Article

What Meritocracy Means to its Winners: Admissions, Race, and Inequality at Elite Universities in the United States and Britain

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Abstract How do winners of processes of meritocracy make sense of those processes, especially in the face of forceful public critiques of their unequal outcomes? In this paper I analyze the meaning-making with respect to merit in university admissions of White, native-born undergraduates attending elite American and British universities. I find that United States students support the "calibration" of evaluations of merit, and emphasize evaluations of applicants' contributions to the "collective merit" of their university cohorts. British students espouse a universalist, individualist understanding of merit. While conceptions of merit differed across national contexts, students in both reproduced the notions of merit espoused by their universities. I conclude that in spite of a long history of student protest on college campuses, rather than engagement with symbolic politics on liberal-identified campuses, self-interest in status legitimation dominates student perspectives, ultimately reproducing understandings of merit that will reproduce inequality. The paper draws upon 98 one-on-one in-depth interviews with White, native-born undergraduates attending Harvard University, Brown University, and University of Oxford.

Keywords: meritocracy; admissions; affirmative action; race; United States; Britain

1. Introduction

Given increasing inequality, understanding elite meaning-making is an increasingly important field (Khan 2012). Indeed, the study of elites, particularly young elites, is a growing field in the sociology of education (for example, see Espenshade et al. 2009; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Khan 2010; Stevens 2007). Elite universities are sites where many elites come of age, even if they weren't elite before entering those institutions. They are institutional sites for cultivating elite identities, and for shaping elite understandings of fairness, merit, and diversity. By virtue of attending elite universities students are more likely to hold leadership positions as adults, in which they will enact the understandings of merit, inequality, and diversity that they hold (Rivera 2011; UK Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014). So, their conceptions of fairness and deservingness matter. In addition, given the increasing competition for admission to elite universities, access to them has become an important public debate.

This paper analyzes conceptions of merit in university admissions among White,[1] native-born students attending elite British and US universities. Britain and the United States are the two most unequal OECD countries in terms of income distribution as well as intergenerational earnings elasticity (Corak 2013). In addition, both have significant inequality by race (for example, see Dettling et al. 2017; UK Cabinet Office 2017). University admissions outcomes, too, are unequal, with working

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[1] Using common convention in the United States, by "White" I mean non-Hispanic White.

class, first generation (first in family to study for a bachelor's degree), and Black students underrepresented at elite universities in both national contexts (Reardon et al. 2012; Warikoo 2016). This paper reveals how emerging elites reconcile this inequality with strong beliefs in equal opportunity and meritocracy in Britain and especially in the United States (Duru-Bellat and Tenret 2012). The paper employs 98 in-depth interviews with students on elite university campuses (Harvard University, Brown University, and University of Oxford) about university admissions. The findings have implications for our understanding of elite meaning-making with respect to selection and what constitutes a fair system of selection, and, more broadly, the production of inequality in society.

How might we expect students to make meaning of admissions to their respective universities? Large datasets measuring US college students' political views find that residential college students tend to identify as liberal (Mariani and Hewitt 2008; Sidanius et al. 2008). After they arrive to college, students tend to become even more liberal (Mariani and Hewitt 2008; Sidanius et al. 2008), and college-educated adults tend to be more liberal than those with lower levels of education (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2005). Scholars in the tradition of symbolic politics find that in public opinion surveys people tend to vote according to their political ideologies rather than their personal self-interests (Sears 1993). This would suggest a liberal critique of unequal outcomes in admissions. The standard liberal scripts critique the admissions process of elite universities for the dearth of poor, working class, and Black and Latino students on Ivy League campuses (Bowen et al. 2005; Kahlenberg 2014; Lammy 2010; Massey et al. 2007), and in Britain of state school graduates and Black students (Harris 2010; Lammy 2010; Vasagar 2010). So I expected students who identified as liberal—the majority of students in this study—to fully take on those critiques as part of their liberal identities[2]. On the other hand, I expected a minority who identified as conservative to express strong disagreement with affirmative action in the United States, aligning with a conservative political identity.

Bolstering the prediction of critique is the long history of student protest on college campuses, including protests advocating for and against affirmative action, suggests that students may not accept their universities' admissions processes as given (De Groot 1998; McAdam 1988; Munson 2010). While the 1960s were a particularly busy decade for student protest, students rebelling against their universities and national governments both predates that period and continued after it (Boren 2001). Most recently, in the past few years undergraduates on Ivy League and Oxbridge campuses have organized protests about the marginalization of Black students, investment in fossil fuel companies, tuition increases in Britain, and more.

On the other hand, elite universities disproportionately serve advantaged youth, and as admissions becomes more selective the student body becomes even more elite (Alon 2015; Stevens 2007). Some attention to diversity serves to legitimate the otherwise elite system of class reproduction (Grodsky 2007). A class reproduction perspective would suggest that students attending elite universities will support the allocation systems of their respective universities, in order to legitimate the status they claim as winners of increasingly competitive admissions contests. In other words, students at elite universities have won an incredibly competitive admissions contest for which they believe they worked hard in high school. Critiquing that competition might undermine their success and the status they feel they have earned through hard work, and consequently undermine the legitimation of class reproduction. Under this scenario, US and UK students would differ in views on admissions, to match the admissions systems of their respective national models for admission to elite universities. This is a story of self-interest, and of maintaining the legitimacy of one's hard-earned achievement, similar to Bourdieu's (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) theory that education

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[2] In a pre-interview survey that students filled out on-line, we asked students, "Where would you put yourself on this scale?" and gave options of extremely liberal, liberal, slightly liberal, moderate/middle of the road, slightly conservative, conservative, extremely conservative. Of the 46 US students, 38 chose some form of liberal, two chose "moderate/middle of the road," and three chose "slightly conservative." Of the 52 British students, 31 identified as some form of liberal, 7 moderate/middle of the road, and 11 as some form of conservative. An additional three British students did not answer or chose "don't know."

systems, rather than serving as sites for equalizing opportunity, can instead serve to legitimate the reproduction of status.

