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# The Best and the Brightest?: Race, Class, and Merit in America's Elite Colleges

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The Best and the Brightest?: Race, Class, and Merit in America's Elite Colleges

An Honors Paper for the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

By Walter Guillermo Chacón

Bowdoin College, 2017

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## Introduction

“Studying privileged people is important, because they create the ladders others must climb to move up in the world. Nowhere is this more true than in schools, which have been official ladders of mobility and opportunity in U.S. society for a hundred years. We do a disservice to the ideal of educational opportunity, I think, if we keep the highest rungs of these ladders obscure.” (Stevens 2009, 4)

A select few colleges and universities have cemented their spots atop the hierarchy of higher education. Schools in the Ivy League and the New England Small College Athletic Conference (NESCAC, sometimes called the little Ivies) consistently differentiate themselves in rankings by the US News and World Report, Forbes, and the Princeton Review. For example, all eight Ivies fall into the top fifteen of U.S. News and World Report’s list of best national universities while eight out of the eleven NESCAC colleges land in the top thirty (“U.S. News & World Report Releases 2017 Best Colleges Rankings” 2016). In a nation with over 4,000 institutions of higher education, these achievements are impressive. The rankings, though, do not offer the full picture about why these schools are in the top tier of American higher education. Many of these schools are some of the oldest in the nation. Founded in 1636, Harvard is the oldest university in America. Yale (1701), University of Pennsylvania (1740), Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754), Brown (1764), Dartmouth (1769), and Cornell (1865) form the rest of the Ivy League. The NESCACs follow a similar pattern, though in general are not as old as the Ivies. Hamilton (1793), Williams (1793), Bowdoin (1794), Middlebury (1800), Colby (1813), Amherst (1821), Trinity (1823), Wesleyan (1831), Tufts (1852), Bates (1855), and Connecticut College (1911) are among the oldest in the nation as well.

Further, the Ivies and NESCACs have vast endowments that allow them to offer their students access to educational resources, facilities, and talented faculty. In fact, the top twenty-five schools on Forbes’s 2016 top colleges list, twelve of which are Ivies or

NESCACs, hold over thirty-six percent of the endowments of all colleges and universities in the U.S. Put another way, the top twenty-five schools have a highly disproportionate share of the wealth and resources of all colleges in America (Vedder and Strehle 2016). Their vast endowments allow these schools to offer students resources unparalleled by less wealthy institutions. Moreover, the advantages of attending one of these schools carries into the job market. Ten years after enrolling in college, the median salary for an Ivy League graduate is over \$70,000 compared to about \$34,000 for all other graduates (Ingraham 2015).

It follows, then, that competition to gain admission to these schools is great. Led by Harvard with an acceptance rate of 5.3 percent for the class of 2020, Columbia (6.1), Yale (6.5), Princeton (7.0), Brown (8.5), Penn (9.9), Dartmouth (10.3), and Cornell (14.9) are exclusive places (Jackson 2016). The NESCACs offer a similar story. Amherst is most exclusive, accepting 13.7 percent of applicants for the class of 2020 followed by Tufts (14.0), Bowdoin (14.8), Middlebury (16.0), Williams (17.3), Wesleyan (17.7), Colby (18.7), Bates (22.6), Hamilton (26.1), Trinity (35.1), Connecticut (36.2) (“Statistics on Admission” 2017; “Profile of the Class of 2020” 2017; “Bowdoin At A Glance” 2017; “Middlebury College Admits 1,415 Students to the Class of 2020” 2016; “Williams College Admits 1,206 Students for Class of 2020” 2017; “Class Profile: 2020” 2017; “College Profile” 2017; “Student Profile” 2017; “Hamilton College Class of 2020 Profile” 2017; “Class of 2020 Profile” 2017; “Admission Statistics” 2017). In summary, these schools are some of the oldest, most prestigious, and most exclusive in the United States.

In the United States, heralded as the land of opportunity, education is in theory perhaps the most accessible means of getting ahead in life. The story goes that education

gives hard-working youth the opportunity to have their effort and ambition determine their life chances, independent of their race or class background. When it comes to the college application process, the idea that education is the great equalizer might lead some to believe that selective colleges would enroll students across the nation who, through their years of hard-work and dedication to academics, have earned their spots at some of the most privileged institutions. Put another way, if the best colleges were places for the best students, then one would not expect these colleges to enroll privileged students more so than others.

Unfortunately, the data paint a different picture. In short, white students and affluent students are overrepresented in elite schools while non-white students and poor students are underrepresented. Despite composing 62 percent of the population of college age Americans (18 to 22), white students comprise three quarters of enrollment at the most selective colleges. Non-white students compose 38 percent of the college age population, but twenty-five percent of enrollment at the most selective colleges (Supiano 2015). The disparities are greater when considering class instead of race. In 2006, students from the poorer half of American households composed just fourteen percent of the student bodies at the 82 “most competitive” colleges as ranked by Barron’s Profiles of American Colleges. At a more elite group of twenty-eight schools consisting of all of the Ivies as well as other highly selective institutions, students from the poorest 40 percent of families composed just eleven percent of their enrollments in 2009 (Hill and Winston 2008). At Harvard, the middle-income students come from families in the top five percent of wealthiest households (Khan 2011). Today, among colleges in the New England Small College Athletic Conference, which I discuss in greater detail throughout the study,

between thirteen and twenty one percent of students come from families in the top one percent of household income (“The Equality of Opportunity Project” 2017).

To understand why elite colleges enroll disproportionate shares of white students and wealthy students, sociologists must study how elite colleges select the students they admit. In theory, education in America has the power to be the great equalizer by operating on a meritocracy. Most broadly, a meritocracy is a form of social stratification that relies on individual effort, achievement, talent, intelligence, and ambition as means of doling out resources. The concept is tied to social mobility in that it promotes hard-work over social background as the criteria on which some receive rewards like education.

Michael Young (1958) originally coined the term meritocracy in his satirical work *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. In the book’s alternate reality the leaders of Britain’s society are those who earn the highest marks on standardized intelligence tests. While on the surface this may appear to be a fair means of dictating who rises to the top of society, poor students who attend the worst schools are highly underprepared for the exam compared to their wealthier counterparts. In this imagined society, the criteria that decide society’s leaders are really just a system of class advantages masked by ostensibly meritocratic evaluation.

Merit, however, is not objective. Instead, merit is fluid and changes depending on contexts. As Amartya Sen states in his contribution to the collection *Meritocracy and Economic Inequality* (2000), merit is conditional upon what a society values and considers to be good. Baez (2006) adds to the concept of merit to state that merit is “an institutional construct and that it does not--indeed, it cannot--exist outside the institutions that use it” (997). For example, elite colleges in America place value on high scores on standardized

tests, high grade point averages, rigorous courses, and extracurricular involvement. In the college application process, these are traits that make applicants meritorious. These traits, however, are only valuable insofar as elite colleges say they are.

Some students, particularly those with means, have the resources to become what elite colleges deem meritocratic. Students who attend well-resourced high schools with broad curricula that offer advanced placement courses and international baccalaureate courses have an advantage. These students are supported in school to the point where they can do well on standardized tests and earn high grades in rigorous courses. Those with less means, however, are less equipped to achieve. Perhaps these students attend schools with outdated textbooks and classes with too many students. Maybe these schools do not offer advanced placement courses making it impossible for these students to achieve on par with their more privileged peers. The problem is that when the college application process comes around, students are evaluated on the same criteria regardless of the opportunities they have had to become what elite colleges deem as meritorious. Without considering the role of social background, one can too easily assume that those whom our society certifies as the most intelligent and achieved are just inherently the best and the brightest in our nation.

How our society deems individuals as meritorious is important because it dictates how we allocate resources. It seems, though, that elite colleges favor those with more resources over those with less. Once in a while, elite colleges will acknowledge that the system of selective admissions is tilted towards the wealthy. Bowdoin's Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Whitney Soule revealed to a Bowdoin publication,

“The assumption and the frustration are that highly selective colleges favor those who achieve the most—the most AP classes, the most leadership, the most breadth of exposure and experience. In other words, the process appears to benefit those

with opportunity and access to resources, and it seems to disadvantage those from schools with fewer curricular options, who work instead of lead clubs, or who cannot afford test prep service—suggesting that these students can't possibly compete. The truth is, the process isn't fair. It will never be fair" (Soule 2016).

Elite colleges know that their admissions processes favor the privileged. The NESCACs practice holistic review processes that evaluate applicants as full packages of students, rather than just examining grades and test scores. They claim the holistic review process accounts for differential access to opportunities, yet the composition of elite colleges continue to tilt in favor of the wealthy. These ideas fuel the macro level questions I pursue in this project. How can elite colleges play a role in the American narrative of education as the great equalizer given that they enroll mostly privileged students? How can we work to make education the great equalizer?

Two competing sociological theories offer useful perspectives on whether or not education can be the great equalizer. The theory of social reproduction posits that privileged parents pass on to their children the resources to become privileged members of society themselves (Bourdieu 1977; Collins 1979; Golden 2009; Stevens 2009). Those who believe theories of social reproduction would say that wealthy parents live in wealthy neighborhoods with well-resourced schools. Wealthy parents might also pay for their children to attend well-resourced and prestigious private schools. These advantages ultimately enable the children of the privileged to attend the best colleges. On the other end of the spectrum of privilege, poor parents lack the means to help their children attain high-quality educations which hinders their prospects for getting into the top colleges (Bourdieu 1977; Collins 1979). Conversely, theories of social transformation contend that individual achievement is the basis for social stratification. Where you come from does not dictate where you end up. Under this theory, the students elite colleges accept are

those who work the hardest and who are the most talented. Education, to transformation theorists, is a true means of social mobility and can allow people from all backgrounds to thrive in America. Incorporating these two competing theories, I pursue several research questions.

Chapter one explores the history of elite colleges as sites of social reproduction. In this chapter, I trace the ways in which elite colleges denied meritocracy in favor of social reproduction by excluding people of certain religions and races, regardless of their ability and achievements. In doing so, elite colleges refused to abide by the principle of equal opportunity. Chapter two examines the landscape of elite colleges today in a time when colleges no longer formally exclude students on the basis of religion, race, or class. In this chapter, I hope to learn if elite colleges are still sites of social reproduction or if they are committed to equal opportunity. I ask, how do the histories of elite colleges as sites of social reproduction bump against contemporary cultural conceptions of meritocracy and equal opportunity? The data suggest that while colleges no longer exclude students on the basis of race and class, social background continues to be an important determinant of who attends elite colleges.

Chapter three builds upon the research in the first two chapters to ask how elite colleges, given their sustained role in social reproduction, perpetuate the myth of meritocracy. If they really are sites of social reproduction, which the data show they largely are, why do Americans continue to herald them as champions of equal opportunity? I reveal data gathered from my content analysis of NESCAC school websites in order to study how selective colleges present themselves to the public and cement their roles within the American narrative of education as the great equalizer. I seek to

understand how they portray themselves as sites of social transformation while never discussing their sustained role in social reproduction. In chapter four, I discuss the findings of this research with respect to the American ideals of equal opportunity and the egalitarian goal of education as an institution in America. This concluding chapter brings together my findings to ask, what role do elite colleges play in the American narrative of the United States as the land of opportunity? What role can they play? How can they work towards ensuring equal opportunity?

## Chapter 1

"[T]he ostensibly objective and meritocratic selection and reward system of U.S. education corresponds not to some abstract notion of efficiency, rationality, and equity, but to the legitimization of economic inequality and the smooth staffing of unequal work roles. Every society must and will reward some individual excellences. But which ones they reward, in what manner, to what extent, and through what social process depend critically on how economic life is organized. The predatory, competitive, and personally destructive way in which intellectual achievement is rewarded in U.S. schools and colleges is a monument not to creative rationality, but to the need of a privileged class to justify an irrational, exploitative, and undemocratic system." (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 108)

### *Theoretical Framework*

The United States as the land of opportunity hinges on the notion that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of social background. Social reproduction runs in stark contrast to equal opportunity and meritocracy because it denies those born out of privilege the opportunity to accrue advantages for themselves. Schools are perhaps the most important and accessible mechanisms for attaining the American dream because our country offers education to all. But, in order for schools to play a role in the larger national narrative of America as the land of opportunity, they must enable the hardest-working and most talented students to rise in society, regardless of their backgrounds. Otherwise, schools will stand in contrast to the narrative of the American dream.

Many social theorists have grappled with the role of schools in social stratification. Bell (1977) posits that elite schools in particular are arbiters of class position. These schools determine who will have access to the top of the social hierarchy, but unfortunately for most people, the wealthy have a monopoly on the most selective schools. In this way, the wealthy have undue control on mechanisms of gaining and maintaining privilege. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) contends education is a masterful

way of masking social reproduction. To Bourdieu, wealthy parents use formal education to mask the transmission of privileges across generations. When asked how this system of nepotism can persist, Bourdieu would point to controlled mobility as the means of legitimation. He argues the social transformation that occurs for some students in schools gives the appearance of class neutrality in education, thereby offering a subtle legitimation of the role of schools in promoting equal opportunity.

