COLLEGE MATRICULATION TRENDS AT TOP US PRIVATE SCHOOLS:
A LOOK AT THE LAST 50 YEARS

PORTER SARGENT HANDBOOKS
A Division of Carnegie Communications
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Introduction

Many motivations inspire a parent’s quest for the best possible educational environment for his or her child. A sound education provides the foundation for a meaningful and thoughtful life. Good schooling not only helps us acquire the knowledge and the skills that will ultimately make us attractive to employers, it also teaches us how to reason and to think critically—indispensable life skills that will serve us well in any endeavor.

Strictly practical considerations, of course, come into play during the school selection process. As a child progresses from one school to the next, past performance dictates class placement at a new school—or, in the case of private education, whether the student meets requirements for admission. Should a family choose private schooling, competition for enrollment may be stiff. It stands to reason that a student who performs well at a highly regarded elementary school has a competitive edge during the high school admission process over a pupil who does roughly as well at a school with a less stellar reputation.

By extension, a similar scenario plays out for high school seniors seeking admission to upper-echelon colleges. Does this undeniable competitive edge translate into matriculation at the nation’s most highly regarded colleges? Does attendance at an esteemed private school—one that carries with it a relatively high tuition cost—significantly improve a student’s opportunity to pursue higher education at one of the very top American colleges?

With a wealth of data that dates back to 1914, Porter Sargent Handbooks is in a unique position to answer these questions by analyzing data and assessing trends in American private education. The Handbook of Private Schools, the nation’s original private school resource, debuted in 1915 and has been an authoritative annual reference ever since.

The Handbook lists and describes approximately 1700 of the nation’s top boarding and day elementary and secondary private schools. For the examination that follows, we will examine college matriculation trends at competitive private high schools. For the purposes of this study, we will restrict our focus to a selection of 38 boarding and day secondary schools from around the country, all of whom currently fall in the top third of Handbook listees in terms of highest tuition cost.

To benefit from the most comprehensive matriculation data, we will begin our study in 1959 (with data from the 1960 Handbook) and proceed at 10-year increments through 2009 (with data from the 2010 Handbook). As a manner of maintaining a strictly elite standard for our college destinations of interest, we will be utilizing the current U.S. News & World Report National University Rankings:

- Brown
- California Institute of Technology
Here are the private secondary schools that constitute this study:

- The Baldwin School *(Bryn Mawr, PA)*
- Berwick Academy *(South Berwick, ME)*
- Breck School *(Minneapolis, MN)*
- Brooks School *(North Andover, MA)*
- The Bryn Mawr School *(Baltimore, MD)*
- Castilleja School *(Palo Alto, CA)*
- Catlin Gabel School *(Portland, OR)*
- Chase Collegiate School [formerly St. Margaret’s-McTernan School] *(Waterbury, CT)*
- Choate Rosemary Hall *(Wallingford, CT)*
- Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School *(New York, NY)*
- Dalton School *(New York, NY)*
- Detroit Country Day School *(Beverly Hills, MI)*
- Foxcroft School *(Middleburg, VA)*
- Georgetown Preparatory School *(North Bethesda, MD)*
- Harvard-Westlake School *(North Hollywood, CA)*
- Hawken School *(Gates Mills, OH)*
- Hopkins School *(New Haven, CT)*
- The Hotchkiss School *(Lakeville, CT)*
- Kent Denver School *(Englewood, CO)*
- Lakeside School *(Seattle, WA)*
- Latin School of Chicago *(Chicago, IL)*
- Lawrenceville School *(Lawrenceville, NJ)*
- Mary Institute and Saint Louis Country Day School *(St. Louis, MO)*
- McDonogh School *(Owings Mills, MD)*
• Mercersburg Academy (Mercersburg, PA)
• Middlesex School (Concord, MA)
• Montclair Kimberly Academy (Montclair, NJ)
• National Cathedral School (Washington, DC)
• Noble and Greenough School (Dedham, MA)
• The Pingry School (Martinsville, NJ)
• Ransom Everglades School (Miami, FL)
• Riverdale Country School (Bronx, NY)
• Roxbury Latin School (West Roxbury, MA)
• Shady Side Academy (Pittsburgh, PA)
• St. Albans School (Washington, DC)
• St. George’s School (Middletown, RI)
• St. Paul’s School (Concord, NH)
• The Webb Schools (Claremont, CA)
1959

