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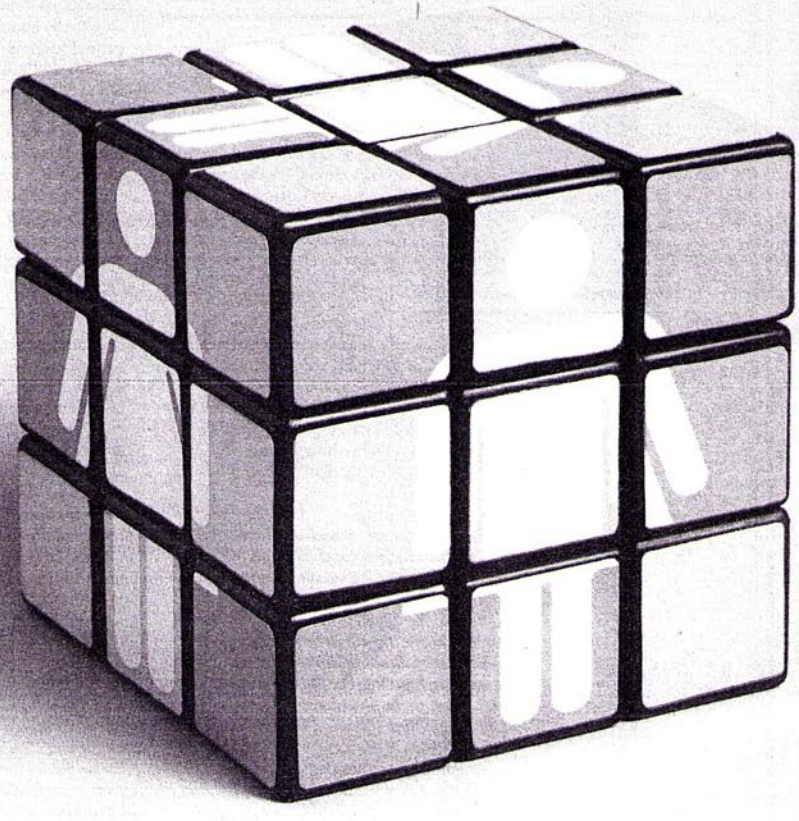


Gender Puzzles

How the humanities

Are Elite Colleges WORTH IT?

By PAMELA HAAG

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 sour 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 ridicule, as upward mobility.

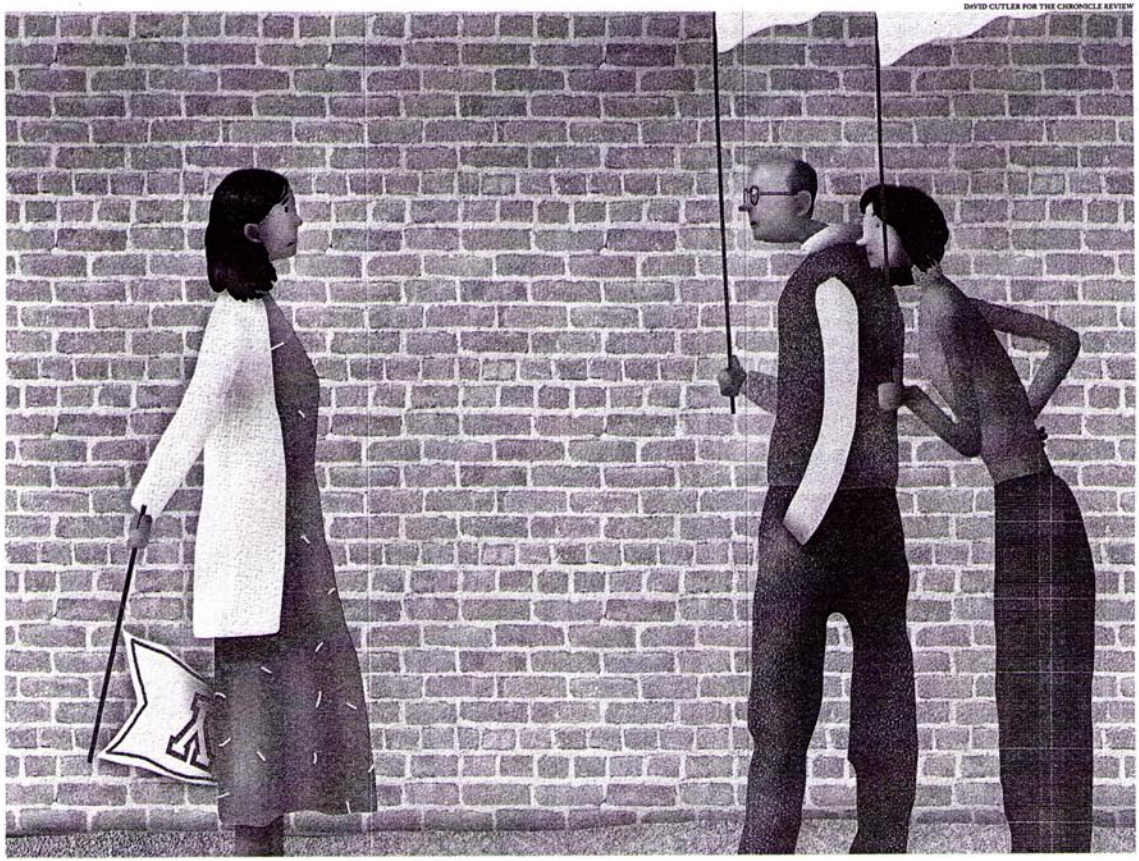
In my high school, I was one of a few "highly selective college" aspirants. My best friends and I went through the Baltimore City public school system, attending one of the two remaining historically single-sex public high schools in the country. Some of our parents were connected to Baltimore's cultural 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 semifinalist 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 fondled those brochures.

