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A “Good Mixer”: University Placement in Corporate America, 1890–1940

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This article explores the role of university placement offices in shaping a twentieth-century corporate elite. While studies of the “corporatization” of the university focus on developments after the 1970s, the rise of the modern university and corporate economy were inextricably linked by the early twentieth century. Scholars of this period have described the circulation of scientific knowledge and the influx of college graduates into industry, but the specific ties that facilitated their employment remain underexplored. By examining the correspondence between placement officers and employers in Boston, I demonstrate how universities actively cultivated a new corporate class that not only had the right technical knowledge and social skills but the gender, racial, and class-based characteristics employers preferred. In so doing, universities helped incorporate these characteristics into the meaning of academic merit itself. The marriage of universities and corporate management legitimated a credential-based form of inequality that continues to structure the American political economy.

Robert C. Hosmer, vice president and general manager of the Excelsior Insurance Company of New York, was looking to hire a new insurance salesman in 1935. He sent an inquiry to the director of the Harvard University Alumni Placement Service, James F. Dwinell, whom he had come to know over many years of correspondence about prospective employees. An Excelsior salesman was to be a “good mixer” and a “gentlemen” with a “good personality.”¹ Dwinell replied to Hosmer on March 11, 1935 with “a possibility for you”:

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¹Excelsior Insurance Co., “Job Specifications and Requirements,” 1933–1935, box 36, folder: Excelsior Insurance Company, Records of the Office of Career Services, 1913–1958, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (hereafter Office of Career Services).

Dear Bob ... Burns graduated in '28 and is now 31 years old. While in college he was pretty active in extra-curricular affairs. He played on the baseball team three years, being Captain in his Senior Year, was on the track team three years, and was on the football team his Senior Year. He was a member of the Hasty Pudding, the Institute, and the Varsity Club ... He [strikes] me as being a bright, energetic, rather attractive young man. His father was a Nova Scotian and the family are Protestants.²

This exchange was one of thousands of letters between employers and the placement office of Harvard University between 1897 and 1940. During these years, the world of business dramatically transformed from small family enterprises to large corporations with vast bureaucracies made up of dozens or hundreds of white-collar staff. Simultaneously, training for business occupations also changed. In the late nineteenth century, merchants and proprietors learned business through an informal apprenticeship alongside a practitioner, and few had formal education beyond high school. In the emerging corporate economy of the early twentieth century, the college degree became a salient credential for a new class of managers and executives. According to one national survey, in 1900 fewer than 20 percent of American business leaders were college graduates, yet just decades later, for those who became leaders between 1921 and 1940, over 50 percent had secured this now-crucial credential.³

A wave of recent studies of the “corporatization” of American universities has traced the ways in which universities adopted corporate management practices, vocationalized their curricula, and reimagined their students as consumers. These narratives tend to focus on developments after the 1970s, corresponding to the neoliberal turn in US politics and increasing social inequality, in contrast to a mid-twentieth-century “golden age” when the culture of the university was supposedly antithetical to the world of commerce.⁴ The rise of the modern university and the corporate economy, however, were already

²James Dwinell to Robert C. Hosmer, March 11, 1935, box 36, folder: Excelsior Insurance Company, Office of Career Services.

³Anthony J. Mayo, Nitin Nohria, and Laura G. Singleton, *Paths to Power: How Insiders and Outsiders Shaped American Business Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2006), 122.

⁴Elizabeth Popp Berman, *Creating the Market University: How Academic Science Became an Economic Engine* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Ellen Schrecker, *The Lost Soul of Higher Education: Corporatization, the Assault on Academic Freedom, and the End of the American University* (New York: New Press, 2010); Gaye Tuchman, *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); and Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

inextricably linked by the early twentieth century. To understand this deep entanglement of universities in the modern economy, this study refocuses our attention on this earlier period between 1890 and 1940.

Universities and the emerging corporate order were interconnected in numerous ways. As scholars have documented, major industrialists made enormous donations of their private wealth to universities, providing much of the capital of this expanding sector.⁵ Historians have also traced the circulation of new scientific knowledge between the academic and industrial world, fueling new research disciplines and management techniques.⁶ Fewer studies, however, focus on the role of universities in training a new cohort of business managers and executives. While some scholarship notes the influx of college graduates into industry and associated cultural shifts, the ties that facilitated the placement of graduates into business remain underexplored.⁷ College placement services have not received significant attention in any major histories of higher education or business.⁸ This article builds on our knowledge of the links between higher education and corporations by focusing on the nexus of formal placement services that directly mediated between universities and corporate sectors.

The world of universities was hardly autonomous from developments occurring outside its exclusive boundaries. Long-standing institutional “silos” within educational history—between higher and secondary education, between public and private education, and between educational institutions and the political economy—are

⁵Roger L. Geiger, *To Advance Knowledge: The Growth of American Research Universities, 1900–1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 45–47; and Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 12–28.

⁶David F. Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology, and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1979); Clyde W. Barrow, *Universities and the Capitalist State: Corporate Liberalism and the Reconstruction of American Higher Education, 1894–1928* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990); Sanford M. Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy: Managers, Unions, and the Transformation of Work in American Industry, 1900–1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Daniel Nelson, *Frederick W. Taylor and the Rise of Scientific Management* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980).

⁷Christopher Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976); and David O. Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915–1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988).

⁸A brief mention of these services is made in Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration*, 62–64, 125; and Pamela Walker Laird, *Pull: Networking and Success Since Benjamin Franklin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 153–54.

still only beginning to break down.⁹ By reinterpreting major curricular and institutional changes as responses to a changing political economy and landscape of schooling, I argue that elite university leaders expanded and formalized their placement services—a practice pioneered much earlier by proprietary institutions—in order to maintain their institutional position of prestige within an increasingly competitive landscape. In the face of the rapid expansion and feminization of white-collar work, growing immigrant political power, and the rise of institutional competitors in the form of proprietary “commercial colleges” and public high schools, university leaders and alumni grew concerned with the stability of their political and economic influence. Universities deliberately reoriented themselves to the corporate world to help construct new career paths for their graduates that came to define the corporate occupational structure itself. In so doing, not only did corporate culture shape universities, but universities also played a key role in shaping the particular form of American corporate capitalism.¹⁰

In facilitating employment pathways for their graduates, universities incorporated technical knowledge as well as cultural norms and personal characteristics into the meaning of educational merit. Universities developed placement services not only to help their graduates find high-paying jobs, but also to cultivate an institutional reputation based on the forms of knowledge and behaviors as well as the gender, racial, religious, and class-based characteristics employers preferred. Under a meritocratic guise, these network-building services

⁹Christine Ogren has argued that “It is still rare ... for studies to combine horizontal [across types of institutions] and vertical [restricted to one institutional type] history; few monographs discuss students, scholarship, or structures across different sites.” Christine Ogren, “Sites, Students, Scholarship, and Structures: The Historiography of American Higher Education in the Post-Revisionist Era,” in *Rethinking the History of American Education*, ed. William J. Reese and John L. Rury (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 196.

¹⁰Historians of American capitalism and the formation of elites in this period have thus far not paid significant attention to the training institutions on which this new class depended. See Noam Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism: Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America's First Gilded Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). An exception is Susie Pak, *Gentlemen Bankers: The World of J. P. Morgan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Ronald Story and William Bruce Leslie trace these linkages more explicitly, but their studies are primarily set in the nineteenth century. Ronald Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy: Harvard and the Boston Upper Class, 1800–1870* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1980); and W. Bruce Leslie, *Gentlemen and Scholars: College and Community in the “Age of the University,” 1865–1917* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

reproduced a wealthy, white, male stratum of college-educated business leaders. This historical account thus reveals the ways in which the “human capital” paradigm dominant in economics and the “cultural capital” and “credentialism” paradigms in sociology each capture partial facets of education’s role in the labor market.¹¹ While economic historians have documented discriminatory employment practices, and studies of discrimination within universities have explored internal policies, virtually none have explored the intermediary role of placement services.¹² By assisting or hindering their graduates’ employment options, universities shaped the composition of elites *beyond* their walls, and employers found a reliable service to deliver the type of “college man” they preferred to have join their offices and boardrooms.

This article explores the making of a new corporate elite by focusing on institutional developments in the city of Boston. States in the Northeast had some of the highest rates of public school enrollment and a rich institutional ecology of proprietary schools and private degree-granting universities.¹³ The Boston metropolitan area was a financial and industrial center with long-standing ties between economic and cultural elites. While unique, the city’s competitive landscape of schools and the corresponding transformation of Boston’s economic elite make it an ideal city to trace their coevolution. In addition, elite universities like Harvard used their placement services

¹¹Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology* (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 2008); Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Academic Press, 1979); and David K. Brown, *Degrees of Control: A Sociology of Educational Expansion and Occupational Credentialism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1995). Lauren Rivera’s ethnography of campus recruitment by elite corporate firms traces this process in the early 2000s; her conclusions are similar to those I draw for the early twentieth century. Lauren A. Rivera, *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹²Claudia Goldin, *Understanding the Gender Gap: An Economic History of American Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); David R. Roediger and Elizabeth D. Esch, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U. S. History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); and Marcia Graham Synnott, *The Half-Opened Door: Discrimination and Admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, 1900–1970* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979).

¹³John L. Rury, *Education and Women’s Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870–1930* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991); and Leverett Samuel Lyon, *Education for Business* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922).

and alumni to exert their influence nationally, and thus played a central role in converting a regional, New England-based elite into a national-level corporate managerial class. Studying the evolving relationship of universities and elites in this city thus provides insight into the broader development of American corporate capitalism.