At the end of the 1950s, tuition and board at the schools in our sample typically exceeded $2000 per annum, with Lawrenceville topping the list at $3000. Expenses at the 13 day schools were often less than $1000 a year, with Dalton leading the way at $1200. College matriculation exceeded 95% at nearly every school, and 17 schools sent all of their graduates directly to college. (Hawken was not included in these computations, as it did not then extend through grade 12.)
Since college matriculation data first appeared in the *Handbook*, Porter Sargent Handbooks has tracked the six most common college destinations for each graduating class, as reported by the schools. For each edition, responding schools have also been encouraged to provide the number of matriculants to each of the top six most common destinations.

On average, a remarkable 45.6%—nearly half—of the reported college destinations for our selection of schools landed on the *US News* university list. Nine secondary schools had five elite colleges among their six most common destinations: Hotchkiss, Choate, Middlesex, St. Paul’s, Lawrenceville, Mercersburg, Roxbury Latin, St. Louis Country Day (a boys’ school prior to its merger with Mary Institute) and Riverdale. Every school in our sample had at least one elite college among its top-six most common destinations, and the norm was at least two.

Delving deeper into the numbers, we find that nearly one-quarter (23.4%) of the sample schools’ graduates attended one of the 20 elite colleges. In light of the extremely limited nature of this college list, these results are extremely impressive. Of its 91 1959 graduates, St. Paul’s sent 64 (70.3%) to top-tier colleges; Roxbury Latin, St. Louis Country Day and Middlesex were close behind, boasting percentages of 65, 55.8 and 55.6, respectively.

Bright students with the good fortune of attending one of these preparatory schools back in the late 1950s had a tremendous opportunity to continue their education at one of the country’s very top universities.
1969

Boarding tuitions at our sample schools toward the close of the 1960s generally exceeded the $3000 mark, with Baldwin and the school now referred to as Chase Collegiate topping the list at $3700. Day tuitions ranged toward the high teens, led by Hopkins at $1900.
The passing of a decade did little to reign in the college admission success of the 38 tracked secondary schools, with only a slight overall decline in elite university matriculation. Top-six matriculation to upper-tier colleges dropped only slightly, from 45.6% overall in 1959 to 40.4% in 1969. Hotchkiss and St. George’s both had five elite colleges among their six most frequent destinations. All but two schools featured at least one target university on its top-six list.

As far as the percentage of graduates attending elite colleges is concerned, there was an increased drop in 1969 from 10 years prior: 23.4% to 15.8%. This still represents a very impressive percentage, albeit not as stratospheric as the previous figure. Despite a sample size limited by the absence of matriculation data from four of the 38 preparatory schools in 1969, four schools sent more than 40% of their college-bound students to top-tier universities: St. George’s (46%), St. Paul’s (45.3%), Middlesex (43.5%) and Noble and Greenough (41.5%). Many of the other sampled schools approached or exceeded one-fifth representation, suggesting that enrollment at a competitive preparatory school justified the expense for those aspiring to elite college entrance.
Annual boarding school tuition fell largely between $5400 and $6200 as the 1970s drew to a close. At $6995, Castilleja charged the highest recorded fee. Day school tuitions hovered largely between $2500 and $3500, with Detroit Country Day topping the list at $3900.
While elite college matriculation rates declined somewhat from 1969, they held to very impressive levels. Nearly unchanged was the percentage of most-attended colleges, which dropped a single point over the decade: 40.4% to 39.4%. With all surveyed schools reporting matriculation information, four—St. Albans at 80% and Riverdale, St. Paul’s and Hotchkiss at 83.3%—reached or surpassed the 80% plateau, the same number of schools that failed to show elite college representation among their most popular student destinations.

