

THE
PRICE
OF
ADMISSION



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

DANIEL GOLDEN

Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for The Wall Street Journal

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Every spring thousands of middle-class and lower-income high-school seniors learn that they have been rejected by America's most exclusive colleges. What they may never learn is how many candidates like themselves have been passed over in favor of wealthy white students with lesser credentials—children of alumni, big donors, or celebrities.

In this explosive book, the Pulitzer Prize–winning reporter Daniel Golden argues that America, the so-called land of opportunity, is rapidly becoming an aristocracy in which America's richest families receive special access to elite higher education—enabling them to give their children even more of a head start. Based on two years of investigative reporting and hundreds of interviews with students, parents, school administrators, and admissions personnel—some of whom risked their jobs to speak to the author—The Price of Admission exposes the corrupt admissions practices that favor the wealthy, the powerful, and the famous.

In The Price of Admission, Golden names names, along with grades and test scores. He reveals how the sons of former vice president Al Gore, one-time Hollywood power broker Michael Ovitz, and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist leapt ahead of more deserving applicants at Harvard, Brown, and Princeton. He explores favoritism at the Ivy Leagues, Duke, the University of Virginia, and Notre Dame, among other institutions. He reveals that colleges hold Asian American students to a higher standard than whites; comply with Title IX by giving scholarships to rich women in “patrician sports” like horseback riding, squash, and crew; and repay congressmen for favors by admitting their children. He also reveals that Harvard maintains a “Z-list” for well-connected but underqualified students, who are quietly admitted on the condition that they wait a year to enroll.

The Price of Admission explodes the myth of an American meritocracy—the belief that no matter what your background, if you are smart and diligent enough, you will have access to the nation's most elite universities. It is must reading not only for parents and students with a personal stake in college admissions, but also for those disturbed by the growing divide between ordinary and privileged Americans.

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

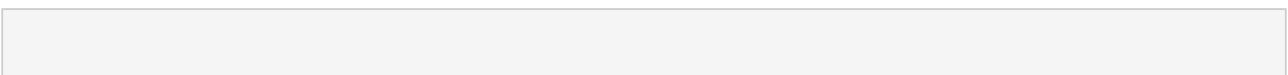
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From Reader Review The Price of Admission: How America's Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges -- and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates for online ebook

Jake says

An incredible work detailing how several colleges and universities have utilized their admissions offices to raise money and prestige, while sacrificing their academic integrity. Each chapter focuses on a different tactic or issue in higher education admissions, be it legacies, development cases, patrician athletics and how they manipulate Title IX, or discrimination against Asian American students. Every tactic is explored largely at one school, but other institutions are freely listed, and most resurface throughout the entire text. Anecdotal evidence lies next to statistics and numerical data for a fascinating read that moves quickly.

Golden skewers highly esteemed schools for their utter disregard of integrity to achieve a higher ranking or a larger endowment. He has accomplished a truly stunning book.

Selim Tili says

The main premise of the book, that wealthy "legacies" have a distinct advantage in admission to elite universities, is hardly surprising to anyone. The extent of that advantage is shocking; according to the author anywhere around 40% of annual seats to elite universities are set aside for children of alumni, athletes of elitist sports like sailing and "development" cases where future donations to the school are an unstated but implied expectation.

The extent of Asian American bias is also well known but the extent is definitely surprising. It is difficult to see how anyone reading this can realistically claim that the "bastions" of American Higher Education can truly claim to be a meritocracy when Asian American students need to score hundreds of points higher on the SATs in order to compare with a comparable white student.

Golden provides a plethora of cases of massive inequality of outcomes where top students of middle class background and Asian descent are rejected from their first choices despite stellar background while a less favorable legacy student is accepted.

This is one of the problems of the book; it could have used half of the anecdotes and been just as effective at conveying its message. While Golden doubtless wanted to convey his message in no uncertain terms it seems like the main purpose of so many narratives telling essentially the same story was to pad the book. By sharing so many similar stories the readers sense of emotional outrage is exhausted quickly.

