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## *The Paper*

It's not easy to judge a person based on what's written on one sheet of paper. And it's never a fair thing and it's never an accurate thing either. . . . You are trying to pick candidates from a very, very qualified group of people, and what separates them ends up being some of your preferences and if you have shared experiences.

—Amit, consultant

After the sounding bell of the first on-campus info sessions, the race for EPS jobs began. Firms would be flooded with thousands of applications from listed schools alone in a period of several weeks. Although firms narrowed the pool by restricting competition to students at core and target schools, they still commonly had to winnow applications by over one-half to compose interview lists. They did so initially through résumé review.<sup>1</sup>

Despite a robust literature on hiring, scholars know surprisingly little about how employers screen résumés in real life. There are a variety of academic theories outlining which pieces of résumé information employers *should* care about.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a large number of empirical studies analyze differential outcomes in résumé screening based on applicants' gender, race, and social class, showing that women, minorities, and individuals from working-class backgrounds are significantly less likely to be invited for an interview.<sup>3</sup> In short, we have front-end theories about how employers should review résumés and back-end information about which candidates they call back. Yet a vital missing link is how employers actually evaluate résumés on the ground. Without studying this important stage of the hiring process, we can only guess what employers do. As a result, we may miss or misinterpret the types of methods and information they use to select interviewees.<sup>4</sup> In order to understand how employers make their first cut of applicants—decisions that set

the boundaries of who ultimately can receive an offer—it is necessary to study the process of résumé screening itself, analyzing how employers sort, compare, and select résumés from among those applications received. This chapter focuses on that process.

### BUCKETING MERIT: THE PROCESS OF RÉSUMÉ SCREENING

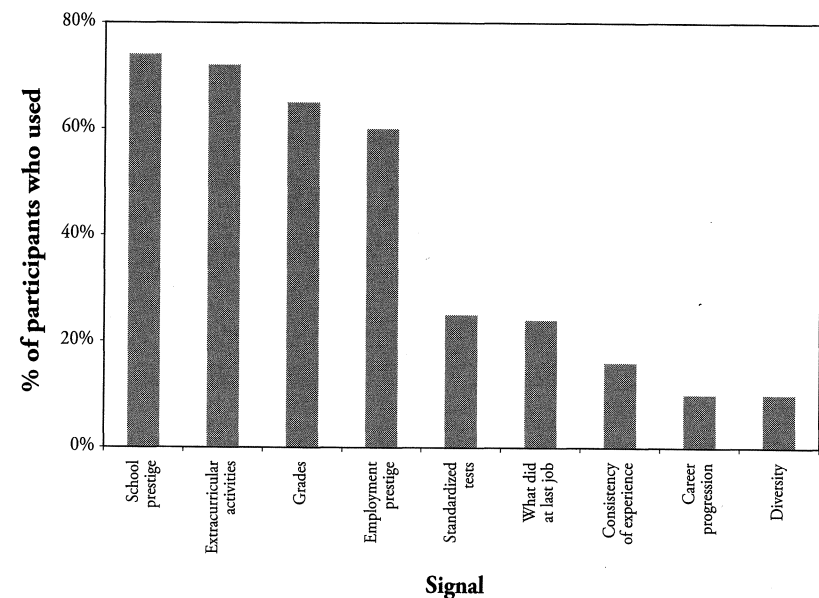
Across firms, evaluators reported following similar sorting procedures.<sup>5</sup> They were typically given little, if any, formal instruction in how to screen résumés. When instruction was provided, which was most common in consulting, it was typically contained in a written memo or pamphlet produced by HR that evaluators could and often did choose to disregard. As such, two people could draw different conclusions from the same résumé. Consultant Priya explained, “It’s not scientific; it’s just kind of like you have a set of criteria. Everyone else probably has similar criteria, but [also] different things, different pet peeves.” Screening also usually took place at evaluators’ convenience. Because professionals balanced recruitment responsibilities with full-time client work, they often screened résumés while commuting to and from the office and client sites; in trains, planes, and taxis; and frequently late at night and over Seamless Web dinner delivery. Evaluators also tended to sort résumés rapidly, typically bypassing cover letters (fewer than 15 percent reported even looking at them) and transcripts and reported spending between ten seconds to four minutes per résumé.<sup>6</sup> Lance described the realities of résumé screening in his firm:

It surprised me actually when I did it versus what I was expecting. . . . What happens is . . . somebody will get a stack of résumés, maybe 50 to a 100 large. In some cases, some people who have extra [recruiting] commitments will get a stack that’s up to 150. . . . All of us are pretty busy, and it’s kind of annoying to have to sit and go through all of that, which means that . . . I will think in my head, “OK, this is important, I have to do it, but I have all this other client work to actually do, so I’m going to reserve maybe 90 minutes to sit down and flip through all these résumés and rank them,” which means that if I get 100 résumés, that’s a minute per résumé with no breaks. . . . The amount of time that I spend on a résumé, cover letter, and transcript is about a minute.

When evaluating résumés under time constraints, evaluators typically followed the procedure outlined by consultant Naveen:

My first crack looking at résumés is simply bucketing them into three piles: “must,” “nice to have,” and “don’t.” And then I go through the “musts” because they passed the threshold. . . . By then I usually have more than I need so I don’t even bother looking at the “nice to have” bucket.

To bucket résumés, evaluators reported “going down the page” from top to bottom, focusing on the pieces of résumé data that stuck out in bold and the information they personally believed were the most important “signals” of candidate quality. Figure 4.1 lists the qualities that evaluators most commonly used to sort applications. These numbers correspond to the percent of résumé screeners in my sample who used particular qualities when evaluating résumés.



**Figure 4.1**  
Percent of Evaluators Who Used Each Quality in Résumé Screening

The number of résumé screeners is lower ( $N = 90$ ) than the number of the total research interview participants because not all interviewers screen résumés. I used purposive sampling to ensure a robust proportion of participants who directly screened résumés.

Although evaluators had many résumé signals available to them, they placed the most emphasis on experiences that were strongly correlated with parental socioeconomic status, especially super-elite university credentials and high-status extracurricular activities. They also discounted résumé signals that were more widely accessible, such as class rank and the content of cover letters. In doing so, they created barriers that kept students from less privileged backgrounds from entering the interview pool.

However, most evaluators did not purposefully seek out résumé signals that had a socioeconomic component nor did they express desires to reserve interview spots for those from privileged households. Rather, in trying to screen résumés efficiently and effectively under real time constraints, résumé screeners drew from ideas about what merit is and what best signals it that were rooted in their own upbringings and life trajectories. Given that most evaluators in these firms were white, upper- and upper-middle class Ivy League grads, merit was defined and measured from their perspectives of what types of educational, social, and occupational paths are appropriate for bright, motivated, successful young people. These tracks, which were taken for granted by many evaluators as available to all students who had the internal abilities and desires to pursue them, in reality required intensive economic, social, and cultural resources on the part of not only the job candidates whose résumés they reviewed but also applicants' parents.