DAVID CUTLER FOR THE CHRONICLE REVIEW



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 loathe 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.

and a bumper crop of Ph.D.'s mean that great professors with stellar credentials, exciting minds, and high standards are competing viciously to get jobs at "lower-tier" schools, where students can get BMW professors for Kia tuitions.

At the same time, talented students compete for spots in less-elite colleges. Liberal-arts programs that Arum flags as the most intellectually successful, with more intense reading and writing assignments, now exist at competitive honors programs nestled in affordable state universities.

And isn't it a dubious assumption, in any case, that the way to achieve the life of the mind, if that's truly the elite-college dream, is on the campus? Matthew B. Crawford's *Shop Class as Soulcraft* observes that "smart" people were once socially permitted to do nonsedentary, nonprofessional jobs that wouldn't even involve a college education, to say nothing of an elite one. Steve Jobs famously dropped out of Reed after a semester, and the PayPal co-founder Peter Thiel is offering kids fellowships not to attend college, but to develop innovative ideas instead.

My high-school friend L. went to a local campus of the University of Maryland and got a law degree from the University of Baltimore. She and her husband are among the most insightful thinkers I know. They like to think, and to learn, so they thought and learned, both in and out of college. They couldn't rid themselves of those habits if they tried.

As for the coveted world of elite-college connections, I sensed a "same planet/different worlds" feeling at Yale when I was a teaching assistant. It struck me that some undergrads came to Yale pre-connected, and they stayed connected and deepened those connections, while those who got in purely on merit, although welcomed, tended to form their own social worlds, albeit with some overlap. If you want a group of previously unconnected college friends to stay connected to and share your life with after college, you can create that for yourself at a more affordable college.

Anyway, the forging of connections today seems more dependent on personality type than school affiliation, since the means of making connections are so diffuse and flat. You no longer need to go to Brown to riffle through the Brown Rolodex. You can do that through Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

I'm not a connecting sort of person. My high-school friend S., who attended a local college, is. She flourished and developed more consequential connections than the ones that I forged at an elite college.

FOR THOSE AND OTHER REASONS—frustration, futility, and heartache, perhaps—there may be a spontaneous uprising beginning to stir against "the elite college." In an NPR story that aired in 2010, a mother declared that at some point, "you have to stage civil disobedience" against the usually futile quest for admission.

As a graduate of a highly selective college, I'm partially convinced by the skepticism—partially.

