

Social Class and the College Choice Process: How Poverty Shapes Where Even Valedictorians Attend

Scholarly Significance of the Study

Study after study indicates that poorer students are underrepresented at America's best universities. For instance, Carnevale and Rose (2004) found that only 3 percent of students at the 146 most selective public and private colleges in America were from the bottom socioeconomic quartile. Pallais and Turner (2006) reported that just 10 percent of students attending one of *U.S. News & World Report's* top 30 public and private universities were from families with incomes of less than \$30,000 (Pallais and Turner, 2006).

Although some might believe that these enrollment patterns are the result of more affluent students receiving better academic preparation, preparation differences by social class are unable to fully account for this phenomenon. First, there are many more low-SES students with the academic preparation to thrive at top universities who do not enroll in these institutions.¹ Second, even among similarly well-prepared students college destinations diverge by social class. McPherson and Shapiro (1991) found that 55 percent of upper-income students with combined math and verbal SAT scores of 1300 or above enrolled in a private, elite, COFHE² institution compared with 30 to 39 percent of upper-middle, middle, lower-middle, and

¹ Hill and Winston (2006) find that about 16 percent of students scoring in roughly the top decile of all SAT and ACT test takers are from the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution, suggesting that even without improvements in K-12 education, top institutions could increase the proportion of less affluent students in their student bodies to at least this percentage without affecting the quality of matriculants enrolled. A more encompassing, holistic review of students' abilities that considers grades, curriculum rigor, class rank, other test scores, and even essays and letters of recommendation is likely to identify an even greater percentage of promising students from less affluent families who could thrive at top institutions.

² COFHE stands for the Consortium on Financing Higher Education. It is a voluntary group of 31 highly selective, private liberal arts colleges and universities (COFHE, 2012).

lower income students with scores in the same range. A more recent analysis of students who possessed the academic preparation necessary to attend a selective institution demonstrated that 73 percent of those in the top income quartile ultimately enrolled in such a college compared with 58, 46, and 41 percent of those in the second, third, and fourth income quartiles, respectively (Haycock, Lynch, and Engle, 2010).

Such enrollment decisions have real life consequences. Numerous studies indicate that selectivity of undergraduate alma mater shapes students' educational attainment and income, even controlling for other variables (Alexander and Eckland, 1977; Andrews, Li, and Lovenheim, 2012; Arnold, 2002; Arnold and Youn, 2006; Behrman, Rosenzweig, and Taubman, 1996; Black and Smith, 2006; Bowen and Bok, 1998; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, 2009; Brand and Halaby, 2006; Brewer, Eide, and Ehrenberg, 1999; Carnevale and Strohl, 2010; Daniel, Black, and Smith, 1997; Fitzgerald, 2000; Hershbein, 2011; Kane, 1998; Long, 2008; Loury and Garman, 1995; Melguizo, 2008, 2010; Monks, 2000; Smart, 1986; Solmon, 1975; Thomas and Zhang, 2006; and Zhang, 2005a, 2005b).

Objective or Purpose

Given that: 1) low-SES students are not well represented at America's top colleges; 2) there are many low-SES students who have the academic preparation necessary to enroll in a top college but do not attend; 3) even similarly well-prepared low-SES students are less likely than their more affluent peers to matriculate; and 4) these enrollment decisions shape life outcomes, it is critical that we better understand when, why, and how similarly accomplished valedictorians' college destinations diverge by social class.

Data Sources, Evidence, Objects, or Materials and Methods, Techniques, or Modes of Inquiry

To achieve this research objective, this presentation draws on a new study, The High School Valedictorian Project I (HSVP I). This study identified public high school valedictorians from five states who graduated between 2003 and 2006. It then surveyed about 900 of them about their college choice process. To provide additional insight, in-depth, in-person interviews were conducted with a sub-sample of 55 valedictorians. This presentation will present both descriptive statistics from the survey data and qualitative findings obtained through coding and analyzing the interview data.

