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Becoming One of the Elect

Ken Briggs | Apr. 3, 2012 NCR Today

Since dispatching the British monarchy, America has busily concocted its own styles of royalty, most often in creating elites.

The creation of elites most often depends on mechanisms for denying access. A prime example is the game of college admissions. Prestige goes with letting the fewest people in. Students are storming the gates but the gate-keeper permits only a handful from entering, like the high priests at the old Studio 54 who decided on the spot who would or wouldn't get into the fashionable New York club.

That, and other more or less tangible factors, catapult some universities to the top of the desirability list. Myths develop around them: that the most sought after are the best in the business; that a degree from one of them is a guaranteed ticket to easy street.

The facts may speak otherwise. The education provided at the "dream schools" may be no better or worse than that available at other schools. It's graduates may fare no better, relatively speaking. But the elite schools both encourage veneration by showing how tough it is to enter and benefit enormously from it.

This year, as has been broadly declared, Harvard cut its acceptance rate to 5.9 percent, an in-your-face performance compared to Yale's practically open door 6.8, Columbia's 7.4 and Brown's 9.6. For some who got into that batch, it will remain the signal achievement of their lives, launching them into a head trip from which some will never recover despite mediocre abilities and achievements.

At this pace, I can see the possibility not far down the line where Harvard and the also-rans might actually find themselves in negative territory. Imagine a surreal future in which Harvard and Yale drop into negative acceptance rates where they'd be rejecting even more applicants than actually apply.

This month, the fateful numbers are usually trotted out as if they were just a normal part of the work week. They disguise the enormous effort that colleges not quite in the top ranks of denial exert in an effort to knock down their acceptance rates. More than a few institutions use a number of shady tactics to scare up as many applicants as possible in an attempt to make the stats look better. For example, if you need to accept 4,000 students in order to fill the incoming class from 8,000 applicants, your acceptance rate is 50 percent, far above the elites. If you can produce another 2,000 applicants, you can cut that rate to 40 percent, still on the fringes of the elite but heading in that direction. So many college scrounge for applicants.

No form of American royalty can exist without convincing the unwashed that the chosen, be they Skull & Bones, Knights of Malta or the marines, are "special" because they offer what lots of people either want or are manipulated into thinking they want, and acceptance of the fact that the favored ones are deserving, more or less.

That, in turn, assumes fierce faith in our intense dedication to competition that produces winners and loses by dint of personality or brains or talent. Perhaps it's inevitable that humans arrange themselves in hierarchies, but often those who don't get the brass ring become permanently scarred.

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