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Alex Posecznick
University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

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Selling Hope and College: Merits, Markets, and Recruitment in an Unranked School

Abstract

[Excerpt] It has long been assumed that college admission should be a simple matter of sorting students according to merit, with the best heading off to the Ivy League and highly ranked liberal arts colleges and the rest falling naturally into their rightful places. Admission to selective institutions, where extremely fine distinctions are made, is characterized by heated public debates about whether standardized exams, high school transcripts, essays, recommendation letters, or interviews best indicate which prospective students are "worthy."

And then there is college for everyone else. But what goes into less-selective college admissions in an era when everyone feels compelled to go, regardless of preparation or life goals? "Ravenwood College," where Alex Posecznick spent a year doing ethnographic research, was a small, private, nonprofit institution dedicated to social justice and serving traditionally underprepared students from underrepresented minority groups. To survive in the higher education marketplace, the college had to operate like a business and negotiate complex categories of merit while painting a hopeful picture of the future for its applicants. *Selling Hope and College* is a snapshot of a particular type of institution as it goes about the business of producing itself and justifying its place in the market. Admissions staff members were burdened by low enrollments and worked tirelessly to fill empty seats, even as they held on to the institution's special spirit. Posecznick documents what it takes to keep a "mediocre" institution open and running, and the struggles, tensions, and battles that members of the community tangle with daily as they carefully walk the line between empowering marginalized students and exploiting them.

Keywords

College admissions, minorities, social justice

Disciplines

Education Economics | Higher Education Administration

Comments

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SELLING HOPE AND COLLEGE

*Merit, Markets, and Recruitment
in an Unranked School*

ALEX POSECZNICK

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INTRODUCTION

An Uncertain Beginning

Ravenwood is only for the serious students and I would recommend that only the serious apply. The pace of the instruction commands attention to detail and mimics real life workplace experience.

I think the educational experience at Ravenwood was exceptional and rewarding. I think the institution needs to get a doctoral program in there.

The education model for adult learning at Ravenwood is extremely helpful. The admission standards should be raised, as should the expectations—both of students and professors. It must be added that several of the Ravenwood professors are extremely good and dedicated.

ANONYMOUS COMMENTS, RAVENWOOD GRADUATION SURVEY 2007-2008

Beginning at the End . . . Which Is the Beginning

I headed to the commencement ceremonies of Ravenwood College at a large hall in the city center on a warm afternoon in June 2009.¹ I knew I was in the right place when I spotted all of the caps and gowns worn by passengers on the bus and in the street leading to the hall. Although I was committed to going, I was not looking forward to the day. As someone who has been around colleges and universities for some time, I had grown to expect a somewhat dull event in which lines of people would file in and stand for too long while listening to droning speeches that were all inspiring in the same uninspiring way. The new chair of Ravenwood's Business Programs and I had both reacted with astonishment upon learning that the last ceremony had been over three hours, particularly considering that there were only a

few hundred graduates. As we entered the hall, I awaited the long, dull speeches and reading of names with a sort of numbness. I did not expect what I encountered next.

The students at Ravenwood College were overwhelmingly Black and Hispanic adult women, and many were also first-generation college students. According to the popular *U.S. News & World Report*, Ravenwood was an unranked institution—indexed in the rankings and yet without a calculated score. Ravenwood was a private, four-year, nonprofit college in the urban Northeast Corridor of the United States. For those who had heard of the college, and even according to many who were part of its community, Ravenwood was mediocre. But the crowds of students and families at the commencement ceremony did not seem to care about rankings, and they were vocal in their joy: cheering, shouting, and making catcalls throughout the ceremony, often encouraged by the speakers. The student speakers that afternoon described finding hope in the face of obstacles, always obstacles. These women of color spoke about being strong in the face of difficulties: exams that terrified, studying till the morning light, working forty hours a week, taking care of children, relying on friends and families, coming to know their faculty as mentors, and always refusing the negativity of others. These speeches were punctuated by shouts from the audience, “tell it girl!” and “that’s right!” At times it felt almost as if we were listening to a sermon in a stereotypical Black American church, and the best speakers that day stoked such sentiment rather than discouraged it.

The crowds fell silent when listening to the story of one young woman. She was graduating with her bachelor degree, and her mother was to graduate with her master’s degree from Ravenwood that very day. But only a couple of weeks before the ceremony, the mother died suddenly, and the young woman accepted that degree on her mother’s behalf. The audience rose from their seats to honor this woman and her mother who had not made it to the ceremony.

Nearly every one of the seven student speakers referred to or directly quoted from newly elected President Obama, and at one point the crowds spontaneously took on his “Yes we can” campaign slogan, chanting in unison that shook the walls: “Yes we did! Yes we did! Yes we did!” A guest receiving an honorary degree from the college was not scheduled to speak but took the microphone from the college president nonetheless and spoke directly to the graduating students, stating “I am in awe of you.” The keynote

speaker said that he had given speeches at commencement ceremonies across the United States, including Harvard, and that the other ceremonies could not hold a candle to what he was seeing at Ravenwood College. When specific faculty members were called upon to speak, there were cheers; when the popular dean of the School for Business and Technology rose, he was greeted by a deafening roar of applause. As students' names were called and they crossed the stage, different parts of the hall would likewise erupt with cheering. When the recessional began to play, it was not the traditional *Pomp and Circumstance* but the R&B disco favorite by McFadden & Whitehead, "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now." By the time the recessional moved past the students, not only were they dancing, but so were the families and the faculty. The students had not let anything stand in their way; hope for the future was palpable. During my time at Ravenwood College, I had encountered cynicism from students, faculty, and staff alike, but on this day, everyone was hugging everyone else amid laughter and tears, and the three hours passed very quickly.

