

Slumdog Ivy Leaguer

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Keynote Speech

Thank you very much. I'm delighted to be here at Wake Forest. I must confess that I'm a bit daunted speaking to an audience that contains so many people who know more about my topic than I do, but I've never let that stop me before, so here goes.

Many of you, I trust, saw this year's Oscar-winning movie, "Slumdog Millionaire." It concerns a homeless, motherless, destitute youth named Jamal from a Bombay ghetto who overcomes numerous hurdles to become the unlikeliest winner of India's version of the game show, "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?"

Among those obstacles: Hardly anyone from Jamal's social class even competes as a contestant on the show. The program's host pretends to be his friend but actually doesn't want him to win. The questions—such as, "Who's on the face of the US \$100 bill"—have a built-in moneyed, upper class bias. And when Jamal, baffled by one question, opts to "phone a friend," he lacks the usual array of knowledgeable mentors; instead he has to turn to an uneducated – though gorgeous – ex-girlfriend.

As I watched, a sequel began running through my head. Call it "Slumdog Ivy Leaguer." In this imaginary flick, a low-income student in the U.S. – let's make it a young woman this time, Jamie – from a public inner-city high school wants to attend a top private university. Bright and hardworking, she yearns to soak up knowledge from academia's best minds and fulfill her intellectual potential. But her dream seems almost as far-fetched as Jamal's game-show fantasy, and blocked by similar barriers. Few of her classmates have such lofty aspirations; few high-ranking universities recruit at her low-performing high school; and her over-burdened guidance counselor scoffs at her hopes and tries to steer her to a community college.

Just as the host of “Who Wants to be a Millionaire” feigns friendship with Jamal, so admissions officials at the top colleges encourage Jamie. But they don't tell her that they want to boost application numbers to make their schools look even more selective – or that many of the slots in the freshman class are spoken for, reserved for the children of alumni and donors, and for athletes who play upper-crust sports never offered at her humble high school. Like Jamal, Jamie is barraged with questions – on standardized tests, in alumni interviews – that presuppose a cultural and family background far more privileged than her own. And, again like Jamal, she can't “phone a friend” – the analogy, in her case, being to hire a tutor, a test-prep service, or private college counselor.

Now I'll concede that my movie premise is susceptible to some of the same criticisms that reviewers leveled at “Slumdog Millionaire.” It's exaggerated, a bit of a caricature, a tad old-fashioned. Elite colleges actually are making some progress toward economic diversity. They're trying harder to find promising low-income students. They're dropping early-decision programs that deny applicants the ability to shop around for the best financial aid deal. Or, like our hosts at Wake Forest, they offer applicants the option not to take the SAT, on which scores correlate closely with income.

Still, it's indisputable that students from rich families and private schools are over-represented at America's top universities. Low-income students remain almost as scarce on these campuses as college presidents who earn less than half a million bucks a year or professors who give “D's” and “F's.” In fact, the Chronicle of Higher Education reported last year that the percentage of students at elite colleges receiving Pell grants – the financial aid program for the neediest students—is actually declining.

In my view, the recent reforms don't disturb the fundamental building blocks of an inequitable system -- the whole array of admissions preferences that favor the rich, powerful and famous. Although colleges enjoy non-profit, tax-free status because they're presumed to serve a social purpose -- namely, educating the best students of all backgrounds -- these “preferences of privilege” serve a

different master: fundraising. As I documented in my book, "The Price of Admission," more applicants receive special consideration under the "preferences of privilege" than under affirmative action, and in some cases the admissions break is as big or bigger than the advantage affirmative action confers. At schools that only admit one in ten or one in eight of their applicants, and are the gateway to power and influence in our society, affluent but second-rate students regularly get in ahead of candidates with greater intellectual ability or artistic aptitude. These colleges, most of which haven't increased their student body size significantly in years, seek donations by reserving slots for children of privilege while turning away outstanding middle-class and working class applicants. As Notre Dame's admissions dean told me, "The poor schmuck who has to get in on his own has to walk on water."

The best-known and most widespread of the preferences of privilege is the boost for alumni children. Some of the following material on legacy preference, by the way, comes from a chapter I'm writing for a forthcoming book to be published by the Century Foundation.

Except for a few private universities in Japan, the United States is the only country where colleges formally favor alumni offspring. Only in America! Here, legacy preference is almost universal among private colleges, and widespread even at flagship public universities. At most top colleges, 10% to 25% of students are legacies, and they are admitted at two to four times the rate of non-legacies. Brown University, for instance, admitted 33.5% of legacy applicants for the class of 2010, almost three times its overall acceptance rate of 13.8%.

