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Author(s): Michèle Lamont, Jason Kaufman and Michael Moody

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## **The Best of the Brightest: Definitions of the Ideal Self Among Prize-Winning Students<sup>1</sup>**

**Michèle Lamont,<sup>2,3</sup> Jason Kaufman,<sup>4</sup> and Michael Moody<sup>5</sup>**

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*This paper documents and explains characteristics of the ideal self rewarded by the American educational system as defined and projected by high school students who have been selected as Presidential Scholars in a national academic competition sponsored by the Department of Education and a White House Commission. Drawing on analysis of competition essays written by 119 Presidential Scholars and interviews conducted with 19 of them, we identify how these students implicitly and explicitly define the ideal self and what they do to demonstrate that they embody the characteristics of the self they perceive as rewarded by the American educational system. The data show that morality is the most salient dimension of the ideal self displayed by Scholars, and that they define it in terms of self-actualization, authenticity, and interpersonal morality; that Scholars present negative or ambivalent*

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<sup>2</sup>Department of Sociology, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey 08544.

<sup>3</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed.

<sup>4</sup>Department of Sociology, Harvard University, 33 Kirkland Street, 675 William James Hall, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138.

<sup>5</sup>Department of Sociology, Boston University, 96 Cummington Street, Boston Massachusetts 02215.

*views concerning the importance of socioeconomic status; and that culture as a dimension of the ideal self is highlighted only by a subset of Scholars. In general, their displayed definitions of the ideal self are individualist in content but highly institutionalized in form. We explain our findings by the cultural repertoires that are made available to students and by their life experience and the broader structural characteristics of American society that lead them to draw on specific repertoires.*

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**KEY WORDS:** cultural excellence; presentation of self; education; morality; self-actualization; fellowship; cultural capital.

## INTRODUCTION

The ideal self is a cultural template expressing highly valued qualities, traits, and characteristics of individuals within an institution (Meyer, 1987). In recent years, sociologists have paid considerable attention to conceptions of the ideal self in the corporate world (Hochschild, 1983; Jackall, 1988; Leidner, 1993; Morrill, 1995), in gender relations (Mori *et al.*, 1987), among political activists (Clecak, 1983; Lichterman, 1996), at various stages in the life-cycle (Buchmann, 1989), and in the “modern world” more generally (Thomas *et al.*, 1987). The ideal self rewarded by the American educational system has not been studied, however. This is an important gap in the literature because schools are an institution deeply involved in the reproduction and dissemination of cultural norms, ideals, and repertoires (Boli, 1989). We aim to begin filling this gap by documenting and explaining the characteristics of the ideal self that are projected by a group of prize winning students certified by the top hierarchical level of the American educational system as “the best and the brightest” in the nation—specifically, students who have been selected as Presidential Scholars in a national academic competition sponsored by the Department of Education and a White House Commission. Drawing on analysis of competition essays written by 119 Presidential Scholars and interviews conducted with 19 of them, we identify how these students implicitly and explicitly define the ideal self and what they do to demonstrate that they embody the characteristics of the self they perceive as rewarded by the American educational system.

Each year since 1964, the White House and the Department of Education invites students having SAT scores in the top 1% of their cohorts to participate in the Presidential Scholars competition, which is designed to recognize “the nation’s most distinguished graduating high school seniors”

(White House Commission on Presidential Scholars 1991:1).<sup>6</sup> The applicants are instructed to “demonstrate style, depth and breadth in your knowledge, and individuality” in an essay that creates “a fictitious conversation between yourself and an important American (living or deceased).” Given the intense competition that goes on in the American educational system, it seems inevitable that these students will develop some notion of the standards by which they are evaluated. Surely, not all are aware of these standards, nor are they capable of attaining them, but as our evidence indicates, students try to display what they assume to be the traits of “ideal” students in drafting their application materials. Thus, authors of prize winning essays are engaging in self-presentation of the Goffmanian variety in so far as “in their capacity as performers, individuals [are] concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged” (Goffman, 1959:251).

To the degree that academic gatekeepers assess students’ potential with respect to some normative set of criteria, then we should expect to gain new insight into American standards of educational (and personal) excellence by examining in detail the students’ attempts to embody these “ideals.” In particular, the students’ essays are implicit expressions of: (1) the values of topmost educational experts and judges and (2) the values projected by students who have been identified by this system as “extraordinarily distinguished.” We believe that the scholars formulate these notions of the “ideal” student-competitor based on their highly successful experience in the system so far,<sup>7</sup> advice from teachers and parents, and expectations concerning criteria of evaluation valued by the educational system.

The information provided by essays is complemented by in-depth interviews conducted with a sub sample of the 1991 Presidential Scholars in order to gain a clearer understanding of their motivations in drafting their

<sup>6</sup>A letter sent to applicants by the president of the 1991 selection review committee described the Presidential Scholar award as “the highest honor that can be granted to a high school senior in the United States.” Hence, we are justified to view this competition as a particularly revealing template of what the educational system rewards. Only students who agree to release their SAT score can enter the competition. The winners do not receive a cash award. However, they are invited to Washington, D.C. for the “National Presidential Scholars Recognition Week,” where they attend panel discussions and seminars, meet with congressmen and senators, and are invited to a formal White House ceremony held by the president and the secretary of education.

<sup>7</sup>Students who score in the top 1% of the nation on the PSAT are provided information about the Presidential Scholars competition before entering their senior high school year and are informed of their potential eligibility to the competition, providing that they maintain their top ranking on standardized tests. As aspiring candidates, these students engage in anticipatory socialization a year or more before they complete their application. This may shape their awareness of evaluation processes and their identity as belonging to a national elite of high school seniors.

application essays, as well as more nuanced data on how they understand the ideal self beyond definitions presented in the context of the scripted scenario set by the competition. In the interviews we questioned them on the self they tried to project in their winning essays and confirmed that students attempt in their essays to meet what they believe to be the criteria of the judges.

### COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF THE IDEAL SELF

We know of no studies that document the specific characteristics of the legitimized, ideal selves institutionally promoted and rewarded by the American educational system. It is important to examine these institutionally valued selves because they operate as central cultural schemas that individuals can apply across contexts and that enable or constrain action and self-presentation (Sewell 1992:19). These schemas can also have a powerful cultural impact in shaping students' aspirations and identity by providing recipes that enable them to define themselves and by setting limits on who they can be (Meyer, 1987:244).

In the absence of a literature bearing on the ideal self in education,<sup>8</sup> we turn to the contemporary literature on American cultural norms of excellence and find three contrasting interpretations that inform our analysis. One literature implicitly defines the ideal self in terms of social status and material success. Early studies of success-related values emphasized materialism as the key component of achievement orientation (McClelland, 1961:292-292; also Merton's nuanced position on "success values" shared across classes (1949:129)). Students of American national character have time and again emphasized the importance of materialism and laissez-faire liberalism in the worldviews of Americans (Lipset, 1996). Easterlin and Crimmins (1991) have documented an increase in the importance American youth place on "private materialism" as a life goal since the early 1970s (through the mid-1980s). Though the prevalence of materialist values among the students interviewed in these studies may have been specific to the social and economic climate of the times, this literature, on the whole, might lead one to expect similar facets of the ideal self to be presented by our prize winning students: materialism without conformity and a desire for socioeconomic status.

A second literature implicitly defines the ideal self in cultural terms.

<sup>8</sup>Studies have been done of the life trajectories and conditions of success of gifted and talented students (Arnold, 1995; Subotnik and Arnold, 1994; Terman and Oden, 1959), graduates of elite high schools (Cookson and Persell 1985), and elite college graduates (Katchadourian and Boli, 1985, 1994), but not of the qualities they try to embody in self-presentations.

This literature, represented for instance by work on cultural capital, suggests that the ideal self is above all defined in terms of familiarity with high culture (Lamont and Lareau, 1988, for a review). Participation and interest in high-status cultural activities, it is argued, are markers that open the doors to educational and occupational opportunity; the display of cultural capital contributes to positive institutional recognition (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; DiMaggio, 1982). From this perspective, we might expect the Presidential Scholars to attempt to display a strong interest in high-status cultural activities, such as ballet or classical music, and emphasize the importance of cultural awareness as an integral part of an ideal, “cultivated” self.

A third literature defines the ideal self in terms of morality as manifested through self-actualization, work ethic, and interpersonal morality. It includes, for instance, Meyer (1987), who argues that the “modern self” is submitted to a highly institutionalized set of rules which includes an obligation to search for self-esteem, to be efficient and individualistic, and to develop an internal locus of control (see also Frank *et al.*, 1995; Meyer and Jepperson, 1996). This conception of “morality” as a sort of “moral individualism”—in which striving hard for personal growth and staying true to one’s beliefs are the hallmarks of moral character—has been identified by other studies as particularly prominent in American culture.<sup>9</sup> For example, Leinberger and Tucker (1991) suggest a “shift from the self-made man to the man-made self” illustrated by a new emphasis put on authenticity and a rejection of conformity. Furthermore, drawing on interviews with professionals and managers on how they evaluate the worth of people, Lamont (1992) also shows the centrality of morality, and particularly of self-actualization and competence, in the culture of the American upper-middle class (also Coleman and Rainwater, 1978). Finally, Bellah *et al.*, (1985) drew on interviews conducted with middle-class white Americans to argue that in the United States, “our ultimate success as persons and our ultimate success in society” (22) is often defined in terms of individual autonomy mixed with moral commitment. Although quite varied, this literature suggests that the Presidential Scholars might try to display qualities such as self-actualization, autonomy, hard work, and commitment to personal goals.