The ebb and flow of college has become so etched into the American imagination that it marks the seasons like a force of nature: while old leaves fall, college application narratives are blooming each autumn; the spring brings exhilarating possibilities and crushing disappointments; offices of admission watch decisions unfold throughout the summer; new crops of hopeful students arrive with the next autumn and return to their home as young adults over the holidays; and summers also bring caps and gowns. But despite these rhythms that resonate with the natural world, colleges and universities are not natural features of our landscape; they are the product of particular histories, agendas, and cultural understandings. Neither are they all the same.

Ravenwood College was the product of the counterculture and alternative educational movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and many members of the campus considered it progressive. Like many other colleges of this type, it was founded by charismatic individuals and was dedicated to providing education to nontraditional students who emerged in the era of L. B. Johnson's Great Society. Although the founders passed away some years ago, the mission of the college retained their vision through terms such as "empowerment," "positive change," and "community." It was a commuter college for working adults, most of whom were women (about 75 percent of the student body) of color (about 91 percent of the student body). It is also suggestive that according to one internal survey,² 80 percent of respondents had studied at a four-year institution at some point in their life; the traditional path had not

worked for these students. And so the graduation ceremony drove home to me something that had been on my mind: despite what many thought of Ravenwood, in my eyes it was far from mediocre. But why, then, did the college always find itself positioned as mediocre? And what were the consequences of that label? This book attempts to answer these questions.

When I arrived at the Office of Admissions a couple of days after the graduation ceremony, a small assemblage of staff were chatting about it; Dean of Admissions Karl Levitz, who was at the center of the buzz, immediately greeted me. Despite the generally positive tenor of the event, he was concerned about one particular speech.

One student speaker had departed from the theme of overcoming obstacles and pride in achievements. She had issued a call to her graduating classmates, not to simply achieve beyond the college, but to dedicate themselves to improving and being a part of the Ravenwood community. Specifically, she asked graduates to donate money to the college, to pursue their graduate degree at the college, to send their family members to the college, to tell their coworkers about the college, and to tell friends about the college. She urged the audience to donate once. She did it twice. She did it again and again. Although Dean Levitz was pleased with the sentiment, he disapproved of her repeating it as often as she did. Whether these repeated calls for money were made out of nervousness or love for alma mater, Levitz was concerned that her speech lacked subtlety and would be perceived as “pandering,” a “sales pitch,” or “over the top.” As the person who oversaw admissions to Ravenwood, Levitz thought that this was an opportunity gone awry. It was his job to think about such things.

Messaging and image were particularly important given Ravenwood’s recent enrollment history. A few years before this study, student enrollment had fallen dramatically, and the institution had laid off about a hundred staff and five faculty members; at about the same time, Ravenwood had closed four satellite campuses. Without the luxury of long wait-lists to take open seats, admission staff members had been schooled on the consequences of low enrollments and worked tirelessly to fill empty seats with students. Whether they were mediocre or extraordinary, Ravenwood College had to have students. Every opportunity counted. Every message counted.

I quickly found that admissions work was not bound to that one office, space, or even institution. Instead, the work of recruiting and admitting students was drawn into many overlapping and competing aspects of life at this

small, less selective, less prestigious college. Ravenwood College operated in a metropolitan region along with at least 166 other accredited colleges and universities within a hundred miles. Ravenwood offered associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees. With some important exceptions, the college had been hovering at a student population of around 1,500 for the past few years but lacked a recognizable brand even by residents in the region.⁵

The students of Ravenwood were interesting and worthy of attention in every way; many seemed to have extraordinary life stories about overcoming obstacles and setting aspirations in the face of them. This book, however, does not tell their stories. This is the story of the “mediocre” college in which they enrolled, which was not really mediocre at all. This is the story of the individuals tasked with the perpetuation of the institution and how they tangled with categories and processes not of their own making. I offer here a snapshot of an institution occupying a precarious position in the higher education marketplace—neither particularly selective nor particularly affordable, rooted in local communities but lacking strong brand awareness even locally. It is an institution that ekes by each year, semester by semester, in its tiny corner of the marketplace. Hope, in all its manifestations, is central to what takes place at Ravenwood: dreams and waking dreams; patience and waiting; doubt, fear, and joy; illusion, fantasy, and the future; revolution, utopia, and apocalypse; salvation, redemption, and expiation; anticipation, expectation, and possibility; realism and resignation (as adapted from Crapanzano 2003, 6). It is a place not only with a special spirit and some unique challenges but with a story that may be relevant to others outside its walls. I argue that through Ravenwood's story, we can learn something about hope, credentials, and the massive educational infrastructure that builds and maintains them.

Ravenwood's Struggles with Mediocrity

As per my agreement with the institution, Ravenwood College and the names of all persons related to this study are pseudonyms. I have taken numerous steps here to protect the identity of the institution less because I think it needs to be protected and more because I want the reader to focus on how other institutions struggle with these questions, not on the particular decisions made at Ravenwood. Although I do not argue that what I observed is

generalizable to all higher education institutions, neither do I want the readers to dismiss everything here as an aberration; although these particular people tangled with tensions in particular ways, the tensions themselves are deep and wide. But where exactly is Ravenwood College?

It is true that the college was located within a physical plant, included a particular set of people, circulated around a set of ideas, created a particular pathway for participation, drew on a group of students, and can be considered, as a whole, a thing called Ravenwood College. Ravenwood College was not bound to or by any one of these individual components, however. Historically there were different staff members tasked with different (although similar) activities to perpetuate the institution, different faculty teaching, different students to participate, and even different ideas encountered. Ravenwood College was once located in another building and moved to its current home in the 1990s. So where is Ravenwood College, if not in a particular building or set of individuals? Exactly what is it that is being perpetuated? Ravenwood College is no more than the locus identified as Ravenwood where multiple networks meet and around which a great deal of activity takes place. Staff, faculty, and students are pulled together in and around the imaginary of the college, but government policies on financial aid, private lenders, marketing agencies, communities, neighborhoods, student and alumni employers, individual families, and so on all acknowledge and are implicated in this space. Further, this circulation is knotted together in unique ways around differing institutions, like Ravenwood, that then regulate or facilitate that flow. But this is not a cold and alien infrastructure; it is layered with culturally and historically contingent affect, hopes, desires, and fantasies. In this book, I describe Ravenwood College as I found it in 2008–2009, a material, semiotic, and social node for moving around people and ideas. I readily acknowledge that this may not be the Ravenwood College of today; the strands in the infrastructure are always shifting, and given its precarity, there may no longer be a Ravenwood College at all by the time you read this. And although I share my sincere reflections and observations, this story is filtered through—and cannot be separated from—my own particular experiences.

