Higher education in America is no longer the preserve of a privileged elite, with more than seven million undergraduates now enrolled in the roughly 2,600 colleges and universities that grant bachelor or higher degrees. In 2002, the most recent year for which figures are available, 1,291,900 students received bachelors' diplomas and 606,958 completed graduate programs. The latter figure is worth noting, since it tells us that almost half of those who are completing college believe that a single degree won't suffice for what they want to do or be.

A census study last year found that among adults aged thirty to thirty-four, only 41 percent had attended high school without going to college. These high school graduates, moreover, represent a dwindling part of the population. Another 32 percent had earned at least a bachelor's degree, while 27 percent had spent time on a campus, whether a community college or a four-year college, without finishing. Viewed one way, that figure shows a high
attrition rate. Many of the colleges and community colleges, moreover, fail to provide more than perfunctory courses.

The claim that almost six in ten Americans in their early thirties have had some kind of college experience thus needs further scrutiny. The experience can range from small seminars in philosophy at Colgate to lectures in motel management at Southwest Missouri State. Some colleges have rigorous core curriculums: students elsewhere must choose courses from huge catalogs in order to amass the 128 credits needed for a BA. Reed College in Oregon limits its enrollment to 1,312 students, while at Michigan State University an entering student would be one of 34,617.

1.

In fact, there are places open for anyone who wants to pursue a bachelor’s degree and can pay for it, and many colleges must work hard to attract students. In a study published this year, James Fallows concluded that

for all but the richest ten or twenty universities, an important part of managing enrollment is simply being sure that enough paying customers will show up each fall. [1]

The Princeton Review, a commercial organization with no ties to the university, compiles useful information about what it calls "the best 357 colleges" in the country. It reports that reputable although less well known schools like Creighton, Duquesne, and Evergreen State accept at least 85 percent of those who apply. But for many American families, knowing that there are many openings is not reassuring. On the contrary, increasing numbers of parents are investing money and energy to ensure that their children be accepted by a college that is recognized and admired.

Ross Douthat writes candidly about these efforts in his memoir of student life in Harvard's class of 2002, Privilege: Harvard and the Education of the Ruling Class. "People send their children to Harvard, above all," he says, "because they want them to succeed." And an early sign of their success will be the college they attend. When friends ask where the children are going, parents want to give a response that brings congratulatory smiles; yet the number of schools that evoke this reaction is relatively small. True, people may recall having heard, say, of Carleton and Grinnell; but they don't see them as being among the first tier. As Douthat writes, ambitious parents don't want to be seen as having children whose attainment was less than the best. Regional loyalties are being replaced by the growing power of a handful of national name brands. A neurologist in Tulsa who himself went to Oklahoma State now wants Dartmouth or Duke for his daughter, and a senior vice-president at Procter & Gamble who went to Lehigh now wants to tell people about his son at Stanford.

From my own observation, perhaps fifteen schools are on aspiring parents' lists. Table A provides the names of twelve, and some indices commonly used to justify their rankings. [2] The first, not surprisingly, is how hard it is to gain admission. On this score, the list starts with Harvard and Princeton, which accept only 10 percent of their applicants, and descends to Duke, which lets in close to one in four. Collectively, admissions officers at these schools considered 171,824 applications last year, and turned down 145,962, for an overall acceptance rate of about 15 percent. In fact, figures like these are public knowledge, reported in guides that are well known in many high schools. Thus the 18,628 students who applied to Stanford knew in advance that only one in eight would be successful. Even given such odds, thousands are willing to try. On their side, colleges don't discourage applications,
since a high rejection rate raises their standing in *US News & World Report* and similar rankings.

Of course, the 171,824 total contains multiple submissions. In this anxious age, it is not unheard of for a high school senior to apply to as many as ten schools or more. This redundancy is time-consuming and costly for both students and admissions offices. For example, many colleges require applicants to write essays that they hope will reveal clear thinking or creativity or some other quality; they all must be written and read. (A typical topic: "Name five books you would choose for six months on a desert island.") Each year, some 10,000 applicants to the top twelve colleges receive more than one acceptance.