These three literatures guide us toward an adequate description of the qualities of the ideal self presented by Presidential Scholars in essays or defined in interviews. We find that key aspects of moral character

<sup>9</sup>American moral individualism needs to be distinguished from more traditional definitions of morality that emphasize moral universals, since moral individualism stresses the importance of allowing people to choose their own beliefs.

occupy a place of choice in the characteristics of the self most frequently displayed by this group, and is defined in terms of self-actualization, hard work, well-roundedness, authenticity, and interpersonal morality. Moreover, Presidential Scholars do not define the ideal self primarily in terms of social status or material success. Finally, cultural excellence, defined in terms of familiarity with high culture, is not highlighted by most Presidential Scholars, although a sizable group emphasizes culture broadly defined.

In the last section of the paper, we provide elements of explanations for these results. While space limitations prevents the development of a full-scale explanation, we point to a handful of explanatory factors. For instance, we propose that the aloofness of scholars toward material success and their concern with personal development, might stem from their relatively privileged socioeconomic background, the period of prosperity that characterized their growing-up years, and the fact that they were born in the United States where the satisfaction of basic human needs is generally taken for granted. We also point to the cultural repertoires available to students, particularly high-achieving or relatively affluent students, as possible explanations of the content of their self-presentations.

## DATA AND MEASURES

Each year approximately 2,600 individuals are invited to apply to the Presidential Scholars competition based on their SAT scores. In 1991, as in previous years, a national panel of approximately 25 education experts was created and brought together by the Educational Testing Service for a 4-day meeting to sift down the application pool to 500 semi-finalists.<sup>10</sup> This selection was based on four sets of criteria:<sup>11</sup> (1) personal characteristics (defined as social concern and contribution to others, character and commitment to higher ideas, and overcoming obstacles); (2) academic achievement (GPA/class rank/test scores, advanced and special courses taken, academic awards, and depth/range/breadth of knowledge); (3) leadership and service

<sup>10</sup>The vast majority of these experts are college admission officers. A few members are academics or delegates from various organizations, such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Socio demographic and regional diversity are taken into consideration in the selection of the members of the panel.

<sup>11</sup>These selection criteria were refined over several years by a group composed primarily of prominent officials in the educational system, including officials from the Department of Education, the executive director of the Presidential Scholars Program (also an educational expert), and past members of the White House Commission on Presidential Scholars. These criteria are based on recommendations made by the panel of admission officers assembled by Educational Testing Service and are not communicated to contestants.

in school and community (meaningful activities and experiences, out-of-school responsibility, awards and other recommendations, special talents, skills, and interests); and (4) “essay analysis” (style, content, risk taking, and originality). Background interviews with 9 of the 29 judges involved in the final selection of the 1991 Scholars revealed that the essays, and what they showed about the candidates’ personal characteristics, were given more weight than other factors in the selection process.<sup>12</sup> Using this same set of standards, a group of 29 White House Commissioners appointed by the President chose 140 winners from among the semifinalists.<sup>13</sup> The winners included at least 1 male and 1 female from each state and a separate set of 21 performing artists. In our study, we exclude performing artists—whose selection is based on other criteria, such as artistic achievement—to focus on the 119 scholars chosen in 1991.

The application essays we analyze are approximately a page and a half long and, again, are a response to the request to “create a fictitious conversation between yourself and an important American (living or deceased).” Applicants are told that these essays “should demonstrate style, depth, and breadth of your knowledge and individuality.” These essays force students to choose between various alternatives to create and display what is, in effect, an ideal self. Who will they choose as their conversational partner? What will be the topics and the tone of the conversation? Should applicants praise their chosen partners for their talents and contributions to humanity or take the role of the nay-sayer, disputing the legitimacy of that person’s contribution to history?<sup>14</sup> Again,

<sup>12</sup>Judges are also asked to consider, when appropriate, heavy workload, extensive family responsibility, or unusual adversity. Performance on standardized tests, class rank, awards, and involvement in the community are criteria that are less amenable to strategies of self-presentation than essays, and we do not take them into consideration in our analysis of the Presidential Scholars’ presentation of the ideal self.

<sup>13</sup>These commissioners/judges include elected officials, business people, artists, religious leaders, state party officials, as well as teachers and academics. Though this White House panel includes more than simply educational experts, we believe this does not contradict our argument that the qualities of the ideal self documented here are primarily promoted by the educational system. The first cut that reduces the pool of contestants from 2,600 to 500 is performed by education officials and does more to determine the basic characteristics of the winners than the second cut performed by the White House commissioners. This is suggested by the commissioners’ observations in our interviews with them that the 500 semifinalists constitute a highly homogeneous group from the perspective of their cultural orientations and achievements, with the 140 finalists as the best exemplars of the group. Furthermore, there is great continuity in the composition of the White House commission over the years, which ensures the constitution of a common set of norms and reduces somewhat the variation in standards when there is a change in administration.

<sup>14</sup>While the focus of the essays is someone other than the essay-writer, the essays are also very revealing of the conception of the ideal self that essay-writers wish to present because they must display their predispositions toward their conversational partner in creating a fictional dialogue.



as is the case with many competitions of this type (including, most notoriously, the college admissions process (Klitgaard, 1985; Paul, 1995)), criteria of evaluation are unknown to students. Therefore, they are free to present a wide range of ideal qualities, stressing intellectual ability, cultural sophistication, knowledge of cultural symbols, moral character, diversity of interests, or other qualities.

In the first stage of our analysis, we inductively identified the spectrum of characteristics of the ideal self that students demonstrated in their essays and documented the frequency of each type to identify predominant patterns. We coded three components of the essays: (1) types of excellence displayed<sup>15</sup> (e.g., did winners portray themselves as scholarly, athletic, patriotic, religious, or altruistic?); (2) styles of self-presentation (e.g., did they emphasize their versatility, their cultural capital, their specialized knowledge, or their morality?); and (3) type of conversational partner (e.g., politician, artist, philosopher). The final coding scheme includes 29 categories of types of excellence, 15 categories of styles of self-presentation, and 22 types of conversational partners (see Appendix A for a detailed list and explanation of each code of styles of self-presentation and types of excellence).<sup>16</sup> Because most of these essays projected several selves, each received three different codes for types of excellence and styles of self-presentation—with the first coding reflecting the most evident projected self and the second and third codings representing the subsidiary projected selves in decreasing order of importance (see Appendix B for a sample essay and its coding). Coding decisions were based not on an accounting of key words or phrases, but on the general orientation of the essay and the student's general approach to the conversational partner. Consequently, for example, not all students who chose famous U.S. military leaders as conversational partners were coded as "patriot." Each essay was coded independently by two investigators. When these two coders could not agree on parts of the coding or their order, a third investigator coded the essay

<sup>15</sup>We describe the characteristics of the ideal self in reference to "types of excellence" because Presidential Scholars describe this ideal self in terms of superior performance/attitudes on various dimensions.

<sup>16</sup>We did not know the criteria of evaluation used by judges until after the data collection and analysis were completed, in August 1996. We proceeded inductively to elaborate the coding scheme but were also guided by the sociological literature. For instance, we drew on studies of the cultural and professional resources emphasized in interactional processes in academic evaluation (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Cicourel and Kitsuse, 1963; Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968) and on previous research on the cultural repertoires of "success" and "worth" in contemporary America (Bellah *et al.*, 1985; Lamont, 1992). We were also influenced by the social psychological literature on strategic self-presentation (e.g., Jones and Pittman, 1982). Drawing on Katchadourian and Boli (1985, 1994), we compare how students fall in defined clusters, but our analysis leads us to identify more and different clusters than these studies.

to arrive at a final decision (14% of the 119 essays were referred to the third coder).<sup>17</sup>

In the fall of 1994 and winter of 1995, we interviewed one sixth of the winners of the 1991 Presidential Scholars competition, who were by then college seniors. Each of the 19 interviews lasted approximately two hours and was conducted and recorded at a time and place chosen by the students. Using random stratified sampling, we interviewed 10 men and 9 women located in various regions and majoring in a range of fields.<sup>18</sup>

To document their explicit description of the ideal self, we questioned winners on how they define the ideal self, whether Presidential Scholars (and themselves in particular) embody it, and how they define excellence and success in their lives. We also asked them what type of people they consider to embody the ideal self, the sort of people they feel superior or inferior to, and the qualities they value most in people. Finally, we asked them to reflect on their essays and on the impression they tried to convey through them (the interview schedule is available upon request). Drawing on Miles and Huberman (1984), we analyzed the interview transcripts by looking for patterns within and between interviews. Two coders analyzed each interview, focusing on several inductively identified central themes.<sup>19</sup> We considered the explicit message conveyed by students in the interviews as well as their implicit strategies of self-presentation.