Yet screeners who had been sensitized to the barriers in attaining these high-status credentials and markers, either through direct personal experiences or those of friends or extended family members, defined merit in a more expansive way. These individuals provided potential inroads to the interview pool for a small number of job candidates from nontraditional backgrounds.

Consequently, cultural beliefs about what constitutes achievement and success—conceptions that are grounded in individuals' own lived experiences and social positions—influence how employers screen résumés and decide whom to interview. Much of the popular discourse surrounding who succeeds in business (as well as some academic research on hiring) portrays ability as a fixed, internal property of individuals that can be measured in a consistent, uniform manner divorced from the identities of the specific people who are performing hiring evaluations. But taking a closer look at the realities of résumé review exposes

that what counts as skill, ability, and human capital—and perceptions of who has more or less of it—resides in the eye of the beholder. As a result, in order to accurately model how employers evaluate candidates in real life, it is necessary to look not only at applicants' characteristics, as current research does, but also those of *evaluators*.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the top-four criteria that evaluators used to screen résumés and the various meanings they attached to them. I conclude by showing how social connections served as a backdoor channel that could nudge an atypical résumé into the interview pool.

### School Prestige Redux

Although firms already restricted on-campus recruiting to listed schools, evaluators further sorted résumés from this select group based on fine-grained definitions of school prestige. At the point of résumé screening, the relevant status distinction was no longer listed versus unlisted schools but rather relative prestige *within* the list. This structure was institutionalized in certain firms, where the number of résumés that could be accepted for interviews was stratified by school prestige, with cores receiving more spots than targets. In some firms, students from the most prestigious core schools received a “first pass” that immediately funneled them into the “must-have” bucket that would receive further screening.<sup>7</sup>

As individuals, evaluators relied so intensely on “school” (what they called educational prestige) as a criterion of evaluation not because they believed that the content of elite curricula better prepared students for life in their firms—in fact, evaluators tended to think that elite and, in particular, super-elite instruction was “too abstract,” “overly theoretical,” or even “useless” compared to the more “practical,” “relevant” training offered at “lesser” institutions—but rather due to the strong cultural meanings and character judgments that evaluators attributed to *admission* and *enrollment* at a super-elite school as well as firm policies regarding interview quotas.

### Brainpower

Participants overwhelmingly equated university prestige with intelligence. In their eyes, it signaled general cognitive aptitude rather than job-specific skills. Most notably, it indicated an ability to learn quickly.

As attorney Jasmine described, "I'm looking for sponges. You know a kid from Harvard's gonna pick stuff up fast." It was not the content of an elite education that employers valued, but instead the perceived rigor of these institutions' admissions processes. According to this logic, the more prestigious a school, the higher its "bar" for admission, and thus the smarter its student body. Consultant Jordan explained, "The top schools are more selective. They're reputed to be top schools because they do draw a more select student body who tend to be smarter and more able." Attorney Thomas agreed, "If they're getting into a top-tier law school, I assume that person has more intellectual horsepower and is more committed than somebody who goes to a second- or third-tier law school."

In addition to such an intelligence-based perspective on university admissions, evaluators frequently adopted an unconstrained view of university enrollment, believing that students typically "go to the best school they got into." Consequently, in the minds of evaluators, prestige rankings provided a quick way to sort candidates by "brainpower." When sorting the mock résumés, Kelly, who was charged with first-cut résumé screens at her bank, revealed how such assumptions played out in application review. She remarked, "Her [Sarah's] grades are lower but she went to Harvard so she's definitely well endowed in the brain category. . . . Jonathan . . . went to Princeton, so he clearly didn't get the short end of the stick in terms of smarts." This *halo effect* of school prestige, combined with the prevalent belief that the daily work performed within EPS firms was "not rocket science," gave evaluators confidence that the possession of an elite credential was a sufficient signal of a candidate's ability to perform the analytical capacities of the job.<sup>8</sup> Even in the quantitatively rigorous field of consulting, Russell asserted, "I've come to the stage where I trust that if the person has gone to Wharton, they can do math."

By contrast, failure to attend a super-elite school was an indicator of intellectual failure, regardless of a student's grades or standardized test scores. Many evaluators believed that high-achieving students at lesser-ranked institutions (even top fifteen or listed ones) "didn't get in to a good school," must have "slipped up," or otherwise warranted a "question mark" around their analytical abilities.<sup>9</sup> Legal hiring manager Mary (who had been an attorney prior to transitioning to an HR role in her

firm) illustrated this point, "Sometimes you see the good undergrad with the good grades and then the not-so-good law school, and I always say, 'Ooh! I guess they bombed their LSAT!'" Such sentiments were particularly evident when evaluators assessed "Blake," one of the mock résumés that I presented to evaluators. Blake had a high GPA from Rutgers, a graduate degree from Columbia, and prior finance experience. Banker Dustin commented, "Good grad school, OK undergrad but not Ivy League. . . . So one thing I'd definitely want to ask him is that if he went to Exeter [for high school], why did he go to a lesser undergrad? What happened?" Similar processes were at play for Annulkah, a minority law candidate who received near-perfect grades at lower-tier undergraduate and graduate institutions and had directly relevant work experience as a paralegal. Attorney Esther was skeptical: "I wonder why she didn't get in to a better law school." But surprisingly, such question marks about intellect applied not only to students at "state" schools (as evaluators called public universities) and "second-rate" or "third-tier" private institutions but also to those who attended selective target schools on a firm's list. Consultant Natalie revealed such assumptions when rating fictitious candidate Sarah: "She's at Stern [New York University's business school, a top-ten yet not top-three school]. She's there either because her husband is in New York or she applied to business school and she didn't get into Harvard or Stanford."

In addition to being an indicator of potential intellectual deficits, the decision to go to a lower-ranked school (because it was perceived by evaluators as a "choice") was often interpreted as evidence of moral failings, such as faulty judgment or a lack of foresight on the student's part. When describing why students who attended highly selective but not super-elite business schools were at a disadvantage in the recruitment process and were justifiably so, banker Tristan shrugged, "If you want to go into banking, you do your homework and you go to one of the schools that's known for sending people to Wall Street." Attorney and super-elite grad Carlos believed that even candidates who faced significant financial obstacles to attendance, like he had, "should be smart enough to invest in their future."