This paper adjudicates between the status legitimation and symbolic politics hypotheses. The in-depth interview data show that most students reproduce the logic of their respective universities' admissions processes, legitimating their own success in those processes, despite public critiques of the underrepresentation of disadvantaged groups in both national contexts. US and British students advocate very different kinds of admissions policies, yet they share in common their agreement with their respective university practices. On the one hand, this perspective makes sense, given that student participants were successful in the highly competitive admissions contest. However, the history of student protest worldwide, students' liberal identities, and the liberalizing impact of university education suggest that this perspective was certainly not inevitable. I did not expect students' views to align so closely to their respective admissions offices.

As the paper shows, the influence of students' investment in the admissions process seems to overshadow the strong forces that may lead them to disagree with what their universities are doing. They invest heavily during their school-age years into getting into highly competitive universities, driven for many by their parents' parenting styles and communities that convey a sense of entitlement to success and a sense of agency, along with anxiety over increasing competition for spots at elite universities (Demerath 2009; Lareau 2003; Weis et al. 2014). This finding suggests that the legitimation of status attained through admission may shape student perspectives on merit in admissions more than a propensity to engage in symbolic politics, with implications for students' future decision-making as leaders in society allocating rewards in the future.[3] Importantly, the findings show how admissions processes reproduce inequality not only through who is selected, but also through their impact on the perspectives of those selected students.

1.1. University Definitions of Merit

In order to put student perspectives in context, I first outline actual admissions practices at the three universities. Private elite universities in the United States, through a process of institutional isomorphism (Lipson 2007; Meyer et al. 2007), have very similar admissions policies. Students applying to most elite US universities submit grade point averages, SAT scores, letters of recommendation from teachers, and at least one personal essay. Both Brown and Harvard stress the importance of a diverse cohort that will teach each other, and individual excellence and character.[4] In addition, both universities emphasize attention to whether applicants have made the most of opportunities available to them. The universities give special consideration to underrepresented groups, including Blacks and Latinos, residents of sparsely populated states, recruited athletes, the children of alumni, and more. Ultimately, around the time of this research 6–8% percent of students at both universities identified as Black, 6–9% identified as Latino, 11%–16% identified as Asian or Asian American, and 8–10% were international students (Brown University Office of Institutional Research 2010; Harvard College Office of Admissions). In terms of financial aid, 62% of Harvard undergraduates received need-based financial aid, as did 46% of Brown undergraduates (U.S. News and World Report 2011a; U.S. News and World Report 2011b).[5]

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[3] While some of the empirical findings in this paper appear elsewhere , this paper develops the theoretical underpinnings of the empirical work, by embedding the findings in the academic literature on status legitimation and symbolic politics. Further, this paper moves beyond by comparing the Oxford case to cases in the United States, drawing on the comparison to develop a theoretical argument about status legitimation and symbolic politics.

[4] Although the elusive nature of "extracurricular distinction" and distinctive "personal qualities" are not easily quantifiable, survey studies of admissions to selective universities in the United States have shown that being an athlete, being Black, and being Latino indeed lead to significant increases in the likelihood of admission (Espenshade et al. 2009).

[5] Though the percentage of students receiving financial aid represents a 16% difference, the percentage of students receiving financial aid who applied for financial aid is quite similar: 65.9% applied for need-based

Admission to these Ivy League Universities is quite different from that at University of Oxford. For most subjects, Oxford requires 3 A's or A*'s on the national A-level exams. Over half of applicants are then invited to an interview on campus.[6] Interviews are conducted by admissions "tutors", who are academics at the university who teach courses and tutorials in the subject to which a candidate has applied. The focus on academics, and academics within the subject to which a candidate is applying, contrasts sharply with US admissions offices' descriptions of holistic evaluation, including nonacademic qualities and contributions to the cohort.

2. Methodology

This paper draws upon in-depth interviews with 98 White undergraduates attending Harvard University, Brown University, and University of Oxford, all of whom are native-born[7]. Students were interviewed in their second semester of university and beyond, to ensure they had significant campus experiences to draw upon. Prior to being interviewed, students filled out a short online survey that captured information on family background, how they identified along a number of factors such as race, political orientation, and socioeconomic status, and their views on a variety of issues related to multiculturalism and diversity. Interviews were conducted between 2009 and 2011.[8]

At Harvard, 23 White students were recruited through one residential house (houses have 350 to 500 students), to which students are randomly assigned, and at Brown University, 23 White students were recruited through emails to particular residential halls (approximately 1000 students total). Students were recruited from residential halls that did not include ethnic- or race-themed halls, nor fraternities or sororities, in order to maximize the variation among students' perspectives included. At Oxford, 52 White students were recruited through emails to all students at two colleges (residential houses where students spend all three years, which typically include 250–450 undergraduates each). The initial email was sent by a senior professor in the college, who encouraged students to participate. Colleges were selected such that they did not have distinct identities as particularly elite or non-elite. The colleges were neither among the oldest, most traditional Oxford colleges, nor among the newest colleges, and student performance at both colleges, according to public league tables, is within the middle 50% of Oxford colleges. The recruiting email at all sites indicated that the project compares the university experiences of students at elite universities in the US and Britain, with an emphasis on issues related to diversity.