A recent study of legacies at one elite university found that as a group they're more likely than their classmates to be white, Protestant, and have attended prep schools. They're also wealthier, with an average family income of \$240,000 a year. Yet, despite their affluent backgrounds, alumni children frequently enjoy tuition discounts. At the University of Arkansas this year, 185 children of out-of-state alumni received legacy scholarships reducing their tuition to the in-state rate, about \$9,000 a year lower. That translates into a loss of \$1.7 million in university revenue that could have funded scholarships for low-income

students.

College officials often defend legacy preference on the grounds that it's valuable to maintaining tradition. That's at most a half-truth, concealing the profit motive. In the early 1990's, one study of Harvard admissions showed that if an alumni child who applied needed financial aid, the legacy boost disappeared almost entirely. The implication was that if an alumnus couldn't earn enough to pay his child's tuition, Harvard wasn't going to make the same mistake twice.

As admissions rates at top colleges have declined for all students, including alumni children, the economic motive behind legacy preference has become increasingly transparent. Legacies have in effect been divided into two groups. The children of graduates who are also big donors or celebrities or politicians enjoy as much of an edge as ever. And then there's everybody else. One high-ranking development official at a top university told me recently that, because the cost of educating a student is one and a half times tuition, alumni who don't donate shouldn't expect admissions preference for their children. "Just because you drank at a trough that others filled does not entitle your child to drink at the same trough," this official told me recently. "There are trough-fillers and there are just drinkers. Those two people are treated differently."

Even as colleges rely on legacy preference as a fundraising tool, the idea that this preference is indispensable to alumni giving is becoming increasingly dubious. Several fine schools, such as Cal Tech, admit students purely on merit, and don't favor alumni children, and yet still raise plenty of money, partly through creative approaches to fundraising. For instance, Gordon Moore, the co-founder of Intel Corp., who earned his Phd. at Caltech, gave \$600 million to the institute, in tribute to what he calls its "fantastic intellectual climate." Mr. Moore's two sons didn't go there, but he received a different reward: Caltech named an asteroid after him.

Several selective public universities that have dropped legacy preference in recent years have seen no adverse effect on fundraising. Since Texas A&M eliminated legacy preference in 2004 under pressure from civil rights groups, it has successfully completed a \$1.5 billion campaign, and gifts to its foundation almost doubled from \$62 million in

2004 to \$114 million in 2007.

One secret to Texas A&M's fundraising success was the ability of its administrators to explain to worried alumni why they jettisoned legacy preference. Robert Gates, then president of Texas A&M and now US secretary of defense, told one alumni audience about his own family, how hard he and his forebears in Kansas had worked for their own college educations. "Texas A&M was built by men who had rough hands," Gates said. One person who attended the speech told me there were tears in the audience, and alumni gave him a standing ovation. They understood and appreciated Gates' message-- that Texas A&M aspired to be elite, but not elitist.

The second preference of privilege doesn't even have the excuse of tradition. It's known as development preference -- for students recommended by the development, or fundraising office, because their non-alumni parents or relatives are considered in a position to help the institution with money or visibility. These parents may be corporate tycoons, Hollywood celebrities, or politicians in a position to provide earmarked funding. This preference can be equivalent to hundreds of SAT points or a full point on the four-point grading scale, depending on the importance of the family.

The family of Texas oil billionaire Robert Bass is a classic example of development preference. Of his four children, two went to Stanford, one to Harvard and one to Duke, while these same institutions rejected academically stronger classmates. Mr. Bass, a Stanford trustee, has given each of those universities at least \$10 million -- in Stanford's case, \$50 million.

Incidentally, the Nixon administration, notorious for ethical transgressions, wasn't above muscling universities for development admits. Nixon's chief counsel, Charles W. Colson, who later served time for obstruction of justice, called Princeton directly from the White House to advocate for his son, Wendell. After Wendell enrolled, Chuck Colson drove to Princeton in September, 1972, to visit the freshman on his first weekend there. He reported back to President Nixon, in a conversation preserved on the Watergate tapes, that, "I just had to make sure my son wasn't in the hands of radicals, and he isn't."

The president replied, "Not yet."

The third preference of privilege is for athletes. Fans watch racially and economically integrated college basketball and football teams on television and think that college sports are diverse. They don't realize that colleges also give admissions breaks to athletes in many prep-school sports that ordinary American kids never have a chance to play: crew, horseback riding, sailing, squash, even polo. College athletics are weighted toward these rich people's sports to attract wealthy donors who rowed crew or played squash themselves, want their alma mater to have a winning team, and are eager to pay for the boathouse or the polo ponies.

Title IX, the law requiring gender diversity in colleges, has worsened this socioeconomic inequity, because it has prompted colleges to start women's teams in blueblood sports like crew and equestrian events – for which they can easily find donors -- while eliminating men's teams in working-class sports like wrestling and track and field.