The negative signal conveyed by the lack of an elite credential was most clearly articulated by a white, female recruiter at a diversity recruitment fair I observed as part of the ethnographic portion of my research.



At a panel on applying to law firms, she instructed attendees who, like the majority of nonwhite law students, were disproportionately concentrated in second- and third-tier law schools to list their reasons for attending an “inferior” institution on their cover letter and résumé.<sup>10</sup> She explained, “If you were admitted to a better school, say which one. . . . If you went to a school because you got a full scholarship, put ‘full scholarship’ up front. If you stayed close to home to help with a family business, include it. . . . You need to have *an explanation* for it.” Thus, in many ways, the credential that EPS firms valued was not the education received at a top school but rather a letter of acceptance from one.

### *Polish and Grooming*

Evaluators also interpreted educational prestige as an indicator of a candidate’s social skills and “polish”—a criteria of evaluation that took center stage in interviews and that I discuss more in chapter 7. Like banker Bill, they believed that “students from good schools are *groomed* better.” As consultant Jordan maintained, “The communication and leadership abilities coming out of those [super-elite] schools is differentially better. . . . There are just smaller pools of people to select from in terms of their leadership competencies or communication skills at a Duke or a Darden [both top-fifteen business schools].” Attorney Carlos summarized how educational prestige simultaneously signaled enhanced cognitive and social skills: “It’s like a shortcut—you know they have a basic level of intelligence but also are interesting people who have more social skills.”<sup>11</sup>

### *The Influence of Evaluators’ Social Backgrounds*

Yet roughly one-third of evaluators did not use educational prestige when screening résumés. One of the primary differences between evaluators who did and did not emphasize this criterion was their own schooling history; those who had attended top schools were more likely to use educational prestige than those who had attended other types of institutions. In this respect, evaluators defined and interpreted educational prestige in a way that resonated with and validated their own educational trajectories. A conversation I had with super-elite law school

graduate Roger, who strongly favored graduates from top law schools, exemplified this pattern:

**ROGER:** I talked to a hiring partner who told me that he had [the] absolute opposite attitude toward schools as me. He said he did not like candidates from Yale or Harvard or other Ivy League schools because the people who go to schools like that . . . they believe they’re supposed to be out there doing great big things that lawyers don’t do. If you found someone who went to Fordham or Cardozo—somewhere that doesn’t carry the cachet of an Ivy—these are guys who are just happy to get hired, who just want to do the work and don’t care about being the smartest guy in the room and just want to do the job. Considering the classes they hire here, he clearly was the only one on the committee who had that philosophy. (*He laughed.*) But different people have different standards, and how you do is a crapshoot because of it.

**LAUREN:** Do you know where he went to school?

**ROGER:** (*He laughed and paused.*) He went to Fordham.

The use of educational prestige (or lack thereof) was related not only to such same-school and same-tier preferences but also to deeper cultural definitions of success that evaluators learned while growing up. For example, banker Oliver, who went to a “Public Ivy,” explained why he, despite having gone to what he called an “OK” school, still put a premium on educational prestige in candidate evaluation:

Having grown up in the East Coast, you’re sort of close by to all the Ivy League schools as well as a lot of the kind of small but really good liberal arts schools in this area. . . . I have the ability to sort of pick out schools that I know are more difficult. . . . You might not think highly about somebody from the University of Missouri because I wouldn’t have thought it would be that tough to get into; that’s from my sort of background experience.

In mock résumé screens, he ranked Julia and Jonathan—both “double Ivies”—at the top of his list because of their superior pedigrees, which were consistent with this frame. Conversely, consultant Karen, who was the first in her working-class family to attend an Ivy League school, discussed how her own upbringing—notwithstanding her super-elite

credential—discourages her from using educational prestige as a measure of intelligence:

I don't care so much about their school. . . . Even though I went to [an Ivy], my background isn't about going to Ivy League schools. I come from Wisconsin and it's like you go to [the University of Wisconsin at] Madison and that's what you do and you can still be really smart and go to Madison. So my background tends to look very favorably at the kids who went to Madison or other state schools.

In mock résumé screens, whereas most evaluators questioned Blake's "choice" of Rutgers for college, Karen put him "at the top" of her list, believing that having gone from Rutgers to Columbia was evidence of a superior work ethic. Thus, whether and how evaluators used educational prestige as a screen was influenced both by the prestige of their own degree(s) and deeper cultural definitions of what educational paths they learned were appropriate for "bright," "motivated," and "interesting" individuals through personal experience.

#### *Education as Exclusion*

Through both formal recruitment policy and on-the-ground practice, employers largely outsourced screening of both "hard" and "soft" skills to admissions committees at elite universities due to a widespread perception that "number one people go to number one schools." The common perception held by résumé screeners that the best and the brightest were concentrated in the nation's most elite universities reinforced firms' exclusionary on-campus recruitment policies and lent on-the-ground legitimacy to firms' on-campus lists. The strong emphasis on educational prestige in résumé screens serves to magnify the socioeconomic barriers in accessing the playing field that I explored in chapter 2. It also indirectly screens out groups of high-performing students who come from more modest family backgrounds.

#### *Extracurricular Activities: Credentials of Character*

Perhaps surprisingly, when assessing résumés, evaluators placed the second-greatest weight on candidates' extracurricular activities. To

participate in on-campus recruiting, both career services offices and firms typically require students to list not only their educational and work experiences on their résumés but also their leisure activities and interests. Although extracurricular activities have been discussed as key vehicles of class inequalities in secondary schools, college admissions, and undergraduate experiences, they are usually not thought of as sources of occupational stratification.<sup>12</sup> Extracurricular activities, however, were used more consistently and frequently to screen résumés than traditionally analyzed labor market signals such as grades, standardized test scores, or prior work experience. Without significant and appropriate involvement in formalized, high-status leisure pursuits—signals deeply entrenched in social class—candidates were unlikely to move to the interview stage. Employers used extracurricular activities as a certification of a candidate's underlying social and moral character.

#### *"A Fraternity of Smart People"*

Due to the reality of long, often-tedious hours spent in the office or on the road—which stood in stark contrast to the depiction of work as constant play in recruitment presentations and videos—participants sought candidates who would be not only collegial coworkers but also formidable playmates who could, as summarized by consultant Amit, "actually be your friend." For evaluators, extracurricular experiences provided clues about how enjoyable interacting with a candidate would be. Adopting the logic of college admissions, evaluators believed that the most attractive and enjoyable coworkers and candidates were those who were "well-rounded" and had strong extracurricular "passions."<sup>13</sup>

Evaluators thought that involvement in activities outside of the classroom was evidence of superior social skills; they assumed a lack of involvement was a sign of social deficiencies. Consultant Howard asserted, "I find people who are involved in a lot of extracurricular activities to be more socially well adjusted." By contrast, those without significant extracurricular experiences or those who participated in activities that were primarily academically or preprofessionally oriented were perceived to be "boring," "tools," "bookworms," or "nerds" who might turn out to be "corporate drones" if hired. Consultant Jasper articulated the essence of this sentiment:

We like to interview at schools like Harvard and Yale, but people who have 4.0s and are in the engineering department but, you know, don't have any friends, have huge glasses, read their textbooks all day, those people have no chance here. . . . I have always said, [my firm] is like a fraternity of smart people.