All students who agreed to be interviewed were included in the study, and an effort was made to recruit students less inclined initially, by sending more than one message to potential participants and by paying students for their participation ($20 in the U.S., £15 in Britain). After being interviewed students were asked to pass along the interviewer's details to acquaintances living in the same dorm, as well. This sampling is not meant to be a stratified or random sample, but the recruitment techniques do attempt to capture a diverse range of student perspectives. Students studied a variety of subjects. In the United States, 16 studied subjects in the sciences, 23 in the social sciences, and 14

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financial aid at Harvard for the 2011–2012 academic year and 61.5% received it; at Brown 48.8% applied for need-based financial aid and 45.5% received it (U.S. News and World Report 2011a; U.S. News and World Report 2011b).

6 Some international students are interviewed remotely.

7 In the United States, two similar elite universities with different cultures of diversity were chosen for comparison. However, differences between Harvard and Brown undergraduates are not significant in the findings in this paper and so they are not discussed here. Elsewhere I discuss the views of students of color and second generation students on merit and diversity (see Warikoo 2016).In Britain, few differences distinguish elite universities with respect to their institutional supports for diversity, so only one university was included in the study.

8 While all interviews on each campus were completed in one calendar year, the precise year is concealed so as to further protect respondents' identities. In addition, to further protect students' identities all names in the paper are pseudonyms, and only characteristics that would not identify individuals are included in descriptions of students.

in the humanities.[9] At Oxford, 19 studied subjects in the sciences, 6 in the social sciences, 24 in humanities, 2 studied law, and one did not report a subject. Students' schools mirrored those of the Oxford and Ivy League student bodies overall. Twenty-eight percent of US respondents attended private or parochial schools, compared to 30% of Harvard and Brown students overall (Brown University Office of College Admission 2012; Fitzsimmons 2009b). At Oxford, 42% of respondents came from private secondary schools, compared to 44% of all Oxford students, and another 21% of respondents came from grammar schools, compared to 18% of Oxford students overall (University of Oxford 2015). Finally, a majority of respondents were female, with 28 of 46 female in the US, and 31 of 52 in Britain.

Given that the United States is a highly racialized society in which cross-race discussions of diversity can be difficult to engage (Goff et al. 2008; Richeson and Shelton 2007), in the United States White students were interviewed by a White doctoral student. In Britain, all students were interviewed by a White, West European doctoral student, who had the advantage of an accent that does not signal a particular class background in Britain. Interviews lasted one to three hours long, for an average of 120 minutes. All interviews were transcribed and then coded in ATLAS.ti. After initial coding, a research team read through responses to the questions below to distill student perspectives on admissions criteria and, more generally, notions of merit and meritocracy:

1. Would you say Oxford (Harvard/Brown) is a meritocracy in terms of its admissions? In what ways? In what ways is it not?

2. Less than 1% of Oxford students are Black, but 2% of Britain's population is Black. How do you explain this difference? Do you think it is a problem? Should the university do anything about it? If so, what?

   a. Fifteen percent of Harvard students (14% of Brown students) are Black or Latino, but 28% of the United States population is Black or Latino …[10]

3. Should university admissions consider racial or ethnic background when deciding whether to admit students to Oxford (Harvard/Brown)? What about school type (state school versus private school graduates)? Social class?

Through analysis of answers to these questions, the themes of "collective" merit and the need to "calibrate" evaluations of merit emerged in the US, and the notion of "absolute" merit emerged in Britain. Interviews were then coded again with these themes in mind, to understand the extent to which students espoused these themes in their answers to the above questions.

In addition, this paper analyzes how student responses resonate with or diverge from those given by administrators who work in admissions. Finally, it draws on an interview with Oxford University's Director of Undergraduate Admissions with the author, and draws upon his comments as well.[11]

3. Findings

3.1. United States: Calibrated, Collective Merit with Attention to Diversity

"What needs to be considered in your admission is [whether] you've made the most of the opportunities that you've had…. And, in that sense, if you go to a private school that maybe is, like, really rich and, like, really great education… and you have somebody who went to a public school that maybe didn't have as much money, but they took huge, full advantage of the opportunities that they had there. And, like, they really, like, milked it for all it was worth, and,

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9   Total does not add up to 46 because some students had more than one subject of study. All participants signed an informed consent form.

10 Data for this question was taken from statistics at the time of this research. The percentages in both Britain and the United States have since changed.

11 Like all study participants, the Director signed an informed consent form.

the person from the private school wasn't like that, [then] the person from the public school should get it."

