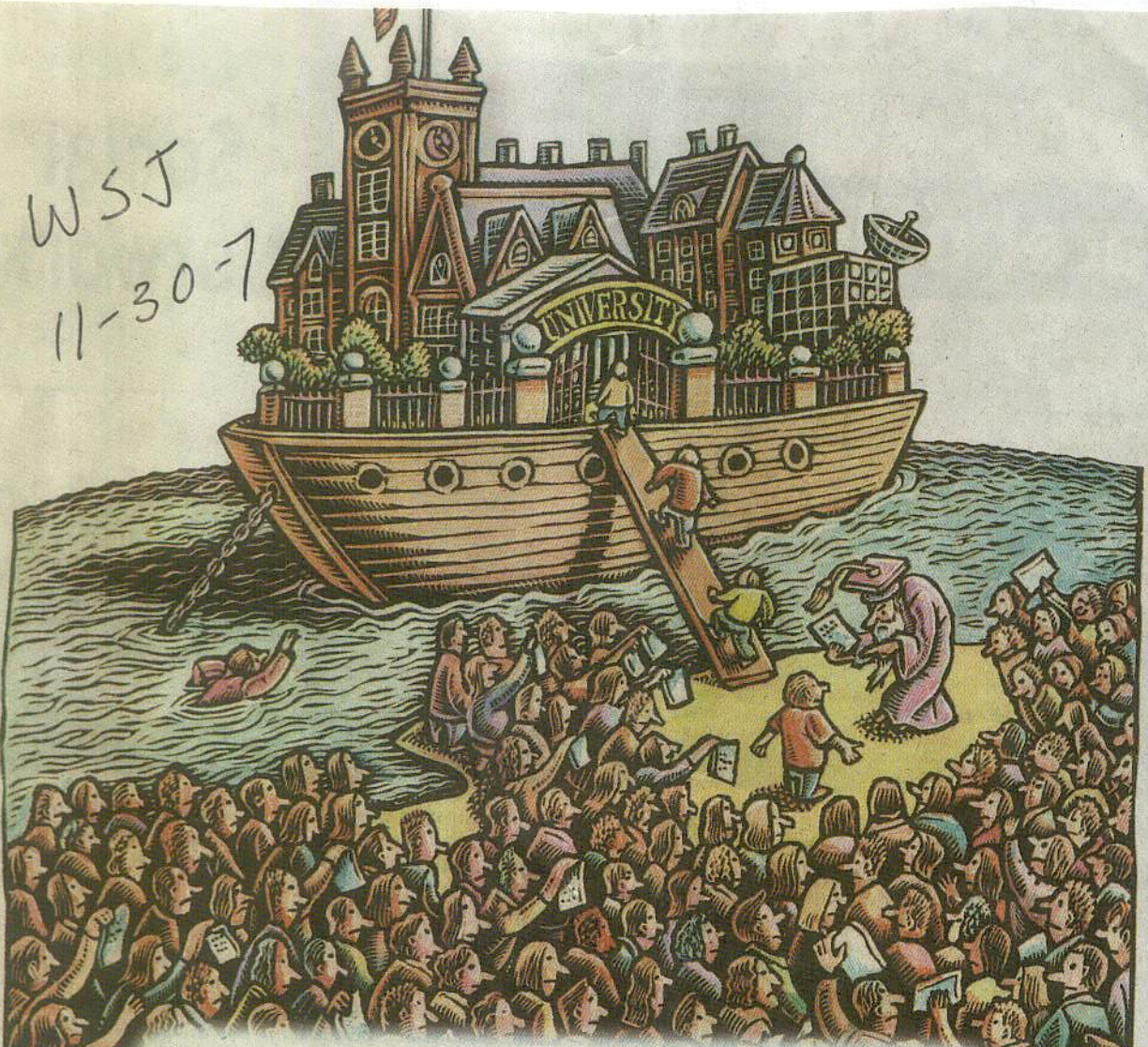


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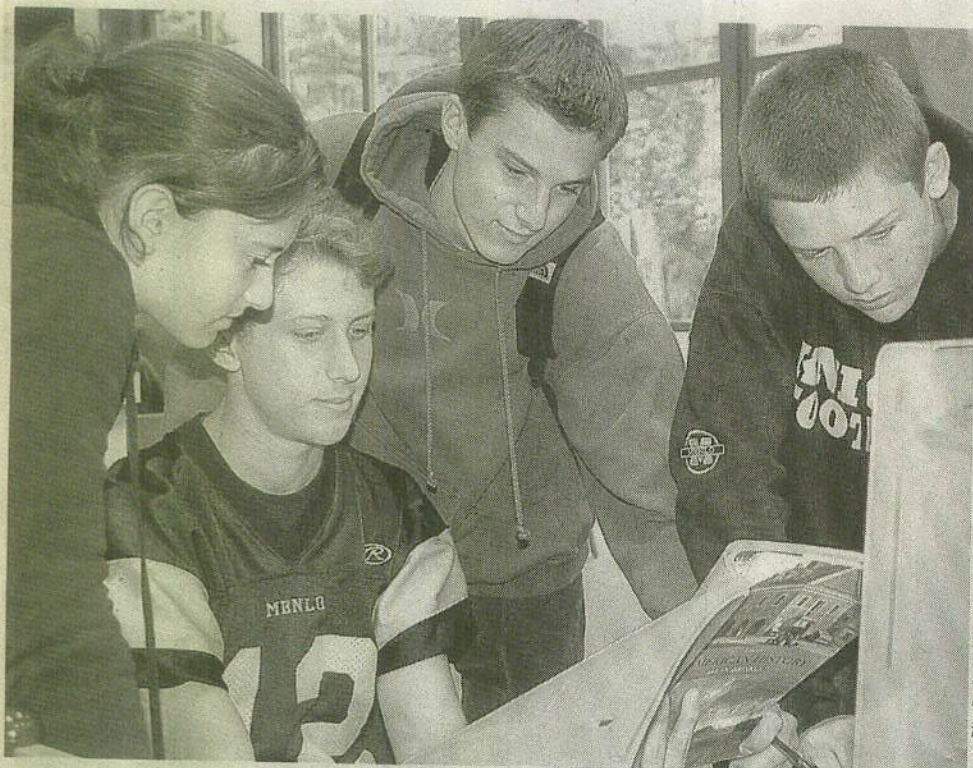


How to Get Into *Harvard*

A WSJ study finds that certain high schools have a remarkable record of sending their students to elite colleges. By **Ellen Gamerman**

AS COLLEGE-APPLICATION season enters its most stressful final stretch, parents want to know if their children's schools are delivering the goods—consistently getting students into top universities.

It's a tricky question to answer, but for a snapshot, The Wall Street Journal examined this year's freshman classes at eight highly selective colleges to find out where they went to high school. New York City private schools and New England prep schools continue to hold sway—Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., is a virtual factory, sending 19 kids to



Susan Ditz (top); Joel Hostell (middle)

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Harvard this fall—but these institutions are seeing some new competition from schools overseas and public schools that focus on math and science.

The 10 schools that performed best in our survey are all private schools. Two top performers overall are located in South Korea. Daewon Foreign Language High School in Seoul sent 14% of its graduating class to the eight colleges we examined—that's more than four times the acceptance rate of the prestigious Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, N.Y.

No ranking of high schools is perfect, and this one offers a cross-section, rather than an exhaustive appraisal, of college admissions. For our survey, we chose eight colleges with an average admissions selectivity of 18% and whose accepted applicants had reading and math SAT scores in the 1350-1450 range, according to the College Board: Harvard, Princeton, MIT, Williams, Pomona, Swarthmore, the University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins. Some colleges that would otherwise have met our criteria were excluded from our study because information on their students' high-school alma maters was unavailable. All the colleges in our survey received a record number of applications last year.

