

# HOW DOES “CULTURE” BECOME “CAPITAL”? CULTURAL AND INSTITUTIONAL STRUGGLES OVER “CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY” AT HARVARD

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**ABSTRACT:** *Although the concept of cultural capital has been widely adopted in sociological studies of culture, education, and stratification, few studies have addressed the processes through which specific instantiations of cultural capital become important in particular institutional locations. This article, based on an analysis of primary documents relating to changes in admissions policies at Harvard College between 1945 and 1965, addresses the question of how nonacademic factors came to have such a significant role in undergraduate admissions at elite American universities. It argues that in relatively autonomous fields such as higher education in the mid-twentieth century United States, cultural capital is shaped not only by the relations of cultural qualities and economic classes but also through specific intra- and extra-institutional struggles within the field in question. Keywords: cultural capital; admissions; Harvard University; cultural arbitrary; cultural field.*

“Cultural capital,” or the use of culture as a power resource (Bourdieu 1997: 47–49; Swartz 1997:75), has become one of the most widely adopted concepts from the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. In its “embodied” state, cultural capital consists of personal qualities and competencies, the particular content of which will vary socially and historically, which may be used to secure for the holder social or economic advancement (Bourdieu 1997:47–49). The role of cultural capital in mediating access to social status, and its specific role in mediating access to prestigious educational institutions, has been widely argued (Bourdieu 1996b; Lamont and Lareau 1988), but less attention has been paid to the cultural and institutional processes through which particular cultural qualities become institutionalized as “cultural capital” and come to be seen as legitimate bases of judgment, selection, and exclusion within specific fields (Lareau and Weininger 2003:598). This article, through a study of post-World War II struggles over changes in admissions policies

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at Harvard College, addresses the question of how a new understanding of "merit," comprising a combination of judgments of both academic measures and certain qualities of "character and personality," became an accepted basis for selection and exclusion at elite American universities.

Within American sociology, cultural capital has taken on particular significance within the sociology of culture, as well as in studies of education and social mobility, but much early work in these fields tended to use the concept in a relatively static way. After the translation of *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984), a number of studies in the sociology of culture (e.g., Lamont 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996) tried to evaluate the concept by testing whether the particular qualities identified in that work, particularly facility with high culture, actually functioned as means of judgment and social exclusion in the United States. Studies in the sociology of education similarly tended to operationalize cultural capital as familiarity with high culture, testing the impact of such knowledge and attributes on educational attainment (Lareau and Weininger 2003:567). This article, building on Bourdieu's assertion that the specific content of cultural capital at any given time is "arbitrary" but not random (Swartz 1997:86), works toward a more flexible and robust conception of cultural capital, which should account for the likelihood that the particular cultural qualities that hold value at any given time are culturally, historically, and institutionally specific.

Most studies that acknowledge this arbitrary, and thus malleable, nature of the content of cultural capital highlight the extent to which cultural capital tends to reflect the cultural qualities that characterize the dominant class at any given time, for example, "the capacity of a social class to 'impose' advantageous standards of evaluation on the educational institution" (Lareau and Weininger 2003:567). Although this definition is indeed a significant improvement over static definitions of cultural capital, it "implies a relative lack of independence—a 'heteronomy'—in the relation between the school system and a class (or classes) capable of carrying out such an imposition" (Lareau and Weininger 2003:588) and thus neglects the extent to which Bourdieu's theory suggests that cultural and educational fields are likely to be relatively autonomous—to possess a particular logic that is relatively independent and not simply reflective of the societal-economic order (Bourdieu 1996a; Swartz 1997:206).<sup>1</sup> Consequently, we should expect to find that the process through which certain qualities become institutionalized as cultural capital is one of social and political contention, shaped not only by the interests of a powerful social class but also by interests and relations deriving from within specific fields.

As has been shown by cross-national and historical studies, the particular characteristics valued and highlighted in educational selection can vary greatly. Whereas elite postsecondary institutions in many other countries (notably, France and Japan) base admissions decisions largely on grades and test scores, most elite universities in the United States admit students on the basis of multiple criteria, including extracurricular participation, athletic ability, and personal characteristics. How and why do institutions come to value some particular qualities and not others, be they high test scores, athleticism, "character," or good looks? Why do particular characteristics become significant as axes of selection, and what is the process through which these characteristics (and not others) are given value?

This article shows how a particular valence and value of cultural capital was institutionalized at Harvard College in the mid-twentieth century through a process of internal struggle. This conflict, between advocates, drawn primarily from the faculty, of a more "objective" admissions policy based largely on grades and test scores, and proponents, drawn mostly from the administration and the admissions office itself, of a "multifactor" model of selection, who sought to defend the university from what they saw as a potential excess of meritocracy,<sup>2</sup> resulted in a reformulation not only of Harvard's admissions policies and the role and meaning of personal qualities therein but also of the very meaning of *merit* itself. This article thus focuses on the debates over admissions policies rather than how admissions decisions were actually made in practice, although some data on the nature of admissions decisions in practice have also been incorporated to indicate the extent to which decision making in practice accorded with the themes of the policy debates.

This article is based on an analysis of discussions of admissions policy found in primary documents from the Harvard University archives, most importantly, the annual "Report on the Committee on Admissions and Scholarships" submitted to the university by the admissions office each year. These reports, which in the earlier part of the twentieth century took the form of a simple listing of facts and figures on the numbers of students applying and admitted, had by midcentury morphed into a detailed ideological document. During Wilbur Bender's reign over the admissions office (1952 to 1960) in particular, these annual documents became not only a space to report on the quantity and quality of students admitted but also a place to ruminate on and advocate for particular types of admissions policies. Additional primary data were drawn from articles relating to admissions policies and procedures from the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* and the *Harvard Crimson*, along with special reports such as the 1960 faculty committee report "Admission to Harvard College," statistical reports on admissions compiled by Dean Whitla of Harvard's Office of Instructional Research and Evaluation, and practical documents such as handbooks distributed to alumni interviewers of prospective students and the guide for prospective students, known colloquially as the "Rollo" book. Some additional primary documents I consulted, including records of internal staff communications and correspondence, were not available for direct quotation, but quotations from such documents have been included in cases where excerpts have been released for quotation elsewhere (e.g., Feldman 1988; Karabel 2005). This article also draws on previous studies of Harvard's admissions policies, particularly Feldman (1988), Karabel (1984, 2005), Karen (1985, 1990, 1991), and Synnott (1979).