Note that our analysis focuses on the performance of winners of the competition only: winners represent a clearly demarcated, formally certified, naturally selected, nationally diverse, ultra-elite group, who are involved in offering a presentation of self in the context of a same institutional setting where evaluative criteria remain, in principle, uniform. A comparative study of winners and nonwinners (or non-contestants for that matter) could not be carried out because the non-winning essays have not been preserved by White House Commission on Presidential Scholars. Moreover,

<sup>17</sup>No essay received the same code more than once for any one component. Thus the raw *N* scores presented in Tables reflect the total number of essays which include that code. The statistical significance of these results was tested by examining the probability of different observed frequencies under the assumptions of a Poisson distribution, which describes the probability of finding *n* randomly derived counts in a given time or number of trials (King, 1989). Given that both high and low frequencies (i.e. unusually prevalent and unexpectedly absent frequencies) are relevant to this analysis, a two-tailed 90% confidence interval was utilized to evaluate the statistical significance of all the observed frequencies.

<sup>18</sup>We identify respondents by their major and, at times, pseudonyms. In some cases, we have slightly altered the students' major to protect their anonymity.

<sup>19</sup>After having identified central themes, each interview was systematically analyzed independently by two investigators to establish the personal orientation of each respondent toward these themes. Results were compared to reach an agreement on the ranking of each respondent, as presented in Table IV. Space limitations preclude an analysis of many more minor themes that emerge from the interviews.

a comparison of the essays of winners and semi finalists would not be particularly informative of the institutionalized self because these two top groups are very similar to one another. That the Presidential Scholars embody the central values of the American educational system was substantiated by the interviews we conducted with the judges, who unanimously portrayed the criteria of selection they used (described in detail below) as corresponding to what they think the educational system “ideally” wants to reward. Analysis of winners provides very useful information on the ideal self independently of whether it is shared by other less successful students.

Whether the ideal self scholars present in their essays and interviews is similar to a “real” ideal self they would present in a more private context is not at issue here, given both the objective of the paper—which is to analyze the conception of the ideal self displayed by these prize winning students—and the absence of clear criteria for establishing empirically the authenticity of the selves that individuals present in various environments. Furthermore, we acknowledge that the Presidential Scholars might not represent the attributes rewarded by the American educational system as a whole—for instance, the Presidential Scholars’ essays might provide a depiction of the ideal self that differs from one they might produce for a competition sponsored by another institutional entity, such as the National Academy of Science or an elite college. Their responses may also have been influenced by the “Presidential” character of the competition.

There was an unavoidable lapse between the time in which the students’ application essays were drafted (1990–91, when they were high school seniors) and the period in which the interviews took place (1995, when most were college seniors). Nonetheless, we believe the benefits of using two complementary types of data outweigh any drawbacks related to this 4-year interval. Furthermore, interviews gave us the opportunity to ask students to reflect on their own experiences and observations during and since their tenure as Presidential Scholars. Overall, we find only minor differences between the selves presented in interviews and in essays.<sup>20</sup>

The Presidential Scholars we interviewed constitute a fairly homogeneous and elite group from a sociodemographic perspective: 85% of their fathers have a graduate or professional degree and 85% are professionals or managers, as is the case for, respectively, 42% and 72% of their mothers (see Appendix C for a detailed description). A study of the 1990 Presidential Scholars (Goldstein *et al.*, 1994:4) leads us to believe that the profile of the total population of 1991 winners is similar, if slightly less elite, than that

<sup>20</sup>Studies show that although young adults undergo important changes between their high school senior year and their college senior year, their core values remain somewhat stable (Feldman and Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991:270-97).

of the winners we interviewed.<sup>21</sup> Note also that African Americans and Latinos are greatly underrepresented among Presidential Scholars.

The paper proceeds by describing various aspects of the self that winners display in their essays, moving from the most prevalent to the least prevalent aspects. We also document the main characteristics of their description of the ideal self as described in interviews. In addition, we examine patterns on the basis of the frequencies with which types of excellence, style of self-presentation, and conversational partners are mobilized in the essays.

## ANALYSIS

### Moral Definitions of the Ideal Self

Morality is more salient in the Presidential Scholars' definition of the ideal self than are materialism and familiarity with high culture. They evaluate morality on the basis of: (1) self-actualization, hard work, and well-roundedness; (2) authenticity; and (3) interpersonal morality. In interviews, a worthy person is portrayed as having a moral obligation to be oriented toward self-development, and yet to follow universal rules concerning how to deal with others. He/she also holds personally chosen beliefs and pursues personally chosen ends, but avoids universalistic judgments about what are good or bad ends to pursue, following the standards of contemporary moral individualism. The essays also offer strong evidence of the centrality of moral definitions of the ideal self. As shown on Table I, "displaying moral virtue," used by half of the 119 winners (60), was the most common style of self-presentation.<sup>22</sup> Table II shows that "moralist" is one of the most prevalent dimensions of the ideal self presented; 30 essays discuss the importance of living by set moral standards, acting virtuously, and staying true to one's beliefs, second only to the category of "patriot." In addition, 21 essays demonstrated commitment to more specific moral values, such as the sanctity of human life (i.e., were coded "humanist"). The sections that follow provide closer analysis of how Presidential Scholars define moral character.

<sup>21</sup>We presume that the profile of the 1991 winners resembles that of the 1990 winners, for whom sociodemographic information is available.

<sup>22</sup>We include both statistics on raw Ns and weighted Ns in the tables so as to provide readers as much information as possible about the prevalence of each code in the essays; nonetheless, given that our principle interest is in the frequencies of each code, and not their prominence as first-, second-, and third-ranked codes, we limit ourselves to discussion of the raw Ns in the text.

**Table I.** Frequencies of Styles of Self-Presentation

Category	Raw $N^a$	Percentage <sup>b</sup>	Weighted $N^c$
Displays moral virtue	60**	17	32.4**
Displays knowledge	56**	16	37.0**
Displays reverence/indebtedness	51**	15	33.8**
Displays a critical mind	42**	12	24.2*
Makes an argument	22	6	16.5
Waxes philosophic	17	5	9.9
Displays wit/sense of humor	17	5	9.8
Displays intellectual curiosity	15*	4	8.6*
Displays originality	13*	4	7.1*
Displays writing ability	11**	3	5.2**
Lists achievements	11**	3	6.2**
Displays breadth of interests	10**	3	5.4**
Displays aesthetic sensitivity	9**	3	5.4**
Displays cultural capital	9**	3	5.2**
Displays creativity	6**	2	2.7**

\* $P < .05$ . \*\* $P < .01$ .

<sup>a</sup> These frequencies represent aggregate totals of three codings, irrespective of ranking.  $P$ -values were derived using a Poisson distribution around a mean of 24, which reflects roughly how many essays one would expect in each category if they were distributed randomly across all the possible Styles of Self-Presentation. A two-tailed 90% confidence interval is bounded at the frequencies 16 and 32, respectively.

<sup>b</sup> Percentages are based on the raw number of codes divided by the 119 essays (as opposed to the total number of codes); each code could only be applied to a single essay once. Percentages rounded up to the nearest integer.

<sup>c</sup> The frequencies represent aggregate totals weighted by code rank. The ranking of codes were accounted for using the formula:  $w = 1(p) + .5(s) + .3(t)$  where  $w$  is the weighted aggregate frequency for a specific code,  $p$  is the frequency of primary codes,  $s$  is the frequency of secondary codes, and  $t$  is the frequency of tertiary codes.  $P$ -values were derived using a Poisson distribution around a mean of 14.9. A two-tailed 90% confidence interval is bounded at the frequencies 9 and 22, respectively.

### *“Be All You Can Be”: Imperatives of Self-Actualization, Hard Work, and Well-Roundedness*

One of the cardinal rules of the self projected by Presidential Scholars is to strive constantly and diligently to make oneself better, and to demonstrate a strong, efficient, active, and confident self. Presidential Scholars describe the construction and perfection of the self as their main project and attach moral significance to it insofar as they construct self-actualization as a virtue exemplifying strength of character, moral fortitude, and self-control, which they contrast to vices such as laziness and stagnation. In their description of the ideal self provided in interviews, they strongly stress the importance of taking charge of one’s own life and maximizing one’s potential. As shown on Table IV, 18 out of 19 interviewees profess their commitment to self-actualization and well-roundedness. Two thirds of these 18 express strong positive orientations toward self-actualization, none ex-

**Table II.** Frequencies of Types of Excellence

Category	Raw $N^a$	Percentage <sup>b</sup>	Weighted $N^c$
Patriot	32**	27	19.8**
Moralist	30**	26	17.1**
Public policy expert	29**	24	19.9**
Humanist	21**	18	12.7*
Activist	20*	17	12.7*
<i>Justicier</i>	19*	16	12.7*
Scientist	16	13	12.4*
Philosopher	15	13	9.7
Scholar	14	12	9.2
Social critic	14	12	8.5
Aesthete	13	11	9.6
Self-actualizer	13	11	6.1
Individualist	12	10	6.6
Democrat	11	9	5.9
Wit (humorist)	11	9	7.4
Anti-materialist	10	8	5.4
Intellectually curious	9	8	3.3
Believer (religious)	9	8	5.2
High IQ	8	7	3.9
Multiculturalist	8	7	5.1
Populist	7	6	3.2
Power and money seeker	5*	4	2.3*
Emotional self-improver	5*	4	3.0
Libertarian	5*	4	3.1
Popular culture consumer	5*	4	1.7**
Altruist	4**	3	2.1*
Pragmatic	4**	3	1.4**
Traditionalist	3**	2	1.1**
Athlete	1**	<1	1.0**

\* $P < .05$ . \*\* $P < .01$ .

