

Senate testimony

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Daniel Golden, and I am the deputy chief of the Wall Street Journal's Boston bureau, where I cover education. I am also the author of the recently-published book, "The Price of Admission," which reveals the extent of admissions preferences for wealthy and well-connected applicants at the Ivy Leagues, Duke, Stanford, Notre Dame, the University of Virginia and other leading colleges. Thank you for inviting me to testify.

I would like to begin by summarizing the key findings of my research, followed by brief comments on its implications.

Overall, the research documented in my book demonstrates that elite colleges and universities use admissions to generate revenue, enhancing their already massive endowments. Their favoritism toward the wealthy undermines equal opportunity and upward mobility in our society.

This conclusion draws on many specific findings.

- **Four major preferences favor affluent candidates in admissions to selective private and public colleges.** I estimate that nearly one-third of students admitted to some elite colleges receive special consideration due to these "preferences of privilege" – far more than those who enjoy an edge due to affirmative action.

The first is the preference for alumni children, who make up about 10% to 25% of the student body at elite colleges. Legacies, as they are called, gain admission at two to four times the overall rate. I estimate that legacy applicants enjoy a 50 to 75 point advantage on the old 1600-point SAT scale over students who do not receive any preference.

Colleges defend legacy preference on the grounds that it's valuable to maintaining tradition over generations. However, that doesn't explain why the child of a rich alumnus who is a major donor receives a larger preference than the child of a poor alumnus who can't afford. For example, my research indicates that about half of all the children of Harvard's 425 biggest donors, most of whom are alumni, enroll at Harvard—a university that only accepts one out of 10 applicants overall. Another study of Harvard admissions found that if a legacy applicant needed financial aid, the alumni-child boost disappeared almost entirely. It's worth noting that, although social class distinctions are widely considered more pervasive in England than in the

United States, England's two most famous universities, Oxford and Cambridge, do not ask about or consider legacy status in admissions.

Children of influential alumni who are also major donors may enjoy an SAT boost of 300 points or more. In 1998, for instance, Stanford only admitted one of nine applicants from the Groton School, a Massachusetts prep school. Among those rejected was Henry Park, a middle-class Korean-American with a 1560 SAT score and high class rank. The only Groton applicant Stanford admitted was Margaret Bass, who had a 1220 SAT score – 340 points lower than Henry -- and was in the middle of the class. Her father, oil magnate Robert Bass, a graduate of Stanford's business school, was chairman of the university's board at the time and had given Stanford \$25 million. Mr. Bass's other three children went to Stanford, as well as Harvard and Duke, to both of which he has made multi-million dollar donations.

The second preference of privilege favors what are called “development cases” – applicants recommended by the development, or fundraising office because if they are admitted their non-alumni parents are expected to provide money or visibility. The parents may be corporate executives, Hollywood celebrities, or leaders in politics or the media. The number of development cases in a freshman class may range from half a dozen to a hundred, depending on the university.

In 1999, for instance, Brown University's president, Gordon Gee, prevailed on its admissions staff to accept Chris Ovitz, the son of prominent Hollywood agent Michael Ovitz. Although Chris was not in the top 20% of his prep school and did not take many advanced classes, Mr. Gee hoped to cultivate Mr. Ovitz and his formidable client list. Although Chris dropped out in less than a year, a grateful Mr. Ovitz later brought celebrity clients such as Martin Scorsese and Dustin Hoffman to Brown for campus events, enhancing the university's prestige.

The third preference of privilege helps athletes in blue-blood sports. Television viewers of college basketball and football tend to assume that college sports are racially and economically diverse. But colleges also give admissions breaks to athletes in many prep-school sports that most American children rarely have a chance to play: crew, horseback riding, sailing, squash, even polo. The way elite colleges and universities have responded in recent years to Title IX, the gender equity law, has worsened this socioeconomic inequity. They have started women's teams primarily in crew and equestrian events while eliminating men's teams in more working-class sports such as wrestling and track and field.

The last preference of privilege benefits children of university faculty and administrators. This admissions break is most pronounced at universities that provide free or discounted tuition only to faculty children who attend their own institution and not to those who enroll elsewhere.

Although the tax-exempt benefit is available to all employees, in practice children of faculty and administrators apply more often to the elite colleges that employ their parents than do the offspring of lower-wage workers. Since faculty and administrators are highly educated – and much research shows that student achievement is linked to the parent’s education level – their children should not need an edge. Nevertheless, to avoid offending colleagues, admissions officials sometimes lower standards to admit their children, who may comprise as much as 2% or 3% of the student body.

