

FEATURE

The Surprising Role of Public Universities in Forging America's Leaders

Flagship graduates outnumber elite-school alums in many positions of power and achievement, especially in state government

DO THE PATHS TO LEADERSHIP and influence in America run directly through the campuses of the most exclusive colleges? That's a common perception and the clear implication of two recent academic studies, which report that graduates of a small cadre of elite universities disproportionately populate America's leadership class and key institutions.

In a 2024 article in *Nature*, Jonathan Wai and colleagues show that a tiny number of prestigious schools produce a large percentage of America's most influential and accomplished individuals, including U.S. presidents, U.S. senators, Nobel Prize winners, MacArthur Fellows, Fortune 500 CEOs, and 25 other lofty categories. In a 2023 report by Opportunity Insights, a team of economists led by Harvard University's Raj Chetty, found that attending one of the 12 "Ivy-plus" universities (the eight Ivy League schools plus Chicago, Duke, MIT, and Stanford) causally increases students' chances of landing in elite positions. These themes reached a broader audience in late 2024 with David

Brooks's much-discussed cover story in *The Atlantic*, which considered the generations-long outsized influence of Ivy universities on American leadership and culture.

My research, however, paints a different picture, showing that public universities, especially flagships, play a major role in the formation of American leaders. The same applies to a host of underappreciated private universities. Although my study, "Publics and Place: Leadership Development by State-Run and State-Based Universities," does not directly contradict the other two, it yields different results, largely because I use a different definition of what constitutes American leadership positions and prestigious professional landing spots.

I don't think these different views on "elite positions" are accidental or arbitrary. I believe the choices made by the other researchers reflect a limited perspective on America's positions of leadership and influence. What's more, their choices reflect the sensibilities of elite-school graduates and therefore ultimately inflate our perception of elite schools' influence.

By **ANDY SMARICK**



MARK SMITH

People from different backgrounds have differing views on what counts as leadership and influence—and that shapes our assessment of which universities are the most “important.”

Understanding the differences in these research findings could spark a change in the higher education discussion among researchers, journalists, commentators, lawmakers, and philanthropists, possibly resulting in a shift in resource distribution and policy—especially if those in power seek to expand opportunity. Those who believe Ivy-plus schools are the true cradles of leadership will probably favor more investment in these schools, more attention for these schools, and (as the Opportunity Insights study advocates) reform of these schools’ admissions processes. Those like me, however, who believe other kinds of schools prove just as effective—or even more effective—at forging leaders might argue for more public recognition of and financial investment in these other schools. They will also promote a greater appreciation for the connection between leadership development and place, and, perhaps most importantly, support research on why institutions dominated by elite-college graduates disproportionately favor the hiring of other elite-college graduates.

The Egalitarian Education of American Leaders

After working at the White House, in Congress, and at the U.S. Department of Education, I concluded that too much of what occurs inside the Beltway is performative rather than substantive

I identified the top lawyers (for example, managing partners and practice-area leaders) from the foremost law firms in each state. My study examined the education backgrounds of these public figures and leading attorneys.

Across the public offices, the same three themes held, whether I looked at undergraduate or graduate education. First, these leaders were likelier to have attended public institutions rather than private ones. Second, they were likelier to have studied in the states they served than in other states; that is, they didn’t need to seek schooling far from home in order to excel. Third, they were likelier to have gone to public flagship universities than Ivy-plus schools (see Figure 1).

At the undergraduate level, the 12 public institutions most frequently attended by these leaders claim proportionately more graduates on my list than the 12 Ivy-plus schools. This set of schools includes the flagship universities of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Wyoming, which never seem to appear on elite radars, even though in my study each educated more future leaders than Stanford or Princeton. Auburn, Indiana University, and Louisiana State collectively educated more leaders than Brown, Cornell, Columbia, and Penn.

More than half of governors went to a public college, and all of these went to a school in their own or a neighboring state. Demonstrating the many pathways into public leadership, the 49 governors with a college degree graduated from 46 different colleges. State legislative leaders (like house speakers and



WIKIMEDIA (3)

A look at the education backgrounds of the most influential state-level leaders reveals they were likelier to have attended their states’ public flagship universities—such as University of Mississippi, University of Wyoming, and University of Arkansas—than Ivy-plus schools.

and effective. I subsequently shifted my focus to state government and spent much of the last 15 years in a variety of state-level posts. I’ve been impressed by the smarts, abilities, and accomplishments of the leaders I’ve encountered along the way. When I decided to study the education backgrounds of America’s influential leaders, I therefore began with a host of the most important state-level officials: governors, state legislative leaders, attorneys general, state education chiefs, and state supreme court justices. These officials, after all, have responsibility for the lion’s share of school policies, criminal justice matters, emergency responses, and other governing decisions affecting our lives. Then, to cast a wider net,

senate presidents) were seven times likelier to go to a public flagship than an Ivy-plus.