The appearance of class neutrality is key for the legitimation of schools. Bowles and Gintis (1976) refer to legitimation as “the fostering of a generalized consciousness among individuals which prevents the formation of the social bonds and critical understanding whereby existing social conditions might be transformed” (104). For selective colleges, legitimation is the process by which they present the image that they operate on a meritocracy and do not serve as vehicles of social reproduction. Legitimacy has increased importance for selective schools since they risk losing their status as some of the best schools in the country if they fail to demonstrate their commitments to equal opportunity.

Randall Collins (1979) extends the work of Bourdieu, Bowles, and Gintis to call the combination of controlled mobility for few with the social reproduction for many a system of credentialism. Under credentialism, elite schooling provides youth with credentials that signify their achievement and status atop the social hierarchy. A degree from Harvard, for example, is a credential that signifies high status without incorporating any information about achievement. Whether an individual is high-achieving is separate from having a degree from Harvard. To Collins, elites monopolize avenues of becoming elite, thereby controlling the distribution of credentials.

Daniel Golden (2009) examines how wealthy Americans today pass their privileges on to their children through the college admissions process. Golden contends that while elite colleges claim to value diversity, they value socioeconomic diversity the least and reward rich students over poor students. Mitchell Stevens (2009) posits that wealth often decides who gets accepted to elite colleges because the definition of merit, the primary criteria on which elite colleges evaluate students, has shifted in favor of the privileged. On the surface, merit and achievement seem class-neutral, but the ways students become meritorious to elite colleges are highly dependent on wealth. For example, colleges value high grades and standardized test scores, rigorous courses, and extracurricular involvement when evaluating applicants. However, it takes resources that not everyone has to even have the opportunity to take challenging courses and be involved in many extracurricular activities. My theoretical framework tests Bourdieu's claims that controlled mobility in elite colleges allows for the persistence of social reproduction. I also study how wealth continues to play an important role in determining who has access to elite colleges. Further, I add to Collins's work on social reproduction by studying how the wealthy mask their monopolization of elite American colleges today.

I study selective colleges in terms of social reproduction and historical moments of social transformation. As I will discuss later in this chapter, the Protestant elite had a firm grip on the nation's most selective colleges, especially through the start of the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1900s, outside groups like Jews and people of color sought to use selective colleges as sites of social transformation. It is in these historical moments that selective colleges demonstrate their commitment to social reproduction over social transformation through equal opportunity. Today, selective colleges are more racially and

socioeconomically diverse than ever before. The proportion of students of color at selective colleges is generally in the range of twenty-five to 35 percent. In addition, about forty to fifty percent of the students at the schools I study are on some form of financial aid, with aid packages averaging upwards of \$40,000 per year. These data point to the fact that selective colleges today do serve as sites of social transformation for some students. That said, selective schools continue to have a prominent role in social reproduction by enrolling primarily students who are white and wealthy.

I argue that selective colleges today are sites of both social reproduction and social transformation. I contend, however, that they play a primary role in social reproduction and a secondary role in social transformation. The racial and socioeconomic diversity that they do have is what gives colleges the data to maintain their legitimacy as places that champion equal opportunity. The unfortunate truth and biting irony is that by being socially transformative for some, they can continue to be sites of social reproduction for many. Ultimately, this layer of equal opportunity is what allows selective colleges to continue to occupy a central piece of the American narrative surrounding equal opportunity and meritocracy.

#### *Privileging Social Reproduction Over Equal Opportunity: Jews 1910-1940*

From their inception in the 1600s through the start of the twentieth century, elite colleges--mostly Ivy League, but some NESCAC--perpetuated social reproduction by constantly denying equal opportunity. Karabel's (2005) history of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton highlights how elite colleges catered to the most privileged people in the nation. By the 1890s 74 percent of Boston's upper class and 65 percent of New York's sent their sons to Harvard, Yale, or Princeton (Karabel 2005, 25). NESCACs, too,

attracted the attention of the Protestant elite. Most notably, Williams was one of the few schools competitive with the Big Three for the sons of elites (Karabel 2005, 123).

Before the 1900s, elite colleges used entrance exams to dictate who would be allowed in. There was a class element embedded in this since most public school students did not have the resources at their schools to acquire the knowledge required for the exam. But, in a way, the system was meritocratic in that students who passed the exam would be offered admission, regardless of background (Karabel 2005, 129). This system ensured social reproduction until groups other than the white and wealthy began to pass the exams and enroll in elite colleges. In response, elite schools changed the definition of merit and created the foundation of selective admissions as we know it today.

The first big movement to promote social reproduction over social transformation, meritocracy, and equal opportunity began in the 1910s with Jews in America. Macro level immigration data confirm that this period was one of intense immigration. In 1910, the immigrant population reached its peak to constitute 14.7 percent of the population, with a large portion being European Jews (Portes and Rumbaut 2014, 25). The increased Jewish population trickled into the landscape of higher education to become known among selective colleges as the “Jewish problem.” In 1918, the first year in which the Association of New England Deans discussed the influx of Jews at their schools, twenty percent of Harvard students were Jewish while Yale and Princeton respectively enrolled roughly six and three percent Jews (Karabel 2005, 86).

Selective colleges originally created admissions offices to bar meritorious Jews from their schools. Columbia, which was notorious among selective schools for enrolling the most Jews out of the Ivies, created the nation’s first Admissions Office in 1910

specifically to exclude Jews (Karabel 2005, 129). Instead of relying on ostensibly objective criteria like entrance exams to determine merit, Columbia's admissions office began to rely on more subjective criteria like "character" and "leadership." This ultimately allowed Columbia to admit more "desirable" students, which at the time meant fewer Jews (Karabel 2005, 129). The shift in admissions policy makes it clear that elite schools admitted students in a way that was not meritocratic, but instead catered to the already-privileged.

Elite colleges also implemented formal policies to deny meritocracy and social transformation. In 1921, Columbia became the first major private college to institute a quota on the number of Jewish students allowed (Karabel 2005, 130). Yale also imposed a quota of ten percent on Jewish students between 1924 to the 1960s (Karabel 2005, 115). Harvard's formal policy of exclusion was to consider applicants in light of the proportional size of their groups relative to the American population at large. So, minority groups had unequal access to the Ivies compared to white students. These quota systems each denied meritocracy in favor of social reproduction.

Princeton began to utilize interviews to exclude Jews. Interviewers could identify mannerisms and comportment in an applicant, and could get a sense of whether or not the student was Jewish based on his appearance (Karabel 2005, 125). In a 1922 letter, Princeton secretary Varnum Lansing Collins asked alumni interviewers to identify which applicants were Jewish to "tip off" the admissions committee about unfavorable candidates. At Yale, administrators denied Jewish students scholarships as early as 1918 in order to discourage and prevent them from attending until this became college policy three years later (Karabel 2005, 113). To promote social reproduction, colleges changed

their conceptions of what it meant to be meritorious to benefit the privileged over all others.

*Privileging Social Reproduction Over Equal Opportunity: People of Color 1950-1970*

At the time that Jews worked towards greater access to top-tier schools, it would have been out of the question for people of color to seek the same access. For reference, in the seven decades between 1870, the year Harvard's first black student graduated, and 1941, just 165 black students graduated from the college (Karabel 2005, 173). At Princeton, just one student out of 800 in the entering class of 1960 was black. The following year yielded the same result (Karabel 2005, 392).

At this point in time, elite colleges espoused ideologies that generally promoted integration and equal opportunity, but their admissions policies perpetuated social reproduction over social transformation. Under the umbrella of the civil rights movements, black students at selective schools brought racial tensions right to the front doors of the gatekeepers. In April 1968, a set of students occupied an academic building at Columbia, trapping the dean in his office to protest the construction of a gymnasium in Harlem because they perceived the gymnasium to be a form of "quasi-colonial disdain for the black community" (Karabel 2005, 389). Black students at Yale marched into the president's home demanding that Yale admit more black students. That same year, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. sparked unrest across the nation and across elite colleges. Following the memorial service, African American students at Harvard presented their administration with a list of demands focused on increased access to selective colleges for black students. Primarily, the black students demanded black

representation to Harvard in proportion with the population as a whole, which was the time was about twelve percent (Karabel 2005, 402).

Gatekeepers responded to student demands for equal opportunity in ways that balanced calls for equal access against their primary goal of enabling social reproduction. At Harvard, the dean of admissions hired its first black admissions officer while its students and alumni took on a bigger role in recruiting black students. (Karabel 2005, 403). This helped increase the enrollment of black students to 90 in 1969, a sharp increase from prior years (Karabel 2005, 403). In response to Yale's student movement, the dean of admissions agreed to allow black students to comprise twelve percent of the incoming class, so long as the students were academically qualified. This so-called concession on the part of administrators was actually a clever means of serving their interests. In reality, there were very few black students who met the qualifications dictated by elite colleges. For example, in 1967 Yale conducted a study that found that there were as few as four hundred black graduates across the country that would meet Yale's SAT requirements (Karabel 2005, 383).

This can undoubtedly be attributed to racial and socioeconomic inequality embedded in American education. It was just thirteen years earlier that the landmark Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* ended de jure segregation and ten years after persisting segregation led to the *Brown v. Board II* decision, imploring public schools to desegregate with "all deliberate speed." At that time, though Yale was ostensibly interested in enrolling more black students, the college refused to alter its criteria for defining merit to favor black students, though it had done the same decades ago

to favor the Protestant elite. Gatekeepers ceded to some demands made by black students, yet in ways that were unequal compromises between the privileged and the rest.

The story was not all bad, though. Elite colleges did not always actively seek to keep out students who were not privileged. Princeton decided to take active steps to enroll more black students. To do so, the college allowed late applications from black applicants and reviewed them with respect to the lack of social advantages that black students compared to white students tended to have. In doing so, they changed the definition of merit in their evaluation of applications of black students, allowing their enrollments to rise to 44 for the incoming class in 1968 compared to just one in seven years earlier (Karabel 2005, 397). That same year, Princeton began to recruit Latino students and Native American students for the first time in its history (Karabel 2005, 398). By this time, the recruitment of minorities to demonstrate devotion to equal opportunity had become a part of selective admissions (Karabel 2005, 398). Still, students of color comprised just a few percent of enrollments at elite colleges.

In conclusion, elite colleges have histories of promoting social reproduction at the expense of equal opportunity and meritocracy. When Jews began to gain access, elite colleges changed the definition of merit to favor the Protestant elite. Yet, when African Americans demanded increased access decades later, elite colleges by and large refused to change the definition of merit to promote social transformation. Clearly, elite colleges have histories as mechanisms of social reproduction. Since then, the landscape of selective college admissions has evolved. Today, elite colleges value racial and socioeconomic diversity. The following chapter details the racial and socioeconomic demographics of NESCAC schools for the past fifteen years. The data demonstrate that colleges are more

racially and socioeconomically diverse than ever before, yet they still favor the white and heavily favor the wealthy.

## Chapter 2

“The rich feel full of merit.” Mason Cooley, U.S. aphorist, cited in McNamee and Miller 2004 (21).

Thus far, I have examined two historical moments that brought issues of race and class to elite colleges. First, the 1910s-30s told the story of how elite colleges responded when they had to decide between equal opportunity and privileging the already-privileged. In response to increased Jewish enrollments, elite colleges used a series of admissions policies that systematically limited the population of Jews. In doing so, selective colleges demonstrated their adherence to social reproduction over meritocracy.

Second, I have traced the ways people of color, namely African American students, gained increased access to selective colleges in the 1950s-60s. At this point in time, immigration was low, fluctuating between 6.9 percent in 1950 and 4.7 percent in 1970 (Portes and Rumbaut 2014, 25). Without immigrants competing for access to selective schools, Americans of color pushed for increased representation. The Civil Rights movement provided an important backdrop to the push for increased representation for students of color. Student movements and protests brought racial tensions to selective colleges, pressuring them to enroll more students of color than ever before. While colleges did cede to some student wishes, they did so in a way that protected their role in social reproduction, allowing only controlled mobility for students of color.

I now shift to the third moment in my study. This era further demonstrates the relationship between macro level structural shifts, such as immigration trends and the civil rights movement, and the students elite colleges admit. In 2015, 45 percent of immigrants to the US were Latino compared to twenty-seven percent Asian and just nine percent black (Zong and Batalova 2017). Given these data, it makes sense that Latino students have

enjoyed the largest increase in representation in elite schools. Asian students have experienced increased representation in elite schools, but less so than Latino students. Without a surge in immigration comparable to that of their Latino or Asian peers, black student representation has remained stagnant over the past fifteen years. Despite the increased racial diversity in elite colleges, however, the class composition has remained largely the same over the past fifteen years with between 40 and 50 percent of students at elite colleges receiving financial aid.

