**Making the Case for a Liberal Arts Curriculum: Understanding Harvard Students’ Learning Experiences and Paths to Management Consulting Firms**

Abel Berhan

Senior in the Sociology Department

Professor Manja Klemenčič

Wednesday, December 15th, 2021

*I, Abel Berhan, confirm my understanding and commitment to adhering to Harvard College’s Honor Code.*

**Abstract**

This research paper explores two questions within the context of Harvard students’ liberal arts curriculum and paths to management consulting firms (a common employer for students). First, how do Harvard students develop skills in college needed for management consulting firms? Secondly, what role, if any, does a Harvard student’s concentration or studies play in their ability to join a management consulting firm? These research questions are essential to understanding what management consulting firms as potential employers look for from Harvard college students. This research also serves as a foundational piece to understanding liberal arts colleges and their curriculum’s transferability to employment more broadly. The research is driven by interviews of entry-level consultants that graduated from Harvard and management consulting firm recruiters. The findings provide insights from various stakeholders about the skills and experiences translated from Harvard to management consulting firms, and the role students’ studies played.

**Introduction**

Over time, liberal art colleges have earned a reputation for providing a transformational and explorative educational experience for students. However, some individuals are skeptical of liberal art colleges and question whether they’re able to produce competent and employable students with real skills. In a recent interview with Bill Maher, a comedian of the show *Real Time with Bill Maher*, he criticizes America’s higher education system and the subjects students learn in colleges. He frustratingly states: “Because in 2019 we had more undergraduate degrees in visual and performing arts, then in computer and information, and science or math” (Real Time with Bill Maher, 2021). Maher continues and discusses how many colleges today offer courses with no substance and that are irrelevant to real work, such as courses like “Discovering History Through Twitter”. While Maher’s segment of the show aimed to criticize higher education at large and make it more unnecessary, he also voiced the concern that curriculums many colleges offer today do not adequately prepare students for the job market. Similarly, many other individuals question the liberal arts curriculum that American colleges have to offer. The emphasis on abstract disciplines and exploration, rather than a technical or pre-professional oriented curriculum, makes individuals concerned about students' preparedness for work.

Harvard College, the pinnacle of higher education and colleges across the world, provides a liberal arts curriculum for students. Throughout my time at Harvard, I have been fascinated by the wide range of disciplines students engage in. From Chemistry to Folklore Mythology, students engage in various interesting subjects and also delve into courses within other disciplines through the general education requirements, such as Ethics and Civics (Harvard College Program in General Education, 2021). Interestingly enough, Harvard students in the various academic disciplines receive jobs upon graduating and a disproportionate amount enter management consulting. The Harvard Crimson surveyed graduates from the class of 2021 and found that 19% went into consulting and 21% went into finance (Harvard Crimson Staff, 2021). While the Harvard name itself carries great weight in the business industry and workforce more broadly, it’s surprising to see nearly a fifth of Harvard graduates enter management consulting firms with no pre-business studies or background. Even for myself, despite studying Sociology and African-American studies, which seems to be quite unrelated to consulting, I will be working for a management consulting firm upon graduation.

Thus, the liberal arts curriculum and the trajectory of students at Harvard make me raise the question of how a liberal arts and science college prepares students for careers in consulting. Specifically, how do Harvard students develop skills in college needed for management consulting firms? Secondly, what role, if any, does a Harvard student’s concentration or studies play in their ability to join a management consulting firm? These research questions are important in understanding what employers like management consulting firms look for from Harvard college students and making the case for Harvard’s liberal arts curriculum, and liberal arts colleges more broadly. To further explore this research question, I look into the existing literature around skills developed in universities and liberal arts colleges, the effects of college on students, management consulting recruitment at elite schools, and several other areas. For my methodology, I interview entry-level consultants that graduated from Harvard and recruiters at management consulting firms who regularly search for new entry-level consultants. Interviewing these different stakeholders provided some findings and insights into the skills and experiences translated from Harvard and consulting, and the role students’ studies played. Thus, I engaged with empirical research to investigate my research question.

**Literature Review**

When exploring the broader question of how a liberal arts and science college prepares students for careers in consulting, it is essential to first understand the purpose and role of a liberal arts education. In the book *In Defense of a Liberal Education*, Fareed Zakaria (2015) outlines the intentions and motives for a liberal education. He first defines a liberal arts education as a program that engages students in a wide variety of subjects, including mathematics, philosophy, literature, biology, and other disciplines, rather than teaching students specialized and technical subjects. Zakaria’s (2015) overarching argument for a liberal arts education is that it teaches students how to write and think critically, communicate and articulate ideas effectively, and learn unfamiliar subjects efficiently. The seminar-based discussions, writing focus, rigorous course load, and explorative nature of a liberal arts education engage all these skills intensely. The academic backgrounds and studies of students today have become less important because the actual content they’ve learned in courses is not relevant to the day-to-day tasks of their jobs (Zakaria, 2015).