The sociological relevance of midcentury Harvard as a case study derives from the historical significance of the post-World War II period as a turning point in American higher education<sup>3</sup> and Harvard's location at the vertex of that system. The system of higher education in the United States is highly stratified; it matters not just *that* one attends college but also *which* particular college one attends (Useem and Karabel 1990). Though certainly not representative of institutions of higher education in the United States as a whole, Harvard's position at the top of the status hierarchy of such institutions means that it exerts unparalleled influence

in the field of higher education and over "selective" or elite colleges in particular (DiMaggio and Powell 1991). Significantly, other selective colleges in the United States also developed similar "multifactor" admissions policies incorporating judgments of personal qualities at this time.<sup>4</sup>

Previous work has largely theorized the role of cultural capital in admission to cultural and educational institutions as the outcome of struggles among competing class or status groups (DiMaggio 1982; Manza 1992), although it has also been suggested (Karabel 1984; Karen 1990) that under certain circumstances internal struggles may be just as influential. Some earlier work on the transformation of elite college admissions in the mid-twentieth century has argued that the transformations that occurred during this period can best be understood as the effect of the rise of a professional-managerial class, whose interests are reflected in the university faculty's struggle for a more "meritocratic" admissions policy emphasizing supposedly objective factors such as grades and test scores (Karen 1990). Others have written of the drive for rationalization of the admissions process as a means of coping with increasing numbers of applicants and attendees (Schudson 1972). Although these factors undoubtedly had significant influence, there are also several difficulties with these lines of explanation. The first, and most serious, is that it transposes onto the faculty a set of interests derived from the apparent interests of the class to which they belong outside of the university, supposing that faculty advocated for a greater importance placed on grades and test scores in admissions because their offspring, like that of the professional middle class more generally, tended to do well on these sorts of measures. Although this may have been a contributing factor, this mode of explanation neglects the possibility that faculty advocacy was significantly driven by their perception of their interests as driven by their position within the university. Second, the emphasis on the increasing salience of academic factors draws attention away from the corresponding question of how and why universities were able to resist the rise of academic meritocracy and why nonacademic factors continued to play a key role in admissions. Universities are not unitary actors but are themselves composed of various actors who hold competing ideas about the purpose and identity of the institution, which manifest in different views of the proper admissions policies.<sup>5</sup> This article argues that when elite universities gain a degree of cultural and financial autonomy from economic elites, as occurred in the United States during the course of the twentieth century (Karen 1990:230), we can expect that admissions policies, and the particular qualities emphasized in selection, will be determined, in part, by the outcomes of struggles between these different constituencies within the university.

#### **ADMISSION TO HARVARD: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE, 1900 TO 1965**

Until the early twentieth century, admission to Harvard (as at most of the other elite colleges in the United States) was granted on the basis of passing an entrance exam. Most colleges at this time did not have many more applicants than places (Schudson 1972), and acceptance rates at Harvard were extremely high by current standards (e.g., in 1911, 72 percent of those who applied were accepted, and even

as late as 1951, approximately two thirds of those applying were admitted) (Bender 1954; Hart 1912). Those who graduated from the traditional "feeder" schools (the elite New England prep schools) were virtually assured acceptance (in part because the entrance exam was based on these schools' curricula). This system, although formally meritocratic, tended to attract and select a body of students from a relatively narrow social base.

The first few decades of the twentieth century saw several significant transformations of this system of selection, including changes in admissions criteria driven by an interest in recruiting more public school students and students from a wider geographic base and the insertion of character judgments into the admissions process to curtail the "Jewish problem"<sup>6</sup> of the 1920s (Karabel 1984). Many of the key elements of the admissions policies that would be instituted in the 1950s, including the principle of selection based on multiple factors, including grades, test scores, and letters of recommendation, as well as evaluations of character and personal qualities, were thus already in place in nascent form at this time.

However, it was not until the dramatic rise in applications after World War II that Harvard College first truly encountered a situation in which it had many more qualified applicants than places. This created both an opportunity and a dilemma for the college. As part of the vast expansion of higher education in the United States<sup>7</sup> in the period following World War II, the number of applicants to the college quadrupled between 1940 and 1960. The percentage of those admitted declined from two thirds (66 percent) in 1951 to one fourth (25 percent) in 1964 (Bender 1954; Glimp 1964). The dilemma then became not so much how to determine who was qualified for admission as how to select from among a multitude of academically qualified applicants. Harvard now had much more freedom to choose what types of students it preferred and to select from among different types of qualifications those it deemed most important.