In this account, I first describe the competitive landscape of business training between 1890 and 1940. These institutions enabled striking transformations of gender and ethnicity in the business world at large, but among the economic elite, the demographic profile remained stubbornly similar. I argue that elite universities used placement services to ensure their position at the top of the educational and economic hierarchy. Through the correspondence of placement officers, employers, and the words of college graduates themselves, I demonstrate the active construction of a new professional corporate class and the criteria of merit on which this class was evaluated. The successful marriage of university credentials and corporate managers helped give rise to a new, credential-based form of social inequality that continues to structure the American political economy.

The Competitive Landscape of Business Training

In the late nineteenth century, Boston's economic elite was made up of bankers, brokers, merchants, traders, and manufacturers, most of whom owned small firms, often run by several members of the same family. Access to these positions was not rooted in formal education. Out of the fifteen business leaders in Boston between the ages of thirty and forty-five featured in *Men of Progress* in 1896, about half had received only a grammar school education.¹⁴ One continued on to a normal school, three to high school, one to a proprietary "business college," and one to a drafting school. Only one entered Harvard College—Frederick Prince, the son of a Boston mayor—but he dropped out to pursue business opportunities and became a successful banker. None earned a four-year college degree. While Boston's "Brahmin" caste of financial and professional elites developed ties to liberal arts colleges like Harvard, most businessmen were ambivalent about the "college man," whom they considered condescending and impractical.¹⁵ Henry Dennison, a Harvard graduate in 1899 who became president of a paper product company founded by his grandfather, described the "typical slang" businessmen used to refer to college graduates: "He

¹⁴Richard Herndon, comp., *Men of Progress: One Thousand Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Leaders in Business and Professional Life in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, ed. Edwin Monroe Bacon (Boston: New England Magazine, 1896).

¹⁵Story, *The Forging of an Aristocracy*.

knows it all,' 'He hasn't got his feet on the earth,' 'He isn't willing to get his hands dirty,' 'He expects good things passed to him on a silver platter.'" ¹⁶ Many professors, such as economist Thorstein Veblen, were eager to distinguish their emerging academic enterprises from the vulgar world of profit-seeking and disdained vocational subjects like business. ¹⁷

Pathways into positions of business leadership, however, underwent a dramatic change during this period. Small firms run by a few family members persisted but were overshadowed by large manufacturing corporations, chain stores, and financial services companies. ¹⁸ These corporations developed internal bureaucracies staffed by clerks, bookkeepers, stenographers, sales workers, secretaries, managers, and executives. The hiring needs of these bureaucracies overstretched the informal ties that had guided previous personnel decisions, and new layers of management were devoted to personnel policies. In Boston, the Manufacturers' Research Association of Massachusetts was founded in 1920 by over a dozen of the largest Boston-area manufacturing firms for the "pooling of business information and experience to the end that excellence in the science of management achieved by one member can accrue to the good of the group." ¹⁹ Personnel management was a primary focus. Personnel departments boomed nationally after World War I: in 1915, fewer than one in twenty firms with over 250 employees had personnel departments, while in 1929, over one-third did. ²⁰

These changes in business management have been detailed by economic historians, but few focus on the institutions that trained

¹⁶Henry S. Dennison, "The Harvard Graduate in the Business World," typescript ca. 1915, Henry S. Dennison Papers, box 1, folder 19, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston (hereafter Dennison Papers).

¹⁷Thorstein Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1918), 191–218; and Jeffrey L. Cruikshank, *A Delicate Experiment: The Harvard Business School, 1908–1945* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1987), 25.

¹⁸Alfred D. Chandler Jr., *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); Naomi R. Lamoreaux, *The Great Merger Movement in American Business, 1895–1904* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Philip Scranton, *Proprietary Capitalism: The Textile Manufacture at Philadelphia, 1800–1885* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

¹⁹Constitution of the Manufacturers' Research Association of Massachusetts, Dec. 29, 1923, carton 1; and *Report of the Personnel Committee on Whom to Hire*, 1924, carton 1, folder: "Personnel Committee," Manufacturers' Research Association Collection, Mss 883 Records, 1922–1932, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston, MA.

²⁰Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy*, 173.

the staff of corporate bureaucracies.²¹ Educational institutions became attractive to growing firms as a means of preselecting potential employees. Men and women seeking employment in new white-collar jobs fueled the growth of a largely unregulated, competitive landscape of schools eager to promote their services.

Proprietary commercial schools, also known as “commercial colleges” or “business colleges,” were the first on the scene to take advantage of a growing market for business training in the late nineteenth century.²² These schools tended to attract middle-class, second-generation immigrants who could afford a small fee for a few months of practical training, but who did not have the social networks to enter business informally.²³ Proprietary commercial schools pioneered placement services: as early as 1853, Comer’s Commercial College catalog listed all graduates who were “now in good situations in Boston and the vicinity, mostly procured on Mr. Comer’s recommendation,” and the subsequent year explicitly listed “employment” as a school service.²⁴ These schools made extensive use of the testimonials of grateful alumni in their promotional materials. “The position you obtained for me . . . is everything that could be desired,” “many thanks for the situation obtained for me,” “accept my thanks . . . for the position you secured for me on leaving” were just some of the quotes featured in the 1893 catalog of Boston’s Burdett College of Business and Shorthand.²⁵

As white-collar work expanded and partially feminized after 1890, women became the drivers of commercial school growth.

²¹ Bruce E. Kaufman, *Managing the Human Factor: The Early Years of Human Resource Management in American Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Jacoby, *Employing Bureaucracy*. Sanford Jacoby describes the emergence of new professions, including personnel management and vocational guidance, but does not focus on the business training the majority of white-collar workers received.

²² While the earliest such schools date back to the early 1800s, their fastest period of growth was the mid-late nineteenth century. A. J. Angulo, *Diploma Mills: How For-Profit Colleges Stuffed Students, Taxpayers, and the American Dream* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 4–5.

²³ Edwin Garfield Knepper, *History of Business Education in the United States* (Bowling Green, OH: Edwards Brothers, 1941), 54–58.

²⁴ Comer’s Commercial School, *Annual Catalogue*, 1853, 1, Widener Library, Harvard University, Cambridge MA; and Comer’s Commercial School, *Annual Catalogue*, 1854, 4, Widener Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Private employment bureaus and teacher agencies date back to the mid-nineteenth century, but proprietary schools first organized employment services within schools. “Intelligence Offices,” *Annual Report of the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1894* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1894), 106–13; and Edward W. Fickett, *The History of Teacher Placement* (Boston: National Association of Teachers Agencies, 1931).

²⁵ *How to Succeed: Annual Prospectus of the Burdett College of Business and Shorthand* (Boston: no publisher provided, 1893), 34–40.

Between 1880 and 1925, Bryant & Stratton Commercial School, the largest proprietary commercial school in Boston, grew from 375 men and only 50 women students to 368 men and 837 women students. After taking courses in penmanship, bookkeeping, accounting, business correspondence, and shorthand, Bryant & Stratton graduates entered the middle ranks of business as accountants, stenographers, secretaries, and mid-level managers.²⁶ Dozens of proprietary schools, ranging from well-established institutions to single educational entrepreneurs, proliferated in the early twentieth century.²⁷ Some were profit-seeking scams, but many offered essential services to which their students would not otherwise have had access.²⁸

By the early twentieth century, even more diverse institutions had joined the market for business training in Boston. By 1900, public pressure helped propel public high schools to expand their commercial offerings (including bookkeeping, stenography, and commercial arithmetic). Women and second-generation immigrants took advantage of these options in high schools in the greatest numbers.²⁹ Degree-granting colleges and universities also moved into the market for collegiate business training. Nationwide, the first bachelor's degree in business, a "bachelor of finance," was offered by the Wharton School of Finance and Economy in Philadelphia in 1881; in Boston, the YMCA's School of Commerce and Finance offered a "bachelor of commercial science" degree in 1911.³⁰ Collegiate business programs

²⁶ *The Bryant & Stratton Commercial School—60th Anniversary* (Boston, 1925); *Bryant & Stratton School* (Boston, 1927); *The Connecting Link: Bryant & Stratton Commercial School* (Boston, 1932); and *Your Next Step toward Securing a Position, Gaining a Competence, and Amassing a Fortune* (Boston, 1930). These are all available in "Bryant and Stratton Commercial School: pamphlet box" in Widener Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

²⁷ For more information on the growth of the Bryant & Stratton school and other proprietary schools in Boston see: *Report of the Commissioner of Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office) specifically years 1880, 482; 1890, 1462; 1900, 2282–2283; and *Biennial Survey of Education* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office) specifically years 1918–1920, 553; 1932–34, Chapter VII, 25; and *The Boston Directory* (Boston: Sampson & Murdock Company, 1885–1930).

²⁸ Angulo, *Diploma Mills*, 1–56.

²⁹ *Annual Report of the Superintendent* (Boston: Boston Printing Dept., 1928), 42–51.

