



Educational Pedigree and Prestige: Does where Head Executives Earn Degrees Matter?

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Abstract

The Introduction explains the purpose of this study -- identify and describe educational pedigrees of head executives of so-called prestigious colleges and universities in the United States. It also illuminates why such a study is important not only to the higher education sector but overall society. The Literature Review attempts to connect the study with others on the same topic; although impressive work was found on relationships between having degrees from prestigious colleges or universities and career success, little ironically examined educational pedigrees of head executives of the actual institutions in question. The Materials, Methods, Results section identifies "prestigious" institutions (i.e., those often highly positioned in popular source rankings) and educational pedigrees of their head executives (found on institutional Websites); results showed that most head executives employed by so-called prestigious schools also earned degrees from those very same schools. The Limitations section reminds readers that this is a descriptive study, not one that infers reasons for results described. The Discussion section considers the study's results from a wider societal standpoint and suggests reasons why they are important, not least of which include equity and inclusion concerns. A Future Research section follows, and the Conclusion includes suggestions for action along with opportunities concerning the situation of higher education executive pedigree as described.

Keywords: *College and University Executives; Educational Pedigree; Equity; Inclusion*

INTRODUCTION

This study sought to describe the educational pedigree of the head executives (e.g., 'President') of prestigious colleges and universities in the United States. In simple terms, it answers the question, 'Where did the head executives of the most prestigious American colleges and universities earn their degrees?' Are the schools from where they earned their degrees as prestigious as those they now head?

Such studies are important for the simple fact that prestigious colleges and universities, and their direct stakeholders, seemingly enjoy many privileges. One obvious association is found among America's presidents; most earned their degrees from institutions that would be described as 'prestigious' by many sources. The same trend is found in other roles within sectors outside government (Brint, German, Anderson-Natale, Shuker, and Wang, 2020; Hall and Appleyard, 2011; Henderson and Zahorsky, 2012; Piketty and Goldhammer, 2020).

Colleges and universities do not always state in job advertisements that their top executive must have graduated from certain types of schools. However, that does not mean that implicit preference for (or bias against) one's educational pedigree does not exist among some schools in their hiring practices. Although unlikely possible to prove or disprove such preference without methodological deception, this

study sought to plainly and explicitly describe the situation of head executive educational pedigree at prestigious colleges and universities as it actually exists in the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

No sources focused on educational pedigrees of higher education executives of what are considered prestigious colleges and universities. Related studies did address demographics, particularly race and gender of higher education executives (Chavez 2011; Donohue 1981; Gorena 1996; Herwatic 2016; Murell, Donohue 1982; Phelps, Taber, Smith 1996; Cross, et al. 1994-95). Executive educational backgrounds and experiences were also addressed with emphases on leadership practices and attitudes regarding higher education in general (Carbone 1981; Duea, Bishop 1980; Green 1998; Green et al. 1988; Keim, Murray 2008; Leatherman 1993; Parker, Parker 1983; Vaughan, Weisman 1998). Some other sources discussed pathways higher education executives took to gain appointment (Carbone 1981; Duea, Bishop 1980; McFarlin, Ebbers 1998; Moore 1983; Twombly 1987; Young, Gammell 1982; Young, Rue 1981).

Although diversification of higher education leadership was discussed (Leatherman), again focus was more on race and gender. When educational background was addressed, it was more about highest degree earned or field of study,

not prestige of schools from where degrees were earned. Interestingly, more was found regarding higher education executives of community colleges than four-year colleges or universities.

Although not much about this study's concerns regarding executive educational pedigree was found, there were studies that considered faculty educational pedigree. Some evidence suggested that the graduate program from which one earned a degree was of greater importance than the overall institution that conferred the degree. Burriss (2004) found that the network created by the exchange of Ph.D. graduates among prestigious programs, in this case sociology, history, and political science, was important for being hired at schools also known for their prestigious programs in the same fields. Warsaw, Toutkoushian, and Choi (2017) detected that educational pedigree was particularly important in terms of institution of first employment, research productivity, and salary.

Smith-Doerr (2006) focused on life science faculty. She found that those who earned degrees from prestigious schools did not have a significantly different chance of acquiring leadership positions than those from less prestigious ones, but within prestigious schools themselves, those with Ph.D.'s from 'top 10 programs' did have better chances. Relatedly, Condic (2019, 2020) examined employment and educational backgrounds of library directors. She found that of those who earned master's degrees in library science (the standard degree in the library profession), almost forty percent of those degrees came from only nine programs which were highly ranked in popular annual higher education rankings.