Like Stephanie above, nearly half of White US students spontaneously expressed a belief in calibrating evaluations of merit according to life circumstances. That is to say, for example, if an applicant's high school offered two advanced-level courses and the student took both, that is more meritorious than taking three at a high school that offers six. Naomi, too, expressed a belief in calibrating evaluations of merit:

> "I think what you do with what you're given is how Harvard should judge you. Like, if you had a very hard life but you did-let's say got A's and B's instead of straight A's but you had to work, like, twenty extra hours a week than another kid. Then I think that speaks a lot more than if you got straight A's, because you had to provide for your family or help provide for them. So I think it should be taken into account."

As with many other nontraditional students at these elite universities, Naomi used herself as evidence that Harvard's admissions is meritocratic:

> "I feel like how driven you were and how hard you worked and what good you did in high school, where you were, and the situation you were in, is how they accept people, not necessarily if you went to the best high school in the world. I certainly didn't."

Naomi grew up in rural New England with parents who both lack college degrees. Given that she did not attend an elite high school she feels confident that the university does not privilege graduates of elite schools only. Instead, she seems satisfied with the calibration of merit according to the resources applicants have had in high school.

Stephanie's and Naomi's responses resonate with the language expressed by both Harvard and Brown's admissions offices. Harvard's Dean of Admissions, William Fitzsimmons, wrote in *The New York Times* (2009b) about Harvard admissions,

> "We are vitally interested in whether or not applicants have taken full advantage of their educational opportunities, whatever they might have been. If so, they have a much better chance of maximizing the use of Harvard's resources."

Similarly, in a section on Frequently Asked Questions, Brown's Admissions office tells prospective students that

> "While we do consider characteristics such as a high school's level of academic offerings and rigor, we choose to concentrate on how well a student has used the resources available to him or her. We do not start with the assumption that students from a certain school are better candidates than those from another school."

Many students seem to have encountered and internalized this language, whether through their own preparation for college applications, as rearticulated by high school counselors and college administrators they have encountered, or through experiences and conversations on campus.

While many students expressed support for calibrating evaluations of merit, even more (70%) expressed support for attention to a diversity of talents and perspectives in admissions, because of its contribution to the "collective merit" of the cohort, or the overall merit of the group. These students emphasized collective merit for its contribution to a rich campus life. The calibrated merit and collective merit perspectives were not mutually exclusive. For example, Naomi, quoted above, also said:

> "I think if Harvard didn't have any of the buildings or any of the beautiful scenery that it would still be just as great if it had the same people, because diversity is really how you learn here. You can take as many classes as you want but your peers are your best teachers."

Karen spoke specifically about diverse forms of merit outside of academic merit: "I think that many people have merits that are different than intellectual—than academic merits. And I think that's a good thing that those merits are valued."

Extracurricular and athletic talents were part of collective merit, with each individual contributing a unique strength to the cohort as a whole. Jack spoke of musical talents when speaking of the collective merit of the cohort:

> "Everyone I've met here has at least one thing that makes them who they are, and very rarely is it actually [that] they were a science fair winner or… The example I talk about is my friend B — American-Korean. He is the biggest slacker maybe I've ever met in my entire life… [But] he is gifted as a composer, as a pianist… To me that's just one of the many people that have… one unique thing that makes them who they are, on top of good grades, good SAT scores, whatever."

Jack contrasts his friend with piano composition and performance skills to "a science fair winner," presumably a more academic candidate, to demonstrate the diverse forms of talent surrounding him at Brown.

Elliot emphasized the contribution to collective merit of athletes, because they enrich student life:

> "I think before I applied, I thought I didn't like [the fact that] it's really easy for…recruited athletes … I've had issues with that. Now that I'm here, I don't have those issues. Because I see, like I love going to the football games. It's fun. It's part of student life… I used to think that … having athletes who are quote unquote "less qualified," — I no longer view them as less qualified. I view them as qualified in a different way."

Elliot seems to have expended significant mental energy evaluating the criteria of "qualified." In the end, he deems athletic merit as one legitimate form of merit for admission to Brown, given its contribution to student life.

As with calibration, student expressions of the importance of collective merit, because of its enhancement of their learning, resonate quite clearly with what their admissions offices say they look for. Here is Dean Fitzsimmons:

> "Personal qualities and character provide the foundation upon which each admission rests. Harvard alumni/ae often report that the education they received from fellow classmates was a critically important component of their college experience. The education that takes place between roommates, in dining halls, classrooms, research groups, extracurricular activities, and in Harvard's residential houses depends on selecting students who will reach out to others. The admissions committee, therefore, takes great care to attempt to identify students who will be outstanding "educators," students who will inspire fellow classmates and professors, (Fitzsimmons 2009a)."

Brown University's website employs very similar language: "Throughout our long history of encouraging diversity, we have learned that it is this dynamic mix of individuals that makes for the most fascinating and productive undergraduate community," (Brown University Office of Admission). As with language on calibrating evaluations of merit, students seem to have internalized Harvard and Brown's language of the importance of a diverse student body, for its contribution to the collective merit of a cohort, thus enhancing the college experience.

What about collective merit related to more contested aspects of admissions: affirmative action and legacy admissions? When students perceive all admits to have a "hook" that adds to the collective merit of the cohort in an incredibly competitive process, being Black or Latino becomes another form of diversity. Elliot, quoted above, also expressed support for race-based considerations in admissions, again for the contributions to campus life, which developed only after landing on Brown's campus:

> "I didn't think [admissions should consider race or ethnicity] before I got here. And I think so now because I definitely think… I had a better experience because they provided me with insight that I otherwise wouldn't have."

