

THE
TYRANNY
OF THE
MERITOCRACY

DEMOCRATIZING
HIGHER EDUCATION
IN AMERICA

LANI
GUINIER

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INTRODUCTION

SUSPENDED ON STEAM tunneling up from the government-issue heating grates, the last of the fall foliage dances just beyond the windowpane. In the crisp autumn air, the leaves ricochet off the grimy glass before coming to rest on the banks of the buildings' curved cement ledge, just outside the science classroom. These dancing leaves are barely visible to the sixteen- and seventeen-year-old teenagers unpacking their book bags atop rows of smooth, black Formica countertop, crowded with petri dishes, glass beakers, and gas blowtorches. It's a Monday morning in November, the time of year when high school seniors around the country carefully calculate their college admissions odds. A solemn stillness reigns as nine boys and one girl wait for the Advanced Placement physics teacher to begin the double-period lesson that is the toughest course in this public school. Of the seven high school seniors and three juniors, only one—a policeman's son—does not have parents who graduated from college. Nevertheless all ten students are preoccupied with the same thing: getting into college.

"Who remembers what the force on a turning object is called?" The teacher surveys the room as he toys with a piece of chalk.

A hand from the front row shoots up. "Torque!" cries the son of a computer engineer. Wisps of his tousled, orange hair outline his pale face, suddenly ruddy with his excitement.

The teacher nods. The boy beams. He quickly swivels in his chair to note the reactions of his classmates. Annoyed by their tired, first-class-of-the-day expressions, he glances back toward the teacher for approval, but the teacher has already returned to the blackboard. Undeterred, the boy blurts out, "Oh, I'm so smart."

The class seems amused but mostly inattentive. A few students suppress yawns. The others busy themselves trying to find the right page in the textbook. A deep cough from the back of the room breaks the silence. The proprietor of the cough, the policeman's son, wears an ironic smile. He has rocked his chair back to rest against the countertop right below the gas blowtorch. Jutting out his chest he bellows, "You shouldn't say that about yourself!"

"I can," the first boy says with a sneer. A smug grin spreads over his face. "I can," he repeats, "when I got a 1600. Bitch." (Today a perfect score would be a 2400.)

A loud thump echoes through the classroom as the front legs of the second boy's chair hit the floor. His eyes narrow. The smile on his face dissolves in a brew of contempt and hurt.

The orange-haired boy's sly excuse has worked. He was proud to know the answer to the teacher's question; but his real agenda was to broadcast his perfect SAT scores. Except for the scraping of the chalk on the blackboard, the room is quiet.

But unable to contain his enthusiasm, the braggart with the orange locks interrupts the class several more times, proclaiming his flawless SAT scores again and again. Awe morphs into disgust among his classmates, yet no one else speaks out. The policeman's boy squirms. He sits hunched with his elbows cocked on his desk, his stubby fingers cupping his chin.

Finally, after the fourth unanswered SAT-score announcement, the policeman's boy sits straight up, his face still glowering from the earlier insult. "That's enough," he snarls. "Shut up already about your scores."

Another student, a tall, long-limbed boy, enters the fray. His parents both graduated from an Ivy League college, and his dad is a science professor. This leggy fellow chewing on a pencil has said nothing all class,

but he now pitches forward in his chair as he calmly assumes the role of defense attorney for the braggart. "If I got a 1600," the college professor's boy says, "I'd be talking about it too."

The policeman's son grimaces. His lip curls as he reluctantly acknowledges the shifting classroom alliance. It is now two against one. He plants his hands on the desktop. "Maybe so," he mumbles and briefly contemplates the thought that the SAT creates a special exception for crude boasting.

"But it doesn't mean you have to be a jerk," he finally shoots back.

For the immodest boy who has hit the SAT jackpot, there is no difference between accomplishment and arrogance. In the terminology of the SATs, a 1600 (or a 2400, depending on what year the test was taken) is an achievement worthy of mentioning—several times. Indeed it is such an accomplishment that it cries out for mention not just by the boy with the perfect scores but by his peer advocate as well.

Both the boastful boy and his tall, lanky supporter know the game. The rules, so the thinking goes, are objective, neutral, and, above all, fair. And that boy won. Using the SAT test as a yardstick, college admissions officers select who they think are the best-prepared students, meaning those likely to get the highest first-year grades. Presumably the SAT not only measures college preparedness; it also provides an incentive system for high school students to work hard and take a rigorous curriculum. The tenets of high-stakes admissions testing—the testocracy—have become so widely shared that they form the building blocks of a secular religion among college-bound elites: if you test well, you deserve to enter a top college. In some ways you have earned the right not just to succeed but to preen. And, such students might think, you owe nothing to anyone, not to the community whose tax dollars supported your AP physics lab with a teacher/student ratio of one to ten, and not to your classmates, whose own egos and futures are also on the line.

The testocracy, a twenty-first-century cult of standardized, quantifiable merit, values perfect scores but ignores character. Indeed, the boy with the winning scores, derisive grin, and bad manners could be a poster child for the closely fought college admissions competition.

The testocracy teaches the cocky boy to internalize success and to take personal credit for the trappings of privilege, including the educational resources and networks of his college-educated parents. He has learned that individual achievement trumps collective commitment. Those who reach the finish line faster will reap their rewards here on earth. And one of those rewards is the right to brag.

