GROWING up, she heard a hundred Harvard stories. In high school, she put the college squarely in her sights. But when judgment day came in the winter of 1988, the Harvard admissions guys were frankly unimpressed. Her academic record was solid—not special. Extracurriculars, interview, recommendations? Above average, but not by much. “Nothing really stands out,” one admissions officer scribbled on her application folder. Wrote another, “Harvard not really the right place.”

At the hyperselective Harvard, where high school valedictorians, National Merit Scholarship finalists, musical prodigies—11,000 ambitious kids in all—are rejected annually, this young woman didn’t seem to have much of a chance. Thanks to Harvard’s largest affirmative action program, she got in anyway. No, she wasn’t poor, black, disabled, Hispanic, native American, or even Aleutian. She got in because her mom went to Harvard.

Folk wisdom at Harvard holds that “Mother Harvard does not coddle her young.” She sure treats her grandkids right, though. For more than 40 years, an astounding one-fifth of Harvard’s students have received admissions preference because their parents attended the school. Today, these overwhelmingly affluent, white children of alumni—“legacies”—are three times more likely to be accepted to Harvard than high school kids who lack that handsome lineage.

Yalies, don’t feel smug: Offspring of the Old Blue are two-and-a-half times more likely to be accepted than their unconnected peers. Dartmouth this year admitted 57 percent of its legacy applicants, compared to 27 percent of non-legacies. At the University of Pennsylvania, 66 percent of legacies were admitted last year—thanks in part to an autonomous “office of alumni admissions” that actively lobbies for

**Why Are Drovers of Unqualified, Unprepared Kids Getting into Our Top Colleges?**

*Because their dads are alumni*

by John Larew

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*John Larew, a former editorial chair of The Harvard Crimson, graduates this month.*
alumni children before the admissions committee. “One can argue that it’s an accident, but it sure doesn’t look like an accident,” admits Yale Dean of Admissions Worth David.

If the legacies’ big edge seems unfair to the tens of thousands who get turned away every year, Ivy League administrators have long defended the innocence of the legacy stat. Children of alumni are just smarter; they come from privileged backgrounds and tend to grow up in homes where parents encourage learning. That’s what Harvard Dean of Admissions William Fitzsimmons told the campus newspaper, the Harvard Crimson, when it first reported on the legacy preference last year. Departing Harvard President Derek Bok patiently explained that the legacy preference worked only as a “tie-breaking factor” between otherwise equally qualified candidates.

Since Ivy League admissions data is a notoriously classified commodity, when Harvard officials said in previous years that alumni kids were just better, you had to take them at their word. But then federal investigators came along and pried open those top-secret files. The Harvard guys were lying.

This past fall, after two years of study, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) found that, far from being more qualified or even equally qualified, the average admitted legacy at Harvard between 1981 and 1988 was significantly less qualified than the average admitted nonlegacy. Examining admissions office ratings on academics, extracurriculars, personal qualities, recommendations, and other categories, the OCR concluded that “with the exception of the athletic rating, [admitted] nonlegacies scored better than legacies in all areas of comparison.”

Exceptionally high admit rates, lowered academic standards, preferential treatment . . . hmmm. These sound like the cries heard in the growing fury over affirmative action for racial minorities in America’s elite universities. Only no one is outraged about legacies.

In his recent book, Preferential Policies, Thomas Sowell argues that doling out special treatment encourages lackluster performance by the favored and resentment from the spurned. His far-ranging study flits from Malaysia to South Africa to American college campuses. Legacies don’t merit a word.

Dinesh D’Souza, in his celebrated jeremiad Illiberal Education, blames affirmative action in college admissions for declining academic standards and increasing racial tensions. Lowered standards for minority applicants, he hints, may soon destroy the university as we know it. Lowered standards for legacies? The subject doesn’t come up.

For all his polysyllabic complaints against preferential admissions, William F. Buckley Jr. (Yale ’50) has never bothered to note that son Chris (Yale ’75) got the benefit of a policy that more than doubled his chance of admission.

With so much silence on the subject, you’d be excused for thinking that in these enlightened times hereditary preferences are few and far between. But you’d be wrong. At most elite universities during the eighties, the legacy was by far the biggest piece of the preferential pie. At Harvard, a legacy is about twice as likely to be admitted as a black or Hispanic student. As sociologists Jerome Karabel and David Karen point out, if alumni children were admitted to Harvard at the same rate as other applicants, their numbers in the class of 1992 would have been reduced by about 200. Instead, those 200 marginally qualified legacies outnumbered all black, Mexican-American, native American, and Puerto Rican enrollees put together. If a few marginally qualified minorities are undermining Harvard’s academic standards as much as conservatives charge, think about the damage all those legacies must be doing.