Perhaps if there had been fewer stories I would have maintained some sympathy for the people rejected from the elite schools. But the reality is that it's hard to feel too much pity for the Korean American (or any student) who got rejected from the Ivy League schools but instead went to Johns Hopkins where she got a partial scholarship.

Golden offers some ideas for remedying the inequality of legacy admissions but he doesn't once question the premise whether an Ivy League education should be attained at all cost. With thousands of universities in the

US it would seem to me that the top students rejected by a narrow stretch of Northeastern Universities would be highly desired at fantastic schools throughout the country.

Those top students might find a great school in the Midwest provides a fantastic education that is an even better fit for them than Harvard. Ultimately a student who graduates with a 3.8 GPA at almost any top school will still have an entryway into any career path even if that path isn't as smooth as it would have been with a Yale sheepskin.

All in all the book was very interesting I just wish it was shorter and challenged the primacy of the Ivy League even a tiny bit.

I wouldn't particularly recommend this book for anyone since a quick review of the book tells the entirety of the story.

Abby says

Interesting, but uses the case study approach rather than marshalling up comprehensive arguments.

Michelle says

Rich kids, celebrities, and legacies getting preferential treatment and perpetuating a culture of privilege at Ivy Leagues isn't ground-breaking, but it was interesting to read how it works in practice. Title IX prompting a rise in "patrician sports" scholarships for girls already wealthy was also informative.

The "Asian fail" and Asian quotas won't be a new concept if you live in California, but I liked that Golden differentiated the subgroups of the Asian-American label, and how this arbitrary umbrella prevents Southeast Asians and Pacific Islanders from getting affirmative action benefits despite high rates of poverty and low rates of education.

The chapter on CalTech (staunch meritocracy), Cooper Union (elite and free), and Berea College (free and only open to the poor) was great--so positive after slogging through so much cynicism.

And that's what I didn't like about this book at all: the cynicism. I can understand his anger at the system, but it messed with his argument. Each chapter focuses on a specific issue and (usually) targets a specific college, and he dumps every related anecdote and statistic even if he's used it before, making it repetitive and meandering. He subtly praises the people he likes, but makes most other people he interviews sound almost insidious. Some of those people were teenagers. Maybe they were willfully ignorant, but seriously, Golden: lay off.

I didn't go to an Ivy League. The clearest message I took from this is that I should be a regular donor to my alma mater and boost its ability to offer aid, and spread the word that you don't have to go to a name-brand college to do well. Like some other reviews state here, it's the obsession to get recognition that's the source of all these problems. Golden's chapter on proposed solutions doesn't bring it up at all, which is a shame.

Melanie says

As I write this, the book is about 8 years old, and as far as I can tell not one damned thing has changed policy-wise since the book has been written. Sigh. (Well other than the fact that Cooper Union is now charging tuition.) College is a business, y'all, and people with lots of money or power will edge out people without it.

There is plenty of dead-horse beating in this book. It's about six chapters of "See [this elite university]! They are one of the most selective in the nation, and the average SAT score of admitted students is 1460 (M+V). However they admitted a person with a really low score because they were [a legacy/a polo player/a billionaire's kid/Natalie Portman/faculty offspring]! How is this fair to [Asians/unhooked applicants/poor geniuses/people whose parents aren't in Congress]?" Lots and lots of anecdotes, some repeated to the point of tedium (did you know that Al Gore's worthless son and Bill Frist's worthless son were both admitted to top Ivies? Golden tells you about each one twice to indicate how this problem crosses party lines). Wants to abolish legacy preference, rich-people courting, athletic scholarships for rich-kid sports like sailing, crew, squash, and fencing, and quit giving admissions breaks to faculty's children.

Obviously the rich and powerful aren't in favor of eliminating this sort of affirmative action, which is part of the reason the 2003 case trying to outlaw race-based affirmative action failed in the Supreme Court (basically everyone but Clarence Thomas benefited from or conferred legacy benefits to their offspring).

