



# Feeding the Elite: The Evolution of Elite Pathways from Star High Schools to Elite Universities

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During the last 50 years, private ‘feeder’ schools in Japan came to dominate entry into elite colleges. Intense organizational competition shaped the organizational environment and changed the pathways available to social elites. Compared to Japan, elite private feeders in the US have failed to dominate pathways into elite colleges.

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## Introduction

In the last half of the 20th century, the ‘fairness’ of national school systems has come to dominate academic discussions both in the US and abroad. Scholars like Ishida (1993) or Treiman and Yamaguchi (1993) have argued that, on balance, transition to tertiary education in the US appears more meritocratic than in Japan. Others have argued that elite pathways or tracks have evolved in the US that have created unfair opportunities for students and parents to utilize social or cultural capital (Wechsler, 1977; Synott, 1979; Karabel, 1984; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Oakes, 1985; McDonough, 1997). Elite US college entrance practices have even been described as an ‘...insult to meritocracy...’ (Lexington, 2004). Several scholars have proposed that elite pathways continue to exist in order for parents (or families) to ensure the transmission of social privilege (see Karabel, 1984; Cookson and Persell, 1985; Zweigenhaft, 1993). Zweigenhaft (1993, 223) argued ‘...marked advantages in admissions have been given to those who already have economic privileges...’ Attending a private ‘feeder school’ is identified as a key organizational link in the maintenance of non-meritocratic pathways into elite colleges.

In the US, private feeder schools have been depicted as bastions of elite power and privilege — the kind of school described in Cookson and Persell



(1985). The tacit assumption is that for students in these high schools, admission to elite colleges is merely a formality. However, Farnum argues that theories of status-group conflict are too narrow and need to include a broader ‘... concept of interest, whether of the status group or the educational organization...’ (1997, 522). In a study of ‘star high schools’, Attewell (2001, 291) argues that ‘affluent parents, in seeking exceptional high schools to advantage their children, fuel organizational practices that rebound negatively on many of their own offspring.’ Even Karabel (1984) found that in the 1930s and 1940s elite private feeder schools were not able to assure entrance to all of their graduates. These findings raise significant questions. Are ‘feeder’ or ‘star’ high schools simply conduits of privilege? In other words, are they elite pathways maintained by privileged parents in order to ensure the transmission of social privilege to their offspring? Or, are they simply actors in a broad organizational field (Scott and Meyer, 1994), where many organizations are competing to assure their own interests as organizations? And, if so, what constrains them, or elite colleges for that matter, from creating even more stable and restricted (buffered) connections?

In this paper, we examine the historical changes in elite pathways between private ‘feeder’ or ‘star’ high schools and elite universities in Japan by looking at changing enrollment rates in the post-war period. We then, briefly, compare the US case to Japan. We question to what extent private feeder schools are the agents of elite status groups or are independent organizational actors that work to optimize their own interests within their organizational environments. The latter interpretation calls into question the theoretical supposition (Karabel, 1984) that status-group conflict largely shapes elite college admission in ways favorable to the dominant status groups. We acknowledge that elite parents in both systems try to maximize their child’s educational chances by accessing elite pathways, but argue that organizational dynamics shape the options that elites may employ, not *vice versa*. Organizational competition and the basic concepts that undergird the organizational field limit and channel high status parents’ attempts to procure educational advantage for their offspring. In essence, elite colleges as organizations have become more powerful than status groups in affecting the evolution of secondary–tertiary transitions in post-industrial democracies.

We also find that cultural differences in the conceptualization of meritocracy create different institutional environments, allowing elite high schools in Japan to dominate their organizational field more than similar schools in the US. In the US, elite colleges altered their entrance policies in response to changes in the organizational environment. While Karabel (1984) documents how anti-Semitic sentiments motivated some early administrators, the institutionalization of meritocratic ideals regarding individual achievement forced elite colleges to pursue forms of admission that severely limited US feeders from



expanding their bridging strategies and strengthening the ‘feeder’ relationship. Owing to these differences in dominant beliefs about meritocratic academic achievement, elite US feeders were less able to adapt to rapid changes in the institutional environment than their Japanese counterparts.

## **Institutional Environments and Organizational Fields**

Research on access to elite educational institutions has traditionally been framed in terms of conflict theory or status-group struggle. According to Collins (1971), the impact of status-group struggle (e.g., elite attempts to control or limit the egalitarian function of education) may be muted or take the form of indirect battles over high-status organizations that typify an ‘ideal type’ rather than direct attempts to control selection at every level of the system. However, we take the perspective that rather than being the agents of social class conflict, elite schools themselves are independent actors that pursue their own goals and engage in competition with one another. Neo-Institutional theory (see Dimaggio and Powell, 1991) provides a detailed framework for understanding organizational change.

Organizations exist in, and compete for resources within, physical and social environments, and changes in the environment can bring about the demise of individual organizations. Neo-institutional theories focus on the broader environment, the organizational field. Scott (1995, 56) states: ‘An example of an organizational field would be an educational system composed of a set of schools (focal population) and related organizations such as district offices and parent–teacher associations.’ The organizational field we are concerned within this paper are elite colleges and their major feeder schools.

A second salient concept provided by institutional theorists is also necessary to understand the forces that provoke educational change. The *institutional environment* refers to the broader social environment, especially the pertinent sets of social beliefs that affect how sets of organizations are run. Drawing on Berger and Luckman (1966), later institutionalists have emphasized the cognitive aspect, or the ‘norms’ that govern how groups of organizations behave (for a review, see Scott, 1995, 30–31). In this theoretical perspective, organizational change is strongly tied to institutional change, that is, changes in basic expectations or beliefs about what a school should do. Under this perspective, the continued existence of educational organizations is based on their claims to legitimacy, not on their accountability to those they serve (i.e. students and their families), nor even some measure of quality of output.