A cursory look at some statistical indicators might seem to indicate that Harvard used this opportunity to transform itself into an academic meritocracy, as conventionally understood—in other words, to base admissions on seemingly objective measures of academic promise, such as grades and test scores. In the decades following World War II, Harvard saw steady increases in the measured academic records of admitted students and a gradual lessening of the privileges traditionally granted to elites, with a corresponding openness to new groups. Median SAT math and verbal scores of admitted students each rose by more than 100 points between 1952 and 1960 (Bender 1960). Prep school graduates and sons of alumni, who had long been the beneficiaries of preferential treatment, found these preferences to be reduced, although not completely eliminated. Although 65 to 70 percent of the graduates of the elite St. Paul's school attended Harvard, Yale, or Princeton in the 1950s, only one third did so in 1967 (*New York Times* 1967). By 1953, public school graduates outnumbered the products of prep schools in the entering class, and by 1965, public school students accounted for 57.7 percent of the entering class (Bender 1953; Glimp 1965). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Harvard's entering classes came to include more Jewish students, more African American students, more scholarship recipients, and more graduates of public high schools than ever before.<sup>8</sup>

Such statistics, coupled with the rise of a discourse of meritocracy<sup>9</sup> during this period, among university administrators as well as in the society at large, have led some observers to characterize the 1950s at Harvard as an era of "meritocracy triumphant," seeing such changes as part of a progress narrative, a sweeping away of old, particularistic methods of selection in favor of objective academic standards.<sup>10</sup> But rather than a straightforward move away from particularistic and toward universalistic modes of selection, admissions policy at this time was rather characterized by a dual movement, characterized by a shift away from some sorts of particularism, such as those explicitly tied to the "old boy network" of prep schools, but simultaneously by a rise in certain sorts of personalism, exemplified by the increasing role of a set of personal characteristics that came to be grouped under the rubric of character and personality. What is truly noteworthy is thus the extent to which the rising tide of academic meritocracy was resisted by Harvard and other elite universities, both in rhetoric and in practice.

This is illustrated by a peculiar finding from a study done at Harvard in the 1960s (Whitla 1965), precisely the time identified by some as the period of meritocracy's greatest ascendance (Riesman 1975), which found that the relative weight of personal evaluations did not decline but actually increased relative to the weight of academic factors in admissions decisions between 1954 and 1964.<sup>11</sup> As part of the evaluation process, applicants were rated (on a scale of one to six, with one the highest) on their personal, academic, extracurricular, and athletic qualities. Between 1960 and 1964, the overall admission rates for those with the highest academic ratings decreased, whereas admission rates for those with the highest personal ratings increased, and for these four years as a whole, applicants with an academic rating of "one" (only 2 percent of the overall pool) had a rejection rate of approximately 14 percent, whereas applicants with the highest personal rating of "one" were rejected only 2.5 percent of the time (whereas 98 percent of applicants with a personal rating of "four" were rejected) (Karabel 2005:288, 292-93).<sup>12</sup> Feldman's (1988) study of the class admitted in 1971 finds that although virtually all of the academic "one"s were admitted, slightly more than half of the academic "two"s were rejected, and more than three quarters of the total class admitted had academic ratings of "three" or below. Furthermore, as Feldman (1988: 102) points out, the academic rating, itself a composite judgment that incorporated subjective judgments such as teachers' letters of recommendation, was more strongly correlated with admission decisions than the "PRL," or Predicted Rank List, score, a numerical score given to each candidate based on grades and test scores alone.

That this trumping of strictly academic measures by factors of "character and personality" was intentional and not accidental is illustrated by statements made by Harvard administrators at the time. Shortly after taking office as Dean of Admissions and Financial Aids in 1952, Wilbur Bender suggested that "brilliant students" should constitute no more than 10 percent of Harvard's student body (Karabel 2005: 254) and that even these should not be accepted if "there is convincing evidence of serious defects of character or personality" (Wilbur J. Bender, "Comprehensive Formal Statement of Harvard College Admission Policy (Confidential)," September 18, 1952, pp. 31-33, as quoted in Karabel 2005:610). The official handbook sent to alumni interviewers the following year echoed this sentiment, stating that applicants,

no matter how well qualified otherwise, should be rejected if interviewers saw "serious weakness of character" or "serious personality problems" (Admission and Scholarship Committee 1953:27). Nonacademic factors were further inscribed into the selection process through the institutional practices of the admissions office. Applicants were divided into a largely geographical<sup>13</sup> "docket" system, and each applicant was evaluated relative to other applicants from the same docket rather than to the applicant pool as a whole. The admissions office also developed a number of "typologies," such as "Krunch" (athlete), "Lineage" (alumni son), and "Mr. School" (all-around type), each corresponding to a particular category of interest (Feldman 1988:228).

As meritocracy became an increasingly potent cultural ideology in the academic sphere and in American society as a whole, elite colleges came to feel increasing pressure from various constituencies, including their own faculties, to institute even greater degrees of academic meritocracy in admissions. Harvard's administrators were ambivalent: although pleased by the rising test scores and grades of entering students, they also worried that these trends represented a potentially grave threat to the college's identity and its elite status based on its position as a top producer of national political and business elites. This placed the leaders of the college in a difficult situation: how could they both endorse meritocracy and also ensure the institution's status?

Harvard's admissions office forged a creative way out of this dilemma. Rather than adopt an admissions policy modeled on the principle of academic meritocracy as generally understood, they crafted a method of selecting students that drew on a complex mixture of different types of measures and legitimated this by skillfully redefining the central concept of "merit" to fit their preferred measures. In the hands of Harvard's postwar admissions office, "character" was transformed from a form of evaluation that valorized traditional Anglo-Saxon virtues such as manliness (Bederman 1995), and that also conveniently served the purpose of providing a rationale for legitimate discrimination against Jewish applicants in the 1920s, into a more modern discourse of "character and personality," which was, at least putatively, universally applicable to all candidates. The dominant purpose of judging personal qualities was no longer a tool for the exclusion of subordinated ethnic groups but part of a method for selecting those who, on the basis of their personal qualities, seemed most likely to go on to achieve success in those fields, such as business and politics, with which Harvard's prominence as an institution had historically been linked. Administrators enacted a more fluid understanding of "merit," seeking to incorporate both academic and nonacademic qualities in this central concept, so as to legitimize their preferred logic of selection.