The rise of the concept of meritocracy as a value in higher education also makes today an important time for studying race and class in elite colleges. Beginning in the 1990s and continuing since, Americans have had more interest in meritocracy and there has been more research on the subject. Lemann (1999) traces the rise of meritocracy from IQ tests originally meant to select the few most talented students from the masses to prepare them for positions of power. McNamee and Miller (2004) draw out the ways that the concept of meritocracy is tied to American culture through the idea that people can attain the American dream. These cultural beliefs notwithstanding, the authors find that the most important factor determining where people end up is where they started in life. Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2014) corroborate these findings in their study of West Baltimore youth. Instead of each generation beginning on a level playing field, some youth are born into much better starting points than others and their social backgrounds follow them throughout their whole lives. Despite the reality that higher education does not operate on a meritocracy but instead “reflects, legitimizes, and reproduces class inequalities” (McNamee and Miller 2004, 112), Americans today still cling to the idea that individual merit is the true determinant of self-advancement.

In addition to recent immigration trends and the rise in interest in meritocracy, the United States has experienced increased social unrest with regard to race, class, and opportunity more broadly. We see this in the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement as citizens protested against the immense inequality between those at the top of the class structure and everyone else. We also see this in the Black Lives Matter movement fighting for equality under the law. Questions and conflicts surrounding race, class, and inequality have been pushed to the forefront of the national consciousness and America's elite colleges are not immune to the context in which they operate.

Given the social context and the highly competitive application process to elite colleges, I examine the landscape of selective colleges with respect to equal opportunity and meritocracy to ask, how do their histories as sites of exclusion and social reproduction bump up against contemporary conceptions of equal opportunity and meritocracy? What is the role of macro level immigration trends in the demographics of elite colleges? What do the data say about who truly has access to elite colleges today?

### *Methodology*

The landscape of elite colleges today looks very different than it did a century ago as Jews sought increased access and decades ago when people of color sought increased representation. Elite colleges are past the era when being Jewish or black or Latino was enough to bar students from their campuses. Since the early 2000s, the NESCACs have worked to increase their enrollments of black, Latino, and Asian students. Race, however, differs from class in a vital way: it is easily seen. Though there is room for ambiguity, racial diversity is highly visible. Walking through the campuses of NESCAC schools, visitors see white students alongside black, Latino, and Asian students in the classrooms,

dining halls, and residences. Class, however, continues to be an important determinant of who does and does not attend elite colleges. Individuals do not walk around with highly visible class markers in ways that they walk around with markers of race. In this way, students of different races on campus present an image of Bourdieu's (1977) concept of controlled mobility which masks the intense social reproduction at work for the white and wealthy.

I study the contemporary landscape of elite colleges through NESCAC schools. For the purposes of this study, I narrow my study population of NESCAC schools based on two criteria. First, I hope to examine small colleges so I limit my study to schools in the NESCAC with fewer than 3,000 students. I study the smaller colleges because they form a status group more so than colleges that differ greatly in student enrollment. I will explain the importance of status groups in more depth shortly. Second, I hope to examine the most selective schools, so I limit my study to schools that accepted about one in four applicants or fewer for the 2016-2017 academic year. Based on these two criteria, eight out of eleven NESCAC schools fill my study population: Bowdoin, Colby, Bates, Williams, Amherst, Middlebury, Wesleyan, and Hamilton.

I chose the NESCAC because they are some of the best small colleges in the United States. Figure 2.1 lists the most recent college rankings by U.S. News and World Report. To rank colleges, the report considered indicators of excellence like retention rates, graduation rates, academic reputation, selectivity, class size, and resources. In a country with over 4,000 institutions of higher education, the NESCACs garnered spots in the top one to two percent of colleges, cementing their status in the top tier.

There is, however, some contention surrounding the validity of the rankings. Some argue the algorithms the rankings use boil down to which colleges have the most money (Rojstaczer 2001). Others say that the rankings create incentives for colleges to misreport data like SAT scores of incoming students to gain a better ranking (Diver 2005). Some colleges like Reed College have opted not to participate in U.S. News and World Report rankings due to the controversy.

Regardless of whether the rankings actually measure quality of education, they have profound cultural influence. For example, the 2014 college rankings attracted 2.6 million individual visitors and nearly nineteen million page views in a single day (Smith 2013). *The Washington Post* goes as far as to say the rankings “have steered the spending of billions of dollars as students and parents agonize over their higher-ed choices” (Leiby 2014). Researchers have also found that with higher rankings come lower acceptance rates, higher standardized test scores of admitted students, greater percentages of incoming students from the top ten percent of their high school class, more applications received, and higher yield rates (Bowman and Bastedo 2009). Whether we like it or not, the Americans place much importance on the rankings.

**Figure 2.1:** NESCAC Rankings Among All Liberal Arts Colleges in the U.S.

<b>College</b>	<b>U.S. News and World Report 2017 Ranking</b>
Williams	1
Amherst	2
Middlebury	4
Bowdoin	6
Colby	12 (tie)
Hamilton	12 (tie)
Wesleyan	21
Bates	27

*Source:* U.S. News and World Report (“The 10 Best Liberal Arts Colleges in America” 2017).

While there are other small colleges that offer high-quality educations, I study the NESCAC because there is sociological evidence that athletic conferences like the NESCAC function as status groups. Lifschitz et al. (2014) conclude that athletic conferences are important because they allow colleges to position themselves with other schools of similar status and prestige. Groups of schools that colleges associate with athletically build status for them not individually, but instead as a group. Bowen and Levin (2003) find that the NESCACs in particular insulate themselves from losing status as elite colleges by grouping themselves with each other. For a college to compete athletically with a college that is academically inferior threatens to diminish its status. For example, Williams College competes with schools like Amherst, Bowdoin, and Middlebury which each have strong academic reputations. If Williams were to compete with a school without a strong academic reputation, then it would risk being associated with less rigorous academics.

That being said, NESCAC colleges are particularly susceptible to following and mimicking what other NESCACs do. This can be explained by DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) assertion that organizations are susceptible to isomorphism, meaning that organizations facing the same constraints will begin to resemble each other. These organizations "respond to an environment that consists of other organizations responding to their environment, which consists of organizations responding to an environment of organizations' responses" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 149). The result is that "organizations are rewarded for being similar to other organizations in their fields. This similarity can make it easier for organizations to...be acknowledged as legitimate and reputable" (DiMaggio and Powell 1983, 153). Bowdoin's Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Whitney Soule alluded to this in a focus group I conducted with Bowdoin College Admissions Officers in November 2016. She informed me,

I think we're all operating in a similar environment. We're highly selective so the students that are even eligible to be considered by our offices for a positive outcome in the admission process, we're talking about a very small population of the United States, right? You think about all the forces at work and the school systems around the country, right, that have students prepared. And then you look at all of the students who are qualified academically, actually qualified, or qualified with potential, that we can feel confident about, who are then interested in a liberal arts college, that are then interested in a residential liberal arts college in New England. We're talking about the same applicant pool....The spread around is hard to shake up. We all have similar forces at work.

The NESCACs occupy a similar niche within higher education and as a result operate in similar ways. Studying the NESCACs allows me to study how they operate as a group to maintain their status as elite colleges.

Their resources also define the NESCACs. These colleges have some of the largest endowments in the nation and stand out even more in terms of endowment per student. Figure 2.2 identifies the endowment of each school ranked from greatest endowment per student to least.

**Figure 2.2: NESCAC Endowments**

<b>College</b>	<b>Endowment (millions of dollars)</b>	<b>Student Body</b>	<b>Endowment per Student (thousands of dollars)</b>
Amherst	2,031 (2016)	1,795 (2016)	1,131
Williams	2,207 (2016)	2,099 (2016)	1,051
Bowdoin	1,340 (2016)	1,799 (2016)	745
Hamilton	817 (2016)	1,872 (2016)	436
Colby	746 (2015)	1,820 (2013)	410
Middlebury	1,001 (2016)	2,542 (2016)	394
Wesleyan	838 (2016)	2,897 (2016)	289
Bates	261 (2015)	1,792 (2016)	146

*Source: Common Data Set.*

Williams and Amherst both have endowments that exceed two billion dollars while those of Bowdoin and Middlebury exceed one billion dollars. Bates is the outlier among the group with an endowment of 261 million dollars, with its closest peer being Colby. NESCAC schools are some of the wealthiest and most selective in the nation, making them appropriate case studies for studying the highest rungs of the hierarchy of higher education.

For this study, I collected data from the Common Data Set (CDS), a collaborative project among colleges and publishers including the College Board, Peterson's, and U.S.

News and World Report. The goal of the project is to streamline data collection efforts for colleges and has become the industry standard in terms of data collection (“Common Data Set Initiative” 2017). The CDS covers topics including admissions statistics and policies, diversity, financial aid, enrollment, graduation rates, retention rates, academic offerings, faculty, class size, and housing, among other things. Colleges that fill out the CDS report the racial demographics of their student bodies as well as their parameters and policies on financial aid, making the CDS an ideal means of studying racial and socioeconomic diversity in elite colleges (“Common Data Set Initiative” 2017).

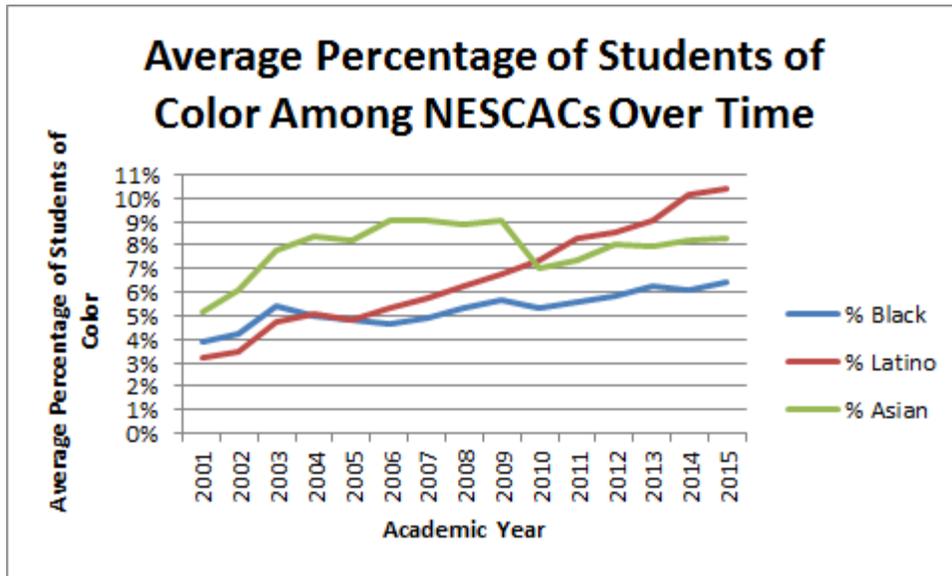
Moreover, the CDS offers data that colleges do not necessarily choose to make publically available on their websites. Online, colleges publish certain data and leave out other data in order to market themselves in a way they think will attract prospective students. The CDS is standardized and does not allow colleges to manipulate the information they publish, making it an ideal means of studying the demographics of elite colleges. As of November 2016, the NESCACs each published information regarding their CDS, allowing for comparison across groups. NESCAC colleges, however, did not advertise the CDS. Instead, I had to search for their institutional research pages to find the CDS. Bates stood out among the group with the highest level of transparency, offering the CDS from 1999 through the present, followed by Bowdoin and Wesleyan which each published the CDS from 2001 to present. Colby’s CDS was available for the years 2001 through 2013. Williams demonstrated the least transparency and only published CDS records beginning in 2011. Most broadly, the CDS data revealed what I had suspected. The next section reveals that NESCACs have enrolled disproportionate

amounts of white students. The section after that focuses on how most students they enroll come from families near the top of the class structure.

*Social Reproduction and Transformation in the NESCAC: Race*

Historically, elite colleges catered to white students. When students of color began to seek increased access in the latter half of the twentieth century, they succeeded in only a minor way. Today these colleges make active efforts to recruit racially diverse student bodies and elite colleges are more diverse than ever before. The three most prominent minority groups--African Americans, Latinos, and Asians--vary in their representation across schools, though Latinos are typically most represented and black students least represented. Figure 2.3 shows the average percentage of students of color at NESCAC schools over time. In the past fifteen years, NESCACs have been enrolling more students of color. While there are students of color attending the NESCACs, the racial diversity functions as controlled mobility that gives elite colleges the legitimacy they need to continue to operate as vehicles social reproduction. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the representation of each racial group over time.

