

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION



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The Making of an Adolescent Elite

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FEBRUARY 4, 2011

Columbia University's Shamus Rahman Khan is part of a new generation of academics [profiled](#) recently in the *New York Times* for focusing on elites rather than the poor. Instead of articulating the extra obstacles that disadvantaged students face, this research examines the special advantages provided to the children of elite.

This scholarship is important for people in higher education to help understand what Khan calls the paradox of “democratic inequality.” On the one hand, “our nation embraces the democratic principle of openness and access,” and our colleges have become more racially and ethnically diverse and far more open to women in the last 60 years; yet at the same time, “levels of inequality” have risen, including within higher education. Since the early 1950s, the representation of black students has increased

tenfold at selective institutions, from 0.8 percent to 8 percent; women have gone from being shut out entirely at many institutions to outnumbering men in many student bodies; and yet there are more wealthy students attending elite colleges and fewer low-income students than 25 years ago. Harvard defines some families in the top 5 percent of the economic scale as “middle income.” What’s going on?

In Khan’s new book, [*Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul’s School*](#), he closely examines the phenomenon of democratic inequality at one of the nation’s oldest and most elite boarding schools. Founded in 1855, the St. Paul’s School, located outside of Concord, New Hampshire, is more racially diverse than it used to be but remains highly selective and confers enormous advantages to its students. Khan, the son of a surgeon, attended as a pupil in the 1990s, and returned a decade later as a faculty member with the open intent of observing and writing about the school.

How is the new elite created and maintained? Most obviously, they are showered with enormous resources, [a phenomenon not unknown at elite colleges](#). With its large endowment and high tuition, St. Paul’s spends \$80,000 per student, roughly 10 times the average per pupil expenditure at American public schools. This money buys many things, including a phenomenal array of course offerings and extracurricular activities. The student body of 500 has access to 50 humanities courses and more than 100 student organizations. The rigorous academic program, Khan writes, “helps instill in students a sense of their tremendous abilities and options in life.”

Resources also buy a very favorable student to counselor ratio (with a counselor for every 35 students). These counselors have the time to nurture special relationships with selective college admissions officers. Khan recalls a meeting with a counselor in which the rector barged in with a deferral letter a student received from an Ivy League institution and instructed Khan’s colleague, “We need to do something about this. *Now*.” Why would a St. Paul’s counselor have any leverage? Khan believes that counselors can signal to colleges which student will likely accept offers, and steer them away from students who will reject them, thus increasing a college’s yield. Thirty

percent of St. Paul's graduates attend Ivy League colleges, with 80 percent attending top 30 colleges. The most likely destination is Harvard, followed by Brown, the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, Yale, Cornell, Princeton, and Stanford.

The enormous resources also allow St. Paul's to fly students to New York on a Saturday to have lunch with participants in the Metropolitan Opera, take in the matinee performance, and be back to campus in the evening. Resources can help the campus to attract illustrious speakers like the author Tobias Wolff, and to own sculptures by famous artists, which the students take for granted. Khan recalls attending the Wolff lecture and hearing a student comment, "I really don't have time for this right now." On another occasion, he caught students throwing rocks at an Alexander Calder sculpture. Students are so accustomed to extraordinary opportunities at St. Paul's, Khan writes, that "you can throw rocks at priceless things and be annoyed by the distractions of notable Americans." Hopping on a plane to go to the Met is treated "as an everyday affair, like walking to the local coffee shop to hear a new singer-songwriter."

Part of the shaping of elites, Khan says, is the "hidden curriculum," that teaches students to be at ease with privilege. Twice a week, St. Paul's students attend formal dinners with a faculty member. "In these moments," Khan writes, "the students are learning a vital piece of upper-class culture: how to act casually while dressed formally." The student who races around campus with a bulging backpack is frowned upon. "Teaching the ease of privilege – the naturalness of wealth and power" says Khan, is "a fundamental role of elite institutions like St. Paul's."

Another part of the message to students is that they are special, that "everything is doable. Constraints are largely absent." Khan acknowledges that many of the students, who go through a rigorous selection process, are indeed very capable, but he says the praise they receive at St. Paul's is often over the top. Eleventh graders are taught to think of their research papers as "contributions to the world's knowledge." A highly talented squash player is assumed by others to have a shot at winning the Junior

Olympics. “This kind of assumption – that the best student in each particular subject at St. Paul’s was probably the best person in the world – was widespread.”

The students at St Paul’s now include substantial numbers of women and minorities, Khan notes, and most are not from families in the Social Register. But they have monumental advantages in life which many fail to acknowledge. “Inequality is ever-present,” Khan notes, “but elites now view it as fair.” This, then, is the remaining challenge: “Twenty-first century America is increasingly open, yet relentlessly unequal. Our next great American project is to find a way out of this paradox.”



1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037
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