³⁰ Steven A. Sass, *The Pragmatic Imagination: A History of the Wharton School, 1881–1981* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 50; and House Bill #1463 1911, School Commerce and Finance Records, 1910–1927, box 1, Northeastern University Archives & Special Collections, Northeastern University, Boston. Degree-granting power was typically derived from a college or university's state charter by an act of legislation. Early charters often granted "general" degree-granting power. While the most common degrees were those derived from their European antecedents (BA, JD, MD), this "general" power allowed institutions to

were more prestigious than a non-degree-granting commercial school, but less exclusive than a classical liberal arts college. Enrollment in private women's colleges was also on the rise, and more women graduates chose employment as secretaries over teaching.³¹ In response, many proprietary commercial schools, pressured from public high schools below and degree-granting schools from above, refashioned themselves as postsecondary professional schools. While nearly all lacked state-chartered degree-granting authority, they increasingly competed with degree-granting institutions.³² They also promoted their graduates more aggressively: by 1923, Burdett College was sending bulletins to local employers with their graduates' photos, interests, and personal characteristics, headlining "If any man here interests you, get in touch with Burdett College at once, because the number becomes fewer each week."³³

These new training institutions made possible dramatic demographic shifts in Boston's business sector. Among all proprietors and managers in Boston between 1880 and 1940, first- and second-generation immigrants rose from 30 percent to 64 percent, the greatest proportion of them Russian Jewish immigrants.³⁴ The fastest-growing economic sector in Boston, and nationwide, was clerical and sales

launch a wide variety of new degree programs. By the end of this period, as elite institutions promoted degrees that others aspired to emulate, degree titles became standardized. Alan L. Contreras, *The Legal Basis for Degree-Granting Authority in the United States* (Boulder, CO: State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, 2009); and Walter Crosby Eells, *Academic Degrees: Earned and Honorary Degrees Conferred by Institutions of Higher Education in the United States* (Washington, DC: U.S. Office of Education, 1960), 6–15.

³¹"College Placements," box 9, folder 8: Oct. 1911–Dec. 1914, "Appointment Bureau College Placements," folder 10: Jan. 1919–Dec. 1921, and "Appointment Bureau College Placements," folder 11: Jan. 1922–Feb. 1925, Women's Educational and Industrial Union Additional Records, 1877–2004, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

³²Rakesh Khurana, *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands: The Social Transformation of American Business Schools and the Unfulfilled Promise of Management as a Profession* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 23–136; and Angulo, *Diploma Mills*, 29–56.

³³*Man Power Highly Developed and Ready for Action: Capable Candidates for Business* (Boston, 1923) in Burdett College Misc. Pamphlets, Widener Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

³⁴"Proprietors and managers" made up about 10 percent of the male workforce and 2 percent of the female workforce in Boston through this period, encompassing everything from the small retailer to the corporate manager. The statistical basis of this article is the *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS)* U.S. Federal census samples: 100 percent sample for 1880, 5 percent for 1900, 100 percent for 1920, 100 percent for 1930, and 100 percent for 1940, analyzed with the statistical software STATA. Steven Ruggles, J. Trent Alexander, Katie Genadek, Ronald Goeken, Matthew B. Schroeder, and Matthew Sobek, *Integrated Public Use Microdata Series:*

work, which grew from 15 percent to 25 percent of Boston's male workforce and 6 percent to 32 percent of its female workforce between 1880 and 1940. Women, choosing these clerical and sales work over domestic service, factory work, or teaching, quickly came to dominate these jobs, which became majority female in Boston by 1930.³⁵ The majority of these women and second-generation immigrants were trained in public high schools and proprietary commercial schools.³⁶

Among business leaders, however, the story is one of continuity. Financial and business elites never made up more than a few percentage points of the entire male workforce in Boston.³⁷ Corporate managers and executives were almost exclusively native-born white men, mostly Episcopalian and Presbyterian, with long roots in the Northeast. In a study of two hundred CEOs of leading US firms in 1917, less than 1 percent were Catholic, and less than 0.5 percent were Jewish. Over one-third had parents who were also company executives, and less than 1 percent had fathers who were manual workers.³⁸ While Jewish businessmen did enter into the top ranks of the corporate world, they did not surpass 10 percent of business leaders in the Northeast before 1950 and remained heavily segregated socially. Irish or Italian Catholics remained only a small percentage, and African Americans, Asian Americans, and women were almost entirely excluded.³⁹

The demographic stability of the economic elite belies their active efforts to maintain their position in a competitive environment. The relationships they forged with exclusively male liberal arts

Version 6.0 [dataset] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2015) <http://doi.org/10.18128/D010.V6.0> (hereafter cited as IPUMS).

³⁵ *Ibid.*; Angel Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business: Men and Women in the Corporate Office, 1870–1930* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter: Gender, Class, and the Origins of Modern American Office Work, 1900–1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992).

³⁶ Ileen A. DeVault, *Sons and Daughters of Labor: Class and Clerical Work in Turn-of-the-Century Pittsburgh* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990); and Miriam Cohen, *Workshop to Office: Two Generations of Italian Women in New York City, 1900–1950* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

³⁷ Using the employment of a domestic servant, maid, cook, or nurse as a rough proxy for elite status, I have calculated that only about 10–20 percent of managers, proprietors, and officials could be considered “elites,” or 1–2 percent of the male workforce at large. *IPUMS*, 1880–1940.

³⁸ Richard S. Tedlow, Courtney Purrington and Kim Eric Bettcher, *The American CEO in the Twentieth Century: Demography and Career Path* (Boston: Division of Research, Harvard Business School, 2003), 54–55.

³⁹ Mayo, *Paths to Power*, 84, 95, 187–215; Pak, *Gentlemen Bankers*, 80–106; John Daniels, *In Freedom's Birthplace; a Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 358–59.

colleges and research universities proved mutually beneficial. Universities provided the institutional basis and cultural prestige to a new milieu of business elites, and a reorientation to the business world allowed these institutions to stay competitive in a crowded educational landscape.

Liberal Arts for “Captains of Industry”

Until well into the twentieth century, the institution that trained the vast majority of male college graduates in the Boston area was Harvard College.⁴⁰ Although many sons of Boston’s mercantile and financial elite were educated in the college’s classical curriculum, the primary orientation of Harvard College in the mid-nineteenth century was to the learned professions. The groundwork for an institutional shift toward business was laid in 1869, when alumni of the college, including many business leaders, gained control of Harvard’s board of overseers. This new board helped secure the appointment of Charles W. Eliot, assistant professor of chemistry at MIT, as president to reform the university.⁴¹ Over the next decades, Eliot would play a key role in reorienting the undergraduate curriculum to “modern” subjects, increasing the scientific research capacity of the university, and formalizing professional education. While earning the disdain of some classical educators who believed “vocational” training should be no part of a liberal education, Eliot believed any subject was worthy of study at its highest levels: “We would have them all, and at their best.”⁴²

Eliot was not opposed to business education on principle, but by the 1890s, as enrollment in proprietary commercial schools surged, he became one of the most outspoken critics of these institutions. In 1899 he called them “sham institutions” that “outrageously abused the name ‘college’ to which none of them had any right.”⁴³ His criticism mirrored that of other civic and university leaders across the country who condemned the practices of proprietary schools—the use of solicitors, guarantees of employment, lack of prerequisites—in numerous reports.⁴⁴ Eliot instead supported what he called an “upper

⁴⁰For comparative enrollment statistics see *Report of the Commissioner of Education*, 1880, 644; 1900, 1660–1661; and *Biennial Survey of Education*, 1918–1920, 337–338; 1934–1936, Vol II, Chapter IV, 123.

⁴¹Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636–1936* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 326.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 330.

⁴³“Our Trade at Stake,” *Boston Herald*, Oct. 31, 1899, 12.

⁴⁴“Private For Profit Commercial Schools” 1914, Boston Chamber of Commerce Records, Case 20, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston; and City Club of

commercial school” that was “parallel with a college or scientific school” to train a middle tier of businessmen (not businesswomen) in occupations such as public accountants, merchants, managers, and foreign consuls.⁴⁵ Based on this description, he likely looked approvingly at new collegiate-level business schools like Wharton to train a middle stratum of businessmen. For an even more exclusive class of “captains of industry,” however, Eliot believed that a liberal arts college education was the best preparation.⁴⁶ This curriculum, which he implemented at Harvard, included a flexible elective system in which students could specialize within natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and foreign languages. Eliot also supported the organization of business-related courses for undergraduates, such as Principles of Accounting in 1900.⁴⁷

With remarkable speed at the turn of the twentieth century, the small minority of Harvard college graduates entering business grew into a majority. In 1897, 15–20 percent of graduates entered positions in business; by 1908, 50 percent did.⁴⁸ Business far outnumbered any other occupational choice among graduating seniors and remained the most popular area of employment for the next decades, only temporarily dropping to 30 percent during the Great Depression.⁴⁹ This massive influx of graduates into business was facilitated by the activities of Harvard’s placement office.

The Harvard Alumni Placement Service

College graduates had long relied on informal connections through their classmates or professors to secure employment. In fields such as engineering and physics, where highly technical knowledge was required, employers would continue to rely on professors for direct

Chicago, *A Report on Vocational Training in Chicago and in Other Cities* (Chicago: City Club of Chicago, 1912), 238–58; see also Angulo’s discussion of the City Club of Chicago report in Angulo, *Diploma Mills*, 47–52.

⁴⁵ Charles Eliot, “Commercial Education,” *Educational Review* 18, no. 5 (Dec. 1899), 417–24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 421.

⁴⁷ Cruikshank, *A Delicate Experiment*, 26.

⁴⁸ Khurana, *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*, 111.