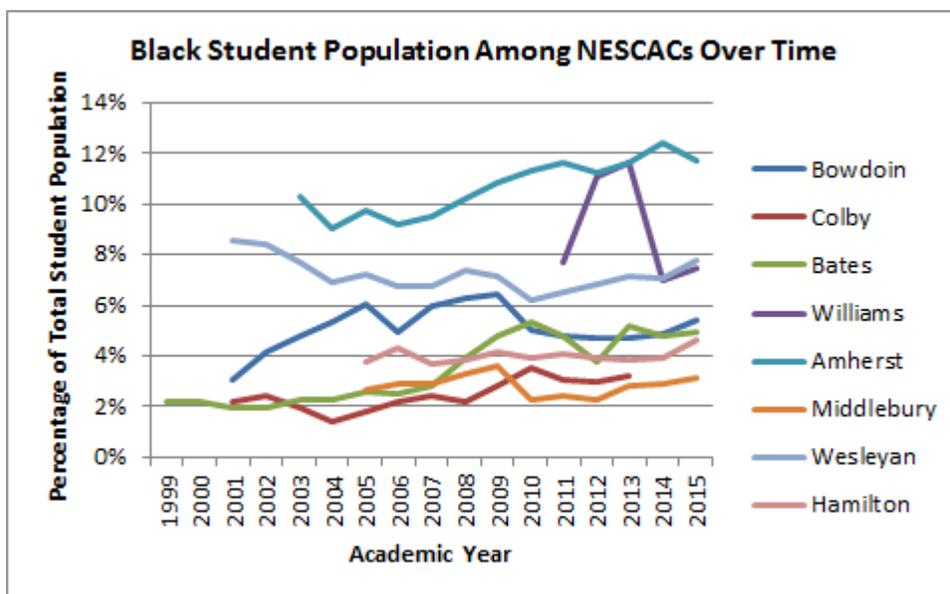
**Figure 2.3:** Average Percentage of Students of Color Among NESCACs Over Time



*Source:* Common Data Set.

According to the Census Bureau, the black population in America has remained stagnant over the past fifteen years. In 2000, blacks constituted 12.3 percent of the population compared to 12.5 percent in 2010 and 12.6 percent in 2015 (“ACS DEMOGRAPHIC AND HOUSING ESTIMATES 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates” 2017). Likewise, the representation of black students in the NESCACs has remained largely the same over the past ten years, fluctuating about two percent for most schools except Amherst. Figure 2.4 shows the black student population among the NESCACs.

**Figure 2.4: Black Student Population Among NESCACs Over Time**



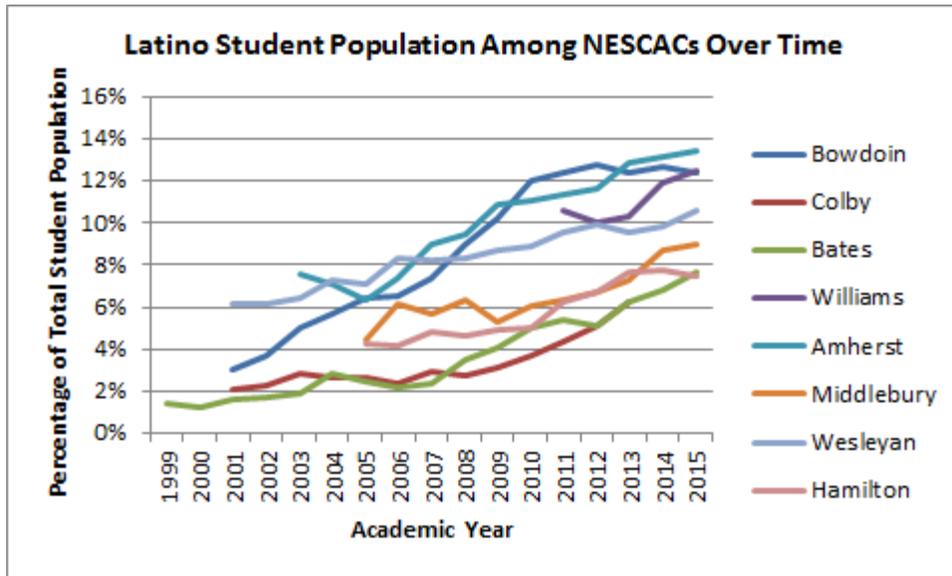
Source: Common Data Set.

Across the nation as a whole, blacks earned eleven percent of all bachelor’s degrees from all institutions of higher education in 2013 (“NCES Fast Facts” 2017). Given these data, we know that the enrollments and graduations from NESCAC schools are approaching those of the nation at large. Amherst has enrolled the most black students each year since 2003 growing from 9.0 percent in 2004 to 12.4 percent of the total student body in 2014. Colby and Middlebury have consistently stood at the bottom of the status group, filling their student bodies with fewer than four percent black students. Colby’s black student population peaked in 2010 at 3.5 percent while that of Middlebury peaked at 3.6 percent in 2009. Bowdoin, Bates, Wesleyan, and Hamilton fill the middle of the status group, enrolling between four and seven percent black students in the past few years. In recent years, Amherst has exceeded the national average while the other NESCACs lag far behind in terms of black student enrollment and graduation. That is, the NESCACs are

moving towards graduating students of color at the same rates as the nation as a whole, though most lag behind. The fact that more black students are graduating from elite colleges may give the impression that there are no barriers to entry for elite colleges since they enroll students of all races. Yet, as I will argue, the increasing racial diversity is just what Bourdieu (1977) means when he discusses controlled mobility. The increased, though still not nationally representative, enrollments of black students obscure the fact that selective colleges continue to enroll white students disproportionately. I discuss in more detail how the NESCACs mask their role in social reproduction with regard to race in the next chapter.

Most notably, increased Latino immigration to the U.S. propels the increased Latino population across NESCAC schools in the past fifteen years. In 1990, Latinos made up 8.8 percent of the population compared to 12.5 in 2000, 16.4 in 2010, and 17.3 in 2014. In absolute terms, the Latino population rose from 21.8 million in 1990 to 55.3 million in 2014 (Stepler and Brown 2016). Due to the rise in immigration, Latino students earned eleven percent of bachelor's degrees across the nation in 2013 ("NCES Fast Facts" 2017). Given the ballooning Latino population, it makes sense that the NESCACs accepted and enrolled a steadily increasing Latino population. Figure 2.5 shows that Latino students have experienced greater representation than blacks in the NESCACs student bodies in recent years.

**Figure 2.5:** Latino Student Population Among NESCACs Over Time

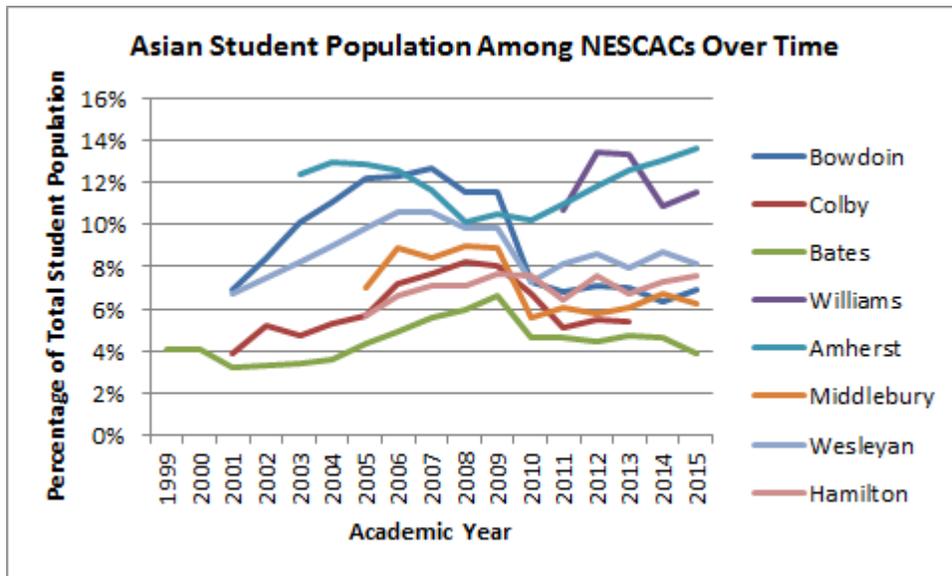


Source: Common Data Set.

Amherst is again ahead of the rest of the conference, enrolling the highest percentage of Latino students for most years, except between 2010 and 2012 when Bowdoin enrolled more. Both colleges enrolled upwards of ten percent Latino students since 2010. Between 1999 and 2015, Bates increased its Latino student population fivefold from just 1.4 percent to 7.7 percent. The other NESCACs fluctuated between five and ten percent Latino students in the past ten to fifteen years. With respect to Latino students, NESCACs are enrolling more than ever which may give the impression that there are no barriers to earning admission to elite colleges. Amherst, Bowdoin, and Williams actually graduate a greater proportion of Latino students than the nation as a whole which may serve as evidence that students of color have just as much access, if not more, than white students. This growth in Latino enrollment, however, is not the norm. Latino enrollments on par with that of the nation is controlled mobility that give NESCACs legitimacy as sites that champion equal opportunity.

The Asian population in America has steadily increased since 2000, though the Asian population pales in comparison to the black and Latino populations. In 2000, Asians represented 3.6 percent of the population compared to 4.8 percent in 2010 and 5.1 percent in 2015 (“Race Universe: Total Population. 2010 Census Summary File 1” 2017). Across the nation Asian students earned seven percent of bachelor’s degrees in 2013 (“NCES Fast Facts” 2017). Beginning in 2010, the CDS altered the ways in which colleges reported the races of their students. For the first time, non-Hispanic/Latino students had the opportunity to identify themselves as “two or more races.” Asian students were more likely than their black and Latino peers to categorize themselves as two or more races instead of “Asian or Pacific Islander.” Figure 2.6 shows that the population of students who reported as solely Asian in the NESCACs dropped across the board in 2010.

**Figure 2.6:** Asian Student Population Among NESCACs Over Time



Source: Common Data Set.

That being said, before 2010 there was a wide range in Asian student representation at the NESCACs. Amherst enrolled the greatest proportion of Asian students, peaking at just under thirteen percent in 2004. Bates on the other hand had lower rates of Asian student enrollment than all of its peers each year leading up to 2010, with its lowest enrollment falling at 3.2 percent in 2001. After 2010, despite the change in student reporting options, the population of Asian students across the NESCACs most often hovered between four and eight percent, falling between that of Latino students and black students. The Asian student populations at NESCACs are consistent with national trends which may serve as evidence that colleges are open to everyone, regardless of race when that is not the case in practice. The controlled mobility for Asian students detracts attention from the fact that white students still have more representation in elite colleges than their peers of color.

### *Being Elite and Being Diverse*

In addition, the colleges with the most financial resources tend to be the most racially diverse. For example, Amherst has the highest endowment per student out of all NESCACs and consistently enrolls the greatest proportion of black, Latino, and Asian students. Williams and Bowdoin are second and third in terms of endowment per student and are also towards the top of the status group with respect to minority student enrollment. Stevens (2009) suggests that this could be due to the ability of these colleges to find and recruit students of color. Colleges devote considerable resources to student recruitment, so those with the most resources are likely to be those that can travel to places where there are talented students of color.

Furthermore, related research suggests that part of what it means to be an elite college today is being diverse. Schools like Amherst, Williams, and Bowdoin that rank the

highest and are considered some of the more prestigious NESCACs have higher levels of diversity than their less wealthy and less elite peer schools. It seems, then, that there is a connection between prestige and diversity. This is consistent with Khan's (2011) analysis of what it means to be elite at a prestigious prep school. Khan contends that part of being elite today is having what he calls cultural omnivorousness. The old elite needed to be comfortable with only high culture. That is not the case anymore. To be elite today, individuals need to be comfortable interacting with all kinds of people and cultures. For example, Khan cites students who listen to both classical and rap music, or are comfortable eating in fancy restaurants and small diners (Khan 201, 151). In elite colleges, students need experience living and studying with people of different races because contemporary elites are comfortable engaging with people of all backgrounds. Bowdoin's Dean Soule alluded to this in a focus group I conducted with Bowdoin College Admissions Officers in November 2016. She pointed out,

Part of what our students have to be able to do when they graduate from here is navigate a world that has wildly different privilege. You're gonna work on work teams with people who have entirely different backgrounds, some of it very privileged. Your whole life will continue to put you in places of socioeconomic diversity and I want all of our students, those who are the wealthiest and those who are the least wealthy, to be able to be comfortable in whatever space they're in and be confident and sensitive to the socioeconomic diversity and all that that means, but to not be sitting in a meeting room as a twenty-four year old with their first job, whether they're a highly privileged student or a less privileged student, feeling like it's not fair. What we want is for our students to be well-versed, confident, articulate, adaptable, in all ways.

Today's elite can navigate cross-cultural situations with ease. Elite colleges must therefore make sure that they have diverse student bodies so that their primary clientele--the children of the elite--can gain a cultural omnivorousness required of their upper class social circles.