That produces a second measure of prestige: how many of those a school invites actually enroll. Here Harvard again leads, with 78 percent choosing to attend. What is interesting is that even at Amherst, Duke, and Williams, fewer than half of those invited accept, which means these colleges must admit the equivalent of two classes to fill up one. (Many others count themselves fortunate if a third of their choices accept.) No-show rates would be even higher were it not for offers of early admission, which exact a pledge to attend before the application season is over.

A third way to rate colleges is by student performance on the controversial SAT. The Princeton Review reports the SAT scores needed to reach the top quarter of recent entering classes. Among the top dozen schools, there is actually a fairly small span, from 1590 at Harvard to 1500 at Brown. These numbers are also widely reported and serve as standards for other colleges, such as Northwestern (1480), Emory (1460), and Vanderbilt (1430), that aspire to national recognition. In hopes of reaching the 1500 threshold, they court high-scoring students, offering scholarships even when the students haven't asked for them. Vanderbilt has sent recruiters to high schools with considerable numbers of Jewish students.[3]

To place so much stress on the SAT numbers may seem irrational and unfair, since the SATs put a premium on quick multiple-choice thinking that may neglect other qualities of intelligence, and there is much more than those scores in each applicant's record. After all, students are asked to submit transcripts, references, lists of activities, as well as an essay. Yet consider what must happen at a school like Yale, where 17,735 applications came in last year. After all have been opened and put in files with the students' SAT scores written on the front, they are read in descending order. Obviously, other factors will be considered, and some applicants with high SAT scores won't make the final cut, but organizing the admissions process on the ability to score on SATs means that many other qualities of applicants may be ignored. Still, if one were faced with 17,735 folders, what would be a better way to start?

The colleges' costs are also relevant here. The twelve have similar price tags despite differences in endowments and local labor costs. Even if there isn't overt consultation, there seems to be a kind of consensus not to engage in price competition. Harvard's $23 billion portfolio could allow it to charge discernibly less than the rest, but Harvard would reply that it wants to get the full fee from parents who can pay, and then use part of the proceeds to assist less well-off applicants. At last count almost half of Harvard's students received help. But it should be added that need is viewed generously and aid is now given to students from families with six-figure incomes. Yet budgets at all of the twelve leading schools except MIT
expect that the full tuition amount be paid by at least half of the applicants they enroll. The result is that students whose parents can pay the full amount will have an extra edge. 

What Douthat says of Harvard applies to most of the other colleges on the list. His fellow members of the class of 2002, he says, were "a wildly privileged lot, culled from the country's upwardly mobile enclaves and blessed with deep, parentally funded pockets." He estimates that 70 percent of his peers came from families with incomes exceeding $100,000 a year, with many well over that. The standard story is that an Ivy League education is open to talented young people regardless of income or origin. Douthat says this seldom happens in practice. "Meritocracy is the ideological veneer, but social and economic stratification is the reality."

Douthat's one-word title explains how most of his classmates got to the head of the admissions line. The preparatory schools their parents sent them to taught them how to outwit the entrance tests and gave them a shrewd sense of how college admissions work. Once at college, he tells us, they apply those skills to "avoidance of academic work" and "maneuverings to achieve maximum GPA [Grade Point Average] in return for minimal effort." This language says more about Douthat and his friends than Harvard students as a whole. All those I've met would cite courses they found intellectually challenging, and where they put in more work than was required. But by whatever route, almost everyone at Harvard gets As, and most graduates go on to well-known professional schools that bring them further up the ladder. Benjamin DeMott has noted recently in these pages that special consideration for athletes in many sports aids the already privileged. While the elite schools sponsor football and basketball, they reserve even more places for teams like skiing, golf, rugby, crew, squash, lacrosse, and sailing—sports that are harder to master if you haven't attended a well-endowed high school. Some shrewd parents now tell their children to forget about editing the yearbook and go out for the squash team.

