

The Invisible University or Academic Elitism

by [Dr. Reid Cornwell](#)

In writing about scholarly networks in Netspace, Barry Wellman, Emanuel Koku, and Jeremy Hunsinger have described such groups as Invisible Universities. We accept their opinion as both personal and professional.

Invisible colleges provide forums for sharing, disseminating, and testing new ideas, as well as for exchanging information about teaching, research, funding opportunities, academic bureaucracies, and personal situations. They promote scholarly identity and purpose and stimulate discussion of theory, methods, and findings. Ideas get transmitted more quickly and innovatively than in formal journals constrained by publication lags and orthodoxy promoting refereeing, though this too is changing in the online era. Typically, they contain:

a core group of elite scholars;

a high degree of communication through formal (conferences, papers) and informal channels among members;

frequent communication between prominent core scholars and subsets of less prominent, non-core scholars;

interactions among core members and their adherents hold the invisible college together;

contacts between members of invisible colleges and outsiders enable mutual exchange of information.

This quote begs the following questions:

1. Who decides who is 'elite'?
2. Do the 'elite' hold the power of social controls?
3. Who decides who makes up the core group?
4. Do the others have any say in developing the rules of discourse?
5. How do the 'elite' handle challenges to their status?
6. Is the governance a meritocracy, autocracy, or democracy.
7. **Is there an "elitist" argument in the quote?**

One wonders if Hunsinger would discount himself as a member of the 'elite' group. His publication record provides no support. By comparison, Wellman is a prolific writer, researcher, scholar, and educator and can without argument lay claim to 'elite' status.

Does this comparison falsify the nature of 'elite' status? Is 'elite' far too subjective to have descriptive value? Is this status bestowed by the 'elite' as they see fit? Again, who is the gate-keeper?

One could assume that the mere use of the term is an expression of academic arrogance. In the alternative, it could be assumed that Wellman was tossing a bone to the aspirant needy.

Finally, how does elitism resolve with the Hunsinger writing below?

Submitted by Jeremy Hunsinger (Virginia Tech) on Fri, 2006/10/06 - 8:24am.

Print: British sociologist Harry Collins asked a scientist who specializes in gravitational waves to answer seven questions about the physics of these waves. Collins, who has made an amateur study of this field for more than 30 years but has never actually practiced it, also answered the questions himself. Then he submitted both sets of answers to a panel of judges who are themselves gravitational-wave researchers. The judges couldn't tell the impostor from one of their own. Collins argues that he is therefore as qualified as anyone to discuss this field, even though he can't conduct experiments in it. ----- Harry Collins, noted sociologist, learns physics as well as or better than some physicists, is able to discuss and describe physics similarly. This experiment shows, to some extent, that one does not have to be inside of a scientific field in order to study and understand a scientific field. That is to say, one can know science without being a scientist. (Which we all knew to some extent) However, more importantly what it seems to indicate is that Science and Technology in Society researchers in their understandings of science and scientific practice could be, and likely are, just as correct as scientists in their observations of science. Now, as a justificatory act, this is important, but it is also important because external observation,outsider research, ethnographic, is generally thought poorly of in the sciences as a result of the 'science wars' . However, everyone had a sneaking suspicion that the science wars were not about science as much as policing the boundaries of a culture of expertise. What this paper then says in that light... is that the boundary, unless well policed, is a fiction, and knowledge of a science or discipline can be had without specific participation in that discipline.

My read is that, there is no room for elitism in true scholarship. It seems to me that real status is an artifact of scholarship and accomplishment.

Barry Wellman, Emanuel Koku, and Jeremy Hunsinger (2006). Chapter 57: Networked Scholarship in J. Weiss et al. (eds.), *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, 1429–1447.C 2006 Springer. Printed in the Netherlands.

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