### SHIFTS AND STRUGGLES OVER SELECTION, 1945 TO 1960

We can see the beginnings of this strategic shift in the meaning of merit in a series of articles published in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* in the years following World War II, which outlined various aspects of Harvard's admissions policy and procedures and can be seen as the first stage in an attempt to reframe understandings of the

role of various factors, academic and nonacademic, in admissions. One of the first of these, "Harvard's Statistical Underground," written by Henry S. Dyer (1946), director of Harvard's Office of Tests, gives a portrait of a hypothetical successful applicant, pointing out that "Bill is a good student, a good athlete, and a generally impressive young man—not just a successful 'grade chaser'" (p. 522), inaugurating what was to become a crucial boundary line throughout this period—that between the well-rounded student and his opposite, the "grade chaser." That same year, "Balance in the College," by Provost Paul Buck (1946), developed in more detail the types of students desired at Harvard and the "proper balance" among these types, expressing concern that Harvard was attracting "the sensitive neurotic boy"; "floppy ducklings"; "bright, precocious, intellectually overstimulated boys"; and "delicate, literary types of boys who don't make the grade socially" at the expense of "ordinary boys" and "the hearty, extrovert kind of American youth which is so much admired by the American public" (p. 405). In a virtual call to arms, Buck asserted that Harvard could indeed transform its image and the sort of students it enrolled "if we set about doing the job with care and patience, with a clear idea of what we want and an equally clear idea of what we don't want" (p. 405).

In other articles in the *Alumni Bulletin*, administrators shared concerns about losing more attractive applicants to the other elite universities with which Harvard competes. Harvard's image was problematic in four regards, wrote Wilbur Bender (then dean of the college and later dean of Admissions and Financial Aids) in 1949: it was perceived as too brainy (a "place only for super-brains"), too snobbish, too radical, and un-athletic (p. 545). Similarly, a 1948 article expresses concern that "conflicting but mutually entertained attitudes of Harvard as a 'brain factory' and a 'nest of snobbery' must be corrected if we are to secure a proper share of students from the south, Mid-West, and West" and suggests that Harvard was losing to other colleges prep school graduates who thought that the college "placed too much emphasis on study and grades" (Buck 1948:317). Such concerns about institutional image fed back on the criteria for evaluation for both admissions and scholarships: as a 1946 article noted, "Once the sine qua non of scholastic competence has been established...the question of individual personality becomes paramount" (von Stade 1946:657).

As the number of applicants grew, Harvard began to develop an infrastructure to enable personal evaluation of geographically remote candidates. Alumni were enlisted into regional "schools committees" to help recruit and evaluate prospective students from their areas, and publications such as the *Alumni Bulletin* and committee handbooks distributed to the local organizations instructed them on what sorts of qualities to look for. The Cincinnati Harvard Club's schools and scholarships committee, organized in 1947, took as its first task "to dispel the idea that Harvard was interested in top students only" (*Harvard Alumni Bulletin* 1948). Subsequently, a representative of this group elaborated on this theme at a meeting of alumni interviewers and representatives of the Harvard administration in Cambridge, reporting that his chapter particularly disliked applicants it called "Quiz Kids," or "greasy grinds," who "worked hard, and they were wizards in the classroom" but were not "worth a lot to the school." Consequently, he said, "Whenever any of these young men are interviewed by the Harvard Club of Cincinnati...

I am not going to recommend them for a scholarship no matter how hard they have worked" ("Meeting of Schools and Scholarship Committee Representatives," November 4–5 1949, as quoted in Karabel 2005:192).

The 1953 handbook sent to alumni recruiters informed them that their screening function consists of "careful evaluation of the human qualities of candidates to help the College select from all candidates those who come closest to meeting its conception of an ideal student body." Furthermore, it continued, "there is some danger in talking about 'strong' candidates and 'outstanding' boys that these adjectives will be interpreted too narrowly to mean only the number one scholars." Alumni were instructed to look for "character, personality, capacity for leadership, maturity, stability, motivation, athletic ability, and background" (Admission and Scholarship Committee 1953:16, 22).

In the years following, the admissions office, led by Wilbur Bender, used the office's annual reports to the college as a platform to develop two main arguments: the first having to do with the relative importance of academic and nonacademic traits and the second having to do with what sorts of nonacademic traits should be valued. As Bender (1954) wrote in his second annual report:

Do we want to go on steadily raising our median scores . . . and presumably the level of academic ability of our entire entering class? . . . Do we want a Harvard student body which has a median SAT score of about 700 with a range from 600 to 800<sup>14</sup> . . . or is our present range of scores and academic ability about right and should our policy be to put greater weight in our selection on intangible non-academic qualities? (P. 238)

Official discourse about admissions policies in the late 1940s and early 1950s can thus be seen as increasingly conscious of academic meritocracy as an ideal but wary of the consequences of its unfettered implementation. There is a focus on the importance of specific nonacademic qualities, including a detailing of specific negative qualities whose occurrence Harvard wished to minimize in its student body.

However, although the admissions office was developing its logic of multifactor selection, the increasing role of personal characteristics in admissions spurred resistance in the form of a countermovement from among the faculty, whose views of Harvard's purpose as an institution, and of the proper methods of selecting students for such an institution, differed significantly from those of the administration. The faculty tended to identify with, and advocate for, a policy of academic meritocracy, pushing for greater influence of grades and test scores in admissions. The different views of faculty and administrators correspond to differing views of the institution as a whole. Many faculty members saw Harvard as a primarily intellectual institution and, correspondingly, argued that it ought to select students on the basis of their intellectual qualities. Administrators, on the other hand, were much more attuned to Harvard's relationships with the outside world. Although not denying that one purpose of the university was to train intellectuals, administrators saw Harvard's primary function as producing national leaders and surmised that selecting students on the basis of academic measurements alone was not the best way to achieve this goal.