Banking recruitment head Stephanie unpacked the rationale behind the aversion to so-called nerds:

We look for someone who's got a personality, has something to bring to the table. You know, for lack of a better term, someone you can shoot the shit with. . . . Typically . . . they were in sports, they were involved in different activities on campus. The more well-rounded individual versus the candidate who has the 4.0, who's got all the honors and all the different econ classes.

Banker Christopher summarized the trade-off that evaluators believed they were facing: "I would trade an outgoing, friendly, confident person for a rocket scientist any day."

However, firms went further than just wanting socially skilled or well-rounded individuals. They wanted new hires who "fit" culturally and socially with existing employees. Just as fraternities and sororities have particular reputations and identities on college campuses, evaluators likewise described firms as having distinct *personalities*, derived from the typical extracurricular interests and self-presentation styles of their employees.<sup>14</sup> They contrasted "sporty" and "fratty" firms with those that were "egghead" or "intellectual." Some companies were "white shoe" or "country club," while others were "gruff" or "scrappy." In résumé screening, evaluators used applicants' extracurricular activities to judge whether candidates would fit into their "fraternity of smart people." Whether someone rock climbs, plays the cello, or enjoys film noir may seem trivial to outsiders, but these leisure pursuits were important for assessing whether someone would be a cultural fit with a firm's personality. For example, legal hiring manager Mary rejected mock candidate Blake, who had grades that met her "scrappy" firm's grade floor and relevant full-time work experience (which is somewhat rare for law students), based on a perceived extracurricular misfit. In a noticeable regional accent, she said, "I'm looking at the interests [on his résumé]—lacrosse,

squash, crew. (*She laughed.*) I'm sort of giving him a personality type here, and I don't think he's going to fit in well here. . . . We're more rough and tumble. . . . I'm going to let him go." Just as these sports were seen as a deterrent to fit in her firm, these same activities were viewed as evidence of a match in others. For instance, white-shoe investment bank HR manager Kelly, dressed in a buttoned, pastel cardigan and pearls, asserted, "I'd have to pick Blake and Sarah. With his lacrosse and her squash, they'd really get along. . . . on the trading floor."<sup>15</sup> As such, evaluators used extracurricular activities to judge candidates' sociability and well-roundedness but also as a proxy for cultural fit.

### *Time-Management Skills*

In addition to being more interesting, enjoyable, and socially graceful people, candidates who displayed extensive extracurricular involvement were frequently perceived as having superior time-management skills, which were thought to be crucial for success in a demanding work environment. As summarized by consultant Eugene, "Extracurriculars also kind of point to an ability to juggle a pretty aggressive schedule." Banker Laura fleshed out the value of "outside" activities more extensively:

It comes back to the idea [that] you want a person who . . . basically does a lot of things in their day. And they've got a lot of varying interests, and they are interesting people to be around, but also they can juggle between whatever commitment[s] they have, dance or sports or whatever, plus do well in school as opposed to the kid who only does school. . . . [It's] like, "Of course you have good grades. You don't do anything *but* that!"

Time-management skills were useful not only for successfully balancing multiple client projects with organizational commitments such as recruiting but also for maintaining one's "interestingness" in the face of extremely long work schedules. As legal hiring manager Brent explained:

I don't think we want people who are just academic. . . . I don't think I want people to come here just to work, work, work, work, work. You know, our firm emphasizes that there's a work-life balance, and maybe some associates may debate that because they feel like they're working all the time, but I think it's adjusting your life in general to accommodate

other things, so I look for people . . . I think the type of people we would want would have more varied interests.

Consequently, evaluators believed that being well-rounded could potentially reduce the risk of burnout or attrition. Attorney Henry related that “there’s always a concern that you can really put in a ridiculous number of hours into this job, and I think the ability to get away and focus on something else that you enjoy, I think makes [working here] a lot more manageable.” Despite the strong emphasis placed on leisure activities in résumé screening, the reality of work in these organizations was such that new hires rarely had time to continue intensive extracurricular participation once on the job.

#### *Drive*

Participants also believed that candidates’ extracurricular activities were indicators of their underlying drive and ambition. Because of the long hours spent in the office or on the road, employers sought new hires that they believed would not only survive but also thrive in a demanding work environment—people who would not only do the work expected of them but also go above and beyond, and even ask for more. Evaluators overwhelmingly interpreted extracurricular accomplishments as reflections of a candidate’s work ethic. Banker Nicholae summarized, “Activities are really our only way to judge initiative. Schoolwork is given to you.” Titled leadership positions in formalized activities as well as quantifiable achievements and accolades were viewed as even more potent signals of drive.

#### *Extracurricular Activities and Inequality*

Without substantial extracurricular commitment, a candidate was unlikely to advance to the interview stage. Although involvement in any activity was typically necessary for advancing to the next recruitment round, it was frequently not sufficient given that evaluators tended to gravitate toward specific types of extracurricular activities.

Across the board, they privileged activities that were motivated by “personal” rather than “professional” interest, even when activities were

directly related to work within their industry (e.g., investing, consulting, or legal clinic clubs). This was because evaluators believed that the latter types of activities served the instrumental purpose of “looking good” to recruiters, and they viewed them as “résumé filler” or “padding” rather than evidence of genuine “passion,” “commitment,” and “well-roundedness.”<sup>16</sup> For example, consultant Karen explained why she gave higher marks to Blake’s extracurricular profile over Julia’s and Jonathan’s, even though all were highly involved in on-campus activities: “Blake remained involved in something he loves at Columbia (sports), whereas HBS Entrepreneurship Club [Jonathan] and Wharton Women in Business [Julia] kind of sound like the kind of activities people do because they will look good on a résumé.” Evaluators also preferred activities driven by desire and personal passion rather than necessity, such as paid employment or care for family members.