Much is made of "legacies"—the preferment given to the sons and daughters of alumni in the admissions process. Harvard, Yale, and Princeton accept 30 to 40 percent of legacy applicants, as against 10 to 11 percent of all others. But what is seldom noticed is that between 60 and 70 percent of alumni offspring are being rejected by their parents' alma maters. This is not a small proportion, and it counters the view that inherited privilege is becoming the rule. It tells us that most of the teenagers whose parents went to Stanford or Yale will actually end up at less highly ranked colleges. While they may not fall far, this is still downward mobility. Moreover, many who benefit from legacies do not end up with the high incomes or professional distinction of their parents. Here, as elsewhere, regression to the mean is a fact of social life. Right now, there are students at Boston College and Iowa State who will displace some of their contemporaries who started out at Dartmouth and Williams.

The last few decades have seen changes in enrollments at the top dozen schools. Most notable has been the arrival of students of Asian origin. While they make up less than 4 percent of the nation's college-age population, they now account for 35 percent of the undergraduates at MIT, followed by 27 percent at Stanford, 20 percent at Columbia and Penn, along with 18 percent at Harvard. Most of these students have been accepted on their merits, and a considerable proportion of them major in science or mathematics. Moreover, few of them benefit from being in the legacy pool or have been recruited for places on the squash and water polo teams.
While all the books under review discuss academic merit as defined by test scores, none of them then draws the conclusion that, by that standard, Asians clearly are academically superior to other groups. Nor do they acknowledge that their admission leaves fewer seats for whites, so each year sees fewer white faces on the most coveted campuses. This shift has been both recent and rapid; less than twenty years ago, the Asian percentages were half what they are now. In some respects, Asians are in a position akin to that faced by Jews in an earlier time. Parents and high school teachers are asking whether schools are rejecting some students who have the expected academic credentials because they fear they would begin to look "too Asian." More than a few Asian applicants believe they are more severely judged on how "well-rounded" they are; they complain that admissions offices do not recognize that Asians can be as heterogeneous as other groups.

2.

All the books under review voice a similar lament: too many professors, perhaps most, are doing a mediocre job in the classroom. Students are inclined to agree. The Princeton Review presented undergraduates at 357 schools with the statement "my professors bring material to life," and asked them to grade their teachers on whether they do so. Table B shows a range of responses. As can be seen, satisfaction is highest in colleges that keep their enrollments small, don't have graduate programs, and are not necessarily nationally known. The lowest scores in the survey went to undergraduate instruction at large, well-known research universities. If we look at just the schools in the table, those with high scores together have only 12,388 students, while the scores in the second column testify to the classroom experience of 150,532 undergraduates.

Patrick Allitt, a professor of US history at Emory University, has published a day-by-day diary of how he conducts his course in American history. The greater part of I'm the Teacher, You're the Student describes the subjects he teaches and how he presents them. ("Today I lecture on farming.") While he has only thirty-nine students, it is his voice we mainly hear. When he asks questions, he tends to get laconic responses, which he generally rates as deficient, if not actually pitiable. We get some idea of his own intellectual sensibility from his final examination, which is devoted largely to dates (the year Wendell Willkie ran), locations (Battle of Little Big Horn), names (author of The Jungle), identifications (Rough Riders), plus a question requiring a one-paragraph response ("Was the New Deal a Success?"). He then quotes some of the egregious errors of his students ("John Kenneth Galbraith tried to kill Henry Clay Frick"). In the end, though, he gives everyone in the class a B or better.

In a closing chapter, Allitt complains that at least a quarter of his students had no aptitude for history, no appreciation for the connection between events, no sense of how a historical situation changes over time, they don't want to do the necessary hard work, they skimp on the reading, and can't write to save their lives.