Headworth and Freese (2016), along with Nevin (2019), did observe the importance of the overall college or university from which a faculty member graduated. In fact, Nevin asserted that institutional prestige was likely an organizing force among Canadian sociologists, while Headworth and Freese discussed how job allocation can devolve into caste systems based on such prestige.

Finally, in a different vein, White-Lewis (2019) described how faculty search committees evaluate and select early career faculty in a way that departs from what would be more standard or conventional approaches. They found that selection is more about committee interactions, elevating departmental reputation, and larger institutional dynamics than the actual candidates, regardless educational pedigree.

Educational pedigree was also considered outside higher education. Kaspari's (2017) dissertation discussed the value employers place on academic credentials. Implication: job advertisements may not explicitly state it but to some hiring committees, where a person earns a degree may be as important as the degree itself. Her findings indicated that it depends on the organization and backgrounds of its human resource personnel.

Three other studies also considered educational pedigree and career success. Hall and Appleyard (2011) discussed

how pedigree can create conditions of elitism within the financial sector. Brint, German, Anderson-Natale, Shuker, and Wang (2020) applied status transmission theory to examine how prestigious institutions prepare privileged individuals for influential roles. Henderson and Zahorsky (2012) considered lawyer educational pedigree, specifically impacts of law degrees from so-called elite schools as opposed to lower-ranked ones in terms of job prospects, and the threat such brand bias poses to the legal profession. These studies indicated that prestigious institutions can play a role in elitism, and according to Brint, German, Anderson-Natale, Shuker, and Wang, one's educational pedigree seemed even more important in a culturally influential sector (e.g., higher education).

A pervading theme throughout literature on the subject was that academic inbreeding, be it at individual institutions or possibly through a collective type of them, can contribute to elitism. The most general consideration of this topic, and perhaps most disturbing, was provided by Piketty and Goldhammer (2020) who described elitism in higher education and dangers it poses to equity and justice on national and global scales.

Literature cited in this review helped inform this study. Again, though, none particularly described the actual educational pedigrees of the head executives of prestigious colleges and universities. Therefore, primary research was required.

MATERIALS, METHODS, RESULTS

The first step was to identify prestigious colleges and universities in the United States. Granted, prestige in terms of a higher education institution, as it should, can mean different things to different people and/or be measured different ways (e.g., number of Nobel Prize winners; number of Fulbright Scholars; notable alumni; amount of money in endowment). However, Americans in general, including colleges and universities themselves, evidently place significant stock in annual rankings that identify so-called 'Best Colleges'; evidence of the influence of such rankings is seen in the number published each year, along with unethical tactics employed by some schools for higher rankings (Jaschik 2018; Nietzel 2019; Rim 2019).

One popular ranking system was chosen to determine United States college and university prestige for this study. Again, numerous such rankings are published annually by various outlets and they all typically have the same colleges and universities listed at the top each year. The rankings used for this study came from a well-established and recognized serial (did not provide permission to be identified). The serial divided the institutions into two categories: liberal arts colleges and national universities; the top fifty schools from both categories that appeared in every ranking examined between 1995 and 2020 were noted.

Two types of colleges and universities emerged. Type 1: schools that appeared in the top fifty in every year (i.e., most prestigious). Type 2: schools that appeared in the top fifty at

least one year. Thirty-seven institutions appeared every year (i.e., Type 1); thus, for purposes of this study, constituted a collective of the most prestigious colleges and universities in the United States.

Once the prestigious colleges and universities were identified, each of their Websites were then used to identify their head executive’s educational background. Note: only actual degrees earned by these executives were noted; no certificates, licensures, or other auxiliary training was considered.

Three categories of head executive educational background emerged. Category 1: degrees earned from any of the Type 1 colleges and universities identified for this study as most prestigious. Category 2: degrees from colleges and universities other than Type 1. Category 3: degrees from foreign colleges and universities. Table 1 shows the number of degrees that fall within Categories 1, 2, and 3 (rounded mean percentages in parentheses).

Table 1. Head executive educational pedigree sat the thirty-seven Type 1 colleges and universities

	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3
Degrees earned (rounded mean percent)	57(56%)	32(31%)	13(13%)

The thirty-seven head executives of interest to this study collectively earned 102 higher education degrees. As Table 1 describes, fifty-six percent of those degrees were conferred by the same thirty-seven colleges and universities the executives administered (fifty-seven total). Not reflected in the table is that six of the thirty-seven executives (16%) were alumni of the actual colleges and universities they administered. Note: only six of the thirty-seven executives (16%) did not earn at least one degree from one of the thirty-seven institutions.