Orin compared being a racial minority to being a talented pianist: "[Ethnic diversity] adds as much to the class as somebody who is a world-class piano player, and… it's just a different sort of diversity

to add." In other words, all kinds of diversity, including racial diversity and diversity of talents, are important for the student body.

Lastly, some students used the collective merit framework to express support for legacy admissions. Students who supported legacy admissions recognized the financial benefits of alumni donations, which would contribute to the collective good of the campus, even while lamenting the inequality legacy admissions engenders. Noa, a Harvard undergraduate, expressed sympathy with the admissions office: "I understand why the school accepts people because of that. I think that Harvard relies on a lot of donations, and I think that's one of the ways that that is fostered." While support for legacy admissions might be seen as conservative for its reproduction of status, Noa identified as "slightly liberal" in the pre-interview survey. Over half of White students supported legacy admissions, even if that support was sometimes ambivalent.

For many students, support for different forms of merit developed *after* they arrived on campus. Recall Elliot, whose support for athletic recruiting and race-based affirmative action developed only after arriving to campus. While some may have been shaped by the admissions process well before arriving on campus, others, like Elliot, described shifts on arriving to campus. James, a student coming from a predominantly White east coast high school and from a home environment in which his father, a politician, opposed affirmative action, told us the following:

> "My father is very against affirmative action … And then coming here, I really have a lot more respect for multiculturalism. As far as diversity goes, when people said, "Brown has a lot of diversity," I didn't really care about that. And since I've been here, I think it's really important. Because I realize like how incredibly White my town was. Like every single one of my friends at home is White. And I like never even thought about it … And I think that actually experiencing other cultures as opposed to experiencing whatever passes for multiculturalism in like your all White little preschool, has actually been influential to me."

James suggests that in his experience diversity among the students at Brown has mattered more than multicultural events at his previous predominantly White schools for his understanding of multiculturalism. In addition, perhaps leaving home allowed him the space to develop his own views apart from his father's. He identified as "slightly liberal" in his pre-interview survey, completed during his junior year at Brown.

Overall, under the conception of collective merit, athletes may contribute by providing school spirit through varsity games; musicians by performing for campus events; Black peers by providing White peers with worldviews they hitherto had not encountered; and legacies through their parents' financial contributions. The responses given by White US students resonate with the criteria described by the Harvard and Brown undergraduate admissions offices. They emphasize calibration of evaluations of merit, and the collective merit of the cohort to bolster everyone's educational experiences. The students demonstrate familiarity with, and agreement about, the kinds of qualities that qualify as "merit", the kinds of students the university should look for, and the goals that admissions should consider (financial resources, athletic teams, racial diversity, and collective merit).

3.2. Scratching the Surface: US Critiques

Agreement with university practices was not universal. One-third of White US students spontaneously brought up legacy preferences as problematic when asked whether their university admissions systems are meritocratic. When we directly asked, "Should your university consider parents being alumni when making admissions decisions?" nearly half of students said no, despite the widespread practice at elite private universities in the United States. These soft critiques usually acknowledged the university's reasons for giving a leg up to the children of alumni, even if they disagreed. For example, Katherine said:

> "The legacy thing is the one thing that I have a little bit more of a problem with, because I don't see how being a legacy contributes to the campus community. I see how, like, athletic ability contributes to the community, musical ability, being of a certain cultural background—I think

those all have a lot to bring to the table and can really enhance the community and enrich it. I don't really see why your mom having been a Harvard student brings anything to the table."

Katherine frames her discussion of legacy admissions preferences in the language of a diverse cohort and contributions to the campus community. That is, she uses the language of collective merit, described above, to evaluate whether Brown should consider family connections in admissions.

A small number of students (4) expressed a belief that there are more meritorious applicants than seats at Harvard and Brown. Jean expressed this view: "There are so many qualified people, so unless they're going to put them into a lottery and pull out names, that would be the only way for it to exactly be a meritocracy." Nevertheless, Jean expressed support for attention to campus diversity in order to foster collective merit. She said, "Diversity is at the essence of Harvard," and that "the goal of the campus is to create a diverse campus life." Given the overabundance of qualified applicants, Jean thinks that Harvard should draw from that pool in a way that creates a diverse student body, or collective merit.

Others critiqued affirmative action, especially when asked, "Should your university consider racial or ethnic background when considering whether to admit students?" Five White students (10%) said no, usually expressing disagreement through a calibrated merit frame, preferring consideration of class rather than race. For example, Alex said,

"I think they should consider socioeconomic background and the difficulties that people have. Like, if I, a White kid, had had the same kind of upbringing with the parents of the same income level as a Black kid, I don't think he should have an advantage over me. I know statistically if you're from minority groups you might be more likely to have a [low] socioeconomic background, but I think the socioeconomic background is the key thing, not what your ethnic makeup is."

Alex frames his critique through the calibration of merit, and disagrees that race is a mechanism of disadvantage apart from class. Like Alex, Jean, and Katherine, most students who expressed any disagreement with university admissions did so through the collective merit and calibration frames.

