Super People

By JAMES ATLAS

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A BROCHURE arrives in the mail announcing this year’s winners of a prestigious fellowship to study abroad. The recipients are allotted a full page each, with a photo and a thick paragraph chronicling their achievements. It’s a select group to begin with, but even so, there doesn’t seem to be anyone on this list who hasn’t mastered at least one musical instrument; helped build a school or hospital in some foreign land; excelled at a sport; attained fluency in two or more languages; had both a major and a minor, sometimes two, usually in unrelated fields (philosophy and molecular science, mathematics and medieval literature); and yet found time — how do they have any? — to enjoy such arduous hobbies as mountain biking and white-water kayaking.

Let’s call this species Super Person.

Do we have some anomalous cohort here? Achievement freaks on a scale we haven’t seen before? Has our hysterically competitive, education-obsessed society finally outdone itself in its tireless efforts to produce winners whose abilities are literally off the charts? And if so, what convergence of historical, social and economic forces has been responsible for the emergence of this new type? Why does Super Person appear among us now?

Perhaps there’s an evolutionary cause, and these robust intellects reflect the leap in the physical development of humans that we ascribe to better diets, exercise and other forms of health-consciousness. (Stephen Jay Gould called this mechanism “extended scope.”) All you have to do is watch a long rally between Novak Djokovic and Rafael Nadal to recognize — if you’re old enough — how much faster the sport has become over the last half century.

The Super Person training for the college application wars is the academic version of the Super Person slugging it out on the tennis court. For wonks, Harvard Yard is Arthur Ashe Stadium.
Or maybe it’s a function of economics. Writing in a recent issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, John Quiggin, a visiting professor of economics at Johns Hopkins University, argues that the Great Academic Leap Forward “is both a consequence of, and a contributor to, the growing inequality and polarization of American society.” Nearly 25 percent of the annual income in America goes to 1 percent of the population, creating an ever-wealthier upper class. Yet there’s no extra space being made in our best colleges for high-achieving students. “Taken together,” Professor Quiggin points out, “the Ivy League and other elite institutions educate something less than 1 percent of the U.S. college-age population” — a percentage that’s going to shrink further as the population of college-bound students continues to grow.

Preparing for Super Personhood begins early. “We see kids who’ve been training from an early age,” says Charles Bardes, chairman of admissions at Weill Cornell Medical College. “The bar has been set higher. You have to be at the top of the pile.”

And to clamber up there you need a head start. Thus the well-documented phenomenon of helicopter parents. In her influential book “Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety,” Judith Warner quotes a mom who gave up her career to be a full-time parent: “The children are the center of the household and everything goes around them. You want to do everything and be everything for them because this is your job now.” Bursting with pent-up energy, the mothers transfer their shelved career ambitions to their children. Since that book was published in 2005, the situation has only intensified. “One of my daughter’s classmates has a pilot’s license; 12-year-olds are taking calculus,” Ms. Warner said last week.

REMEMBER the Dumb Kid in your math class who couldn’t understand what a square root was? Gone. Vanished from the earth like the stegosaurus. If your child is at an elite school, there are no dumb kids in his or her math class — only smart and smarter.

Even the most brilliant students have to work harder now to make their nut. The competition for places in the upper tier of higher education is a lot tougher than it was in the 1960s and ’70s, when having good grades and SAT scores in the high 1200s was generally sufficient to get you into a respectable college. My contemporaries love to talk about how they would have been turned down by the schools they attended if they were applying today. This is no illusion: 19 percent of applicants were admitted to my Ivy League school for the class of ’71; 6 percent were admitted for the class of ’15.

Graduate and professional school statistics are just as daunting. Dr. Bardes told me that he routinely interviewed students with perfect or near perfect grade point averages and SATs —
enough to fill the class several times over. Last year 5,722 applicants competed for 101 places at Weill Cornell; the odds of getting in there are even worse than those of getting your 3-year-old into a New York City private school.

“Applicant pools are stronger and deeper,” concurs Stephen Singer, the former director of college counseling at Horace Mann, the New York City private school renowned for its driven students. “It used to be that if you were editor of the paper or president of your class you could get in almost anywhere,” Mr. Singer says. “Now it’s ‘What did you do as president? How did you make the paper special?’ Kids file stories from Bosnia or El Salvador on their summer vacations.” Such students are known in college admissions circles as “pointy” — being well-rounded doesn’t cut it anymore. You need to have a spike in your achievement chart.

AND it doesn’t hurt to be from an exotic foreign land. “Colleges are reaching out to a broader range of people around the world today,” says William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard’s dean of undergraduate admissions. “They go to Africa and China. If you want first-class mathematicians, try looking in Bulgaria.” In case they miss someone, many colleges now have recruiting agents in other countries who are paid commissions — by both the parents and the college — to help “place” those students. Globalization comes to the college admissions world.

Just as the concentration of wealth at the very top reduces wealth at the bottom, the aggressive hoarding of intellectual capital in the most sought-after colleges and universities has curtailed our investment in less prestigious institutions. There’s no curricular trickle-down effect. The educator E. D. Hirsch Jr. has pointed to a trend he labels the Matthew Effect, citing the Biblical injunction: “‘For unto every one that hath shall be given and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.’ We’ve lifted up rich kids beyond their competence,” he says, “while the verbal skills of the black underclass continue to decline.”

Affluent families can literally buy a better résumé. “In a bad economy, the demographic shift has the potential to reinforce a socio-economic gap,” says Todd Breyfogle, who oversaw the honors program at the University of Denver and is now director of seminars at the Aspen Institute. “Only those families who can help their students be more competitive will have students who can get into elite institutions.”

Schools are now giving out less scholarship money in the tight economy, favoring students who can pay full freight. Meanwhile, Super People jet off on Mom and Dad’s dime to archaeological digs in the Negev desert, when they might once have opted to be counselors in training at Camp Shewahmegen for the summer. And the privilege of laboring as a volunteer in a day care center in
Guatemala — “service learning,” as it’s sometimes called — doesn’t come cheap once you tote up the air fare, room and board.

Colleges collude in the push to upgrade talent. “It’s a huge industry,” Mr. Breyfogle says. “Harvard has a whole office devoted to preparing applicants for the Rhodes and Marshall scholarships.” At its worst, this kind of coaching results in candidates who are treated as what he calls “management projects.”

“They’ve been put in the hands of makeover experts who have a stake in making them look better than they are, leveraging their achievement,” Mr. Breyfogle says.

“We are concerned about that,” confirmed Jeff Rickey, head of admissions at St. Lawrence University, whom I tracked down at the National Association for College Admission Counseling conference in New Orleans. “If they joined a club, when did they join it? Maybe they play 15 instruments, but when they list them out, the amount of time they spent on each isn’t that much.” Mr. Breyfogle is also on the alert for résumé stuffing. “They’ve worked at an orphanage in Katmandu, but it turns out it was over Christmas break,” he gave as an example. “It’s easier to be amazing now.” All you need is money.

O.K., so maybe some Super People aren’t so Super. But the fact is, they do a lot of good. When I read about a student who has worked at a mental health clinic in Bolivia or founded a farmers’ market in a low-income neighborhood in Washington, I’m impressed. (All we did in college, I seem to recall, is smoke dope and play pool.)

And it’s not as if the Super People get to slack off when they graduate. There’s too much competition.

In the end, the whole idea of Super Person is kind of exhausting to contemplate. All that striving, working, doing. A line of Whitman’s quoted by Dr. Bardes in our conversation has stayed with me: “I loaf and invite my soul.”

Isn’t that where the real work gets done?
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