The relative drop in the percentage of matriculants destined for upper-echelon universities in this 10-year period stood at only 2.8%, as the collective rate continued to be a robust 13%. Most impressive in the sample was Lawrenceville, which saw close to half of its college-bound students—59 of 129—head off to top-ranked universities. All told, seven surveyed schools exceeded 24% graduate matriculation levels, a strong indication of the degree of college preparation offered by this group of schools.
Private school tuition took a substantial leap in the 10 years leading up to 1989. Boarding costs spiked, with many in the $15,000 per annum range. The upper bound again was Castilleja, at $15,950. Day school rates exhibited a similar rise, with tuition typically exceeding $7000 and topping out at Columbia Grammar’s $11,200.
Our data indicates, however, that these additional tuition expenses may have amounted to money well spent for parents hoping to enroll their students at the very best colleges. Of all years surveyed, 1989 returned the highest average percentage of elite schools on our lists of sampled schools’ most common college destinations: 48.6%, a 23.3% increase from the 1979 aggregate. For the first time, all of a preparatory school’s most-attended colleges landed on the elite universities list, with Riverdale achieving this highly unlikely feat. A glance at the performance of the other 36 schools supplying matriculation data for 1989 confirms the strength of this trend toward elite school admission. While only one school failed to list at least one top-tier university on its list of most common college destinations, five—Lakeside, Roxbury Latin, Ransom Everglades, St. Paul’s and St. Albans—had five elite schools on their top destinations lists, and another nine reported four elite colleges.

As far as total percentage of college matriculants is concerned, there was a slight decline (13% to 12.2%) from 1979, but this modest drop may merely indicate the sheer volume of competitive colleges that were then available. Despite the overall decrease, four secondary schools still exceeded the 20% plateau: Roxbury Latin (39.5%), St. Albans (25.4%), Riverdale (22.8%) and Hotchkiss (20.3%). Without question, 1989 was a very strong year of college placement for our cross-section of schools.

For the complete list of 1989 percentages, see page 21
Tuition at highly competitive private schools continued to escalate toward the close of the 20th century. All but one boarding school set its tuition above $20,000 per year, with Georgetown Prep’s rate topping the list at $27,000. Day school rates tended to range from the middle to high teens; Riverdale’s $20,100 tuition was the highest.
An examination of matriculation data a decade later further showcases the strength of college preparation evident throughout our preparatory school lineup. Once again, the schools reporting matriculation data (all but one of the 38 sampled institutions) showed a consistent propensity for sending graduates to top-tier colleges. The overall percentage of elite schools among most common destinations dropped only slightly from 1989, clocking in at an impressive 45.9%. Just as in 1989, one of the secondary schools in our cross-section—this time, St. Albans—had nothing but elite schools on its top-six destination list. In addition, there were no fewer than eight schools that had five upper-echelon universities on their lists: St. Paul’s, Lawrenceville, Kent Denver, National Cathedral, Roxbury Latin, Pingry, Riverdale and Lakeside. In contrast, only two schools failed to report at least one elite university on their lists.

Perhaps even more impressively, the 1999 percentage of college-bound students matriculating at top-tier colleges increased from the solid 1989 level of 12.2% to 13.4%. Three schools had particularly strong showings: Roxbury Latin at 50%, St. Albans at 46.7% and National Cathedral at 32.8%. Only two schools failed to report an elite college among their most common graduate destinations, indicating how consistently stellar our school sample has been in its preparation for the most-competitive colleges.
Tuitons at private schools in the more expensive tier were approximating private college charges by 2009. Most boarding schools in our sample easily exceeded the $40,000 barrier, led by St. Albans at $46,667 annually. Day school rates typically approached or surpassed $30,000, topping out at Riverdale’s $38,800.
The final year of this survey certainly reinforced our previous findings. For the sixth time in six opportunities, the percentage of elite universities among most-common college destinations was above or within a percentage point of 40%. With an overall average of 41.7% in 2009, the study cross-section again featured Riverdale as the one school whose most common college placements consisted entirely of top-tier universities. Noble and Greenough reported five elite universities among their six top choices, while 10 preparatory schools listed four upper-echelon colleges. In contrast, only two sampled schools reported no elite colleges on their top-destinations list.