⁴⁹ Through the 1920s the second largest choice of Harvard graduates was law, at around 15 percent, and teaching, at around 10 percent. “Committee on Choice of Vocations,” “Vocational Preferences in the Class of 1923, 1924, 1925, 1926,” “1931 Questionnaire #3,” box 94, folder: Vocational Studies, Harvard, 1924–1929, Office of Career Services; and “Table IV” box 96, folder: Vocational Survey, Class of 1935–1938, 3 Years After Graduation, Office of Career Services.

recommendations, even after formal placement services developed.⁵⁰ University placement offices, however, soon took over the majority of placement coordination. The Harvard “Appointment Committee” was founded in 1897, primarily to assist students seeking appointments as college professors and high school teachers.⁵¹ This office coordinated with the Harvard Alumni Association for students seeking business positions, and the latter branch quickly outpaced the former.⁵² By 1912, teaching and business placement services split in two. While male staff officially directed business placement, the bulk of the work was carried out by an “appointment secretary”—a female college graduate named Ruth Mork—who served in this capacity for twenty-two years.⁵³ Over the next decades, the alumni branch of the Appointment Committee placed one hundred to two hundred graduates each year into business-related positions. With around four hundred students in each graduating class of the college between 1900 and 1917, these placements made up a substantial proportion of each class.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Donald Moyer to Clarence Clewell, Oct. 11, 1939, box 43, folder: Pennsylvania Association of School and College Placement, Office of Career Services; Donald Bridgman to Donald Moyer, April 14, 1936, box 31, folder: American Telephone and Telegraph Company, Office of Career Services; and E.M. Billings to J. B. Conant, Oct. 21, 1938, box 36, folder: Eastman Kodak Company, Office of Career Services.

⁵¹ For “perhaps ten years” prior to this formal organization, the secretary of the college had operated an informal bureau that predominantly helped students find term-time and summer employment to help finance their college expenses. A “Student Placement Office” separated from the Appointment office in 1910. Louisa L. McCrady, “Development of a University Appointment Office,” box 30, folder: Alumni Placement Service, Harvard, General Printed Matter, Office of Career Services; and *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1910–11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 261.

⁵² *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1900–01* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1902), 10–13.

⁵³ “A New Harvard Service,” *Alumni Bulletin*, Sept. 26, 1929, box 30, folder: Alumni Placement Service, Harvard, General Printed Matter, Office of Career Services.

⁵⁴ *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1903–04* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1905), 353; *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1905–06* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1907), 353; *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1910–11* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1912), 266; *Reports of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1917–18* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919), 283, 287. Placements were made from the pool of alumni registered with the service, including graduates with more than a bachelor’s degree and graduates one or more years out of college. However, those who were placed with master’s degrees primarily went into high school or college teaching, and one or two hundred annually, even of a pool of several classes, was still substantial.

Despite their criticisms of proprietary schools as vulgar and vocational, universities like Harvard adopted many of the same practices, placement services among them. Long-standing institutions had the advantage of ready access to a much larger pool of alumni contacts. The Harvard Alumni office developed relationships with hundreds of employers, coordinating with Harvard clubs across the United States.⁵⁵ While the heaviest concentration of employer contacts were in New England, where over half of all graduates in the 1920s remained, the office made a concerted effort to “nationalize” their placement service after 1925.⁵⁶ The Great Depression provoked a renewed interest in and devotion of resources to placement services for students entering a depressed labor market. From a small staff of one secretary and stenographer in 1898, the office expanded into the Alumni “Placement Service” in 1929, which included three male supervisors, two male directors, and two female staff.⁵⁷ This office created a special bulletin to send to employers throughout the country—matching that of Burdett College—advertising registered candidates, including academic record, extracurricular activities, family background, race, religion, personal appearance (including height and weight), and personality.⁵⁸ This national outreach facilitated the disproportionate impact of a few universities like Harvard on the emerging corporate scene.

New professional associations helped facilitate the connections between college placement officers and company personnel departments, in the process establishing male dominance over the emerging profession. While the National Association of Appointment Secretaries (NAAS) was founded in 1924 by women serving as placement secretaries, including Harvard’s own Ruth Mork, this organization was ignored by an expanding cohort of male administrators. Walter Daly, a Harvard alum and administrator specifically in charge of undergraduate employment, coordinated with other male placement officers at MIT, Boston University, and Massachusetts Agricultural College to form the Associated College Employment Officers in 1926.⁵⁹ When a female colleague inquired about the

⁵⁵ *Report of the President and Treasurer of Harvard College 1918–1919*, 252–56.

⁵⁶ “Table: Geographical Distribution of Harvard Classes, 1923–1932” in *Report to the Harvard Alumni Employment Committee*, 3, box 94, folder: Vocational Studies, Harvard 1924–1929, Office of Career Services.

⁵⁷ James Dwinell to Helen Porter, March 2, 1936, box 46, folder: U, Office of Career Services.

⁵⁸ J. F. G. Miller to Harvard Alumni Placement Service, March 26, 1936, box 46, folder: B. F. Sturtevant Company, Office of Career Services.

⁵⁹ Helen MacMurtrie Voorhees, *History of the Eastern College Personnel Officers, 1926–1952* (Boston: T. Todd, 1952), 4.

relationship between this organization and the NAAS, Daly admitted he had no knowledge of the prior association and, to avoid confusion, quickly changed the name of his organization to the Eastern College Personnel Officers (ECPO).⁶⁰ Several years later, these aspiring male professionals, all Harvard alumni, were responsible for reorganizing the Harvard placement office and transferring Mork's nearly one thousand employer contacts, developed over more than twenty years, to her new male superiors.⁶¹

ECPO became an important institutional site for networking between colleges and employers. Although representatives from women's colleges attended, the focus was overwhelmingly on placing male college graduates into business.⁶² Over time, representation at ECPO expanded geographically, and placement officers and employment managers formed close professional and personal ties.⁶³ When the employment manager of Ohio-based Procter & Gamble Company left his firm in September of 1940, he made sure to introduce his replacement, David Watt, to the directors of Harvard's placement office.⁶⁴ A few weeks later, Watt wrote to the assistant director, Donald Moyer, expressing how much he enjoyed meeting him at the last ECPO meeting, and how much he looked forward to getting better acquainted when he visited Cambridge.⁶⁵ These ties were further reinforced as personnel circulated between universities and firms. Paul Viets, one of the founding members of ECPO from Massachusetts Agricultural College, left in 1927 to take up a job as personnel manager of the Plymouth Cordage Company.⁶⁶ James Dwinell, who graduated

⁶⁰Ibid., 5; Miriam Carpenter to Walter Daly, Sept. 21, 1926, and Oct. 22, 1926; and Daly to Carpenter, Oct. 25, 1926, box 1, folder: Eastern College Personnel Officers, Records of Placement Office, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University Archives, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

⁶¹As reported in the *Alumni Bulletin*, "It is clear that Miss Mork's employer contacts are many, and should serve as an excellent nucleus upon which to build the work of the new office." *Report to the Harvard Alumni Employment Committee*, box 94, folder: Vocational Studies, Office of Career Services; and "The Alumni Employment Office," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, June 21, 1928, box 30, folder: Alumni Placement Service, Harvard, General Printed Matter, Circulars, Office of Career Services.

⁶²Voorhees, *History of the Eastern College Personnel Officers*, 9.

⁶³Stuart Clement to R. W. Warfield, Nov. 17, 1937; Ralph Robinson Wolf, Jr. to Donald Moyer, Jan. 25, 1940, box 48, folder: Yale University, Office of Career Services.

⁶⁴F. G. Atkinson to Donald Moyer, Sept. 20, 1940, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Company, Office of Career Services.

⁶⁵David M. Watt to Donald Moyer, Oct. 29, 1940, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Company, Office of Career Services.

⁶⁶Voorhees, *History of the Eastern College Personnel Officers*, 5; and "Paul W. Viets Obituary," *Paper Trade Journal*, Nov. 22, 1937, 107.

from Harvard in 1902, had been an employment manager at the New England Telephone and Telegraph Company before becoming the director of Harvard's Alumni Placement Service in the reorganization of 1929.⁶⁷ Other colleges and universities saw the benefits of these services to both institutions and their alumni. In 1925, 44 percent of large universities in the United States had organized placement bureaus.⁶⁸ By the 1940s, most colleges and universities had joined one of a growing number of regional and national personnel and placement associations that vied for professional dominance.⁶⁹

Criteria for Selection and Placement

Those in charge of personnel hiring based their decisions on a combination of technical knowledge, social and cultural skills, and personal characteristics. A human capital explanation of recruitment and hiring would focus primarily on the technical skills that students possessed.⁷⁰ Specialized technical knowledge was essential for certain jobs, particularly technicians and engineers. The Walworth Company in New York called for "experienced metallurgists"; Lever Brothers in Cambridge was "eager to see promising young chemists at any time" for "general industrial chemistry work."⁷¹ The Harvard placement office compiled lists of students who had taken courses in sought-after forms of knowledge: physics, math, and advanced economics.⁷²

Technical knowledge, however, was a necessary but not sufficient condition. Social skills and cultural norms were just as important. Kendall Mills, a textile company headquartered in Boston, wanted scientists who had the "ability to get along with others"; for a new chemist, they preferred someone with an "advanced degree and industrial

⁶⁷"Report of the Associated Harvard Clubs," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, May 15, 1930, 31, 24, box 30, folder: Alumni Placement Services, Harvard General Printed Matter, Office of Career Services.

⁶⁸Levine, *The American College and the Culture of Aspiration, 1915–1940*, 63.

⁶⁹College Placement Council, *The Fundamentals of College Placement: History, Philosophy, and Operational Techniques Associated with the Modern College Placement Office* (Bethlehem, PA: The College Placement Council, 1962), 27, 219–34.