In addition to specifically leisure-oriented endeavors, evaluators favored activities that were time and resource intensive because they believed that the investment such cultivation entailed indicated stronger evidence of drive and an orientation toward “achievement” and “success.” For example, they differentiated being a varsity college athlete, preferably one who was also a national or Olympic champion, versus playing intramurals or pickup games; having traveled the globe with a world-renowned orchestra as opposed to playing with a school chamber group; and having reached the summit of Everest or Kilimanjaro versus hiking recreationally. The former activities were evidence of “true accomplishment” and dedication, whereas the latter were described as things that “anyone could do.” In evaluating mock candidate Jonathan, who expressed an interest in community service on his résumé, banker Christopher illustrates this distinction: “I would ask him about the volunteering. . . . Does he drive around with his mom with Meals on Wheels, or did he go to Costa Rica and build houses with Habitat for Humanity?” In this respect, leisure was a domain in which candidates were expected to demonstrate achievement. Consultant Yi explained, “We try to see did they show any sort of extraordinary or above-ordinary achievements in their extracurricular activity? You know, would they run a marathon? Were they a concert pianist?” Mere interest and passion were not enough; rather, leisure activities were to be pursued and mastered methodically in a manner that provided

accomplishments and heralded outside accolades. Consultant Lance described:

So there's all sorts of different things that people can list in activities, like I'm a skier, and I read palms, and I like to drag race or something. But if it's just a collection of things or interests, then it's just sort of meaningless words to me. . . . I want to see . . . whether that person has found some sort of interest or passion and not only does it but actually decided to pursue it. . . . So great, you like skiing, but tell me that you make it a point to go twenty times a year or you enjoy playing chess, but tell me that you go to tournaments or that you go to Central Park and play twice a week or something like that. So something beyond just the interest, but show me that . . . you've actually taken something and decided to pursue it.

Furthermore, evaluators tended to prefer activities that were associated with white, upper- and upper-middle-class culture. This is particularly the case for varsity sports at elite colleges, which are often perceived to be "open" to all, but are strongly associated with parental income. Evaluators also tended to favor sports that had a strong presence at Ivy League schools as well as pay-to-play "club" sports such as lacrosse, field hockey, tennis, squash, and crew over ones that tend to be more widely accessible or are associated with more diverse player bases such as football, basketball, and wrestling.<sup>17</sup> Sandeep, a banker and avid squash player, remarked, "You will never find a squash player in a public school in Detroit. Because courts don't exist. Nobody even knows that game exists. To them, squash is a vegetable." Banker David illustrated how, when it came to perceptions of which extracurricular activities "count," time, class, competitiveness, and ethnicity worked together. "Being on the ping-pong team [a stereotypically Asian sport]," he asserted, "might be taken less seriously than crew, just because of the implicit time commitments that you need to make to do well in a sport and sort of the role of a player on a team. . . . It's just not as substantial as being on an eight-man [crew] boat rowing together every morning for four years."

The emphasis placed on prolonged and intensive participation in formalized, high-status extracurricular pursuits serves as an important filter based on students' socioeconomic backgrounds. Upper- and upper-middle-class parents are more likely to know that enrolling their children in structured leisure activities pays off in selective college admissions and

beyond than are working- and lower-middle-class families; they also are better able to afford them.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, students from less privileged families are more likely to believe that extracurricular activities are irrelevant to their job prospects because what employers really care about are grades, tangible skills, and prior employment experiences and invest their time accordingly.<sup>19</sup> These beliefs inform behavior; working-class students on colleges campuses are significantly less involved in extracurricular activities than are their middle- and upper-class peers.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, working-class students' focus on academics (rather than social and extracurricular activities) while in school constrains, not expands, the types of jobs and incomes available to them when they graduate.

Yet even if they do learn that employers care about extracurricular activities, these students still face disadvantages in acquiring the right types of leisure credentials. This is because *simply knowing* this rule of the hiring game is insufficient for passing résumé screens. Students needed to have evidence of participation, and real material constraints (e.g., joining fees, equipment costs, time away from paid work, and foregone wages) limit their involvement. In fact, at certain business schools, students must pay fees to sign up for extracurricular organizations (at some schools, this charge is per activity). Moreover, employers wanted to see *intensive* participation in activities that involved a prolonged investment of time and resources, often beginning in childhood. Those students who start cultivating their leisure profiles when the recruitment frenzy begins on campus come to the party too late and typically won't have time to develop the evidence of intensive drive signaled through a lifetime of participation and passion.

Flipping through résumé stacks at Holt was a lesson in this. At recruitment events, firms often gave candidates hints for submitting winning résumés. One such piece of advice was to *quantify* extracurricular achievements to show accomplishment and success within a given domain. It was jarring to see students who knew the correct logic of extracurricular storytelling—to quantify achievement—but lacked the right cultural meat to do so persuasively. One applicant, for instance, listed that he had performed at a student karaoke night eight times, while another had participated in seven out of ten open microphone nights at a local bar. Still another had played guitar in front of 350 people. Although these résumé activities could be useful in demonstrating the

job-related skill of confidence before groups and at minimum showed familiarity with the code of extracurricular quantification, they did not display the long dedication of time, effort, and money that evaluators associated with real extracurricular achievement. These résumés were typically discarded (and sometimes circulated among employees for their humor value). To compare the hiring process in EPS firms to that in the theater world, to successfully audition, actors need to have not only the right script in their hands from which to read but also the right props to convincingly and smoothly play the part.

#### *Awareness of Constraint*

Although they were in the minority, a small number of participants who had been sensitized through their own experiences or those of family members or close friends that not all students were able to invest in such activities due to external constraints were more likely to see the value of spending time outside the classroom engaged in nonleisure activities, including paid work or caregiving. Attorney Danielle, who was from an immigrant family, noted how, for her, a full-time job was a valid, if not superior, indicator of drive. She asserted, "Someone who works full time in school to support his family . . . anybody who is willing to work that hard should be somebody who you *absolutely* want to work for you." Although such candidates frequently received "points" for their work ethic from sympathetic evaluators, they still were often penalized on the dimensions of interestingness, sociability, and well-roundedness because they had fewer extracurricular activities. Consultant Karen, who had previously described herself as a champion for students from state schools, discussed why, despite her strong belief in the intelligence of such students, she did not end up advancing most that she encountered in résumé screens to the interview stage. She sighed, "Often the activities that they were in weren't as strong. Just very few on campus activities." Attorney Caroline illustrated the inherent conflict that such evaluators faced in assessing socioeconomically "diverse" candidates:

We don't hold it against someone if someone had to work his or her way through college. And just because you didn't work for a senator during your college summers, we wouldn't hold it against you. We must be

cognizant that people come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, and they can't always work for free. You have to be aware that not everyone has the same opportunities. But still, someone has to have demonstrated dedication to *something*.