<sup>a</sup> These frequencies represent aggregate totals of three codings, irrespective of ranking.  $P$ -values were derived using a Poisson distribution around a mean of 12, which reflects roughly how many essays one would expect in each category if they were distributed randomly across all the possible Types of Excellence. A two-tailed 90% confidence interval is bounded at the frequencies 7 and 18, respectively.

<sup>b</sup> Percentages are based on the raw number of codes divided by the 119 essays (as opposed to the total number of codes); each code could only be applied to a single essay once. Percentages rounded up to the nearest integer.

<sup>c</sup> The frequencies represent aggregate totals weighted by code rank. The ranking of codes were accounted for using the formula:  $w = 1(p) + .5(s) + .3(t)$  where  $w$  is the weighted aggregate frequency for a specific code,  $p$  is the frequency of primary codes,  $s$  is the frequency of secondary codes, and  $t$  is the frequency of tertiary codes.  $P$ -values were derived using a Poisson distribution around a mean of 7.5. A two-tailed 90% confidence interval is bounded at the frequencies 3 and 12, respectively.

press ambivalent or negative orientations, and only one is indifferent.<sup>23</sup> These specific trends were slightly less evident in the application essays, however (only 5 essays were coded “emotional self-improver,” though 13 were coded “self-actualizer” (Table II)).

Revealing evidence of the moral imperative to “be all you can be” is found in the responses winners give to questions concerning their feelings of inferiority and superiority. Ten out of 19 interviewees say that they feel inferior to people who do more things more effectively, have “it” more together, are more driven and disciplined, and are more committed to well-defined goals than they themselves are. A physics major says she feels inferior to people “who want things badly, who work hard to get them, as opposed to people who seem to be sleepwalking through life” and an economics major comes to a surprisingly simple conclusion: “I guess I lose respect for people who are slackers.” The interviews clearly suggest that the 1991 Presidential Scholars define the ideal self in terms of having expectations for oneself to grow, be organized, and remain “driven.”

Being hardworking, competent, and ambitious are at the core of the institutionalized set of prescriptions for the self defined by students in interviews. These personal qualities are also intertwined and implied in the central moral tenets of the American dream: anyone can be good at something if they just try, we are all good at something, and are all ultimately equal because of it (Hochschild, 1995). Accordingly, Presidential Scholar interviewees are non judgmental about what people pursue, but judgmental about how hard they pursue it. Self-actualization might aim at cultural, intellectual, social, or experiential growth, but in all cases, it is a moral imperative to the extent that it reflects strength of character.

The premium placed on hard work and ambition, another moral imperative inspired by the Protestant tradition (Weber, 1946), is illustrated by Betsy, a student in mechanical engineering, who, when asked what she is best at, says: “I think I’m very hardworking and motivated and maybe more so than the average person. I may or may not be any smarter than anyone else, but I think that one of the reasons why I am where I am is because I put in a lot of time . . . Being really on top of things like deadlines and being resourceful and finding out where the scholarships are that maybe other people haven’t looked into. Things like that.” Similarly, nearly all

<sup>23</sup>All interviewees were asked about their evaluation of the qualities of the ideal self listed in Table IV. The designation of an interviewee as having an “indifferent” orientation—a score of 0 in a column of Table IV—should be distinguished from an ambivalent orientation (scored as 3). An ambivalent orientation indicates that the respondent expressed both marked positive and negative statements *a propos* of this orientation—for example, they both acknowledged striving to be an elite and disdained the idea of belonging to an elite. An indifferent orientation indicates an expressed lack of interest (neither positive nor negative), a lack of consideration of the issue, or an implicit unwillingness to take a stand on the issue.

the essays demonstrate great reverence for the conversational partner's achievement and hard work. Many essays also had the conversation partner encouraging the student to work hard and improve themselves, such as one in which Martin Luther King advises the essay-writer: "Continue to fight until you reach your goal. Never let anyone extinguish the flame of determination that burns deeply within you."

Presidential scholars also put great emphasis on "being well-rounded." Indeed, for many, well-roundedness epitomizes the qualities that best characterize the Presidential Scholars as a group. Peter, a chemistry major, explains that he would like to be "the ultimate embodiment" of what he calls the "*Carpe Diem* Lifestyle," manifested by "engaging in things that you would consider diverse." This lifestyle is also manifested in traveling, opening oneself to the world, or getting a job in a non traditional setting. Many of the interviewees say this well-roundedness and eager embrace of diverse, new experiences are the qualities they look for in friends. A computer engineering student who teaches martial arts as one of his many extracurricular activities argues for well-roundedness in terms of balance: "I think 'the best' is someone who has the Yin-Yang, the balance. If you can do *Tai Kwon Do* 6 hr a week and teach and get good grades, why shouldn't I consider you as better than someone who just studies all the time? So I find a lot of my views on quote-unquote success and intelligence [involve] being well-rounded in that sense." A crucial signal of well-roundedness is having a social life and a wide range of friends. Most of the people we talked to point with pride at the diversity of their friendship network. For instance, an Asian-American economics major explains: "One thing I do pride myself on is being able to make friends with people outside my circle. That's what I really like about college. You meet all sorts of interesting people." *Carpe Diem* is part of a more permanent strategy for becoming a complete person: having diverse and enjoyable experiences is just as important as being smart.<sup>24</sup>

### *"Be True to Yourself": Imperative of Authenticity*

Presidential Scholars also frequently define the ideal self in terms of authenticity in the sense of "being true to yourself," knowing what you want or believe and what interests you, and pursuing it on your own terms. As mentioned above, a statistically significant number of the essays are coded "moralist," which refers in part to applicants' efforts to stress the

<sup>24</sup>However, only a few respondents conspicuously displayed their breadth of interests in their essays (Table I). This might be explained by the short length of the essay format that limits the number of interests that one can present.



value of personal integrity (Table II). Several essays honored people who held fast to their personal beliefs in the face of conflict or blind conformity, such as an essay where the young student imagines herself having tea with Susan B. Anthony. This student has Ms. Anthony say in the conversation, "I was dedicated to the cause of women's rights, for I truly believed in the equality of the sexes. I held to my principles and chose to ignore popular sentiment." In interviews, some scholars portrayed authenticity as an essential ingredient of happiness. Patrick, an English major studying in an Ivy League school, describes this imperative of authenticity when he says: "[The college years] are the years that you find out what authenticity means to you, or what is the real you . . . I couldn't see myself working in the fast-paced, hand-shaking, golf-club wielding, business world sort of . . . I'd like to do something that is compelling to me . . . [to know] that I've asserted myself and that I've made myself heard." Of his goals in life, he also says that he wants to "live my life on my own terms . . . I would also like to leave something behind that is definitely me." As shown on Table IV, this quest for authenticity is highlighted by 17 of the 19 interviewees—two thirds express strong positive orientations toward authenticity, and none express ambivalent or negative orientations.

Several interviewees contrast external validation and internal motivation, describing the latter as a more authentic and valid type of motivation, perhaps because they associate it with "true" moral character. An electrical engineering student puts it this way: "I do tend to set very high goals for myself, [but] that's something that I keep almost completely internal as to what those goals may be, and then I can aim for it on my own." Carol, an English major, talks about fighting the "demon of external validation," not pandering to people's expectations but rather seeking internal confirmation. This involves: "*Doing* what would make you happy, not *having* what would make you happy, because you can't ever guarantee that things are going to shake out so that you get an end result that you like, so you have to just decide to do what excites you." In the same vein, a philosophy student denounces other students who pursue "a kind of expertise that can be gained at the cost of one's genuine core, that can only be had by jettisoning what is individual and potentially most fruitful about one's self." This suggests that Presidential Scholars prescribe achievement "for oneself" as opposed to "for others," as if weak boundaries between self and others were a fatal flaw, and as if moral individualism was considered a good in itself.

This imperative of authenticity is also expressed in the political realm: in interviews, several winners describe their political position as determined by what they personally believed in and not by broader ideological movements. For example, a mechanical engineering student claims, "If I hold

an opinion politically, it's because I think it's the right thing, not because it has anything to do with any party." Respondents say they want freedom to decide issues on their own, as is the case for an evangelical Christian who is proud that one of his friends is the leader of the gay group on campus. Similarly, a self-proclaimed libertarian respondent says she enjoys wearing apparently contradictory political buttons; when people come up to her and say "This does not make sense," she retorts, "Does for me." Similar patterns of political individualism were documented within other elite groups by Jackall (1988) and Cookson and Persell (1985).