This conflict came to a head in 1958, prompted in part by increased Cold War concerns about America's scientific capabilities. Two groups of science faculty, led by physicist Gerald Holton and chemist George Kistiakowsky, argued that Harvard was failing to attract the top students in the nation, particularly in the sciences. Kistiakowsky, who had joined the admissions committee as a faculty representative in 1957, sharply criticized current admissions policies at a 1958 faculty meeting, calling instead for a policy based strictly on SAT scores and class rank (Karabel 2005:264). Bender's 1958 annual report to the president responds to these challenges, characterizing them as a "vigorous attack" from science faculty whose proposal calling for stricter academic prerequisites for admission "ignores the question of the diversity of qualities, interests, and backgrounds needed in the makeup of an optimum Harvard student body,<sup>15</sup> and the question of Harvard's relationship with the country and the democratic process" (p. 25). This conflict led President Nathan Pusey to appoint a special faculty committee, led by Professor Franklin L. Ford, to investigate and report on admissions practices (Feldman 1988:19).

Although the primary division within the university with regard to potential admissions policies was between the faculty and the administration, there were significant divisions within the faculty as well. The report of the faculty committee reflected this by striking a balance between the positions of the admissions staff and the demands of a smaller subset of (mostly science) professors who had demanded a much more radical shift toward an admissions policy based strictly on academic measures. The faculty report, issued in February 1960, starts off with an argument about Harvard's identity as an institution: "the task of every such institution is to bring together the best available teachers into contact with the best available students, under the best obtainable conditions for teaching and learning" (Special Committee on College Admission Policy 1960:1). For the faculty, Harvard College was first and foremost an academic institution, devoted to teaching and learning, whereas from the point of view of the administration, Harvard was an institution devoted to selecting and developing the future leaders of the country. The faculty report asserted that Harvard's central mission and identity was specifically intellectual: "We shall be deluding both ourselves and the public if we fail to recognize clearly and state unequivocally that Harvard's advantages lie, above all, in the realm of the intellect... in making final admission choices, we must opt for intellectual promise" (Special Committee on College Admission Policy 1960: 8-9). Although the faculty report acknowledges that qualities such as "warmth, tenacity, moral courage and practical judgment," may be taken into account, these are definitively construed as secondary to academic measurements (Special Committee on College Admission Policy 1960:9). Additionally, although the faculty committee report acknowledged that personal characteristics might be relevant to admissions decisions, the types of personal characteristics valued by faculty and administrators differed significantly. The faculty report acknowledges the value of personal characteristics in a very general way, focusing on moral and civic virtues rather than the utilitarian value of personal qualities as a predictor of future worldly success. In contrast, the rhetoric of the administrators specifically stressed personal characteristics considered predictive of future worldly success. For the faculty, the central constituency of Harvard was "the truly brilliant members of American

society," while nonintellectuals are conceived as a mere byproduct: "we can also give society a worthy supply of capable, alert and open-minded citizens" (Special Committee on College Admission Policy 1960:11).

Dean Bender's final report, issued in 1960, responds further to this faculty challenge and presents a final formulation of his vision of Harvard and its admissions process. Bender notes the extent to which academic meritocracy has made inroads at Harvard, highlighting three main changes during this period "which can be measured numerically": the increased percentage of public school graduates in the entering class, increased geographic diversity and decreased number of commuters, and a rise in "the apparent level of academic ability of the Harvard student body as measured by our only objective indices" (pp. 6–7). As a vivid demonstration of this latter change, "the median student in the Class of 1964 would have stood at about the 90th percentile of the Class of 1956 as measured by SAT and PRL scores" (Bender 1960:8). However, Bender reiterates that change must be tempered by awareness of Harvard's "peculiar mixture of 'gentlemen and scholars'" (p. 18) if it was to retain its position of preeminence. Harvard's "institutional strength and character must be maintained or it will lose its ability to serve the national interest effectively" (Bender 1960:18).

As shown by the admissions data discussed above, the outcome of this conflict was a policy in which academic measures were highly significant but never to the exclusion of judgments of personal qualities. The admissions committee, seeking a way to counter the rising tide of academic meritocracy, found "character and personality" to be an ideal rhetoric for justifying its choices, while the use of non-academic factors was formally institutionalized in the form of the personal evaluation and through the use of standardized typologies to categorize applicants. Particularly as simple preferences for the sons of traditional elites came to be both less effective in predicting future leadership and less socially acceptable than they had been in the past, the discourse of "character and personality" became valuable for two key reasons. First, such judgments of character and personality, as detailed above, could further the admissions committee's attempt to rationally select those applicants who appeared likely to be among the future elites in business and politics. Furthermore, however, "character and personality" was useful because judgments of this sort could be aligned with the rhetoric of merit, which was becoming the dominant legitimation for selection. In other words, one thing that made "character and personality" so especially useful for the admissions office was that it provided them a way to counter the challenge/threat of academic meritocracy yet also allowing them to claim to speak from within the discourse of merit themselves. Crucial to their success was that "merit" turned out to be a relatively flexible concept, open to successful reinterpretation.<sup>16</sup>

#### **DISCUSSION: THE MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF "CHARACTER AND PERSONALITY"**

In the previous sections, this article has established the historical process through which nonacademic factors, known rhetorically as "character and personality," were firmly established as part of Harvard's contemporary admissions policies

and practices. This analysis thus functions as a case study detailing how specific cultural ideals, in the form of positive and negative values attributed to personal characteristics, were institutionalized as a part of the admissions process at elite American universities. The question that remains to be answered, however, is why these particular nonacademic characteristics were so significant. The answer can be discerned through an analysis of the specific meanings attached to the particular characteristics composing this broader term of "character and personality."