State supreme court justices provide the most dramatic example. In strong contrast to today’s U.S. Supreme Court justices (only one of whom lacks an Ivy degree), these leading figures were likelier to have gone to public undergraduate and public law schools than private institutions. In 22 states, not a single supreme court justice went to an Ivy-plus college; in half of states, not a single justice went to an Ivy-plus law school.

Perhaps surprisingly, the same themes held across the private-sector lawyers. The leading attorneys from each state’s most elite

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firms predominantly attended public undergraduate institutions and law schools, and they were more likely to have degrees from flagship colleges and law schools than Ivy-plus schools.

One other key finding provides reason to reassess a particular aspect of the other studies' conclusions: Place matters enormously when it comes to education and leadership. In the vast majority of states, few of the public leaders or attorneys hold any type of Ivy-plus degree. For example, in 18 states, zero of the public officials have an Ivy-plus undergraduate degree. In much of America, that credential is scarce. Leaders in these regions were primarily educated by public and private schools in their own states or those nearby.

Moreover, the data from just a few states, including California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New York, skew the national averages presented in Figure 1. In these places, the Ivy-plus credential seems to give graduates a strong edge. For instance, in California and Connecticut, nearly half of the public officials went to an Ivy-plus college. In Massachusetts, 45 percent of the leading attorneys have an Ivy-plus undergraduate degree and 42 percent have an Ivy-plus law degree.

In a few places, then, the Ivy-plus credential appears to offer the key to the realm. Everywhere else, not so much. This finding alone should make us pause. Young people who dream of living and working in Manhattan or Silicon Valley should know that employers in those places do highly value the Ivy-plus credential. But we should recognize that more young people are "Somewheres" than "Anywheres" (to use author David Goodhart's terms). Somewheres are rooted in a place; they care about that location, and they want to live and work there. Anywheres, by contrast, view themselves as citizens of the world and can feel at home in most any cosmopolitan city. It is not a problem that Somewheres and Anywheres prioritize different locations and professional positions. That's natural. But it is a problem for the study of leadership and influence when Anywhere-oriented academics

associate leadership and influence with only those locations to which Anywheres gravitate.

Defining Categories of Leadership and Accomplishment

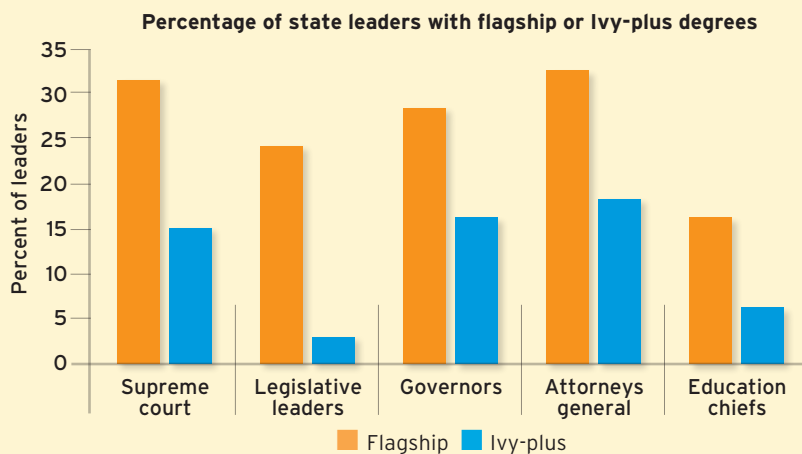
None of the positions I studied were included in the other two reports. Those studies used different offices, firms, awards, and graduate programs as indicators of leadership and exceptional professional accomplishment. I suspect four overlapping factors caused those choices to inflate the perceived influence of elite private schools:

Affinity bias. The first factor is straightforward: The Opportunity Insights paper defines "elite" and "prestigious" firms as those employing high percentages of graduates from Ivy-plus colleges. The argument, presumably, is that the preferences of Ivy-plus graduates determine whether a firm is elite—if Ivy-plus grads gravitate to an employer, it must be elite. The study then reports that an Ivy-plus graduate, compared to an otherwise similar student, is "three times as likely to work at a prestigious firm."