This, if we are to believe Allitt, is the situation at Emory, which US News & World Report ranks twentieth among its 129 "best national universities," ahead of Berkeley, Georgetown, and NYU. Its students score well on the SAT, and presumably worked hard in high school. But at no point does Allitt wonder how he might have stimulated students to take more interest in the subjects he taught. For a teacher to conclude that his students have "no aptitude" for history seems to foreclose their chances of learning about the past that produced them.
Ken Bain, who directs NYU’s Center for Teaching Excellence, introduces us to thirty-three professors who year after year receive high ratings from their students. All the men and women he met, from universities ranging from Stanford and Northwestern to an unnamed "freshwater college in Oklahoma," are deeply committed to undergraduate education. In most of What the Best College Teachers Do professors describe the approaches and techniques they use in their classrooms. Some have high aims: "I want the students to feel like they have invented calculus." Others talk about their basic beliefs: "There's no such thing as a stupid question in my class." Yet having heard many academics talk about their work, and having met many of their students, I tend to be wary of self-appraisals. A recent study found that only 24 percent of professors who were polled admitted that their courses required a lot of memorizing, while 64 percent of their students felt this was the case.

Bain's account would have been improved by an accompanying DVD, if only to confirm the claim that these are unusual teachers. It would help to see them in action, whether lecturing to large groups, teaching mid-sized classes, or presiding over a seminar. For example, one of Bain's professors reminds us that "students operate on different levels and will not all catch on at the same time." So she finds ways to "give different people different kinds of challenges." It is possible, she suggests, within a single lesson, to give those in the bottom quarter one set of ideas to ponder, yet simultaneously show the top quarter that there are more complex mazes to untangle. When this happens, both A and C students will have the potential to learn something, and may even agree that the course was worthwhile. From such accounts, we can't really know what students learn, but this teacher sounds more imaginative than most others.

Nowhere does Bain ask the professors he studied about their own research and writing. In some smaller colleges, many faculty members no longer publish books or articles about their subjects, and their deans don't seem to mind. At universities, the traditional argument is that research enhances teaching because it requires teachers to keep up with their disciplines. Bain sidesteps this issue, perhaps because the typical undergraduate is nineteen, and will probably gain from whatever a conscientious professor puts in a syllabus.

Andrew Delbanco has noted in these pages that undergraduates are mainly taught in university settings. Indeed, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that seven out of eight candidates for a BA or BS are enrolled in campuses where the work of devoted teachers is rarely rewarded, and prestige and high salaries are conferred on professors who concentrate on their research, graduate seminars, publications, and reputations. As Stanley Katz, a professor of public affairs at Princeton, sees it, they are dominated by "faculties for whom thoughtful consideration of undergraduate education is simply not on the agenda."

As a result, few universities design basic core curriculums for their undergraduates. There are exceptions, like Columbia and Chicago, which encourage a continuing faculty discussion about what an educated person should be aware of. Other schools are less demanding. For example, Harvard requires that all students enroll in a course in "Quantitative Reasoning." At first glance, this seems promising; and it is obviously important, for example, to know how to use mathematical models to forecast, say, global warming or future health care costs. However, it is possible to satisfy Harvard's requirement by taking any one of nineteen standard courses already in the catalog, including staples such as multivariable calculus and linear algebra.
Research universities also make very little effort to induce their senior faculty to teach first- and second-year students. And if they don't want to, as is often the case, it's unlikely they would be good at it.

3.

The jacket of Jennifer Washburn's University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of American Higher Education shows a mortarboard with a "Sold" tag attached. Her book is valuable for its details, but the general picture is familiar. Pharmaceutical companies farm out research to medical schools, and can prevent the release of findings that don't promote their products. College teams are now worth as much as professional franchises, with players encouraged to take undemanding courses taught by obliging professors. Schools market themselves with Madison Avenue slogans, and try to lure students by providing outsized jacuzzis and five-story climbing walls. I certainly agree that there's corruption and commercialization in university life. But I'm not so sure that if universities are selling themselves—or selling out—they are doing so for the reasons Washburn cites.