Such processes capture how evaluators' personal experiences and social backgrounds shape which signals they use and how they interpret them in résumé screenings. The dominant view held that extracurricular activities were crucial credentials of applicants' social and moral worth, and provided disadvantages on average for students who did not have these high-status résumé signals. Yet a smaller number of applicants who happened to be paired with evaluators who were aware of barriers to extracurricular involvement could avoid such disadvantages in résumé screening and pass through to the interview pool.

#### *Grades*

While there was substantial consensus surrounding the use of school prestige and extracurricular involvement as indicators of merit, there was far less agreement about how to use or interpret grades. Grades are often distrusted by employers in general.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, grades were one of the most contested aspects of the hiring process in EPS firms. Many firms set an official "grade threshold" or minimum GPA that candidates were supposed to meet in order to be invited for interviews. Conversations with evaluators, though, revealed that particularly at super-elite core schools, grade requirements were more suggestions than rigid cutoffs, and at many schools were not uniformly applied or enforced. An evaluator's own level of academic achievement in undergraduate or graduate school strongly influenced the meanings that he or she attributed to grades and whether (and to what degree) the evaluator actually used them in résumé screens, regardless of official firm policies.

Evaluators who had reported receiving high grades while in undergraduate or graduate school reported using grades as a signal of merit. Attorney Morgan, who had been at the top of her class years ago, conveyed the weight that she personally attributed to law school grades: "I think grades are really important. . . . I'd have to put grades first." Conversely, those who reported receiving less stellar marks believed that

grades were not valuable or reliable indicators of success and discounted them in evaluation. Consultant Sunny observed:

I know a lot of consultants look for [undergraduate] GPA first of all. . . . I don't particularly believe in that because I myself was a person with a low GPA in college, but that was due to several circumstances that weren't under my control, and I really feel that GPA is not a measure of how good a person is at consulting itself.

Regardless of their own achievement level, however, most evaluators *did not* believe that grades were an indicator of intelligence. Rather, grades provided a straightforward and "fair" way to rank candidates, especially those within a given school. When asked to describe the value of grades, attorney Naomi said, "They're just easier to wrap your head around. Everyone's personality is so subjective." More commonly, grades were used to measure a candidate's moral qualities. Attorney Roger believed that grades were an indication of a candidate's coping skills. "It tells me how they can handle stress, if they'd had their feet to the flames before. If they've gotten good grades at a very competitive school, [then] they're probably pretty sharp and can take care of themselves." Moreover, attorney Raj, from one of the few historically "open" firms that had a policy of considering the top student from any school, explained that grades could be a signal of a candidate's attention to detail:

I actually don't think that we hire the top of the class because we think they're that much smarter. I think we hire the top of the class because more often than not it signifies that they're meticulous, because I think the brain's the necessary but not sufficient part. I think you have to be smart to get to the top of your class, but I don't think you can *just* be smart. Every once in a while, somebody will get to the top of their class without being meticulous, but I don't think that's the norm. . . . I think that's what class rank tells you. For lack of a better word, how *anal* they are.

Still, just as evaluators who did not receive stellar grades were less likely to believe that grades were reliable measures of future performance, they were also less likely to penalize students with lower marks on such moral qualities. Attorney Rebecca explained:

Not being a great student myself before law school, I'm one to look beyond them. I think if you see someone who excelled, it means that they're willing to work hard. But I think someone with poor grades, it doesn't mean that much. I guess I think good grades show that they're willing to work hard, but the inverse isn't true.

### *Shifting Standards*

The information conveyed by grades and the degree to which they were weighed in résumé screening also varied according to the candidate's school prestige and level of extracurricular involvement. Because evaluators largely interpreted attendance at an elite school as a measure of intelligence, being at the top of one's class was less important for such students.<sup>22</sup> At super-elite campuses, grade thresholds were lower, if present at all. As lawyer and legal hiring manager Mary commented, "I've never heard of a GPA cutoff at Harvard." Similarly, Holt granted an interview to the majority of students who applied from Eastmore, regardless of their grades. When I asked about this policy, Zach explained, "I trust their admissions committee . . . knows how to pick the smartest [people] in the country." Conversely, students at less selective institutions needed to be at the top of their classes. Consultant Javier confessed:

If you are not part of one of a group of pretty much three or four universities, then you have to be in like the top 1 percent or more [of the class] of the second-tier universities. A second-tier university would be like NYU. And we do take people from there, but you'd have to be sort of a summa cum laude rock star. Whereas just being kind of average at Harvard might get you an interview.

Attorney Rebecca provided a slightly more lenient standard: "Outside of top schools, they won't look at anyone below the top 10 percent."

Within a given school, grades were also less important for candidates with strong levels of extracurricular involvement. According to banker Daryl:

You'll see someone with a 3.9 GPA, but they're not involved in any other activities outside of the classroom, so it's hard to compare that



person, apples to apples, with someone with a 3.5 GPA, but is also a . . . president of their sorority or fraternity or student government or is also captain of the tennis team. You know, I think it's kind of a complete package.

Grade "discounts" were particularly strong for varsity athletes. Undergraduate grade floors were typically lowered from 3.5 to 3.0 for varsity athletes (and potentially lower if the athlete was of professional or Olympic caliber). Consequently, the interpretation even of straightforward, easily commensurable quantitative metrics like grades was highly subjective and varied by the identities of both evaluators and candidates.<sup>23</sup>

### Prior Employment

Prior employment was the fourth most common signal used to screen résumés and the final one to be used by more than half of evaluators. Employment experience was more important for business school candidates because, simply put, they tended to have more of it; students typically need at least two to three years of full-time work experience to be admitted to top MBA programs. Undergraduates applying to consulting firms and banks were not expected to have full-time experience, but were expected to have held internships during at least one (but preferably more) of their summers. This was also the case for the many law students who "went straight through" from undergraduate to law school.

Despite these variations, there was a surprising degree of consistency as to how evaluators assessed the quality of prior work experience, whether it was a summer internship or full-time career: they focused on the job's prestige. Prestige came in two forms: the category of employment and that of the specific employer.

With respect to the employment category, evaluators distinguished between high-status, "real" corporate jobs versus other types of employment. Banker Oliver illustrated this difference when describing how he evaluates the employment section of an undergraduate résumé: "Do they have some experience not solely in finance but sort of *real* jobs [as]

opposed to . . . [working at] Starbucks or mowing lawns or whatever? Like an office job." Legal hiring manager Abby agreed: "If they're just working as a research assistant or as a waiter or bartender, then that's not usually some of the best experience. We're looking for people who have had experience working in . . . corporate settings or have done some other things that have given them *life experience*."

