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Benner, K., & Green, E. L. (2026). *Miracle children: Race, education, and a true story of false promises.* Metropolitan Books.

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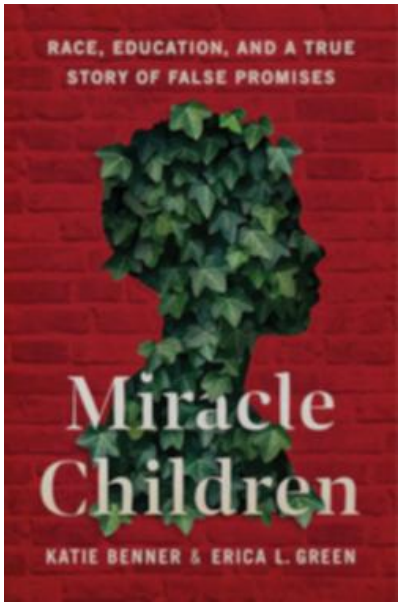

Both miracles and scams usually start out small and then grow large. It often takes a while to tell one from the other. In 2005, when Michael and Tracy Landry established a home school for five children in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana, there was no reason to suppose that their school, eponymously named the T. M. Landry College Preparatory School, was either. It began simply enough as a reaction to the Landry's apparently legitimate concerns about the flaws in their own children's education.

Over the next seven years the school's enrollment rose; the school grew out of its early home at the Landrys' private residence and moved to a former warehouse at 1800 Rees Street, also in Breaux Bridge. But the physical growth of the school was tiny compared to the enormous growth in its reputation.

The T. M. Landry school gained national fame for its apparently miraculous success in sending underprivileged Black students from rural Louisiana to the nation's most elite Ivy League universities. But with fame came closer scrutiny, particularly from Katie Benner and Erica L. Green, two prize-winning *New York Times* journalists. Their investigation was conducted from 2018 until 2025, the results of which they reported in *Miracle Children*.

Let's Start with Miracles, We'll Get to Scams in Due Time

In 1748, Scot David Hume defined a miracle as a violation of a law of nature. He elaborated such a law as "a regularity of past experience projected by the mind to future cases." He argued that the evidence for a miracle is rarely sufficient to suspend rational belief because a closer look has always revealed that what was reported as a miracle was more likely false, resulting from misperception, mistransmission, or deception. Hume's contemporary, Immanuel

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Kant, took a similar tone, but to avoid conflict with established religious beliefs he hedged his bets by explaining that miracles seemed to have been more frequent in the distant past yet have become very rare recently.

Extensive experience over the two centuries since Hume's path-breaking work has only reinforced his caution in accepting the validity of any event whose very existence contradicts frequently confirmed experience.

With Hume and Kant providing the epistemological background it should come as no surprise that many were skeptical when they heard the stories of a Louisiana miracle emanating from the T. M. Landry College Preparatory School.

Many of the facts of the matter are undisputed. A very large proportion of the students who graduated from the T. M. Landry school were accepted by top-tier colleges, not always Harvard or Yale—although videos of Landry students opening their acceptance letters from such places is what garnered the most media attention—but without question, they were all first-rate institutions. How did they do it?

To begin to get an answer to this question let us review what evidence colleges typically use to make admissions decisions:

- High school records of courses taken, and grades received.
- Rank in class (with growing evidence of grade inflation colleges are lately focusing more attention on rankings than GPAs).
- Letters of recommendation.
- Student-generated essays often describing their out-of-school activities and their backgrounds.
- Admission test scores (SATs and/or ACTs).

How colleges use this evidence, how they weight it, how they transform it, may be both idiosyncratic and secret, but anyone considering the first four items on this list could not help but remember Sir Josiah Charles Stamp's (1880-1941) warning that:

> The government [is] extremely fond of amassing great quantities of statistics. These are raised to the nth degree, the cube roots are extracted, and the results are arranged into elaborate and impressive displays. What must be kept ever in mind, however, is that in every case, the figures are first put down by a village watchman, **and he puts down anything he damn well pleases.** [emphasis added]

After reading Benner and Green's evocative narrative it is clear that T. M. Landry's policies were informed by Sir Stamp's observation,[1] for much of its success seems to have been built on deceptive practices.

Apparently, school transcripts were filled with courses not taken and associated high grades not earned. Rank in class was similarly counterfeit; in a

[1] Indeed, it would not have been surprising to discover *Quidquid ei plane placet, deponit* inscribed over the school's gateway substituting for *Lux et Veritas* as a guiding principle.

typical T. M. Landry graduating class, 50% were ranked in the top 10%—reminiscent of Lake Woebegone, where all children were above average.