Perspectives or Theoretical Framework

Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) work on college choice has been particularly influential in the field. In their schema, there are three phases: 1) "predisposition," during which students develop attitudes toward attending college, 2) "search," in which students explore college options, and 3) "choice," in which students select the universities to which they will apply and the college in which they will enroll. Researchers have applied this model to explain two different decisions: 1) the decision to attend college at all, and 2) the decision to enroll in a specific college.

While Hossler and Gallagher's framework is a very useful starting point, this project seeks to analyze not how students decide whether to attend college, but how students come to matriculate at a particular type of college. For examining this latter process specifically it is helpful to refine Hossler and Gallagher's model somewhat. I call this revised framework the "college destination" process to distinguish it from previous models referred to as the "college choice" process and to emphasize that this revised framework is designed specifically to explore the type of college students come to attend, (their destination), and not their decision to attend college. The six phases of the college destination process are: 1) predisposition, 2) preparation,

3) exploration, 4) application, 5) admissions, and 6) matriculation. As table 1 indicates, the college destination process varies from Hossler and Gallagher's model in that their "choice" phase has been disaggregated into separate application, admissions, and matriculation phases and the preparation stage has been added as a distinct stage rather than viewed as a factor in the predisposition stage. Figure 1 illustrates how the stages in the college destination process interrelate, with solid arrows indicating primary relationships and dashed arrows conveying secondary relationships.

[Table 1 about here.]

[Figure 1 about here.]

Results

HSVP data presented in Figure 2 indicate that valedictorians enroll in very different types of colleges depending on their social class. Given time constraints, this presentation will focus on the large social class differences in enrollment at most selective private colleges.³ Figure 3 illustrates that high-SES students were more likely than low-SES students to attend a most selective private college because they applied at much higher rates. Events during the admissions and matriculation stages did little to change the gap between these two groups. The difference in representation at most selective private colleges between high- and middle-SES valedictorians, on the other hand, can mainly be attributed to differences in application rates, though differences in propensity to enroll also contributed.

[Figures 2 and 3 about here. See also Figure Captions.]

After discussing *when* valedictorians become funneled toward and away most selective private colleges, (the application stage, and, to a lesser extent, the matriculation stage), the

³ Differences by social class in enrollment at a most selective public college could not be detected. Colleges were considered most selective if they were rated as such by *U.S. News & World Report* (2006). Appendix Table 1 lists the 72 public and private colleges that received this designation.

presentation will turn to *how* and *why* students' paths diverged during these phases. Examining what occurs in each of the six stages of the college destination process, reveals valedictorians' application and matriculation decisions were largely determined by the preferences they developed and the conclusions they made during the exploration phase. The remainder of the presentation will therefore focus on key qualitative and quantitative findings from this stage.

To provide a brief overview, this portion of the presentation will first illustrate that high schools' guidance in providing information on college admissions, financial aid, and college options was woefully lacking, even in more affluent communities. Some counselors did not even mention the existence of need-based aid. Counselors also generally did not explain the admissions process at out-of-state, private, and most selective institutions or note the possible educational and career benefits of such attendance. Though one might think that if any student could obtain personalized advice it would be high achieving valedictorians, there was no evidence of this. Rather, valedictorians reported that their counselor did not know their name and that they had to fight just like any other student to get what little personalized time and attention their counselors could provide.

Next, the presentation will underscore that in the absence of sufficient guidance from high schools, valedictorians frequently turned to their families for information. Unfortunately, parents' knowledge about and involvement in the college admissions and financial aid processes, as well as their college preferences for their child, differed by SES. Compared with other parents, less affluent parents were less informed about college admissions and financial aid and less actively involved in their child's navigation of these processes.

Valedictorians' paths also diverged because of the ways in which they explored college options. Some valedictorians were pushed toward certain types of universities and away from

others because of the parameters they established in determining which institutions to consider. Low- and middle-SES students were particularly likely to limit their search on the basis of cost. They also talked about potential emergencies arising and thus tended to prioritize attending college closer to home. High-SES students, on the other hand, often restricted their exploration of colleges to prestigious institutions and were more open to attending college farther from home if doing so allowed them to attend a “better” institution. Parents often encouraged the setting of these particular constraints.