Zakaria (2015) offers several anecdotes of high finance employees coming from a range of backgrounds (physics, social sciences, etc.) that felt that their particular studies in college put them at no advantage. The employees’ abilities to learn quickly and on the job were more important than any particular background. Zakaria (2015) also emphasizes the skill of being able to think critically because many jobs at the top of the market require employees to engage with problem-solving, decision-making, and creativity, rather than being able to regurgitate or memorize information. Similarly, he argues that clear and concise written and oral communication is a foundational skill for any profession, ranging from policymakers attempting to create persuasive arguments with officials to business professionals presenting slide decks to clients (Zakaria, 2015). Zakaria (2015) explains the purpose and transferable skills of a liberal arts education to employment more broadly very well. My research aims to build on Zakaria’s (2015) work by understanding the transferable skills and connections between a liberal education at Harvard and consulting careers more specifically. I am particularly interested in transferable skills and connections with consulting careers because of the large pipeline between Harvard, other liberal art institutions, and management consulting firms.

Extracurriculars and campus employment also serve as integral parts of liberal art colleges and other colleges more broadly. In an article by Kim and Bastedo (2017), they examine the influence of students’ extracurricular activities involvement on occupational outcomes. Kim and Bastedo (2017) found that extracurricular activities contributed to students’ occupational pathways and outcomes after college. They (2017) suggest that employers value students’ extracurricular involvement because of the various skills developed (leadership, management, communication, etc.) that are utilized in employers’ occupations. Interestingly enough, Kim and Bastedo (2017) also found that students’ involvement in extracurriculars and engagement with content helped them navigate their interests and fit for potential occupations.

McClellan et al. (2018) also delve into the benefits and transferability of campus employment for college students in *A Good Job: Campus Employment as High-Impact Practice*. Campus employment influences development in two relevant and different manners. McClennan et al. (2018) first highlights how campus employment influences student personal development through several theories, including Chickering and Reisser’s Seven Vectors of Development. Some of the individual mindsets and traits developed from campus employment include intellectual competence, emotional management, maturity, interpersonal relationships, integrity, purpose, etc.These personal traits and skills are not only effective for employment but are also useful skills that shape students’ lives and identities (McClennan et al., 2018).

In the following chapters, McClennan et al. (2018) focus on learning opportunities for students with campus employment. One of the theories McClennan et al. (2018) explains isLearning Reconsidered II, which outlines the seven broad learning outcomes or competencies from campus employment, including cognitive complexity (intellectual and logical reasoning, and problem-solving), practical competence (basic day-to-day skill such as communication), knowledge acquisition, integration, and application (students’ resourcefulness and ability to apply knowledge from one place to another), persistence, humanitarianism (ability to understand others and differences), etc. Students with campus employment generally learn these various skills that employers seek (McClennan et al., 2018). The skills students develop through extracurriculars and campus employment in colleges more broadly have assisted many in understanding the potential personal and employment benefits, but there’s a gap in identifying how extracurriculars and campus employment specifically play out for students at liberal art institutions. My research is critical to bridging this gap because there is the potential for subtle differences in outcomes at a liberal art institution like Harvard. Thus, in my fieldwork I explore how students develop skills for management consulting firms at Harvard and the role of extracurriculars, campus employment as well as academic coursework.

Now, shifting away from students’ perspectives, it is also essential to identify what employers seek from college students to understand the transferability of skills developed in college. In a recent 2020 survey by the National Association of College and Employers (NACE), the staff surveyed employers to rank the key attributes employers wanted to see on students’ resumes. In the survey, respondents ranked the attributes in the following order: problem-solving skills, collaboration, strong work ethic, analytical and quantitative skills, written communication, leadership, oral communication, initiative, attention to detail, etc. Beyond students’ GPA and course load, these were key attributes employers sought after from extracurricular and work experiences on students’ resumes (National Association of College and Employers, 2020). These attributes help identify what employers seek from college students more broadly, and I my research aims to further inquire into what elite management consulting firms seek from students.

On the note of elite management consulting firms, in *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*, Rivera (2015) introduces how students from high socioeconomic and elite backgrounds funnel into elite and high-paying entry-level jobs, such as law firms, investment banks, and management consulting firms.Rivera (2015) refers to the term pedigree, and in the context of elite occupations, this means: “the term that employers in elite firms used as shorthand for a job’s candidate’s record of accomplishments,” (Rivera, p. 3, 2015). Elite firms believe to hire students on this idea of pedigree and merit by evaluating students’ accomplishments.