For example, she says that the embrace of business practices is "also changing what is being taught," citing a state university where unprofitable "degree programs in classics, German, French, and several other humanities departments were eliminated." Subjects like these, its president told her, are "stuff that you don't need." At first hearing, this sounds shocking. In fairness, the book might have noted that faculty members in these fields continue to teach; indeed George Mason University continues to list ninety-two courses in these fields, including "The Age of Goethe," "Medieval French Literature," and "Greek and Roman Comedy." At the same time, she might have asked why, with an enrollment of 17,102, so few had chosen to major in the humanities. The standard answer is that students now want practical credentials, like degrees in business or computer science. Yet it is also possible that not enough professors tried to make their subjects interesting to a broader range of students. This can be done without betraying scholarly standards, or inflating grades, or resorting to showmanship. What is wanted is a serious commitment to undergraduate teaching, a trait not commonly found at research universities and those aspiring to that status.

The commercial activities that Washburn describes derive largely from the fact that universities have become huge research empires that need continual infusions of cash to sustain their personnel and overhead costs. Recent figures from the National Center for Education Statistics show that employees who are not teachers make up 71 percent of Stanford's total payroll, as do 73 percent at Columbia and 83 percent at Harvard. Many of these people do research. But even more are counselors, fund-raisers, groundskeepers, lawyers, security personnel, admissions officers, or coaches.

The medical schools at these universities provide telling evidence. Regarded simply as colleges for training physicians, most of them are really quite small. For example, Johns Hopkins Medical School has only 482 students, fewer than in Williams's freshman class. Yet capitalizing on their presence, its university has applied for and receives $364 million in federal research funding, even though these outlays have only a marginal relation to medical education. In addition to federal money, the school applies for grants from companies, foundations, and charities. Nationwide, university medical schools and hospitals have 112,000 students and residents. Yet there are 137,000 professors on their payrolls, at least one for each student. Most of this putative faculty do little or no teaching, but work
on research paid for by grants and contracts funded by the government or private companies and foundations.

Murray Sperber, a professor of English at Indiana University and the author of several books on college sports, has proposed that universities spin off their research facilities, allowing them to become wholly independent entities, with their own managements, budgets, and new names. The Rand Corporation, the Brookings Institution, and SRI International all do competent research without direct academic connections. In fact, SRI began as a branch of Stanford University, but has been on its own since 1970. Sperber's view is that organizations like these can contract with businesses, the military, even clandestine agencies, on their clients' terms, without having to worry about any effects on academic values.[15]

As often as not, the lack of concern for education originates within the institutions themselves. Since 1980, average tuition at private colleges has more than doubled, rising from $10,954 to $23,505 in today's dollars. Schools charge what the market will bear, and since applicants seem willing to pay, enrollments haven't dropped. Boston University is asking $28,906 and Southern California $28,827—about the same as many more famous schools. But how much of this money is applied to undergraduate teaching? Will every student be able to take part in a seminar each semester?

What can be shown is that much tuition money is allocated to expanding the top tiers of the faculty, both in numbers and in what they are paid. During the last twenty years, Harvard's roster of full professors has grown from 533 to 777, Columbia's from 462 to 589, and Duke's from 284 to 399, while student enrollments have remained essentially the same. Table C gives examples of how salaries of full professors have risen in real terms, and how much they take of their faculties' budgets. Nationally, at 115 colleges and universities, full professors are paid on average more than $100,000 a year, including at small schools like Hamilton and Colby.[16] Indeed, forty-one public institutions pay full professors more than $100,000, despite cuts in legislative funding. While salary increases at the state schools in Table C are below those in the private sector, full professors there are still receiving the biggest share of their institutions' budgets.

As matters stand, one measure of a university's prestige is how little teaching is asked of its tenured professors. Although there are more endowed chairs at the top, more undergraduates are now taught by graduate assistants, adjuncts, and part-time faculty who will never be promoted. Some even handle full loads for a third of the $100,000 that professors get even if they don't teach. Unfortunately, that saving is what makes the six-figure salaries possible.