This circular argument catches us in a loop that says the firms are special because Ivy-plus graduates disproportionately work there, and that Ivy-plus schools are special because their graduates disproportionately work at these prestigious firms. Indeed, this narrow view of the world would lead one to believe a firm can't be considered elite if it doesn't have enough Ivy-plus graduates and that a firm becomes elite as soon as it does.

State Leaders' Undergraduate University (Figure 1)

College graduates who become state leaders are more likely to have earned degrees from their state's flagship university than one of the Ivy-plus institutions.



SOURCE: Author's calculations

But a bigger problem with this definition of leadership and accomplishment is that it ushers “affinity bias” into the equation. Research shows that people like to be around, hire, and promote people like themselves. For that reason, one might expect that a firm with many Ivy-plus employees would attract and hire a disproportionate percentage of Ivy-plus graduates. The definition naturally inflates the perception of Ivy-plus importance. Consider an alternate scenario. Based on my results for public officials, I might well define a prestigious employer as one with a disproportionately high percentage of flagship graduates. Since those employers would likely hire more flagship graduates in the future, we may soon conclude that the universities of Alabama and Wyoming are far more prestigious than Brown and Dartmouth. We must be careful not to bake our hypotheses into our results.

The *Nature* article illustrates that affinity bias is not an idle concern. Of the 30 institutions and firms considered to possess extraordinary achievers, the one with the highest percentage of Harvard graduates—at nearly 50 percent—is the Harvard

Supreme Court justices with an Ivy-plus law degree choose significantly more clerks with an Ivy-plus law degree.

that I identified as unusual for their predominance of Ivy-plus leaders. In other words, the researchers may have created a list of elite firms composed of the top firms in the few places that are home to Ivy-plus schools and have an unusual number of Ivy-plus leaders. If they’d chosen firms headquartered in Alabama, Indiana, or Oklahoma, they probably would have gotten quite different results.

Perceptions of accomplishment and leadership. The *Nature* article does list its categories of outstanding achievement. That list includes numerous examples that may be the aspiration of many academics but that are probably unknown to, or considered largely unimportant by, most Americans—such as membership in the American Philosophical Association, Bilderberg meeting participation, and attendance at the World Economic Forum. Imagine that I, as a Republican male who likes to read and play chess, selected as elite organizations conservative book circles and all-male chess clubs. That would suit my interests, but it would also mean that I was choosing to identify people who are a lot like me as elite.

Our frame of reference colors which positions we deem prestigious, which then shapes our belief in which educational institutions are most important. Along these lines, the *Nature* article’s categories of achievement include presidents and vice presidents but not governors; members of Congress but not state legislative leaders; and federal judges but not state supreme court justices. The offices left out are those that I found primarily populated by public-university—especially flagship—graduates.

Gatekeepers. The issue of gatekeepers relates to affinity bias. Throughout both the *Nature* and the Opportunity Insights reports, many entities defined as elite and dominated by elite-college graduates also put elite-college graduates in charge of choosing future members. For instance, the academic societies identified in the *Nature* article have disproportionately high numbers of elite-college graduates as members—and members choose new members. The Opportunity Insights study considers acceptance into elite graduate schools as evidence of the eliteness of admittees’ undergraduate colleges, but the study defines “elite graduate schools” as the Ivy-plus schools and five others. These schools’ faculties are disproportionately composed of Ivy-plus graduates. Past Rhodes Scholars lead the selection of future Rhodes Scholars; a disproportionately



The institution found to have the highest affinity bias is Harvard University, where nearly 50 percent of its faculty is made up of its own graduates.

faculty. Since faculty members select their colleagues, this implies that Harvard professors disproportionately choose Harvard graduates.

Geography. Another problem with this perspective on leadership institutions and positions relates to geography. Though the Opportunity Insights paper doesn’t provide its list of elite or prestigious firms (for reasons related to the private data used to identify the firms), the authors note that their list overlaps significantly with some public lists, including those at vault.com, a source for industry and career information. I identified the top 10 firms on Vault in three of its categories—consulting, finance, and law. Of those 30 firms, 25 are headquartered in Boston or New York and two others are in California. As such, these firms are almost entirely located in the very few states

high percentage of past Rhodes Scholars graduated from elite colleges. The MacArthur Foundation awards its “genius” grants disproportionately to Ivy-plus graduates, and the governing board that authorizes the selection committee has 12 members possessing 14 Ivy-plus degrees.