However, Rivera (2015) argues that the hiring practices of elite firms are hidden and rooted in students’ socioeconomic backgrounds, rather than individual merit. Rivera (2015) outlines the process of elite reproduction in hiring throughout the chapter by explaining the role elite students’ education, social connections, cultural resources, parenting strategies, and other factors play in their success. Rivera (2015) also highlights how specific hiring practices, such as on-campus recruiting, employee referrals, cultural and social biases, and other practices contribute to elite students’ success. While it is vital to understand how hiring practices within elite firms are rooted in inequalities and reproduce elite employees, my research attempts to understand the exact standards and skills elite firms are seeking in their hiring processes. I also specifically focus on management consulting firms. This enables individuals to understand the transferability of skills undergraduates develop at Harvard to management consulting firms.

In addition to understanding the pipeline between elite students and various elite firms, most management consulting firms have very formulaic hiring processes and assess specific skills and metrics from candidates. *Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation*, by Marc P. Cosentino (2005), is the consulting Bible for any students aspiring to become consultants. Consulting interviews consist of two portions: behavioral and case interviews. The goal of behavioral interviews is for interviewers to understand candidates' various skills and traits, including verbal communication, confidence, enthusiasm, personality, collaboration, leadership, initiative, problem-solving, and perseverance. Behavioral interviews also assess candidates' motives for consulting. Interviewers can evaluate these different traits and skills by asking a series of questions such as “Why consulting”, “Could you tell me about a time you demonstrated leadership”, or “Could you tell me about a time you had a conflict with someone on your team”. Candidates are expected to answer these questions coherently and concisely with experiences and reflections from college (Cosentino, 2005).

The second portion of consulting interviews consist of a case interview. During a case interview, candidates are presented with an example business scenario and problem from a mock client by the interviewer. Candidates are expected to analyze and propose a solution to the problem. Throughout the case, candidates work through several questions engaging with business strategy, quantitative and qualitative analysis, and solution proposals. The purpose of case interviews includes testing candidates’ analytical abilities, logic and organization of answer, thought process, tolerance for ambiguity, poise and confidence, verbal communication, and passion for problem-solving. Candidates prepare for case interviews by practicing dozens of cases individually and with colleagues to familiarize themselves with strategy frameworks, quantitative questions, and the general format of case interviews, such as taking notes, asking questions and hypothesizing, etc (Cosentino, 2005).

Case in Point is promoted and used by many college careers services and aspiring consultants. The book lays down the blueprint to successfully achieving a consulting internship or job, but it only illuminates what management consulting firms are seeking from candidates. With my research, I aim to connect the skills students develop in a liberal arts institution (Harvard) with the skills management consulting firms seek. Bridging this connection is critical to understanding the transferability and relevance of Harvard’s liberal arts curriculum with management consulting firms.

To answer my research question, I investigate several key variables. The variables include investigating Harvard’s liberal arts and science academic and overall college program, skills developed by students at Harvard, and skills desired and required for a consulting career. I will elaborate further on my methodology and my investigation of these variables in the following section.

**Data & Methods**

For my methodology, I investigated how a liberal art and science college prepares students for careers in consulting. More specifically, what role, if any, does a Harvard student’s concentration or studies play in their ability to join a management consulting firm? Secondly, how do Harvard students develop skills in college needed for management consulting firms? I utilized semi-structured interviews to investigate my research question and different variables. The survey population consisted of seven interviewees. The seven interviewees were five entry-level consultants who graduated from Harvard (ranging from different concentrations and academic disciplines) and two recruiters. The five entry-level consultants studied a range of concentrations and secondaries at Harvard, including Sociology, Applied Math, Government, Neuroscience, Social Studies, Global Health Policy, and Economics. All interviewees were pulled from management consulting firms focused on business strategy that Harvard students often join, including Oliver Wyman, the Boston Consulting Group, Bain & Company, and the Bridgespan Group.

The five entry-level consultants who graduated from Harvard are an integral part of the survey population because they provided insight into the skills they’ve utilized in their role and conveniently shared their recent experiences with Harvard’s liberal arts curriculum and skills developed in college. The larger number of entry-level consultant interviewees from Harvard also further diversified the backgrounds and range of disciplines data is being gathered from. The two recruiters were a critical part of the survey population because they provided key insights on hiring practices and what skills and traits are required of consultants since their primary role is to recruit and frequently work with entry-level consultants.

Semi-structured interviews were the most effective method for my research questions because they enabled me to receive an in-depth understanding of interviewees’ responses about Harvard’s liberal arts and science college program, skills developed by Harvard students, and skills desired and required for the consultant role. Asking follow-up questions and having a free-flowing conversation enabled me to further probe specific responses and interviewees to fully elaborate as well.