Table 1 further describes that thirty-two (31%) of the 102 degrees earned were from colleges and universities that did not meet this study’s prestige designation. Additionally, fewer than half of the executives (eighteen) actually even earned a degree from such a college or university. Finally, thirteen (13%) of these degrees were conferred by foreign colleges and universities of which this study was unable to determine prestige level in the same manner as their American counterparts.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation already stated is that there is no one way to best describe something as subjective and elusive as college or university prestige. Despite the justifications for the method employed for this study, it is likely that college and university rankings might hold little value to others in terms of their own estimations of prestige as applies to someone’s educational pedigree.

Another limitation was this study’s American focus. In the course of collecting data, degrees earned from what were likely considered prestigious colleges and universities

outside the United States were also found. These were not considered for the following reasons: the study’s focus was the relationship between American head executive educational pedigree and employment at prestigious American institutions, but also, admittedly, the researcher’s limited familiarity with or knowledge of these institutions when compared to their knowledge of American schools.

Yet another limitation is the study’s focus on more recent years. Although twenty-five-years-worth of rankings were incorporated, only more recent head executive educational pedigrees were analyzed. It is possible that past situations may have differed.

Lastly, as already mentioned, the source of the rankings used in this study is a proprietary site that did not provide permission to be identified. Additionally, the researcher’s Institutional Review Board required institutional anonymity. Again, however, the researcher suspects that the thirty-seven colleges and universities that emerged as most prestigious would likely be recognized by anyone familiar with higher education institutions and that similar results produced using the rankings this study employed would closely resemble those of other rankings (the same schools typically appear at the tops of all rankings). Regardless, the purpose of the study was to describe educational pedigree of head executives at the most prestigious institutions as a collective group, not about proprietary serials or individual schools or executives themselves.

DISCUSSION

Contrary to what some studies that focus on faculty suggest, the overall institution from which a head executive graduated could be more important than a particular program. Unlike faculty, who teach in one department for the most part, the head executive of a college or university is responsible for the entire institution. Additionally, executive searches typically involve multiple stakeholders; all may not appreciate the prestige associated with a particular program but might recognize an overall school brand, especially if their school is one of the many who participates in these rankings.

Although analysis was descriptive, had this study posited a hypothesis it would have predicted Category 1 from Table 1 to be a larger number. However, that actual result becomes more impressive when the fact that there are over 2,800 higher education institutions in the United States that confer at least bachelor’s degrees is considered (Educational, 2021).

One can simply accept these findings for the description they provide. However, the findings can also inspire discussion. It is impossible to definitively prove or disprove that the most prestigious colleges and universities in the United States consciously or subconsciously seek to hire only head executives with the highest educational pedigrees (findings certainly offer no reason to believe they consciously or subconsciously discourage it); however, it does not mean these descriptions should not be discussed.

Although many schools refer to themselves as prestigious, unlike the thirty-seven that emerged in this study, they lack the brand to make as serious a claim to it, at least to the general public. A justification to give preference to head executives with educational pedigrees matching the schools they administer could be on the grounds that such background better enables them to understand a school's needs and expectations.

Better understanding of a school even further justifies the six schools in this study that hired an alumnus as head executive. In addition to greater familiarity, an alumnus might feel greater sense of proprietary commitment. It also sends the message that a school that hires its alumni has the utmost confidence in its own graduation standards. On the other hand, as seen in the literature, the notion of institutional inbreeding has been taboo in higher education for years. In terms of these prestigious colleges and universities, such inbreeding could be counterproductive to inclusion and diversity initiatives about which the entire higher education sector, and these thirty-seven schools themselves, are concerned (at least according to their institutional artifacts). This concern gains weight when the below finding is also considered.

All thirty-seven colleges and universities identified as most prestigious for this study had acceptance rates under fifteen percent with a collective mean under ten percent. Such a rate establishes significant exclusivity, perhaps promotes elitism. The point is, it could be beneficial for these schools to hire more executives with educational backgrounds from outside the prestigious collective who might be able to relate to the more diverse types of potential stakeholders they claim to desire. Again, these thirty-seven schools all have significant diversity, equity, and inclusion goals; hiring leaders outside their prestigious (and exclusive) collective could be of benefit to those goals (Brint, German, Anderson-Natale, et al., 2020; Hall and Appleyard, 2011; Piketty and Goldhammer 2020) and provide greater levels of legitimacy to their advocacy.

