

# The Invisible Preppies

## Speculations on the “two cultures” of undergraduate life

BY LANDON Y. JONES

One popular conception holds that Princeton is the great melting pot of the secondary school masses. From 47 states and 500 secondary schools the freshmen flow into Princeton, where in four short years the academic grindstone wears away the rough spots, smooths out differences, and finally spews forth the finished product — the Princeton graduate. Certainly an ironing process does take place. The farm boy from Broken Hatchet, Oklahoma, and the aristocrat from St. Grottlesex do over the years gravitate toward a medium dictated by the environment. By the time a class reaches its senior year, the physical differences between the public and private school graduates are not so manifest. But statistics can illuminate certain differences between the two groups that do not necessarily appear on the surface. Drawing only a broad outline of the two breeds, this article leaves the shadings to the reader.

Before World War II, Princeton undergraduates came overwhelmingly from private schools. The ratio of public to private school students passed 50 percent with the Class of 1962, and for the Class of 1969 it is about 60-40. Since this ratio has been roughly the same over the past four years, the student body as a whole can be broken down in the same 3-2 ratio of public school graduates to private school graduates. If Princeton were an evenly-heated melting pot, one would expect to find this same ratio prevalent in all the groupings within the university. Ideally, students participating in extracurricular activities would divide into a neat 60-40 public-private school ratio. The same ratio would thus emerge in every hodgepodge group on campus; the top and bottom 100 academically in each class, the astrophysics department, and even in the fencing team.

Obviously, the inherent difference in backgrounds of public and private school graduates makes any conception of maintaining this ratio in all groups preposterous. Where discrepancies do occur, where an institution or grouping may be significantly weighted in one direction, conclusions can be drawn about the structural character of public and private school graduates at Princeton. To take generalizations of this sort too seriously is to invite analytical disaster, but the breakdown does provide thoughtful material.

The four largest extracurricular activities at Princeton are: *The Daily Princetonian*, the Whig-Cliosophic Society, WPRB Radio, and the Undergraduate Council. Examination of their membership rosters would

indicate that public school graduates take a heavier interest in campus activities than their private school brethren. *The Princetonian* most approaches the Princeton norm. Twenty-four private school students are on the newspaper's staff as opposed to 32 high school students. This 3-2 ratio exactly parallels the proportion of private to public school students in the university at large. But the newspaper is the exception, as the high school graduates shoulder the weight of membership in the other activities. Whig-Clio carries 98 high school graduates on its active membership roster and only 43 private school graduates. WPRB, campus radio, breaks its membership down 32-17, in favor of the public school graduates. The Undergraduate Council and staff is composed of 40 public school and 20 private school graduates. All four activities combined total 202 public school students as compared to 104 private school students. This 2-1 ratio diverges significantly from the 3-2 proportion in the entire undergraduate body. The question leaps from the figures: What happened to the private school graduates?

One prep school graduate who hasn't participated in extracurriculars at Princeton terms them “a lot of mickey mouse.” He considers devotion to his studies to supersede extracurricular interest. His spare time he spends with his friends or dates. This attitude is not uncommon. “I went through all that stuff in boarding school,” says another. “It helped me get into here, but I don't need that anymore.”

This is not to imply that prep school graduates are absent from the extracurricular scene. At present, the chairman of the Inter-Club Council, head of the Chapel Deacons, chairman of the Campus Fund Drive, president of Whig-Clio, and the captain of the varsity football team are all private school graduates. One prep school graduate, who is president of a large extracurricular activity, deals easily with his kind. “There's too much sarcastic apathy in the prep school kids,” he says. “The high school boys are more rah-rah gung-ho. The preppies get here and think that because they have it made, they can sit on their tails.”

Another student, enjoying the relative neutrality of a day-school diploma, considers the difference between prep school and private school graduates to center

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This piece by Lanny Jones appeared in the January 25, 1966, PAW. It has been slightly abridged.

on the matter of commitment. "The high school boys have had to make sacrifices to get here. They appreciate it more and are in the habit of working hard," he maintains. "A prep school student can afford to remain detached because he has the security of established position or wealth. They don't have to prove themselves to anybody." This same student later added that he found himself most admiring of the prep school boys on campus who did make an effort to contribute to the university.

Many socio-psychologists contend that private school students tend to orient themselves in the past, while the public school students are more future-directed. The prep school graduate, they propose, is more concerned with the abstract acquisition of knowledge for gentlemanly contemplation. In their view, the high school students, who have worked hard for what they got, use college more as a "trade school" that will contribute directly toward careers.

Analysis of Princeton's academic departments would seem to verify this hypothesis. There are twice as many prep school students in the English department as high school students. In fact, the English department contains more private school students than any other department. The private-public ratio in English is 2-1, as compared to the 2-3 division in the rest of the university. This extraordinary concentration can be explained by the character of English as a terminal, self-contained subject. Literature is said by many to be the heart of the liberal-arts tradition. Starkly in contrast with English is the Engineering School, which is composed almost entirely of high school graduates. An engineering student knows that everything he learns in his department will contribute directly to his career. "Not only do I not know any prep school students in Engineering," said one, "I've never heard of any."

Two other departments where prep school students tend to mass are history and Romance Languages. The history department is split down the middle between private and public school graduates, which in relative terms reveals a prep school preference. The Romance Languages department, reeking of the well-traveled, proportionately has the highest percentage of prep school graduates in the university. In this year's senior

class, 16 private school students will major in Romance Languages, while only 6 high school students have chosen that field of study.

Two of the most forward-oriented departments are physics and mathematics, where high school students are solidly entrenched. The physics department will graduate 16 public school students this year and only 6 boarding school graduates. Even more overweighted is the mathematics department, which this year is composed of a whopping 35 public school graduates and only 6 prep school graduates. The same question again leaps from the figures — What happened to the private school graduate in the applied sciences?

"That's for winks," said one graduate of an Eastern boarding school, and his answer at least partially typifies the underlying sentiment held by private school students. Certainly, many private schools do not even pretend to turn out the scientists of tomorrow. Their emphasis is admittedly on the liberal arts. They hold to Matthew Arnold's judgment of Oxford that "although it would surrender to any other master, it would never yield to the Philistine." The high school graduate takes a different viewpoint. "Too often the prep school student forgets his role in society," a senior commented. "The high schools do a better job of training their students to become a creative element in society — whether in the sense of applied sciences working for progress or in civic activity."

Most observers concede that the high school students in any Princeton class will perform better academically than the prep school graduates. The reason, here again, is the higher standard of admission exacted from the high schools. The boys who enter Princeton from the public schools are used to ranking first or second in their class. The extent of this "academic gap" between the public and private school graduates is startlingly evident in the composition of the members of the Class of 1965 nominated for membership in the Phi Beta Kappa Society. These students are the best of the class — and last June, 55 high school graduates were nominated while only 18 prep school graduates received the honor. In blunt terms, high school students outnumbered the private school students in the upper rankings of the class 3-1. ■

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"The fact that your father gave it to you when you were six can, I'm sorry to say, in no way influence us in regard to your possible admission next fall."

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