Mentions Cal Tech, Berea, and Cooper Union as anti-legacy, anti-rich, meritocratic institutions, though at least one of them has ceased to be so since the book was published.

Michael Silverman says

Starts off real strong and I thoroughly enjoyed the first few chapters. I personally knew/know a few of those mentioned and I was moved to see how positively they were portrayed by the author. Unfortunately, I felt the book fell apart in the later chapters - and I suspect, that it why the book has ultimately received such a low average rating. The first chapters are absolutely 5 star and exceptionally well researched. The rest of the book is unfortunately anecdotal, narrow focused, opinion based and at times not cognizant of (or even worse) not willing to acknowledge other possible reasons for outcomes. The author at times cherrypicks stories clouded by recall and memory bias and then weaves them together. There are outliers in every exploration, focusing only on those cases is disingenuous.

As someone who has been involved in the admissions process, I can attest that it is complicated and sometimes heartbreaking. While I certainly understand the author's agenda, and he is in many ways correct, I still prefer full academic honesty in what I read. University Presidents, Admissions Officers, and Development Directors are not evil. While the system is not perfect, it is also not rigged against you. Everyone I have ever known who has been involved in the admissions process has an interest in continually improving it - for so many reasons, not the least of which is child health.

It's not just about equality.

Kathleen says

This is an entertaining and well-researched read. The gist of the book didn't surprise me (and it's clearly evident from the title), but the extent to which faculty children, "legacies" and the wealthy/famous get breaks in the college admissions game was a bit of a shock. The author won a Pulitzer with the Wall St. Journal for his writings on this subject.

Hubert says

Damning indictment of policies that equate to "affirmative action for the privileged and wealthy." The anecdotal, reportorial style makes for faster reading, but a more systematic, empirical study is called for. Nonetheless, the author's conclusions will make you nauseous! The recommendations at the end of the book calling for the end of preferential treatment for legacy admits, and other privileged groups, is useful.

Elaine says

So gross. A must-read.

Seems that the anecdotes could've been better organized within each chapter.

Mike Harper says

This would be an OK newspaper editorial. It makes the case that kids get into prestigious colleges because they come from wealthy families, are children of alumni or faculty, or - horrors - are recruited athletes. Probably so, but the author's abhorrence of admissions preferences, and of the injustice to more qualified applicants who are rejected, is perfectly apparent after the first few pages. The rest is just TMI. I stopped caring when I encountered page after page about Notre Dame's preference for legacies and Duke's preference for rich kids

The author's prejudice becomes all too apparent as he praises Ted Kennedy, of all people, for taking a stand against Harvard's legacy preferences. Good grief! If there ever were preferred legacy students, they were members of the Kennedy clan.

This would have been a better effort if there had been some mention of the nation's small liberal arts colleges. Somehow, they escaped scrutiny, even those that are notoriously difficult to get into, such as Williams, Carleton, Swarthmore and Oberlin.

Beverly Kent says

I will admit to reading the first chapter carefully, but between anger and sadness I skimmed the remaining chapters until the last 2. These are worth trudging through the others. His detailed analysis of Caltech, Copper

Union and Berea are well worth. The last chapter detailing what should and (could) be done verges on fairy tale particularly in the current political environment and considering how long ago this book was written. Kudos to Mr. Golden for courage to detail the inequities.

Lisa says

Not bad at all. I think this will unfortunately put more fuel to the fire to those who weren't accepted to the college of their choice. Sometimes, yes, there is some question as to why some students are accepted or denied. But sometimes, you're denied because you don't fulfill the qualifications.

There was one interesting section on Asian applicants and how Asians must excel twice as well as their white counterparts in order to be accepted. We don't fall under Affirmative Action. So, if an Asian is a good student but poor, they have less of a chance of admissions.

I would recommend this book to anyone who has ever had to work in Admissions or are interested in college counseling.