*"Be Good to Others": Imperative of Interpersonal Morality*

In interviews, Presidential Scholars also define the ideal self in terms of being nice, generous, and treating others with respect. As shown on Table IV, it is the case for 17 of our 19 respondents. Also, a third of them express strong positive orientations toward interpersonal morality. The interviewees explicitly project an image of integrity and moral worthiness through a process of "exemplification" described by Goffmanian social psychologists as one of the most frequent styles of self-presentation (Jones and Pittman, 1982). In some cases, this appears as a defense of altruism and social consciousness. For instance, a computer engineering student who attends a public university in the Midwest says that he disliked some of the other Presidential Scholars when he met them because they appeared to value hard work and intellect instead of hard work and helping others. Similarly, a philosophy major criticizes "heartless intellectualism" and says that he wants to pursue a teaching career in order to "bring some humanity back into the way the next generation will live their lives." Finally, a few others argue for the importance of using one's professional skills to help others—one by working as a physician in refugee camps in the Third World, and another by taking care of poor children. While only four of the essays were coded as reflecting altruism, many more were coded "activist" (20) and "*justicier*" (19) (Table II). These types of excellence reflect an altruistic commitment to fighting for a social cause and making a difference in the world.

Others point to moral character defined not in terms of altruism, but of how one deals with others. An electrical engineering major who studies at a prestigious scientific institute explains that he views himself as a highly moral person because "I stand pretty fast to a set of principles" about "how I think it's okay to treat a person and how I think it's not." Carol, an English major, who says she values morality highly, defines it primarily in terms of: "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Be honest."

Interestingly, many interviewees specifically argued that interpersonal morality is a more desirable quality, and in some cases more central to the ideal self than intelligence or achievement. A biomedical engineering and pre med student says she wants to be singled out for “being a nice person. I like other people . . . and I go out of my way to do things for other people, and I would like to be thought of as that kind of person instead of just a smart person.” A mechanical engineering student says it is more important to be nice than to be “Number One” because “someone is going to come along and be better than you at whatever you’re number one at, then it turns out to be not very much. And if you make friends along the way and if you get along with people, then that’s something else.”

Political commitment is also presented as a dimension of morality because it indicates a moral commitment to collective goods—which is different from, but not incompatible with, interpersonal morality. One of the surprising findings is the lack of interest in politics displayed by the winners in interviews. Even when explicitly probed, only a few winners say that they are interested in politics or are politically involved. If they are committed to larger goals, they weave this commitment into their own professional goals. For the public policy major, “making a difference in the world” means taking a job in the public sector at the Federal Reserve Bank. However, in their essays, many winners discuss the importance of defending their country or sing its praises: more than one quarter of the essays are coded “*patriot*,” twenty are coded “activists” (i.e., committed to some social, political, or moral cause); nineteen are coded “*justicier*” (i.e., interested in fighting for social justice); and eleven are coded “democrat” (i.e., defenders of the system of democratic governance)—though this last figure is not statistically significant (Table II). Some winners said that they had partly chosen to write about political or nationalistic topics because of the “Presidential” label attached to the competition, while most accounted for their politically oriented essays as a convenient way to discuss substantive issues and events. As shown on Table III, presidents were chosen as conversational partners by 21% of the 1991 Presidential Scholars. Altogether, 45% conversed with a political figure—a president, a politician, a judge, a military leader, or an activist.

To summarize, Presidential Scholars presented an ideal self to judges and defined the ideal self to interviewers, primarily in terms of morality. Self-actualization and authenticity are the dimensions of morality that are particularly emphasized, while “being nice” is slightly less emphasized, but presented as a valued goal nevertheless. Essays also indicate the centrality of morality in the ideal self projected by the students although, compared with interview data, essays focus less on self-actualization, well-roundedness, or altruism, and more on politics, a type of moral commitment

**Table III.** Frequencies of Conversational Partners

Category	<i>N</i>	Percentage <sup>a</sup>
President	26	21
Activist	13	11
Writer	12	10
Scientist	10	8
Military leader	7	6
Philosopher	7	6
Common man	7	6
Musician/composer	6	5
Other politician	5	4
Religious leader	4	3
Inventor	4	3
Judge	3	3
Business person	3	3
Ethnic or racial hero	3	3
Entertainer/actor	2	2
Educator	2	2
“God”	1	<1
Dancer	1	<1
Athlete	1	<1
Scholar	1	<1
Miscellaneous	1	<1
Artist	0	—

<sup>a</sup>Percentages are based on the raw number of codes divided by the 119 essays (as opposed to the total number of codes); each code could only be applied to a single essay once. Percentages rounded up to the nearest integer.

to collective goods. The lesser emphasis on self-actualization and well-roundedness might be explained by the restrictive format of the essays, which might push students toward presenting themselves in specific instead of general terms. By examining less central aspects of the ideal self as defined by Presidential Scholars we will see how this moral vision of the ideal self articulates with ones relating to socioeconomic status and culture.

### Socioeconomic Definitions of the Ideal Self

Social status and economic success are not very salient in the winners' descriptions of the ideal self. Many construct competitiveness and “Being Number One” as very valuable, but most express ambivalence about their own elite status, saying they want to be recognized only for “good reasons” such as dedication to principles, strength of character, performance, and hard work.

*“Be Comfortable”: Imperative of (Sufficient) Economic Success*

Interviews and essays suggest that most Presidential Scholars claim to be indifferent to economic rewards. They say they view money as a reward for success and something needed for comfort, but argue that it should not be *the* motivation. As Karen, a sociology student, puts it, “Money would be an issue to the extent that I want to live comfortably, meaning I want to have a place to live and whatever. In terms of, do I want to go and be an investment banker so that I can make a million dollars by the time I’m thirty? No.” Many interviewees say they would eagerly sacrifice higher income to maintain their authenticity, but they also say, as Clecak’s (1983) work predicts, that money is good if it helps them pursue their personal goals.

Similar to American professionals and managers, the interviewees almost unanimously condemn people who make money and have professional success at the cost of moral character and personal enjoyment (Lamont, 1992). As an anthropology major puts it, “my gut reaction would be to say that [materialism] seems like a very empty way to live; it seems like that way of living kind of misses the point of things.” As shown on Table IV, only 5 of the 19 interviewees say that money is important to them and only three say they value it highly, four express negative or strong negative orientations toward money, and three have ambivalent orientations. In the essays, an even smaller proportion of winners promote materialism as a dimension of the ideal self. Only three winners choose a business person as a conversational partner, and two of these are very critical of him (Table III); only five out of 119 essays emphasize an appreciation for money, power, or careerism as types of excellence (i.e., are coded as “power and money seeker”), while 10 are coded “anti materialist” to reflect their strong negative statements about money and economic conceptions of success (Table II). A representative antimaterialist essay involves a street musician telling the essay-writer, “Materially, the people who earn a million a year and hate their jobs are better off, but it depends on what you’re looking for.”

In downplaying material success, Presidential Scholars present an ideal self that prefers morality to money; they emphasize being nice and being good at what you do as opposed to economic gain—Huber (1971) identified some early precursors of this trend in his historical analysis of the literature on success. In other words, winners contrast what one interviewee labeled the “internal standard of excellence” (personal growth and meaning) to the “outside standard of success” (external rewards and recognition).

**Table IV.** Personal Orientations of 19 Interviewees

Interviewee's major	Moral		Socioeconomic			Cultural	
	Self-actualization	Authenticity	Interpersonal morality	Money	Elite status	High culture	
Anthropology	5	5	4	3	2	5	
Biology/pre-med.	4	5	5	0	0	4	
Biomedical Eng./pre-med.	4	4	5	0	3	0	
Chemistry/pre-med.	4	5	0	3	4	0	
Communications	5	5	4	3	1	5	
Computer Eng.	5	4	4	5	3	0	
Economics	5	4	0	0	4	0	
Electrical Eng. #1	5	4	4	5	5	0	
Electrical Eng. #2	5	5	5	2	0	5	
English #1	5	5	5	4	3	5	
English #2	4	5	4	1	3	5	
Mechanical Eng. #1	0	0	4	5	4	0	
Mechanical Eng. #2	5	5	4	4	4	0	
Mechanical Eng. #3	5	4	4	0	3	0	
Philosophy	4	5	5	2	3	5	
Physics #1	5	5	4	0	2	5	
Physics #2	5	5	4	2	0	5	
Public policy	5	0	5	0	0	0	
Sociology	5	5	4	0	3	5	
Total	85	80	74	39	47	49	
Mean of non-zero scores <sup>a</sup>	4.72	4.71	4.35	3.25	3.13	4.9	
Number scoring 4 or 5	18	17	17	5	5	10	

Key to Scores  
 5 = strong positive orientation  
 4 = positive orientation  
 3 = ambivalent orientation (some positive, some negative)  
 2 = negative orientation  
 1 = strong negative orientation  
 0 = indifferent (lack of orientation)

<sup>a</sup> Zero scores are excluded from the mean since indifferent scores often indicate a lack of consideration of the issue rather than a strong negative orientation. The reported mean indicates the strength of orientation of those interviewees who expressed some orientation.

