

Admissions Equity

Problems with preferences

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, a journalist at Harvard as a Nieman Fellow whispered a pitch for what he thought an explosive story: that Harvard gave admissions preference to “legacies”—children of alumni. I knew that, I replied. I had in mind M. Elaine Mar’s vivid story of her freshman encounter with an alumnus, the parent of a classmate whose middle name she subsequently found “adorning one of the buildings in the Yard” (“Blue Collar, Crimson Blazer,” November–December 1995, page 47), and the genealogical table that illustrated “The Welds of Harvard Yard: History through a Family Lens” (November–December 1998, page 69).

In a new millennium, with competition for spaces at elite colleges ever more in-

tense, alumnus Daniel Golden has taken a fresh look at admissions. Rather than fostering “the American dream of upward mobility and equal opportunity,” he finds biased policies that “channel the children of the privileged into premier colleges, paving their way into leadership positions in business and government” while lower-income students languish outside the gates. College admissions, in his view, has taken the place of primogeniture in fostering aristocracy. Golden ties the legacy effect to related phenomena, such as the rise of upper-income sports (women’s crew, horseback riding) under the pressure of Title IX: “[A]thletic preference...favors the wealthy, the white, and the well-connected.”

In a sense, this is old news. William G. Bowen, president emeritus of Princeton,

highlighted the skewed socioeconomic character of elite institutions’ student bodies—and admissions preferences given legacies, “development” cases, and recruited athletes—in a 2004 address. Harvard and other institutions had begun earlier that year to lessen the tuition burden on lower- and middle-income families, and to recruit their children in a more focused way. Bowen and coauthors fleshed out the argument in their 2005 book, *Equity and Excellence in American Higher Education* (excerpted in these pages, May–June 2005, page 48). They cited Golden’s 2003 *Wall Street Journal* series on admissions practices and preferences; Golden, in extending his reporting for this book, cites Bowen et al., along with other standard sources on admissions practices, preferences, and outright biases.

What makes *The Price of Admission* worth adding to

the pile of such literature? First, Golden has fun making trouble in the best journalistic sense. He managed to get students—legacies and their “unhooked” peers—on the record. Indexing available information, he has linked membership on the Committee on University Resources (the most generous donors and fundraisers) with relatives’ attendance at Harvard. In pursuit of various flavors of admissions preference, he tracks Gores, Frist, and Kennedys through the institutions where family members have enrolled.

My favorite example of this kind of anecdote has nothing to do with legacies, Golden’s chief *bête noire* (although he finds similar fault in preferences for faculty children, celebrities, and the just plain rich). He reports that the University of Virginia awarded a nominal athletic scholarship to Ty Grisham, the son of wildly successful novelist John Grisham, to assure his admission in the hope—soon realized—of a parental gift to renovate the stadium.

Golden packages this kind of naming-names digging—a guilty pleasure for readers—with a knack for populist phrasing (“kowtowing to wealth,” “the preferences of privilege”) that probably reflects the broader public’s skepticism, even resentment, of elite educational institutions. Though the academic literature does not capture those sentiments, the higher-education community would do well to recognize them.

Colorful though this approach is, Golden’s method has limits. He acknowledges that colleges should not “automatically accept applicants with the best test scores or grades,” but his examples lean heavily on just those criteria. In fact, standardized test scores increasingly are seen as having limited predictive value; colleges are beginning to make them optional. Readers cannot always assess from Golden’s resonant individual cases which students’ courses of study were more rigorous, recommendations less compelling, or extracurriculars truly indicative of initiative and leadership. Admissions officers at Harvard and Yale, for example, must take those factors into account as they winnow out more than nine-tenths of

Daniel Golden ’78, *The Price of Admission: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way into Elite Colleges—and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates* (Crown, \$25.95)



Illustration by Dan Page

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their already self-selected applicants.

Golden cites as examples of purely meritocratic, “wealth-blind” institutions Caltech, Cooper Union, and Berea College. Each has real strengths, and Caltech’s scientific work is incredibly expensive. But none of those institutions spends, say, \$100 million per year on acquisitions and staffing for its library system, nor offers dozens of languages mod-

ern and archaic: the vital cultural functions performed by some research universities. Such costs are assuredly *not* financed by government grants or corporate philanthropy. In recent years, presidents including Yale’s Richard Levin and Princeton’s Shirley Tilghman have defended legacy preferences precisely because of these larger functions supported by donors, some of whose ties are

strengthened by legacies. Golden does not dwell on this nontrivial aspect of the university entity.