To put this in the context of US tertiary organizations, Farnum (1997, 523) notes that between 1940 and 1960, elite colleges, such as Harvard, Yale,



and Princeton, were affected by the widespread ‘institutionalization of universalism and meritocracy’ that swept over the country. Even such wealthy, and ostensibly well-buffered, organizations would have faced severe threats to their legitimacy if they had not changed their admission process to reflect these basic values. Organizations like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton had to respond to demands for social legitimacy if they wished to maintain their positions as pre-eminent institutions of higher education.

Organizations themselves, especially educational organizations, are actors in any social movement for change. Status-group struggle models fail to account for how organizational interests affect competition for limited spaces within highly stratified educational systems. Similarly, researchers who rely on cultural or social capital theories to explain transmission of parental privilege fail to account for the role that organizational members (teachers, principals, deans, admission officers, etc.) may play in defending specific organizational interests. Particularly in Japan, where social identity is strongly linked to organizational affiliation, organizational conflict and competition may be a more salient force than status-group conflict.

Seen from this perspective, organizations are not the battleground on which social classes or social-status groups engage in battles, but organizations, such as colleges and high schools, are themselves powerful social actors engaged in competition with each other. Particularly in the case of elite universities like Harvard University or Tokyo University, their positions at the top of the social pinnacle allow them to have a disproportionate effect on the organizational environment because they function as ‘ideal types’ (see also Douglas, 1986). Changes in these institutions are likely to be quickly copied by other colleges and universities. As changes ripple through the tertiary sector, secondary schools need to adapt, and competition is likely to ensue between high schools that are trying to get their students into the best colleges.

These twin forces — changes made by elite colleges to assure their status and the competition to meet these changing demands among high schools — drive the evolution of the organizational field. Those organizations (high schools) best able to adapt to changes in their environment essentially out compete other organizations. This leads to more and more specific niche-utilization, that is, an increasingly hierarchical system of secondary and tertiary institutions that are interconnected through different pathways.

The next two sections briefly summarize the changes that have occurred over the last 50 years in the number of students moving from elite high schools to elite colleges. We examine these trends in enrollment data as a way to document overall organizational success as high schools compete to place their students in elite colleges. We understand that the concept of pathways implies a diffuse and complex set of relations (see Karen (1990) for a discussion of the culture of admission processes in elite colleges). Nonetheless, even if feeder

high school staff maintain strong social ties with elite college staff, this does not equal great access for students. In the end, feeder schools have an objective measure of one core aspect of their functioning — how successful they are at placing graduates into elite colleges.

## Elite Pathways in Japan

Japan's college and university system originated with the creation of imperial universities during the Meiji period (1868–1912). Prior to this (in the Tokugawa period 1600–1867), advanced education was largely restricted to the samurai caste and provided in 'fief' schools that were established, funded, and controlled by the major samurai families (see Dore, 1965). By the end of the Tokugawa era, a number of private academies (*shijuku*) had been established around the nation, providing advanced education not only in military arts and Chinese classics (the staple of the fief schools) but also instruction in Western or 'Dutch' science (Rubinger, 1982). Many of these schools were reorganized and reopened as either national universities (e.g. Tokyo University) or private universities (e.g. Waseda University). During the Meiji period, the central government made major attempts to modernize the extensive system of temple schools (*terakoya*) that had educated peasant and merchant-caste children by modeling the western school systems (see Lincicome, 1995). By the end of the Taisho period (1912–1926), Japan had a full-fledged educational system comprised of a compulsory primary system, a highly diverse and stratified secondary system, and a tertiary system that provided advanced studies to a small portion of the aged cohort (Uchida and Mori, 1979).

The Japan of the pre-war period was, then, an industrialized nation that had won a major naval battle against Russia and was pursuing a policy of colonial expansion similar to that of European nations of the time. At the pinnacle of the educational system were the imperial universities (*teikoku daigaku*) that admitted only a tiny portion of the population. While these universities were technically open to all subjects of the Emperor (i.e. students from colonized territories such as Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria), in reality most of the students came from socially elite families in the major metropolitan areas. The reforms imposed after Japan's defeat in WW II preserved the elite status of the former imperial universities, transforming them into 'national' universities (Cummings *et al.*, 1977). During the post-war period from 1950 to 1975, tertiary education grew rapidly, which was fueled by the establishment of new national and public universities. The current tertiary system is made up of national, private, and public universities, the latter being funded by prefectures and cities rather than the national government.



Despite these radical changes, the original imperial universities (e.g. Tokyo, Kyoto, and others) have retained their social prestige as the pre-eminent universities in the nation. Although enrolling relatively few students (there were only 3,582 entrants in 1991 for Tokyo University), Tokyo and Kyoto University have played a major role in the generation of elites in Japanese society (Cummings, 1990). While private universities also play a key role in the production of social elites, the former imperial universities continue to dominate the government sector.

Competition to enter these colleges is intense (see Zeng, 1996), and academic high schools in Japan are stratified according to both the test scores of entrants and the placement of graduates in tertiary education (see Rohlen, 1983; Ono, 2001).<sup>1</sup> A few high schools, mostly private, dominate admissions to the most elite colleges (OERI, 1998). A pervasive system of 'shadow education' also fuels this competition with some students studying for 1 or 2 years beyond high school in private preparatory schools (*yobikou*) in order to gain admission to elite colleges (Tsukada, 1991; Baker *et al.*, 2001; Roesgard, 2005).

There is also significant stratification of the secondary system, and severe competition for placement in elite high schools. Several authors have argued that certain informal processes work to increase teacher (middle school) impact on the placement process, and, in the case of less capable students, mediate the harsh repercussions of failure to gain entrance to high school (Kariya, 1985; Shimizu and Tokuda, 1991; Okano, 1993, 1995; LeTendre, 1994). Similar institutional placement mechanisms also characterize the transition between the secondary and tertiary levels (Okano, 1993, 1995; Rosenbaum and Kariya, 1989).