We tracked down the high-school alma maters of these colleges' current freshmen—nearly 7,000 kids in all—and made a list of the high schools that had graduating classes of at least 50 students. We then calculated what percentage of last year's graduating class at each high school had gone on to the colleges in our survey.



Student Life:

Above, students at Menlo School; left, Miles Jacoby of the Rivers School's class of 2007, with English Department Chairwoman Barbara Ligon; below, a biology student at Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy.

Despite the fact that many people who went to state schools or obscure liberal arts colleges lead happy, successful lives, high-school seniors and their parents are routinely terrorized with alarming and now familiar college-admissions statistics. There are more high-school seniors going on to college in America now than at any point in U.S. history. Last year, Harvard admitted an all-time low of 9% of applicants after receiving a record 23,000 applications.

In a sign of the shifting global economic food chain, students from abroad now take up a growing number of spots. At the University of Pennsylvania, 13% of the class of 2011 is made up of international students, up from 11.8% the previous year.

And coming from a prestigious suburban public school or elite private school may not offer the same advantages it once did for students. Many Ivy League schools say they're going after low-income students more aggressively, making it harder for middle-class kids to stand out.

"It's scary," says Jessica Assaf, 17 years old, who's waiting for word on her early application to Brown University. Ms. Assaf, whose parents send her to the \$29,800-a-year Branson School north of San Francisco, is highlighting her work with an organization that focuses on the health hazards of cosmetics. But she worries her activism won't be enough to get her in, especially given Brown's record-low acceptance rate of about 13.5% last year. "A 14% acceptance rate isn't a good statistic," she says. "If someone said you had a 14% chance of living, that's nowhere near being reassured."