*Social Reproduction and Transformation in the NESCAC: Class*

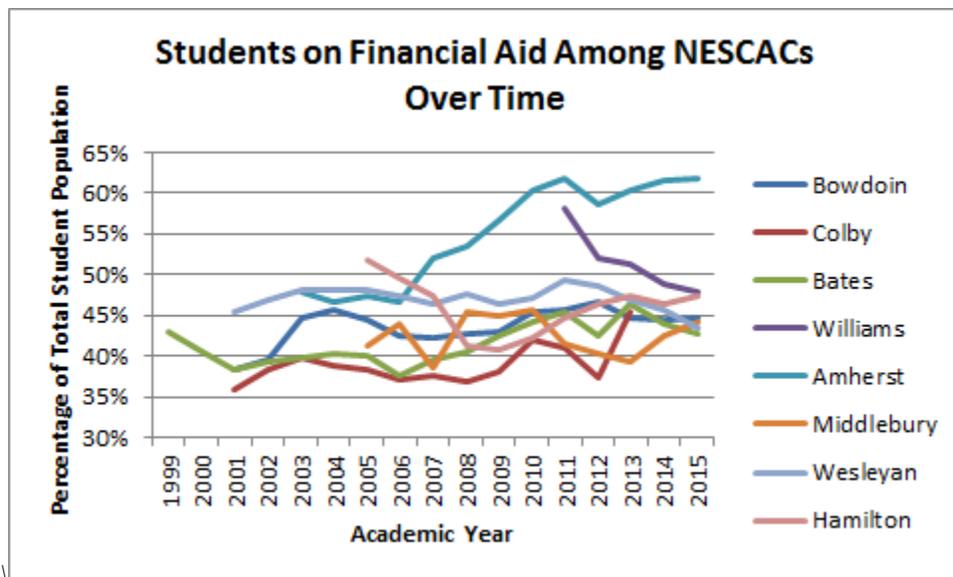
Failing to talk about socioeconomic diversity would be antithetical to the value of diversity colleges claim to have. Colleges have made strides to help students from all class backgrounds afford their tuitions which hover over \$60,000 per year. The NESCACs demonstrate their commitment to socioeconomic diversity through a combination of generous aid packages. Yet, similar to racial diversity, the existence of some socioeconomic diversity masks the overrepresentation of wealthy families in the NESCACs. Having some students on financial aid is a form of controlled mobility that allows colleges to continue to cater to wealthy populations.

These colleges vary with respect to resources they allocate toward financial aid packages, but they are generous enough to enable even the poorest students who get in to attend. Bowdoin and Amherst offer the most generous packages. They are need-blind, meaning that they do not consider a family's ability to pay when evaluating applicants for admission. They also meet full demonstrated need of admitted students, which they calculate by subtracting a family's ability to pay from the total price of tuition. What makes them stand out most, however, is that they do not include loans in their financial aid packages, which in theory allows students to graduate debt-free. Williams, Middlebury, and Hamilton are need-blind and meet full demonstrated need, but include loans in their aid packages. While a family's ability to pay is not a factor in the admissions process, students may need to take on loans in order to attend these colleges. Colby, Bates, and Wesleyan are not need-blind, but meet the full demonstrated need of admitted students. That being said, Colby does not include loans in its aid packages while Bates and Wesleyan do. To be clear, these colleges offer highly generous aid packages that allow

admitted students from the poorest backgrounds to attend. I am one of these students. Without the generosity of my institution and its donors and dedication to increasing access for all, I could not conceive of attending a NESCAC school.

However, I am not the typical case. Instead, students from families who pay full tuition of upwards of \$60,000 per year are more likely than their needier peers to attend elite colleges. Figure 2.7 traces the percentage of students on financial aid among the NESCACs over time. With the exception of Amherst, all colleges in my sample admit more full-pay students than students on any kind of financial aid today.

**Figure 2.7:** Students on Financial Aid Among NESCACs Over Time



Source: Common Data Set.

Amherst has made large gains in enrolling socioeconomically diverse classes in the past fifteen years from 48 percent in 2003 to 62 percent in 2015. The other NESCACs however, remained stagnant across time in terms of students on financial aid. Colby generally enrolled the lowest rate of students on financial aid at just under 40 percent while Bates and Middlebury consistently enroll a bit more than 40 percent of students on

aid. Bowdoin and Hamilton hover around 45 percent compared to Wesleyan which generally enrolls fewer than 50 percent of students on aid. Williams typically enrolls about half of its student population on financial aid. That is to say, at the NESCACs the majority of students do not receive financial aid and pay over \$60,000 per year per child in tuition. But, the story does not end there.

While the data suggest that the majority of students at NESCACs come from wealthy backgrounds, the percentage of students on aid masks the even greater socioeconomic inequality embedded within elite colleges. Using data from federal income tax returns between 1996 and 2014, economists at the Equality of Opportunity Project explored the class backgrounds of students at colleges across the nation and found startling results. Figure 2.8 details the class backgrounds of students at the NESCACs from greatest to the least proportion of students from the top one percent household income.

**Figure 2.8: NESCAC Student Body Wealth**

<b>College</b>	<b>Median Parent Household Income (\$)</b>	<b>% Students from top 1%</b>	<b>% Students from top 20%</b>	<b>% Students from bottom 60%</b>	<b>% Students from bottom 20%</b>
Middlebury	219,600	21.1	76	14.2	2.3
Colby	208,700	18.3	76	11.1	1.5
Williams	184,000	17.9	67	19.6	3.2
Amherst	181,300	16.8	60	24.4	4.2
Bowdoin	177,600	15.4	69	17.5	2.6
Bates	176,900	13.8	76	12.9	1.8
Wesleyan	165,300	13.5	70	17.5	4.2
Hamilton	164,600	12.9	72	13.8	3.9

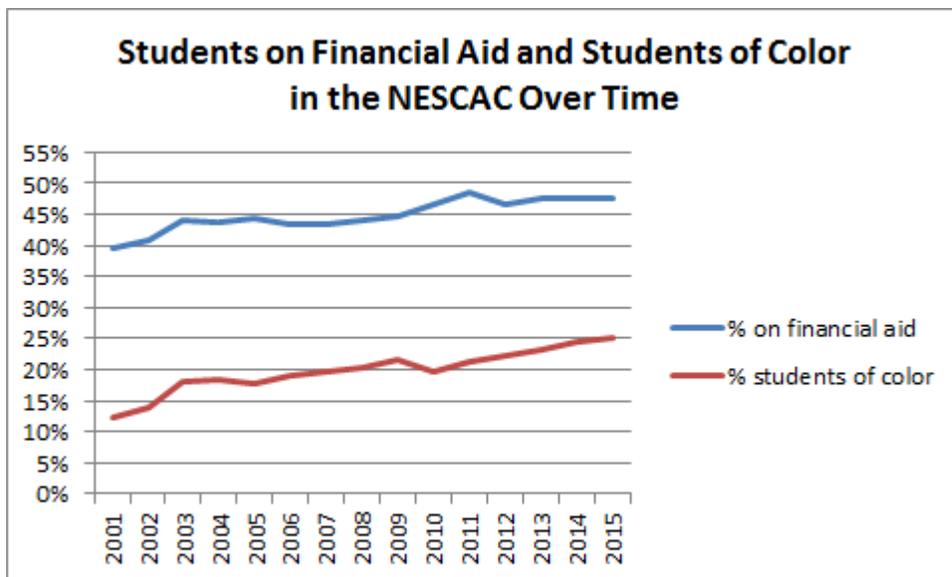
*Source:* Equality of Opportunity Project (“The Equality of Opportunity Project” 2017) and New York Times (Aisch et al. 2017).

Relative to the American population as a whole, the NESCACs enroll some of the wealthiest students in the country. Median family earnings for NESCAC students are six figures ranging from \$164,600 at Hamilton to \$219,000 at Middlebury. The national median household income in 2015 was \$53,889 (“Population Estimates, July 1, 2016, (V2016)” 2017), meaning that the median family at each NESCAC earns more than three times the median American family. Middlebury leads the status group in this regard as well with over one fifth of its students coming from the top one percent. At Hamilton, 12.9 percent of students come from the top one percent of earnings in the nation, the lowest rate among NESCACs. Even when considering the top twenty percent of families--not uber rich, yet quite wealthy who earn an average of over \$194,000 annually (“Household Income Quintiles” 2016)--the NESCACs cater heavily to the affluent. At Middlebury, Colby, and Bates, over three quarters of students come from the top fifth of the income distribution, indicating the vast overrepresentation of the affluent in elite colleges. And, given that less than half of students at these colleges are on financial aid, even some students from the top income quintile receive financial aid. Amherst demonstrates the greatest level of socioeconomic diversity, yet students from the top income quintile and overrepresented by a factor of three. On the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum, students from poorer backgrounds are vastly underrepresented. At Colby, just eleven percent of students are from the bottom 60 percent of the income distribution. There, students from the poorest three income quintiles are underrepresented by a factor of nearly six. Amherst again leads the pack in terms of socioeconomic diversity, despite enrolling just about a quarter of its students from the poorest 60 percent of the population. When considering the poorest population, the

disparities in enrollment are even greater. Amherst and Wesleyan enroll 4.2 percent of their students from the poorest 20 percent of the nation while just 1.5 percent of Colby students are from the bottom income quintile.

The data make it clear that elite colleges enroll most of their students from the most affluent and privileged sections of society. Figure 2.9 maps the percentage of students of color in NESCAC schools with the percentage of students on financial aid, demonstrating that while racial diversity has increased in the past fifteen years, socioeconomic diversity has changed little.

**Figure 2.9:** Students on Financial Aid and Students of Color in the NESCAC Over Time



*Source:* Common Data Set.

Between 2001 and 2015, racial diversity in the NESCACs increased by thirteen percent. Socioeconomic diversity increased less, from 39 percent of students on financial aid in 2001 to eight percent more in 2015. The increased racial diversity helps the NESCAC colleges gain a veneer of equal opportunity despite the smaller changes in socioeconomic diversity. The racial diversity operates as the controlled mobility that detracts attention

from the intense social reproduction for wealthy families, even in this era of equal opportunity and meritocracy. The following chapter explores the ways in which elite colleges market themselves to appear like they are committed to equal opportunity and meritocracy. The NESCACs present themselves using race-neutral and class-neutral language that promotes individual achievement stripped of the effects of social background, thereby masking their role in social reproduction.

### Chapter 3

“Surely I disclose no institutional secret when I say that there is likely to be disjuncture between the values embraced in rhetoric and the practical realization of those values in academic action on the ground. By the same token, I hope readers understand that I am not belittling the importance of any of the qualities to which the institution expresses commitment, rather I am analyzing the nature of the rhetoric of that commitment.” (Urciuoli 2003, 406)

“Our general acceptance of the idea of meritocracy may be the greatest accomplishment of higher education’s greatest leaders.” (Stevens 2009, 247)

In light of the data that suggest that race and class are important determinants of who is accepted to elite colleges and meritocracy in education is a myth, this chapter asks how elite colleges participate in creating the myth of meritocracy. What mechanisms allow colleges to mask their role in social reproduction? My research suggests that colleges construct a race-neutral and class-neutral discourse about themselves which appeals to everyone, regardless of background. It is through this discourse that elite schools present themselves in a way that masks the intense social reproduction and the power of wealth in determining access to elite colleges.

Today, college websites are a primary means of disseminating information to prospective students as well as the public at large. College websites are the first place prospective students go for information on colleges (Merker 2014) and colleges use their publications as means of forming a relationship with prospective students (Hartley and Morpew 2008). Meyer (2008) studied the homepages of college websites as the virtual faces of colleges for visitors. Meyer concluded the ways colleges choose to present their virtual faces is demonstrative of their priorities, values, and how they hope to be seen by the public. Meyer also found that among the variety of colleges surveyed in 2003, the websites of undergraduate institutions catered to prospective students more so than any other audience including current students, faculty, donors, community members, and

parents, though they addressed prospective students and alumni equally. Overall, colleges present themselves to prospective students and demonstrate their values via their websites.

The content they publish has a specific purpose for colleges as institutions and merits analysis. For example, Saichaie and Morpew (2014) find that colleges use their websites primarily to market higher education as a product, emphasizing the private purposes of education over the public benefits. These colleges noted their close connections to top companies because they concluded that this message would resonate most with students. On the contrary, these websites included few messages about the public good of their educations. Instead, they focused on their role in supporting self-advancement over contributing to the public good of society. Ultimately, the websites communicated the message that students are pursuing credentials over knowledge. These findings are consistent with Collins' (1979) assessment that higher education primarily offers credentials to elites.

### *Methodology*

In order to study how elite colleges participate in creating and perpetuating the myth of meritocracy, I conducted a content analysis of college websites because prior studies suggest their published content has a specific purpose. Overall, I sought to study their race and class based messages. By studying the content that colleges publish on their websites, I analyze the discourses they create surrounding equal opportunity and the myth of meritocracy.

For this study, I went beyond home pages and examined three sections of each college's website. In each section, I analyzed published text exclusively. First, I studied the About section. For students looking for basic information about a college, the About

section is a go-to. This section contained information about the purpose of the college, the values the college espouses, as well as the mission statement of the college and its history. Within the About section, I limited my examination to the associated tabs. I did not examine external links listed on the About page. I limited my analysis to these areas because they are most easily accessible to readers. That is, prospective students do not have to dig deeply to find the information listed on the About page and the associated tabs.

Second, I studied the Admissions section of the websites. For prospective students, the Admissions page details the application timeline, application requirements, criteria for admission, and other important information. The Admissions pages of NESCAC webpages also detail student demographics like racial and socioeconomic diversity. Just like in the About section, I limited my analysis to tabs within the Admissions home page and did not examine any external links listed on the pages.