Ravenwood of 2008–2009 was located in an eighteen-floor building in an urban neighborhood that was once industrial but was quickly becoming trendy and hip; the college leased four floors plus a large suite on the first floor for the Office of Admissions. Although the building entrance was on

the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, a secondary entrance was designated for college use only and was staffed by Ravenwood security. Near this secondary entrance, large "Ravenwood" banners gave the impression that the institution took up the whole eighteen-floor building. Not far away were small art galleries, thrift shops, and trendy young people. To the east was a growing community of Russians and Eastern Europeans, with fresh produce, hidden bakeries, and very strong coffee. A number of businesses in this neighborhood were pushing to re-label the area in an attempt to give it its own character and designation, but those in the college remained uninterested, as this new name had no cachet; administrators in the college seemed happy to be part of the trendy nearby neighborhoods. Staff indicated that even ten years earlier it was difficult to find more than one or two places to eat lunch, but at the time of this study, there were strings of eateries within walking distance: trendy coffee shops, gourmet sandwich joints, soup shops, Starbucks, and Dunkin' Donuts. Over the course of the year of this study, a nearby empty lot was transformed into a park with fountains, benches, and gardens, and an art gallery had been slated to open on the first floor of the same building as Ravenwood. At one time, the only people on the street would be locals going to and from work, but by 2008–2009, many others passed through the area daily; the neighborhood was clearly gentrifying.

There were other postsecondary institutions and their satellites in this neighborhood: a culinary arts school had moved into the eighth floor of the same building, and a university from the greater metropolitan region had opened a small site across the street from Ravenwood. Furthermore, Ravenwood "sublet" space to two institutions: an English-as-a-second-language school and a German liberal arts college that maintained an exchange site in the United States.

Ravenwood's halls were wide but poorly lit; the layout was a bit confusing and contained some passageways that were not intuitive. The facility was generally clean and well maintained, and during the day, the campus was somewhat quiet. As the evening hours approached, students would begin to arrive for the many night classes and could be found meandering around the massive concrete pillars, which were painted Ravenwood blue. As the building was by far the tallest structure in the neighborhood, it afforded amazing views of the city skyline, which appeared with almost astonishing suddenness upon coming around a corner or entering a classroom.

Divided into two academic schools with mostly professional majors, the college offered both undergraduate (59 percent of Ravenwood students) and graduate degrees (41 percent of Ravenwood students).⁴ Among undergraduates, 73 percent were female and 27 percent were male. In terms of reported race and ethnicity, 70 percent were Black, 21 percent were Hispanic, 3.4 percent were White, and 3.2 percent were international students.⁵ The average undergraduate student was 32.8 years old (more heavily distributed with those in their twenties and others in their forties). Graduate students had similar traits: 75 percent female (average age 35.7) and 25 percent male (average age 34.4); 61 percent Black, 18 percent Hispanic, 11 percent White, and 7 percent international. Among full-time, first-time undergraduates, 94 percent received some form of financial aid, 72 percent of students received federal grants, 58 percent received state or local grants, 75 percent received some institutional grants, and about 84 percent were taking out student loans. Roughly 30 percent were married, 43 percent had children under their care, and 27 percent were first-generation college students. Students came primarily from four different, local townships or communities in the region. According to internal data, Ravenwood College's acceptance rate had varied dramatically over the years, from 74 percent in 2000, to 97 percent in 2006, to about 40 percent in 2008. The freshmen retention rate was only about 40 percent, meaning that nearly 60 percent of freshmen dropped out at some point in their first two semesters.⁶ In many ways, Ravenwood fits Astin and Lee's (1972) description of relatively small, private, less selective institutions with limited resources.

The Ravenwood tuition rate was between \$450 and \$850 per credit, which translated into between roughly \$15,000 and \$26,000 per year depending on the program in which a student enrolled. Ravenwood College was about twice as expensive as local public institutions and priced similarly to other four-year, private institutions operating in the region.

The college was founded as an alternative educational institution designed to empower women of color and had originally operated under another name. As part of its attempt to rebrand itself, the college's name was eventually changed to Ravenwood College, but the founders' activist heritage was still enthusiastically celebrated on campus. Several important terms were peppered throughout its literature on the school's vision, mission statement, and values, including *social justice*, *experiential learning*, *applied scholarship*,

positive change, communities, and empowerment. The college was regionally accredited and successfully renewed its membership after each review.

Ravenwood College had a curriculum design that some praised and others lamented. Ravenwood offered a limited number of degree programs in its two academic schools; the majors offered tended to be those often referred to as careerist, professional, or vocational in orientation. The college operated one “traditional” liberal arts program, which had one of the lowest enrollments of any program. For all degree programs, students at Ravenwood would enroll not for a single course but for a cluster of courses that integrated material from a variety of disciplines into a single theme based on that major. Therefore, students would enroll in “Learning Community Clusters” (or LC Clusters) topically relevant to their major with a cohort of other students doing the same (thus, students had courses only with other students of the same major, moving through all the same courses for that semester). A capstone project for each semester would explicitly link the coursework for that cluster and some sort of internship or professional experience. Many faculty and administrators at Ravenwood felt that this alternative curriculum design not only was at the heart of their activist heritage but also appealed to adult students. Students took these LC Clusters as a cohort and were then encouraged to continue taking LC Clusters with the same cohort. When many students graduated, they were doing so with students with whom they had taken dozens of courses over the entire course of study, creating the sense of a very close-knit community (although one, like all others, with internal conflicts). At the graduation ceremony, many students talked about their cohorts as a powerful and important support group that they drew upon semester after semester, although there were also cohorts of students rife with conflict and disagreement.