Mind you, colleges have the right to give the
occasional preference—to bend the rules for the brilliant oboist or the world-class curler or the guy whose remarkable decency can’t be measured by the SAT. (I happened to benefit from a geographical edge: It’s easier to get into Harvard from West Virginia than from New England.) And until standardized tests and grade point average perfectly reflect the character, judgment, and drive of a student, tips like these aren’t just nice, they’re fair. Unfortunately, the extent of the legacy privilege in elite American colleges suggests something more than the occasional tie-breaking tip. Forget meritocracy. When 20 percent of Harvard’s student body gets a legacy preference, aristocracy is the word that comes to mind.

**A caste of thousands**

If complaining about minority preferences is fashionable in the world of competitive colleges, bitching about legacies is just plain gauche, suggesting an unhealthy resentment of the privileged. But the effects of the legacy trickle down. For every legacy that wins, someone—usually someone less privileged—loses. And higher education is a high-stakes game.

High school graduates earn 59 percent of the income of four-year college graduates. Between high school graduates and alumni of prestigious colleges, the disparity is far greater. A *Fortune* study of American CEOs shows the usual suspects—graduates of Yale, Princeton, and Harvard—leading the list. A recent survey of the Harvard Class of 1940 found that 43 percent were worth more than $1 million. With some understatement, the report concludes, “A picture of highly advantageous circumstances emerges here, does it not, compared with American society as a whole?”

An Ivy League diploma doesn’t necessarily mean a fine education. Nor does it guarantee future success. What it does represent is a big head start in the rat race—a fact Harvard will be the first to tell you. When I was a freshman, a counselor at the Office of Career Services instructed a group of us to make the Harvard name stand out on our resumes: “Underline it, boldface it, put it in capital letters.”

Of course, the existence of the legacy preference in this fierce career competition isn’t exactly news. According to historians, it was a direct result of the influx of Jews into the Ivy League during the twenties. Until then, Harvard, Princeton, and Yale had admitted anyone who could pass their entrance exams, but suddenly Jewish kids were outscoring the WASPs. So the schools began to use nonacademic criteria—“character,” “solidity,” and, eventually, lineage—to justify accepting low-scoring blue bloods over their peers. Yale implemented its legacy preference first, in 1925—spelling it out in a memo four years later: The school would admit “Yale sons of good character and reasonably good record . . . regardless of the number of applicants and the superiority of outside competitors.” Harvard and Princeton followed shortly thereafter.

Despite its ignoble origins, the legacy preference has only sporadically come under fire, most notably in 1978’s affirmative action decision, *University of California Board of Regents v. Bakke*. In his concurrence, Justice Harry Blackmun observed, “It is somewhat ironic to have us so deeply disturbed over a program where race is an element of consciousness, and yet to be aware of the fact, as we are, that institutions of higher learning . . . have given conceded preferences to the children of alumni.”

If people are, in fact, aware of the legacy preference, why has it been spared the scrutiny given other preferential policies? One reason is public ignorance of the scope and scale of those preferences—an ignorance carefully cultivated by America’s elite institutions. It’s easy to maintain the fiction that your legacies get in strictly on merit as long as your admissions bureaucracy controls all access to student data. Information on Harvard’s legacies became publicly available not because of any fit of disclosure by the university, but because a few civil rights types noted that the school had a suspiciously low rate of admission for Asian-Americans, who are statistically stronger than other racial groups in academics.

While the ensuing OCR inquiry found no evidence of illegal racial discrimination by Harvard, it did turn up some embarrassing information about how much weight the “legacy” label gives an otherwise flimsy file. Take these comments scrawled by admissions officers on applicant folders:

- “Double lineage who chose the right parents.”
- “Dad’s [deleted] connections signify lineage of more than usual weight. That counted into the equation makes this a case which (assuming positive TRs [teacher recommendations] and Alum IV [alumnus interview]) is well worth doing.”
- “Lineage is main thing.”
- “Not quite strong enough to get the clean tip.”
- “Classical case that would be hard to explain to dad.”
- “Double lineage but lots of problems.”
- “Not a great profile, but just strong enough #’s and grades to get the tip from lineage.”
- “Without lineage, there would be little case. With it, we’ll keep looking.”

In every one of these cases, the applicant was admitted.

Of course, Harvard’s not doing anything other schools aren’t. The practice of playing favorites with
alumni children is nearly universal among private colleges and isn’t unheard of at public institutions, either. The rate of admission for Stanford’s alumni children is “almost twice the general population,” according to a spokesman for the admissions office. Notre Dame reserves 25 percent of each freshman class for legacies. At the University of Virginia, where native Virginians make up two-thirds of each class, alumni children are automatically treated as Virginians even if they live out of state—giving them a whopping competitive edge. The same is true of the University of California at Berkeley. At many schools, Harvard included, all legacy applications are guaranteed a read by the dean of admissions himself—a privilege nonlegacies don’t get.

