A CRITIC AT LARGE

GETTING IN

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*The social logic of Ivy League admissions.* by Malcolm Gladwell

 **I** n 1905, Harvard College adopted the College Entrance Examination Board tests as the principal basis for admission, which meant that virtually any academically gifted high-school

senior who could afford a private college had a straightforward shot at attending. By 1908, the freshman class was seven per cent Jewish, nine per cent Catholic, and forty-five per cent from public schools, an astonishing transformation for [Harvard]… As the sociologist Jerome Karabel writes in “The Chosen” (Houghton Mifflin; $28), his remarkable history of the admissions process at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, that meritocratic spirit soon led to a crisis. The enrollment of Jews began to rise dramatically. By 1922, they made up more than a fifth of Harvard’s freshman class. The administration and alumni were up in arms. Jews were thought to be sickly and grasping, grade-grubbing and insular. They displaced the sons of wealthy Wasp alumni, which did not bode well for fund-raising. A. Lawrence Lowell, Harvard’s president in the nineteen-twenties, stated flatly that too many Jews would destroy the school: “The summer hotel that is ruined by admitting Jews meets its fate . . . because they drive away the Gentiles, and then after the Gentiles have left, they leave also.”

The difficult part, however, was coming up with a way of keeping Jews out, because as a group they were academically superior to everyone else. Lowell’s first idea—a quota limiting Jews to fifteen per cent of the student body—was roundly criticized. Lowell tried restricting the number of scholarships given to Jewish students, and made an effort to bring in students from public schools in the West, where there were fewer Jews. Neither strategy worked. Finally, Lowell—and his counterparts at Yale and Princeton—realized that if a definition of merit based on academic prowess was leading to the wrong kind of student, the solution was to change the definition of merit. Karabel argues that it was at this moment that the history and nature of the Ivy League took a significant turn. The admissions office at Harvard became much more interested in the details of an applicant’s personal life. Lowell told his admissions officers to elicit information about the “character” of candidates from “persons who know the applicants well,” and so the letter of reference became mandatory. Harvard started asking applicants to provide a photograph. Candidates had to write personal essays, demonstrating their aptitude for leadership, and list their extracurricular activities. “Starting in the fall of 1922,” Karabel writes, “applicants were required to answer questions on ‘Race and Color,’ ‘Religious Preference,’ ‘Maiden Name of Mother,’ ‘Birthplace of Father,’ and ‘What change, if any, has been made since birth in your own name or that of your father? (Explain fully).’ ” …The personal interview became a key component of admissions in order, Karabel writes, “to ensure that ‘undesirables’ were identified and to assess important but subtle indicators of background and breeding such as speech, dress, deportment and physical appearance.”

By 1933, the end of Lowell’s term, the percentage of Jews at Harvard was back down to fifteen per cent. If this new admissions system seems familiar, that’s because it is essentially the same system that the Ivy League uses to this day. According to Karabel, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton didn’t abandon the elevation of character once the Jewish crisis passed. They institutionalized it… At Harvard, the key figure in that same period was Wilbur Bender, who, as the dean of admissions, had a preference for “the boy with some athletic interests and abilities, the boy with physical vigor and coordination and grace.” Bender, Karabel tells us, believed that if Harvard continued to suffer on the football field it would contribute to the school’s reputation as a place with “no college spirit, few good fellows, and no vigorous, healthy social life,” not to mention a “surfeit of ‘pansies,’ ‘decadent esthetes’ and ‘precious sophisticates.’ ” Bender concentrated on improving Harvard’s techniques for evaluating “intangibles” and, in particular, its “ability to detect homosexual tendencies and serious psychiatric problems.”

**I** once had a conversation with someone who worked for an advertising agency that represented one of the big luxury automobile brands. He said that he was worried that his client’s new lower-priced line was being bought disproportionately by black women. He insisted that he did not mean this in a racist way. It was just a fact, he said. Black women would destroy the brand’s cachet. It was his job to protect his client from the attentions of the socially undesirable. This is, in no small part, what Ivy League admissions directors do. They are in the luxury-brand-management business, and “The Chosen,” in the end, is a testament to just how well the brand managers in Cambridge, New Haven, and Princeton have done their job in the past seventy-five years. In the nineteen twenties, when Harvard tried to figure out how many Jews they had on campus, the admissions office scoured student records and assigned each suspected Jew the designation j1 (for someone who was “conclusively Jewish”), j2 (where the “preponderance of evidence” pointed to Jewishness), or j3 (where Jewishness was a “possibility”).

In the branding world, this is called customer segmentation. In the Second World War, as Yale faced plummeting enrollment and revenues, it continued to turn down qualified Jewish applicants. As Karabel writes, “In the language of sociology, Yale judged its symbolic capital to be even more precious than its economic capital.” No good brand manager would sacrifice reputation for short-term gain. The admissions directors at Harvard have always, similarly, been diligent about rewarding the children of graduates, or, as they are quaintly called, “legacies.” In the 1985-92 period, for instance, Harvard admitted children of alumni at a rate more than twice that of non-athlete, non-legacy applicants, despite the fact that, on virtually every one of the school’s magical ratings scales, legacies significantly lagged behind their peers. Karabel calls the practice “unmeritocratic at best and profoundly corrupt at worst,” but rewarding customer loyalty is what luxury brands do. Harvard wants good graduates, and part of their definition of a good graduate is someone who is a generous and loyal alumnus. And if you want generous and loyal alumni you have to reward them. Aren’t the tremendous resources provided to Harvard by its alumni part of the reason so many people want to go to Harvard in the first place?

The endless battle over admissions in the United States proceeds on the assumption that some great moral principle is at stake in the matter of whom schools like Harvard choose to let in—that those who are denied admission by the whims of the admissions office have somehow been harmed. If you are sick and a hospital shuts its doors to you, you are harmed. But a selective school is not a hospital, and those it turns away are not sick. Élite schools, like any luxury brand, are an aesthetic experience—an exquisitely constructed fantasy of what it means to belong to an élite —and they have always been mindful of what must be done to maintain that experience. In the nineteen-eighties, when Harvard was accused of enforcing a secret quota on Asian admissions, its defense was that once you adjusted for the preferences given to the children of alumni and for the preferences given to athletes, Asians really weren’t being discriminated against. But you could sense Harvard’s exasperation that the issue was being raised at all. If Harvard had too many Asians, it wouldn’t be Harvard, just as Harvard wouldn’t be Harvard with too many Jews or pansies or parlor pinks or shy types or short people with big ears.