In addition, the presentation will underscore the importance of institutional familiarity in funneling students toward particular colleges. Other valedictorians only investigated colleges that were already familiar to them, and those familiar colleges varied substantially depending on where they lived and the members in their social networks, both of which are shaped by SES. Familiarity was especially influential in students’ decision to apply or not apply to most selective institutions. Though valedictorians of all social class backgrounds mentioned concerns about these institutions’ cost and distance from home, less affluent students had additional apprehensions: the academic and social environment of such institutions. Less affluent valedictorians were less likely to know someone who had enrolled in a most selective institution and thus had a harder time envisioning their own attendance. They suggested that these institutions would be too academic, too difficult, too intense, and not allow time for a social life. In contrast, high-SES students were less apt to worry express these reservations because they were more likely to know someone who had attended a prestigious institution and not only survived academically but enjoyed themselves socially.

The presentation will conclude by highlighting that leaving college guidance to families instead of providing it to all students in school enables social class to have an unnecessarily

strong influence on where students ultimately enroll. And because of the effect college destinations has on individuals' socioeconomic futures, this system of entrusting college guidance to families allows the advantages (and disadvantages) of one generation to be passed on to the next generation. In this way, the social hierarchy is recycled or reproduced rather than restructured based on the achievements of the new generation.

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TABLE 1

The Relationship Between the Stages of the College Destination Process and the Stages in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Three-Phase Model of College Choice

| Phases in the College Destination Process | When These Phases Occur in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) Model of College Choice |
|--|---|
| Predisposition | Predisposition |
| Preparation | Predisposition (Explored as student characteristics and educational activities, which are viewed as factors in shaping predisposition toward attendance) |
| Exploration | Search |
| Application | Choice (Explored as choice set within the choice phase) |
| Admissions | Choice (Explored as college and university courtship activities within the choice phase) |
| Matriculation | Choice |

Figure Captions

Figure 1

Title: The College Destination Process

Figure 2

Title: Percentage Distribution Showing the Control and Selectivity of HSVP Students' College Destinations, By Social Class (N=622)

Notes: Results are based on students with enrollment data. Differences by social class in the percentage of HSVP students who enrolled in a most selective public college are not statistically significant at the .05 level but differences in the percentage who enrolled in a regular private college are significant at the .01 level and differences in the percentage who enrolled in a regular public college or a most selective private college are significant at the .001 level. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: The High School Valedictorian Project Person Dataset