A smaller minority of White students (3) expressed a more comprehensive critique of the admissions system. Jeremy, a Harvard student who identified as "extremely liberal", told us that Harvard admissions is:

"…an institution that exists to perpetuate the class structure. I mean, people get in because they're—within rich kids, probably the rich kids that are better at school get in, but it's still rich kids getting in. So, no, I don't think it's a meritocracy. It's kids who went to fancy New England prep schools and who have parents who could buy these SAT prep courses and private tutoring and just had resources. Like 40% of students are legacies. That's not a very meritocratic policy. So no, I don't think Harvard is a meritocracy."

Jeremy evaluates the results of the process, and declares it wildly unequal, given the percentages of wealthy, legacy, and private school kids among his peers. In doing so, Jeremy emphasizes equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity, an emphasis unpopular in the United States for reducing class or race inequality (Schuman et al. 1997). His perspective was rare on campus as well.

Overall, most White US students had faith in the complex, idiosyncratic system that brought them and their classmates to campus. Given positive experiences with their peers, who generally seem worthy or "deserving" of the elite education they were experiencing, their evaluations were positive. Still, there were soft but significant critiques around the edges, most commonly over legacy admissions, athletic recruiting, and race-based affirmative action. Most of the time, students expressed their critiques within the frames of calibrated evaluations of merit and contributions to the cohort's collective merit. This language mirrors the officially stated policies of Harvard and Brown admissions, which also mirror each other's, through institutional isomorphism (Lipson 2007; Meyer et al. 2007).

How do U.S. students' understandings of merit and worthiness of an elite education compare to those of their counterparts in Britain? As demonstrated below, while Oxford students'

understandings of merit differ considerably, students in the two national contexts share a faith in the institutions in which they are embedded.

3.3. UK Students on Admissions: Universal, Individual Merit

In Britain, like in the US, student views on admissions reproduced official university policies, not the critical perspectives of many media commentators and politicians. Overall, nearly three quarters of White British students expressed a simple, unequivocal "yes" when asked whether Oxford's admissions process is meritocratic. They said things similar to private school-educated Marie, the daughter of parents with graduate degrees: "Absolutely, I think Oxford strives for excellence and I think they would always rather choose a brilliant candidate before looking at where he's from, or what colour he is. Absolutely." Marie's answer, like those of many of her peers, is unequivocal. Matthew said, "Of course! You have to get the best grades. You have to perform the best in the interview. You have to do the best essays. So yeah, of course." Matthew defines merit as measured by grades, essays, and the on-campus interview, for which private school students are frequently coached intensively. Rose, a graduate of a prestigious grammar school and the daughter of university-educated professionals, told us that:

> "Yes, I mean the admissions process isn't perfect but those who get in have their merits. If you've got money then you can get the merits more easily. You've got more of an advantage anyway … I think the private schools know how to play the system, and obviously private schools you have to pay to go to. So they know how to play the exam system so you pass them, and they know how to prepare you properly for an Oxford interview because they've done it a lot. Whereas state schools, particularly comprehensives, but I suppose I also include grammar schools slightly, don't have the same advantages."

While liberal-identified Rose identifies a problem with unequal access to a secondary education that prepares disadvantaged youth for entrance to Oxford, she believes in the system. When asked whether the underrepresentation of Black students on campus is a problem, she notes that "I think it's a problem but it's not Oxford's problem. It's an educational problem that the government needs to address. Oxford has its own criteria to maintain and that's to keep a high level of intellectual ability in education." In other words, considerations of unequal access to education prior to applying—a calibrated evaluation of merit—would compromise the goals of Oxford as an institution. Later Rose stated this understanding of Oxford's essential mission even more explicitly. When asked whether the university should consider various social factors in admissions, Rose retorted that it "does not lie with Oxford to choose that," because "Oxford has a very clear stated aim, and that is to maintain its position in an intellectual society." Given this role for Oxford, Rose can believe that private school graduates have a better chance of admission than state school graduates, while also believing that the selection system is meritocratic.

Stephen, a private school graduate, also expressed unequivocal belief in Oxford's admissions being meritocratic, "Definitely. From my experience the people that are admitted are done so based on how good they are rather than where they are from." Like Rose, he acknowledged inequality in access to high quality secondary education:

> "Although sometimes they are linked, as in—I'm not sure what the figures are, but I think it's about 50% [of admitted students went] to [private] school, but only about 3% of people in England go to [private] school. So it is a meritocracy but that meritocracy might be to do with the upbringing of the child."[12]

Stephen acknowledges the influence of school type, a proxy for social class, yet remains confident in Oxford's meritocracy. Indeed, the lack of state school graduates, a fact often repeated in British national media, did not dissuade Oxford students from believing in the admissions process. Most

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12   Seven percent of British youth attend independent secondary schools, but 45% of accepted students to Oxford in 2010 were graduates of independent schools (UK Department for Education 2010; University of Oxford 2011).

viewed the dearth of underrepresented groups on campus as a problem, but not Oxford's problem. Hence, it did not contravene faith in the process of selection, like it would under the calibrated merit logic underlying the responses of many U.S. students.