Letters of recommendation were completely fraudulent with the same letter often being used for multiple students (but usually for a different college). Such letters typically included reports that the student:

- Single-handedly built a nonprofit organization that regularly collects huge quantities of groceries to be handed out to needy families in the area;
- Ran a tutoring service for younger students;
- Was an all-county track star; and
- Played 2nd chair violin in the Louisiana Symphony Orchestra.

And, to paint the flower, student essays were often written jointly by the student and Michael Landry, in which the student's background was fictionalized —a homelife with two hard-working parents wanting the very best for their child was transformed to a single mother on welfare with only horrific occasional visits from an alcoholic and drug-addled father, and the student's modest 3-bedroom, 1½ bath home was reported as a shack with neither central heating nor indoor plumbing.

Imagining myself in the place of a college's admission committee when faced with such a remarkable application led me to think of Yogi Berra's response to a sports reporter who asked what he thought of Sandy Koufax's 25-5 season. Yogi explained "I understand the 25 wins, but what I can't understand is how he lost 5 games." The miracle is not how T. M. Landry students with background stories like these were accepted to elite colleges but rather how could any of them have ever been rejected?

The answer to this could only have been that the student's admission test scores were stridently out of phase with the rest of the application. A low ACT score would call into question the validity of the rest of the student's application, so it was not a surprise that essentially the entire focus of every student's education at the T. M. Landry School was on the ACT test and how to maximize the student's score on it.

Preparing for (Gaming) the Test

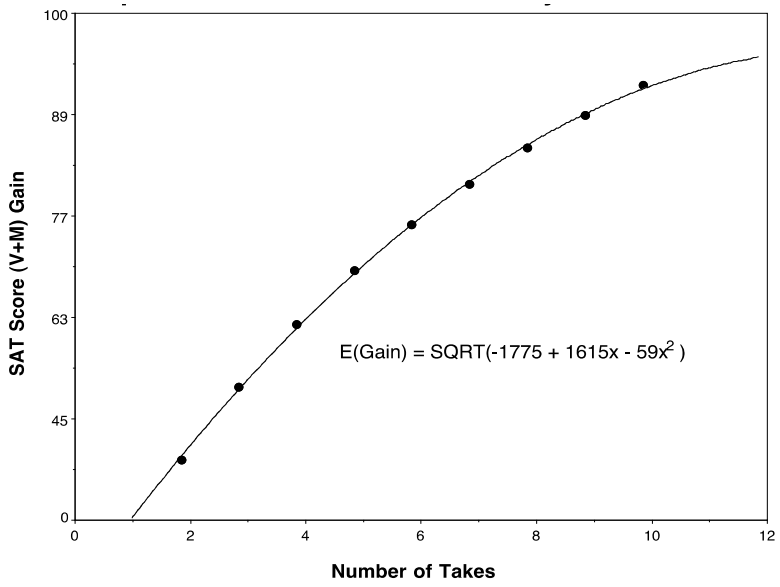
Let us begin with a metaphor. Suppose on a frigid January evening we enter a cold house. One obvious option would be to turn the thermostat up to 70 degrees, which would stir the furnace into action until it reached that comfortable goal. An alternative to that strategy, which would save money, would be to hold a match under the thermostat until it reached 70 degrees. This latter option seems to be the strategy adopted by the T. M. Landry school. Students were focused almost entirely on practicing for the ACT. They took and retook publicly available forms; they discussed the logic of each question and its answer with their instructors and with one another. All of the rewards that the school had to offer, including which colleges they would be permitted to apply to, depended sharply on their scores.

So it was that essentially the only check on the dishonest application were standardized tests. One would think that college officials—and anyone else who cared about having an honest and valid entrance process—would argue forcibly to keep a prominent role for admissions tests in the process and zealously guarded their validity (see Lubinski, 2025; Wainer & Robinson, 2026). Shockingly, they did not. Instead, they adopted one or more of three steps to reduce the consequences of test scores:

Superscores. Suppose we have a shooting contest. One competitor is limited to just one shot whereas the other one can shoot as many times as he desires, counting only the best one. That, in essence, is the idea behind superscores. Students take the test as often as they like and then only submit their highest score. Obviously, this introduces a bias and the people with multiple opportunities will be submitting a score that is higher than their true ability. It is easy to calculate how much a boost this provides. Figure 1 shows how large a gain is expected on the SAT as a function of how often the test was taken. The gain can easily be significant. There is a similar gain function for the ACT.