Let’s home in on the issue of gatekeepers’ potential affinity bias. By examining choice positions for which the decisionmaking process is publicly known, one can assess whether decisionmakers with particular education backgrounds are likelier to select people like themselves. I’ve looked at two such examples: U.S. Supreme Court clerks and White House Fellows.

Supreme Court justices choose their clerks, so we can compare justices’ schooling to that of the clerks they select. And a public commission chooses White House Fellows, so we can compare commissioners’ schooling to the schooling of the fellows they select. Both analyses suggest affinity bias plays a role. For example, on average, justices with an Ivy-plus undergraduate degree choose significantly more clerks with an Ivy-plus undergraduate degree. And justices with an Ivy-plus law degree choose significantly more clerks with an Ivy-plus law degree (see Figure 2).

Similarly, the percentage of Ivy-plus graduates on the White House Fellows Commission correlates positively with the percentage of Ivy-plus graduates among the fellows they select.

In sum, the two studies purport to show that elite-college graduates predominate in categories of accomplishment and influence. But they chose for those categories entities already filled with elite-college grads, entities located in places with unusually high percentages of leaders with elite-college degrees, and entities where elite-college graduates serve as gatekeepers.

It is not at all surprising that these conditions produced the findings reported by *Nature* and Opportunity Insights. In fact, it would have been a surprise if they had produced anything else.

Right-Sizing Ivy-Plus Influence

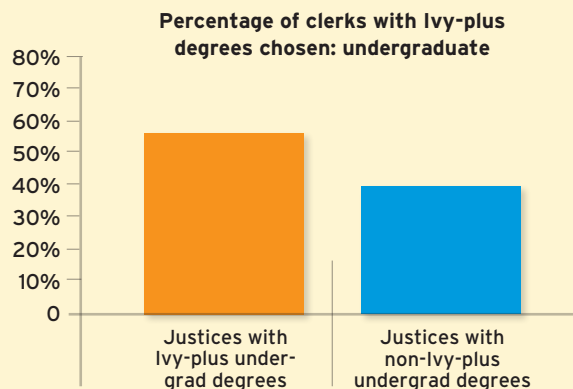
My intention is not to criticize elite private colleges, their graduates, or the authors of the other two studies. In fact, the primary aim of the Opportunity Insights study was to demonstrate the unfair admissions practices at Ivy-plus schools. The findings—for instance, that those schools exercise staggering preferences for the children of America’s wealthiest families—are invaluable, and I cheer the research. My hope is to right-size our understanding of the value of Ivy-plus and other elite private degrees when it comes to American leadership. Such a shift in perspective will spark two significant changes: It will alter how we think about higher education and leadership development, and it will modify the research and reforms we pursue to expand opportunity.

Overstating the importance of elite schools poses real dangers. Philanthropists committed to developing future leaders will tend to invest disproportionately in the Ivies, at the expense of the many other schools that deserve it. State policymakers, who

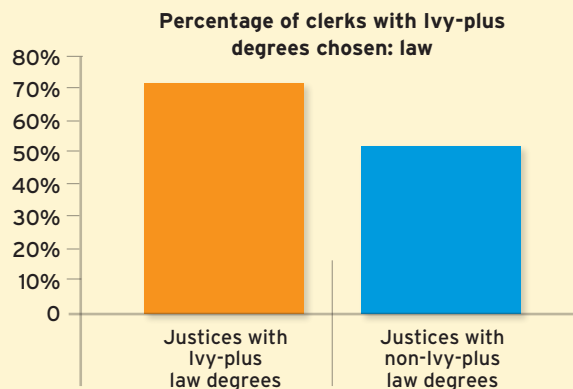
control and fund public universities, will be unaware of the leadership development contributions of their schools. Students from non-elite schools won’t be given opportunities they deserve because they will be deemed to have graduated from the wrong type of university. The students themselves may not pursue certain opportunities because they *believe* they went to the wrong schools. Journalists and commentators will give undue attention to elite schools—growing their applicant numbers and endowments—while ignoring other schools’ contributions. Ambitious,

Affinity Bias in Justices’ Choices of Clerks (Figure 2)

Supreme Court justices are more likely to hire clerks who hold Ivy-plus degrees if they themselves graduated from Ivy-plus institutions. If the justices graduated from non-Ivy-plus universities, they are less likely to hire Ivy-plus clerks.