These institutionalized placement mechanisms mean that any given middle or high school has a relatively narrow range of 'client' institutions that it maintains strong ties with. For middle schools, ties are maintained with the most popular or prestigious local high schools (LeTendre, 1994). In the case of high schools, the type of high school determines the kinds of clients sought out. Technical, commercial, or industrial high schools maintain extensive relations with a variety of local industries (Okano, 1993). Elite private high schools send virtually all of their graduates to 4-year universities. Thus, within each type of high school, individual schools devote their organizational resources to maximizing placement in the client institution. For example, elite private high schools create a guidance and placement section that meticulously follows each year's version of the entrance exam for elite clientage universities (Rohlen, 1983).

### **Entry into Elite Colleges**

Under the pre-war system of education, entrance to Tokyo University largely funneled through public schools in Tokyo. Like the protagonist in Soseki's

novel *Botchan*, many youth from rural families were sent to live in Tokyo and attend Tokyo public high schools in the hope that they might someday enter this elite institution. Throughout the period of World War II and on into the post-war period, these local public feeders played a key role in channeling elite students into Tokyo University.

Japanese high schools, like universities, are typically categorized into three types based on funding and control: public, private, and national. National high schools enroll a small percentage of the overall population, are funded directly by the national government, and offer 5 years of education. Public schools and private schools offer 3 years of education. Table 1 shows that private high schools have continued to capture more and more of the enrollments in elite universities in Japan (e.g. Tokyo and Kyoto Universities). Both national and public high schools have continued to decline in terms of enrollments in the most elite levels of the Japanese tertiary sector.

The data presented in Table 1 document a significant shift that occurred against a broader backdrop of change in the secondary school organizational environment. During the early post-war period, new laws reshaped the national system of education and did away with many of the geographic preferences for admission. The former imperial universities increasingly drew applicants from the nation overall, and this created an opportunity for schools from outside the Tokyo metropolitan school system to get their students into Tokyo University. However, public schools (and to a lesser extent, national schools) saw declines in their share of enrollments in Tokyo and Kyoto University. Instead of being replaced by students from public schools outside of Tokyo, entering classes to Tokyo and Kyoto University in the post-war period were increasingly recruited from private schools. Given that roughly 14% of Japanese attended a private

**Table 1** High school background of students at Tokyo and Kyoto Universities (percentage of entering class)

	1975	1980	1985	1991
<i>Tokyo</i>				
Nat'l	12.38	12.03	11.78	9.32
Public	61.36	53.68	46.18	40.77
Private	26.26	34.29	42.04	49.91
<i>Kyoto</i>				
Nat'l	8.04	1.7	7.66	5.04
Public	76.49	70.89	63.95	55.73
Private	15.48	27.41	28.4	39.23

Source: Sandei Mainichi, various issues for March, April, and May 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990.



high school in 1998, private schools have rapidly expanded their positions as 'gateways' to elite college attendance.

This shift is even more apparent when we look only at feeder schools. In the immediate post-war period, entrance to Tokyo University was dominated by local public high schools, just as it had been in the pre-war period. However, educational reforms in the 1960s significantly altered the organizational environment of public high schools, putting them at a competitive disadvantage. Kariya and Rosenbaum (1999) has demonstrated rather convincingly that the rise in private and the decline in public preparatory schools nationally can be traced to a 15-year-long series of local reforms beginning in the 1960s. These reforms, large and small, occurred in the national entrance examination process, in the selection systems to public high schools in the leading urban regions, and in the approach to exam preparation on the part of teachers in the formerly top public high schools. All of these public system reforms, while intended as means to more egalitarian educational outcomes through the reduction or elimination of elitist aspects of public secondary education, actually resulted in a major restructuring of elite pathways in Japan's major urban areas. One after another these reforms opened up opportunities for private high schools. The parents of able students (especially males) increasingly chose private high schools over public ones as a means of avoiding the impact of reforms. Instead of 'white-flight,' the Japanese public system witnessed a 'bright flight' from the public system.

Public high schools were widely affected by detracking policies that affected their ability to place students in elite schools. 'Parents gradually fled public schools as they saw that detracked public high schools offered lower pass rates on admission exams and lower rates of admission to the best universities' (Kariya and Rosenbaum, 1999, 216–217). Kariya and Rosenbaum further note:

About 10 other prefectures began detracking in the 1960s and early 1970s. Tokyo was one of the leading examples of this group. In 1967, Tokyo implemented detracking by quasi-randomly assigning students to high schools (group selection). In the years after this, Tokyo's private schools saw an increase in applications, and they were able to greatly increase their student body quality in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Moreover, after the 1967 detracking reform, a decreasing percentage of admissions to University of Tokyo came from public schools.

This dramatic decline in the competitive advantage of individual public feeder schools can be readily seen in Table 2. In 1960, public high schools dominated entry into Tokyo University. These traditional public feeder high schools (e.g. Hibiya, Nishi, Shinjuku) continued their pre-war eminence, sometimes sending