Little white Elis

Like the Harvard deans, officials at other universities dismiss the statistical disparities by pointing to the superior environmental influences found in the homes of their alumni. “I bet that, statistically, [legacy qualifications are] a little above average, but not by much,” says Paul Killebrew, associate director of admissions at Dartmouth. “The admitted group [of legacies] would look exactly like the profile of the class.”

James Wickenden, a former dean of admissions at Princeton who now runs a college consulting firm, suspects otherwise. Wickenden wrote of “one Ivy League university” where the average combined SAT score of the freshman class was 1,350 out of a possible 1,600, compared to 1,280 for legacies. “At most selective schools, [legacy status] doubles, even triples the chances of admission,” he says. Many colleges even place admitted legacies in a special “Not in Profile” file, so that when the school’s SAT scores are published, alumni kids won’t pull down the average.

How do those kids fare once they’re enrolled? No one’s telling. Harvard, for one, refuses to keep any records of how alumni children stack up academically against their nonlegacy classmates—perhaps because the last such study, in 1956, showed Harvard sons hogging the bottom of the grade curve.

If the test scores of admitted legacies are a mystery, the reason colleges accept so many is not. They’re afraid the alumni parents of rejected children will stop giving to the colleges’ unending fundraising campaigns. “Our survival as an institution depends on having support from alumni,” says Richard Steele, director of undergraduate admissions at Duke University, “so according advantages to alumni kids is just a given.” In fact, the OCR exonerated Harvard’s legacy preference precisely because legacies bring in money. (OCR cited a federal district court ruling that a state university could favor the children of out-of-state alumni because “defendants showed that the alumni provide monetary support for the university.”) And there’s no question that alumni provide significant support to Harvard: Last year, they raised $20 million for the scholarship fund alone.

In a letter to OCR defending his legacies, Harvard’s Fitzsimmons painted a grim picture of a school where the preference did not exist—a place peeved alumni turned their backs on when their kids failed to make the cut. “Without the fundraising activities of alumni,” Fitzsimmons warned darkly, “Harvard could not maintain many of its programs, including needs-blind admissions.”

Ignoring, for the moment, the question of how “needs-blind” a system is that admits one-fifth of each class on the assumption that, hey, their parents might give us money, Fitzsimmons’s defense doesn’t quite ring true. The “Save the Scholarship Fund” line is a variation on the principle of “Firemen First,” whereby bureaucrats threatened with a budget cut insist that essential programs rather than executive perks and junkets will be the first to be slashed. Truth be told, there is just about nothing that Harvard, the richest university in the world, could do to jeopardize needs-blind admissions, provided that it placed a high enough priority on them.

But even more unclear is how closely alumni giving is related to the acceptance of alumni kids. “People whose children are denied admission are initially upset,” says Wickenden, “and maybe for a year or two their interest in the university wanes. But typically they come back around when they see that what happened was best for the kids.” Wickenden has put his money where his mouth is: He rejected two sons of a Princeton trustee involved in a $420 million fundraising project, not to mention the child of a board member who managed the school’s $2 billion endowment, all with no apparent ill effect.

Many colleges even place admitted legacies in a special “Not in Profile” file, so that when the school’s SAT scores are published, alumni kids won’t pull down the average.
Most university administrators would be loath to take such a chance, despite a surprising lack of evidence of the legacy/largest connection. Fitzsimmons admits Harvard knows of no empirical research to support the claim that diminishing legacies would decrease alumni contributions, relying instead on “hundreds, perhaps thousands of conversations with alumni whose sons and daughters applied.”

No doubt some of Fitzsimmons’s anxiety is founded: It’s only natural for alumni to want their kids to have the same privileges they did. But the historical record suggests that alumni are far more tolerant than administrators realize. Admit women and blacks? Well, we would, said administrators earlier this century—but the alumni just won’t have it. Fortunately for American universities, the bulk of those alumni turned out to be less craven than administrators thought they’d be. As more blacks and women enrolled over the past two decades, the funds kept pouring in, reaching an all-time high in the eighties.

Another significant historical lesson can be drawn from the late fifties, when Harvard’s selectiveness increased dramatically. As the number of applications soared, the rate of admission for legacies began declining from about 90 percent to its current 43 percent. Administration anxiety rose inversely, but Harvard’s fundraising machine has somehow survived. That doesn’t mean there’s no correlation between alumni giving and the legacy preference, obviously; rather, it means that the people who would withhold their money at the loss of the legacy privilege were far outnumbered by other givers. “It takes time to get the message out,” explains Fitzsimmons, “but eventually people start responding. We’ve had to make the case [for democratization] to alumni, and I think that they generally feel good about that.”