Last, I reviewed the content that colleges published with respect to diversity and multiculturalism. There was more variation in terms of how and where colleges published content about diversity. As a result, it was necessary to search different parts of the school websites including sections on Multicultural Life, the Multicultural Center, or the Office of Equity and Inclusion. When studying the discourse surrounding diversity in the NESCACs, I examined the main page in which colleges talk about diversity and multiculturalism. Again, I refrained from examining external links on these web pages in order to study what is most accessible to the public.

After compiling data from these three sections, I gathered the text into a Microsoft Word document and coded into the four themes that emerged: the purpose of higher education and admitted students, racial diversity, recruiting diverse applicants, and

socioeconomic diversity. I coded into these four themes because these are points that all colleges discussed in their online content. Instead of using software, I manually highlighted the ways each theme contributed to the discourse of equal opportunity and meritocracy. All quotations in this chapter come directly from the published content on websites during my data collection period of November 2016.

Overall, I find that although data from the previous chapter demonstrate that NESCACs cater primarily to families with the most advantages, especially the white and wealthy, when NESCAC colleges talk about their purposes, race, recruiting diverse students, and class, they create a discourse that is race and class neutral. In terms of race, Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls this type of discourse colorblind racism which has three key components. The first is that race is just skin color. This perspective ignores the history of racial oppression and the resulting contemporary power dynamics. Second, noticing race is racist. Instead of noticing race, people should pretend as if it does not exist because doing so is the only way to be truly colorblind. Last, racism is a personal problem. Racism is not institutional, but instead exists through a few prejudiced individuals across society. In terms of class, websites perpetuate the myth of meritocracy by overlooking the power of wealth in determining who has access. Ultimately, their silence surrounding topics related to race and class in their published discourse obscures their role in perpetuating social reproduction, thus achieving a dual purpose of educating elites and still playing a role in the American narrative of education as the great equalizer.

### *The Purposes of Higher Education and Admitted Students*

When describing their purposes, the NESCACs perpetuate the myth of meritocracy by adopting race and class neutral language that appeals to people from all

backgrounds. Foremost, NESCAC colleges claim to push students to become independent thinkers while instilling character in their students. For example, Bowdoin hopes to instill “attributes of maturity and wisdom” including “self-knowledge, intellectual honesty,...mental courage, self discipline” as well as “tolerance of and interest in differences of culture and belief, and a willingness to...subordinate self to higher goals” in its students (“Mission of the College” 2017). Middlebury hopes to foster in its students a sense of respect for other community members while Wesleyan seeks to graduate students with a generosity of spirit gained through their time at the university. These are all, of course, positive characteristics, admired across races and classes because they are race-neutral and class-neutral. Yet, the NESCACs are silent about how the criteria they colleges use to evaluate students favor the most privileged students. As I mentioned in Chapter One, elite colleges admit students who earn high grades in rigorous courses, earn high test scores, and participate in extracurriculars. It takes resources, however, to be able to take rigorous courses, receive the preparation to do well on standardized tests, and have extracurricular opportunities. In being silent about this reality, NESCAC colleges fail to disclose the importance of class in determining who has access to their schools.

Elite colleges draw attention away from the class reproduction that occurs on their campuses by claiming that their students use their privileges to serve society at large and to further the public good. For example, Bowdoin says it seeks to mold students who will work towards the “common good” so that they may use their skills to benefit society at large (“Mission of the College” 2017). Similarly, Williams asks its students to view their education not as a “privilege destined to create further privilege, but as a privilege that creates opportunities to serve society at large” (“Williams College Mission and Purposes”

2017). When NESCAC colleges emphasize their role in giving back to society, they tie themselves intimately to social transformation over social reproduction. They also distance themselves from selfishness and replace that with altruism. Ultimately, their rhetoric about how their students work for the public good masks the social reproduction with notions of American ideals like altruism and giving back.

The language NESCACs use when describing the students they seek to admit is peculiarly class-neutral in that there is no mention of the importance of class in determining who has access to their schools. These colleges claim to seek students who are committed to academics, but also demonstrate potential to contribute to the diverse learning communities that small, residential, liberal arts colleges offer. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the remarkable consistency between schools in terms of the types of students they seek.

**Figure 3.1:** Rhetoric on Students Selected NESCACs Seek

College	Rhetoric
Colby	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “intellectually adventurous”</li> <li>• “have demonstrated consistent achievement in a challenging program of study”</li> <li>• “seem likely to make meaningful contributions to our diverse and collaborative community” (“Apply and Afford” 2017)</li> </ul>
Amherst	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “students of strong and vibrant intellectual promise...that will enable them to thrive in our dynamic academic and social environment and to take full advantage of the remarkable resources our community offers” (“Applying to Amherst” 2017)</li> </ul>
Wesleyan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Diverse in nationality, ethnicity, race, first language and socio-economic background, all Wesleyan students have two things in common: an intellectual curiosity and a genuine love of learning” (“Class Profile: 2020” 2017)</li> </ul>

Successful applicants are intellectually curious and not afraid to take intellectual risks in their schoolwork. By demonstrating intellectual engagement, attractive students demonstrate a passion for challenging themselves in the classroom, which is crucial for applicants who hope to thrive in the academically rigorous environments the NESCACs provide. These schools search for students who garnered exceptional achievements in their high school careers who can contribute to the learning environment of each school. Nowhere in these descriptions, however, do NESCACs mention the inequalities that allow some students to become intellectually engaged or have the resources and support that helps garner exceptional achievements. Some students have vastly better learning environments than others. For this reason, some students are much more predisposed than others to gain the credentials that NESCACs value, giving further evidence of the myth of meritocracy. By leaving race and class out of the mix, elite colleges present a colorblind and class-neutral discourse that diminishes the importance of social background in determining enrollment in highly selective colleges.

### *Racial Diversity*

The discourse surrounding racial diversity differs from socioeconomic diversity primarily because race is seen in ways that class is not. I will address socioeconomic diversity later in the chapter, but the NESCACs are more straightforward in how they represent their racial diversity than socioeconomic diversity. When describing campus racial diversity, selective colleges are in part demonstrating their commitments to equal opportunity. If elite colleges enrolled exclusively white students, it would be difficult to claim that they are part of the American narrative of education as the great equalizer. By publicizing their racial diversity, however, colleges demonstrate their commitment to

enrolling students from all backgrounds, thereby legitimizing themselves. This is an example of what Bourdieu (1977) means when he discusses controlled mobility. Additionally, colleges appeal to upper class families by sending the message that these schools are sites where elite children can gain what Khan (2011) refers to as cultural omnivorousness. The NESCACs advertise themselves as places that enable students to interact with people from a wide variety of backgrounds who bring with them different cultures. It is in these environments that children of the elite can become comfortable with all cultures and at ease among people from many backgrounds, a necessary skill for the contemporary elite.

In describing their racial diversity, the NESCAC colleges publicize their efforts to recruit racially diverse student bodies. The schools in my sample do not advertise themselves in terms of the percentages of white students they enroll. Instead, they highlight the percentage of students of color and other nonwhite students, thereby reinforcing white privilege. Some, like Bates, gave a definitive percentage of students of color, twenty-two percent, while others like Bowdoin were more vague and stated that it has “more than 30% students of color” (“Bowdoin At A Glance” 2017). Meanwhile, Williams and Hamilton specified U.S. students of color when referring to racial minorities. Wesleyan was the only school that specified the breakdown of different ethnic groups within their population of students of color. In contrast, Hamilton grouped students of color and international students together into one group that represent twenty-nine percent of its student body. Despite varying descriptions, their announcements that some students are not white normalizes whiteness and white privilege on their campuses.

In addition to quantifying students of color on their campuses, the NESCACs qualified their commitments to racial diversity. Figure 3.2 compares rhetoric surrounding racial diversity at selected NESCACs.

**Figure 3.2:** Rhetoric on Racial Diversity at Selected NESCACs

College	Rhetoric
Bowdoin	“Through our programming we bring together people of varying experiences and perspectives to learn and grow with the creative friction generated in contact with difference” (“Student Center for Multicultural Life” 2017)
Amherst	“exposure to students from many different backgrounds, with unique experiences and perspectives, enriches education and personal development in our classrooms, our residence halls and our students organizations” (“Diversity Programs” 2017)
Hamilton	“The quality of personal interaction that takes place in our classrooms extends to residences, performance halls, playing fields, dining halls, labs and to casual conversations that take place in Café Opus. That’s why we seek a diverse student body. Different perspectives and life experiences expand the breadth and augment the rigor of the intellectual life of our College” (“Hamilton College” 2017).
Bates	“a campus community and climate that capitalize on diversity and inclusion as necessary and powerful dimensions of preparing our students to live and work in an increasingly interconnected world” (“Three Strategic Priorities” 2017)

By focusing on the stated importance of contact with a diverse group of peers, the NESCAC webpages create a discourse that claims to value students from all backgrounds because they all have value in learning communities. When these schools bring them together, they expand everyone’s experiences in valuable ways. Amherst’s claim that “exposure to students from many different backgrounds, with unique experiences and perspectives” (“Admission & Financial Aid” 2017) emphasizes that people of all backgrounds have valuable experiences and perspectives that enrich the community. Hamilton’s claim that “Different perspectives and life experiences expand the breadth and augment the rigor of the intellectual life of our College” (“Hamilton College”

2017) has the same effect. Peculiarly, however, in talking about diversity none of these statements mention the word race. These colleges are exhibiting Bonilla-Silva's (2010) second rule of colorblind racism by not acknowledging race in their rhetoric. By not explicitly talking about race even when they talk about racial diversity, they other students of color while simultaneously ensuring that upper class white students do not feel othered. Their rhetoric on racial diversity is a masterful way of appealing to people from all backgrounds in a seemingly colorblind way. Yet, if all backgrounds truly had value to the learning communities, then the student bodies at NESCACs would not be so homogenous and privileged. Their espoused rhetoric and discourse surrounding diversity is disconnected from practice.

A handful of the NESCAC colleges also offered stories from their histories that serve to demonstrate the extent to which they have been and continue to be colorblind. On numerous occasions in their published content, Bates traces its commitment to diversity back to its founding in 1855 by Maine abolitionists, noting that some of its earliest students were former slaves ("Key Bates Facts" 2017). Middlebury highlights that its home state of Vermont was the first to abolish slavery in its constitution and the school graduated its first African American in 1823. Wesleyan boasts, "A number of Wesleyan faculty, students, and staff were active in the civil rights movement, and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. visited campus several times" ("History of Wesleyan" 2017).

It is doubtful that peripheral roles in enrolling former slaves or graduating a single African American in 1823 or having a number of community members involved with the civil rights movement has disrupted the normative whiteness of these campuses. I contend that these anecdotes bring to the forefront the idea that colleges are colorblind and that

racism is historic, not ongoing. The anecdotes about their historical devotion to colorblindness removes these colleges from their histories of bastions of white privilege and allow NESCAC colleges to claim to have been on the right side of history despite their true practices of catering to the white and affluent. Just like rhetoric on racial diversity, these historical anecdotes that some colleges provide mask their role as avenues of social reproduction and white privilege.

### *Recruiting Diverse Applicants*

The published content of the NESCAC colleges detail how they use special programs to increase access to their schools for students who are traditionally underrepresented and to form racially diverse student bodies. The use of special programs, however, brings out the fact that these colleges have historically been for white people, thereby cementing white students as the norm and silently painting students of color as the other. For example, Colby offers the Ralph J. Bunche Scholars program that recognizes students of color who demonstrate “scholastic strength and leadership potential” to help Colby increase the “multicultural presence in American higher education” (“Student Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Programs” 2017). In contrast to normal open houses for all students, Amherst holds two Diversity Open Houses each fall to “introduce prospective applicants to Amherst's campus, student body, faculty, classes and residence halls” (“Diversity Programs” 2017). The college also employs Diversity Interns who “are current Amherst students who work with the Office of Admission to reach out to prospective students from different cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds” (“The Amherst Story” 2017). Again, these colleges allude to racial diversity with soft language like

multiculturalism. There is nothing here about their histories of exclusion on the basis of race. Instead, they paint multiculturalism as one of their values that everyone can participate in.

### *Socioeconomic Diversity*

On websites, there was noticeably less discourse surrounding socioeconomic diversity than racial diversity. These schools create a discourse of equal opportunity by noting that they have the financial resources to ensure that talented and qualified students from all parts of the socioeconomic spectrum can attend. In doing so, they show that they are genuinely serving as vehicles of social transformation for some. Nearly all schools reported that about half of their students receive financial aid. At Amherst, the percentage of students of color is 58 compared to 50 at Williams, 44 at Middlebury, and 42 at Wesleyan. Some schools but not all also provided information about the percentage of students who receive Federal Pell Grants which the government offers to the neediest students across the nation. At Amherst, 24 percent of students receive Pell Grants compared to 14 at Amherst. In addition, schools published the average financial aid packages offered to students. The average grant at Amherst was more than \$50,000 compared to \$45,553 at Hamilton, \$45,310 at Bates, \$42,072 at Middlebury, over \$41,000 at Wesleyan, and over \$40,000 at Bowdoin.

