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Source-Based Argument

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Is it Meritocracy or Aristocracy?

Having gone to under-resourced schools in China and the US, I felt extremely lucky in getting accepted into Stanford University when nobody from my elementary school in China could ever dream about getting into a so-called elite college, and the majority of my classmates from my first high school in the US are going to community colleges. Imposter syndrome kicked in as soon as I joined my first Stanford group chat. I got so scared to be caught as a fraud. I'm just the same as any of my peers from high school. And in no way do I deserve this spot.

So I questioned: if I don't deserve it, who does?

I began to talk to other Chinese students who got in to figure this out. I came out of the conversations feeling envious—they all seem quite well-off and have gone to either the most prestigious schools in China or one of the highest-ranked private schools in the US. Most importantly, it seems like all their friends are going to top-tier colleges like Stanford and Ivy League.

That is the kind of students the elite higher-ed institutions want, I thought to myself, the students who are from the higher end of the socioeconomic ladder.

The American dream—the belief that anyone has the opportunity to succeed through hard work and determination, regardless of what class they were born into—is widely believed by Americans and new immigrants. Although, when compared to the rest of the world, people do have a better chance of experiencing social mobility upward in the so-called land of opportunity,

the romanticized American dream created a delusion that everyone was born with equal opportunities and that the education system is a pure meritocracy. In other words, getting admitted into elite universities with a single-digit acceptance rate resulted from students' academic excellence. However, that's not the case when 66% of Stanford students come from the top 20% of family income and only 4% come from the bottom 20%. The statistics are similar among other elite colleges (Jaschik 1). Admissions to elite higher education have become an aristocracy in which students from high socioeconomic families utilize their wealth and connections to gain legal or illegal competitive advantages in getting in.

Historically, class division in education started when the dual-track system was created when Puritans first settled in Plymouth in 1620. In the article *Wealth, Legacy and College Admission*, Ornstein suggests that the children of the community were supposed to attend town school and learn reading, writing, spelling, and religious passages. On the other hand, the boy children of upper-class families were attending Latin grammar schools, which prepared the students for Harvard and Yale and advanced education in ministry, law, and medicine. Ornstein argues, "Harvard's and Yale's original mission was to further religious purposes; nonetheless, they quickly became institutions for educating the children of wealthy parents in order to preserve their privilege, rank, and station in life." Like its original purpose of creation, elite institutions continued accepting and educating the children of the elite class.

Today, high socioeconomic families provide their children a better chance to excel academically prior to college admission. In Hernandez's book, *A Is for Admission: The Insider's Guide to Getting into the Ivy League and Other Top Colleges*, he points out, "For many, the mad scramble to get into the Ivy League starts in infancy, with an utterly mad scramble to get into the right nursery school" (Hernandez 28). The competition of getting into Ivy League schools begins

in the womb for many children from upper-class families. “Highly affluent parents jostle and plead to get their children into exclusive, private schools (at \$20,000 to \$40,000 a year for tuition) to position their children for the race to Harvard and Yale, and other elite colleges” (Ornstein 335). The parents sign up for expensive piano, violin, tennis, golf, coding, Mandarin classes and hire experts in the field for their children at young ages to prepare to stand out in college admission 15 years earlier. Not to mention the prep courses and private tutoring, growing up with easy access to great schools, expert teachers, and other top-notch educational resources, these students statistically score higher on SAT than their peers from low-income families. Needless to say, not having to worry about putting food on the table, the wealthy students have the privileges to have the time, money, resource, knowledge, support, and connections to achieve academic excellence and develop a “passion” that elite colleges are looking for.

When it comes to the college application process, the wealthy has even more ways to “game the system,” “bend the rules,” and “break the rules” (Hanson). Most high schools in America have counselors who guide the students and their families throughout the college application process. However, in public schools, one counselor helps hundreds of students in an application season. The individualized attention distributed to each student is the bare minimum, thus, creating the billion-dollar private college admission counseling industry. In 2005, a three-and-one-half-day workshop cost \$9,999. In 2018, a service charged \$1.5 million to complete applications to 22 colleges (Jaschik 1). The admission consultants who call themselves former admission officers at elite institutions have all the insights on applying and getting accepted. However, the fee of such services makes it only accessible to the rich.

Legacy applicants also have a considerable advantage. Elite colleges accept the children of alumni “as a means for increasing alumni donations”(Ornstein 338). 15% to 40% of Ivy

League students are legacy applicants in the past 20 years. In 2019, legacy students made up 36% of Harvard's accepted applicants (Ornstein 338). Hanson, a Stanford graduate who coaches students on SAT and ACT and helps students get accepted into top colleges, says in her YouTube Video, *Corruption in College Admissions: An Insider's Take. How the Wealthy Game the System*, that well-connected parent's landing fluff internships, calling friends on the school's trustee to get in-person interviews instead of alumni interviews, giving huge institutional donations, getting extra time on SAT and ACT, and having the essays written by professionals (Hanson). Through both legal or illegal ways, the wealthy knows how to play the game of college admission with their privileges, even if it involves breaking, changing, or inventing new rules.

Education is a human right, which includes access to top-quality education from "elite" universities. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares that "everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit" (UN). Sadly, in our society, higher education is not equally accessible to all, and it's definitely not based on merit. The wealthy utilize their power and money to get their children accepted into elite universities in order to ensure generational class status, causing the class divide to widen and perpetuate inequalities.

So, how do we create a fair education system that provides equity among race, gender, and socioeconomic levels? Well, I have no idea. But the first step in coming up with any solution is always realizing the issues. In the book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell argues that while hard work and talents are necessary for success, privileged social standing and other early advantages are the foundations before everything. Realizing the century-old social

issue, the privileged ones should recognize their privileges. The less privileged ones will stop blaming themselves for not working hard enough to get in and stop feeling like an imposter when they do deserve the spot. It is not a mere meritocracy.

Works Cited

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What choices did you make in revising your piece? What did you focus on? Why? How did feedback (from peers, from the instructor, from a Hume tutor) contribute to your research plan? What do you want me to particularly notice about your revision? You should include this reflection as a comment to your uploaded revision or as a clearly marked separate upload.

I integrated the Op-Ed I wrote in week two into the first draft of this source-based argument. After talking to Irena, I realized that, although I analyzed and used lots of evidence and sources from other research, articles, and even YouTube videos, there wasn't a clear message throughout the essay. Even though I pointed out the thesis that wealthy people can use their power and money to gain unfair competitive advantages in getting into an elite school. I did not clearly indicate the significance of it, which is that "The less privileged ones will stop blaming themselves for not working hard enough to get in and stop feeling like an imposter when they do deserve the spot" and that knowing the problem is the first step in solving the problem. I also split the original fourth paragraph into two simply because it is too long as a paragraph. It ended up having one paragraph about the counseling service and another about legacy advantages and other illegal ways of getting in. I also made the conclusion paragraph into two. One focused on the conclusion part and another on the significance of the conclusion. I added the personal story and feelings from my Op-Ed prior to my original introduction paragraph, because I feel like opening up an essay with personal

feelings would make a better hook in a source/research based essay. And that readers have a higher chance in connecting with my essay.