I analyzed the interview data through an inductive approach, meaning I gathered and analyzed my data first and then constructed my codes and theories. I analyzed my data by taking a first read through of all my interview data and noting down key words, ideas, and broader answers, such as “multitasking” or “synthesizing and understanding information”. Also, during the first read I would just highlight parts of testimonials from the respondents that were memorable or generally stood out to me. Then I took a second read through to understand and record sort of the general narratives and ideas being told in response to my questions. I also took note of which key words, phrases or codes were recurring the most across samples. After collecting these narratives and ideas, and thinking about my research questions, I began to create broader “buckets” or categories of answers for each research question (e.g. interpersonal skills, quantitative background) to serve as umbrellas for the different responses provided by interviewees. On my third read through, I did a final check for any other key ideas or words I may have missed, and I also thought about which quotes and testimonials would best help illuminate and explain the findings for the different codes identified. .

**Findings & Discussion**

This section intends to share and contextualize the responses from interviewees. The responses help develop answers to the research questions of how Harvard students develop skills in college for management consulting firms, and the role of their liberal arts education and concentrations with their paths into consulting.

*Interpersonal Skills*

When analyzing interviewees' responses and attempting to understand how Harvard students develop skills in college needed for management consulting firms, the findings were categorized in three groups: interpersonal skills, learning competencies, and *task manager*. In regard to interpersonal skills, recruiters emphasized the importance of interpersonal and “people” skills because it is valuable in day-to-day work since consultants are in a client-facing role where they’re constantly interacting with clients and various people. Carly Osa, who has been a recruiter at an management consulting firm for two years, stresses how integral teamwork is and states: “A huge part of the job is coming together with other people and collaborating… And if someone is more of an independent worker and they like that, that’s awesome. I think that works for other types of careers, but not necessarily consulting” Carly explains the inevitable nature of collaboration and consulting, and their interconnectedness makes collaboration a necessary interpersonal skill. Carly also mentions the importance of communication as an interpersonal skill because of the heavy feedback nature in consulting and because the job is so people focused (communicating with teammates, clients, etc.).

Similar to the recruiter’s response, entry-level consultants started by emphasizing the vital role of extracurriculars at Harvard in developing interpersonal skills. Liam Dallows, a first-year consultant at a management consulting firm who studied Applied Math at Harvard, discussed his role on the Men’s and Women’s track team as captain, and how he felt like a constant “relationship manager” between the different dynamics on the team. Being captain and managing relationships taught him so much about collaboration, which has played a large role in his consulting team. Mecca Bonner, a first-year consultant at a management consulting firm who studied Government with a secondary in Economics at Harvard, also shared the importance of collaboration in his role in the Harvard Black Men’s Forum (BMF) as Political Action Chair (PAC) and Vice President (VP). In his role as PAC, he frequently was in charge of facilitating political events, and his individual work stream contributed to a larger goal within BMF, which was very similar to the way his work is divided in consulting. Similar to collaboration, David Carter (a first-year consultant at a management consulting firm who studied Neuroscience with a secondary in Global Health Policy) and Cameron Boyle (a first-year consultant at a management consulting firm who studied Applied Math with a secondary in Sociology) developed communication skills in their extracurriculars and stressed its importance in consulting.

Respondents also discussed how Harvard’s general education courses and liberal arts curriculum helped them develop interpersonal skills by making them more “well-rounded” and generally, well-informed citizens. Cameron draws on his ability to connect with clients with his broader course knowledge and shares: “There'd be times I was sitting in like a client meeting before everyone came. And we'd be talking about something and I could just refer to some sociology class, or something I learned in a random evolutionary biology class… I feel like that people skill, like, just becoming an informed person is what you get from liberal arts” The variety of courses and exposure Cameron received served him well by being a more well-rounded work professional, and being able to genuinely socialize with others. Mecca also made similar remarks in his interview and was grateful for his liberal arts education at Harvard because it made him a well-rounded person, enabling him to receive a greater understanding for his work, colleagues, and even the world.

The nature of Harvard and a liberal arts education also forces one to interact with individuals different from themselves in various ways, helping develop valuable interpersonal skills. Liam explains: “With any firms doing consulting nowadays they’re so diverse… there’s a lot of different people, different viewpoints… it takes some getting used to… I think being at a place like Harvard, where I was forced and had the opportunity to communicate with different types of people has helped a lot” Liam opens up by sharing some of the growth he’s experienced in consulting by interacting with people with opposing views or different backgrounds, but how Harvard’s environment has prepared him to work and socialize with people from a range of backgrounds and interests. So the combination of extracurriculars with a liberal arts education that exposes one to various subjects and also individuals assists one in developing interpersonal skills, which are extremely valuable in consulting because of the nature of the work.