The boy still squirming with resentment in the back row knows the difference between being proud and being a jerk. He has the instincts of character. One should not boast, preen, or complain. Yet, he knows that, to the academic world, his character counts less than his SAT scores. He knows that the SAT opens doors to the best schools and by extension to long-term success. This boy is from a working-class family. The son of the policeman and the school secretary, he is hoping to be the first in his family to attend college. But in order to give himself and his children-to-be a better life than his parents could provide for him, he needs financial aid. He plays hockey, but because he barely got 1300 on his SATs, his athletic skill was not enough to win a much-needed scholarship. Thus far he is losing in the college admissions contest. His test scores and his self-esteem both take a beating. Reduced to protesting from the back row, he struggles to compete while staying grounded. His parents cannot afford SAT prep classes. He will simply retake the test, hoping that his scores improve.

THIS IS THE challenge I propose in this book: to reconsider the status quo. We can and must adjust our understanding of testocratic merit to better reflect what we want to value in a democratic society. Testocratic merit makes the assumption that test scores are the best evidence of applicants' worth, without paying much attention to the environments in which one finds those individuals. It thereby ignores several built-in biases that privilege those who are already quite advantaged. However, if our society truly values education as a means of preparing citizens to participate in the decisions that affect their lives as individuals and the society they create as a collective, as well as to enable individuals to

improve their lots and their society, then we need to reexamine exactly how we define "merit."

Harvard economist Amartya Sen defines "merit" as an incentive system that rewards the actions a society values.¹ Defining merit through students' grades and test scores is evidence that our society values individual competition above all else. As the policeman's son reminds us, our obsession with testing is often depressing but it need not be permanent. In fact, the historical journey that led to this current culture, which I trace in chapter 2, demonstrates how our national understanding of "merit" can change and has changed over time. We are at a turning point in history. It is now time for another culture shift: from honoring testocratic merit to honoring democratic merit.

We can alter how we think about merit, from something a child is born with to something that she (and/or we) can help cultivate. We can shift from prioritizing individualized testing to group collaboration among all stakeholders, including students, parents, teachers, and administrators. Unfortunately, it's not going to be easy, as the entire undergirding of our educational system rests upon notions of individual achievement and the promotion of competition. Yet we must shift from promoting testocratic merit, which has produced dubious results, to developing democratic merit, because the latter is the foundation upon which our national values truly ought to rest.

I am not trying to destroy the concept of merit here. I am trying to redefine what it means to be meritorious beyond a student's performance on standardized tests or in isolated academic situations. If we are going to have a "meritocracy"—which really just means "rule by merit"—then we need a better conception of what now constitutes merit in our society versus what it should be.

THE TERM MERITOCRACY was coined by British sociologist Michael Young as a spoof. In his 1958 satire, *The Rise of Meritocracy, 1870–2033*, Young gave an imaginary account of a smug elite: instead of ancestry, ability had determined their social position. Rule by this select few would

appear both benign and bountiful because of a talent-based formula for assigning status. The best would rise to the top using this simple equation: intelligence (or aptitude) + effort = merit. In Young's hypothetical meritocracy, test scores (or other suitable substitutes for innate talent or aptitude) would matter the most; because those who had risen in the status hierarchy would have attained their status through talent and effort, they would also be immune to criticism. Those at the top of this status hierarchy would be able to justify their continued rule because they had earned it.

To Young, such a testocracy would not be a shining vision but rather a nightmare. And more than forty years after the publication of his book, Young is "sadly disappointed" at how the word he coined has "gone into general circulation, especially in the United States."² He intended to warn society about what might happen if, in assigning social status, we continued to place gaining formal educational qualifications over all other considerations. In Young's fictional world, anyone unable to jump through educational hoops, including many—like the policeman's son—from the working class, would be barred from a new, exclusive social class as discriminatory as older ones based on inheritance.

And that is exactly what has happened. Through their admissions criteria, our colleges and universities have adopted Young's nightmarish meritocracy. Just as Young anticipated, merit as defined by test-based admissions has harnessed "schools and universities to the task of sieving people" according to a "narrow band of values."³ Those values, as it turns out, are the production and reproduction of privilege but without obligation or shame. The rise of the testocratic meritocracy has enabled those already at the top of the heap to continue to preside without a sense of moral or political accountability. The privileged have come to believe that their "advancement comes from their own merits," and thus they are entitled to their power.

But this is not the only possible definition of merit. The term *merit* originally meant "earned by service."⁴ Giving good service, such as working for the benefit of community rather than simply for personal advantage, is what made someone worthy of entitlements, such as ad-

mission to top-ranked colleges and plum internships and job opportunities. Democratic merit revives this notion by providing educational access to those who serve the goals and contribute to the conditions of a thriving democracy. It does what our current meritocracy fails to do: it creates an incentive system that emphasizes not just the possession of individual talent and related personal success but also the ability to collaborate and the commitment to building a better society for more people. Our nation has always prided itself on overthrowing tyranny. We now have a new one in our midst: the tyranny of our current understanding of meritocracy.

In addition to providing basic services like helping students fill out financial aid forms and decipher syllabi, the alumni coordinator, along with the rest of the staff, discusses students' concerns about fitting in. Students typically raise questions about financial constraints, like what to do when all their friends are going out for beers and pizza, and they don't have any money.