Another aspect of this curriculum design, however, was that it limited choices. Unlike some other colleges with similar curricula, the LC Cluster was the only option at Ravenwood. There were no electives, no traditional departments, and although students had some choice in terms of which LC Cluster to take, they could not opt out of any courses within that cluster. The advantage of this accelerated, integrated approach was also that it allowed students to complete a bachelor’s degree in fewer than four years. Adult students were thus able to take LC Clusters of courses every semester (including the summers) in the evenings and weekends, while working a full-time

job. The intense series of demands that were placed on students left little time for extracurricular activities or student activities and left students with less need for academic advisement.

Although there were both full-time and part-time faculty at Ravenwood, there were no traditional departments, and there was no tenure or faculty ranks. There were approximately forty-eight full-time faculty, fifteen of whom were women. Among the full-time faculty, twenty-nine self-identified as white and nineteen as people of color. With some important exceptions, teaching and service were generally the focus of time spent by faculty. Under the presidency of Saul Hartwick, Ravenwood had attempted to move toward a more traditional university model, with an emphasis on ranking, research, and prestige. As will be seen, faculty expressed a great deal of dislike for former President Hartwick during this study, and many of his changes were rejected after his departure. Faculty who came in under this presidency found themselves with different responsibilities—including rules for sabbatical and an expectation of publication—that differed from those who came in before or after. In addition, a veritable army of part-time, adjunct faculty worked on a course-by-course contract.

The degree of student satisfaction was difficult to measure, and of course, there were many ways that one could point to this or other related measures. (One such attempt to uncover student satisfaction was in a detailed survey of recent graduates implemented and analyzed by a research company hired by Ravenwood College to measure likes, dislikes, and perceptions that the program “helped students develop marketable strengths and achieve goals.” The survey was sent to 750 alumni (of both undergraduate and graduate programs), of whom 174 (or 23 percent) responded. Graduates whose first year at Ravenwood was anywhere from 2004 to 2007 made up about 90 percent of respondents.

Broadly, the questions asked alumni to reflect on their opinions either of the college or of the students themselves; although the response rate was only 23 percent, the results show a great deal of support for what Ravenwood was doing. Eighty-six percent of respondents were either “Very” or “Somewhat” satisfied with their experiences, and 85 percent said they would recommend Ravenwood to a friend. The survey allowed students to write in comments as well, and many of these rich, anonymous comments provide an interesting window into alumni perceptions. I draw on these at the head of this and the other chapters of this book to bring forward the voice of students. This

light peppering of student voices is intentional, not because student voices are not valuable, but rather because comment sections such as these were the primary media through which administrators heard those voices.

In these comments, there is little consensus about whether Ravenwood was a good or bad place to pursue one's education. This book follows in that tradition of Varenne and McDermott (1998), in which they set out not to answer why certain schools are successful or failing but rather to engage in a dialogue about how these categories are actively constructed in context. Or as applied to this case, my goal is not so much to ask how much merit this institution warranted, but rather to understand why hierarchies of excellence are the starting point of most discourses about colleges and universities, and how persons deal with this fact. I am not trying to answer the question of whether Ravenwood was a "good" place to pursue postsecondary education, which is why these students are not at the center of this book. The quotes from students here also demonstrate how student voices are deployed and made sense of within institutional bureaucracies.

The fates of institutions such as Ravenwood are the result of continuous, joint activity by all sorts of actors, from administrators and professors to magazine editors and accrediting agencies. Ravenwood is both a locus, or node, for these activities, and also the end result of those activities identified as "Ravenwood." In the end, therefore, this book is not about Ravenwood *being* mediocre but about how Ravenwood comes to be *classified* as mediocre by many constituents, and the consequence of that mediocrity for those affiliated with it. And the consequences of inhabiting a mediocre label shaped not only how activities were enacted but also how individuals layered meaning into their pasts, presents, and futures. Likewise, the Office of Admissions was a locus for certain sets of activities within Ravenwood, but particular actors (admission counselors, college presidents, professors, prospective students, current students, and so forth) participated to varying degrees in those activities.

Welcome to the Office of Admissions

Although rife with tension, work in college admission has a somewhat predictable rhythm. Ravenwood operated with three full semesters every year: fall (September to December), spring (January to May), and summer (May to

August). Offering a full set of courses in the summer was one way that Ravenwood allowed for students to complete requirements more quickly than many of its peers. Unlike at many other colleges, new students (both undergraduate and graduate) were admitted each semester, including summers. This created a near constant stream of activity, culminating in the weeks leading up to a semester start and the few weeks after that start date, which were at a breakneck speed. At other times, admission counselors were able to operate at a slower and independent pace—coming to the office at 10:00 or 11:00 AM, attending meetings, traveling to events, making presentations, and planning where or how to find prospective students. At high points, however, admission counselors spent every moment of their day managing communication with prospective students in “conversion,” the process of moving one from *prospective* status to enrolled *student*. Despite the dean’s pride in teamwork and team goals, the counselors did much of this work independently—in parallel, and they often saw themselves in competition with one another. Sitting in the Office of Admissions during these frenzied “conversion” periods, I would note a steady stream of students being let in to sit and wait in the reception area, while counselors rushed throughout. They ran from their office, to the administrative center, to their office, to the waiting students, to the files, to Dean Levitz’s office for special approval, to their office, to the tuition planner’s office; sometimes there was a student in tow and usually a clutch of papers under the admission counselor’s arms (as most of the process at Ravenwood was not digitized). At their frequent stops in their offices, counselors would make a phone call, listen to eighteen voice mails, and send off an e-mail or two. All of the activity by these six or seven men and women ensured that the college would continue to exist from semester to semester.