Once enrolled at a top college, by the way, children of the rich and famous have a leg up in making varsity rosters. The last player on the bench on many college teams tends to be a legacy or a development admit. From 2003-2007, for instance, Joe Pagliuca, a basketball player of modest talents, enjoyed a coveted spot on Duke University's men's basketball team, one of the nation's top programs. Joe didn't score a single point in his entire college career. But it fulfilled the dream of his father, Boston Celtics co-owner Steve Pagliuca, a Duke graduate and former junior varsity basketball player, who has given more than \$1 million to his alma mater.

The fourth preference of privilege is the edge for children of faculty and administrators. I include this preference because college faculty and administrators, while mostly not millionaires--except for some college presidents--are highly educated. Since the level of parental education is one of the biggest predictors of student accomplishment, the children of these PhD.'s and MBA's shouldn't need a boost, but they get it anyway. The admissions break is a side-effect of the tuition subsidy most colleges give to employees' children. Admissions deans are afraid to reject the child of a prominent professor or administrator because it

means the parent will not only be embarrassed but will also have to pay full tuition someplace else.

As social injustices go, these preferences for the privileged may not seem like a big deal. The worst outcome is that somebody with the ability to excel at a top-tier school goes to a second-tier one instead.

Still, there's something about these admissions perks for the rich that violates our basic notions of what America stands for -- fairness, equal opportunity, upward mobility, particularly in an era of growing social and economic inequality. The unfairness breeds cynicism among teenagers who represent America's future and learn even before they're old enough to vote that money talks louder than merit. It's also the bane of high school guidance counselors, who have to console their spurned valedictorians, and the admissions staff at the colleges themselves, who consider themselves professionals and generally want to pick the best candidates. Often, the beneficiaries of preference are imposed on them over their objections.

Harrison Frist wasn't in the top 20% of his class at his prep school. When he applied to Princeton, the admissions office gave him the lowest ranking on its academic scale. Nevertheless, Princeton's president considered him a top priority, and he was admitted. Why? Harrison's father, Bill Frist, was a US Senator at the time, and about to become majority leader. He was also an alumnus and a former Princeton trustee. And the Frist family had given Princeton \$25 million to build the Frist Campus Center. Once enrolled, Harrison joined Princeton's rowdiest student club and was arrested for drunk driving. Undeterred, Princeton admitted his younger brother, who was then photographed wearing a Confederate uniform.

Many colleges have developed special backchannel routes to admissions for the rich. In September 2006, Harvard eliminated early decision, which, the university contended "advantages those that are already advantaged" and hurts low-income applicants. But, while professing to discard early admissions in the interest of fairness, Harvard preserved what might be called "late admissions" -- its Z-list. Students on the Z-list tend to be children of well-connected alumni and big donors with less than peak credentials. Although they often are told in

advance that they'll be admitted, they're officially waitlisted until the school year ends. Then, after their rejected classmates have gone home and are in no position to complain, Z-listers are admitted not for the following September but for the year after.

Keep in mind that the preferences of privilege I'm talking about come on top of numerous other advantages for the wealthy in the educational process. They generally go to excellent high schools that offer a much wider range of courses, foreign languages, sports and clubs than inner-city schools do. Their parents introduce them to the world of books and travel. They can afford tutors, SAT prep, independent college counselors, and expensive extra-curricular activities. Moreover, many colleges aren't what is known in admissions jargon as need-blind – in other words, they have a limited pool of financial aid and consequently give preference to students who can pay their own way. So the rich shouldn't need legacy, development and athletic preference; that's just the cherry on the sundae.

The preferences of privilege squeeze out one ethnic group in particular: Asian-American students. Data for Harvard, Yale and other schools show that Asian-American applicants need higher SAT scores for admission than any other group, including whites. While Asian-American students make up about 30% of winners and finalists for the most prestigious high school awards – AP National Scholar, Presidential Scholar, Intel Science Talent Search, and the like -- they only comprise about 15% of Ivy League students.

A few years ago, I visited Hunter College High School in New York City. It's an exam school, very difficult to get into, and one of the best high schools in the country. I interviewed a group of top Asian-American students there, including Elizabeth Wai. She told me that she had a 3.7 GPA and a 1530 SAT score (out of 1600; this was before the writing test.) When I congratulated her, she said, No, you don't understand. We call that an "Asian fail."

Or consider Navonil Ghosh, who comes from a middle-class South Asian family and graduated last year from a public magnet school in Austin, Texas. He received perfect scores on the SAT and ACT, one of only a handful of students in the country to accomplish that feat, and

was fourth in his high school class. Yet he was rejected by Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Penn and MIT. These universities love to boast about how many valedictorians and students with perfect SAT scores they turn down, giving the impression that the Navonil Ghoshes of the world don't measure up -- when the reality is that they could make room for Navonil by turning down weaker candidates whose parents happen to be alumni or donors.