⁷⁰Goldin and Katz, *The Race Between Education and Technology*.

⁷¹The Walworth Company, "Job Specifications and Requirements," April 16, 1934, box 48, folder: The Walworth Company; and Lever Brothers Company, "Job Specifications and Requirements," Nov. 18, 1929, Jan. 16, 1930, and Aug. 2, 1938, box 39, folder: Lever Brothers Company, Office of Career Services.

⁷²"Concentrators in Physics," "Concentrators in Math," "Ec. 26b," 1937–1940, box 30, folder: Info re Business Recruiters and Student Concentrators, Office of Career Services.

experience, though personality and adaptability come first.”⁷³ Firms also distinguished between prospective technical assistants, engineers, and researchers, and those they wanted to groom into supervisors and executives. For the latter group, cultural knowledge and social skills were essential. Employers valued extracurricular clubs and athletic teams as arenas in which students developed and demonstrated leadership qualities as well as the skill of being a team player.⁷⁴

The parallel development of Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) illustrates the distinction between these two types of college graduates. MIT developed a reputation for training engineers, and the bulk of requests for technically trained men went there.⁷⁵ Compared to Harvard, a greater proportion of MIT students were lower middle class, nearly 30 percent of students were international in 1910, and there was even a small minority of female students.⁷⁶ MIT’s success in engineering, as well as each institution’s financial concerns, led to five different merger attempts by Harvard and MIT leaders between 1869 and 1912. However, the overwhelming majority of MIT alumni believed that a merger would destroy MIT’s identity as an engineering institute as opposed to a liberal arts college. Critics of the merger, such as Francis Walker, MIT president from 1881 to 1897, contrasted the hard-working MIT student with the Harvard undergraduate, who could be seen “loafing in academic groves” and “browsing around among the varied foliage and herbage of a great university.”⁷⁷ There was some truth to this caricature. Harvard undergraduates at the turn of the twentieth century were still overwhelmingly the sons of wealthy New Englanders, and the social tone was set by “club men” who lived in “gold coast” dormitories and ate in elite social clubs.⁷⁸

⁷³Kendall Mills Company, “Job Specifications and Requirements,” June 27, 1934 and April 28, 1939; and Warren Eustis to J. F. Dwinell, Nov. 12, 1940; box 38, folder: Kendall Mills, Office of Career Services.

⁷⁴David Watt to Donald Moyer, Dec. 6, 1940, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Company, Office of Career Services.

⁷⁵MIT Placement Bureau Records, 1920–1968, Institute Archives and Special Collections, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA; and *MIT Annual Report of the President and Treasurer 1902*, 41; *MIT Annual Report of the President and Treasurer 1905*, 48; *MIT Annual Report of the President and Treasurer 1906*, 51; *MIT Annual Report of the President and Treasurer 1910*, 68; and *MIT Annual Report of the President and Treasurer 1911*, 73.

⁷⁶“Mechanic Arts High Criticised,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Dec. 15, 1910, 4.

⁷⁷Bruce Sinclair, “Mergers and Acquisitions,” in *Becoming MIT: Moments of Decision*, ed. David Kaiser (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 37–57.

⁷⁸Morton Keller and Phyllis Keller, *Making Harvard Modern: The Rise of America’s University* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), 13–14; and William James,

These divergent reputations had an impact on their graduates' employment prospects. John Ripley Freeman, an MIT graduate who headed a successful hydraulic engineering consulting firm, supported the merger plan in 1904.⁷⁹ Freeman argued that MIT only trained the corporals of industry, while Harvard trained the captains. What MIT lacked was the cultural education that liberal arts college students received. Employers reaffirmed this distinction. In the 1920s, Howard Coonley, president of the Walworth Company, said, "We find that the man who stands best in his college training as a student very seldom is a good executive. He is often a remarkable specialist. ... If I want to obtain engineers I go to an institution which specializes in training engineers of a certain type, but if I want an engineer executive I always seek a man who has had a general course of engineering training."⁸⁰ While the MIT–Harvard merger plan ultimately failed due to a legal technicality, MIT began to expand humanities and social science requirements in ways that reflected Freeman's and Coonley's observations and a broader shift in elite engineering education.⁸¹ MIT economist David Rich Dewey (the brother of philosopher John Dewey) was instrumental in launching Course XV in Engineering Administration in 1914 "to fit men for administrative positions." This sequence included classes in law, history, economics, and scientific management, and became the Sloan School of Management in 1938.⁸² As other engineering schools in Boston expanded, MIT graduates were groomed to enter the executive elite. A 1910 survey of MIT alumni found that 9 percent were in executive positions; by 1939, 20 percent were.⁸³

While a substantial minority of Harvard undergraduates pursuing business entered manufacturing, the majority went into finance, banking, distribution and marketing.⁸⁴ For these jobs, academic knowledge

"The True Harvard," in *William James: Writings, 1902–1910* (New York: Library of America, 1987), 1126–129.

⁷⁹ Sinclair, "Mergers and Acquisitions," 49.

⁸⁰ James Bossard and J. Frederic Dewhurst, *University Education for Business: A Study of Existing Needs and Practices* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931), 93.

⁸¹ Noble, *America by Design*, 316.

⁸² "Mechanic Arts High Criticised"; Davis R. Dewey, "Teaching of Economics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology," *Journal of Political Economy* 18, no. 6 (June 1910), 434–37; and Daniel Nelson, *A Mental Revolution: Scientific Management Since Taylor* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1992), 86–87.

⁸³ John B. Rae, "Engineering Education as Preparation for Management: A Study of M.I.T. Alumni," *Business History Review* 29, no. 1 (March 1, 1955), 67.

⁸⁴ In a 1927 survey of the class of 1924, of those employed in business occupations, 14 percent were in manufacturing, 27 percent in banking and finance, and 30 percent in distribution or trade. "Committee on Choice of Vocations: Table 1: Class of

was important, but in a more abstract sense. In 1936, Boston investment bank Kidder, Peabody and Company, whose partners included several “Harvard men,” reached out to the Harvard placement office. “One of the principal requisites,” partner Chandler Hovey wrote, was “outstanding records scholastically, as such records indicate brains.” As Hovey explained, “We are not looking for clerks; we have plenty of those. We are looking for the type of young men who have enough imagination and intelligence to work up into responsible positions.” Brains plus “spark” was something intangible but identifiable. Hovey admitted that he himself had never attended college, but “I remember distinctly when I was at school that there were always some scholars who were head and shoulders above the others.”⁸⁵ Employers often possessed a vision of the brilliant “college man” they wanted.

In the wake of the Great Depression, the proportion of jobs in banking and finance declined, while those in manufacturing, marketing, and insurance increased.⁸⁶ In the realm of marketing and sales, appearance and an affable yet aggressive personality were the primary requirements. Through the 1930s, Robert Hosmer of the Excelsior Insurance Company continued to ask Dwinell for salesmen with a “pleasing appearance” and “good personality.”⁸⁷ Procter & Gamble sought a man for their sales department who was of the “dominant type” with an “impressive appearance.”⁸⁸ The Dennison Manufacturing Company specified in its request for salesmen: “Must be a diplomat, good sales type. No timid souls.”⁸⁹ Unmarried men were preferable, especially in sales, since salesmen were expected to travel frequently.⁹⁰

1924,” box 94, folder: Vocational Studies, Harvard, 1924–1929, Office of Career Services.

⁸⁵ Chandler Hovey to Donald Moyer, Feb. 14, 1936; “Kidder Peabody Co.” March 16, 1936; Chandler Hovey to George Plimpton, April 13, 1937 and April 30, 1937, box 39, folder: Kidder, Peabody and Company, Office of Career Services.

⁸⁶ A survey of 1935–1938 graduates found that of those in business, 8 percent were in banking or finance, 17 percent were in “manufacturing and production,” and 33 percent in marketing, advertising, or insurance. “Classes of 1935–36–37–38,” box 96, folder: Vocational Survey, Class of 1935–1938, 3 Years After Graduation, Office of Career Services.

⁸⁷ Robert C. Hosmer to James F. Dwinell, Aug. 15, 1939, box 36, folder: Excelsior Insurance Company, Office of Career Services.

⁸⁸ Procter & Gamble Distributing Company, “Job Specifications and Requirements,” April 21, 1931 and Jan. 18, 1934, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Co., Office of Career Services.

⁸⁹ Dennison Manufacturing Company, “Job Specifications and Requirements,” April 29, 1940, box 35, folder: Dennison Manufacturing Company, Office of Career Services.

⁹⁰ As James Dwinell explained to an employer, “There are several men with sales experience who ... might be good prospects. These latter men, however, are all

Some companies asked directly for information about religion, race, and ethnicity. Procter & Gamble desired “men of good ability and personality, not in last quarter of class, and Christians preferred.”⁹¹ Kendall Mills requested Protestants exclusively.⁹² The International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) in New York asked for photos of students and information about “what [his] father does” because the company believed “family background [was] important in estimating [a] boy’s capacity and interest.”⁹³ Because there were so few candidates who were not Caucasian Protestants, the Harvard placement officers tended to note exceptions. In correspondence about a prospective employee with Kendall Mills, Dwinell wrote, “He is good-natured, cheerful, and does not betray too forcibly in his appearance that he is of Levantine origin.”⁹⁴ Dwinell followed up with Connecticut manufacturing company Landers, Frary & Clark: “It has, of course, occurred to me that you may not react favorably to Woodhouse’s record on account of his race. I realize that it is difficult to imagine a native of India being particularly successful in working with New Englanders. I want to reassure you, however ... Woodhouse is extremely attractive and has made good with all kinds of people around here.”⁹⁵ Over the next few years, Landers, Frary & Clark would continue to ask for detailed information about students’ “pedigree” and would follow up about unusual names to ensure they were of the desired nationality.⁹⁶ To the American Telephone and Telegraph Company in New York looking for a statistician, Moyer reassured the

married ... A man who is now [married] would be apt to shy a little at a job which compelled him to be away from home as much as this one does.” James F. Dwinell to Robert Hosmer, Sept. 5, 1939, box 36, folder: Excelsior Insurance Company, Office of Career Services.