Without these generous aid packages, it would likely be impossible for students from the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum to attend. I myself am a student on financial aid, without which I would not be able to attend and take advantage of the resources Bowdoin affords me. For me, Bowdoin has played an instrumental role in social transformation. That being said, about half of the students at these elite colleges are not on

financial aid, meaning that they come from families that can afford to pay upwards of \$60,000 per year in tuition. These families come from the top tiers of the class hierarchy and are highly overrepresented in elite colleges. Moreover, given the high tuitions, some students on financial aid are still from the top of the class structure. For example, as I discussed in the previous chapter, between 60 and 76 percent of students at the NESCACs come from the top income quintile. And, given that between 40 and 50 percent of students at the NESCACs are on financial aid, up to a third of students at NESCACs are on financial aid, but still come from the top income quintile. Even the data on financial aid obscures how wealthy students in NESCAC colleges really are.

The NESCAC webpages focus on how they can help poorer students attend. They are silent, however, about how they admit so many affluent students. The discourse focusing on less advantaged populations masks the ways NESCAC colleges enroll a wildly disproportionate share of highly wealthy students. There is no mention of the structural disadvantages that poor students have. The mantra “if you can get in here, you can come here” focuses only on the end result, denying the importance of social background in determining who gets in and who gets left out. What about the inequality in our K-12 education system that denies meritocracy and gives some students immense advantages in the college application process? By being silent about this, elite colleges perpetuate the myth of meritocracy.

### *The Discourse of Equal Opportunity and Merit*

I have shown that elite colleges like the NESCAC perpetuate the myth of meritocracy through colorblind racism and class-neutral language. Their rhetoric regarding commitment to equal opportunity holds true for some like myself and these

colleges do act as vehicles of social transformation for many. I take issue, however, with the universality of these claims. Social background is clearly an important determinant of who has access to elite colleges, yet their discourse fails to discuss this. The language they use appeals to people from all backgrounds equally, but their admissions practices reward those with privilege over those without. This is part of a theme of elite colleges divorcing merit from social factors like race and class that clearly are important determinants of who attends these colleges. This discourse paints elite colleges as places for the most talented, hardest-working, and highest-achieving students rather than as places for talented, hard-working, achieving students who have the luck to be born with the opportunity to advance to America's top colleges. If we do not hold elite colleges accountable for practicing equal opportunity and meritocracy, then we fail to do all we can to make education the great equalizer. Those at the top stay there while those at the bottom are fooled into believing that there really is a ladder to the top.

## Chapter 4

“The aforementioned American Values implicate the matter of Permissible Advantage. This notion captures the tension between the belief that there is something unfair and unseemly about advantage and the understanding that it is an unavoidable fact of life. It takes very little experience to understand that life is unfair, and that we will be eternally challenged to understand and accept unfairness, which is the advantage from which we do not personally benefit. The point here is about our acceptance of, if not our belief in, educational advantages that accrue unevenly in favor of some people relative to most others. Over time, we come to acknowledge this uneven distribution as normal, accepting some advantages as permissible, others as not. Indeed, to come to terms with this uneven distribution, we develop elaborate rationales that resonate with premises, logic, arguments, even data and doctrines.” (Peshkin 2000, 122)

“The United States today is not a meritocracy; but this does not discredit the principle. The idea of equality of opportunity is a just one, and the problem is to realize it fairly. The focus, then, has to be on the barriers to such equality.” (Bell in Karabel and Halsey 1977, 626)

### *The Issue at Hand*

Throughout this project, I have attempted to answer the question of whether elite colleges are sites of social reproduction or social transformation. At their inceptions, religious affiliation or race was enough to dictate whether elite colleges would allow people in. When Jews sought increased access, colleges devised a series of mechanisms and admissions policies to perpetuate social reproduction and advantage the elite. For example, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, Harvard’s president from 1909-33, wrote in a 1922 letter, “apart from the Jews” there was no issue with the entrance examination as the prevailing system of admission (Karabel 2005, 130-31). But Harvard, like other elite colleges, continued to change its admission policy to favor the elite while limiting opportunities for admission for competing groups. A few decades later when people of color sought increased access, selective colleges responded by agreeing to accept “qualified” students of color. This compromise, however, was not that at all. The inequality embedded in the public school system in America only enabled a small minority of students of color to gain the credentials necessary to gain admission to

selective colleges. This is all part of a pattern throughout the history of selective colleges. Elite colleges changed the definition of “merit,” enabling the wealthy to use their means to become meritorious while those without the same privileged floundered. When excluded groups sought equal footing, elite colleges changed the rules of the game to privilege the already-privileged.

The demographics of the NESCACs offer a compelling story about how history repeats itself. The data paint a picture of immense wealth and privilege in their student bodies, suggesting that the privileged have a strong grip on America’s elite colleges today as they have for centuries. Just because the days in which religious affiliation or race were enough to keep people out of selective colleges have passed, that does not mean privilege has not found a way to persist. In a society that condemns class advantages and instead values individual effort, hard-work, talent, and ambition, privilege must find another way to persist. Today, privilege persists under a veneer that appeals to the values of our time: meritocracy. Stevens (2009) sheds light on how wealth pervades a system that is on the surface class-neutral, which I quote at length,

The fact that elite colleges make admissions decisions primarily on the basis of applicants’ documented accomplishments is a triumph of meritocracy. The days when old-school connections were enough to get through the doors of top schools, and when dark skin or a Jewish surname were enough to be excluded, are over. In their place has arisen an information-based evaluative regime that nevertheless systematically favors the wealthy, well educated, and well connected. The mechanisms of preference have changed. Measurable accomplishment is the baseline criterion selective colleges now use to sort applications. But in general, only the relatively wealthy are able to afford the infrastructure necessary to produce that accomplishment in their children. Upper-middle-class Americans have responded to the triumph of educational meritocracy by creating a whole new way of life organized around the production of measurably talented children and the delivery of news about kids to the right places at the right times. (Stevens 2009, 22)

Today, elite colleges shifted the definition of merit such that those with the most means are those who are most able to gain the credentials elite colleges deem meritorious. As I have

demonstrated, elite colleges use race-neutral and class-neutral language when describing the criteria on which they evaluate students. To the public, elite colleges are open to everyone regardless of social background. The secret that the world of higher education masterfully covers is that the means of attaining the credentials elite colleges value are highly dependent on class. Many elite colleges may be need-blind, but their admissions practices are in no way wealth-blind. They can continue to occupy a central role in the American narrative because they educate some students for whom elite college are vehicles of social transformation while continuing to certify generations of already-privileged students. It seems, then, that education as an institution does not operate in the same way for all Americans. Instead, education works as a concealing mechanism for the inequalities that already exist in society under the guise of meritocracy. The result is an unequal compromise between the privileged in society and the rest.

It is clear that parents pass on their advantages to their children in ways that are difficult to disrupt. The power of social reproduction, however, should not deter us from working to make education work equally for all. The key, then, is to disrupt social reproduction. If elite colleges want to be more than the finish line in a race that funnels privileged students to and through their campuses, then they must change their ways. To do so, they have to take steps to address the inequality embedded in the K-12 system of education. They must also reconsider the criteria on which they evaluate applicants. Doing so will help to end the cycle of privileging the already-privileged over everyone else.

### *Suggestions for Institutions and Practitioners*

To end their role as vehicles of social reproduction, I suggest that elite colleges embrace more transparency in their websites. The colorblind and class-neutral language colleges use when describing their purposes and the students they seek, racial diversity, recruiting diverse applicants, and socioeconomic diversity is misleading given that white and wealthy students have immense advantages in the application process. Failing to inform prospective students and families about the powerful role of social background in determining access to elite colleges is deceptive and hurts low-income nonwhite students more than their higher-income white peers. In a similar vein, I suggest that elite colleges like the NESCACs publicize their socioeconomic diversity in the same way they publicize their racial diversity. The NESCACs describe their racial diversity for all racial groups, so I implore them to offer a breakdown of their socioeconomic diversity by family income. For example, today Harvard gives a bar graph of the class backgrounds of its families on financial aid, offering a true picture of the composition of the families on financial aid (“Fact Sheet” 2017). Harvard sets an example for transparency to which other elite colleges should aspire. Doing so will help unmask the powerful role wealth plays in determining access to elite colleges.

Another important way elite colleges can limit their role in social reproduction is to shift the composition of their applicant pools. Hill and Winston (2008) discuss the ways that selective colleges do not passively wait for their applicants, but instead actively recruit students across the nation. High-ability low-income students (as measured by SAT and ACT scores) are underrepresented by nearly thirty percent in selective colleges (Hill and Winston 2008), but the recruitment processes of selective colleges do not target the areas

in which they live. For example, New England, the home of most NESCACs, holds about three and a half percent of high-ability low-income students while the East North Carolina region has upwards of twenty-two percent of the population. Shifting the recruitment practices to areas with high concentrations of high-ability students who are on the poorer end of the socioeconomic spectrum will help elite colleges find students who can do the work they demand, yet also increase their socioeconomic diversity.

Hoxby and Avery (2012) also study the population of high-achieving low-income students and find that a barrier to enrolling in elite colleges lies in student behavior during the application process. For example, low-income students are less likely to apply to selective colleges than their equally achieving high-income students peers. Students from low-income backgrounds come from schools in which there is not a critical mass of high-achieving students and are unlikely to know a peer or family member or teacher familiar with selective colleges. To address this issue, admissions officers must find and recruit talented students in high schools without a critical mass of high-achievers. Rather than recruiting from specific schools that have many high-achieving students, admissions officers at elite colleges can hold recruitment sessions in cities more broadly. Doing so will allow all students, regardless of the school they attend or how many high-achieving students they have as peers, to learn about what selective colleges have to offer.

Further, Hoxby and Turner (2013) find that mailing certain recruitment materials tailored towards low-income students helps to increase the number of low-income applicants. Students who received recruitment materials including application guidance, net cost information, and application fee waivers from the Expanding College Opportunities Project applied to more colleges of varying selectivity and gained admission

to more colleges than their peers who did not receive the materials. And, the price of the recruitment materials from the Expanding College Opportunities Project totals to just six dollars per students. With the resources elite colleges have, spending six dollars per prospective applicant seems like a small price to pay to promote social transformation for low-income students over social reproduction. Similarly, the founders of the Fair Opportunity Project create and update a book written by students about everything related to the college application process (“Fair Opportunity Project” 2017). The creators sent the book to all superintendents, principals, and counselors in nine midwestern states, urging them to pass along the information to their students. Elite colleges can use this project as further outreach to students who come from schools that might lack the resources to adequately support students who aspire to college.

Recruitment efforts can only go so far if students do not know the truth about the financial aid available to them. The NESCACs offer generous financial aid, yet the sticker prices of tuition can obscure the fact that their aid packages can mean that students would pay less at an elite college compared to a state school. In this vein, Harvard set an example for other elite colleges to follow. In the 2000s, Harvard enjoyed considerably more socioeconomic diversity after implementing its Financial Aid Initiative. The college publicized that families earning less than \$40,000 per year would not have to pay to attend and families making between \$40,000 and \$60,000 would have to pay less than they had in the past. The Initiative also sought to recruit students who would benefit most from the program. The Admissions Office shifted some of its outreach to areas with more talented low-income students. The Initiative helped increase the number of low-income students in the applicant pool who then earned admission at rates similar to their wealthier peers

(Avery et al. 2006). By emphasizing their commitment to financial aid, Harvard fought against its history of social reproduction and other elite colleges would do well to follow its lead.

Changing the composition of applicant pools is only useful insofar as applicants from lower-income backgrounds can be evaluated on terms equal with their more privileged peers. Throughout their histories, selective colleges have changed their definitions of merit to favor particular groups. In the first few decades of the 1900s, admissions offices shifted from entrance exams to more subjective criteria like character and leadership to advantage those from wealthy backgrounds. Today, the criteria for admission include measures of achievement like challenging courses like Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes, extracurricular activities like clubs, sports, arts, and summer internships, among other factors. Each of these criteria for achievement cater to the practices of the wealthy, giving students from privileged backgrounds an immense advantage in the college application process. Elite colleges have histories of changing their practices to favor the privileged, yet they fail to do the same to favor the disadvantaged populations today in an era that champions equal opportunity and meritocracy.

A new college application can also help elite colleges see the merits of all students, not just those with measurable achievements that are dependent on class privilege. This application season, a group of 83 selective public and private colleges joined together in the new Coalition for Access, Affordability and Success. The Coalition, which includes all the Ivies and all NESCACs in my study population, is open only to colleges that graduate at least 70 percent of students within six years and meet the demonstrated need of admitted

students (Borin 2015). The purpose of the Coalition is to increase access to college, especially for low-income and first-generation students. The application will allow students to begin thinking about college in ninth grade as they build their portfolios in their virtual lockers. The ultimate goal of the application is to give students from schools without well-staffed college counseling offices more resources to support them during the college application process by allowing community members as well as counselors to review student work and offer guidance (Jaschik 2015). At the least, the Coalition application offers extra support to help low-income students create stronger applications to gain admission to elite colleges, thereby further disrupting social reproduction.