When the rejection letter from Harvard arrived, "my son was devastated," said Nirmalendu Ghosh. "He told me he could not study any more and went to bed." Navonil is now a freshman at Rice -- and learning, I hope, that this country has many fine educational institutions outside the Ivy League.

Much of Navonil's case for admission rested on his SATs -- a test that has become increasingly beleaguered. Some, including our friends at colleges like Wake Forest that have made it optional, argue that using the SAT in admissions amounts to a preference for privilege, because of the sizeable scoring gap between whites and minorities, and between high and low-income students.

In my book, I tried to duck the debate over the validity of the SAT. While I relied heavily on SAT scores to document preferences for children of alumni and donors, I noted in a preface that I only cited scores because "college admissions offices pay considerable attention" to them, and that I took "no position in the long-running controversy over whether SAT scores are a useful way to evaluate college applicants and predict future achievement."

I dodged this issue for two reasons. First, I'm no psychometrician -- which would be a good SAT vocabulary word! Second, I have very ambivalent feelings about the SAT. I agree with its critics that disparities in scoring by race and social class, exacerbated by test-prep and other coaching options available to affluent students, are profoundly disturbing.

At the same time, though, I'm a product of the SAT generation. I was one of the thousands of bright, middle-class public high school students who were able to attend an elite college at least partly because the test helped extend the vision and reach of the Ivy Leagues beyond a cluster

of old-boy prep schools. Emotionally, I guess, it's hard for me to accept that a test that broadened opportunity for so many young people is now responsible for denying that same opportunity to others.

Opponents of the SAT often talk as if it's the only instrument of privilege in college admissions -- ignoring the preferences for children of legacies and donors. Unlike those preferences, the SAT at least tries to gauge the candidate's individual merit. And, even granting a bias toward the white and wealthy, the SAT may remain useful in comparing two candidates within the same racial and economic groups -- or when a score goes against type. For instance, if a minority applicant from a low-performing high school does well on the SAT, that score could be a noteworthy indication of academic potential.

But if--as in so many of the examples I cited in my book--a legacy or a development applicant, with all of the advantages of wealth and parental education, does poorly on the SAT, that can be a strong signal that he or she may not be serious about learning--and that the admissions staff should resist lobbying on the applicant's behalf by the development or alumni office. Indeed, without SAT scores to act as a check on these preferences, it's likely that the number of legacies and development admits at elite universities would be even greater than it already is.

Today, curbing the clout of alumni and donors in college admissions is more important -- and perhaps more difficult -- than ever before. With endowments plummeting in the deepest economic downturn since the Great Depression, admissions officials are likely to face intense pressure to accept candidates whose parents could replenish the college coffers, and to reject more applicants who need financial aid. As Williams College president Morton Shapiro recently observed, "You've always been in an advantaged position to be rich and smart. Now you're at an even greater advantage."

At the same time, a movement to stop the preferences of privilege is gaining momentum. The latest strategy is to attack legacy preference in the courts. Legacy preference had been considered untouchable legally under civil rights laws because it doesn't overtly discriminate on the basis of race. But now two law professors are seeking plaintiffs to challenge legacy preference under other, older laws that prohibit rights

and titles based on heredity or nobility.

In a 2006 interview in the Wall Street Journal, Princeton president Shirley Tilghman was asked to justify legacy preference. She responded with admirable candor that alumni are “extremely important to the financial well-being of this university.”

The reporter, John Hechinger, followed up, “And wouldn’t they continue to be even if you didn’t give their children the preference?”

President Tilghman responded, “We’ve never done the experiment.”

Let's assume that, perhaps voluntarily, perhaps under a court order, a college does try this experiment -- eliminating preferences for children of the wealthy, famous and powerful. What would that mean? It would open more slots for students of demonstrated intellectual brilliance or creative talent, and more slots for children of poverty with tremendous academic potential that’s been suppressed because they went to bad high schools or bounced around from one school to the next.

It would lead to more demanding courses and more stimulating class discussions, both because the intellectual quality of the student body would rise and because the students would represent a wider spectrum of society. And for children of the rich and famous, it would mean an end to guilt and self-doubt and wondering—as many do-- whether they got in on their own merits or their parents’ wallets.

So a decisive moment may be approaching for college admissions - - and for the climax of my film. Will Jamie get into the college of her dreams, or will she be spurned and disillusioned? To emulate the box office and Oscar success of "Slumdog Millionaire," and, more importantly, to demonstrate the continued vitality of the American dream of meritocracy and equal opportunity, "Slumdog Ivy Leaguer" needs a happy ending. Thank you.