Figure 1

Expected Score Gains Due Solely to Chance



Source: Wainer et al. (2024).

Make admissions test scores optional. This policy was first put into place in 1969 by Bowdoin College. What they found was that although all applicants took the SAT only those with high scores chose to submit them. The unsubmitted scores, had they been available to Bowdoin, would've allowed the admissions committee to make a more accurate assessment of each student's likelihood of success at Bowdoin (Wainer, 2011). Obviously making admission tests optional reduces their value.

Eliminate admissions tests altogether. Why would a school consider this? There may be many answers but one revealing reason takes us back to the early 1930s when a young Henry Chauncey was working in the admissions office at Harvard shortly after his own graduation. Excited by the positive results the use of admissions tests was yielding at Columbia, he became enthusiastic about the idea of using entrance exams at Harvard to open its enrollment to a far broader range of students. Harvard's president Abbott Lawrence Lowell rejected his idea because using tests would not exclude enough Jews—he preferred quotas instead.[2]

And What Happened?

Disappointingly, it is here that Benner and Green's reporting gets even hazier. We know that a remarkable proportion of the students who attended T. M. Landry were, despite their uncertain preparation, accepted to first-class colleges. What we don't know is how they fared once they got in. I was hoping for some sort of accounting (e.g. "85% graduated within 6 years" or "20% dropped out in the first semester, and only 40% eventually graduated") but nowhere was there such an accounting. Instead there were only anecdotes. Anecdotes can enliven data but they are not a substitute for them. An understanding of this has led every first-year stat student since time immemorial to learn that ….

The Plural of "Anecdote" Is Not "Data"

So instead of facts Benner and Green tell us stories. Apparently, some students did fine, others dropped out, some quickly, others after a while. One former student explained that unless the subject of the course was the ACT she was completely lost. There was an apparent trend for students who transferred into T. M. Landry late in their high school careers to stand a better chance of surviving in college. Why this might be true is uncertain. One reason could be that before they came to T. M. Landry they had been in real classes that taught real subjects and/or they might have been students of talent who felt that their collegiate ambitions would have a better chance of being fulfilled coming from T. M. Landry, whose sensational reputation was spreading. And finally, Michael Landry might have realized that the school's reputation for getting its graduates into elite schools would be further burnished if he could more selectively choose better students on the basis of their ACT scores. This would increase both their likelihood of getting into top schools and succeeding there, where the light of their success would further bathe the methods and staff of T. M. Landry in positive publicity.[3]

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[2] Lowell was successful at implementing his policy, for Harvard reduced the percentage of Jewish freshmen at Harvard from almost 28% in 1925 to less than 15% when he retired in 1933. Chauncey left Harvard to found the Educational Testing Service. Lowell's successor as Harvard's president was James Bryant Conant, who reversed Lowell's policies. The administration building at the Educational Testing Service is named Conant Hall.

[3] Apropos of this is the story of a famed football coach whose team had just been defeated in the championship game. He walked into the somber locker room and told his team that they should not fault themselves. He explained, "The blame for the defeat is completely mine. I should have recruited better athletes."

Evidence of various kinds of malfeasance and incompetence by the staff and management of T. M. Landry grew, amplified by Benner and Green's reporting, which led to a 2019 FBI investigation and thence to the school's closing in 2022.

Coda

I have been writing reviews of technical books for the last 50 years. During this time I have observed two things: (i) such published books usually contain a fair amount of facts and wisdom, if you have but the wit to extract them; and (ii) most statisticians do not write as well as most readers would desire. More often than seldom the opening line of a technical book might be something akin to "Let I be an index set"—a long way from "Call me Ishmael." This is not to say that there are not many statisticians who write beautifully (e.g. Erich Lehmann, Fred Mosteller, and Steve Stigler are three who come to mind whose prose is sometimes so evocative as to be poetic). That said, when picking up a technical book to read I would pray briefly for the Almighty to grant the author skill in constructing descriptive prose that is both effective and graceful.