*Learning Competencies*

This second category, learning competencies, is focused on expected competencies of consultants in their first-year and competencies entry-level consultants have developed through their coursework at Harvard or work at management consulting firms. During a consultant’s first-year, Tiana Hall (a recruiter who has been at a management consulting firm for ten years) explains the idea of a “consultant toolkit”. The consultant toolkit is composed of various learning competencies and building blocks that consultants are expected to develop in their first 1-2 years in the role, in order to be an adequate consultant and advance. Tiana explains some of the competencies and says: “Conduct complete accurate research analysis under manager’s guidance, I’m attentive to details… can apply the suite of tools available (Excel, PowerPoint, etc.) for my analysis, synthesize findings… begin to fit them in my broader context projects… communicate concisely and clearly across a range of channels… engaged in all team and client interaction…” There are several other competencies I addition to theses, but Tiana lays down the foundation to understanding what makes an effective and ideal consultant in the first 1-2 years.

Now, interestingly enough, many interviewees either indirectly or directly explain how they develop these various competencies through their concentrations and coursework. One of the first competencies developed through coursework and emphasized by interviewees is problem-solving and being able to think critically. In Cameron’s interview, he recounts his memories of studying Applied Math and explains: “Applied Math is where I really like worked on and learned problem solving skills… just being creative about like solving P-sets… like the P-sets are fucking hard and you have to get it done” The reality of having to turn-in extremely challenging problem sets prepared Cameron in being able to confront challenges and provide solutions in consulting. Mark Peterson (a first-year consultant at a management consulting firm who studied Social Studies at Harvard) also made a very compelling analogy of Harvard’s liberal arts education and methodology, and states:

“in like high school, or maybe like other institutions like it would kind of be rote memorization… but here, they’re always shifting the goalposts to make sure that you actually ingested the information so much… and it wasn't just the fact that you had memorized the tools, but that you knew when to pull out the wrench at the right time versus the hammer… to build the house correctly… that type of like, methodology is something that I got really strong at… because of the way that Harvard teaches its classes”

Mark makes an extremely critical point here because rather than the actual knowledge or content teaching Mark how to solve problems, it’s the way he learned how to understand, think and relevantly apply the tools he’s learned for the different problems and scenarios he encounters through Harvard’s liberal arts education. When thinking about the competencies Tiana mentioned, being able to problem solve and effectively apply the tools one has learned to different situations is essential.

Respondents also developed and refined their abilities to learn unfamiliar topics and synthesize information quickly through their concentrations and broader coursework. Mecca, a government concentrator, talks about how it was simply “impossible” to complete all his government readings at Harvard. Thus, he explains how the Government Department really taught him how to sift through readings, synthesize information and develop key takeaways quickly, which was a helpful skill in his day-to-day consulting work. Additionally, Mark mentions similar experiences when taking Social Studies and Sociology courses. He recounts his memories of reading very dense books and having to understand and break down complex topics into simplistic information and essays within short timeframes.

It’s very interesting to see Mecca and Mark mention these skills they’ve developed from coursework because David mentions similar competencies of having to synthesize information in his first-year as a consultant. David states: “Having quick thoughts, so like processing information very quickly. Being able to like to sift your information really quickly. I may go through an expert interview that's an hour long… And like being able to flip it very quickly…The manager might be like we need the slides in an hour… and like the slides gotta get done” So the ability to understand, synthesize and present information rapidly is an essential competency in consulting, and there are many ways Harvard’s liberal arts curriculum prepares students for that competency.

*Task Manager*

The third category, *task manager* (a term I will further explain later), is focused on an individual that is able to balance time and various commitments in the midst of a pressure-filled and rigorous academic or work environment. One of the most important skills recruiters continuously sought out from candidates and consultants was the ability to multi-task and a candidate’s sheer drive because of the demands of consulting. In Carly’s interview, she explicitly discusses about balancing different commitments and explains: “I think the other skills of like I’m taking five classes, and they all have different exam dates, and different papers due and different timelines, while also leading the student organization, and also working or being on a sports team… the developmental skills you learn as a student transfer over…” After emphasizing how important it is to balance different commitments, Carly goes on to explain its significance because of the various tasks consultants are assigned, such as working in PowerPoint and Excel, planning and scheduling, meeting with teams and clients, etc.

On a similar note, Carly shares the importance of a consultant’s drive and determination. She states: “I think drive and determination aspect comes from the fact that it’s not a 9-5 job. And for someone to have the drive to either help their project succeed, or even to grow their own career trajectory… you can’t teach someone how to want to push themselves forward” Drive and determination are so important in the consultant role because it’s such a challenging and demanding job that’ll require one to have their own initiative. Tiana also provides similar sentiments, explaining how candidates should be able to demonstrate resilience and their ability to adapt to change throughout the interview process because it’s so important on the job.