Students' understandings resonated with those suggested by the Oxford admissions office. The Director of Undergraduate Admissions, when asked about what role if any Oxford should play in considering inequality in secondary education, said:

> "I think it's sometimes perceived as being the university's fault that we don't get more students in from particular backgrounds, but all the evidence suggests… that a lot of the inequities in society start at a very young age … So part of my job is to try and make people aware that it's not just us who can influence this. This is a big issue for the UK as a whole, and it's a government-led sort of responsibility to deal with this. It's about raising attainment in schools… You can't say 'Oxford, Cambridge, it's your job to solve social mobility.'"

To most Oxford students, then, merit is absolute, evaluated individually, and based only on academic outcomes. Students acknowledge that those outcomes are unequally distributed, because they are a result of both personal qualities such as intelligence and hard work, along with environments that cultivate those qualities, such as excellent schools and families with cultural know-how.

In addition to the difference between absolute and calibrated merit, US and British students also differed in their approaches to diversity. In contrast to US students' emphasis on building a diverse cohort, Oxford students took a strictly individualist approach to admissions. John said,

> "The interviews are obviously the main part of the admissions process and I think they are there to see who would be best at the subject… Obviously it's in the admissions tutors' interest to let the best people in, because then they will get the best marks and generally be the most interesting to teach… I suppose it depends on what you define as merit because obviously it's a very narrow form of meritocracy… Whereas there are obviously other forms of merit, like moral merits, sporting ability, or whatever, which don't get considered at all."

The students tutors admit will be their future students in tutorials, which are intimate learning environments.[13] Overall, John's perspective highlights the individual attention to merit at Oxford, in contrast to the collective merit of the cohort that both students and admissions offices emphasized in the United States.

British students emphasized Oxford's role as an elite, singularly academic institution whose role was to attract the most skilled students and to cultivate their subject-specific learning. Under this model the university wouldn't play a role in correcting inequality in society, even as it manifests itself on campus, because students don't see the university as playing a civic role. Furthermore, the goal for the university is to produce the academic elite of society as students saw it. British students believed that a combination of intelligence and a social context in which that intelligence is sufficiently cultivated leads to the quality of "potential to succeed" in one's subject at Oxford, the singular criterion for admission expressed by most students. These perspectives are quite far from the common perspectives on calibrated evaluations and collective merit among White US students. Still, they share with US students a faith in the system of selection that got them and their peers to campus.

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[13] Recent evidence suggests that this system is flawed. Research comparing exam results with outcomes of the interview process suggest that White applicants with the same exam results as Black or Asian students' exam results are more likely to be offered admission after the campus interview (Boliver 2013).

3.4. Critiques at Oxford

As in the United States, a small but significant number of Oxford students critiqued their university's system of admissions. When asked whether Oxford admissions is meritocratic, eight (15%) students disagreed, while another six (12%) expressed ambivalence. Students who expressed doubt about meritocracy at Oxford tended to cite the underrepresentation of state school graduates, given the higher levels of preparation in private schools. Trevor, one of just three White British respondents who was eligible for free school meals sometime during secondary school, said "probably not" when asked if Oxford's admissions is meritocratic. He went on:

> "I think it's… pretty clear just from being a student in Oxford that a disproportionate amount of people get in because they've had the money to get in. They've been able to constantly afford the best education and the best kind of tuition and stuff to prepare them for getting in here. They know how to do the interview process and things like that. They're coached in it. While that means that they might be the best kind of qualified, I don't necessarily think that means they are the most intelligent people. Um, also in the state school kind of admissions the university clearly prefers people from state grammar schools as opposed to normal state schools, and that's because they are very similar to private schools. So I don't think it is a meritocracy."

Trevor scored high enough on a grammar school entrance exam at age 11 to gain entrée to his local grammar school. The admit rate to that school is less than 10%, making it more competitive than Oxford admissions. Trevor acknowledged both the privilege he enjoyed in attending a grammar school, as well as the advantages of peers whose parents paid tuition at expensive private schools.

Ellen, who graduated from a state comprehensive school, said,

> "I think there's maybe more subjectivity in accepting people to Oxford because of the interview process, so I don't know if that makes it more meritocratic or less, because I'm not sure how transparent the interview system is, and I think it gives a big disadvantage to people who… There are far more people who I know who have exactly the same grades as me, who work harder than me, who haven't got into Oxford and I don't understand why, so maybe not."

Unlike Ellen and Trevor, the majority of Oxford students expressed views on admissions in line with the selection process at Oxford.

4. Discussion

Elite universities in the United States and Britain boast of extremely competitive admissions, and admissions rates have declined over time (Geiger 2002). Declining admission rates are meant to signal a strong cohort of students, and increasing prestige on the part of the university (Stevens 2007). Meritocracy seems to have developed into what Joseph Soares names an "ultrameritocracy". That is, as the competition for spots at elite universities grows more and more fierce—in the US the most elite universities have admit rates close to 5%, Oxford's rate is 20%, and both are declining each year—so too does the belief that the system is truly meritocratic. Unlike in the past, students coming from elite high schools no longer see a large number of their peers gaining admission to the likes of Harvard, Brown, and Oxford; they take this as evidence that the system is fair, even while ignoring the fact that students like them and their peers are vastly overrepresented at elite universities. Admission becomes the ultimate reward for hard work, the pinnacle of achievement. In fact, research shows that the more competitive admissions becomes, the greater inequality in who gains admission to elite universities (Alon 2009; Soares 1999).