Within the broad category of "office jobs," evaluators drew further distinctions by the status and reputation of specific employers. They drew from shared cultural understandings about which employers were "good companies" that transcended industry bounds. They reported learning this information from friends, family members, and their own job searches. Given that investment banks, consulting firms, and corporations with large, competitive management training programs (e.g., Gap, Google, Microsoft, or Proctor & Gamble) tend to dominate on-campus recruitment at elite undergraduate and graduate schools, evaluators tended to think of employment in these *visible* industries as more prestigious than less established career paths. In this respect, Teach for America, extremely visible on these campuses, was the one highly prized noncorporate type of employment.<sup>24</sup>

The emphasis on prior work prestige rather than content was most clearly articulated in the résumé-screening pamphlet that Holt distributed to evaluators during the year I conducted my observation. In it, Holt instructed evaluators to assess a candidate's education (as measured by prestige), extracurricular activities, and work experience and provided them with some guidelines about how to measure merit in each category. Under the work experience heading, evaluators were told that there were three tiers of job quality: excellent, good, and other. At the time, "excellent" work experience consisted of employment in one of eight peer professional service firms (this spanned banking, consulting, and law) and one high-tech firm; "good" experience entailed working at one of six additional professional service firms, four blue-chip retail/technology/manufacturing companies, and one nonprofit organization. Any employment outside of these twenty companies was grouped into the "other" category and deemed unremarkable. There was no instruction offered about whether or how to rate the tasks that applicants actually performed at a given job.

*Signal of Prior Screening Success*

Why was there such strong emphasis on the status of prior employers? Evaluators believed that prior employment at a name-brand organization was a signal that candidates had successfully navigated a rigorous screening process and thus likely had strong cognitive and social skills. As such, they outsourced screening not only to university admissions committees but also to the hiring committees of prestigious firms. In fact, evaluators collectively referred to the prestige of a candidate's school combined with that of their previous employer(s) as their "pedigree"—a term that to them, signaled a candidate's personal propensity for achievement and success. Pedigree was seen as the highest marker of worth and individual accomplishment. Although significant full-time work experience was less common for law school students, full-time or summertime employment at blue-chip banks or consultancies was prized, as were competitive legal clerkships. Law firm partner Diana explained that clerkships were considered to be valuable by firms because they similarly indicated success in navigating a competitive filter: "It's like another sort of prescreening. . . . There are judges where it's more prestigious to get a clerkship with. It's like getting into Harvard or getting into Yale. You know, you had to have done well to get there."

*Signal of Drive and Interest in Industry*

Furthermore, procuring employment at a top firm was interpreted to be a sign of drive and an interest in corporate life. Evaluators reported that one of the key challenges in recruitment, given the large size of applicant pools, was to identify candidates who had a genuine interest in the work. They believed that those who really "wanted" or "were hungry for it" (as opposed to just "going through the motions") would be more likely to accept a firm's offer, if given one, and stay for at least a few years once there. Having obtained prior full-time or summer employment in an EPS firm—regardless of the specific industry—was seen as being the primary signal of corporate interest available "on paper." Consultant Patrick explained what an undergraduate internship in consulting or banking signals to him: "Obviously, people who get an internship at a firm like ours, or even at a bank, it at least demonstrates that

they were . . . driven enough to get that position in the summer before as opposed to someone who did more like a high school part-time job for the summer."

In this respect, the earlier that a candidate began to seek corporate employment, the more "interested" they seemed. Consultant Naveen talked about how such interpretations play out when he evaluates undergraduate résumés:

Have they shown the initiative to go out there and work their junior year or even their sophomore year? A lot of people don't wait until their junior year to have an internship. . . . But I think a lot of the "where" does come into account. So you know, if they were interning at a grocery store or if they were interning at Google, I think in our minds that there is this sort of thing where we know it's hard to get into Google. We know it's hard to get into Apple. Especially if they were at another consulting firm as an intern, it's like, "OK, this was a person who had managed to get into another top-tier consulting firm as an intern; definitely someone who we should be looking at."

Banker Kevin agreed:

I'd definitely be interested in knowing whether or not they've shown interest in financial services before through a summer internship. . . . There are some people at Harvard that are kind of really on the ball when it comes to that kind of stuff, and they will have two summer internships already under their belt before they're applying to these full-time positions. So I'll look to see what kind of experience they have; if they have been on Wall Street already, that's a huge plus.

But importantly, a previous internship in a "peer" industry or firm was valued as a signal of candidate interest rather than a certification of job-relevant skills. Banker Laura summarized the significance of finance internships: "It's not so much that you've learned anything, but you know what you're getting yourself into."

Although it may indeed be a signal of interest, procuring these types of early employment (during freshman or sophomore summers in college or the summer after the first year of law school) is heavily dependent on having high-status social connections, as are some legal clerkships; often these competitions are typically not formally open recruitment

processes. Rather, they are allocated through behind-the-scenes networking and preexisting social connections—frequently family ties—to a firm or its clients. Moreover, many early opportunities, particularly those outside of the big, blue-chip firms, are unpaid. Students who need to earn money for tuition or as part of their financial aid packages are often unable to take these types of positions.<sup>25</sup> In sum, obtaining early employment may indeed be a valid signal of interest; however, it is one that is not equally available to all candidates. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that evaluators generally disregarded a potentially valuable signal of interest that was equally accessible to all candidates: their articulated interest in pursuing a career at the firm detailed in their cover letter.

#### *Variations in the Use of Work Prestige*

Of course, as with other criteria, there was some variation between evaluators in the degree to which they weighed work prestige in résumé screening. Those who had worked at blue-chip firms emphasized work prestige more than evaluators who had come from other employment backgrounds. For example, consultant Jordan, who had come from a less prestigious industry, discussed how he valued tenure with a firm over firm prestige when reviewing MBA résumés:

I have very strong bias for people who've had a good run at one company. So show me somebody's who's worked at [a major corporation, like my previous employer] for three and a half or four years. . . . That's actually very interesting to me. . . . It doesn't have to be a top-shelf company either. . . . It just needs to be some company that isn't badly reputed. But it doesn't need to be four years at Goldman Sachs, or four years at one [of] the world's leading industrial companies. You know that's great, that's wonderful, I love that, but show me kind-of four years at a *good* company and that's something I really want to talk about.

Similarly, legal hiring manager Vivian recalled how one of her firm's hiring partners—who held summer jobs in restaurants growing up—believed such experience as a server, bartender, or in retail was evidence of superior job-relevant abilities: “He used to say, ‘They know client service!’”