Now, when focusing on the responses of entry-level consultants, Mecca discusses a fascinating point about Harvard “breeding *task managers*” and its transferability to work because one is forced to multi-task so much in the consultant role. He states:

“people don’t want to hear this, but Harvard honestly makes you really good at being a *Task Manager*… outside of classroom experiences at Harvard are very task based, whether it be organizations, comping process, and things of that nature… fits very well into a lot of the consulting areas where you’re doing things on a quick turnover…”

So essentially, Mecca describes a *task manager* as someone who is equipped with the skills to balance various tasks from extracurriculars, coursework, and other Harvard experiences. He believes this skillset is quite transferable to consulting, and this especially makes sense after hearing Carly mention similar ideas around seeking candidates who can balance various commitments.

This idea of being able to balance various commitments and practice time management is a recurring theme with other respondents as well. David and Cameron mentioned how they grew in their ability to juggle different extracurricular experiences and tasks during their time at Harvard. Liam also continuously reiterated how there’s a level of discipline that is required to be accepted and continue studying at Harvard, and how the rigorous environment continues to enhance one’s perseverance and overall discipline. Thus, the combination of Harvard’s rigorous environment and task-focused experiences shapes students into being resilient, determined, and *task managers*, and these skills are highly sought out for in the consultant role.

*Role of Concentration*

Now, for our second question of what role does a Harvard student’s concentration or studies play in their ability to join a management consulting firm, we found two overall findings. The first is that in the grand scheme of things, a Harvard student's concentration doesn’t play a significant role in their ability to receive employment from a management consulting firm and to perform as a consultant. The second finding is that having a quantitative background can still be beneficial in the consultant role.

After analyzing many of the responses from Carly and Tiana, it seems that one’s concentration doesn’t play a significant role in consulting because so much of the role is learned on the job. This is illustrated by Carly’s response, where she states: “there’s no consulting major right… people think that a certain major might be a shoe into consulting because it gives more like of that business acumen… that’s the type of stuff that can be taught to people without that knowledge” This was an interesting response by Carly because she explicitly explains how there’s no secret major or particular academic background that will get one into consulting. Instead, Carly mentions that things such as academic success or growth are better indicators of one’s fit for consulting.

Tiana provides a similar response in that firms encourage individuals from all majors to apply. She even shares about a Partner (the most senior role in consulting and partners lead specific practices within a management consulting firm) in the Finance and Risk practice who studied English in college but works with very technical content, and how the Partner was able to advance because of their ability to learn on the job. Carly’s and Tiana’s responses make a lot of sense because so much of the consulting role is learned on the job, and there are many other skills that are more important (interpersonal, competencies, and being a *task manager*) in assessing a candidate’s preparedness for the role.

 Interestingly enough, many of the entry-level consultants responded with in a similar manner as the recruiters. In Mark’s interview, he says: “that’s kind of the beauty of getting set up an institution like Harvard is that like I could have done sociology, history, psychology, economics, and I probably would have still gotten the job” Mark is basically alluding to how Harvard’s liberal arts curriculum and also prestige, enabled him to study what he was interested in and develop an array of skills that prepared him for consulting since everything is learned on the job. Along the same line, Mecca discusses how he thinks he wouldn’t have had a better chance getting his job if he had studied another concentration instead of Government, such as Sociology or Applied Math.

Additionally, David describes how individuals from a pre-professional institution may be more prepared for consulting initially compared to liberal arts education students, but skill levels between both group of students equalize after several months. He says that pre-professional students may have more of the business acumen and tangible skills (like PowerPoint and Excel) because they’ve studied different aspects of business in college. However, after several months of the ramp up period where you’re in weeds of consulting and learning the different terminologies and tools, you’re able to overcome that initial learning curve. He states: “So I think preprofessional can only help you in some areas. And after that, like your general experience takes over” David further explains that so much of consulting is your ability to adapt to change and learn on the job, so the prior knowledge you come in with, whether you’re from a pre-professional or liberal arts background, can only really help you so much. So overall, one’s concentration at Harvard doesn’t play a significant role in their ability to serve as a consultant at a management consulting firm because so much of the jobs revolves around learning quickly and on the job.

*Quantitative Background*

In light of one’s concentration at Harvard not playing a significant role, respondents still emphasized the benefits of having a quantitative background while being in the consultant role. From a recruitment standpoint, Carly discusses how a lot of the projects within consulting require consultants to either have or develop a quantitative skillset, making it a valuable skill. She explains: “students who have quantitative experience, it’s definitely helpful. It’s something that we’ve learned from the [Human Resources] development team… but is that always an indicator of success? Absolutely not” Carly further elaborates and says that a consultant’s eagerness to develop quantitative skills and learn is more important in terms of success. Tiana also talks about how having a background in quantitative skills like SQL, Python, and other areas can be very helpful starting off as a consultant, but the use of those technical skills becomes less important as a consultant grows into larger roles (Associate, Engagement Manager, etc.) that are more client-facing and qualitative and soft skills (e.g., verbal and written communication) become more important.