It became clear that, rather than coming into college with a sense of entitlement, as paying customers demanding a service, the UPCS students were often insecure about whether they belonged and whether they were worthy of their spot in the class. The faculty encouraged them to realize that they did possess critical-thinking skills at a college level. When pressed, students admitted feeling confident in their writing skills, as well as in speaking and presenting, given all the participation required of them at UPCS. As Hall notes, they are "dynamite, dedicated, personable people" who can be campus leaders, if only they are given the opportunity and can be convinced of their own worth. Hall continually reminds graduates that not only do they possess the ability to succeed in college, but they bring a valuable perspective to the campus that other students benefit from. "You are getting a lot from the school," Hall tells them, "but you are also an asset."

In recognition of the value UPCS students bring, Clark has also taken steps to support them. Those who matriculate to Clark now attend a pre-orientation summer session, and all have the same faculty advisor in the Hiatt Center for Urban Education. The hope is that UPCS alumni will support one another, both socially and academically. Hall describes the "cohorts of supportive alumni" he wants to gather; these cohorts would connect with incoming students to provide mentorship and guidance. The program is not yet as robust as he would like, but UPCS continues to work toward this goal, which fits more broadly with the school's mission. As Hall puts it, "We are a community, and we can always achieve more together."

CHAPTER FIVE

No Longer Lonely at the Top: The Posse Foundation

DESPITE THE GAINS made by the students at University Park Campus School in Worcester, their academic success often came to a halt outside the high school hallways. This was not as a result of their supposedly lower intellect or from a lack of dedication. Many students struggle at the higher echelons of education for very different reasons: because they have trouble advocating for themselves or finding necessary resources, because they have never learned the principles of time management, or simply because they suffer from insecurity as to whether or not they "belong." As it turns out, for certain students, such as children of parents who did not go to college or in some cases didn't even go to high school, gaining admission to college is only the beginning of the battle; adjusting to college life proves in some cases to be even harder than getting in. This is where democratic merit can truly shine: when students work together to solve problems and make advances, rather than scratch their lonely way to the top, they can create a supportive learning environment, one I find wonderfully embodied by The Posse Foundation.

In the fall of 1989, a twenty-three-year-old Brandeis University graduate named Debbie Bial was running a New York City youth leadership program when she met a young black man from East Harlem who had

recently walked away from what she describes as “a major scholarship at a major university.” The student was known to be academically gifted; his friends had nicknamed him “Stein” for “Einstein.” When Bial asked him why he had dropped out, he responded, “I could have done it if I had had my posse with me.”

From this remark came the idea for The Posse Foundation, which each year helps urban public high school students to win full, four-year merit scholarships from “top-ranked” colleges. Currently in its twenty-fifth year, the foundation recruits students from Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, New Orleans, New York, and Washington, DC; it has fifty-one partner universities to date. Since its start in 1989, when the foundation recruited five New York City students to attend Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, more than 5,500 students have received over \$680 million in scholarships.

The foundation’s principal missions are, one, to identify promising urban public high school students who lack the traditional testocratic indicators of success, such as high SAT scores, and two, to send these students on to college in groups of ten, which they call “posses.” Although the foundation does not take race into account in its selection process, most of its scholars are students of color, thanks to the racial and ethnic make-up of the city high schools from which the foundation recruits. Because these students often find themselves overwhelmed by the cultural and academic differences between their high schools and the elite, majority-white colleges they enter as freshmen, the posses serve as critical peer-support networks.

We all have times in our life when we are feeling lonely, when the situation we are in feels overwhelming. I remember working for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF) after I left my position at the Justice Department as special assistant to Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Drew S. Days III. My LDF team was sent to Arkansas to try a case. There were three of us: myself (a black woman), a white woman, and a black paralegal. There were no restaurants available in the part of Arkansas we were in after five o’clock, so we’d have to cross the river to Mississippi to eat. I think we went maybe twice to this

Mississippi restaurant, and the first time we could hear the people in the kitchen saying, “They say they’re from New York.”

My coworkers at the LDF were my posse, and they helped me cope with the feeling of being a stranger in a strange land; we helped each other in this tense situation. Posse Foundation alumni have recounted facing similar cultural barriers when they started college. Danielle Berry, a Posse scholar at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, says her first weekend visiting campus was “the worst weekend of my life. I didn’t see another African American the whole time I was [there]. I actually went into a store . . . and asked the clerk where all the black people were. I couldn’t believe what I’d gotten myself into.” But when Berry was put on academic probation, two other Posse students pushed her to get on top of her studies. “Jai and Dominique and I were like a Super Posse,” she told the alumni magazine *On Wisconsin*. “Especially Jai; I think of her like a big sister. They were very honest with me, even when I didn’t want to hear it.” Thanks to this support, Berry says, “I was more comfortable. I was meeting other people, being myself,” and doing better academically. By the summer of her junior year, Berry was confident and upbeat enough to assert that everything was “falling into place for me. I feel like I know my purpose. And I feel like I can help other people.” Danielle not only graduated from Wisconsin but went on to get her master of science degree in journalism from Roosevelt University.