With this as background it is easy to understand how avidly I was looking forward to reading this book, authored, as it was, by two world-class journalists. But turnabout being fair play, I must admit that as I read the book, I wished that they knew more statistics[4]. I will not attempt to be exhaustive in enumerating their statistical shortcomings but let me describe three of them:

> **1.** In any study of an experimental treatment (in this case the educational program at T. M. Landry) one must **pick the dependent variable wisely.** In this situation there are two: (i) what proportion of students got into the college they desired, and (ii) how did they do after they got in. Benner & Green focus almost exclusively on (i) even though (ii) is the variable of crucial importance. And for neither do anecdotes measure up to plain unadorned facts.
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> **2. Strenuously avoid making claims that are not borne out by facts**. If facts are not reported, but instead just selected anecdotes and stories it is especially important to get those stories right (for stories are harder to check than facts and so the reporters' accuracy is critical). But some of the stories they told do not hold water (I couldn't check many of them). For example, on page 76 they claim, "Princeton relied heavily on legacy admissions to guarantee spots for the types of students it was infamous for coddling… legacy students (are those) with the strongest egos and the weakest grades." In fact, the proportion of legacy admits to Princeton has held steady at about 12% for decades, and the average SAT score for a legacy admit was higher than for nonlegacy, as was their Princeton grade point average. A recent poll of Princeton alumni found the most

[4] Not an impossible combination: Benner and Green's colleagues Gina Kolata and Brent Staples combine Pulitzer level prose with an expert's knowledge of statistics.

> ardent supporters for the legacy policy came from its African American alumni.

On the same page they discuss improvements in Harvard's enrollment of Black students was due, they claim, principally to the efforts of Willliam Fitzsimmons,[5] who joined the faculty in 1986. It seemed odd to me that they would omit any mention of much honored David Evans,[6] who, after getting his graduate degree in electrical engineering from Princeton, began as an admissions director at Harvard more than a decade earlier than Fitzsimmons, and during the course of his 50 years of service he is credited with the lion's share of Harvard's gains in racial equity.

And, finally, reporters must remember that they can't eat a statistical omelet if they are not involved in retrieving the statistical egg. Should they try anyway, they run the risk of:

> **3. Promulgating policies based on a false premise.** On page 99, they describe a hypothetical situation in which there are two students who do equally well on a college entrance exam, but one comes from a poor family and the other a more wealthy one. The admissions office should favor the student from the poor background who, they suggest, is likely to do better based on her demonstrated grit and determination. This idea only makes sense if you say it fast. In fact, exactly the opposite is true (both from a formal statistical point of view and empirically). This phenomenon was laid out in 1947, by Harvard statistician Truman Kelley and is called Kelley's Equation in his honor. Since then many agreed that this might seem counter-intuitive to an untrained mind and so it is often referred to as Kelley's Paradox (Wainer & Brown, 2004). The equation that Truman Kelley derived is:

$$\hat{\tau} = r\mathrm{x} + (1 - r)\mu$$

Kelley's equation relates the estimated true score ($\hat{\tau}$) to the observed score (x). It tells us that the best estimate is obtained by shrinking the observed score in the direction of the mean score (μ) of the group that the examinee came from. The amount of the shrinkage is determined by the reliability (r) of the test.

Note how Kelley's equation works. If a test is completely unreliable ($r = 0$), as would be the case if each examinee's score was just a random number, the observed score would not count at all and the estimated true score is merely the group mean. If the test scores were perfectly reliable ($r = 1$), there would be no regression effect at all, and the true score would be the same as the observed score. The reliability of virtually all tests lies between these two extremes, so the estimated true score will be somewhere between the observed score and the mean. This result is shown in Figure 2.

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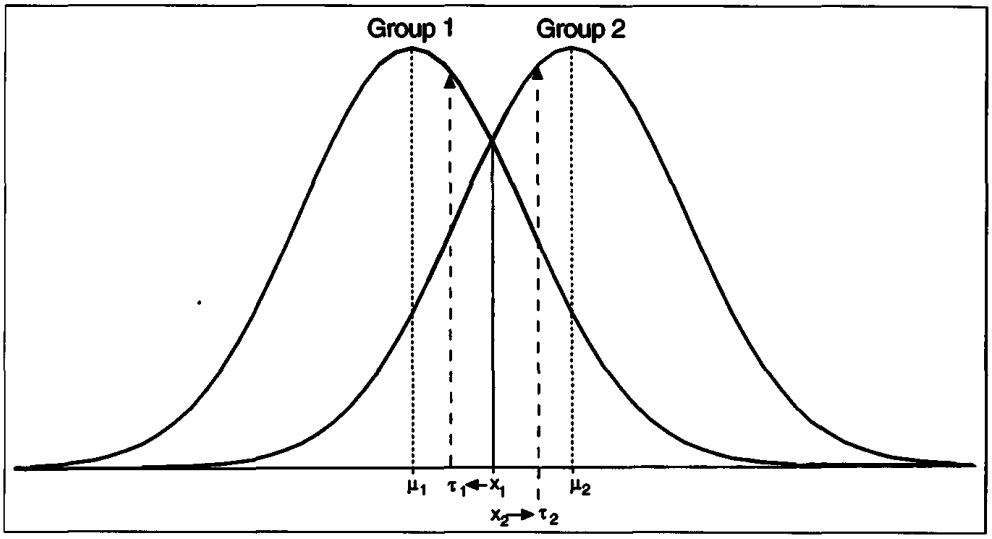
[5] https://www.fas.harvard.edu/people/william-fitzsimmons