The findings in this paper show that in the domain of admissions and defining merit, rather than university being a time of rebellion against institutions and their universities, for these students it is a time when students reproduce the criteria of evaluation and status that their universities espouse. In fact, the campus experience actually leads some to bring their views in line with their universities rather than to greater protest, even if they disagreed with certain practices such as athletic recruiting before they arrived on campus. Unlike in other campus domains in which there is a history of social protest among college students, in the realm of admissions students seem to agree quite strongly with

their universities, and come to even more agreement rather than critique upon arriving to campus. They suggest that most actors in elite institutions espouse views that reproduce their elite status, rather than engaging in symbolic politics or protest. Even though US students espouse a collective understanding of merit, ultimately their perspectives, like those of their British counterparts, are also embedded in an individualist frame. They value collective merit for its impact on themselves, not for social justice, or for the collective good of society. They are not espousing, for example, a vision of multiculturalism that emphasizes group identities and the need to support ethnic and racial groups in society, as many scholars define multicultural state policies (Kymlicka 2007).

Why does self-interest outweigh symbolic politics in the case of elite university students' perspectives on admissions? Perhaps when status is at stake self-interest dominates. Jackman and Muha (1984) describe how those in power may cling ever more tightly to status when the legitimacy of that status is called into question. That is, public discussions of unequal outcomes of university admissions may serve to solidify students' beliefs in the legitimacy of the process rather than leading them to question or critique the process. The strong resonance between student responses and practices of their respective universities legitimates students' status position through enrollment at elite institutions.

This reproduction of status means that students across the two national contexts don't express shared meaning with respect to merit, as we might expect from students groomed to become global leaders (Faust 2012), and who are part of a highly institutionalized system of higher education with convergence around cultural content about values and scientific rationality (Meyer et al. 2007). Elites are often assumed to transcend national boundaries as cosmopolitans with universal understandings of morality, human rights, status, and more (see for example, Appiah 2006; for a critique, see Calhoun 2008; Lamont and Aksartova 2002). Instead, students' views align with institutional meaning-making on merit that is nation-specific. They perceived different institutional goals in admissions, and they supported those different institutional goals.

In the United States, universities seek to craft a diverse cohort of students who made the most of whatever opportunities they had in high school. In Britain, universities seek to admit those with the most potential to succeed in their subject matter, and potential is seen as stemming from both intelligence and cultivation of that intelligence in high-quality schools. These different criteria are supported by different university actors who make admissions decisions. In the United States, admissions decisions are made by an independent Admissions Office, while at Oxford interviews are conducted by tutors who teach in the subject for which they interview candidates.[14] Tutors have their own interests in mind, because they will be conducting 1–2 tutorials with admitted students, while US admissions offices must respond to demands of the faculty, athletic coaches, public relations for the university, alumnae, and more. Of course, nation-specific historical processes and understandings of the role of elite universities in society also play a role in shaping admissions practices (for a discussion of these histories, see Karabel 2005; Ramirez 2006; Soares 1999). Universities should consider, then, their role in this socialization with respect to perspectives on fairness and merit. Their practices can foster a policy feedback loop. That is, their admissions policies define merit for admitted students, who will go on to reproduce those processes of selection in their own work as adults making hiring and other types of decisions as leaders in society, with troubling implications for social inequality, given the unequal outcomes the selection processes in both national contexts produce.

By paying attention to the ways in which students conceptualize merit in admissions, this paper has unpacked how their conceptual frameworks on merit make room for or instead limit social changes toward a more inclusive university and society. More broadly, the paper shows how admissions systems often reproduce inequality not only by how they select students, but also by defining "merit" for admitted students in ways that will reproduce inequality in the future.

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[14] In an interview Oxford's Director of Admissions suggested that Oxford admissions is increasingly centralized. For example, colleges are more likely to swap application folders today than in the past, facilitated by the central admissions office. In addition, "Widening Access" agreements at selective British universities may place pressure on departments to accept more non-traditional candidates.

Ultimately, students in both countries are deeply embedded in their universities' cultures, both past and present. Their meaning-making on admissions reflects the ways in which national cultures around elite higher education shape young adults' notions of worthiness of entrée into the elite of society, through attending the likes of Harvard, Brown, and Oxford. Systems of selection are not just about the rewards they mete out; they also shape and reflect individuals' meaning-making in other domains. This meaning-making matters is likely to shape students' future decision-making as they go on to leadership roles in their respective societies. Hence, paying attention to their status-reproducing views is critical.

What is to be done? Given that both systems of selection of students for elite higher education, despite very different criteria, ultimately reproduce inequality in American and British societies, selective universities might consider an admissions lottery in which students who meet a particular bar for admission get put into a lottery, with provisions or "weights" for qualities of interest (for example, intended field of study, or in the United States, markers of diversity). An admissions lottery would shift the meaning of selection from an absolute sense of merit—the best of the best—to an understanding that admission is somewhat arbitrary. Less dramatically, universities might better signal the meaning of admission to their universities. For example, universities often advertise declining admissions rates, a supposed marker of increasing excellence. However, the findings in this paper show that advertising increasing selection might further students' beliefs in the legitimacy of their status position as elites, despite the unequal outcomes of admissions. Thus, less emphasis on low and declining admissions rates would attenuate students' beliefs in the legitimacy of the system of selection.

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