Suzie says

1. Underqualified rich white people are taking a high percentage of spots at Ivy league schools.
2. High achieving Asian Americans are rejected at a higher rate than others from a lot of highly competitive US schools.
3. There are three highly competitive US schools doing it right: Berea, Caltech, and Cooper Union.

It's mostly depressing, everyone.

David Nichols says

I admit it - I primarily read this book to learn the unsavory details of Jared Kushner's admission to Harvard, which in Daniel Golden's telling becomes only one of the more blatant instances of rich parents buying admission to the Ivies for their callow offspring. The rest of *THE PRICE OF ADMISSION* tells a story shocking only to those who take Harvard et al's propaganda seriously. Ivy League and elite universities (we may include in this category state "flagships" like Berkeley) advertise themselves as meritocracies, but in practice they award large percentages of their admits to "development cases" (families with \$\$\$), celebrities' children, and athletes in elite sports like horseback-riding. Consequently, a lot of truly talented young people, many of them Asian-American, get rejected from the "top" schools and have to settle for large state universities or small liberal arts colleges. As another Goodreads reviewer noted, this is more a tragedy for the Ivy League than for the rejected students, who probably get a better education at Williams or Michigan.

At the very end of his expose, Golden waxes rhapsodic about his days at Grand Old Harvard, basking in the

warm rich light that flowed into Dunster House library, sipping sherry with tweedy old profs, and flourishing in the company of so many brilliant young people like himself. PRICE OF ADMISSION reveals itself as a declension narrative: the Ivies once incubated young talent, but now they just coddle rich mediocrities. All of this is bunk. Insofar as they were anything other than giant tax-free real-estate investment firms, Ivy League colleges always served as finishing schools for the rich. Anyone who has studied their social institutions (dining clubs, etc.) knows that student life at the Ivies revolves around snobbery rather than mutual interest. When Yale, Princeton, Stanford, or Duke admit the brilliant or eccentric, they do so to provide a slightly brainier classroom environment for the real (wealthy) customers, and because they can steer some of the science geeks and pre-meds into finance and convert them into future donors. This was true thirty years ago and I bet it was equally true in Golden's day.

Kate says

An interesting read on how the wealthy, well connected and powerful ensure places for their potentially underqualified children at America's most prestigious universities (see section on Jared Kushner's acceptance to Harvard). Often these kinds of legs-up are given to students to ensure alumni and family giving and enhance a university's endowment. Golden argues that to be a true meritocracy we need to dispense with things like legacy preference, development cases, breaks for faculty and staff children and athletic scholarships for sports that are usually only played at elite and exclusive private schools (polo, fencing, sailing, crew, etc.) He uses Caltech, the Cooper Union and Barea college to illustrate how colleges can still ensure their endowments without catering to legacy or development preference.

Golden also suggests that the college admissions system hurts Asian-American students (he argues that they are the new Jews), who have superior grades and test scores (and are often held to higher standards), yet don't have the connections to give them an edge at very competitive schools. Golden suggests that due to the fact that many of these kids are first generation Americans, they do not benefit from legacy and their parents are not in the financial position to donate to the school so they cannot be consider development cases. Asian Americans also do not benefit from affirmative action programs because they are often overrepresented in colleges.

I would have given the book a higher ranking, but it was a bit repetitive. This might have to do with the fact that it was initially written as a series of newspaper articles for the Wall Street Journal. I also felt like some of Golden's conclusions, though well-intentioned, were unlikely. For example, he suggested that universities pay their professors more rather than giving them breaks on their children's tuition. He argued this would be more equitable to faculty who don't have children. While I support this idea in theory, in the era of underpaid adjuncts and TAs, universities are unlikely to raise the salaries of professors. Therefore, I think Golden's suggestion that faculty tuition breaks be "portable" (transferable to whatever college the child attends) is more a more likely and useful solution.

Overall a good, if somewhat infuriating, read.