WHO'S GETTING IN

Among public schools, those that specialize in math and science fared well in our survey, in part because some top universities are focusing more on drawing high-caliber science and engineering students. Last year, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, a magnet school in Alexandria, Va., sent 9% of its graduates to the colleges on our list—with 14 students, or 3% of its graduates, going to Princeton.

Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, another public school for kids who excel in science and engineering, last year sent graduates to Harvard, MIT, Duke and Cornell, and 14 went to nearby Johns Hopkins. Kids see that list of colleges every time they walk by the guidance office: It's written on a 10-foot board to give students inspiration, the school's director says.

Good neighbors make good feeder schools. Princeton High School, a public school down the street from Princeton University, sent 19 kids to the college last year, up from 12 four years ago. Jeff Lowe, the high school's college adviser, says the numbers are so high in part because the children of Princeton professors are more likely to attend the high school, and are more likely to be good students. He says the school typically sends between 10 and 20 kids to the university every year. (The university subsidizes up to half the tuition for the child of a faculty member.) Two years ago, the high school began accepting kids from outside the district for \$15,817, after parents requested it.

THE POWER OF THE COUNSELOR

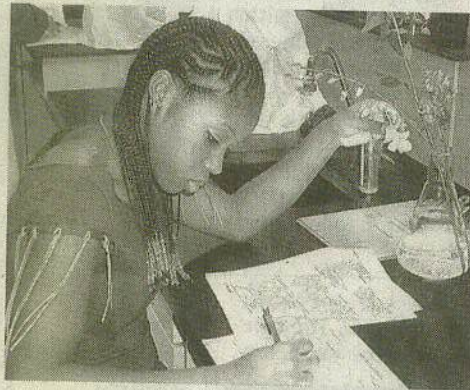
Still, many parents enroll their kids in private schools for the trump card that top prep schools have long held: the powerful, highly connected college counselor. The college counselors at many private schools have spent years building relationships with college ad-

missions offices. Some have inside experience in the admissions process.

Jon Reider, director of college counseling at San Francisco University High School, is a former senior associate admissions director at Stanford University. Mr. Reider says his former colleagues are no longer working at the university—he left seven years ago—but he still thinks having worked in an admissions office gives him an edge. "Because I've been on the other side of the desk, I have some idea how an application reads and what goes through an admissions officer's mind when they read it," he says. Last year, he says, Stanford admitted 11 of his students—more than any year since he took the high-school job.

Nancy Siegel, head counselor at Millburn High School in northern New Jersey, says that when an applicant vows that he or she will attend a particular college if accepted, she'll often let the school know. That can help a student's chances—but if the child has a change of heart, she says, the high school is in trouble. "You talk to kids ahead of time and say, 'Don't you dare say that unless you mean it because the high school's reputation goes down the tubes,'" she says.

Samantha Broussard-Wilson promised to attend Georgetown if the school accepted her early application. It did. But later that spring, the student from Mira Costa High School in



Manhattan Beach, Calif., got into Yale. When she decided to go to New Haven, she says some teachers at her high school turned hostile. "I actually did get a lot of negative comments," says Ms. Broussard-Wilson, 18, now a freshman at Yale. "Teachers told me, 'You may have taken one of the spots from someone else at our school.'"

Richard Bischoff, director of admissions at the California Institute of Technology, says parents overestimate the importance of a high-school name. He recently received a letter from a parent of a toddler wanting to know where the child needs to go in order to get accepted at Caltech. Mr. Bischoff wouldn't indulge the question. "I don't have the formula," he says.

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See an expanded, sortable version of this chart, experts' tips on writing college entrance essays, and join a reader forum, at WSJ.com/OnlineToday.

Behind the Numbers

Our survey looked at enrolled students, not the number of students accepted. In some cases, college admissions offices shared the list of high schools for their freshman classes. In others, we looked at the printed "facebook" distributed by colleges, which were either loaned to us or purchased on our behalf by students or alumni.

We worked with high schools and colleges to verify our numbers, which sometimes differed when students had been accepted to college but deferred enrollment for a year or when college facebook's offered incomplete information. In cases where the high school and college's numbers diverged, we worked with both to try to resolve the discrepancy.

We relied only on official school information, not outside sources such as Facebook.com. We omitted some universities that otherwise would have met our criteria because either they didn't print facebook's or those facebook's didn't list high-school alums, and the colleges wouldn't supply the data on their students independently.

Of course, college placement is only one measure of a high school's success, and varies from year to year. Many high schools emphasized to us that they strive to find the right match for each student, not the college with the most cachet.