Prospective students and guests entering the Office of Admissions would generally be greeted at the front desk by student workers, usually young women responsible for providing forms and contacting admission counselors. Behind the desk were the three “ladies in the back,” the administrative support staff who processed the vast amounts of documentation that streamed into the office every semester.

The rest of the Admissions suite was a large, open hall with offices around the perimeter. The main hall could be arranged for either small group conversations at individual tables or with rows of seats for large presentations. Admission counselors, who were the main face of the institution to prospective

students, had window offices along the outer wall. In contrast, the administrative support staff were in a shared, interior space without windows, individual offices, or general access.

At any given time, there were six admission counselors whose primary duty was to recruit students and “convert” them into students. Admission counselors tended to be young, and turnover rates were typically high. Upon my arrival, the admission counselors were Bernard, Maggie, Nadira, and Louisa. There were two open positions at that time, which were almost immediately filled by Aaron and Jaleel in November. In March 2009, Nadira resigned and was soon replaced by Kenya. In September 2009, Louisa resigned and was replaced by Julian, who started in October. According to the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (2010), the national average salary for an admissions counselor in a “Master’s University” was \$33,361 per annum, and the salaries at Ravenwood College were close to this figure.

Other staff members were also peppered throughout the office. Andrei and Sam worked with graphic design and website, respectively. Cole was a part-time tuition planner working out of the office to help applicants think through the financial decisions.

At the time of this study, Dean Levitz was a long-standing member of the community and remained so until his passing in 2012. At one point, he had moved from admissions work to development and marketing but had returned to the Office of Admissions shortly before my research began. He laid out goals, established policies, and provided leadership for the office. Dean Levitz was supported by Madelyn, the assistant director of admissions, who was tasked both with recruitment responsibilities and with the daily operations of the department.

These were the men and women I came to know most closely at Ravenwood. They shaped my understanding of how the institution struggled with recruitment, legitimacy, and precarity.

Capturing and Complicating the Special Spirit of Ravenwood

Ostensibly, this book is about one particular place; it is about the individuals I encountered from 2008 to 2009 engaged in the ongoing activity required to produce Ravenwood College on a daily basis. It is about their struggles,

competing agendas, tensions, triumphs, and deliberations as they went about these activities. Layered through this work, however, is the broader cultural context in which these activities made sense. Although this work was necessary for the continued existence of Ravenwood College, much of it also reproduced the institution's position in a hierarchy of excellence or merit—in particular, on the lower end of that scale. Only about 30 percent of Americans have a bachelor's degree (Ryan and Bauman 2012), and as such, we must reject the notion that Ravenwood and its students represented the most marginalized or dominated groups in the United States. And yet, in the ongoing, postsecondary hierarchy premised on elitehood, selectivity, resources, and prestige, Ravenwood was peripheral at best.

Much of the educational infrastructure is intended to make diverse institutions and students commensurate with one another—so that they may be better compared. But this also serves to mask the incommensurate nature of race, gender, and class. Explicit talk about race, gender, and class were difficult in the administration—either because of formal organizational culture and conventions or perhaps because it was just difficult to perform in front of an outside observer such as myself. Regardless, these three hovered beneath the surface of nearly every interaction, unspoken and unexplored. Despite the extraordinary commencement ceremony, and what some term Ravenwood's "special spirit," the American context positioned the institution as mediocre; in many ways, its service to nontraditional students (in terms of race, gender, and class) was starkly overshadowed by the pressure to maintain its position in the meritocracy. The chapters that follow highlight particular aspects of these activities and work in relation to this central concern.

In chapter 1, I provide a historical analysis of the American culture of meritocracy as I understand it and as it is made manifest in education broadly and in higher education in particular. This chapter thus lays out the broader understandings that inform this work as a whole and provides the context in which Ravenwood can best be understood.

In chapter 2, I describe Ravenwood's position in the higher education market and the kinds of persuasive arguments that members of the community deploy to recruit new students every year. As I attempt to do throughout the book, I attend to the views and realities of administrators making decisions.

Chapter 3 brings to the fore the day-to-day activity of the admissions team with a particular emphasis on the bureaucratic process through which *in-*

quiries become *applicants* and then *students*. Of particular importance in this section is the semiotic place of numbers and how they are understood and deployed at Ravenwood. In fact, “numbers” are an important aspect of the cultural life of organizations and are layered through the chapters that follow as well. In chapter 4, which focuses on how Ravenwood’s community thinks about and tangles with merit, numbers have a privileged place in conversations about entrance examinations, accreditation metrics, and so on. I also, however, unpack how “merit” gets folded into ways of talking and walking or even in the physical plant of Ravenwood—and the contradictions that these ways of being then entail.

Chapter 5 focuses entirely on the most pressing and consequential of numbers: fiscal ones. In this chapter, I show how the financial conditions that disciplined the Ravenwood community shape the way the college operates and drive the ways that they resolve problems. As in chapter 4, I also examine how notions of merit become entangled with this sort of number through access to resources, financial decisions, and financial knowledge.

Finally, in the conclusion, I attempt to bring these various strands together to provide a fuller picture of life in institutions such as Ravenwood—disciplined by market and merit. In this book as a whole, therefore, I share the very real dilemmas and deliberations that the members of the Ravenwood community encountered every day. Despite faculty stereotypes, administrators were not universally malicious, incompetent, apathetic, or obsessed only with dollars. Administrators can be a convenient symbol of the corporatization of higher education in the last forty years, and certainly, university administration has been radically transformed over the course of the twentieth century (Bok 2003; Shumar 1997, 2014; Shumar and Canaan 2008; Sunderman 2010; Trencher et al. 2013; Tuchman 2011). Based on both this study and on those whom I encounter in my own professional experiences, however, there are many well-intentioned and deeply moral administrators; it seems unfair to impugn an entire class of person for the ills of the era.