Entry-level consultants also explain that their quantitative studies and concentrations were helpful in being able to solve problems and provide more value to their teams and clients. Cameron, an Applied Math concentrator, shares: “in my early cases, there were times where I could flex muscles of data analysis, statistical analysis, even like understanding tech stack, and like how it worked. And that was useful for our client… made me stand out more than someone who didn’t have that background” Cameron’s quantitative background enabled him to provide value to his team and client immediately (versus having to learn this skillset on the job). And this background enabled him to showcase a different way of problem solving that consultants with other backgrounds weren’t able to do as effectively. Liam also studied Applied Math and rather than the actual content from his classes helping him in consulting, he said the general “framework of thinking” (e.g., concepts like statistical significance, weighing risk and reward in order to prioritize) helped him quite a bit in consulting. As a result of interviewees responses, there definitely seemed to be a consensus in quantitative backgrounds or studies serving as a valuable skillset in consulting.

**Limitations & Positionality**

One limitation is my personal friendship and relationship some of the individuals that were interviewed. My relationship with interviewees could potentially increase the chance for biases to influence my research. Hence, during the beginning of the interview, I stated the purpose of my research to interviewees and the importance of not letting our personal relationship affect their answers. Another limitation to consider with this research are my experiences with consulting. I’ve interned as a consultant at Oliver Wyman and will be returning as a consultant for full-time employment. Thus, my familiarity with the industry, preparation process, and consultant role may also increase the potential for biases that may influence my research. Thus, it was critical for me to rely solely on literature and data gathered from interviews to guide my research, findings, and reasoning.

The final potential limitation to consider with this research is the low sample size. Due to the time constraints of this research project, I only interviewed seven individuals. A higher sample size (e.g., 30 respondents) would have increased the representation of my respondents (racially, socioeconomically, gender, etc.) and accuracy of my data because I would have a larger pool of data to pull from and more consistency. As a result of this, it was important for me to select respondents from a range of academic disciplines (particularly for the entry-level consultants) and to ensure respondents provided the most candid responses within their abilities.

**Conclusion**

In this research, we aimed to answer the question of how a liberal arts and science college prepares students for careers in consulting. Overall, Harvard’s liberal arts curriculum is able to prepare students quite adequately for management consulting firms in various facets. Students are able to develop interpersonal skills, competencies, and task management skills that are essential to consultant’s day-to-day work and ability to perform well. Students are able to develop these skills through the combination of their coursework, extracurriculars, and other experiences outside of the classroom (job, internship, sports, etc.). Additionally, students’ concentrations and academic backgrounds do not play as significant of a role in their ability to be employed and perform at management consulting firms because so much of consulting revolves around being able to learn quickly and on the job. But having a quantitative academic background can be valuable as a consultant because a lot of projects from clients require consultants to develop or utilize that skillset.

Now, as a result of this research, there are several areas and questions that could be further researched. I would work to further examine the role of elitism in consulting recruitment through two avenues. Firstly, how does targeted recruiting efforts and networking opportunities affect the candidates that are recruited and selected? In my interviews with Carly and Tiana, they noted about how 50% of candidates are recruited from target schools (a set of selective universities defined by the firm’s recruitment team, including Harvard, Princeton, MIT, etc.) and 50% of candidates are recruited from non-target schools. While interviewing processes remain the same for the two groups, more recruitment efforts are put into the target schools through on-campus recruiting and networking opportunities (management consulting firm presentations, coffee chats, etc.). During Tiana’s and Mark’s interviews, they also reiterated the importance of networking and establishing connections during the recruiting process. This difference in recruitment efforts may create gaps in learning and networking opportunities for non-target schools, which would be interesting and necessary to further explore.

The second avenue that should be further explored in regard to elitism is how does one’s institutional reputation and pedigree grant them more academic freedom in college and in their pursuits of consulting? Mecca raised a very intriguing point in that he believed if he went to another liberal arts college that was less “popularized”, such as Williams or Swarthmore, the reality is that he would have to study something “business related” or technical, such as Economics or Math. Mecca alluded to the fact that Harvard’s brand name alone draws a lot of positive assumptions about his overall intelligence and capabilities While his concentration didn’t matter so much at Harvard, he didn’t know if that case applied to every liberal arts college. Cameron also raised a point around management consulting firms intentionally seeking out students from “prestigious” schools because consulting is a client-facing role and clients like they’re receiving value from consultants with prestigious academic backgrounds.

My current research provided insightful findings into how a liberal arts curriculum at a place like Harvard can adequately prepare students for a career in consulting very well. However, a liberal arts curriculum itself may not be the only variable helping Harvard students in their consulting career pursuits. It is critical to further examine the role of elitism in recruitment processes and efforts, and how methods of evaluating candidates’ studies, capabilities, or other factors may differ across institutions. Further researching these areas will allow for a more transparent understanding of the recruitment process across all liberal art colleges, and even pre-professional institutions.