There are larger ambiguities, too. Golden decries preferences for athletes in “patrician sports.” But he would retain them for other sports, as measures of the “candidate’s own hard work and excellence,” not “parental achievement.” Not entirely true: success in even some main-

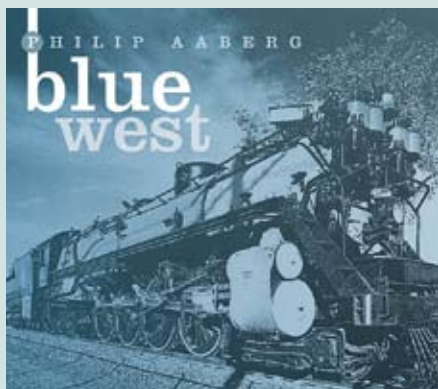
PERFORMANCE

Big Sky Blues

In high school, Philip Aaberg ’71 took train voyages lasting 12 hours each way between his hometown of Chester, Montana, and Spokane to study piano with master teacher Margaret Saunders Ott. Four decades later, Ott is 86 and Aaberg still makes the same rail jaunt on occasion, and sometimes even takes a piano lesson. You can hear railroad rhythms in both Aaberg’s music and his backyard: each day, 47 trains rumble through Chester, where, four years ago, Aaberg returned after 27 years in the Bay Area.

A Great Northern steam engine appears on the cover of Aaberg’s newest CD, *Blue West*, a collection of bluesy compositions, and Aaberg notes that the familiar boogie-woogie rhythm may even have originated in rail travel—many of the early blues artists toured on trains. “Someday I want to do a train tour myself,” he says. “Nothing but train rides.”

Some might call “Montana blues” an oxymoron: it’s a long way from Chester—which is 40 miles from Canada on the high plains east of the Rocky Mountains—to New Orleans or Chicago’s South Side. Yet Aaberg is steeped in blues music, having played for years with guitarist Elvin Bishop, formerly of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Years ago, he and Bishop’s band toured as many as 300 days a year, and Aaberg has played keyboard with countless others in nearly every kind of music, from classical to R&B to New Age; he’s been a session man



A Great Northern steam engine dominates the cover of Philip Aaberg’s solo piano CD *Blue West*. Right: Aaberg at the keyboard.

on more than 300 albums. *Blue West* is his ninth record as solo pianist; he recorded the first five between 1984 and 1991 for Windham Hill, and has released the last four on his own Sweetgrass Music label, launched in 2000.

The Sweetgrass Hills, where Aaberg lives, would be “mountains” to many, but a hundred miles east of the Rockies, “We call them hills,” he says. Aaberg is an intensely regional musician, and in his liner notes for *Blue West*, he says, “I hope you smell sagebrush, see Big Sky, hear the train, and feel the river.”

Coming east to Harvard was a big switch for the rural Montana boy, who attended Harvard on a scholarship endowed in 1961 by Leonard Bernstein ’39, D.Mus. ’67. Leon Kirchner (then Rosen professor of music) and Luise Vosgerchian (the late Naumburg professor of music) “kept me in school,” Aaberg says. In the Harvard libraries, he heard original blues artists like Big Bill Broonzy, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Son House for the first time on Folkways LPs, and, he says, “It was an awakening.” He played in jazz and rock bands during college, and accompanied the Freshman Glee Club; he also studied classical piano at the New England Conservatory, where, one day, he played a Haydn sonata especially well. His teacher remarked, “Maybe you’ll specialize in Haydn sonatas.” “That idea was so foreign to me,” Aaberg recalls. “I couldn’t imagine ever being so restricted.”

Since then, although he says the classical repertoire remains “the well,” Aaberg has ranged nearly everywhere in music. He spent a year in Iowa working on the Beethoven piano sonatas, had a stint at the Marlboro Chamber Music

Festival, and has recorded film scores, jingles, and cartoon music. He also has three sons from his first marriage and a five-year-old boy with his second wife, Patty, who runs Sweetgrass Music. Two of his older sons are musicians. Even though Aaberg feels that musical ability is inherited—his own family has long been a musical one—when it comes to advising his sons on making it a professional career, he has only one bit of counsel: “Get paid first.” ~C.L.



stream sports now practically requires expensive outlays for equipment, coaching, or private academies. Looking beyond the scope of this book, Golden doesn't wade into the murky waters surrounding state merit-scholarship programs for students who attend their public colleges (like those in Georgia and Massachusetts): the "merit" appeal is politically winning, but the potential diversion of funds from needy applicants to middle- and upper-class suburbanites may be terrible socioeconomic policy. Americans' enthusiasm for merit *and* support for those in need may, in other

words, depend on where the cash flows.

That larger problem remains undressed. "Legacy" children are often excellent college candidates because they come from families who have already benefited from excellent higher education—and who have the means to provide enriching college-preparatory experiences. None of the reforms Golden suggests, beginning with abolishing legacy preference, will fill the pipeline with future applicants whose elementary and secondary schooling leaves them ill-equipped for a demanding higher education.