Thus, one of my central goals here is to draw a face on the faceless bureaucrat. As is the case with any good ethnography, I hope to depict cultured agents moving through structures; Ravenwood was inhabited by real people making hard decisions about a risky social world that they did not build themselves but with which they were faced daily. Although it was not always clear how well it was working out, it was crystal clear to me that there were individuals at Ravenwood who had spent their lives devoted to

improving the condition of others. There were persons at Ravenwood who deeply believed in the empowerment of the marginalized and did not hesitate to act when it was easier to simply shake one's head at the futility of it all. Ravenwood faced challenges, and the persons involved were deeply human—with shortcomings, failings, and idiosyncrasies like any other. But any such shortcomings only highlight to me how important their work was; their words, their actions, and their lives helped transform constraints into possibilities. Although I present a complicated and critical picture here, I do so while paying homage to the hopeful and special spirit that I also felt at Ravenwood College.

Chapter 1

EXTRAORDINARY MEDIOCRITY

I have already recommended some of my clients. This program is very challenging but for working individuals with a family, the outline and schedule is one of the best in the nation.

They need to have more experienced teachers who understand that the older you get the harder it is to learn.

I would have recommended this program to both friends and family members, because the program is great for working adults and it did help change my life. I entered Ravenwood raw. When I say raw, I mean the last time I set foot in a school it was over 20 years to the date. I was working and doing things that I could not put a name to, and Ravenwood College helped me to not only place a name on what I was doing, but helped me to perfect what I was doing.

Try to have a smaller class roster so that the teachers can give the students a one on one tutoring session when needed. Also try to compensate the tuition when you are a re-entrant back to school. In other words, work with the student so that going to school will not be a heavy burden to them.

ANONYMOUS COMMENTS, RAVENWOOD GRADUATION SURVEY 2007–2008

The student opinions quoted above reveal the hidden struggles that nontraditional students might have with the category of *merit* and the hope that they can find their place within it. Merit is most often understood as being a personal matter, as inhering in enduring and individual personality traits such as competency, intelligence, and diligence—which are themselves rooted in cognition, biology, and morality. Although those things are certainly at play, it does not take into account a twenty-year hiatus from education. By others, merit is imagined in aggregate as a massive bell curve with the mediocre bulk in the middle and tails of exceptionality and incompetence on either side. And yet, as I describe in this chapter, every individual is embedded in complex social worlds that are

culturally specific and historically contingent and through which notions of merit arise.

This work is rooted in many core assumptions and arguments about the world, which I explore in this chapter. Individuals make choices and take action, but they do so within the confines of their cultural understandings and as these conform to the existing social order; education as a formal institution is organized in a particular way and around particular logics. Although there is an infrastructure to education, educational institutions also operate *as* infrastructure, in that they act to facilitate the movement of individuals and ideas, literally and figuratively, across different social institutions over the lifetime. Much of the work of educational institutions is therefore less concerned with teaching or learning (although those things certainly take place) and more concerned with sorting or positioning everyone in relation to the others around them, and then in communicating that position to other institutions through a process that can broadly be called credentialing. Additionally, the ways that educational institutions are built are more likely to maintain or reproduce the status quo than to challenge it. Particular students have been served well by these institutions, and others have been systematically marginalized from it. I will also argue that although schooling is certainly more meritocratic than it once was, the credentialing process involves much more than just individual traits in individual students. This is largely because the structures of schools emerge from a particular history, and so do the ways that we think about individual traits and their various merits. There are deeply entrenched paradoxes and contradictions built into the way we see merit, which is cultural and deeply informed by our particular ways of thinking about race, class, and gender and which education attempts to resolve in a rather patchwork way.

Individuals with resources and privilege, quite rationally, do an awful lot to keep those things and to give others the impression that they deserve them (or that they are legitimately theirs, or merited). They also do the same for their children. These people are more central to the centers of power and so can hold on to resources very efficiently. Those without resources and privilege attempt to obtain both tangible resources and pride in themselves but have a much more difficult time doing so because they lack privilege but also because they lack a finer-tuned understanding of how the whole system works. They are more peripheral to the centers of power, and so this process is marked by struggle.

In financially insecure times (such as 2008–2009, when this study took place), education is seen as a way to better manage the risk of an uncertain future in supposedly meritocratic societies and is tightly wrapped up with our understanding of the market. Those with privilege seek to protect it, and their position in the market, through education, and those without it want to use it as a mechanism for social mobility (or at least to shield them from economic decline). Like individuals, institutions act to secure their own futures by taking on the markers of privilege and bestowing them on their students as best they can. Like individuals, institutions are either central or peripheral to centers of power. Institutions do a tremendous amount of sorting and positioning work, and how well they do this will either cement or undermine their position in the meritocracy. The way they approach this work, however, both reflects where they currently stand in the meritocracy and reinforces that position. In the remainder of the chapter, I therefore explore the extraordinary, and contradictory, nature of merit as it emerges from American history and political economy.

Merit and American Higher Education

I have been asked, “What is interesting about mediocre kids going to a mediocre college?” Mediocrity, in essence, is about having a certain amount of merit—not too much and not too little. Thus, to answer this question, it is to merit that we must first turn. Merit is a social construct against which we evaluate people and institutions as legitimately aligning with culturally constituted and historically relevant values. In classical China, in order to be appointed as a civil engineer, one demonstrated merit through an ability to recall from memory various works of classical literature, such as Confucius’s *Analects*. In medieval Europe, a man’s right to rule was merited in part by his ability to ride a horse and knock another man off of his—even if he never went to war. Today, one’s position in the market economy is largely merited by the ability to perform well on standardized tests and to become affiliated with others who perform as well, regardless of whether one will ever encounter an algebraic expression after the schooling days have passed.

