. We weren't expected to. I edited the newspaper, joined the honor society, and so on, but played no sports. I took no Advanced Placement classes (few, if any, were offered), although I excelled in the classes I took, and I attended courses at the Johns Hopkins University during my last year in high school. I saved money from my part-time job at a drugstore and, with some help from my parents, spent a summer in France, where I studied at the University of Strasbourg but mostly got entangled in social frivolity with other Americans.

By today's standards I was an unremarkable candidate. "We'd never get into Swarthmore today," my college friends say, and they're probably right.

But I did get in. I was also accepted at Smith, and I applied to only two other colleges, Brown and Yale, a preposterously ambitious and meager list for students today. "We were so dumb" about admissions, said E., years later. "Swarthmore was our safety school."

Brown was my first choice. It rejected me. And in a cruel blurring of the large-versus-small-envelope rule, I learned by way of a large envelope that I was wait-listed at Yale.

"Why don't you just go somewhere that wants you," my parents pleaded when it came time to make the big decision. My intensity scared them. To them, one college was as good as another. They lost the social airs, so they'd get no thrill out of saying, "My daughter's at Yale."

My high-school friends and I were tribally close. Our last evening together, we said our goodbyes, aware that we were going in different directions and wouldn't be together in this way again. My best friends would be attending local colleges. As for E. and me, the next day we were leaving for Swarthmore, our unwittingly arrogant safety school.

Some of those friends from high school and college now have children themselves who are gearing up for the college-admissions process. A persistent question comes up. Is it worth it? For those few who can afford to pay full price, it hardly matters. For the talented but not rich, it's an agonizing question.

Parents have different approaches. One mom doesn't want to encourage her son to look at colleges in the $55,000-a-year range because she simply can't afford them. Why should he try to get in, when it's a moot point financially, she says. It's like sadistically dangling a Christmas present he'll never get.

Another family's strapped financially, but they're gunning for a few highly selective colleges anyway. The mother went to Swarthmore, and revered her experience there, the intellectual intensity, and the friends she made. She wants some of that magic for her daughter.

I loved Swarthmore, too, and I loved Yale even more. The question isn't how much students like their elite colleges (usually, they like them a lot). It's the hypothetical, with profound real-life consequences, of teasing out the margin of difference: how much more a child might reap from an elite, $55,000-a-year college over a less-expensive college. What great things would happen at any college, versus things that happen only because of some alchemy that truly is about Stanford, or Princeton?

A few recent books (such as Richard Arum's Academically Adrift and Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus's Higher Education?) have called into question the college mystique. A study by the economists Stacy Dale and Alan Krueger finds that going to a more selective college makes little difference in future earning power once you take into account students' inherent abilities. However, they did find that it increased earnings significantly for low-income students, if not for middle-class or affluent students, and for those whose parents did not attend college at all.