For argument's sake, let's stipulate that you can develop equivalent connections and an equally rich intellectual life somewhere other than at a highly selective college. That leaves a fair amount of *je ne sais quoi* that must make up the difference between the nonelite and the elite colleges to justify the debt.

It may feel crass to quantify like this, to try to put a price tag on cherished experiences in my life, but this is the grim math that parents and students are forced to perform each year during admissions season.

With hindsight and all the no-sour-grapes perspective I can muster, the answer still isn't clear to me.

Along with the nascent tendency to question elite colleges is the occasional habit among elite-college graduates to play down their hard work and good fortune, and to claim indifference. Some will say they went to school "in New Haven" or "in Cambridge" instead of naming Yale or Harvard.

Is that just a mannered false modesty, or do elite-college graduates really feel blasé about their pedigrees and experience? It's important for poor and middle-class parents and students to know: Does the emperor have clothes, or not?

I play down the names, too. But if asked, I answer forthrightly. I *do* care, though. It's just that some of the ways that a highly selective college feels "worth it" to me are louche to admit. Maybe you talk about it with college classmates, but no one else, so others don't have access to

Christie mystery at a country estate, an intellectual ocean cruise, and a TB sanitarium.

Not all students at elite colleges are creative, smart, curious, and ambitious, but your chances of finding a positive-trait-homogeneity-hothouse are better there than in most offices, professions, and neighborhoods because of the collective belief in the value that these colleges still inspire. Like any other rare a truffle, or a blue diamond, you'll pay more just for the rarity of it.

The pleasures of rarity chafe against the democratic soul, and can inspire the familiar mockery that elite schools aren't the "real world," as if meaningful and true things about the human condition can be learned only in a milieu of perfect averageness.

But don't we want our children to get one chance to experience an unthought experiment of seeing what grows under exceptional circumstances, where you can refine your sense of the possible?

The elite college grounded me. I mean that spiritually and psychologically, not practically. An acquaintance of mine, who got her B.A. and Ph.D. from Yale, is modest about her credentials. However, she once put it this way: "There are times in your life when you have a Ph.D. from Yale.'"

It does help. There's a notion, deservedly ridiculed, that the elite-college mystique is about snob appeal, or the superficial bumper-sticker shock and awe of having "Harvard" stamped across your car.

That's not the grounding I'm thinking of—and I myself never got a bumper sticker. My friend meant that there had been times when she found herself belittled, disrespected, or disregarded, and that the phrase restored her dignity and gravitas to *herself*. You remember that you're a person to be taken seriously. You don't have to prove that point from scratch, every time. We should all get that kind of good will for free, just for being human, but we don't.

While the elite college grounded me, it simultaneously did the opposite, and made me feel more free. It gives you social and cultural capital to spend down, if you choose, so you can follow your muse or take a risk or invent some weird vocation for yourself, without feeling—or looking—as if you're going entirely off the rails. It certifies you. You've "earned" the ability to fail, with something to fall back on psychologically. Most of us aren't as strong as we imagine we'll be when we're 18. Sometimes you need a crutch.

True, there are probably a thousand other ways to get yourself an intellectual or professional crutch in life, and some of them might even be free. I can't say that having a crutch like this is worth the debt burden, or what level of debt it's worth, but nor is it nothing.

Things can and should change. It may be more prestigious in the future to find the best college bargain, and to tell people about it—very much as a chic woman will show off her five-dollar sundress when the greatest fashion success is to look amazing on two bucks, not to look predictably awesome on two thousand.

It also could and should happen that we stop attaching self-worth to college admissions entirely, and accept its serendipity.

Admissions is an alchemy dressed up as a science. Barry Schwartz, a professor of social theory at Swarthmore, had a brilliant idea. Why not make undergraduate college admissions more random, by design? Screen applicants for basic qualifications to perform the work at "top-tier" colleges, and then use a lottery to assign them more or less randomly among their choices. That process would correct the illusion of a rational meritocracy in the current system that can leave students feeling like failures.

As for now, my feeling decades out, though I don't often say it, is that the elite college is not worth it at all, but still, that it is. ■