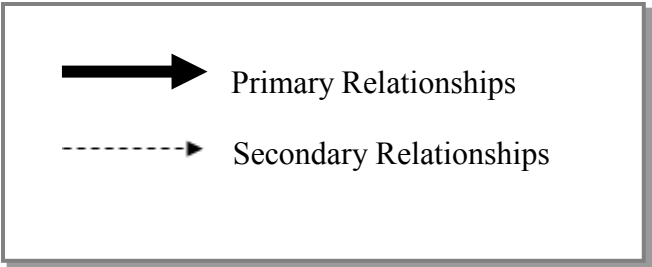
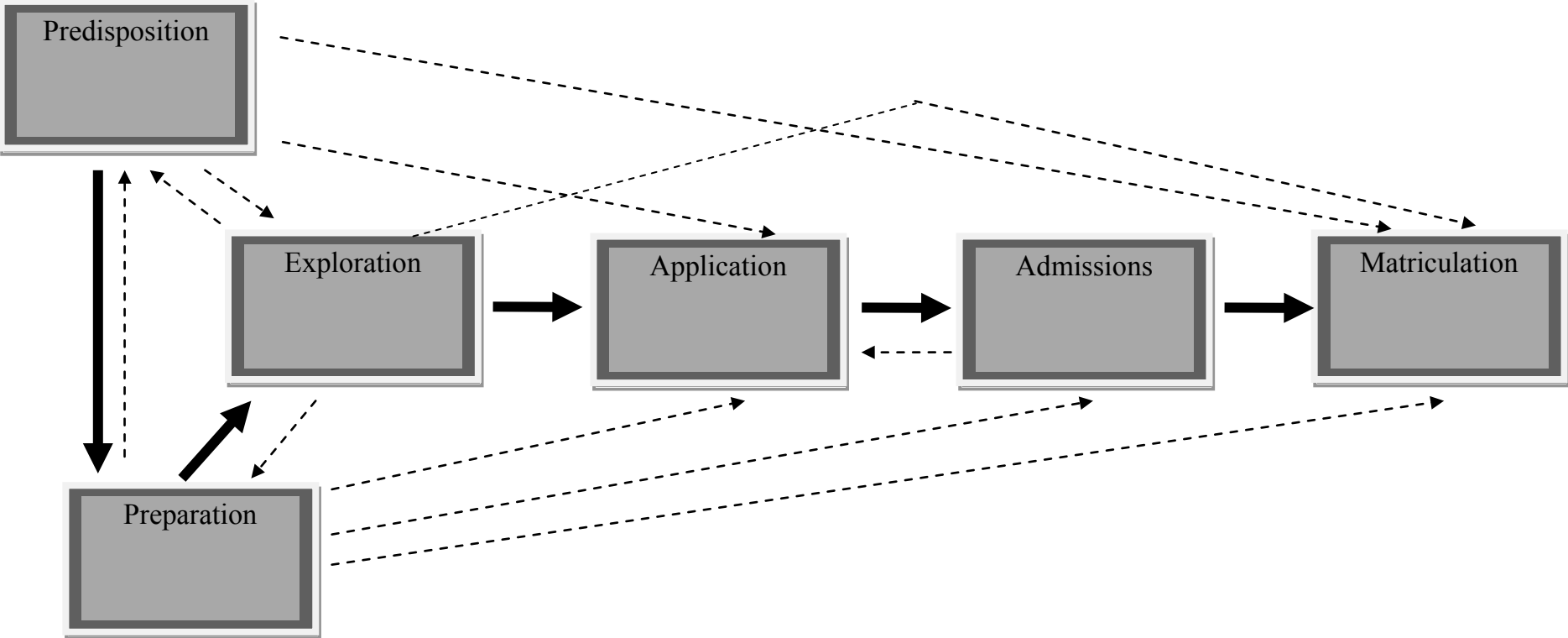
Figure 3

Title: The Role the Application, Admissions, and Matriculation Stages Played in HSVP Students' Paths to Most Selective Private Institutions, By Social Class (N=622)

Notes: Results are based on students with enrollment data. Differences by social class in the percentage of HSVP students who applied, admitted, and were enrolled are statistically significant at the .001 level.