Several rhetorical strategies and opposed sets of archetypes recur in the administrators' discourse on character and personality. Analysis of the substantive content of the discourse of "character and personality" suggests that this discourse operated on multiple levels, including attempts at rational selection of applicants most likely to achieve worldly success as future elites in the business and political spheres, a serious desire to distinguish those applicants who were most academically promising, and a desire to select applicants with certain characteristics of character and personality that were as valuable in and of themselves. At all of these levels, moreover, the specific valued and disvalued characteristics partake of larger cultural meanings shaped by social relations of class, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

### **An "Army of Future Ph.D.s": Stigmatizing "Grade Chasers"**

The admissions office viewed the steady rise in test scores of Harvard's student body throughout the 1950s with a degree of dismay. First, they expressed concern that grades and test scores were deceptive or inaccurate measures of academic promise:

High test scores and top class ranking in secondary school are not the only or indeed very reliable evidence of real quality. (Bender 1955:41)

A deliberate policy of one-factor selection might produce, in fact, simply a high level of dull, competent, safe academic mediocrity, an army of future Ph.D.s. (Bender 1960:23)

In other words, either Harvard's admissions office doubted the reliability of grades and test scores as measures of academic promise or they had something apart from academic merit in mind when they spoke of "real quality."

Second, administrators raised concerns that impressive grades and test scores may have been obtained at the expense of desirable qualities of character and personality. The admissions committee expressed fears that academic achievement might be linked to poor character, neuroticism, conformity, and effeminacy, among other detrimental qualities:

The student who ranks first in his class...may be a compulsive worker...or self-centered careerist...he may have focused narrowly on grade-getting as compensation for his inadequacies in other areas...or lacks passion and warmth or normal healthy instincts or is afraid of life...unstable or unattractive or physically uncoordinated or have a bad character or a high feminine component. (Bender 1960:22, 31-32)

What seems to have been occurring in the administrators' language of judgment was an attempt toward the bifurcation of judgments of merit. It appears that Harvard's decision makers were dubious about the use of grades and test scores as measures of merit, first because they were concerned not only with probable future academic success but even more so with potential for worldly success. Admitting Harvard's entire class on the basis of academic measurements (however determined) risked turning Harvard into the production line for the feared "army of future Ph.D.s." The answer to this quandary was to limit the number of students accepted purely on their academic merits, hence ensuring that this pool was limited to only the absolute "top" students and leaving room in the class for students with other sorts of desirable (nonacademic) qualities. The admissions committee categorized applicants into doers (primarily those who would go into business and politics) and thinkers (intellectuals, scientists, and academics). The expanding role of character and personality at Harvard can be seen as part of a strategy to maintain the institution's status and identity as a producer of not only intellectuals but also "leaders." These sorts of oppositions were used explicitly to argue against an admissions policy based solely on academic factors, as when Dean Bender (1960) asked "whether the two preceding Harvard graduates in the White House, F.D.R. and T.R., would be admitted to or would want to attend an academically elite Harvard" (p. 28).

Furthermore, however, we can also see that even when selecting among those applicants whose main attraction was their academic prowess, the admissions committee thought it necessary to temper "objective" measures such as grades and test scores with a fuller personal portrait of the applicant. The negative characterization of "grade chasers" illustrates an alignment between Harvard administrators' logic of evaluation and one underlying aspect of the logic of cultural capital as discussed by Bourdieu. Characterizations of high achievers as dull, competent, conformist, and narrow or as unbalanced and overly focused on grades point to the extent to which administrators were concerned with not simply an opposition of "thinkers" and "doers" but also the degree to which, in selecting among the "thinkers," administrators were overwhelmingly more focused on students' dispositions toward academic work rather than measurable academic achievements alone. A concrete indicator of the effects of this distinction is suggested in Feldman's (1988) finding, noted above, that the admissions office's numerical academic rating of candidates, which incorporated both qualitative and quantitative factors, exerted greater influence on decisions than did the "PRL," which incorporated grades and test scores alone.

Substantively, the administrators' discussions of desirable and undesirable academic qualities resonate with Bourdieu's discussion of class-based habitus.<sup>17</sup> Although the value assigned to particular cultural qualities is always culturally and historically specific, we can observe some parallels between the particular mode of academic engagement valued by Harvard's administrators, which valued true passion and interest in learning for its own sake, and devalued "grade-grubbers" and those who sought academic achievement to compensate for some exterior or interior deficiency, including the implied insecurities stemming from social mobility, and what Bourdieu (1984) calls the "aesthetic disposition," which

stems from a “distance from necessity” in the upper classes’ mode of interacting with the world (p. 54). Similarly, the administrators’ negative judgment of those who are seen to be “trying too hard” both echoes specific cultural ideals from earlier American discourses of gentlemanly character and anti-Semitism<sup>18</sup> and resonates with Bourdieu’s (1984) statement that:

It is no accident that the opposition between the ‘scholastic’ (or ‘pedantic’) and the *mondain*, the effortlessly elegant, is at the heart of debates over taste and culture in every age: behind two ways of producing or appreciating cultural works, it very clearly designates two contrasting modes of acquisition, and, in the modern period at least, two different relationships to the educational system. (P. 69)

Furthermore, the anxiety of Harvard’s administrators over a potential “army of future Ph.D.s” reflects a dilemma predicted in Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu 1996b: 164) theory that education, specifically as a social institution, and educational capital, as a means of advancement, are particularly attractive to those from the relatively dominated and stigmatized sectors of society, it is not unexpected that these relatively unattractive (from Harvard’s point of view) types would be disproportionately attracted to the foremost educational institution in the nation. Hence, Harvard’s administrators were faced with a dual problem. Fears about an “army of future Ph.D.s” were not only about the relative temporal power and influence of future Ph.D.s as opposed to future CEOs but also about the sorts of people who were likely to constitute this “army” to begin with: precisely those likely to be marked as personally or demographically unattractive according to the discourse of character and personality.