**Table 2** Decline of Tokyo public feeders

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Year</i>			
	<i>1960</i>	<i>1965</i>	<i>1970</i>	<i>1975</i>
#1	Hibiya	Hibiya	Nada	Nada
Type	Public	Public	Private	Private
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Kobe	Kobe
# of entrants	(141)	(181)	(151)	(126)
#2	Toyama	Nishi	KDT	Komaba
Type	Public	Public	Nat'l	Nat'l
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo
# of entrants	(120)	(127)	(137)	(123)
#3	Nishi	Toyama	KDT	Azabu
Type	Public	Public	Nat'l	Private
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo
# of entrants	(100)	(110)	(103)	(98)
#4	Shinjuku	Azabu	Nishi	Kaisei
Type	Public	Private	Public	Private
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo
# of entrants	(98)	(91)	(100)	(104)
#5	Koishikawa	KDT	Hibiya	Gakugei
Type	Public	Nat'l	Public	Nat'l
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo
# of entrants	(81)	(87)	(99)	(95)
#6	KDT	Shinjuku	Kaisei	Lasalle
Type	Nat'l	Public	Private	Private
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo
# of entrants	(58)	(72)	(86)	(83)
#7	Ryogoku	Komaba	Toyama	KDT
Type	Public	Nat'l	Public	Nat'l
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo
# of entrants	(56)	(68)	(80)	(76)
#8	Azabu	Nada	Azabu	Shonan
Type	Private	Private	Private	Public
Location	Tokyo	Tokyo	Tokyo	Kanagawa
# of entrants	(48)	(66)	(80)	(60)
#9	Nada	Koishikawa	Shonan	Musashi
Type	Private	Public	Public	Private
Location	Kobe	Tokyo	Kanagawa	Tokyo



**Table 2** (*Continued*)

Rank	Year			
	1960	1965	1970	1975
#10	Kaisei Private Tokyo (37)	Kaisei Private Tokyo (55)	Lasalle Private Tokyo (59)	Showa Private Saitama (55)

as many as 141 students in 1 year to the Tokyo University (i.e. Hibiya in 1960). After the mid-1960s, as Kariya and Rosenbaum noted, these schools began to be displaced from their pre-eminent role as a feeder into Japan’s top university by private and (to a much smaller extent) national high schools. Nogaki (1978: 258–259) analyzed data on the top-ten feeders to Kyoto for the period 1968–1975 and also found a drop in public feeders, decreasing from 5 out of the top 10 to 2 out of the top 10 over this seven-year period.

Note, however, that the rise of the private feeders appears to begin as early as 1965, suggesting that while the detracking reforms certainly hindered public feeders, private feeders may well have increased their dominance regardless of the changes. Kariya and Rosenbaum suggest that the ‘bright flight’ was gradual overall, but Table 2 shows that at the most elite levels, the flight was more rapid. In only ten years (1965–1975), all but one public feeder school had been displaced from the top ten. Change at the upper reaches of academic status in Japan occurred much more quickly than change in the system overall. So, while the secondary and tertiary systems in Japan have generally become increasingly stratified in the post-war period, elite pathways emerged rapidly — a fact that suggests that individual organizations mobilized resources to take advantage of the changes in Japanese educational law and policy.

Private feeders appear to have had an early and continuing competitive advantage over public feeders. We argue that one significant advantage private high schools had was the ability to provide more accurate ‘placement counseling’ (*shinro-shido*) and test preparation in the form of private tests (*gyosha tesuto*) in order to better predict what school a student could get into (Rohlen, 1983; LeTendre, 1994). Applying a buffering-coding strategy perspective, those organizations that provide the best input for others (i.e. high schools who tailor students to fit college entrance requirements) are likely to out compete other organizations overall (see Attewell, 2001).

Private high schools at this elite level provide extensive counseling and use of distribution tables (*hensachi*) that predict students’ chances of entry. However, unlike the ‘winner-take-all’ public high schools in the US that Attewell (2001)

describes, there is no constraint from universities on the number of successful applicants that a high school can supply. Thus, private high schools in Japan are free to fine-tune their exam preparation strategies for all students, and there is no disadvantage to good, but less-talented, students in attending these schools.

To further refine our analysis of what was happening in the feeder high school/elite college relation, we looked at overall trends in feeder school acceptances to elite colleges. For the purpose of this paper, we defined a ‘feeder’ school as any high school that sent 20 or more students in a given year to a selected elite university. For example, in Table 3 we can see the breakdown of entrants from private, national, and public feeders. Overtime, the pattern of certain ‘feeders’ dominating entrance into Tokyo University is stable. Since 1975, feeder high schools have provided about 60% of the incoming class of entrants for Japan’s most elite university. While this parameter of the overall environment has remained relatively constant, significant changes have occurred within the feeder school population.

From 1975 to 1991, students from private feeder high schools increased by 10%, whereas students from public feeder high schools decreased by 10% and national feeder high school students also declined slightly. Private schools, then, were able to capture a greater share of the feeder sector entering Tokyo University. Within the feeder sector, their graduates systematically outperformed graduates from public and national high schools in gaining admission to Japan’s most elite university, even though there were no more external shocks to the environment in terms of changes in admission policies.

These data confirm that private feeders, not just private schools overall, were able to gain a competitive advantage in the wake of extensive educational

**Table 3** Top feeder schools for Tokyo University (schools sending 20 or more students in one of the following years): Private, National, and Public High Schools

	1975	1980	1985	1991
Total # of Tokyo entrants	3,079	3,077	3,076	3,582
Total # of entrants coming from feeder high schools	1,835	1,893	1,907	2,159
Feeders as % of total entrants	59.6%	61.5%	61.9%	60.0%
Private feeders as % of total entrants	27.6%	28.7%	33.8%	37.2%
National feeders as % of total entrants	11.9%	10.9%	9.4%	7.7%
Public feeders as % of total entrants	25%	21%	18.6%	15.5%
Total numbers of students coming from feeders				
Private (23)	696	916	1042	1332
National (6)	367	336	292	272
Public (29)	772	641	573	555

Source: Sandei Mainichi, various issues for March, April, and May 1975, 1980, 1985, 1990.



reforms. Table 3 confirms that private feeders continue to dominate entrance to Tokyo University up to the present. Again, ‘feeders’ are defined as any school sending 20 or more students in the year examined. Only a handful of public schools can claim to be in the top 30 schools sending students onto Tokyo University. Relative rankings among the top feeders remained relatively stable from 1995 to 2001. Clearly, these elite schools along with a very small number of public and national high schools created a significant elite pathway within Japan’s educational system.