Source: The High School Valedictorian Project Person Dataset

Figure 1: The College Destination Process



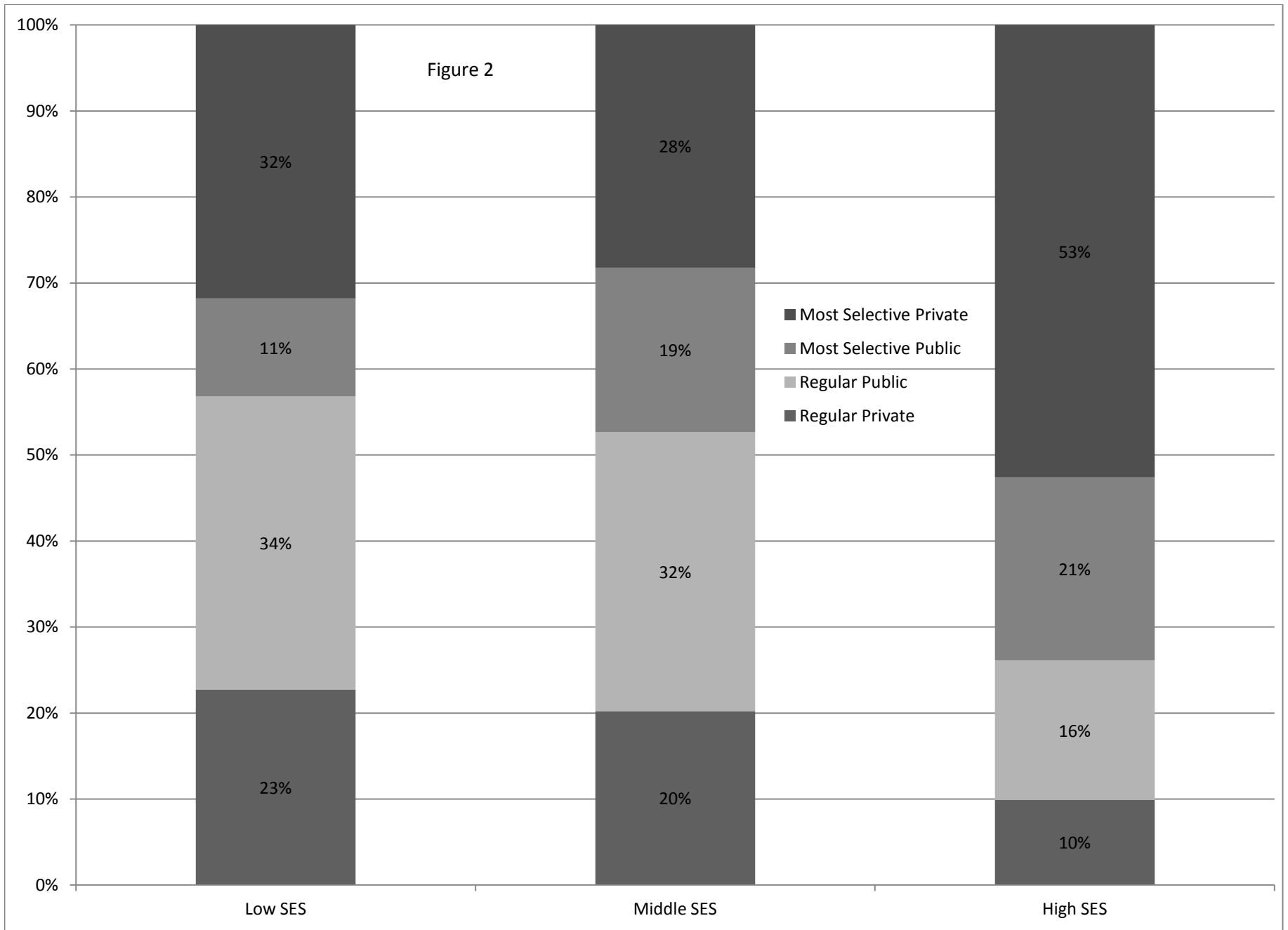
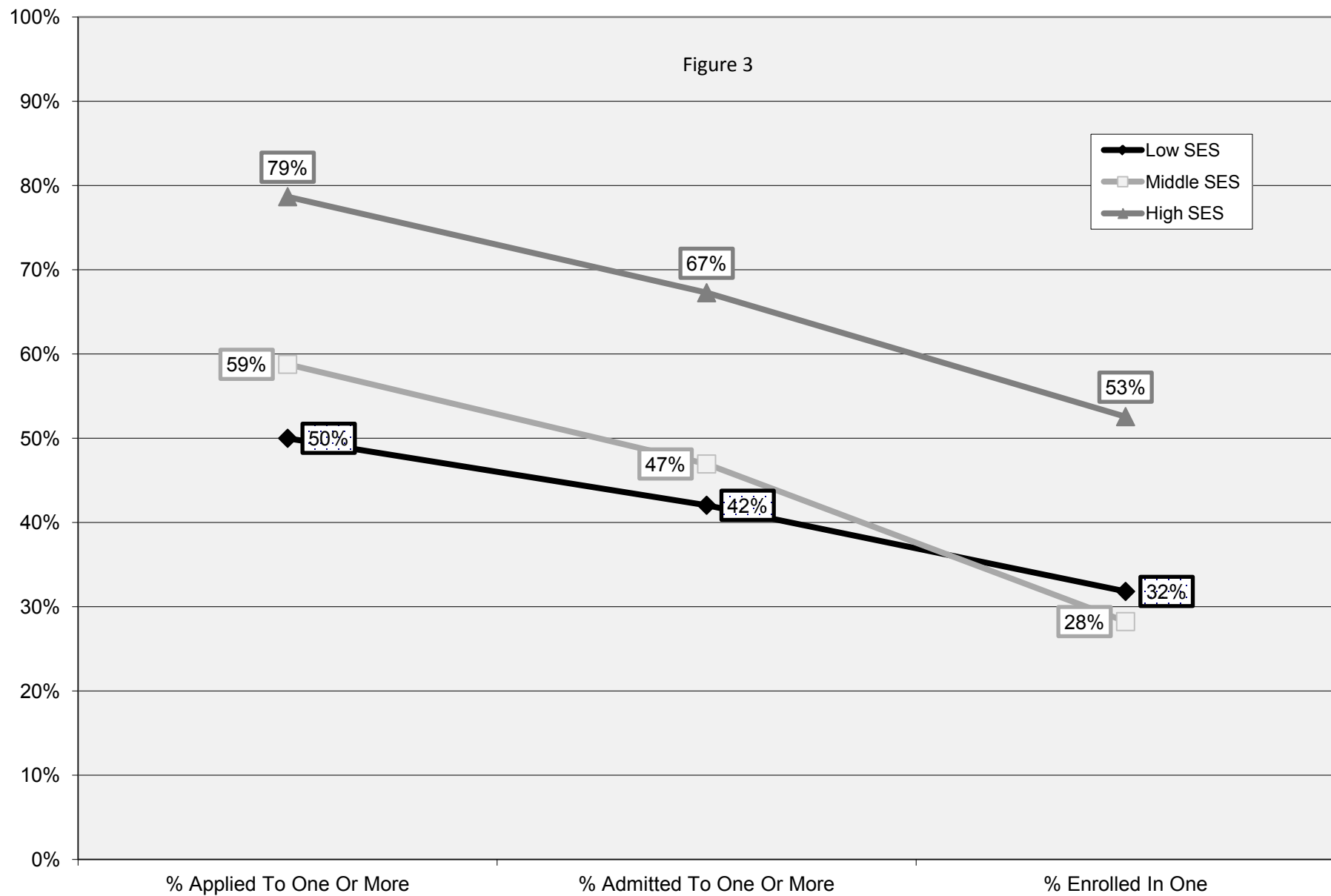