***“Pansies,” “Floppy Ducklings,” and “Ordinary Boys”:  
Monitoring Masculinity***

In contrast to the numerous concerns expressed by Harvard’s decision makers about academic overachievers, a consistently positive characterization centers around the theme of the “ordinary boy.” Although this trope was to a certain extent a device used to legitimize the continuation of preferential admissions for applicants from special backgrounds, such as sons of alumni, it also provided a handy foil to illustrate the sorts of qualities Harvard did not wish to attract. A 1946 article in the alumni bulletin expresses a desire for “a larger share of the hearty, extrovert kind of American youth” (Buck 1946:405), and Wilbur Bender (1949) discussed fears that Harvard projected an image in which “the healthy, normal, well-rounded American boy is unwelcome” (p. 545). Praise for “ordinary boys” also acted as a counterpoint to concerns about Harvard’s institutional identity tied to masculinity.

A persistent theme in Harvard administrators’ discourse on character and personality has to do with cultural ideals relating to gender qualities, particularly masculinity. A 1946 article in the Harvard Alumni Bulletin expresses concern over “the sensitive neurotic boy,” “floppy ducklings,” and “delicate, literary types of boys who don’t make the grade socially” (Buck 1946). Dean Bender’s reports are full of references to the dangers of effeminates, neurotics, and weaklings,

as well as more or less coded references to homosexuality (e.g., in Bender 1960), which was also seen as intrinsically linked to poor character. A particular and striking component of the character discourse relating to masculinity was Harvard's antipathy to homosexuals. Wilbur Bender had early on declared his fear that Harvard was admitting "pansies and poets and serious la-de-da types" instead of "virile, masculine, red-blooded he-men" (Bender, Wilbur J. "Speech to Class of '27," May 3, 1947, as quoted in Karabel 2005:253), and he later specifically included "heterosexuality" in a list of desired traits ("Confidential Memo by Wilbur J. Bender to the Committee on Admission and Scholarships," November 17, 1958, as quoted in Karabel 2005:267).

But why was masculinity such an important theme? Harvard College accepted only male students until the midseventies.<sup>19</sup> It seems counterintuitive that an all-male institution should exert such energy regulating its students' gender qualities. There are two factors that may contribute to an understanding of why judgments of masculinity were such a constant concern in the admissions office. First, masculinity, including athletic ability, was part of the complex of personal traits through which admissions officers evaluated an individual applicant's potential for leadership.<sup>20</sup> Homosexuality was also particularly salient in this context because of its cultural association with weakness of character, especially in the context of the McCarthy-era linkages between communism and homosexuality (D'Emilio 1989; Epstein 1994; Johnson 2004). Harvard's reputation as a "nest of communists" (Bender 1949) may have made it even more susceptible to this association than other schools that lacked Harvard's reputation for radicalism. Second, Harvard's institutional reputation was significantly more intellectual, and less athletic, than many of the other elite schools that constituted its "organizational field" and with which it competed for students and status.

A convincing institutional display of the correct sort of masculinity may have been perceived as necessary for Harvard to maintain its position of authority (Connell 1995). This is supported by a striking contrast between the admissions policies of Harvard and Radcliffe: character and personality never held the degree of importance in Radcliffe's admissions policies that they did at its brother institution. Radcliffe was closer to the meritocratic ideal than Harvard in its admissions, relying more on grades and test scores and less on judgments of individual traits, perhaps because it was not conceived of as selecting women for positions of national leadership (Karen 1985). This focus on masculinity demonstrates that selecting and producing leaders, the overwhelming concern of Harvard administrators, was enacted through a gendered understanding of who these leaders were likely to be. The qualities of leadership themselves are highly entangled with gendered understandings of personal characteristics.

## CONCLUSION

Although this analysis thus shows that the "content" of institutionalized cultural capital as it was incorporated into Harvard's admissions policies does to some extent reflect the qualities of the upper class, this alignment was achieved not

through a simple process of reflection but through a specific institutional history, enabled by the increased relative autonomy of the university field from the economic field at mid-twentieth century.

These developments at Harvard were not unique; it has been shown that other elite schools became similarly attentive to personal qualities during this time (Cookson and Persell 1985),<sup>21</sup> and the significance attributed to personal factors in the mid-twentieth century continues to be an important part of Harvard's admissions process to this day (e.g., Chung 2000). The transformation of admissions policy at Harvard in the mid-twentieth century was at the leading edge of a trend that has had long-lasting effects for the field of selective higher education in the United States as a whole. In contrast to a number of other countries' elite universities, selective colleges in the United States are likely to use a holistic logic of selection, considering multiple academic and personal factors in their evaluation of applicants (Fetter 1995; Hearn 1991; Hernandez 1997; Karen 1991; Paul 1995).

This case study, I have argued, can help provide insight into a more general theoretical question, that of the how particular qualities come to have value in the form of cultural capital. A central finding of this article is thus that cultural capital is not best understood as simply a direct reflection of the qualities most valued/possessed by the upper class, because there is a (historically contingent) degree of autonomy in particular fields, which may also allow the interests and positions of actors within the field to exert control over the "cultural arbitrary." At the same time, however, the influence of class on admissions criteria remains significant, first because the very content of "character and personality" derives (indirectly) from an earlier, more strictly class-based understanding of which qualities should be so valued and second because universities as organizations retain strong incentives to shape their identities in ways that will allow them to continue to attract and produce members of society's economic and political elites.

Rather than seeing struggles over admissions criteria as a proxy for or directly representing class interests, my research complicates this picture by adding to the mechanism through which cultural capital takes shape a process in which actors agitate for particular logics of selection based on their positions and interests within the specific field of the elite university. Thus, as Bourdieu argues, the content of cultural capital is arbitrary but not random. Insofar as elite educational institutions have a degree of relative autonomy from the larger class structure in which they are embedded, such institutions are able to independently craft the content of the sorts of criteria that hold value as "capital" in their processes of selection and evaluation. Finally, this case suggests that cultural capital is not only shaped by the qualities valued by/associated with the dominant economic class and by the interests of actors within cultural/educational fields, but it is also molded by other social relations of power and inequality, including gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and religion.