The intellectual genius stands as a contemporary icon of merit and meritocracy. The genius is understood as an extraordinary class of person who possesses natural inclinations and competencies that will allow him or her

to individually overcome most circumstances and obtain public recognition of those achievements.¹ As McDermott (2004) has demonstrated, however, this is only one version of genius that has emerged and grown to dominate Western notions of merit, while others have slowly faded from memory. McDermott describes at least four other understandings of genius, all of which point to not a class of person but rather a moment of clarity or inspirational experience (thought by Pascal, for example, to be bestowed by God) that anyone might encounter. This shift in how we think about genius is instructive in how we have come to think about intelligence and schooling more broadly. There are extraordinary people born with extraordinary talents, and then there is everyone else.

To be extraordinary is to stand out from others around you; the genius is the icon of this side of the binary. In contrast, to be mediocre is to be similar to the others around you, to be invisible. But this simple binary is specious. A great deal of diversity of experience is hidden in that “mediocre” label—nuance is erased or dismissed as irrelevant. Further, mediocrity is not a fixed position but one that we may all experience at different points in our lives. The valedictorian is a local hero who finds herself suddenly mediocre at the elite university, only to be extraordinary again when she returns home for Thanksgiving dinner. Merit is a fundamentally relational and comparative quality, and thus it depends on those with whom one is compared.

De Botton (2004) has argued that tensions about meritocracy are real; they are internalized as status anxiety, which has emerged under the conditions of modernity and from the democratic egalitarianism engendered by the radical reconceptualization of rights in the Enlightenment era. In the medieval era, in contrast, there was no expectation that the masses could or should do anything other than toil for the benefit of their “betters,” whose position in the hierarchy was ordained by God. But, he argues:

The rigid hierarchy that had been in place in almost every Western society until the late eighteenth century, denying all hope of social movement except in the rarest of cases . . . was unjust in a thousand all too obvious ways, but it offered those on the lowest rungs one notable freedom: the freedom not to have to take the achievements of quite so many people in society as reference points—and so find themselves severely wanting in status and importance as a result. (De Botton 2004, 35)

As the formal channels of privilege were replaced with more subtle ones, and as our ability to observe the conditions of others was expanded via the media, the cultural interpretation of the hierarchy made a significant shift. Rather than the invisible persons at the bottom being “unfortunate” in God’s plan, they came instead to be seen as the producers of their own misfortune: failures. Meritocracy, the notion that social structures are built to recognize and reward persons solely on individual merits (and largely succeed in this effort), when paired with our late capitalist political economy creates an endless tide of unfulfillable expectations for ourselves.² In other words, as merit is relational and comparative, it requires that that which cannot be seen is made visible. To be clear, like Young (1958), who coined the term, I do not believe that our society (or any other) is structured as a real meritocracy, and I instead reference merit throughout this work more as a cultural and ideological outlook than as an objective reality. Despite the near impossible odds of any particular individual achieving the material wealth of Bill Gates (and the impossibility of many individuals achieving such wealth, as its concentration produces inequality that makes that impossible), his story reinforces the notion that with some hard work and innate ability, anyone can.³ Within a meritocracy, inability to achieve material success points to personal incompetence or moral failing (such as laziness), even when such success is statistically implausible.

In the context of colleges and universities, people and institutions mutually constitute one another’s position in the structure and mobilize one another as symbolic capital. An alumnus of a prestigious institution proudly wears his or her affiliation to demonstrate merit—particularly through the initial job search after college. If an extraordinary individual graduates from a particular institution, that institution shouts it from the rooftops to reinforce the notion that through the institution one will be affiliated or branded with that extraordinary individual. And achievement as measured by standard metrics like SAT and ACT scores are deployed in aggregate to likewise suggest a certain profile of attendee. Of course, if scores are not toward the top of the curve or alumni have not moved mountains, then there is a resounding silence on these matters. Institutions deploy those traits that are most favorable for cultivating enrollments. Some institutions, like some individuals, are the object of attention, high regard, and privilege—and others are invisible. Just as it is difficult for individuals to significantly change their

position in the meritocracy, so too is it challenging for institutions. And these challenges have an enduring history in the United States.

The Jeffersonian Paradigm and Higher Education

Perhaps one of the most enduring and deeply rooted tensions about merit and higher education is the fundamental cultural and ideological contradiction of the American project as both deeply egalitarian and capitalist. The Enlightenment-era notions of human equality were radical in their time, and the Declaration of Independence built upon these notions to apply them to a more democratic alternative than what was widely available in that era. Declarations about “all men being created equal” and being “endowed with certain inalienable rights from their Creator” obviously conflicted with the ways that Native Americans, African slaves, and women were systematically oppressed and even non-land-owning European males were marginalized from the initial democratic experiment. If all men were created equal, why were all men not living as equals? And according to the capitalist ideology requiring competition to act as the agent of stratification, all people should not be equal. This contradiction needed some sort of resolution, which the capitalist ideology was able to partially reconcile by suggesting that the focus shift from *equality* to *equal opportunity*. Thus, the critique of the old, European models of social hierarchy was not that inequality existed but rather that those differences were handed down through arbitrary bloodlines and not on the basis of individual merits.