David Perez Jr., a Posse scholar and class of 1997 Vanderbilt University alumnus, completed his PhD in education at Pennsylvania State University in 2010, but he was out of his element when he first began school. A Puerto Rican kid who grew up in pre-gentrified Williamsburg, Brooklyn, David had joined a gang when he was in his mid-teens to gain status in his neighborhood, and he was cutting school and failing all of his classes. In and out of different high schools, David eventually fell two full academic years behind and finally finished his studies at an alternative high school for students with chronic problems. He worked hard there, doubling up on his courses and excelling academically. A teacher took an interest in David and nominated him for a Posse Foundation scholarship, back when the program was still fairly new. David

was stunned when he received the news that he had been selected to matriculate at Vanderbilt University with a full scholarship. He had never heard of the university before.

David did not have a smooth transition to college life. "It wasn't the first time I was away from home, but it was the first time I was on my own," he says of his experience. "My mom was able to scratch pennies together to get me a plane ticket, and I went to Nashville with a word processor, which was a pretty big deal."

David felt like a complete outsider when he first arrived at Vanderbilt. He looked at the students' cars—Mercedes, Saabs, and Porsches—and calculated that many students drove automobiles with price tags greater than his mother's annual salary. Nothing about him—from his limited wardrobe to the way his noisy, cheap word processor stuck out amid his roommates' state-of-the-art computers—blended in. Having the campus police stop him and question his student status one night seemed to confirm to David that he didn't belong. He didn't even bother to unpack his clothes for the first six weeks of school and called his mother every day because he was so homesick.

By the middle of the first semester, David was convinced that the best thing for him to do was to drop out of Vanderbilt and go back home. He was getting up the courage to break the news to his mother when Erica Spatz, one of the members of his posse, happened to stop by his room one day. "She saw that my bag was not unpacked, and she was like, 'Let's go to the store and get some hangers.' We began to put my clothes on hangers, and that moment was very symbolic of the fact that I was then going to stay."

Though he resolved to stick it out at Vanderbilt, David struggled in his classes. As a first-generation college student from an alternative public high school, he hadn't cultivated the study skills or familiarity with academic language, such as how to decode a syllabus, which he needed to hit the ground running in college. Like some graduates from University Park Campus School, he also hadn't yet mastered how to organize his time. By the end of the first semester, David had the lowest GPA in his posse: a near-failing 1.3. The dean placed him on academic

probation, and David realized that he would have to start asking for help if he was going to succeed academically.

With the support of his posse, professors, and various mentors, David was able to turn things around. He got off academic probation in only one semester, bringing his GPA up to a 2.5. "A lot of it was learning through the process of being with others," he explains. "I would watch people in my posse and ask how do they know what to read for class? Why are they working on that paper now if it's not due? How do you put together a calendar?" David enrolled in study-skills classes at Vanderbilt's learning center, which helped him with time management, critical reading skills, and writing. "There were also a lot of faculty who were really invested in The Posse Foundation, so when I was placed on academic probation, I met with a caring faculty member who really helped me," he says.

Of all the people who helped him, David singles out his mentor, Shirley Collado, an older and more experienced Posse student at Vanderbilt. The daughter of Dominican immigrants, Shirley was a member of the very first group of Posse scholars to enroll in college, in 1989. Like David, Shirley grew up in Brooklyn and was the first in her family to attend college. Her father drove a New York City taxicab and her mother worked at a factory.

Shirley understood the culture shock that David was experiencing. Her father, a traditional Dominican man, was initially against Shirley leaving home to enroll in college in Tennessee. She says her parents didn't have a sense of the difference between Vanderbilt or a local community college and couldn't understand why she needed to go so far from home to attend school. Shirley's grandmother was able to persuade her father to let Shirley go under one condition: Shirley had to agree to speak to her father every night at 8 p.m., when he would call her from a pay phone. He wanted to keep the family rules, Shirley explains, to let her know that going away was a privilege, and she agreed to abide by them. "It was an enormous sacrifice on his part," she says. "I felt like this was the least I could do." They spoke every day throughout her first few years of school, strengthening her ties to her community and providing

constant support from back home. At first Shirley thought those nightly phone calls were for her father's sake, but she soon found out they were far more beneficial for her. Conversing with her father gave him an opportunity to reinforce his confidence in her, even as the experiences she was having were a lot to take. Though her father had not gone to college, he was able to be an effective mentor for Shirley and gave her the skills to mentor David in turn.

Because Shirley was a few years ahead of David, she was able to help him adapt to the academic rituals and demands of Vanderbilt University. Shirley would invite David to join her during her study time at the library. She got out her datebook and showed him how to manage a schedule. She helped him get a job at the campus bookstore so he could get a discount on textbooks and wouldn't have to rely as much on his mother for funds. "There was a point where I kind of gave up on myself, but I think those interactions enhanced my self-efficacy and made me realize that I could take certain steps to get through Vanderbilt," David says.

With the help of his mentors and peers, David eventually adjusted to life at Vanderbilt. He took advantage of a study-abroad opportunity and went to London for a semester. He became a resident advisor in a dormitory, made dean's list, and started contemplating graduate school.

As David began to flourish at Vanderbilt, he started to look for ways to give back. "I made it a point to extend myself in any way possible to a new Posse student, because I remembered how hard it was for me," he says. When he returned for his sophomore year, he quickly reached out to the new students, befriending one student in particular—another Puerto Rican boy from New York—who also happened to share his last name. "He was encountering a lot of the same challenges: feeling isolated, kind of struggling academically. I spent time with him, talking to him about how things were going. I got a sense of how he was doing things so that I could figure out how to help him," David says of his friend.