Figure 3



Appendix Table 1
List of Most Selective Colleges

The 72 Public and Private Colleges Rated “Most Selective” By
U.S. News and World Report, By Control and Then Alphabetical Order

| Name of Institution | Name of Institution |
|---|---|
| <i>Public</i> | <i>Private not-for-profit (Continued)</i> |
| College of William and Mary | Grinnell College |
| Georgia Institute of Technology | Hamilton College |
| University of California--Berkeley | Harvard University |
| University of California--Irvine | Harvey Mudd College |
| University of California--Los Angeles | Haverford College |
| University of California--San Diego | Johns Hopkins University |
| University of California--Santa Barbara | Kenyon College |
| University of Florida | Lehigh University |
| University of Michigan--Ann Arbor | Macalester College |
| University of North Carolina--Chapel Hill | Massachusetts Institute of Technology |
| University of Virginia | Middlebury College |
| | New York University |
| <i>Private not-for-profit</i> | Northwestern University |
| Amherst College | Oberlin College |
| Bard College | Pomona College |
| Barnard College | Princeton University |
| Bates College | Rice University |
| Boston College | Scripps College |
| Bowdoin College | Stanford University |
| Brandeis University | Swarthmore College |
| Brown University | Tufts University |
| Bucknell University | Tulane University |
| California Institute of Technology | University of Chicago |
| Carleton College | University of Notre Dame |
| Carnegie Mellon University | University of Pennsylvania |
| Claremont McKenna College | University of Rochester |
| Colby College | University of Southern California |
| Colgate University | Vanderbilt University |
| Colorado College | Vassar College |
| Columbia University | Wake Forest University |
| Cooper Union | Washington and Lee University |
| Cornell University | Washington University in St. Louis |
| Dartmouth College | Webb Institute |
| Davidson College | Wellesley College |
| Duke University | Wesleyan University |
| Emory University | Williams College |
| Georgetown University | Yale University |

Source: U.S. News & World Report (2006)