Bowen argued for a less sweeping measure: he would retain the legacy preference—private institutions create resources and incur costs assuming the flow of gifts from alumni—but put an equal "thumb on the scale" for lower-income applicants. Whatever policy you prefer, *The Price of Admission* is a powerful reminder that the public will increasingly require selective colleges to defend their preferences; that not all are prepared to make their complex case well; and that some of their practices, finally, seem indefensible today. —JOHN S. ROSENBERG

Grolier Reincarnated

A venerable poetry bookshop makes a fresh start.

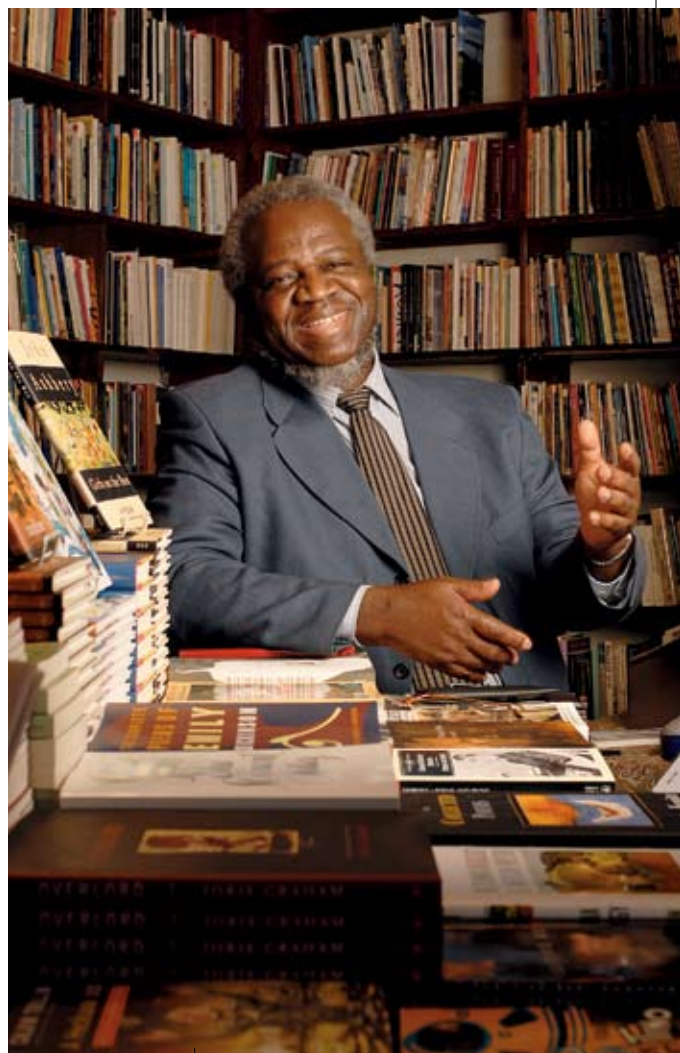
by NATHAN HELLER

TUCKED INTO a single room behind a window in Harvard Square, the Grolier Poetry Book Shop is to the world of book-selling what La Sainte Chapelle is to Gothic architecture: small, unusual, and, to those who know to track it down, a jewel box. The shop, which saw only two managements from its founding in 1927 to this past spring, has managed to stay afloat for the last three decades with the unorthodox business plan of selling only poetry. Today, it's one of only two all-poetry bookstores in the United States (the other is in Seattle) and a meeting point for literary neophytes and regulars alike. Rarity doesn't make for profit, though. The Grolier was teetering on the verge of bankruptcy when poet Ifeanyi Menkiti, Ph.D. '74, a philosophy professor at Wellesley College, bought the store in March to keep it from going under.

Named after sixteenth-century French bibliophile and collector Jean Grolier de Servières, the shop has been dubbed a "poetry landmark" by the Academy of American Poets and offers a literary home for both poets and readers. Not that there's much difference. The Grolier has served contributors to many of the anthologies it carries, with past patrons ranging from T. S. Eliot '10, E. E. Cummings '15, and Robert Lowell '39 to John

Ashbery '50 and Adrienne Rich '51. Under the ownership of Louisa Solano, who took over in 1974, it has offered a reading series, an annual poetry prize, and a yearly reading of undergraduate poetry from several universities. Now, even as some professors direct their students to the Grolier rather than the Coop, many of the store's most enthusiastic supporters come from outside academia.

Menkiti, a longtime Cantabrigian, has taught moral philosophy at Wellesley since 1973. The general imperatives he feels as a college professor—broadening his students' perspectives and taking advantage of cultural proximity—shape his priorities for the Grolier, too. Although his professorial responsibilities keep him from managing the store's day-to-day business, he plans to build up its collection of international poetry with as much intermingling as possible. "I wasn't thinking of, 'Let's say today we'll have our little Indian enclave or little Chi-



Poet and Wellesley philosophy professor Ifeanyi Menkiti, a native Nigerian, holds court in his new bookstore.

nese enclave, tomorrow our little African enclave," he explains. "I think there's something wonderful about it all happening together." He hopes to extend the shop's outreach programs by this same standard. "It would be nice to see the poets of the