*“Be Number One”: Imperative of High Performance*

While they downplay materialist definitions of success, in interviews most Presidential Scholars define their conception of the ideal self in terms of “Being Number One” at what they are interested in or passionate about, although many express an uneasiness about unchecked competitiveness and value being competent and determined as qualities of moral character regardless of the status they may bring. The allure of “Being Number One” is best illustrated by Betsy, a mechanical engineering major, who says that being a Presidential Scholar put her in touch with other people who understand “the whole ambition thing.” She explains the place of “Being Number One” in her life as an enduring motivation that has changed over time from wanting to be the top student to wanting to be recognized as the most competent. About herself and her siblings growing up, she says: “We wanted to be at the top of the class, wanted to know our stuff . . . I guess there are a lot of issues that surround the whole, you know, ‘I’m Number One’ thing. There’s personal satisfaction and there’s the reflection on your school and on your family and the respect that other people give you. I think now the reason that I work hard in college is partly motivated by my past desire to want to be at the top somewhere. But it’s also that I really want to know the material because it’s probably going to be relevant to what I want to do in the future.”

All interviewees say they perceive themselves as being, by definition, part of an elite group and several of them construe this status as beneficial, if kept in perspective and used as motivation for additional personal development. However, some stress the relative randomness of being chosen Presidential Scholars, giving clear signals of humility. None of them declare disliking competitiveness, although several prescribe keeping it within moral bounds. For instance, a physics student who repeatedly talked about her craving for “challenges” of any sort describes her competitiveness during high school in a way that emphasizes self-actualizing and de-emphasizes status-seeking: “I wasn’t competitive with people; I was competitive with the system, with myself, with what I could do.”

*“Be Brilliant”: Imperative of High IQ*

The expressed respect for competitiveness among Presidential Scholars is accompanied by a respect for great intelligence, a form of elitism and an important basis for social status. Many say they put a very high premium on hanging out with stimulating people who are not only smart but also mentally challenging.

Most interviewees claim to be acutely aware of their own insufficiencies and stunned by the intelligence of their fellow students and Presidential Scholars. Several say that although they were very proud to be chosen as Presidential Scholars, witnessing so much raw intelligence since entering college has been a humbling experience. Peter, who studies chemistry at an elite liberal arts college, says that his opinion of his own intelligence has been “knocked down many pegs” in recent years. Like many other scholars, particularly those in the sciences, Jim says he still respects intelligence, but now sees other aspects of self-actualization as equally important.

A high respect for intelligence is also signaled by Presidential Scholars in their essays. Many winners choose to display intellectual skills or to portray themselves as mastering a specific expertise in their application. As shown on Table I, 56 essays are conspicuous in the display of knowledge and forty two try to show their critical mind. Also, as shown on Table II, twenty nine winners present themselves as “public policy experts”—that is, as someone with considerable applied knowledge—while 16 present themselves as “scientists” and fourteen present themselves as “scholars.” This signals an appreciation for knowledge in and of itself. However, only nine of the 119 winners display intellectual curiosity in their essays (Table II; also see Table I), and only eight conspicuously attempt to show that they have a high IQ (Table II). However, most winners attempt to demonstrate their intellect in their application essays implicitly by, for instance, displaying their ability to utilize complex and sometimes esoteric knowledge of historical, political, and scientific information in moral debates, comical sketches, and critical diatribes.

### *“Be Humble”: Imperative of Anti Elitism*

Despite their investment in competitiveness and “Being Number One,” many winners do not include belonging to an elite in their projection of the ideal self. Indeed, many display ambivalence about their belonging to an elite. In a populist turn, several say that it is fine *not* to be part of an elite, that it does not make you less of a human being, and that people who excel in activities other than academic activities should be properly recognized. A communications major at an elite Midwestern university describes how she felt uncomfortable during high school because, “I got all this attention from the teachers and the principal and the paper and random people on the street who recognized me from the paper, whereas there were all these people who were doing all these other things, and never got any attention paid to them, and it was people doing things that I could never do,” such as a friend of hers who is an excellent mechanic.



She appears to adhere to the belief described earlier that it is not what you pursue that is important but how hard and how well you pursue it. This resonates with other prescriptions made by the Presidential Scholars that achievement of high social rank should not be one's ultimate goal. Table IV shows that when probed, 7 of the 19 interviewees express ambivalence toward elite status, three show negative or strong negative orientations, while only five express positive or strong positive orientations—non-scientists tend to express more negative and ambivalent feelings toward elitism than scientists did. Moreover, seven of the essays have the “Common Man” as a conversational partner (see Table III)—a conspicuous anti elitist statement—and an equal number are coded “populist,” i.e., they promote the rights and importance of all people against the elite (see Table II). None conspicuously affirm their elite status in their essays by, for instance, providing information on their IQ score, awards they have won, or their parents' income.

Presidential Scholars also describe the ideal self in anti elitist terms by asserting at times that being part of an elite and being competitive is acceptable only if it is kept under control. As an electrical engineering student says, “I think ambition is a wonderful thing, as long as you're not abusing other people or things in the process.” Furthermore, being part of an elite is declared acceptable only if it is based on hard work. Many of the interviewees said they only wanted to be recognized as elite for “good reasons.” For example, a biomedical engineering and pre Med major explains that she wants to be considered part of the “best and the brightest” not because of sheer intellectual ability—or as she puts it, “not because of the genes that I got”—but rather because “I've been able to work hard and use my natural talent to accomplish my goals.”

To summarize, only five Presidential Scholars we interviewed describe material success as a key dimension of the ideal self and more than half of those who are not indifferent to it express ambivalent or negative feelings toward it. Positive orientations toward materialism are even less frequent in essays—only five essays are coded “money and power seeker.” A similar pattern appears concerning elitism, with two thirds of the interviewees who are not indifferent to it expressing negative or ambivalent reactions. Essays also indicate an expressed indifference toward elitism and types of excellence indicating elite status, such as “high IQ.” Finally, the “Common Man” is the fifth most frequently chosen category of conversational partner, equal in frequency to the categories “military leader” and “philosopher” (which are much more obvious choices for a “famous American”). In sum, these findings from the interviews and essays clearly suggest that Presidential Scholars downplay elite status and material success in their definitions of the ideal self.

### Cultural Definitions of the Ideal Self

Though more prominent than status and economic success, cultural excellence is only presented as an important component of the ideal self by a subset of Presidential Scholars. Culture is considered somewhat important by about half of the interviewees, but those who do say they view it as an important dimension of the ideal self, or as an important dimension of their own self, define it very broadly and claim to value it quite highly. Essays also confirm that cultural excellence is not a primary dimension of ideal self presented by winners. In addition, scholars view cultural consumption in terms of self-actualization and self-improvement and reject those who view it as a way to signal or achieve social status.

#### *“Be Cultivated”: Imperative of High/Some Culture*

Only slightly more than half of the interviewees—mostly non-scientists—describe involvement with culture as an important aspect of the ideal self (Table IV), and they define it very broadly, not privileging high culture. Their approach to high culture resonates with the appreciation for self-actualization, intellectual curiosity, and well-roundedness described above. Many admit that to improve themselves they would like to gain more exposure to or knowledge of high culture. For instance, an anthropology student says, “I don’t feel as if I got much of a cultural education, certainly not living in the middle of nowhere [where I grew up]. I would’ve liked to have read a lot more.” Similarly, Karen, a sociology major, relates that she started watching French films after “my roommate and I decided we should be more cultivated.”

The essays provide additional evidence of the moderate salience of culture as an aspect of the ideal self portrayed by the winners. Cultural producers are relatively popular as conversational partners: all together, 24% of the winners have a conversation with a cultural producer (12 choose a writer, 7 a philosopher, and 6 a musician, though only 2 picked an entertainer, 1 a scholar and 1 a dancer (Table III)). As for the types of excellence, 15 present themselves as “philosopher,” 14 as “scholar,” 13 as “aesthete,” 9 as “intellectually curious,” 8 as “multiculturalists,” and 5 as “popular culture consumer” (Table II). However, the importance of culture was less evident in styles of self-presentation: “displaying cultural capital” and “displaying aesthetic sensitivity” are among the least common styles, with 3% of the winners choosing each of these styles (both are in the negative tail of the 90% confidence interval).

Moreover, the interviewees who highlight culture tend to define it very

broadly. For instance, Patrick, an English major, defines “being cultivated” in terms of intellectual curiosity for civilization as a whole. For him, “a cultivated person is someone who has a general concern for what is going on around them, whether it’s high culture, whether it’s low culture.” And he defines culture as “everything that men and women have achieved. I think [the] Presidential Scholars [program] honors students who have that enthusiasm for education, who are generally interested, very interested in humankind.” When asked to describe his heroes, he points to David Letterman (“he proved that we Midwesterners do have a sophisticated sense of humor”), Salvador Dali (“because of the depth and the quality of his mind . . . he predicted the shape of DNA”), and Johnny Rotten from the Sex Pistols (“Just because he made a lot of noise and if you didn’t like it that was your own problem”). With this choice of heroes, Patrick signals his interest in both high and popular culture, which he puts on equal footing. He also signals the breath of his own cultural repertoire, a characteristic shared by the highly educated (Bryson, 1996, Peterson and Simkus, 1992). Other interviewees displaying an interest in culture have similarly broad definitions, many mentioning an involvement in television and popular music alongside opera and art exhibits. However, the most culturally inclined students often complain that their interest in culture is not supported by their environment. Patrick says that he has to defend himself against his friends who berate him for participating “in the useless worship of letters.” Such attacks suggest that, surprisingly, involvement in high culture is a type of excellence that is not perceived to be on a very strong footing in the world in which Presidential Scholars live. This supports other studies documenting the marginality of intellectualism and high culture on American campuses (Katchadourian and Boli, 1985; Moffatt, 1989).