[6] https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2020/08/jhj-changemaker-in-admissions

Figure 2

Graphical Depiction of Kelley's Equation for Two Groups



Source: Elaborated by the author.
Note: The two distributions and their means are shown. How the true scores are regressed when two identical observed scores come from each of the two different score distributions is also indicated.

For a simple example of Kelley's Paradox suppose we are faced with two 6-year-olds who are the same height and we wish to predict which of them would be taller at adulthood. Without further information it would be hard to decide, but suppose we learn that one of them had tall parents and the other short ones. Would you reward the one with short parents for his grit in growing as much as he had? Or would you follow Kelley's equation and pick the one with taller parents?

And finally…

A great deal of *Miracle Children* is taken up describing the extreme and sometime brutal practices that were apparently commonplace within the walls of the T. M. Landry school. Yet I have reported on none of this. I made this decision for the tautological reason *that if there are no effects there can be no causes.* That T. M. Landry had gotten an unexpectedly large proportion of its students into first rate institutions is unarguable. And how they did it is also clear—they lied and cheated by constructing counterfeit credentials. No miracle. Had these students subsequently done well within the highly competitive academic environment of these schools it might be worth our time to study the efficacy of the extended boot-camp exercises that substituted for scholarly instruction at T. M. Landry.

Thus, while I strongly suspect that Benner and Green's reportage played an important role in instigating the F.B.I. investigation that eventually closed the school, it is unlikely to be of any educational interest.

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About the Reviewer

Howard Wainer was on the faculty of The University of Chicago until 1977, was in Washington during the Carter administration, was principal research scientist at the Educational Testing Service from 1980 until 2001, was a distinguished research scientist at the National Board of Medical Examiners and professor of statistics at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania from 2001 until 2016. He is now in his post-employment career as statistician and author. Dr. Wainer is a Fellow of the American Statistical Association and American Educational Research Association and has been the recipient of many honors, most recently: *American Statistical Association's Harry V. Roberts Statistical Advocate of the Year Award* in 2019 and its *Statistical* Computing and Graphics Award*, in 2021;* additionally The E. F. Lindquist Award for Outstanding Research in Testing & Measurement, The Psychometric Society Lifetime Achievement Award, The Samuel J. Messick Award for Distinguished Scientific Contributions from the American Psychological Association, The Career Achievement Award from The National Council on Measurement and Evaluation., and ETS's coveted Senior Scientist Award in 1990. He has written the Visual Revelations column in the statistics magazine *Chance* for the last 32 years and has published more than 450 articles and chapters as well as 26 books. Among his recent books are *Truth or Truthiness: Distinguishing Fact from Fiction by Learning to Think like a Data Scientist*, which was published by Cambridge University Press and was named "top 6 books of 2016" by the *Financial Times* of

London. In 2021, he published A *History of Data Visualization and Graphic Communication* in collaboration with Michael Friendly (Harvard University Press). His most recent book, *Testing and the Paradoxes of Fairness* with Daniel Robinson, was published by Cambridge in 2026.

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Katie Benner, a graduate of Bowdoin College, is an investigative reporter for *The New York Times* who was part of the team that won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service for coverage of workplace sexual harassment. Benner is an MS NOW contributor who has also appeared on CNN, CNBC, CBS, PBS NewsHour, and the radio programs Fresh Air and Marketplace to discuss issues related to national security, public corruption, financial fraud, and civil rights. She once briefly taught English in Beijing.

Erica L. Green, who holds an MS in journalism from Northwestern University, is an award-winning journalist at *The New York Times* and was named a best education reporter in the country by the Education Writers Association in 2021. She was the education reporter for *The Baltimore Sun* (2010-2017) and covered education policy for *The New York Times* (2017-2023).