The following year, when he was a junior, David made it a point to look after Carlos, a Dominican boy from New York City who was still suffering the raw wounds of his brother's murder from several years

before. Whenever something bad happened at school—if Carlos broke up with a girlfriend or got cut from the baseball team—he would post negative quotes or phrases on a bulletin board outside his dorm room. Remembering how bleak things had seemed to him when he first matriculated at Vanderbilt, David wanted to help raise Carlos's spirits. So, every night, he would replace one of Carlos's pessimistic slogans with something positive. "It became a battle, and we talked about it," David says of the exchange. "I told him, 'I know I'm not in your position, but you're going to get through this.' Our relationship was stronger because of these fights. We still stay connected."

Shirley also felt compelled to share her success with others who came through the program after her. She went on to get her PhD at Duke, although without her posse, she says, "it was one of the hardest things I've ever done." When the atmosphere of collaborative learning that Shirley had embraced—and mirrored for others—was replaced by one of individual achievement she struggled. But she was motivated to set an example of academic success for other Posse scholars. "I wanted my story to help colleges and universities believe in people like me," she explains.

TO FORM ITS POSSES, the foundation relies on nominations from school guidance counselors and other community partners to gather an initial group of students who show promise beyond what their performances on conventional measures of testable merit might indicate. Nominated students receive a letter that says, "Congratulations. You have been nominated by someone in your community for a \$100,000 scholarship because you are outstanding."

So begins a three-and-a-half-month process, with multiple rounds, throughout which the selection committee highlights students' strengths and their potential to enrich the campuses of the colleges that seek to recruit them. Since the selection is both need-blind and race-blind, there is no emphasis on increasing numbers of different groups on campus but rather on selecting the next generation of leaders from an often-overlooked pool of students from disadvantaged neighborhoods. As a

result, there is no accompanying stigma to becoming a Posse scholar and no implication that schools are lowering their standards by including the Posse scholars.

One donor who gives financial support to the Posse program at his alma mater said he does so because it's not a traditional affirmative action program. "It isn't about numbers but about recruiting high-quality students," he said. "It's about identifying leadership potential. Posse provides a group of kids who know how to deal with the diversity issue. They aren't just going to go to class and take up space. They're leaders. They're involved. They're the kind of students you really want to have on campus."

One of the most innovative features of The Posse Foundation is its selection process. During the initial screening, foundation staff members do not consider those pervasive standards of competitive merit seen on traditional college applications such as test scores, grades, and extracurricular activities. Rather they use what they call the Dynamic Assessment Process (DAP), which measures collaborative merit instead. Staff members give nominated students several group assignments ("interactive workshops") and evaluate them on leadership ability, the ability to get along with people from different cultural backgrounds, the quality of thinking, and their desire to succeed—all traits the foundation has identified as predictors of academic success in college.

The foundation invites back approximately 60 percent of this initial group for follow-up interviews and, together with college admissions officers, assembles "posses" of roughly ten students per institution. The college gives each Posse member a four-year, full-tuition merit scholarship.

Nominees tend to find value in the foundation's selection process in and of itself. "I remember the first round being the best interview that I have ever had," says Daniel Acheampong, a Posse scholar at Brandeis from Crown Heights, Brooklyn. "It wasn't just the interview. You go there and see hundreds of kids. It was about being creative. . . . I was like, 'This is exciting. I'm going to have fun here.'" Other Posse scholars agree. "I think it felt less like an interview and more of a positive experience where you could see how ideas are formed and learn how to

communicate with different people you had never met before," says Mosi London, a Posse scholar who graduated from Lafayette College. Since this process often represents the students' first experiences interviewing, many nominees find that process useful as well. "I plan to go to medical school, and in any career you need to do some kind of interviewing, so the more experience I get in that, the better," says Angel Garcia, a Posse scholar at Brandeis.

Rather than viewing "merit" as a fixed and measurable quality that students demonstrate to gain entrance, The Posse Foundation continues to cultivate students' potential for innovation and leadership after they are selected to receive the scholarship. Before they even set foot on a college campus, Posse scholars embark on an eight-month weekly training program to prepare them for higher education. Each week, posses gather to focus on four areas: (1) team building and group support, (2) cross-cultural communication, (3) leadership, and (4) academic excellence. The training focuses equally on preparing students academically and preparing them for personal challenges, such as time and money management and interacting with a majority-white student body that is considerably better off than those in their high schools. A range of topics are discussed, including race, diversity, sexual orientation, and class, which helps to prepare students for conversations on these topics once they arrive on campus. Students are encouraged to cultivate self-awareness, which helps them set and achieve goals, and to prepare for the challenges they might face in college. At the end of the eight months, Posse members attend a weekend retreat outside the city.

Daniel Acheampong recalls that the pre-college training program "felt a little forced in the beginning," but he conceded that "it was really good to get to know each other." Looking back, he reflects, "I think they were training us to be supportive of each other. They wanted us to see that there was a difference between going to campus as a 'posse' and just being a collection of students who happen to have a scholarship." Right from the beginning, Posse scholars are encouraged to view each other as collaborators and to understand that they are stronger as a unit than as an assortment of individuals.