⁹¹Procter & Gamble Distributing Company, “Job Specifications and Requirements,” Feb. 10, 1930, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Co., Office of Career Services.

⁹²The Kendall Company, “Job Specifications and Requirements,” Sept. 12, 1933, box 39, folder: Kendall Mills, Bauer and Black, Office of Career Services.

⁹³“International Business Machine,” Jan. 25, 1939; and H. E. Pim to Placement Office, Feb. 20, 1941, box 39, folder: International Business Machine, Office of Career Services.

⁹⁴J. F. Dwinell to Mr. Eustis, March 21, 1941, box 39, folder: Kendall Mills, Bauer and Black, Office of Career Services.

⁹⁵J. F. Dwinell to R. H. White, May 23, 1933 and May 29, 1933, box 39, folder: Landers, Frary & Clark, Office of Career Services.

⁹⁶For example, the treasurer of the company, R.H. White, wrote to Donald Moyer: “The name Robert Bennick is a rather peculiar one. I would appreciate your advice as to the nationality of the man.” Moyer assured White that Bennick was “a protestant, a Congregationalist,” and “the only other [clue] I can think of giving you is the fact that his father is a bank officer and the further fact that the question of his racial background seems never to have arisen before.” R. H. White to Donald

personnel manager, “Although Bernstone is Jewish, he is one of the most popular men in the department.”⁹⁷ It must be highlighted that these were instances in which Harvard placement officers chose to recommend students despite their racial and religious characteristics—it is not knowable how many were passed over entirely.⁹⁸

More subtly, many descriptors that placement officers used to describe candidates were proxies for other characteristics, particularly class. Lower-class graduates were usually described as a “chap” with adjectives that connoted roughness and resilience: the son of a packing-house foreman and mechanical engineer by training was “a substantial chap”; a Catholic student recommended for production work was described as a “small but very husky sort of chap”; the son of a mining engineer recommended for production in a foundry was “a rugged, self-reliant chap who knows how to take it.”⁹⁹ Students from lower-class backgrounds typically attended public school, were the recipients of scholarships, and worked part-time during college and over summers. This personal history was made known to potential employers, likely exacerbating class disparities.¹⁰⁰

While the Harvard placement office promoted itself as a service to aid all students, in reality its top priority was to shape Harvard’s reputation. Placement officers openly admitted, among alumni circles, that they did not help everyone who registered. Addressing the Harvard Associated Clubs in 1930, Dwinell explained that graduates could be classified into three categories. About 10 percent of each class consisted of successful men eagerly sought by employers. A much larger second group encompassed men “of capacity, but whose personalities do not so clearly reveal that capacity.” Dwinell offered an example:

“I have one man whose case concerns me very much. He is graduating from College at the age of 26, and he worked four years between the grammar and high schools. ... He came to Harvard and majored in

Moyer, Feb. 8, 1937 and April 13, 1936; and Donald Moyer to R. H. White, April 15, 1936, box 39, folder: Landers, Frary & Clark, Office of Career Services.

⁹⁷Donald Moyer to Donald Bridgman, May 16, 1941, box 31, folder: American Telephone and Telegraph, Office of Career Services.

⁹⁸In examining the majority of the Harvard placement office correspondence with business employers, I did not come across the mention of any African American students.

⁹⁹J. F. Dwinell to Robert Hosmer, Sept. 5, 1939, box 36, folder: Excelsior Company; Donald Moyer to R. R. Wallace, May 27, 1931, box 31 folder: American Steel and Wire; and J. F. Dwinell to S. T. McCall, March 14, 1939, box 31, folder: American Brake Shoe and Foundry Company, Office of Career Services.

¹⁰⁰J. F. Dwinell to Harold L. Young, July 2, 1936, box 36, folder: The Employers Group; and J. F. Dwinell to S. T. McCall, March 14, 1939, box 31, folder: American Brake Shoe and Foundry Company.

English Literature with a better than average standard, but he still speaks the language of the small town machine-shop. Harvard may have deepened his understanding of English literature, but superficially he is just what he was four years ago. In no outward respect is he a college man. He has sought four opportunities [through placement] unsuccessfully. ... It is the men in this group that constitute the real placement problem. They are not the type of men the average employer has in mind when he says he wants college men.”¹⁰¹

Academic achievements notwithstanding, this was a working-class student who would never be a “college man,” and the placement office was wary of recommending him. A third category of men, according to Dwinell, was made up of low-achieving students whom the placement office would simply not help, students who really “should have gone to work directly after leaving high school and never gone to college at all.” A college education had been wasted on these students, Dwinell implied. The placement office should not help them, he explained, because “the office of service is finally going to be sold, not by advertising, but by the men placed.”¹⁰² In correspondence with employers, placement officers would often state that they did not have anyone who fit the bill. In 1936, Dwinell wrote to the Excelsior Insurance Company: “While we have one hundred or so men registered [in that geographic area], frankly there is not one of them whom I care to suggest to you.”¹⁰³ The Harvard placement office was careful to help employers find exactly who they wanted, including the right class, racial, and ethnic preferences, to improve their reputation as a source of employees.

The Credentialed Corporate Ladder

The pathways from elite universities to leading firms strengthened over time. Once alumni moved into executive positions, they often favored those from their own alma mater. Between 1896 and 1939, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and its subsidiaries hired between one and fourteen Harvard graduates per year and became one of the largest employers of college graduates in the United States in the 1920s.¹⁰⁴ Henry Dennison of Dennison

¹⁰¹J. F. Dwinell, “Proceedings of the Meeting of the Associated Harvard Clubs,” *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, June 1930, 33, box 30, folder: Alumni Placement Service, Harvard, General Printed Matter, Office of Career Services.

¹⁰²*Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰³J. F. Dwinell to Robert Hosmer, Sept. 26, 1936, box 36, folder: Excelsior Company, Office of Career Services.

¹⁰⁴“College Men in the Bell System with Degrees from Harvard University, 1896–1939,” box 31, folder: American Telephone and Telegraph Company, Office of Career Services.

Manufacturing was partial to other Harvard alumni.¹⁰⁵ In 1930, General Agent Frank Bobst of the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance in Boston wrote to the placement office to express the company's continued interest: "In view of the fact that a number of Harvard graduates have been and are now members of the sales staff of this Agency ... we will be most interested to interview others who might qualify for work of this sort."¹⁰⁶

The influx of college graduates into business corporations significantly shaped the corporate occupational structure. Employers benefited from easy access to a supply of employees with their desired characteristics as well as the prestige and social networks that college graduates brought to their firms. At the same time, most graduates had very little experience in the actual operation, let alone management, of business. Large firms restructured their internal training procedures to accommodate this lack of experience. Many created distinct "tracks" and training programs for college graduates, who started at the bottom and would rotate through departments before promotion to a managerial role. At Lever Brothers, college graduates started as "messengers" before advancing to administrative positions.¹⁰⁷ In the early 1930s, Procter & Gamble developed a yearlong salesmanship training course for future division managers as well as a preforemanship training course that groomed collegians into factory superintendents.¹⁰⁸ Because firms typically hired college graduates in order to promote them to management, these graduates quickly surpassed less-educated employees into executive positions.¹⁰⁹

The structure of employee training and promotion favored wealthier candidates, which helped reinforce a particular class composition of managers. Starting college graduates at the bottom continued long-standing apprenticeship practices that served to teach novices the

¹⁰⁵The handwritten notes of one placement officer read, "I spoke to Mr. Dennison as he was a classmate of my fathers and used to know him. He seemed really interested as you well know in us.;" "Dennison Mfg. Co.," Feb. 20, 1934, box 35, folder: Dennison Manufacturing Company; and "A New Harvard Service," *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*, Sept. 26, 1929, box 30, folder: Alumni Placement Service, Harvard, General Printed Matter, Office of Career Services.

¹⁰⁶Frank Bobst to Ruth Mork, May 2, 1930, box 39, folder: John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance, Office of Career Services.

¹⁰⁷H. A. Deering to Harvard Alumni Placement Service, Jan. 24, 1936, box 39, folder: Lever Brothers, Office of Career Services.

¹⁰⁸Procter & Gamble, "Job Specifications and Requirements," Nov. 7, 1930 and Feb. 28, 1933, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Co., Office of Career Services.

¹⁰⁹R. L. to Donald Moyer, Oct. 31, 1936, box 39, folder: Landers, Frary & Clark, Office of Career Services.

ins-and-outs of the firm at a low cost.¹¹⁰ This policy also had the effect, however, of weeding out students from lower-class backgrounds who could not afford to live in Boston on such a small income. In correspondence with Boston department store Filene's Sons Company, Moyer noted that one prospective employee "questions whether he can afford to accept employment in Boston for as little as you are prepared to offer him," while two other candidates "are local boys and I assume are interested."¹¹¹ Based on data gathered through vocational surveys of graduates in the 1920s and 1930s, a large proportion of Harvard graduates lived at home with parents immediately after college.¹¹² Boston consulting firm Lichtner Associates expected a new hire to be "able to support himself for a time," assuming assistance from parents or savings.¹¹³ Like a nineteenth-century apprenticeship or modern-day unpaid internship, being able to forgo a livable income was a fee of entry into the most desirable firms.