Our most recent data (Table 4) from 1995 and 2000 demonstrate the degree to which private feeders have come to establish themselves within this elite pathway. Kaisei, the lead feeder, sends over 150 students each year onto Tokyo University. Indeed the best that any public school did in 1995 or 2000 was Okazaki that sent 40 students in 1995.<sup>2</sup> This is still an impressive achievement — few of the US top public schools send double-digit numbers onto Harvard.

The fact that many public schools show up at the lowest level of feeder ranks (i.e. sending 20–30 students) may indicate that existing private schools have created a secure niche that is not readily challenged by new private schools. Since private schools serve both high-scoring and low-scoring students, new private schools may not be able to break into this market. ‘Advancement schools’ (*shingaku*) and ‘safety schools’ (*suberidome*) are two widely recognized terms that Japanese students and educators use to describe both public and private types of high schools. With a small number of private schools dominating entry into the most prestigious colleges, new entrants to the competitive secondary environment are unlikely to break into this specialized niche.

## Comparison with the US

Prior to the admission reforms of 1941 by the ‘Big Three’ (Harvard, Yale and Princeton), elite prep schools wielded considerable influence and power when it came to getting their students into the elite colleges (Cookson and Persell, 1985, 176–177; Karabel, 1984, 1; Powell, 1996). In the US, ‘prep school’ is synonymous with a small group of private, largely boarding, schools at the secondary level catering to the social elite. Sometimes referred to as the ‘St Grottlesex’ schools, a compilation of the names of three of these schools, St Andrews, Groton and Middlesex, these schools form an elite level within the larger universe of private, secondary schools in the US.<sup>3</sup> These elite prep schools and the Big Three had a highly ‘bridged’ relationship that allowed elite prep schools to send large numbers of students on to these colleges. Karabel’s study (1984) of status-group struggle between the White, Protestant upper-class, and Jewish students for entrance into Harvard, Yale, and

**Table 4** Current feeder schools to Tokyo University

<i>School</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i># of entrants</i>
<i>1995</i>			
Kaisei	Private	Tokyo	170
Gakugeidai Fuzoku	National	Tokyo	110
Toin Gakuen	Private	Kanagawa	107
Azabu	Private	Tokyo	101
Nada	Private	Hyogo	95
Tsukubadai Komaba	National	Tokyo	84
La Salle	Private	Kagoshima	73
Oin Gakuen	Private	Tokyo	72
Eiko Gakuen	Private	Kanagawa	70
Kaijyo	Private	Tokyo	68
Sugamo	Private	Tokyo	63
Rakunan	Private	Kyoto	58
Musashi	Private	Tokyo	57
Kenritsu Chiba	Public	Chiba	55
Toho	Private	Tokyo	55
Urawa	Public	Saitama	50
Aiko	Private	Ehime	48
Komaba Toho	Private	Tokyo	47
Tsukubadai Fuzoku	National	Tokyo	47
Kurumedai Fusetsu	Private	Fukuoka	41
Okazaki	Public	Aichi	40
Seiko Gakuin	Private	Kanagawa	38
Hakuryo	Private	Hyogo	37
Hiroshima Gakuin	Private	Hiroshima	34
Tsuchiura Daiichi	Public	Saitama	33
Todaiji Gakuen	Private	Nara	31
Seiun	Private	Nagasaki	29
Takaoka	Public	Toyama	28
Gifu	Public	Gifu	27
Asahigaoka	Public	Aichi	26
Syonan	Public	Kanagawa	25
Kumamoto	Public	Kumamoto	24
Tokai	Private	Aichi	23
Rakusei	Private	Kyoto	23
Utsunomiya	Public	Tochigi	22
Asano	Private	Kanagawa	22
Toyamachyubu	Public	Toyama	22
Nishi	Public	Tokyo	21
Kofuminami	Public	Yamanashi	21
Chiben Wakayama	Private	Wakayama	20
Tsurumaru	Public	Kagoshima	20
<i>2000</i>			
Kaisei	Private	Tokyo	168
Nada	Private	Hyogo	103



**Table 4** (*Continued*)

<i>School</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i># of entrants</i>
Tukubadai Komaba	National	Tokyo	97
Azabu	Private	Tokyo	91
Gakugeidai Fuzoku	National	Tokyo	86
Oin	Private	Tokyo	74
La Salle	Private	Kagoshima	73
Kaijyo	Private	Tokyo	58
Toin	Private	Kanagawa	58
Rakunan	Private	Kyoto	57
Sugamo	Private	Tokyo	46
Musashi	Private	Tokyo	45
Komabatouho	Private	Tokyo	39
Kurumedai Fusetsu	Private	Fukuoka	38
Toho	Private	Tokyo	37
Hiroshima Gakuin	Private	Hiroshima	36
Eiko	Private	Kanagawa	34
Hakuryo	Private	Hyogo	34
Urawa	Public	Saitama	32
Seiko Gakuin	Private	Kanagawa	31
Aiko	Private	Ehime	31
Tuchiura Daiichi	Public	Ibaraki	31
Okazaki	Public	Aichi	30
Asano	Private	Kanagawa	28
Kumamoto	Public	Kumamoto	28
Jyohoku	Private	Tokyo	26
Seiun	Private	Nagasaki	25
Rakusei	Private	Kyoto	25
Kenritu Chiba	Public	Chiba	25
Daitoji Gakuen	Private	Nara	24
Tokai	Private	Aichi	24
Mito Daiichi	Public	Ibaraki	23
Okayama Hakuryo	Private	Okayama	23
Nishi Yamoto Gakuen	Private	Nara	21
Ichinomiya	Public	Aichi	21
Chiben Wakayama	Private	Wakayama	21
Kanazawadai Fuzoku	National	Ishikawa	21
Osaka Seiko Gakuin	Private	Osaka	20

Princeton between World War I and World War II (1920s–1945) argues that the elite ‘St Grottlesex’ prep schools had significant advantage in sending their graduates on to the Big Three. Karabel sets up his argument with the colleges and prep schools modeled as agents or engines by which elite status groups press their advantage. Karabel argues that since this class of students came from predominantly wealthy families, the Big Three heavily relied on them as a source of economic sustenance.