NOTE: One-tail t-test, $p = .002$



NOTE: One-tail t-test, $p = .007$

SOURCE: Author’s calculations

Overstating the importance of elite schools poses dangers. Students from non-elite schools won't be given opportunities they deserve because they will be deemed to have graduated from the "wrong" type of university.

high-potential high school students will only apply to elite universities instead of lower-cost, closer-to-home schools that quietly develop scads of leaders.

Once we appreciate the major role of non-Ivy-plus universities in cultivating leaders, we may well pursue both research and reform differently. Researchers clearly need to create a better system for defining elite professional landing spots and categories of accomplishment. I believe the other studies' choices shaped their findings, and I'm sure some would say the same of my choices. How can we decide, in a balanced way, which positions and organizations to put into these categories? Should mayors be included? Or each state's top employer? Or leading nonprofits, or winners of the Presidential Medal of Freedom? Another factor to weigh is that because of history, tradition, culture, and geography, the roles considered elite may vary in different parts of the country. My use of each state's top law firms was meant to respect geography, but perhaps it unduly prioritized the practice of law. In some places, relatively fewer young people might aspire to work for law or consulting firms, preferring instead to find a great job at the company that's been in the county for 100 years and sponsors local charitable causes; or lead the region's largest agricultural or natural resources firm; or own the most profitable mill or shipping company; or run a symphony orchestra or regional art museum. Even if there is no consensus on the categories of accomplishment, further study would offer a clearer picture of the education pathways into various domains of leadership.

We also need to better understand the role of affinity bias. Is it the case that some institutions are continually populated and led by elite-college graduates simply because elite-college graduates tend to choose people like themselves? Prior to my research, I generally accepted that the benign term "network effect" explained a large part of Ivy-plus graduates' career success. I had understood that term to mean that the expansive web of well-placed Ivy-plus graduates helped younger Ivy-plus graduates meet prospective employers, learn of job openings, access career advice, and so on. This "old boy" (and now "old

girl") network is surely part of the picture. But I now worry that something more pernicious is at work: that at the point of a final decision—for a scholarship, fellowship, job, award, promotion—Ivy-plus graduates give an unfair advantage to people like themselves at the expense of others.

This is no distinction without a difference. This would mean that equally or more qualified non-elite graduates are denied opportunities because they do not share a specific characteristic with those empowered to select. In practice, this difference matters enormously. Those who subscribe to the "network effect" understanding could accept that Ivy-plus graduates enjoy an advantage and then aim to make Ivy-plus admissions processes fairer (for example, by ending preferences for the children of the most affluent families). But those who subscribe to the "affinity bias" understanding will want to dramatically decrease the role of Ivy-plus graduates on selection committees—whether for Rhodes Scholarships, MacArthur Fellowships, faculty positions, op-ed columnist jobs, or law clerkships.

More work also needs to be done on the dynamics of leadership and place. Why do elite-college diplomas seem to mean so little in most of America? Why do they seem to mean so much in a few states? Is our view of the influence of elite schools distorted because those with platforms are disproportionately located in the places where Ivy-plus degrees do matter?

If we better understand all of this, we will be positioned to better serve students. High school counselors will give better advice, philanthropists will make better-informed investments, and administrators of scholarship programs will make smarter decisions. We'll be able to develop leadership training programs tailored to each type of school's strengths. We'll also be able to develop selection systems for coveted opportunities that enable all talented individuals to compete.

And ultimately, we'll be able to deliver on the promise of the American Dream. Telling young people and their families that the way into professional positions of esteem is to go far from home to attend expensive, exclusive universities runs counter to America's sense of opportunity and egalitarianism. Populism and other anti-institutional movements are built on the public's view that their leaders are distant and unfamiliar with, even uncaring about, people's day-to-day lives. Resentment builds when we sense that those in charge are not like us. Americans would benefit from knowing that, contrary to the dominant narrative, non-elite graduates already hold many positions of authority and respect. And they would smile if they knew work was underway to give talented graduates of all schools an equal shot at a full array of prized opportunities.

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