Daniel and his posse enrolled at Brandeis after completing the pre-college training program. As part of the scholarship requirements, the group continued to meet weekly and members were assigned to work with on-campus mentor Ashley Rondini, a PhD student in philosophy and sociology. In addition to the group meetings, Daniel and Ashley met individually twice a month for Daniel's first two years of college. "She was willing to give up almost anything for us as a posse," Daniel recalls. "She went through so much herself, but she was always there. She would find a way to help you if you needed it and did a really good job of bringing us all together and making us realize that we're not friends—we're family."

Daniel's Posse family came out in full force when he decided to run for student body treasurer in his sophomore year. Not only did his posse help him with campaign materials like posters, fliers, and e-mails, but they also provided the support he needed to take the emotional risk of running for a campus office. "Posse had a lot to do with that," he says of his courage to run. "Everyone on campus knows what Posse is, and the support system we have is really strong."

In addition to assigning an on-campus mentor (usually a graduate student or a member of the faculty or college staff), universities designate a liaison to stay in regular contact with the foundation, and four times a year, a foundation member visits the college. Additionally, every spring the foundation sponsors a PossePlus retreat, in which Posse members and members of the larger student body meet to discuss a campus issue chosen by Posse members. Recently, the foundation initiated a career program, which helps Posse students secure internships at organizations in the United States and abroad (supplying a stipend for students doing unpaid internships) and helps Posse alumni to connect with potential employers. The career program maintains an active alumni network (there are currently more than 1,500 Posse alumni and more than 1,600 Posse scholars on campuses), provides job-search training (individually or in group workshops), and facilitates a mentoring relationship between Posse grads and current Posse students.

Yvonne Perez, another Posse scholar at Brandeis, explains the culture of the Posse program at the university: "Posse at Brandeis is very well

known for being made up of leaders. Behind every aspect of student life, you see a Posse scholar. We realize that you can't keep yourself behind your books all the time. I saw other Posse scholars going out of their way to get involved in campus and still excelling academically. Having that great model to follow, I found what interests me on campus and went about doing it." Yvonne is a co-coordinator of a Hispanic group called AHORA (Hispanic and Latino/a Student Association) and has organized Hispanic Heritage Month events on campus. Along with several members of her posse, Yvonne also helped found a Brandeis chapter of the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science.

FOLLOWING GRADUATION, many Posse scholars have demonstrated a commitment to public service. Both David and Shirley went on to pursue careers as educators and focused on expanding opportunities for underserved students, for which they credit their experience in The Posse Foundation's career program. "There's no question that I would not be where I am today but for or because of Posse," David says. "It has pretty much dictated the career that I wanted to pursue."

After graduating from Vanderbilt, David took a position in a residential treatment center doing conflict resolution and family therapy for inner-city youth, a job he learned about from one of his peers in his posse. He then returned to Vanderbilt for his master's degree in education and became a mentor to Vanderbilt Posse 10. "I felt that serving in that position was my calling," David says. "I just knew that this was something that I wanted to do forever."

David has since worked in diversity and youth development programs at Syracuse and New York universities, ultimately attaining his PhD in higher education at Pennsylvania State University with a focus on high-achieving Latino male college students. "Rather than focusing on those in crisis, I want to interview the ones who get through and identify those factors that contribute to their success to figure out how to help the ones who don't make it," David explains. His goal is to

influence education policy and expand college access for underserved students in order to provide others with the same opportunities that Posse gave to him.

Shirley was the first Posse student to earn a doctorate (hers was in clinical psychology). After doing community mental health work, she went back to work with The Posse Foundation, serving as its executive vice president for six years. She later worked in the administration of Middlebury and Lafayette colleges. In 2010, she returned to Middlebury as vice president for student affairs and dean of the college. In January 2015, she will serve as executive vice chancellor for strategic initiatives and executive vice provost at Rutgers University–Newark. Shirley describes herself as a “quiet revolutionary,” someone working within the system of selective, predominantly white institutions to bring about change and inclusiveness.

To that end, Shirley believes that her experience as a Posse scholar gives her an insider’s view of the program and insights into the needs of Posse scholars. As part of the first cohort of Posse scholars, Shirley initially thought her experience of going to a selective college was unique. But she soon realized that hers was a typical story of coming to Posse as a first-generation college attendee from an immigrant family. “There were a lot of other versions of that story,” she observes.

At Middlebury, Shirley says, the Posse program has been “so much more than a way to get a critical mass” of students of color. Posse’s presence on campus is a “true partnership,” she says, and not just as a pipeline for recruiting low-income students or a means of outsourcing admissions. In the fall of 2012, Middlebury added a cohort from Chicago to its original group from New York City because the program had found such success. And in 2014, the college added a Posse STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) cohort from Los Angeles, which will matriculate in the fall of 2015. That will bring to Middlebury three posses—a total of 120 scholars by 2018. “The Posse program has allowed us as an institution to ask the hard questions,” she says of the partnership. “How do we act and think about diversity and community and inclusion?”

Ultimately, Shirley sees the Posse program as a way to think about admissions in a more holistic way. The real question, she says, is how to make sure students from all backgrounds fully participate in and get the full benefit of their education, whether they are coming from Posse on a scholarship or from Connecticut and paying a full ride. Shirley aspires to “take what we know works with Posse and bring it to the rest of the institution.” Mentoring works, she observes, and cohorts work.