- **Elite colleges give special treatment to wealthy, well-connected applicants at each stage of the admissions process.** While most applicants are interviewed by alumni or admissions staff, privileged students often enjoy personal interviews with the dean of admissions. Key administrators at universities such as Duke and Brown have combined the supposedly separate functions of fundraising and admissions – by courting donors and also recommending their children for admission.

Some colleges have institutionalized backchannel routes to admissions for well-connected applicants, such as Harvard’s Z-list. Most students on the Z-list are children of alumni and donors, sometimes with borderline credentials. Although they may be told informally that they’re likely to be accepted, they are placed on the waiting list until the school year ends. Then they’re quietly admitted not for the following September but for the year after.

The preferences of privilege augment other advantages for the wealthy in America’s educational process. Affluent students typically attend excellent elementary and secondary schools and can afford tutors, SAT test-preparation courses and independent college counselors. All of these factors help explain why an estimated three-fourths of the students at America’s elite colleges come from the top quartile in family income—and only about 5% to 10% from the bottom quartile.

- **Preferences for the privileged directly exclude highly talented candidates who are not wealthy or connected.** To be sure, many

children of alumni, donors and faculty are brilliant candidates who would likely have been admitted on merit. But, since elite colleges admit only one in eight or ten applicants and rarely increase their overall enrollment, when they lower the bar for other privileged children, they make room by turning away many outstanding middle-class and working-class applicants, predominantly whites and Asian-Americans. As Notre Dame's admissions dean told me, "The poor schmuck who has to get in on his own has to walk on water."

Sometimes walking on water isn't enough. Without any test preparation course, Jamie Lee achieved perfect scores on the SATs and two out of his three SAT2 subject tests. He received high school honors for creativity in mathematics, and was a promising violinist and composer. Yet of the seven schools to which he applied, five rejected him and the other two placed him on their waiting lists.

Or consider Jonathan Simmons, a high school valedictorian from a low-income family, and a devout Catholic, who was turned down by Notre Dame. It accepted his classmate, Kevin Desmond, who had lesser grades and test scores. Kevin's father, grandfather, three uncles and five older siblings had all attended Notre Dame and the family endowed a scholarship there.

I'm not saying that colleges do – or should – evaluate applicants on the basis of test scores and grades alone. They also consider extra-curricular activities, essays, recommendations and the like. But no matter which of these criteria a college uses, preference based on parental wealth and privilege is not consistent with a merit-based admissions process.

- **Raising money by compromising the admissions process is taking the easy way out – and is not the only way for elite colleges to maintain quality.**

Some college administrators have acknowledged to me that the preferences of privilege are fundraising tools. But they contend that they have no choice because they need contributions from wealthy parents to support laboratories, scholarships, faculty salaries, and other expenditures. Certainly those are worthy causes. But I wonder how much more money colleges need, with Harvard's endowment at \$29 billion, Yale's at \$18 billion, and so on.

In my book, I profile three fine institutions—California Institute of Technology, Berea College, and The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art—which admit students purely on

merit and yet are still able to raise ample endowments, in part through creative approaches to fundraising. For instance, Gordon Moore, the co-founder of Intel Corp., who earned his doctorate at Caltech, gave \$600 million to the institute. Mr. Moore's two sons didn't go there, but he received a different reward: Caltech named an asteroid after him.

Berea College, in Kentucky, educates the best and brightest of Appalachia's rural poor. It won't even admit any students from families earning more than \$50,000 a year. Yet its per-student endowment is as big as Wellesley's and Dartmouth's, because thousands of alumni and non-alumni alike admire its mission and donate with no hope of an admissions quid pro quo.

Turning now from findings to implications, I want to comment briefly on the nonprofit, tax-exempt status of America's elite private colleges. This status confers on them a social responsibility. For instance, Harvard declares in its tax filing that it aims to "educate the future leaders of America" and "improve access to a Harvard education."

Reflecting this mission, such colleges describe themselves as "need-blind" – meaning that admissions decisions do not take into account a candidate's need for financial aid. But the finding of my research is that even if colleges are "need-blind", they are not "wealth-blind" -- that is, they offer advantages to the wealthy and connected in admission, to the detriment of young people of outstanding talent born to less well-off or prominent parents.

In a recent interview in the Wall Street Journal, Princeton president Shirley Tilghman was asked to justify legacy preference. She responded with admirable candor that alumni are "extremely important to the financial well-being of this university."

The reporter, John Hechinger, followed up, "And wouldn't they continue to be even if you didn't give their children the preference?"

President Tilghman responded, "We've never done the experiment."

I would encourage America's elite universities to try that experiment – to eliminate the preferences of privilege and open their doors to the best applicants, regardless of wealth.