While the Big Three did rely on White, Protestant upper-class students as resources that would sustain them, they were also concerned with maintaining their status/elite position among American colleges and universities. In 1941, without warning their elite preparatory (prep), feeder schools, the Big Three abandoned the College Board essay exams in favor of short answer, multiple-choice tests, including the SAT (Powell, 1996, 139). This symbolized the beginning of a more egalitarian enterprise that the Big Three wanted to pursue.

Missing from Karabel's model was a comprehensive assessment of the organizational environment of the Big Three and their feeder prep schools. From the 1920s to the early 1950s, graduates of public schools outperformed those of private schools in college in their academic college work (Zweigenhaft, 1993, 211–212). The Big Three, thus, wanted to expand their talent pool to include more public school students (Cookson and Persell, 1985). This delineates a shift from the Big Three away from elite status built on exclusivity towards a different form of elite status based on talent regardless of whether the student came from a public or private university. While Karen (1990, 238) argued that 'private schools continue to be advantaged in the admission process', he also noted that changes in the organizational field pushed admissions' offices at the Big Three to adopt more 'meritocratic' measures.

In his study of all Harvard applicants to the class of 1984, Karen (1990) found that several admission factors for each individual student had different weights. For example, an applicant who was an athlete was admitted at a rate of 48% as opposed to 15% for non-athletic applicants (Karen, 1990, 231). Nevertheless, Karen asserts that admission officials '...act in pursuits of organizational interests...' (p. 236). And he also notes that children of alumni, regardless of their secondary school background, appear to have a significant advantage in gaining admission (see also Lexington, 2004). He suggests that 'pressured by faculty, constrained by the organization's consumers of its product (graduate/professional schools and employers), and driven by its members' orientation toward bright students, the admission office tends to select candidates who are likely to become academically successful.' (p. 237). Organizational interests, then, are paramount. Most of these students are disproportionately rich, white males (Weiss, 2000).

Once the College Board essays were eliminated, 'the special privileges of the private high school disappeared' (Powell, 1996, 145). According to Dimaggio and Powell, high status institutions, such as the Big Three, are ideal institutional forms that exert forces on other organizations (i.e., secondary schools) that are attempting entry into these universities (1991). For the Big Three and other colleges, 'objective' tests like the SATs 'promoted fairness and democratic access, since they required no special courses or demanding standards in schools' (Powell, 1996, 142). Harvard in particular had 'a deep



suspicion of the social impact of the private school admissions monopoly' and, thus, embraced the SAT as a 'scientific and democratic predictor of college performance' (Powell, 1996, 143). Hence, the power and influence of the prep schools on the College Boards and elite colleges ceased. Prep school enrollments dropped at Harvard from 57% of freshmen in 1941 to 32% in 1980 (Powell, 1996, 144). In 1990, only 5% of those who took the SATs were from independent schools (Powell, 1996, 143). The change towards meritocracy had such an effect on the prep schools that they were forced to also change their conception of elite status, and instead of admitting students from high status families, they started to search for students who would meet the Big Three's newly developed notion of talent (Powell, 1996, 167).

Admissions reform nullified the prep schools' ability to maintain their own status and influence over the Big Three. The expansion from exclusivity to egalitarianism through meritocracy by the Big Three shows not only the impact of changes in the organizational field but also highlights the effects of the institutional environment. The Big Three were able to set and span their boundaries by adopting a new system of entrance exams, and as they stood at the pinnacle of the tertiary system, their changes were rapidly mimicked by less prestigious schools. The predominant position of the Big Three in the institutional environment allowed them to dramatically limit their admissions of prep students. Owing to their position at the top of the university status hierarchy, they were well buffered from attempts by elites to maintain the elite pathways from private feeder schools. In his study of 347 graduates of a Harvard class from the mid-1960s, Zweigenhaft (1993) found through an examination of SAT scores that his 'findings did not indicate that extensive advantages in the admission process were given to students applying from all elite prep schools' and that only 'students applying from some schools have been given special treatment' because of their 'established relationships' with some Ivy league schools (p. 217). For example, according to Zweigenhaft, students from St Grottlesex had the lowest verbal and mathematics scores because their ties with Harvard, like Choate's or Hotchkiss' ties with Yale (Zweigenhaft, 1993, 218), are strong. Nevertheless, the SATs for Harvard serve as a coding mechanism that extracts the most capable students regardless of which school a student attended. Harvard's central core or task is to educate talented students and to maintain its status as a producer of such talent. SATs provide a specific mechanism to maintain Harvard's status. By lessening the influence of the elite prep schools, the Big Three were able to expand their academic purview and focus more instead on academically talented students. The Big Three's boundary expansion to serve a greater student population also served to protect itself from over-reliance on prep school students who did not show academic capability while in college during the interwar years (Zweigenhaft, 1993).

**Table 5** Top feeder schools in the US and Japan enrollment and number to Harvard or Tokyo University

<i>US (1992)</i>			<i>Japan (1991)</i>		
Philips Academy	(1223)	42	Kaisei	(396)	191
Philips Exeter	(996)	54	LaSalle	(251)	105
St Paul's	(494)	19	Azabu	(302)	102
Deerfield	(595)	17	Nada	(225)	101
Lawrenceville	(748)	17	Touin Gakuen	(NA)	90
Groton	(326)	12	Musashi	(178)	70
Taft	(544)	14	Eikou Gakuen	(164)	70
Hotchkiss	(538)	13			
Choate	(1030)	9			

Source: Japan — Sandei Mainichi.

