

Book Reviews

The Price of Admission; How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates

By Daniel Golden, Crown Publishing, New York, 2006;
ISBN: 1400097967; \$25.95; 323pp

International Journal of Educational Advancement (2008) 8, 43–45.
doi:10.1057/ijea.2008.3

In conjunction with the rising tide of college-going students, a growing amount of pressure and anxiety pervades the college admissions process across the nation. America's most elite colleges set the epitome of this frenzy which has spawned an industry dedicated to climbing the competitive admissions ladder as high as possible. Daniel Golden's "Price of Admission" does nothing to calm these waters by exposing the unfair and inequitable influence that wealth, power, and privilege exert on the admissions process at America's most prestigious colleges and universities.

Golden's muckraking expose grew out of a series of Pulitzer Prize-winning articles he penned as an education writer for *The Wall Street Journal*. A self-described "child of immigrants" from a public high school (he fails to mention he is an alumnus of Boston Latin School, the oldest and perhaps most revered public high

school in America which is hardly an ordinary public school and claims five signers of the Declaration of Independence and the likes of Joseph Kennedy and Sumner Redstone), Golden laments the loss of meritocratic admission which allowed him to attend Harvard in the mid-1970s. More broadly, Golden questions elite universities' claims of providing social mobility through egalitarian principles. Instead, Golden finds current admissions practices only perpetuating the American aristocracy and threatening to limit the "American Dream" of upward social mobility based on equal opportunity.

Golden supports this thesis through a series of well-written chapters that expose the unfair advantage given to the rich and famous at the most selective universities. Through investigative journalistic tactics, such as analyzing donor rolls and admissions statistics and candid



interviews with high school and college officials, as well as classmates of privileged applicants Golden paints a sordid tale. His chapter on Harvard exposes the inequities of legacy admission where the admit rate is a scant 9 percent, but 30 percent for those with legacy connections and even higher for those who have given seven-figure gifts. A chapter on Duke University describes how the leaders of the institution sought out the children of wealthy who had stronger bank accounts than high school records in order to build their facilities and endowment. Brown University is featured in Golden's chapter on how universities relax standards to attract the children of Hollywood stars. Besides focusing on these and several other universities with particularly egregious admissions practices, Golden points out the inequities of the admission and scholarships for females in "country club" sports like crew, equestrian sports, and squash, an unintended consequence of Title IX. In addition, he highlights how Asian students have become the "new Jews" by having to meet higher standards of admission than other ethnic groups. He also spends a chapter exposing the unfairness of admissions breaks for the children of colleges' faculty and staff. Through all of these examples of inequality, Golden contends that 60 percent of the admissions slots are filled by the advantaged (legacy, wealthy, famous, athletes, faculty brats, minorities, etc.), leaving only 40 percent of the slots for the "unhooked," that is, those who only have their meritorious records to stand on. All of these case studies are colored by compelling examples of the unfair admission of the rich and

famous. Here Golden calls out the privileged sons and daughters of rich and famous like Bill Frist, Al Gore, Michael Ovitz and many more by pointing out their weaker class ranks, test scores, and legal indiscretions. This part of the book takes on a tabloid-like flavor, but it certainly adds to the entertainment value in a perverse but compelling way.

Finally, Golden does offer some solutions and examples of honorable admissions practices. He sites California Institute of Technology, Cooper Union (NY), and Berea College (KY) as shining examples of "wealth-blind" admission where high standards and successful fund raising can coexist. Golden proposes that colleges should: end legacy preference, build fire-walls between admissions and fund raising, develop conflict of interest standards for admissions officers, end preferences for country-club sports, end admissions preferences and tuition assistance plans for faculty children, and provide equal access for Asian-American students. While noble, it is unlikely that many colleges will institute these measures without considerably greater public pressure.

Golden successfully shines light on several troubling aspects of college admission, but there are several shortcomings to his work that grow out of his effort to make his case. His attempt to make the inherently gray work of admission black and white oversimplifies what is a subjective process. He often relies on SAT scores to serve as the sole measure of ability between "hooked" and "unhooked" candidates. The SAT is but one measure in a holistic review and an over-reliance on standardized testing can lead to other inequities such as



Caltech's 1 percent African-American enrollment. In order to strengthen his argument of injustice and denial of opportunity, Golden implies that an Ivy League education is the only "golden ticket" to prosperity. His claims of "psychological scars" being inflicted upon, for example, the meritorious student who had to go to Johns Hopkins instead of Harvard to realize his dream of gaining admission to medical school stretches the point and serves to dull his case in the end. He is also slow to acknowledge strides that colleges have made in diversity and recent changes to both admissions and financial aid processes that may help open access. Unfortunately, these steps and Golden's own recommendations will likely only lead to a slight improvement in access to the upper-middle class instead of the truly disadvantaged unless more drastic reforms are implemented.

The biggest disappointment is that Golden does not "follow the money" to the source of the injustice in college admission—resource dependence and metrics in higher education. As long as

university CEO's are measured by the amount of funds they raise we will continue to see compromises in admissions practices. There is simply greater reward for achieving capital campaign goals than there are for running a meritocratic admissions process. To that end, I doubt Duke University regrets the "development admits" it made in the past when it takes stock of where it is as an institution today. Until the measures of success are changed, do not expect the rules of the game to change either. Golden's "Price of Admission" is a well-written and entertaining attempt to shame higher education into more just practices, but it will likely take either greater external pressure and/or greater reward for admissions practices that are more based on the meritocracy Golden yearns for and assumes once existed.

David Lesesne

Sewanee: The University of the South,
735 University Ave., Sewanee,
TN 37383, USA