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The Failure of Critical Thinking

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

The current controversies over admission practices of elite public and private institutions illustrate what happens when we allow ourselves to fight about the wrong things. This lack of critical thinking begins with a false premise and continues with an attack on institutions that do not conform to the false premise. Sometimes, rather than pointing out the false premise, institutions and their leaders react defensively as if the false premise were correct. Both attacker and respondent in this circumstance fail the test of critical thinking.

The error is usually at the beginning. Someone ([most recently the Education Trust](#), but the list of commentators who have taken the same tack is long) asserts that elite public universities should be admitting as many poor people as there are in the population of high school graduates in their states. Having asserted this erroneous notion, they compile data (that may also be flawed) using often unreliable methodologies, and issue a manifesto damning elite public universities because they don't meet the original false premise. Rather than pointing out the error, some elite universities, sensing a politically correct risk, counter with data showing how much they do to recruit and subsidize the poor people who want to come to their university.

All this is not very helpful in addressing issues of access and affordability. We do indeed have to pay attention to the possibility that some graduates of high school who have the preparation and interest might be priced out of an opportunity to acquire a quality higher education, either by virtue of a high net cost of attendance or by the imposition of admissions standards that less affluent students find difficult to meet. This, however, is not a problem that belongs to elite public or private universities alone but is a challenge faced by all the providers of higher education in America. To focus on elite institutions is to make some pernicious and inaccurate assumptions about all the other institutions of higher education.

If we assume that everyone should have an equal opportunity to attend an elite public or private institution (since both are heavily subsidized by taxpayers), then we must also assume that attendance at a non-elite public or private institution represents an unsatisfactory and therefore unequal outcome for a student. If the community colleges, state colleges, non-flagship state institutions, and many non-elite private colleges represent an unsatisfactory and inequitable opportunity, compared to what we call elite institutions, that would seem to require us to assume that they do a poor job of educating students; that the results of their educational efforts are second rate; and that anyone who attends such places is sure to

be deficient upon graduation. This kind of thinking may reflect the snobbery of some elite groups who can't imagine a good education coming from a campus of the California State University system, or a fine education at a combination of Greenfield Community College and Westfield State College in Massachusetts. Such an assumption also reflects a profound ignorance about the actual academic performance of the students who graduate from these "non-elite" institutions.

The notion of "elite institution" deserves some attention. We who live and work in institutions labeled elite have every reason to accept the premise that only an education in our remarkable places is worth having even if we can present little evidence to demonstrate that our elite characteristics result in higher performance after graduation. Research that attempts to demonstrate the higher value of elite compared to non-elite education seems to indicate that while some people may benefit from instruction at a small private elite college, most students do just about as well after graduation, all other things being equal, whether they go to elite or non-elite institutions.

The elite status of an institution comes from its ability to spend more money than institutions deemed "non-elite." These expenditures do indeed make a different institution. For example, a state flagship institution may have its faculty teaching only half time, assigning the other half time to research. The student activities supported by the elite institution may be more elaborate, the residential spaces more elegant, the quality of the buildings and other facilities more impressive, the student recreation center more comprehensive, and the intercollegiate sports program more nationally visible. These amenities define elite status for undergraduates, and many assume that the amenities reflect academic quality. Students and their parents like these amenities, they ask about them when they visit campus, and they appear willing to pay a premium for the opportunity to participate in the residential life of an elite university. Still, the data that would tell us that the students really learn more and will do much better after graduation as a result of these amenities is not very persuasive.

If we figure the cost of attendance at one of these elite institutions and compare it to the cost of attending a community college and state college, near where the student lives and where the student can hold down a job, we find that the best educational bargain by far is the community college-state college combination.

When we worry about whether poor people can get access to college, some imagine that a zero cost of attendance will solve the problem. That doesn't really work. Even when an institution pays for the tuition and fees, including room and board, for students below some income marker, these students still come up short an additional \$10K to make up for the opportunity cost of living away from home and losing the income from a regular 12-month part-time or full-time job. The public cost of subsidizing elite education for all is very high for rather limited gains. And, of course, there are not enough spots in what we call elite institutions to accommodate all the deserving students of all income levels.

Because space is limited, even in elite public institutions with enrollments over 40,000, the institutions select students based on various criteria, some related to geography, some related to ethnicity, some related to academic preparation, and some related to athletic skill. It would certainly be possible to add other criteria to this list to try and achieve an equal opportunity for all students. However, the only truly "fair" admission process would do what we suggested in [an earlier Reality Check](#): fill the class using random selection from a pool composed of all high school graduates who meet the institution's minimum admission criteria. There is a certain simplistic charm to this notion.

What's the great benefit, then, that the elite institutions provide? Well, they are elite and they are expensive, and they have luxuries that aren't available at the community college or state college, or non-elite private institution. Do they do a better job of helping students who have deficient high school preparation succeed? Surely not better than the community college that specializes in serving these

constituencies.

The real issue for any state is whether its total system of public higher education is effectively serving the people for whom the institutions are intended. If we believe that only elite public research institutions provide quality academic preparation and degrees, we should close the community colleges, the state colleges, and the university campuses not deemed “elite” and transfer those funds and the responsibility for serving all graduates of the state’s high schools to elite institutions and require them to expand their enrollments to accommodate all the college bound students of the state.

This solution, impossible of course, would result in each elite institution reinventing community colleges, non-elite campuses located near the communities from which the students come, and investing only a fraction of the funding available in the high priced research university environment that many people define as elite.

The failure of critical thinking about how to provide quality higher education to all citizens leads people to confuse two challenges. The first is how a state should construct a higher education system that will ensure access for all qualified and interested students. The second is how to express hostility toward politically incorrect elite institutions. The first challenge is worth worrying about; the second one is just plain silly.

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