*“Be Against Fads and Fashions”: Imperative of Customized Culture*

As in other realms, Presidential Scholars make much of the right of individuals to decide what they are interested in and to customize their form of cultural self-actualization. They describe this customization as an essential dimension of anyone embodying the ideal self. They are often quite specific concerning which elements of high (or other) culture they would like to pursue, describing personal preference and curiosity as their main motivation. For example, one essay-writer, in a conversation with the poet Frank O’Hara, proclaims the importance of having a personal connection to art: “What’s great about [the artist] Claus Oldenburg is to see children responding to the sculptures. They get really excited.” Scholars are particularly critical of snobs, fakes, and of those who “follow fads and

fashion” and whose cultural consumption is motivated by status more than by personal interest. Clearly this approach to judging cultural excellence—encouraging the pursuit of personally interesting culture while rejecting standardized criteria of good or bad culture—mirrors the Scholar’s statements regarding personalized moral excellence.

This customizing approach is also found with regard to literature and the on-going debates about the Western canon. When questioned about their position on these debates, the interviewees were generally supportive of what might be called a “*voluntary* multiculturalism” because they suggest that everyone has a right to chose to consume whatever culture they like. For instance, Carol, an English major who loves classical literature, says that multiculturalism should not mean to “sacrifice the historic for the trendy,” but asserts that she is “a big believer in free choice. It’s like you offer the courses [in multicultural literature] and then people go take them. I don’t believe in trying to coerce people.” In sum, Presidential Scholars present culture (broadly defined and personally pursued) as a more important component of the ideal self than social status or economic success, but not as important as moral character.

## DISCUSSION

This paper analyzed how Presidential Scholars implicitly and explicitly define and portray the ideal self and how they describe themselves and others as exemplifying it. We view their construction as informative of valued characteristics of the self prescribed and rewarded by the educational system—these prize-winning students are recognized by top educational experts as their cohort’s “best and brightest.”

To document the ideal self as defined and displayed by winners, we examined two bodies of evidence: written essays where Scholars display what they believe to be the characteristic of an excellent candidate, and interviews where they describe their conception of the ideal self (both as Presidential Scholars and in general). The main findings from both types of evidence suggest that: (1) morality is the most salient dimension of the ideal self portrayed by Presidential Scholars, and is defined in terms of self-actualization, hard work, well-roundedness, authenticity, and interpersonal morality; (2) material success is not very salient in the definition of the ideal self presented by the majority of respondents, nor is the quest for social status as an end in itself; and (3) culture is somewhat salient in the conception of the ideal self portrayed by a subset of the respondents, but those who do highlight it claim to value it highly and define it very broadly. In general, winners present themselves in interviews as slightly more materi-

alistic and moralistic, and slightly less political, than they do in their application essays. These findings suggest that of the three literatures on cultural definitions of the ideal self in American society discussed at the beginning of the paper, the literature that emphasizes moral individualism and self-actualization resonates best with the Presidential Scholars's conception of the ideal self.

Hence, our analysis suggests that morality is more at the center of the conception of the ideal self displayed by winners than are the quest for cultural acuity and social status. Their views on culture and status are informed by their primary attention to moral character. For instance, they reject those who pursue culture as a status signal, but value those who pursue it out of sheer, authentic interest or a desire for self-actualization. In the interviews they decry fame and glory as meaningless if one is not also recognized as a decent human being.

In general, these prize-winning students argue that one should be *independent* in the moral realm (decide their own beliefs and let others do the same), in the political realm (define what they think by themselves), and in the cultural realm (consume only the culture they enjoy). They insist on customizing their definition of the ideal self yet, paradoxically, their definitions resemble one another to an astonishing degree. This is a significant finding because winners all put such a strong emphasis on self-determination and authenticity and disdain conformity. We might say that their definitions of the ideal self are *individualist and even anti-institutional in content*, but *collectively shared and highly institutionalized in form*. The selves they present therefore resemble recipes for the modern self described by Meyer (1987) in that they are shaped by a requirement to be strong individuals and to develop an internal locus of control.

Are our results surprising? No, to the extent that the values promoted by Presidential Scholars resemble those promoted by academic institutions with which our readers will be familiar. However, given the evidence from previous research on cultural capital, we are surprised to find that in a competition where students are striving to be made part of the educational elite, knowledge and appreciation of high culture were not particularly prominent in students' efforts to display their qualifications. Moreover, we did not expect the moral dimension to be as central as our findings indicated. These results might suggest that by downplaying their educational and cultural excellence, this educational elite attempts to increase its integration into American middle-class culture and to avoid marginalization from the mainstream. Indeed, like the American middle class studied by Bellah *et al.* (1985), Presidential Scholars claim to value self-actualization, personal authenticity, and individualism, and attach importance to effort in measuring success. However, the moral individualism of Presidential Scholars also

differs from that described by Bellah and his colleagues in that the scholars put less emphasis on economic success than most middle-class Americans, and put more emphasis on having a sense of calling and moral meaning. They aspire to be the best *of* the brightest by demonstrating their moral character.

How can we account for the predominance of the specific definitions of the ideal self documented here? Space limitations precluding an extensive discussion of these issues, we can only provide a provisional explanation that takes into consideration: (1) the cultural repertoires made available to students by the educational system and by American society at large; (2) the distinctive life conditions and experiences of these students; and (3) the structural characteristics of American society that make them more likely to value (or say they value) one dimension of the ideal self over another. Note that we explain the content of the ideal self displayed by Scholars in part by other, broader elements of cultural repertoires, explaining elements of a cultural phenomenon by different but cognate cultural factors.

The cultural repertoires offered to students include the ideal of the self-made man inherent in the American Dream, which may have strengthened their commitment to self-determination. Again, the moral individualism that prevails in American society at large (Bellah *et al.*, 1985), the emphasis on self-actualization typical of American upper-middle class culture (Lamont, 1992), and the increasing influence of a therapeutic culture that emphasizes personal growth (Nolan, forthcoming) most likely shape some of their main cultural orientations. These orientations also resonate with the institutionalized rules by which modern individuals must abide, according to Meyer (1987). A specific example of a recipe for the self offered to students is a recent book on the college admission process, *Getting In* (Paul, 1995)—part self-help manual and part insider-stories of admissions directors and college applicants. This book gives the following parting advice to applicants (p. 252): “‘Being yourself’ may mean going in an unexpected direction—even discovering that ‘self’ doesn’t really fit in with the academic intensity of a place like Princeton after all. The real point is not so much where you go to school as how you live your life. If you’re learning, growing, and pursuing your own interests with a passion—I’d say you’ve already got the better part of the bargain.” Pursuing goals with fervor and self-actualization, whatever they may be, constitutes true excellence for this author, an Ivy League recruiter. Thus, the Presidential Scholars present a customized and “authentic” definition of the ideal self that appears to have been provided to them by the cultural repertoires promoted by the American educational system.

Turning to the distinctive life conditions of Presidential Scholars, the

great investment that parents of Presidential Scholars put in the personal, emotional, and cognitive development of their children, by the latter's own account, undoubtedly contributed to making them describe their life as a project of development of the self. The middle class or upper-middle status of these students also gives them a material security that is likely to reinforce post-materialist values, including perhaps anti materialism, self-actualization, and a commitment to intellectual growth (Inglehart, 1989). Moreover, they have grown up in prosperous times, and most have resided in upscale communities where the satisfaction of basic needs is taken for granted, which would partly explain their weak materialist orientation.

Some of our findings can also be explained by the distinctive challenges that Presidential Scholars, like all high school or college seniors, face as young adults. The focus on defining oneself is central to what predominant theories of individual development describe as "the primacy of identity conflicts" that characterizes the college years (e.g., Erikson, 1968; Kohlberg, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). In this context, "being true to yourself" is likely to be particularly accentuated.

It is possible that the rising level of competition for admittance into high prestige colleges drives elite students toward putting an increasingly greater emphasis on attempting to embody the ideal self valued by these institutions. Therefore, it is not surprising to find a high level of convergence in the definitions of the ideal self promoted by these students, at least concerning self-actualization, hard work, authenticity, and ambivalence toward belonging to an elite. The tracking of these high achievers can also contribute to their relative cultural homogeneity by weeding out those who do not fit the predominant mold (Rist, 1977).

Finally, some general characteristics of the structural environment in which scholars live might also contribute to explaining the importance they attach to specific aspects of the ideal self. For instance, the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the American population might help explain the importance that many interviewees attach to cultural breadth or multiculturalism. Moreover, the democratization of higher education during the twentieth century militates against socioeconomic success, knowledge of high culture, or other class-related criteria serving as the qualities that students seek to embody, and promotes moral criteria as the sort of qualities they would display.

In conclusion, we find that these students emphasize the imperative of authenticity and uniqueness in a rather patterned manner, suggesting that the predominant recipes are rigid and stable in form (as described by the requisites for the self described in this paper) but flexible in content. These shifts in analytical focus are particularly crucial at a time when excellence might be becoming an ever more central requirement in Ameri-

can society, resulting in a growing cultural (and class) segmentation between high achievers and others, and possibly in a greater cultural homogeneity within the upper-middle class at the national level.

