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By JARED SANDBERG



Hiring by School Tie Happens All the Time, But Is It a Good Idea?

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(See Corrections & Amplifications item [below](#).)

Peter Ireland finds the continuing tug of school and fraternity ties in the business world bizarre but difficult to escape. The founder of [antventurecapital.com](#) once helped four graduates of Washington State University, home of the Cougars, get financing for their pet project. Whenever the four met someone who was also a Cougar, "They'd jump up and down and shout, 'He's a Coug!'" Mr. Ireland recalls.


He also says a good number of his classmates -- mostly "party animals," he notes -- ended up in the marketing department of a major consumer-brand company with offices in western Canada.

And he remembers how much effort his former business partner put into helping a fellow fraternity member. The young man had an idea for a door lock that people could use if they felt a hotel's locks were insufficient. "It was dumb," says Mr. Ireland. But "my friend started going out of his way to provide assistance for this guy." When Mr. Ireland asked why, his partner said, "He's a fraternity brother," as though that explained it all.

School ties are immensely powerful in the business world, providing preexisting networks of relationships and low search costs. But while relying on them often works out just fine, lost in the mix of well-meaning loyalty to educational institutions and nostalgia for the past is the possibility that the ties that bind can also blind, undermining corporate efforts to build meritocracies.

Everyone knows that the educational degrees you earned can affect your career. How else to explain the spate of exaggerated claims of academic prowess among top executives, some of whom have decades-long track records but nonetheless continue to inflate precareer educational achievements. Most recently, Radio Shack was stung by this problem. But it also happened to **Bausch & Lomb**, **Veritas Software**, A.T. Kearney and the U.S. Olympic Committee when they welcomed executives to their top echelons.

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If prestigious academic degrees make job candidates more attractive, it isn't a big leap to suggest that hiring people with shared experiences at particular schools can make sense too. Walter "Woody" Powell, a professor of business and education at Stanford University, argues that the door-opening component of school connections has the advantage of generating mobility for minorities and others who are underrepresented in the business world. But Prof. Powell also notes research that shows that school ties are less likely to produce a diversity of creative solutions to business problems.

Many people forget as the years go by that some of their classmates weren't that productive and others got into school thanks to charitable notions of merit. "I wouldn't hire any of my fraternity brothers," says commercial real-estate executive Jason Anderson with a laugh. But not everyone feels that way. Three of Sen. Trent Lott's chiefs of staff were fraternity brothers from Ole Miss. "A lot of his former staff" were Sigma Nus, says one of them.

When Texas A&M grad David McMahon worked at Union Carbide, he was the college-relations representative there for his alma mater. When he heard of job openings, he would call the school and get 15 or so résumés within the hour. "If I could get there with my candidates before another guy from another school could get there," he says, "I had a better shot."

David Davis, formerly the chief of staff for a U.S. senator from Texas, favored Texas A&M graduates even though he wasn't one himself. He says they exuded a love of Texas and country.

Louis Conzo played a lot of Dungeons & Dragons in college, not the sort of detail he'd feature on a résumé. But a fellow player recruited him for an engineering job "because of our association in our gaming group," which was kind of like a fraternity, Mr. Conzo says.

Rob Meyer, the chief executive of a software company, warns that "common backgrounds also include common and negative perceptions of other places and groups" that can cause problems. When he was considering a joint venture with a company that had a large number of same-school graduates, he worried that graduates of other schools might have a "reasonable belief" that they wouldn't advance.

April Benetollo is a marketing director at a software company. She says that when a University of Alabama graduate headed her company, "the overwhelming majority of us were Alabama graduates." Then a graduate of Auburn University, also in Alabama, was hired as president, and since then a growing number of Auburn graduates are showing up. The rivalries go way too far, Ms. Benetollo says. "You almost grow up thinking if someone goes to the other school, they're stupid," Ms. Benetollo says.

Yale Law School graduate Stephen Weiss got help from other Yalies landing a summer clerkship at a firm where he later worked as an associate. But he concedes that not all his former classmates would be good hires. There were some, he says, "whose emotional intelligence wasn't great," while others were "mesmerized by the sound of their own voices." He says he has decided that "all you know is the kid was smart enough to get in and graduate. Beyond that you don't know a hell of a lot more."

Write to Jared Sandberg at jared.sandberg@wsj.com¹. To see past columns, go to [CareerJournal.com](http://www.CareerJournal.com)².

Corrections & Amplifications: Peter Ireland is the founder of antiventurecapital.com. His first name was incorrectly given as Patrick in the initial version of this column.

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