Although the aggregate percentage of college-bound students matriculating at upper-echelon universities was at its lowest point among surveyed years, it still reached 10%. Five schools exceeded the 20% mark: Roxbury Latin (28%), Noble and Greenough (27%), Dalton (24%), Castilleja (23%) and Riverdale (22.2%). Once again, only two schools reported no top-tier schools among their most common college destinations.

*For the complete list of 2009 percentages, see page 23*
Conclusion

The wealth of data compiled for *The Handbook of Private Schools* over the course of six decades provided us with a comprehensive view of college matriculation results for a cross-section of 38 well-established private schools. Armed with this extensive information, we set out to answer this question: Does an education at a relatively expensive private school constitute a wise investment for students seeking admission to the nation’s 20 top colleges, as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* in their influential National University Rankings?

For the sake of simplicity—and because the 20 colleges on the current list represent an excellent cross-section of elite American universities—we have used the most current National University Rankings as our source for comparison. At 10-year increments dating back to 1959, we tracked how often these elite colleges appeared among preparatory schools most-common college destinations. We then took our examination a step further by analyzing the percentage of college-bound graduates who matriculated at one of the 20 elite colleges.

The results of our study leave little doubt that esteemed private schools offer outstanding preparation for college, so much so that matriculations at the very best American universities are commonplace. The fact that placements at elite colleges remained at such consistently high levels throughout the course of the study is truly remarkable. One should also keep in mind that the preparatory school lists were limited to six college destinations. Therefore, the figures discussed here would have been even more impressive had we been able to track elite college matriculations beyond the six most-common annual placements. Also, many students—even those who attend top private schools—do not aspire to elite college attendance. For instance, these pupils may wish to attend college in a part of the country that does not include an elite university, or they may be interested in studying the arts or a specialized subject area.

College preparation is but one consideration for those evaluating their secondary school educational options. There is little doubt, however, that college preparation is an extremely important factor for many students and parents. In our study, a cross-section of well-regarded independent schools certainly displayed the collective strength of their elite college preparation.

While the secondary schools surveyed fell in the upper third of annual tuition cost, it is important to note that these schools work diligently to enroll students from all economic strata and to increase affordability. Among elite preparatory schools, financial aid programs are typically robust, and many schools maintain offices of diversity to maximize socioeconomic and racial variety in the student body. In fact, data compiled for a previous Porter Sargent Handbooks’ report tracking financial aid trends at 30 elite American boarding schools indicated that more than a third of the students at the surveyed schools (34.8%) received financial aid awards in 2010. This generosity is even more impressive when one realizes that the average reported award in the sample that year covered 54.1% of total tuition expenses (read the full report at
Clearly, discounting the possibility of independent education because of cost considerations—especially before exploring aid options at schools of interest—would be a mistake for parents seeking the best education for their children.

Our study has demonstrated the consistent effectiveness of college preparation at 38 boarding and day schools over a period spanning six decades. If gaining entrance to a highly selective college is a priority, serious private school consideration is a prudent decision.
2009 Percentages

% of Graduates to Elite Colleges | % of Elite Colleges in Top Destinations

\[ \begin{array}{cccccccccc}
& 0\% & 10\% & 20\% & 30\% & 40\% & 50\% & 60\% & 70\% & 80\% & 90\% & 100\% \\
\hline
\end{array} \]