This structure of employee promotion was also a way to build loyalty to the firm. Employers pitched a low starting salary as a meritocratic means of proving oneself as a worthy employee. The Employers Group, an insurance company, explained, "We are willing to start them in on what we call a livable wage and from there on it's up to the man himself."¹¹⁴ Waldo Adler, a Harvard alum and Philadelphia-based real estate executive, preferred "entirely green" graduates to hire as salesmen, who would serve a six- to seven-year apprenticeship on a commission basis before earning a salary.¹¹⁵ Adler was one of many employers who specified that they did not want graduates who had previously worked for competitors.¹¹⁶ Some firms, like Procter & Gamble, developed summer internship programs for college juniors and seniors as a way to recruit loyal employees

¹¹⁰Richard Plumley to Donald Moyer, July 18, 1938, box 48, folder: Yale and Towne Mfg. Co., Office of Career Services.

¹¹¹Donald Moyer to Charles E. Barry, April 18, 1940, box 36, folder: Wm. Filene's Sons Co., Office of Career Services.

¹¹²For examples of Harvard graduates living at home with parents see: "No. 138 Work History" box 93, folder: Manufacturing; "No. 120 Work History," box 93, folder: Sales; "No. 251 Work History," box 92, folder: Advertising; and "No. 239 Work History," box 92, folder: Accounting, Office of Career Services.

¹¹³The Lichtner (Wm. O.) Associates, "Job Specifications and Requirements," Jan. 10, 1933, box 39, folder: Lichtner Associates, Wm. O., Office of Career Services.

¹¹⁴Harold T. Young to J. F. Dwinell, Aug. 7, 1936, box 36, folder: Employers' Group, Office of Career Services.

¹¹⁵Waldo Adler to George Plimpton, July 18, 1935 and Nov. 5, 1935, box 31, folder: Adler, Waldo, and Company, Office of Career Services.

¹¹⁶F. G. Atkinson to Mr. Sage, March 10, 1936, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Co.; see also Richard Plumley to Donald Moyer, July 18, 1938, box 48, folder: Yale and Towne Mfg. Co., Office of Career Services.

fresh from college.¹¹⁷ In these ways, college graduates became dependable, devoted employees with in corporate management.

Collegian Corporate Culture in Their Own Words

In the upper echelons of the business world, alumni were increasingly surrounded by other college graduates. An actuarial clerk for the State Mutual Life Assurance Company in Worcester, Massachusetts, described, “To give you an idea of my associates, at the neighboring desk is a Yale grad—behind me is a New Hampshire man with a year’s graduate work in Math at Brown; my ‘boss’ is a Yale man, and the Actuary himself is a University of Toronto graduate.”¹¹⁸ One Harvard graduate began to work as a messenger at Lever Brothers with six colleagues from his Harvard class.¹¹⁹ Alums enjoyed working with fellow collegians and described their college associates as “gentlemen,” “high grade” men who made work more “pleasant” and “attractive.”¹²⁰ If not living at home, college graduates often boarded and socialized together.¹²¹ These associations spilled over into their professional life, especially investment and marketing jobs, in which lunching or playing golf with clients was their day-to-day work.¹²²

Alumni also took to heart the superiority of college-educated men. These attitudes are expressed most clearly in their descriptions of non-college-educated associates. One Harvard alum working among “high school graduates” in the classified ad department of a Cleveland newspaper reflected, “For the most part a fine lot, but many of them little children as far as ideas and social development is [sic] concerned.”¹²³ Another accountant for the New Jersey Bell

¹¹⁷F. G. Atkinson to J. F. Dwinell, May 4, 1936, box 43, folder: Procter & Gamble Co., Office of Career Services.

¹¹⁸“No. 133 Work History,” 1940, box 92, folder: Actuarial Work, Office of Career Services.

¹¹⁹“No. 218 Work History,” 1938; and “No. 136 Work History,” 1939, box 92, folder: Advertising; “No. 225 Work History,” 1940, box 92: Actuarial Work, Office of Career Services.

¹²⁰“No. 275 Work History,” circa 1930, box 90, folder: Department Store; “No. 247 Work History,” 1938; “No. 203 Work History,” 1939, box 92, folder: Advertising; and “No. 117 Work History,” 1938, box 92, folder: Accounting, Office of Career Services.

¹²¹“No. 225 Work History,” 1939, box 92, Actuarial Work; “No. 251 Work History,” 1939; and “No. 206 Work History,” 1937, box 92, folder: Advertising, Office of Career Services.

¹²²“No. 36 Work History”; and “No. 287 Work History,” circa 1930, box 90, folder: Investments, Office of Career Services.

¹²³“No. 251 Work History,” 1939, box 92, folder: Advertising, Office of Career Services.

Telephone Company surrounded by “clerks drawn from the lower middle class” claimed that they were all “of indifferent intelligence and small education.”¹²⁴ These attitudes were both racialized and gendered. One insurance agent of the class of 1920 dealt with “Petty Jewish types principally. Unprepossessing, uninteresting and for the most part unintelligent.”¹²⁵ Many college graduates had women working for them as secretaries and stenographers, commonly referred to as “girls,” and some male collegians expressed annoyance with the “petty office politics” of female employees.¹²⁶ As college graduates often experienced rapid promotion, a common way to refer to less-educated associates was to suggest their limited promotion prospects. “My associates were mostly high school or less products without the desire to accomplish anything more advanced than what they were doing,” stated one *New York Daily News* clerk. Another AT&T accounting clerk wrote, “Only a few were college grads. ... Majority were of the type that would never receive much advancement.”¹²⁷ Furthermore, the failure of a college graduate to receive rapid promotion was a major blow to his own self-worth as a collegian. One Harvard graduate working in a clerical job at Dennison Manufacturing that “any elementary high school pupil could do,” wrote, “I feel quite useless, and it is a ‘deflating’ thought to think that if I left the company I would not be missed one iota.”¹²⁸ Some college graduates especially resented having superiors that subverted the racial and gender hierarchy. A sales employee of Godfrey L. Cabot Inc., a Boston-headquartered chemical company, wrote, “The person immediately over me was a Jewess who had been working there five years. She was most ignorant and domineering.”¹²⁹ As male college graduates increasingly filled the higher ranks of management, they internalized an occupational ladder that conflated job performance and merit with credentials, racial, and gendered characteristics.

¹²⁴“No. 239 Work History,” 1938, box 92: Actuarial Work, Office of Career Services.

¹²⁵“No. 177 Work History,” circa 1930, box 90, folder: Insurance, Office of Career Services.

¹²⁶“No. 207 Work History,” 1937, box 92, folder: Actuarial; “No. 142 Work History,” 1937, box 92, folder: Advertising, Office of Career Services.

¹²⁷“No. 239 Work History,” 1939, box 92, folder: Advertising; “No. 249 Work History,” 1938, box 92, folder: Actuarial, Office of Career Services.

¹²⁸“No. 247 Work History,” 1938, box 92, folder: Advertising, Office of Career Services.

¹²⁹“No. 279 Work History,” 1936, box 93, folder: Sales, Office of Career Services.

University Degree and the Criteria of Merit

The rising number of college graduates in business in turn provoked changes in the institutional ecology of business-training institutions. Harvard University leaders supported a professional school of business open exclusively to college graduates. If business were to be put on a scientific basis and guided by the ethical ideal of service, many educators and businessmen believed, it could become, in the words of Henry Dennison, the “newest and possibly the greatest profession.”¹³⁰ In 1908, the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration (today’s Harvard Business School, HBS) opened offering a two-year master’s in business administration, with courses including accounting, commercial contracts, banking, and finance.¹³¹ By 1929, 40 percent of each graduating HBS class entered positions in banking and finance, the majority as investment bankers.¹³² The HBS placement office, founded in 1923, was even more selective than the college in making recommendations, and from day one only aided highly qualified students.¹³³ Even with this exclusive policy, by the mid-1920s the HBS placement office was placing the majority of graduates pursuing employment.¹³⁴ The HBS placement officers also conducted extensive visiting tours in the 1930s to promote their alumni among leading businessmen across the country, turning the MBA into a coveted credential by 1930.¹³⁵

While Harvard University continued to dominate the niche of liberal arts and graduate degrees, other Boston colleges and universities began to offer tailored bachelor’s degrees in business administration, finance, or commercial science. As mentioned, the YMCA won degree-granting power for its male-only evening School of Commerce and Finance in 1911, which quickly became one of the largest collegiate business schools in the country, primarily training

¹³⁰Henry S. Dennison, “What the Employment Department Should Be in Industry,” address at Employment Mangers’ Conference, April 2–3, 1917, box 1, folder 30, Dennison Papers; Khurana, *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*, 46, 111–21; and Louis D. Brandeis, *Business: A Profession* (Boston: Small, Maynard, 1914).

¹³¹Cruikshank, *A Delicate Experiment*, 41–54; and “Mechanic Arts High Criticised.”

¹³²“Placement Statistics from 1929–1939,” box 2, vol. 8, Placement Office Records, Harvard Business School Archives, Boston, MA (hereafter HBS Placement Records).