A problem for these schools with the sort of inclusion suggested above could be marketing. A likely appeal of these prestigious colleges and universities is that they are indeed exclusive (Fu and Kim, 2020); thus, those who are admitted or hired can enjoy the distinction that accompanies exclusiveness in the United States and also network with equally privileged peers. One might also argue that such exclusiveness is good for overall society: that enabling graduates of the most 'prestigious' schools to work together forge a better future for society. Would this not be best administered by head executives who have the same elite educational credentials? A problematic byproduct of such a situation could be an elitist network based upon educational pedigree that excludes those outside itself. Some, like Piketty and Goldhammer (2020) and Burris (2004), argue such a network already exists. (Ironically adding legitimacy to their concerns is the fact that these scholars themselves

have affiliations with some of the schools identified as most prestigious for this study).

Another possibly negative consequence of an exclusive educational pedigree network could be that the privileged few who comprise it make decisions that impact the vast majority. This would include hiring executives at the very institutions on which such a network would rest. It is almost like a self-perpetuating cycle in terms of mission, vision, and ideals. If a person is not even given the chance to attend such schools, probable considering acceptance rates which will likely become more rather than less exclusive (Kim 2022), then they would have fewer opportunities compared to those who do enjoy that privilege, including setting policy at the very schools in question. This aligns with the power and influences Hall and Appleyard (2011), and Brint, German, Anderson-Natale, Shuker, and Wang (2020) described. An 'old boys club' of sorts could materialize based on educational pedigree that would not only determine who gets what (and what not) but also produce groupthink at places and in sectors responsible for innovation.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This study described the educational pedigree of head executives at prestigious colleges and universities in the United States. A related study might ask the question to those involved in hiring these executives: How important is educational pedigree in your decision to hire? How does head executive educational pedigree compare to that of faculty in prestigious colleges and universities?

It is difficult to make generalizations across the higher education sector based on survey responses. Colleges and universities differ, even so-called prestigious ones if in no other ways than size and mission; however, case study could be used to further describe individual situations. Additionally, as mentioned in the Limitations section, case study could include more historical analysis to see if there is a common trend throughout different eras of a school's existence.

Additional research might look beyond prestigious colleges and universities and/or beyond the United States. For example, Do head executives of prestigious institutions outside the United States have prestigious educational pedigrees? Perhaps bounded case study could shed light on educational pedigree amongst prestigious institutions in nations with shared or similar cultural attributes to further explore Piketty and Goldhammer (2020) concerns.

Related to the Brint, German, Anderson-Natale, Shuker, and Wang (2020) study, a question to explore could be, Does educational pedigree matter in terms of influence in the higher education sector? (e.g., professional governing body appointments; high impact journal editorial assignments; keynote address invitations). If not educational pedigree, then what about where one works? (i.e., employment pedigree).

CONCLUSION

In the United States hiring is legally based on objective merit in accordance with Equal Employment Opportunity Commission regulations. For the most part, the American higher education sector does due diligence in regard to race, gender, veteran status, and alternative physical ability; however, there does not seem to be as much done in terms of socioeconomic constructs like where a person attended school, or perhaps more importantly, was permitted to attend school. Therefore, although not legally obligated, colleges and universities might consider efforts to include more socioeconomic diversity, especially with head executive appointments, in keeping with the spirit of their missions, visions, and strategic plans, especially those that involve diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Not only might more diverse educational pedigree serve socioeconomic diversity but could also increase innovation. A possible byproduct of conformity and exclusion is groupthink: for innovation to occur sometimes requires diverse perspectives from outside a group or organization; the same argument could apply to collectives of organizations such as the prestigious colleges and universities identified in this study. Prestigious schools assume leadership and advocacy privilege and responsibility in this country and this country should be grateful for their services; however, the more they lead by example, the more credibility their leadership and advocacy will likely demand.

Is a degree from a prestigious college or university important in terms of career? Common knowledge and review of relevant literature indicate educational pedigree matters in the United States, in some form or fashion; the situation this study describes certainly does not refute that indication. As higher education as a sector, along with its individual colleges and universities, focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion, standards and structures that may inhibit such constructs deserve consideration. Hopefully, this study's findings inspire further research and discussion about such standards and structures.

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