The suggestions I offer come with a tradeoff. Enrolling more low-income students means enrolling fewer wealthy students which will be a change for elite colleges. Yet, if the NESCACs seek to disrupt social reproduction, then they must be willing to break with the tradition of catering to the wealthy. Enrolling more low-income students necessarily creates a need for more funding given that low-income students pay less in tuition require more financial aid. However, these colleges are among the wealthiest in the country and hold a highly disproportionate share of the wealth. The Education Trust analyzed how the wealthiest 138 colleges spend their endowments and conclude that increasing spending rates by even a fraction of a percentage point can go a long way in supporting low-income students. For example, the report found that out of the 138 wealthiest colleges, there were 35 that spend less than five percent of their endowments each year. If these 35 colleges increase their endowment spending to five percent, they would generate an additional \$418 million that can be dedicated to financial aid (Nichols and Santos 2016). The authors acknowledge that institutional leaders resist increasing endowment spending because it is

difficult to shift the use of funds, but not impossible to do so. Despite the difficulty of shifting endowment spending for the sake of increased financial aid, doing so can help elite colleges fight against their histories as vehicles of social reproduction. Each of these methods can help to shift the composition of annual applicant pools to elite colleges. With increased socioeconomic diversity in their applicant pools, selective colleges can play a bigger role in social transformation while contesting social reproduction.

### *Limitations and Future Research*

My study is most limited by its cross-sectional approach to studying how colleges present themselves to the public. It would be useful to study how college websites have changed over time in order to study how their presentations of race and class have changed as diversity has become an increasingly important aspect of higher education. This is difficult, however, given that colleges do not offer public catalogs of their past web pages. In addition, I rely on websites as a primary means by which colleges advertise themselves. In doing so, I do not study the small fraction of students who learn about elite colleges through other avenues like word of mouth and personal connections.

There is room for future research to explore how elite colleges operate as status groups. I touch on how operating similarly insulates elite colleges from losing status, but further research exploring their similarities with regard to racial and socioeconomic diversity would shed light on how elite colleges maintain their legitimacy and remain atop the hierarchy of higher education. Furthermore, it would be useful to study how less prestigious colleges present themselves. For example, it would be useful to ask if colleges outside of the Ivy League and NESCAC use colorblind and class-neutral language when advertising themselves. In addition, studying how historically black colleges and

universities present themselves with regard to diversity would offer a useful comparison given their traditionally black student bodies.

### *Conclusion*

Failing to ensure that highly talented students of all social backgrounds truly have equal access to America's top colleges threatens the strength of our nation. If elite colleges that prepare the leaders of the next generation pluck their students from the most privileged sectors of the population, we risk losing out on all of the talent in other parts of society. We are stronger when we find, nurture, and prepare talented students from across society, not just the privileged parts, to lead the next generation.

A meritocracy does not exist in our nation, but we like to go about our lives pretending that it does and that those in America's top colleges truly are the best and the brightest. It is the hard truth that our nation is highly stratified by race and class. Education as an institution in our society is highly susceptible to the effects of this social stratification. Until we address the immense power of privilege in determining access to the elite colleges that certify those whom we call America's best and brightest, we do a disservice to the idea of education as the great equalizer in the land we like to call the land of opportunity.

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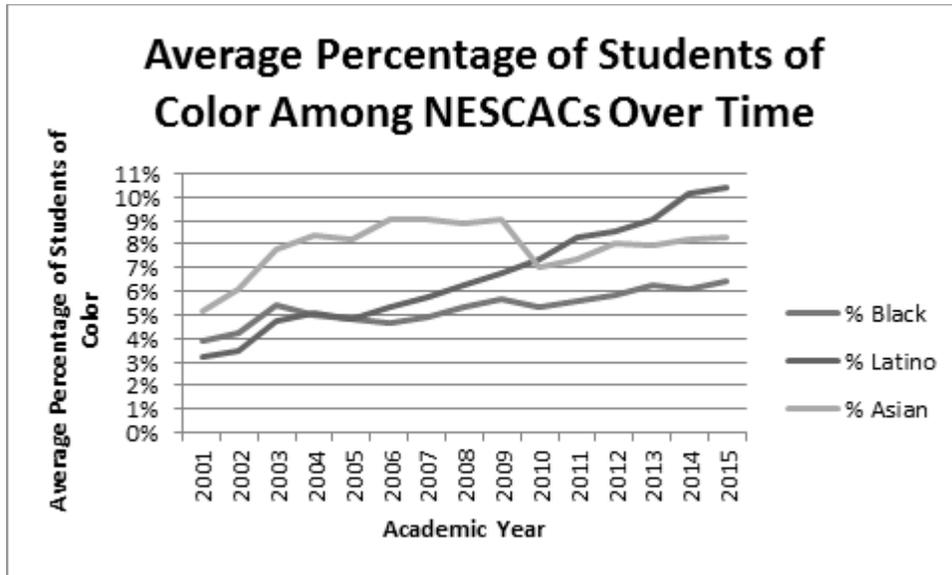
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**Appendix: Grayscale of Color Images**

**Figure 2.3: Average Percentage of Students of Color Among NESCACs Over Time**



**Figure 2.4: Black Student Population Among NESCACs Over Time**

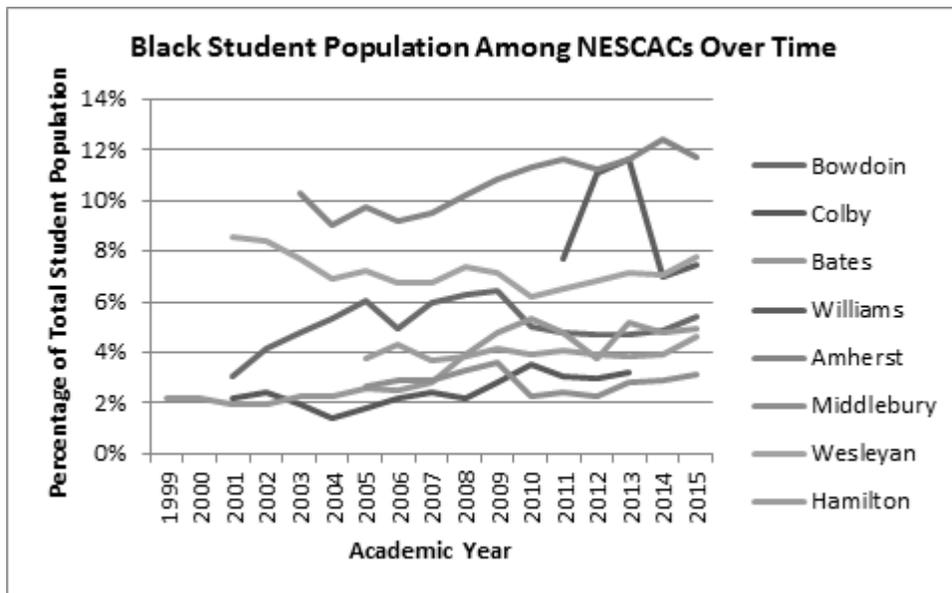


Figure 2.5: Latino Student Population Among NESCACs Over Time

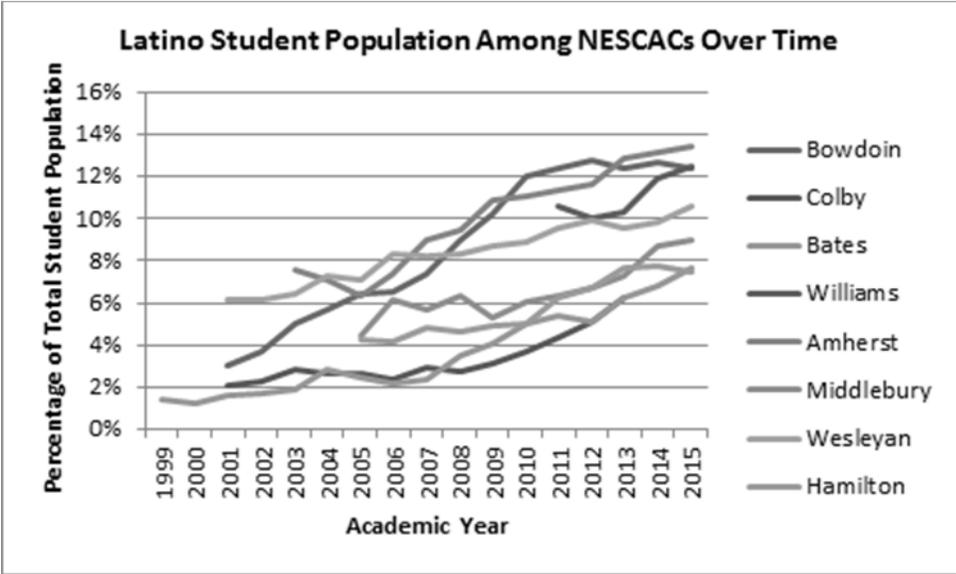
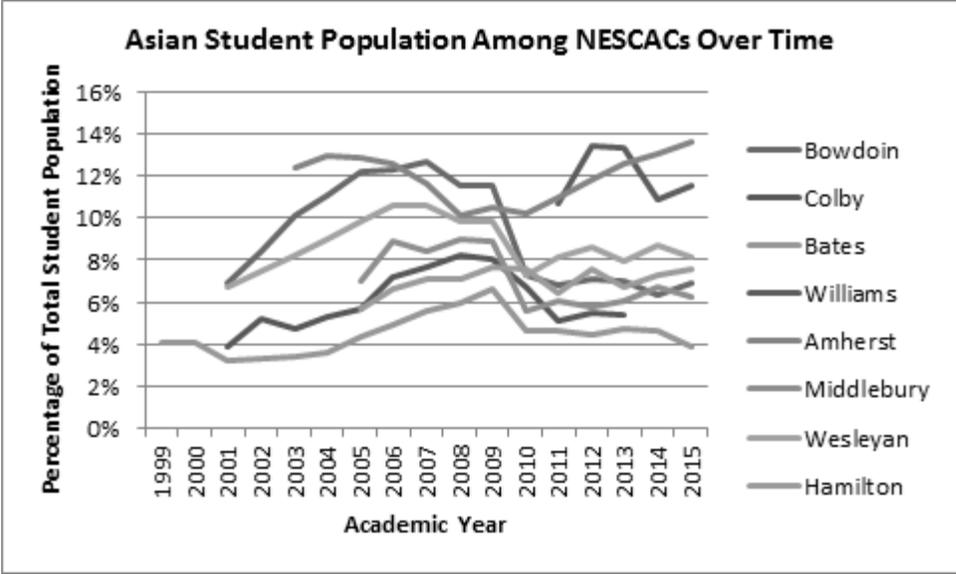
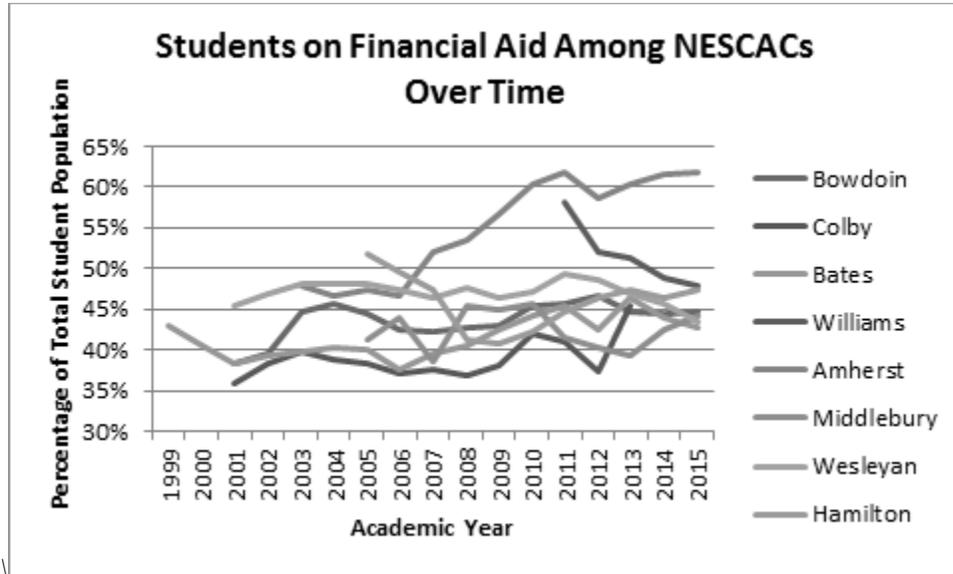


Figure 2.6: Asian Student Population Among NESCACs Over Time



**Figure 2.7:** Students on Financial Aid Among NESCACs Over Time



**Figure 2.9:** Students on Financial Aid and Students of Color in the NESCAC Over Time