¹³³Melvin Thomas Copeland, *And Mark an Era: The Story of the Harvard Business School*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 291–93; and “Trips by School Staff for Placement Office 1932–1946,” HBS Placement Records.

¹³⁴In 1926, the office placed 57 percent of the graduating class seeking employment. Placement Statistics 1926–1929, box 1, vol. 1, HBS Placement Records.

¹³⁵“Trips by School Staff for Placement Office 1932–1946,” HBS Placement Records; and Mayo, *Paths to Power*, 131.

certified public accountants.¹³⁶ Boston University (BU), a co-ed university, founded an evening (and subsequently daytime) College of Business Administration in 1913, which soon outpaced all of its other schools in enrollment.¹³⁷ Boston College (BC), a Catholic institution, opened a mens-only School of Business Administration in 1938.¹³⁸ Across the country, programs of “higher commercial education” multiplied and were praised by university presidents.¹³⁹ Compared to a traditional BA or BS degree, these degrees were typically one or two years long, less expensive, and they often offered flexible evening hours. These features made them accessible to working adults—like proprietary commercial schools, but with a culminating college degree. Students increasingly chose the more prestigious option. Many proprietary commercial schools, newly squeezed by degree-granting business programs, were forced to close; others sought to remake themselves as collegiate institutions.¹⁴⁰

The race to open new collegiate degree-granting programs can also be understood as a response to the feminization of white-collar work and the surge of female students in proprietary schools, public high schools, and women’s colleges. A broad swath of the educational and economic leadership of Boston saw advanced business education as a way to channel men into positions above “dead-end” feminized clerical jobs. The BU College of Business Administration originated out of a concern among male alumni that BU’s co-ed liberal arts college was developing a reputation as a “girl’s college,” and that collegiate-grade business training would help retilt the gender balance toward men.¹⁴¹ The business school at BC explicitly aimed to train

¹³⁶House Bill #1463 1911, box 1, School Commerce and Finance Records, 1910–1927; *School of Commerce and Finance Catalogue 1914–15* (Boston: Young Men’s Christian Association, 1915), 11, and 1920–1921, 6. Northeastern University Archives & Special Collections, Northeastern University, Boston.

¹³⁷*The Year Book 1914–15* (Boston: Boston University, 1914), 319–22.

¹³⁸*School of Business Administration 1938–1938*, Boston College Bulletin (Boston: Boston College, 1939).

¹³⁹“In Joint Sessions Historical and Economic Associations Unite,” *Boston Herald*, Dec. 29, 1900, 9.

¹⁴⁰No. 818, Secretarial Work Employee Questionnaire, 1925, folder 403, Bureau of Vocational Information Records 1908–1932, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; and Scott Adams Fisher, “The Development and Recession of the Private Junior College Including Fisher Junior College: A Case Study” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1983), 1–85.

¹⁴¹Eleanor Rust Collier, *The Boston University College of Business Administration, 1913–1958* (1959), Boston University Archives, Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston University, Boston; and “The Syllabus,” 1934 Rev. Everett William Lord Correspondence, Maine Writers Correspondence, Maine State Library, http://digitalmaine.com/maine_writers_correspondence/320/.

“upright and God-fearing ... Christian gentlemen” for “the various fields of business activity.”¹⁴² Often driven by the demands of their alums, institutions like BU and BC used their degree-granting authority to establish a higher-level niche in a crowded landscape of business-training institutions and to launch their preferred male graduates into the upper levels of business employment.

In practice, women attained college degrees in increasing numbers, outpacing each new credentialed hurdle. The meaning of a woman’s credential in the labor market, however, was distinct from that of her male counterparts and powerfully illustrates the illusion of meritocratic promotion that male collegians assumed. The philanthropic Women’s Education and Industrial Union (WEIU) in Boston founded the earliest women’s employment bureau in 1878 and narrowed its focus to placing women college graduates in 1909. In 1910, the bureau secured a new director, Laura Drake Gill, who was also the president of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae representing women college graduates across the country.¹⁴³ Through this national network, the WEIU bureau placed college women in positions “other than teaching,” primarily as stenographers and secretaries, and developed extensive connections to firms more than a decade before their male college counterparts achieved the same level of coordination.¹⁴⁴ However, while the WEIU bureau aspired to promote new professions for women, the employment paths for female graduates were restricted. While the rare female college graduate became a proprietor herself, in large firms women tended to reach the position of secretary or mid-level manager (typically managing women) while remaining subordinate to male executives.¹⁴⁵ Many women were content with their positions, which offered higher pay and better working conditions than alternatives open to them. However, according to one 1926 national survey, 20 percent of secretaries hoped to use their positions as an

¹⁴² *School of Business Administration 1938–1938*, Boston College Bulletin, 9, <https://archive.org/details/bostoncollegebulletin>.

¹⁴³ “The Worker and the Chance to Work,” *Boston Daily Globe*, May 8, 1910, 46.

¹⁴⁴ “History of the Appointment Bureau,” box 8, folder 66, 7, Women’s Educational and Industrial Union Records, 1894–1955, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. Subsequent studies of college placement have also ignored the prior role of college women, including College Placement Council, *The Fundamentals of College Placement*.

¹⁴⁵ Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering Business*, “College Placements,” box 9, folder 8: Oct. 1911–Dec. 1914, “Appointment Bureau College Placements,” folder 10: Jan. 1919–Dec. 1921, and “Appointment Bureau College Placements,” folder 11: Jan. 1922–Feb. 1925, Women’s Educational and Industrial Union Additional Records, 1877–2004, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

“entering wedge” into higher managerial or professional positions, and some complained about the limits of advancement and salary.¹⁴⁶ Specialized college degree programs for women—such as Secretarial Studies at Simmons College launched in 1902 or BU’s School of Secretarial Science founded in 1919—aspired to elevate, but in practice “demarcated,” the positions of secretaries, stenographers, and office and department store managers as women’s professions.¹⁴⁷ Credentials alone could not open all doors, and placement services could only help certain populations within the constraints set by the leaders of the new corporate economy.

Conclusion

By 1940, colleges and universities had forged new pathways for their graduates into the corporate world. The expansion of proprietary schools and the influx of women and immigrant populations into business provoked a reaction among economic and educational elites seeking to maintain their own prestige and power. Through alumni-based placement networks, elite institutions like Harvard cultivated ties to leading employers and shaped the reputation of their own graduates. This reputation was based not only on knowledge and skill but the gendered, racial, ethnic, and class traits of those graduates they endorsed. Based on the success of the selected alumni they promoted, elite universities helped set the standards of prestige to which other students, and institutions, aspired. Other degree-granting colleges and universities developed their own business programs and placement services to establish their own niche as high as possible within a competitive landscape.

Many promoters of higher education in the twentieth century believed that a college degree would provide a fail-safe ticket into lucrative employment. The dramatic growth of proprietary commercial schools, public high schools, and degree-granting institutions in cities like Boston indeed helped many enter an expanding field of white-collar employment. Business leaders and the most well-

¹⁴⁶“The Woman Secretary” 1926, 262–68, folder 507; “No. 783,” and “No. 797,” Secretarial Work Employee Questionnaire, 1925, folder: 403, Bureau of Vocational Information Records 1908–1932, Schlesinger Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

¹⁴⁷Anne Witz describes the gendered strategy of “demarcating,” rather than “usurping,” a “related but distinct sphere of competence in an occupational division of labor.” Anne Witz, “Patriarchy and Professions: The Gendered Politics of Occupational Closure,” *Sociology* 24, no. 4 (Nov. 1990), 682; and Kathleen Kilgore, *Transformations: A History of Boston University* (Boston: Boston University, 1991), 128–32.

connected universities, however—increasingly linked on a national scale—responded by mutually strengthening their control of corporate leadership positions. Although the need for technical knowledge sometimes overcame employer prejudices, the expansion of exclusive degrees in the early twentieth century helped cloak gender, racial, and class-based hierarchies under the guise of merit. Through the creation of a tier of corporate managers by 1940, universities thus played a central role in legitimating a steep social hierarchy. The mid-twentieth century “golden era” of federal education funding, the gains of industrial labor unions, and the social protections of an expansive welfare state mitigated some of the effects of this new, credential-based form of social inequality. But as these rights and resources began to be eroded in the 1970s, the partnership of the academic and economic 1 percent was invigorated, and educational credentials became increasingly salient as a means of structuring social opportunity.¹⁴⁸

The long history of the coevolution of elite universities and corporate capitalism should help us to think critically about the making, and remaking, of an economic elite. As the history of placement services demonstrates, universities did not merely reflect the power of the corporate world but, through their administrators and alumni, were active agents in forging the composition and professional culture of this corporate class. As graduates entered, rose, and recruited like-minded graduates into the business world, they replicated the forms of technical, social, and cultural knowledge as well as the gendered, racial, and demographic traits cultivated at their own institutions. A close historical reconstruction of the nexus of elite university placement and American business elites allows us to observe the process through which placement officers, alumni, and employers together forged the criteria that defined one’s value within the modern corporate economy.

¹⁴⁸“In the United States ... about two-thirds of the overall rise of earnings dispersion between 1980 and 2005 is proximately accounted for by the increased premium associated with schooling in general and postsecondary education in particular.” David H. Autor, “Skills, Education, and the Rise of Earnings Inequality among the ‘Other 99 Percent,’” *Science* 344, no. 6186 (May 23, 2014), 843–51.