**Heir cut**

When justice dictates that ordinary kids should have as fair a shot as the children of America’s elite, couldn’t Harvard and its sister institutions trouble themselves to “get the message out” again? Of course they could. But virtually no one—liberal or conservative—is pushing them to do so.

“There must be no goals or quotas for any special group or category of applicants,” reads an advertisement in the right-wing Dartmouth Review. “Equal opportunity must be the guiding policy. Males, females, blacks, whites, Native Americans, Hispanics... can all be given equal chance to matriculate, survive, and prosper based solely on individual performance.”

Noble sentiments from the Ernest Martin Hopkins Institute, an organization of conservative Dartmouth alumni. Reading on, though, we find these “concerned alumni” aren’t sacrificing their young to the cause. “Alumni sons and daughters,” notes the ad further down, “should receive some special consideration.”

Similarly, Harvard’s conservative Salient has twice in recent years decried the treatment of Asian-Americans in admissions, but it attributes their misfortune to favoritism for blacks and Hispanics. What about legacy university favoritism—a much bigger factor? Salient writers have twice endorsed it.

What’s most surprising is the indifference of minority activists. With the notable exception of a few vocal Asian-Americans, most have made peace with the preference for well-off whites.

Mecca Nelson, the president of Harvard’s Black Students Association, leads rallies for the hiring of more minority faculty. She participated in an illegal sit-in at an administration building in support of Afro-American studies. But when it comes to the policy that Asian-American activist Arthur Hu calls “a 20-percent-white quota,” Nelson says, “I don’t have any really strong opinions about it. I’m not very clear on the whole legacy issue at all.”

Joshua Li, former co-chair of Harvard’s Asian-American Association, explains his complacency differently: “We understand that in the future Asian-American students will receive these tips as well.”

At America’s elite universities, you’d expect a somewhat higher standard of fairness than that—especially when money is the driving force behind the concept. And many Ivy League types do advocate for more just and lofty ideals. One of them, as it happens, is Derek Bok. In one of Harvard’s annual reports, he warned that the modern university is slowly turning from a truth-seeking enterprise into a money-grubbing corporation—at the expense of the loyalty of its alums. “Such an institution may still evoke pride and respect because of its intellectual achievements,” he said rightly. “But the feelings it engenders will not be quite the same as those produced by an institution that is prepared to forgo income, if need be, to preserve values of a nobler kind.”

_**Forgo income to preserve values of a nobler kind**—it’s an excellent idea. Embrace the preferences for the poor and disadvantaged. Wean alumni from the idea of the legacy edge. And above all, stop the hypocrisy that begrudges the great unwashed a place at Harvard while happily making room for the less qualified sons and daughters of alums.

After 70 years, it won’t be easy to wrest the legacy preference away from the alums. But the long-term payoff is as much a matter of message as money. When the sons and daughters of today’s college kids fill out their applications, the legacy preference should seem not a birthright, but a long-gone relic from the Ivy League’s inequitable past.
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The editor shook his head in disappointment. "No, it won't work. We are not in the business of writing diaries here. The story should be more politically aggressive, more pathetic, if you wish."

He fished his pen out from under the pile of Reuters and Agence-France dispatches and newspaper clippings, bent over my neatly typed story, and started to write between the lines. "In his speech the head of the Rhodesian racist regime, Ian Smith, called upon his military to kill everyone who would be suspected of sympathy toward the patriotic guerrilla fighters."

I looked at him in surprise. "Wait a minute—Smith didn’t say that. He said he would be firm in defending law and order in Rhodesia, but there was nothing in his speech about killing civilians."

The boss looked at me the way a corporal inspects a virgin draftee. "That’s what he had in mind," he said impatiently. "Always try to remember: We are engaged in an ideological war. We cannot work with white gloves on."

It was my first lesson in journalism, and I was learning from a master: Vladimir Alekseevich Korochantsev, chief of the African Desk of the Soviet news agency TASS. I had prepared myself for harsh criticism of my phraseology and word choice; I didn’t know a thing about white gloves. But over the next 10 years, from Africa to Paris to Washington and back to Moscow, I would learn the craft from the best journalists in the Soviet Union—men whose skills had nothing to do with curiosity or resourcefulness and everything to do with the subtleties of making propaganda. Like that of his peers, Korochantsev’s talent was knowing exactly how to navigate the stormy and treacherous waters of Soviet journalism, where a single mistake could sink your career without a trace.

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