**Bibliography**

Cosentino, M. P. (2005). *Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation* (Fourth). Burgee Press.

Jia, A. J., & Chu, S. C. (2021, June 5). *The Harvard Crimson: Class of 2021 by the numbers*. The Crimson. Retrieved October 4, 2021, from <https://features.thecrimson.com/2021/senior-survey/after-harvard/>.

McClennan, G. S., & Savoca, M. (2018). Chapter 2: Student Development and Campus Employment. In K. Creager (Ed.), *A Good Job: Campus Employment as a High-Impact Practice*. essay, Stylus Pub.

McClennan, G. S., & Savoca, M. (2018). Chapter 4: Campus Employment and Student Learning. In K. Creager (Ed.), *A Good Job: Campus Employment as a High-Impact Practice*. essay, Stylus Pub.

NACE Staff. (2020, January 13). *Key Attributes Employers Want to See on Students' Resumes*. National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). Retrieved October 26, 2021, from <https://www.naceweb.org/talent-acquisition/candidate-selection/key-attributes-employers-want-to-see-on-students-resumes/>.

*Requirements and Gen Ed Categories*. Harvard College Program in General Education. (2021).

Rivera, L. A. (2015). *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton University Press.

YouTube. (2021, June 4). *New Rule: The College Scam & Real Time with Bill Maher*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_x5SeXNabd8&ab\_channel=RealTimewithBillMaher.

Zakaria, F. (2015). *In Defense of a Liberal Education*.

**Appendix 1**

**Interview Guide**

**Note:** Interviews are semi-structured with many potential follow up questions. Not every follow up question was asked and the use of follow up questions varied between respondents and was dependent upon their responses.

**Entry Level Consultants**

1. Could you give me a little bit of a background on yourself, including your concentration, house, and anything else you’d like to share?
2. Why’d you decide to go into consulting?
3. How did Harvard prepare you for your consulting role?
   1. Follow up: What skills have you developed during your time at Harvard?
   2. Follow up: Where did you develop those skills?
4. Why’d you study [*insert* *concentration*] at Harvard?
5. What skills did you develop from your concentration and coursework?
   1. Follow up: Which of those skills have been useful in your role as a consultant?
   2. Follow up: Do you feel like the liberal arts and science curriculum and exploration of courses helped you develop any other skills?
6. Did your concentration and studies play a role in your ability to do well as a consultant?
   1. Follow up: Do you feel like your concentration played a large factor in your ability to receive your role?
7. What extracurriculars, jobs, or projects were you mainly involved with on campus?
   1. Follow up: Did you hold any leadership roles?
   2. Follow up: What skills did you develop from [*insert extracurricular/leadership role*]? (Repeat question as many times needed)
   3. Follow up: Which of those skills have you used in your role as a consultant?
8. What are the most important skills you’ve developed and used in your first year as a consultant?
9. Is there anything else relevant that you would like to share about your role as a consultant or experiences at Harvard?

**Senior-Level Consultants (Partners, Principals, Engagement Managers, or Project Leaders)**

1. Could you give me a little bit of a background on yourself, including what college you attended, what you studied, and how long you’ve been working for [insert firm]?
2. Why’d you decide to go into consulting?
3. You’ve had the opportunity to work with many entry-level consultants now. What makes an excellent consultant?
4. How can college students aspiring to become consultants develop those attributes of an ideal consultant?
   1. Follow up: How can aspiring consultants in college develop those skills through coursework (e.g., is there a particular major they should study or particular classes they should take)?
   2. Follow up: How can aspiring consultants in college develop those skills outside of coursework (e.g., extracurriculars, etc.)?
5. Looking back at your experience and after working with other consultants, do you think a pre-professional or liberal arts undergraduate education is more effective for preparing one for a consulting career?
6. Is there anything else relevant that you would like to share about the consultant role or your experience in consulting?

**Recruiter**

1. Could you give me a little bit of a background on yourself, including what college you attended, what you studied, and how long you’ve been recruiting for [*insert firm*]?
2. Why’d you decide to go into recruiting for [*insert firm*]?
3. Where do you primarily recruit students from?
   1. Follow up: Do you primarily recruit students from a certain academic or extracurricular background (such as economics or students a part of consulting groups)?
4. After recruiting for \_\_\_\_\_\_ cycles, as a firm, what does an ideal candidate look like for the consultant role?
   1. Follow up: Why do you look for the [insert recruiter’s response] in a consultant?
   2. Follow up: Specifically, are there any tangible things recruiting teams are seeking for, such as a skill set, a specific major background, extracurricular, etc.
5. How are the skills consultants develop in college transferable to the consultant role?
6. What are the most important skills for consultants to develop in their first year?
7. Is there anything else relevant that you would like to share about the consultant role and hiring process?