US — *The Handbook of Private Schools* (1993) (J. Kathryn Sargent). Boston: Porter Sargent Publishers, Inc.

The results in terms of dominance over elite college entry were striking. Compared with Japanese private feeder high schools, elite ‘prep’ schools in the US have not performed well in placing students into the most elite universities (see Table 5). Like the ‘winner-take-all’ high schools that Attewell documents in the public sector, elite prep schools in the US are able to place only a small portion of their graduates into Harvard. This means that there is probably considerable disadvantage to good, but not top, students in attending these prep schools. Given that the Big Three and other elite universities (e.g. Stanford) will only accept a limited number of students from any one high school, attendance at the ‘St Grottlesex’ schools may place many students from highly elite backgrounds at a significant disadvantage!

For example, in 1992 about 3.5% of the students enrolled in Philips Academy gained admission to Harvard. In Japan in 1991, 48% of Kaisei students got into Tokyo University. The best that any top private feeder did in 1992 was Philips Exeter, sending about 5.5% of its students. The worst any Japanese top feeder did was to send about a third of its students (Azabu) to Tokyo University. As data on the number of students in the graduating class was not available, such percentages are not as accurate as could be hoped, but the difference between US and Japanese feeders is not to be found in a few percentage points — it is an order of magnitude difference. Unlike their Japanese counterparts, the elite private feeders in the US have not been able to minutely tailor their outputs to the inputs demanded. This inability to control basic environmental factors has led to a significant weakening of the once dominant ‘prep schools.’

Compared with top private feeders in Japan, the ‘St Grottlesex’ schools place a much smaller percentage of their graduates into the most prestigious college.



The Japanese feeders appear much more specialized for entrance to the pinnacle's of undergraduate education. This may reflect the fact that the prestige hierarchy is less clear in the US than in Japan. Many students from elite US families might choose to attend Princeton, Yale, or Dartmouth over Harvard based on family ties or personal preference. Few Japanese students would make a similar decision. The more contested prestige environment of elite US tertiary education means that it is not possible for elite private feeder schools to use the kind of narrow niche exploitation strategies that Japanese private feeders seem to have developed.

Finally, it must be noted that the relative ability to place students into Harvard among private feeders in the US has remained remarkably stable over the last 60 years. The traditional feeders discussed by Karabel have not lost ground *vis-à-vis* other private feeders. On the other hand, they have made no headway in securing a larger share of the entrant pool. Their organizational niche remains much smaller than their Japanese counterparts.

## Discussion

Karabel (1984) and Karen (1990) have argued that Harvard, Yale, and Princeton's ability to control their admission policies reflected an organization attempt to react to status-group conflict over access to these elite universities. As Karabel (1984) has shown, admission policies shifted in the Ivy League to accommodate the problems elite private schools were beginning to face in the period between the two world wars, as more and more talented students were seeking admissions from public high schools (p. 26). The prerogatives of privilege and money were threatened as competition for high-status educational credentials increased. The adjustment was never absolute, but it did serve to a degree to reinforce status reproduction in the elite ranks, Karabel argues.

Harvard, Yale, and Princeton sought to change their admission policies in order to ensure their status in the hierarchy of universities, and this concern appears to have outweighed concerns about assuring powerful status groups continuing admission for their offspring (Karabel, 1984, 26). While these elite routes still exist (Karen, 1990), they appear as *post hoc* accommodations to the new organizational field, not as deliberate attempts by elite status groups to maintain dominance.

Buffer-Bridging theory from an institutional perspective is a better theoretical model than status-group struggle, because it identifies specific changes made by the organization itself to maintain its status *vis-à-vis* organizations. Karabel's (1984) account failed to take into account how institutional forces affected Harvard, Yale, and Princeton's self-perceptions as

well as their concerns about maintaining dominance in the rapidly changing higher education system. Karen's piece (1998) lacks the cross-national perspective we have been able to exploit. Ironically, our data suggest that elite US preparatory schools suffered a significant loss over time. Perhaps in trying to serve the demands of a traditional elite clientele, these schools were unable to exploit the new organizational environment caused by the changing admission structure of the elite US universities.

While specific administrators at elite US schools, like President Lowell, had documented racist or anti-Semitic reasons for their support of new entrance policies, the overall changes in the universities were eventually sustained and driven by changes in the institutional field of elite universities. With the rise of the research universities in the 1930s and 1940s, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, or any other college for that matter, which had traditionally been a bastion of privilege, could not continue to maintain its dominant status without transformation. This transformation included the basic restructuring of relationships with traditional feeder schools.

In Japan, we note significant differences, but the same change in the institutional fields created a change in the organizational environment for universities and their feeders. Elite universities were traditionally national institutions and their prestige rested, in part, on their strict adherence to 'meritocratic' admissions, namely entrance exams. However, with the restructuring of education after World War II, these universities now were asked to accept students on a nation-wide basis. Newer organizations, like private high schools and the *juku/yobiko*, exploited rather than challenged the universities' base of legitimacy, catering in an ever more detailed manner to the demands of the entrance exams. National attempts to reform the exam system (or curb the growth of the *juku/yobiko*) have either failed or have been altered in ways that benefited the elite universities and their emerging feeder schools.

Each university has long given its own set of exams for each school, where ultimate control over the content of the test resided in the university. Only in the last two decades has a national 'first stage' exam gradually emerged. This reform has been the first attempt to challenge the status of the universities to essentially control their pool of applicants by their own test. Yet, so far its impact on the elite tracks has been minimal. Rather, private feeder schools have systematically targeted admission at these elite colleges and maximized their organization niche in 'pre-selecting' students for this elite pathway.