Princeton's mathematics department may be an extreme example, but it offers a glimpse of academic priorities. It has fifty-six professorial-rank faculty, who supervise fifty-five graduate students and thirty juniors and seniors majoring in math. Simple arithmetic suggests that even if courses are added for students who do not major in mathematics, some professors will not enter a classroom in a typical semester. Doubtless they will say they are engaged in research. But even esteemed faculties have members who have essentially ceased publishing since receiving tenure.

While other organizations such as corporations have fewer people at the top of the hierarchy, senior ranks at colleges outnumber those lower down, often by a large margin, and are paid
a high proportion of the total payroll. At the schools cited in Table C, full professors absorb upward of 79 percent of overall instructional budgets. In fact, at most of them, full professors exceed assistant professors by greater ratios than they did twenty years ago. Legally, full professors who wish can stay on with full salaries as long as they want. In 1983, the campuses in North Carolina's system reported that only 34 percent of their regular faculty members were under the age of forty. By 2003, the proportion had fallen to 18 percent. Of twenty-two professors in one economics department, just one was under forty. This trend seems at least as worrisome as corporate contracts at medical schools.

Far too few of our nation's undergraduates are getting the educations they want and deserve. The easiest reply is that they have only themselves to blame, as we often hear in reference to their careerism and partying, and remarks like Douthat's that students devote the least amount of effort to their studies. Or in professors' laments about student apathy, lax attendance, and indifference toward assignments.

Yet my own observation is that young people of college age have a capacity for intellectual curiosity, and will respond when their minds are aroused. This is in fact happening at many independent liberal arts colleges, where their professors' first commitment is to teaching undergraduates. I have visited many of these schools and seen how students are encouraged to use their minds, including those who may have first enrolled there for sports or other nonacademic activities. While faculty members may not engage in much research, they work together to maintain a common curriculum. Moreover, I have no doubt that the 322,791 students now at these colleges do not differ inherently from the millions who are being ignored on mega-campuses. I am also convinced that despite differences in endowments and faculty salaries, as good an education can be had at Coe College in Iowa, Whitman College in Washington, and Knox College in Illinois as at brand-name schools like Williams and Swarthmore.

A student who is now basically majoring in beer at the University of Arizona could be presenting a paper on Molière at Oregon's Lewis & Clark College. Plenty of teachers know how to provide the best in undergraduate education. The question is whether they will ever reach the larger number of students who should be learning from them. The recent trends in higher education suggest that the prospects of that happening are not good.

Notes


[2] Cornell was not included since most of its applications are to its less competitive vocational programs.


[4] The exception is MIT, which gives financial aid to 71 percent of its students. At Yale, only 39 percent are awarded such help.
"Jocks and the Academy," *The New York Review*, May 12, 2005. The teams cited in this paragraph are among the thirty-four intercollegiate sports played at Dartmouth.

A study by Stacy Dale and Alan Krueger surveyed two groups of students. One attended highly selective colleges; the other had also been admitted to such schools, but ended up at lesser-ranked campuses. After graduation, the two groups were found to have similar earnings, suggesting that for good students, it doesn't much matter where they go. See "Estimating the Payoff of Attending a More Selective College" (Industrial Relations Section, Princeton University, 1999).

The Hillel Web site gives estimates of the number of Jewish students on each campus. For example, it reports 27 percent at Columbia, 25 percent at Yale, and 21 percent at Brown. Using its figures, it appears that Jewish and Asian students together make up 51 percent of the enrollment at Harvard and 54 percent at Penn.


Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, Statistical Results for Fall 2003.


*Statistical Information Related to Medical Schools and Teaching Hospitals* (Association of American Medical Colleges, 2005), pp. 8, 34.

"How Undergraduate Education Became College Lite," in Hersh and Merrow, *Declining by Degrees*, pp. 139–140.