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## NOTES

1. Cultural fields may be taxonomized as more or less autonomous. As this article argues, the increase in the relative autonomy of the field of elite universities in the United States in the mid-twentieth century was one precondition of the changes discussed herein.
2. I will use *meritocracy* and *academic meritocracy* in this article to refer to a logic of selection based primarily on seemingly objective academic indicators, such as grades and test scores. As many have argued, a system of selection that is "meritocratic" in this sense should not be seen as socially neutral, as it also favors particular forms of cultural capital more likely to be held by those from privileged backgrounds. The developments analyzed in this article should thus be seen not as a struggle between objective and socially biased methods of selection but rather as analyzing how particular logics of selection and particular types of capital became institutionalized.
3. Total U.S. enrollment in higher education expanded tremendously over the course of the twentieth century: total enrollment figures were 237,592 in 1899–1900; 1,494,203 in 1939–1940; 2,659,021 in 1949–1950; 3,639,847 in 1959–1960; and 8,004,660 in 1969–1970 (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2002).
4. For example, Karen (1991:354) cites research from the College Entrance Examination Board (Willingham and Breland 1982) finding that "personal qualities" played a role that was, on average, one quarter as significant as academic qualities in a sample of nine colleges. Significantly, however, at the highly elite Williams College, academic and personal qualities were found to be equally important.
5. Farnum (1997) introduces the importance of differences in perceptions of interest and identity in comparing universities but does not address the extent to which such institutional interests and identities may be shaped through a process of struggle between actors within each institution.
6. The "Jewish problem" was, in short, that too many Jews were being admitted, which was seen as making Harvard less attractive to the sons of the elite. Evaluations of applicants' character were first formally incorporated into the admissions process at this time; this functioned in effect as a veiled quota system, as it was considered obvious that most Jewish applicants had less attractive qualities of character than the typical graduate of an elite New England prep school (Karavel 1984).
7. Michael Schudson (1972:56) provides some numbers that suggest the extent of this national transformation: whereas 25,680 high school seniors took exams administered by the College Board in 1945 and 65,352 in 1950, by 1960 the number was 400,000, and by 1970 1 million.
8. Despite these advances, however, traditional forms of privilege remained remarkably significant throughout this period. Admissions were not yet need blind, and financial aid was not guaranteed for all who required it. Black students still made up only twenty places in the class of 1964, alumni sons still garnered significant advantage in admissions decisions, and women were not admitted to Harvard at all, only to its sister Radcliffe, and there in greatly lesser numbers.

9. On the rise of meritocracy, see Jencks and Riesman (1968), Lemann (1999), Riesman (1975), and Young (1958).
10. The term *meritocracy triumphant* is from Riesman (1975). Also see Brooks (2000) for a more recent example of this view.
11. Whitla's explanation for this finding was that the later applicant pools were both larger and had more impressive academic credentials as a whole; thus, there was less variation in academic measures between the students, making this a variable with less explanatory power over decisions as a whole. However, this should not obscure the larger point that personal factors continued to play a substantial role in admissions decisions throughout this time period. Feldman (1988:108) extends Whitla's calculations and finds that the relative weight of academic and personal factors leveled off in 1971 to figures close to those seen in 1960, a rate at which personal ratings still explained a greater degree of variation in admissions decisions than did academic ratings. (I thank an anonymous reviewer for clarification on this point.)
12. Karabel's statistics here are drawn from data compiled by the Harvard admissions office: Office of Admission, "Comparative Summaries of Pre-Admission Ratings, Classes of '64, '66, '67, '68" n.d. [circa 1965].
13. Although most dockets appeared roughly geographical, a number of elite New England prep schools received their own category, and public and private schools in much of the Northeast were considered separately (Feldman 1988:224–25).
14. In 1954, the median SAT score at Harvard was 615 verbal and 598 math. By the end of Bender's term as director of admissions, in 1960, median scores had very nearly reached the 700 mark he suggests (679 verbal and 695 math).
15. Here, as in other places, administrators use the language of "diversity," which in the present day has come to be associated primarily with affirmative action and other policies aimed at ensuring diversity of race and ethnicity. However, in this context, "diversity" primarily refers to diversity of interests and personal qualities, without specific regard to race. (Affirmative action did not begin at Harvard until 1968 and is thus beyond the scope of this article.)
16. Recent work in the sociology of culture (e.g., Swidler 2001:13) has suggested the importance of paying attention to the polysemy, or flexibility, of cultural symbols and concepts.
17. Some concrete evidence of the extent to which personal evaluations were class linked in practice is given by Feldman (1988), who writes that the admissions committee "still evidently preferred the personal qualities of private school graduates to those of public school students of equal ability. The strong handshake and direct gaze, the gentlemanly bearing, and the access to money and power—all are characteristics of private school applicants which are viewed as beneficial to Harvard by the admissions committee" (p. 70; see also p. 120). Feldman provides evidence that private school applicants did in fact attain higher personal ratings than applicants from public schools.
18. Given the original purpose of character evaluations at Harvard, we might ask to what extent the postwar content of "character and personality" was still inflected with anti-Semitism. Karabel (2005:180, 258, 593–94) suggests that anti-Jewish quotas were still in effect as late as 1942 and that although overt discrimination appears to have halted by the end of 1940s, more subtle forms of discrimination may have persisted through the 1950s. Although administrators publicly disavowed racial and religious prejudice after World War II, the cultural standards on which evaluations of personal qualities were developed clearly derive some meaning from the earlier anti-Semitic discourse, even if slurs such as "grade chasers" and "greasy grinds" were scrubbed of their overtly ethnic associations.

19. Women could attend Radcliffe College, which had a separate admissions process not discussed in this article.
20. For an extended discussion of the importance of athletics in the admissions process and the perceived connections between athletic ability and leadership, see Shulman and Bowen (2001:183–86).
21. For an illustration of similar developments at Yale and Princeton, see Buck (1950).

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