Thomas Jefferson, a key figure in crafting the educational dialogue of the era, in founding the University of Virginia focused on the project of schooling not only as a site for learning but primarily as a systematic means to sort people. He described his vision in a letter to John Adams, arguing that one of the state’s goals should be

to establish in each ward a free school for reading, writing and common arithmetic; to provide for the annual selection of the best subjects from these schools who might receive at the public expense a higher degree of education at a district school; and from these district schools to select a certain number of the most promising subjects to be completed at a university, where all the useful sciences should be taught. Worth and genius would thus have been

sought out from every condition of life, and completely prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trusts. (Jefferson 1959)

Although learning would clearly be integral at each stage of this sorting process, Jefferson was one of the earliest thinkers in the United States to imagine the role of school in society as an infrastructure to identify, evaluate, measure, and reveal the natural talent and intelligence in individuals that would warrant their promotion through the education system.⁴ Thus, the old aristocracy would be replaced with a new one based upon ability rather than bloodlines; in other words, Jefferson did not reject the notion of aristocracy or inequality—just the premises on which it had been based. Jefferson’s “natural aristocracy” was grounded in “virtue and talents,” in stark contrast to the “artificial aristocracy founded on wealth and birth, without either virtue or talents” (Jefferson 1959). By implication, an intellectual elite existed invisible to the naked eye, which schooling would make visible through the process of sorting. Those who completed university studies were marked as the most elite, and thus the most deserving of authority and positions of leadership. Education thus acts as a revelatory infrastructure: revealing what is hidden. I refer to this way of thinking of education as the *Jeffersonian paradigm*.⁵

Although Jefferson’s own efforts at school reform were not particularly successful in his lifetime (or even the generation after), the Jeffersonian paradigm of schooling as centered as much in sorting as learning would become a powerful strand of ideological thought in twentieth-century American educational thinking. James Bryant Conant, the Harvard University president directly responsible for many of the features of present-day college admissions systems,⁶ believed in a perhaps radical meritocracy. A powerful public figure and a bundle of contradictions,⁷ Conant tirelessly promoted “Jefferson’s Ideal” as critical to the national project of the United States,⁸ largely centered in educational testing as a means to identify and classify all members of the population in order to align their talents with their role in society. For Conant, perhaps naively, these roles were intended to have no stigma or privilege associated with them and rather to be a neutral and objective space for this sorting process. At one point, he even suggested that wealth should not be passed on from one generation to the next in order to disrupt the ways that affluence corrupts meritocratic sorting (Lemann 1999, chapter 4). Ironically, while Conant was busy professing a new period of radical

meritocracy in his written works, in admission policy he was inventing systems designed to sharply reproduce existing elite structures, including access for students from elite families, strict quotas for Jews, and tactful strategies for turning away virtually all Black applicants (Karabel 2005, chapter 6) regardless of their merits.⁹

After some false starts with explicitly sexist, racist, and elitist logics, Karabel (2005) demonstrates how the Ivy League universities devised both a system and a logic that included understanding merit not only as academic tests (upon which Jewish applicants were scoring well) but also as a more holistic review of individuals that included athletic ability, legacy, personal character, extracurricular activities, letters of recommendation, and all of the other accouterments that American college applicants are familiar with. The logic averred, in the vein of the Jeffersonian paradigm, was that the universities were looking not just for intellectuals but for true leaders and well-rounded people who would be the future leadership of this country. This system also allowed for the possibility that a Jewish kid from Brooklyn with excellent academics could be denied admission, while a White prep-school athlete with mediocre grades could be admitted. Conant, of course, was not alone in this project but rather was working alongside admission officers in Harvard, Princeton, and Yale to identify undesirable applicants who might otherwise meet the academic criteria (with a particular emphasis on Jewish students), and a strictly enforced quota system was enacted to keep such “undesirables” to a minimum. Karabel’s work thus demonstrates how merit has historically been racialized in the United States. Today, as I discuss below, the reality is now largely inverted, as privileged parents who have engaged in a lifetime of systematic and concerted cultivation (à la Lareau 2003) may see testing (which their children have been trained in their whole lives) as reliable and consistent markers of their children’s merit. Given the prevalence of this paradigm, the very existence of nonelite, less selective colleges is itself extraordinary.

On a visceral level, the policies Karabel (2005) describes are clearly anathema to the American notions of equal opportunity, and yet it is important to recognize that they are logically implicated in capitalist understandings of schooling and merit—where competition for few resources will incentivize those with access to resources to fight ferociously to keep them and pass them on to their children. The contradiction has been wrapped up in the language of education for the “public good” versus the “private good” and is

partly at the root of Labaree's (2010) "School Syndrome"—the compulsiveness Americans demonstrate when "we keep turning to school for the answer to every social and individual problem" (222) despite evidence that it is not an institution suited to that task. These contradictions were further captured by John Adams, who argued against Jefferson in his written response, suggesting that a democracy should not have any aristocracy—old, natural, or otherwise. Or, as McDermott and Raley (2010) point out, "the problem is not that some children are on the bottom. The problem is that there is a bottom, a carefully crafted bottom, that defines a top eventually available to only a few" (37). The capitalist enterprise of education as resolved by "equal opportunity" could put only a bandage on the contradiction of embracing both equality and unfettered competition. Embracing education as relational and competitive must by definition produce inequality and mediocrity. But in order to take any sort of action about these assumptions, instruments, tools, and processes must be put in place.

Instruments for Sorting in the Credential Arms Race

Psychometricians today design tests that presuppose that intelligence and performance conform to the bell curve mentioned earlier, with a tail on either end and a bulge in the middle. But this so-called normal curve does not merely capture some reality—it produces a particular reality. For example, Herrnstein and Murray's (1996) influential work *The Bell Curve* took up the Jeffersonian paradigm, arguing with statistical data that educational tests accurately measure IQ, which fits a normal distribution (i.e., a bell curve), which in turn demonstrates the existence of a cognitive elite. They argued, however, that given the "objective" nature of this process, this advantage represents an *inherited* intelligence, because smart, educated individuals tended to procreate with one another. As such, we were seeing a genetically predetermined hierarchy of intelligence unfold in America—again in the Jeffersonian vein, as revealed by the "objective" sorting infrastructure in place at schools. They also argued that particular racial, ethnic, or cultural groups occupied particular places in that hierarchy because of these inherited differences.¹⁰ Again, the underlying assumption in this position is that *education is more revelation than production*. That is, although education may produce something in students, its core function is rather to