Future research should attempt to spell out empirically the structural linkages between suppliers of institutionalized models of the ideal self, including the educational system, and the models embodied and enacted by individuals. For instance, we need to consider how it is that institutional structures, such as the educational system, paradoxically support definitions of the self that are highly anti-institutional, yet highly predictable and patterned. Furthermore, the potential for growing homogeneity among competing students could be addressed in future research by, for instance, comparing conceptions of the ideal self across social classes. Finally, it would be useful to compare competition winners such as the Presidential Scholars with students who have not benefited from the same elite tracking in the United States, and with elite students in other countries. Such studies would help us elaborate a more exhaustive explanation for patterns of definitions of the ideal self than the one we are able to suggest here.

## APPENDIX A: CODE DESCRIPTIONS

### Types of Excellence

**Activist:** committed to some social, political, or moral cause or goal; wants to fight to achieve that goal; believes everyone should be actively involved in making society better.

**Aesthete:** artistic or knowledgeable about the arts, values creativity and artistic expression, shows a cultivated sense of aesthetic judgment.

**Altruist:** says helping others is an individual responsibility and social goal, wants to assist the less-fortunate, caring and compassionate.

**Anti-Materialist:** argues against the pursuit of worldly goods and possessions as ends in themselves, disdains success that comes at the expense of others or for purely utilitarian purposes.

**Athlete:** interested in sports, values physical activity.

**Believer (Religious):** believes in and respects God or a higher power, sees an important role for religion in everyday life, wants to follow God's plan and pass it on to others.

**Democrat:** believes in a democratic system of governance as the best possible, values representation and inclusion of all people.

**Emotional Self-Improver:** reflective and introspective, strives to become a better person, sensitive to feelings, values self-discovery.



**High IQ:** demonstrates knowledge of or proficiency in high-level scholarly fields, advanced science, trivia; mentally quick or rigorous.

**Humanist:** has faith in the goodness of people and human potential, values human life, pacifist.

**Individualist:** resists blind conformity, self-reliant, takes responsibility for one's own actions and development, needs autonomy.

**Intellectually Curious:** excited about ideas and thirsty for new knowledge, inquisitive, overwhelmed by a need to ask questions about everything, seeks a deep and substantive understanding.

**Justicier:** wants to promote social justice and equality among individuals or groups and to redress inequities, points to the social causes of unfairness and underprivileged.

**Libertarian:** promotes freedom and individual liberty as primary means to social and political ends, sees government's role as protecting individual self-determination.

**Moralist:** emphasizes integrity, honesty, ethical sensitivity, perseverance through thick and thin; admires character and virtue.

**Multiculturalist:** emphasizes the importance of respecting and learning about minority groups and ethnic heritage, values pluralism, promotes the distinctiveness of a particular cultural tradition or identity.

**Patriot:** hails the greatness of America, respects the people who made this country the best in the world, willing to fight to keep America great and protect American ideals.

**Philosopher:** concerned with "big issues" like human nature, the nature of beauty, the meaning of existence; appreciates the mystery in life; shows a tendency to philosophize.

**Popular Culture Consumer:** likes to experience high or pop culture, respects notable or novel cultural achievements; seeks pleasure as an end in itself, wants to have fun in life and enjoy leisure time.

**Populist:** promotes the rights and importance of all people or "everyman," wants government by the people for the people, against benefits exclusively for elites.

**Power and Money Seeker:** wants to make a lot of money, sees accumulation of wealth as a sign of success; admires those who have high social status and especially those who "pulled themselves up" from a disadvantaged position, values hierarchy; concerned with achievement in a particular career or profession and progressing up the career ladder.

**Pragmatist:** gets things done by getting down to business, realistic, accepts circumstances as a starting point for action.

**Public Policy Expert:** knowledgeable about particular domestic or foreign policy topics or events, understands the political process, curious about the real politics behind the news.

**Scholar:** has competence or expertise in an academic field, takes a critical or learned perspective, values good writing and scholarship.

**Scientist:** interested in and knowledgeable about some branch of science, focuses on a scientific accomplishment or problem, values the scientific approach; skilled in a particular craft, able to understand or solve difficult mechanical operations or other technical problems.

**Self-Actualizer:** wants to “be all they can be” in all phases of life, concerned with positive development in academic and non-academic pursuits.

**Social Critic:** points out the negative causes or outcomes of social patterns, respects the “gadfly” who exposes phoniness or criticizes the status quo.

**Traditionalist:** Values work, family, religion, time-honored practices, the status quo; wants to preserve the heritage of the West including the canon and the “Great Books,” interested in the classics of the humanities.

**Wit (Humorist):** light-hearted and funny, approaches the world with an eye for irony, jokingly sarcastic.

### Styles of Self-Presentation

**Displays Aesthetic Sensitivity:** demonstrates nuanced and informed judgment of art or beauty.

**Displays Breadth of Interests:** talks about personal well-roundedness and diversity of talents or experiences.

**Displays a Critical Mind:** questions assumptions or standard wisdom, tries to show a penetrating intellect and a rigorous concern for uncovering the real truth.

**Displays Creativity:** shows expressive ability or talks about personal creative talent.

**Displays Cultural Capital:** drops names of high culture figures or titles of important works.

**Displays Intellectual Curiosity:** asks a lot of questions, expresses fascination for knowledge or ideas.

**Displays Knowledge:** exhibits expert or in-depth knowledge of a specific topic, drops facts and figures.

**Display Moral Virtue:** emphasizes personal moral character or integrity, shows compassion or commitment to doing and being good.

**Displays Originality:** tries to answer questions in a novel way, focuses on an obscure figure or book.

**Displays Reverence/Indebtedness:** expresses awe at the accomplishments of others, thanks a hero who provides inspiration.

**Displays Wit/Sense of Humor:** makes jokes, explicitly tries to be funny.  
**Displays Writing Ability:** assumes a poetic or distinctive voice, uses “big” words, literary devices.

**Lists Achievements:** focuses primarily on past accomplishments.

**Makes an Argument:** presents a particular argument about a specific subject or issue (especially policy issues), offers and justifies a solution or new perspective.

**Waxes Philosophic:** talks at length about the meaning of life or the nature of human existence.

## APPENDIX B: SAMPLE ESSAY AND CODING

Here is an illustrative example, a fictional conversation with “Joe American” written in the form of a poem:

Excuse me sir, but I must say, I saw you here alone;  
 It's mighty cold and you look old, with you may I roam?  
 Most certainly, my young lad, accompany me on my journey.  
 I shall tell you my story of triumph and glory  
 That for the past two centuries I've been learning.  
 I came from Britain, Ireland and faraway places;  
 I speak many languages and have many faces.  
 I had a dream of fortune, freedom and fame,  
 And Joe American is my name.  
 I'm the common man you always and never see,  
 I've protected democracy and made this land free.

As the essay continues, Joe American describes America as “the greatest [country] on Earth,” recounts the repeated struggles and hardships of the American people, and exhorts the narrator to “respect your brothers regardless of race.” We can thus identify the applicant’s effort to portray excellence in terms of patriotism, justice (racial, in this case), and democracy. This essay was coded as illustrating three types of excellence: first, as a “Patriot” (someone loyal to his or her country), second as a “*Justicier*” (in support of racial justice and equality), and third as a “Democrat” (a supporter of individual self-determination and representational politics). As far as the styles of self-presentation chosen by the author, the essay is notable for both its unusual conversational partner and unusual format. In addition, the essay presents the author’s moral opinions about the qualities of American life. The essay was thus coded: “Displays Originality,” “Displays Moral Virtue,” and last “Displays Writing Ability.” Finally, we coded this essay’s conversational partner as “Common Man.”

### APPENDIX C: CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWEES AND OF THE 1991 PRESIDENTIAL SCHOLARS<sup>a</sup>

	Interviewees	Presidential scholars
Region of origin		
North East	17%	16%
Mid-Atlantic	17%	8%
South/Southwest	17%	21%
Midwest	27%	25%
West	32%	19%
Other	—	5%
Race/ethnicity		
Euro-American	58%	72%
African-American	0%	1%
Asian	22%	18%
Latino	10%	3%
Other	10%	6%
Type of university		
Private university	84%	78%
Ivy League	37%	39%
Public university	16%	21%
Major		
Humanities	16%	7%
Social Sciences	26%	12%
Science and engineering	58%	52%
Undecided and n.a.	—	29%
Fathers' occupation		
Professional/managerial	85%	n.a.
Sales/clerical worker	4%	
Blue collar worker	0%	
Homemaker	0%	
Other and n.a.	11%	
Mothers' occupation		
Professional/managerial	74%	n.a.
Sales/clerical workers	5%	
Blue collar workers	10%	
Homemaker	11%	
Other and n.a.	0%	
Fathers' highest degree		
Graduate or professional	85%	n.a.
Undergraduate	16%	
Mothers' highest degree		
Graduate or professional	42%	n.a.
Undergraduate	53%	
High School	5%	

<sup>a</sup> All percentages rounded off to the nearest integer.

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