Likewise, the use of industry prestige as a signal varied by gender. Although differences between men and women in the use of other

signals to screen résumés were minimal, women were less likely to use prior employment in banking, consulting, or law as a signal of merit. Such patterns could potentially be due to occupational sex segregation; women tend to be concentrated in traditionally female industries that are outside of the male-dominated, blue-chip financial and tech firms.<sup>26</sup> Although most of my female banking interviewees had prior financial services experiences, the consultants in my sample as well as those attorneys who had worked prior to law school came from a broader array of backgrounds, including stereotypically female jobs in marketing, advertising, retail, government, and nonprofit organizations. Not coincidentally, as they too defined merit in their own image, they often considered a wider range of employment experiences as valuable. It is noteworthy, however, that there were few differences between men and women in their use of employer prestige (in contrast to industry prestige) as a résumé screen; both groups emphasized it strongly in résumé screening.

#### *Screening through Institutionalized Cultural Capital*

When evaluating résumés and making decisions about whom to interview, evaluators placed the most weight on experiences that were strongly associated with parental socioeconomic status, especially super-elite schooling and concertedly cultivated extracurricular profiles. The use of these signals as the primary means of screening applications provided a leg up for students from affluent families in gaining access to the interview pool, while systematically excluding candidates from less economically privileged backgrounds—even those from within the golden pipeline of listed schools—from further competing for EPS jobs.

Employers did have access to résumé characteristics that are more widely available to students regardless of social background, but they often de-emphasized them. Although they are less stratified by social class and can be a fairly reliable predictor of job success, for instance, grades were typically discounted beyond a basic threshold unless the evaluator personally had been a high performer academically.<sup>27</sup> Along similar lines, only about a quarter of evaluators used the actual tasks performed at a previous job, less than 20 percent used relevant coursework, and only about 10 percent used a candidate's career progression or history of promotions in résumé screens.

Instead, when evaluating merit on paper, most evaluators drew from taken-for-granted beliefs that attendance at super-elite schools and intensive extracurricular participation were important credentials, certifying applicants' intellectual, social, and moral worth. Most were unaware of the socioeconomic underpinnings of these credentials.<sup>28</sup> Rather, they viewed them as the fruits of individual intelligence, hard work, ambition, and social skills.

In many ways, super-elite college attendance and concerted cultivation of extracurricular profiles correspond to what Bourdieu calls *institutionalized cultural capital*: high-status credentials associated with social origin that gatekeepers use to distribute valued economic and social prizes. In the competition for the nation's highest-paying entry-level jobs, having the right social capital shapes who is allowed on the playing field in the first place, and institutionalized cultural capital determines who is permitted to stay on the field for tryouts.

Nevertheless, there were specific instances in which applicants who lacked the right institutionalized cultural capital did succeed in résumé screening. This most commonly occurred when the applicant's résumé was reviewed by an evaluator who defined merit in a more expansive manner. Not surprisingly, these evaluators were often themselves from more economically constrained families.<sup>29</sup> Yet because such individuals were in the minority, due to sheer numbers, résumé screening tended more toward elite reproduction than reconstruction. There was one additional way, however, that students—regardless of their social backgrounds—who lacked the right résumé credentials could get into the interview pool: social connections.

### TIPPING POINTS AND HALL PASSES

Having the right social capital could compensate for shortcomings in institutionalized cultural capital. Social connections could serve as tipping points and tiebreakers in the case of borderline candidates, who straddled the line between being invited for an interview and being rejected. Preexisting family or school ties or those developed during recruiting events could push a borderline résumé into the interview pool.

Candidates with the right individual sponsors could actually receive hall passes and bypass résumé review altogether. But this applied only to

"high-touch" referrals: individuals who were sponsored by a particularly high-status member of a firm or an influential client. Such candidates, although rare, were typically granted "courtesy interviews"—meaning they were automatically scheduled for interviews regardless of any information contained on their résumés—as "favors" to the firm's senior partnership or its most important clients. According to Finn:

We get "referrals." Some that are mandatory interviews. . . . Every year we have maybe two, three, four people who are quote, unquote must interviews. And they're usually clients' kids or important people's kids who love to call someone and that trickles down to the HR staff and they are automatically interviewed. But they get absolutely no benefit beyond that. They might get a first round [of interviews], but that's it. The interviewers do not know who is . . . a referral versus who was actually picked [internally] by the team. So having a client as a daddy will get you an interview, but it won't get you a job at [our firm].

It is crucial to note that there was a difference between courtesy interviewing and "courtesy hiring," and many courtesy interviews did not make it past the first round of interviews. Yet the practice of courtesy interviewing suggests that, at least at the point of entering the pool, social capital can outweigh cultural capital by not only compensating for a lack of these signals but also creating a different track into interview pipelines. This finding is theoretically important because in studies of culture, inequality, and social reproduction, cultural and social capital are usually examined in isolation from one another.<sup>30</sup>

### AFTER THE SCREEN

Despite the types of biases shown in this chapter, evaluators believed that résumé screens were the most "objective" phase of the hiring process. Interviews—which happened next and carried great weight in final hiring decisions—were seen as highly subjective assessments based on applicants' personalities rather than their qualifications listed on paper. Banker Nicholae explained:

Once you make it to your interview, your résumé stops mattering. I mean you need to know what's on your résumé and articulate what you've

done persuasively, but things like GPA and school don't matter after the screen. You can be from University of Texas and have a 3.2 GPA but if you do well in the interview, you'll still get hired.<sup>31</sup>

Although a candidate's school officially "stopped mattering" from an evaluation standpoint at the interview stage, educational prestige did indirectly matter. Firms generally host numerous preinterview cocktail receptions and interview workshops at super-elite campuses to help "level the playing field" in interviews. Nicholae (quoted above) justified such efforts by insisting, "It's hard to find the best if all the good guys don't know what to expect." At such events, candidates have the opportunity to meet representatives from the firm who might be their interviewers, ask questions about the firm that could be an asset in "demonstrating interest" in interviews, and receive valuable interview preparation with individualized feedback. One consulting firm even had a hotline where candidates could call at a designated time to participate in a mock telephone interview and receive immediate feedback. Yet such events were typically limited to the top of the school list. As such, students from super-elite schools, although no longer given formal priority at the interview stage, tended to have more coaching from firms to help them "shine" in interviews.

### MOVING FROM THE PAPER TO THE PERSON

After limiting the bounds of competition to students who possessed the right social capital, firms then screened candidates by the prestige of their educational, extracurricular, and employment credentials, each of which is strongly associated with parental socioeconomic status.<sup>32</sup> Evaluators screened résumés in this manner not because they intentionally tried to exclude candidates from less affluent backgrounds. Rather, they screened résumés in a manner that validated their own upbringings and educational and occupational trajectories. This process of *looking glass merit*—in which evaluators define and evaluate applicant quality in their own image—increases in intensity during the next phase of the hiring process: job interviews.