Individual schools, we argue, are the 'relevant' actors in the system of status allocation in Japan, where institutional interests are guarded by highly institutionalized selection processes that are ideologically linked to the entrance examination. Rohlen (1983), Okano (1993, 1995), and LeTendre (1996)



all describe in detail the ways in which high school teachers cultivate links with middle schools on one end and companies or other tertiary institutions on the other. The power relationships are quite clear: middle schools are beholden to the high schools and must work to send a consistent quality of students. High schools must follow the cues of universities or employers and must tailor student expectations in the light of overall demand for colleges. In sum, high-school academic ranking resulting from the widespread use of practice tests creates an extensive and consistent gradient in relation to attainment in post-secondary outcomes. Institutionalized mechanisms of guidance and placement provide evidence of established feeder/client relations between individual high schools and colleges, universities, and employers.

The preponderance of private school students at Tokyo University today indicates the rise of an elite set of private high schools that act as ‘feeders’, much in the way that Andover, Exeter, and other private high schools fed into Harvard, Yale, and Princeton earlier in this century (see Karabel, 1984). The drop in public school entrants at Tokyo University is dramatic. The data we reviewed suggest that the same trend can be seen in some degree at both Kyoto and Keio Universities. Since 1975, private schools have come to dominate entrance to the elite track in Japan. The rise of these private schools and their increasing dominance of the top universities are thus an unintended consequence of reforms in the public sector aimed at reducing the competitive atmosphere surrounding the elite track.

In this sense, the existence of viable private alternatives implied the existence of a nascent market at the secondary level, one readily activated by the above-mentioned reforms. Within 20 years, elite secondary education shifted radically away from the control of public officials and simultaneously came to represent impressive barriers to full equality of opportunity. These changes are not suggestive of some status-group struggle, but rather point to the comparative differences in the ability of private and public high schools to tailor their outputs (student scores) to the input demands of elite universities.

### **Institutional Dominance and Organizational Competition**

Elite universities in both systems essentially retained their position as the legitimate apex of the system by maintaining their highly selective entrance requirements; yet, in each case this required the basic restructuring of the requirements. Stated another way, the kinds of schools themselves denote important cultural categories (Douglas, 1986) in each culture. In the post-war period, the status of various universities and high schools has become increasingly elaborated with elite institutions symbolically representing idealized status categories and thus conferring great importance to entrance

into these institutions. Elite universities at once stand as symbols of status and at the same time have a social charter (see Meyer J, 1977 and Meyer JW, 1970) to confer status. An elaborate hierarchy of intermediate ranking aligned with this symbolic order is preserved by the same logic. As schools are particularly central to the general status order, competition among schools and among classes of schools is the central dominant reality, and it supersedes other kinds of competition among status groups when it comes to shaping education policy. In the US, elite private high schools confer status by being adjuncts of wealth and privilege, whereas in Japan they are valued strictly for their capacity to greatly enhance success on the all-crucial university entrance exams. Many of these private schools were considered inferior to elite public high schools even as late as the 1960s.

Unlike Groton or St Paul, where elite culture is disseminated as the child is 'prepped,' Japanese elite high schools borrow their prestige from the national universities. Attendance at an elite university becomes the basis networks of affiliation that extends throughout business and government — that is, status groups. These groups share a common legitimating ideology that centers on the entrance exam. It is in the best interests of such status groups and the elite universities to co-opt the powerful legitimating ideology of the entrance exam system, the image of a stream of fish fighting the current (rather than each other), even if it means some 'carp' will 'slip back into the pond.' (see Zeng, 1999).

The result is a very publicly visible meritocratic mechanism defining the final stage of the educational ladder. Like the bright and hard-working immigrant Jewish or Asian youth that have risen through the American system's elite universities, bright and motivated Japanese from middle and lower socio-economic groups can (and have) out compete their upper-class peers. Yet, access to the increasingly important private secondary schools necessitates supplementary education, and both require substantial investment. In cases of extra years of preparation at *yobiko*, considerable amounts of money may be spent for only small gains in test scores. While all forms of such extra-school investment are becoming more common (and hence more of a 'requirement') for educational success, it remains clear that money cannot buy educational status. Hard work and talent, supplemented by parental concern and investment, is the critical formula for success.

The Japanese system continues to be very resistant to manipulation by political forces, largely because elite universities are so central to the overall status order. Short of a major reorientation in the entrance exam system, efforts at significant reform at the secondary level or primary level (such as the institution of 'free time' or the 5-day school week) have only intensified private responses — that is, parents are investing more eagerly in cram school, tutoring, and other supplements, which ironically underscores the entrance



exams central position. Parental and public interests are at odds and the growing importance of private options makes reforms increasingly problematic. In Kyoto, for example, public leaders have recently made a plea via the newspapers that cram schools should not take advantage of the end of Saturday public school classes simply to expand their business. The fact is that such decisions will rest largely with parents who are likely to support the cram schools. This is, in other words, a very conservative institution in the final analysis: one that channels social aspirations into academic competition and legitimizes strongly what mobility there is. Ironically, it also affirms the fairness of a system in which there is actually less mobility than one would expect, and in which gender, income, and residence play larger roles in outcomes than is acknowledged.

## Notes

- 1 This represents an informal segmentation of part of the secondary system that is already formally segmented into non-college bound high schools (technical, commercial, industrial, etc. high schools, and academic (college-bound) high schools).
- 2 For the most recent data on feeder schools at Tokyo and Kyoto University, see <http://www.biwa.ne.jp/~syuichi/toudai-ranking.html>  
<http://www.biwa.ne.jp/~syuichi/kyodai-ranking.html>
- 3 The term 'prep school' is used differently in both Britain and France. In Britain, the term means private elite schools that enroll students aged 8 to 13 years and link to the ironically named British 'public schools,' which are also elite and private. French preparatory schools (*Classes Préparatoires aux Grandes Ecoles*) are also elite, selective institutions, but are largely public and enroll students aged 19–21 years.

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