Posse’s approach, says Shirley, is having a ripple effect on the rest of the school. For example, the first-year orientation program went through a major overhaul. Students are now broken into cohorts and take trips as a part of orientation, which can consist of outdoor excursions or cultural, political, or agricultural outings. Over the course of three days, the students are in dialogue with one another, and the groups are engineered to be racially and ethnically diverse as well as mixed in terms of life experience. Also included in orientation is an intensive workshop around identity called “Middlebury Uncensored,” which encourages the students to challenge their assumptions about others and have difficult discussions that touch on race, sexual orientation, and financial situations, as well as personal fears and anxieties. Orientation is facilitated by peer leaders and is mandatory for all first-year students, including varsity athletes.

“There is no way of measuring or starting to imagine the impact of Posse on the faculty,” Shirley adds, noting that faculty describe their experiences with the program as transformational. “Posse has changed mentors in a way that Posse never imagined and mentors never imagined.”

Miguel Fernandez, a Spanish professor and former Posse mentor agrees, calling his involvement in Posse “one of the most rewarding experiences I’ve had as an educator.” He describes his Posse scholars as a “remarkable, incredible group.” At weekly meetings, they talked about different issues the students were facing, such as social life, roommate problems, and racist comments made in class. “Why do these white people want to drink all night and no one is interested in dancing?” he recalls his students asking. In the group, the Posse scholars were often able to address one another’s concerns, teaching Fernandez how to

handle various issues that affected many of his students. "The social piece is very, very important," he says, "and can be as challenging as the academics, if not more so."

Fernandez observes that general admissions to the school have begun to take a more holistic view of students, as well, considering additional information beyond grades, test scores, and activities. Yet he bemoans Middlebury's continued lack of diversity among its faculty. "Middlebury has failed at that," he observes, noting that there are few role models for students of color.

Nonetheless, the school has managed to find mentors who have successfully led and learned from their posesses. Roger Sandwick, for example, was not the usual suspect to mentor a diverse group of young urban students. A white male chemistry professor in his late fifties, he describes himself as a "country hick" who gets nervous about taking the subway. He says he didn't know what to expect when he agreed to serve as a Posse mentor. "When I took it on, I hardly knew what Posse was," he recalls.

That summer, Sandwick attended a weekend retreat on campus to get to know the students. He also attended a training session, whereupon he was told, "Don't be their parent; be their mentor." But that lesson never stuck. "I was bad at that—I was their parent. I loved them to death," he confesses. Sandwick admits having had a hard time being objective: if his students were upset, he was upset; if a professor slighted them, he felt slighted and resentful.

Meanwhile, many members of his posse struggled upon their arrival on a campus full of rich kids, with few students of color and fewer students from urban environments. Middlebury is in "the middle of nowhere," Sandwick admits, noting that the closest big town, the small city of Burlington, is an hour away. For his students, it was as big a culture shock as anything, he explains. More than one of his students was surprised to learn that yellow dandelions grew from the fuzzy white weeds they saw on the ground.

Yet Sandwick was bowled over by the qualities his posse brought to campus, in addition to their diverse viewpoints as urban public school

kids in a largely suburban prep school student population. "Oh my God, you guys are so much smarter than me," he recalls thinking, amazed at how articulate they were.

In the end, Sandwick concludes, "they taught me more than I taught them." Specifically, he was reminded about the social pressures that students faced, particularly in dating and dorm life, and he learned to be more compassionate to students. "The whole dating scene was something I didn't know about," he confesses. But working with the students gave him the opportunity to see students as individuals. "I try to listen more to the students, to the internal struggles they have," Sandwick says. Moreover, his posse brought him out of his shell a little. He concedes that he is by nature reserved and bashful, and that his students taught him to take chances, reassuring him that he had nothing to lose. At the Posse retreat, they'd cheer him on to speak publicly and participate in group activities.

IN GENERAL, SANDWICK admits that his students didn't excel academically, although all of them ultimately graduated. He believes the problem is with the pedagogy and not with the Posse scholars. "Grading in college is similar to grading in prep school: students are told by their professors, 'Here is the information, now repeat it back; here is my view, now regurgitate it.'" As a chemist, Sandwick thinks that he and his colleagues are some of the worst perpetrators of this "spit it back" approach. But that's not how it should be, he says. "I don't think that's what intelligence is all about."

Sandwick shares the view of the two educators I will feature in the next chapter. Part of what his posse taught him was to credit different learning styles and to give students different kinds of assignments. "If you just do it one way, a certain population of students will rise to the top," says Sandwick. In the sciences, he admits, they often employ the "regurgitation method," where there is only one right answer, much like the SAT. "We have to do things better," he concludes. "The regurgitation method doesn't get you the best students, like my posse."

This method certainly suited the typical Middlebury student, however. “The prep school students are trained to take an SAT, and they’re ready to come on campus and excel in the type of education that we champion,” Sandwick says. Yet this method of teaching caused several Posse scholars to fall short of their academic goals. Some came to school wanting to be pre-med, Sandwick recounts, but they soon dropped that course of study and switched majors, though “not because they weren’t smart or going to be good doctors or scientists.” In fact, one of Sandwick’s students was an especially smart young woman who had won prestigious fellowships and was a leader among her peers. “Everyone knew her on campus,” Sandwick recalls, and she knew where all the resources were, so she’d direct other members of her posse to where they needed to go. But she couldn’t handle the math in her introductory chemistry course, so she ultimately majored in psychology. She now plans to go to graduate school in clinical psychology, but, says Sandwick with a sigh, “I worry about that GRE score for her.”

In the present-day testocracy, Sandwick’s fears for his student’s future may well come to pass. Meanwhile, however, Posse’s influence has been expanding among undergraduate institutions. New schools are added as partners every year, allowing the foundation to expand to more cities: by 2020, the foundation expects to have seven thousand alumni. The program comes with a hefty price tag: even at a state school like the University of Wisconsin at Madison, the cost of four years of full tuition for a posse of ten out-of-state scholars is nearly \$1 million. Yet the foundation’s success at attracting college and university partners despite the cost is largely attributable to its skill at matching an often overlooked supply of talented high school students (most but not all of color) with a growing demand among majority-white colleges for ways to diversify their campuses without resorting to race-based affirmative action programs, which are increasingly maligned by the public and disfavored by the courts.

The Posse Foundation does this largely by redefining merit as something other than cumulative GPA and SAT and AP scores, and focusing instead on characteristics such as leadership, the ability to collaborate

with and learn from others, and drive. This is an important factor in the effort to shift the idea of merit from being individualistic and competitive to being pluralistic and supportive. Of course, as I’ve noted repeatedly, universities have long prized such traits as predictive of student success, and since the advent of the SAT and other standardized tests in the 1940s, they have relied heavily on such quantifiable, comparable measures of ability for their objectivity and to place less significance on an applicant’s “noncognitive” skills, which are seen as immeasurable and elusive. To assess them is an inherently subjective process, making it difficult to compare candidates across localities or institutions. By emphasizing traits like leadership and collaboration, Posse has found a way to help colleges identify and nurture students who are likely to succeed in all conventional measures of success—college GPA, extracurricular involvement, and post-graduate attainment—students they otherwise would likely have missed.

To this end, with a \$1.9 million grant received from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 1999, Posse has developed a college-admissions assessment tool known as the Bial-Dale Adaptability Index, cocreated by Posse Foundation founder Debbie Bial. BDI is designed to identify students with specific leadership traits such as social interactions skills and the ability to work in groups that predict their ability to succeed in college and become active members of their campuses. BDI evaluates students in groups of ten or twelve at a time through exercises such as the “Lego test,” in which members study a robot built of Lego blocks and then try to reconstruct it based on sharing their collective memories. Observers watch students taking the Lego test—as well as engaging in other dynamic interactions, such as running impromptu discussions on genetic testing or creating a public service announcement—to see who takes initiative, who collaborates well, and who is persistent.¹

By scoring and tracking hundreds of New York City high school seniors who have applied to college through the Posse program, the study found that BDI can in fact predict these attributes in students: persistence, ability to access resources, and ability to contribute to a campus community (leadership).² After controlling for SAT scores, the

study found that students with a high BDI were more likely to graduate in four years than were low-BDI students, and that high-BDI students had considerably higher GPAs than low-BDI students (again controlling for SAT scores). In fact, students' SAT scores had very little correlation with their BDI scores, and the former did not reflect the likelihood of success in school or graduation rates. Moreover, BDI students were shown to graduate at rates similar to those of the overall student body, despite having much lower SAT scores. BDI was found to be a particularly strong outcome predictor for black students, in contrast to standardized tests, which are even weaker predictors of black students' success than white students'.

Ultimately, the Posse program has the promise to realize its goal of being "a catalyst for increased individual and community development." Mike Schoenfeld was the dean of admissions when Middlebury first decided to partner with The Posse Foundation. Noting Middlebury's location in Vermont—"The whitest state in the nation," as Schoenfeld describes it—he initially sought to connect with Posse as a way to recruit more African American students to campus. However, he quickly learned that the program had more to offer. "Posse has influenced decision making in respect to who we think merits education," he says. "After ten years of success [with Posse], we looked to see what these students are doing. They rose to leadership roles and formed new clubs, and that is merit. They would go on extraordinary service trips to do things across the country, and that's merit. They would go work for Teach For America, and that's merit. What's more important: someone with all As or someone with some Bs who goes out and makes a difference in the world?"

CHAPTER SIX

Democratic Merit in the Classroom: Eric Mazur and Uri Treisman

YOU'VE READ HERE about the problems of testocratic merit—and there are plenty of them. It all begins with an admissions test, the SAT, that colleges use to select the "best and the brightest." The so-called best and the brightest are often nothing more than students who can perform well on a test, often by using quick strategic guessing with less-than-perfect information. Boys, for example, do better on the math portion of the SAT than girls. They routinely score forty to fifty points higher. Many people say, "Well, that's because girls are ignored in high school math." That may be true, yet despite their lower SAT math scores, these girls do just as well as the boys when they take math courses in college. The difference becomes evident when you interview students as to how they approach the SAT. The boys basically view it as a pinball machine: the goal is speed and winning. The girls, on the other hand, want to work through the problems before they put down the answer. For the SAT-test defenders, carefully analyzing a question, apparently, does not exemplify merit. Our over-emphasis on the testocracy has us confusing merit with speed and the confidence to guess.