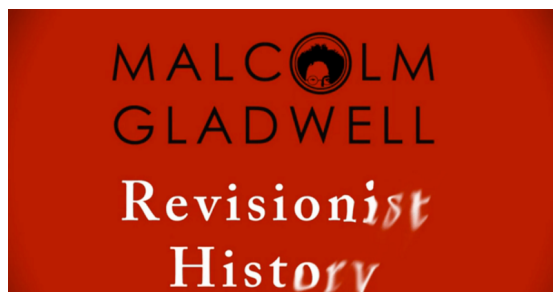


Food Fight with Malcolm Gladwell | E5/S1: Revisionist History Podcast (Transcript)

[Simon Says](#) is an automated transcription service. We assist people and companies, such as those in the media, to swiftly transcribe audio and video files so they can find that meaningful dialogue. We are not associated with *Revisionist History* or Panoply Media; we are just big fans. And we highly recommend you listen to the podcast if you can. We have provided the transcript below as a supplement. Enjoy!



Read the interactive transcript [here](#).

Transcripts for the entire Season 1 and Season 2 podcasts of Revisionist History are available [here](#).

Food Fight with Malcolm Gladwell

Episode 5 | Season 1 | [Revisionist History](#)

Length: 30 min | Released: July 13, 2016

Ken Cardone: The first week I arrived, I was met at the back door by local folks who were bringing in flats of blueberries. Uh, and it was just, it was remarkable.

Malcolm Gladwell: That's Ken Cardone speaking. He's the Executive Chef at Bowdoin College, in Maine. In the world of American colleges, chef Cardone's food holds a special place.

Jacob Smith: So you've consistently make the top, number one spot on the lists of best college food. What are a couple things that you think sets Bowdoin apart?

MG: And that's Jacob Smith, one of my producers. He went up to Maine for *Revisionist History's* first culinary investigation.

JS: Can you just describe what we're looking at here?

KC: Uh, directly below us is, is the salad bar, and you'll notice in the center of the salad bar there's several, uh, prepared salads, entr, à la carte salads and then you kinda have your make own areas to the right and the left. There's homemade soups, uh, and vegan options. There's fresh fruits and deserts, and then you'll see there's, there's condiments and toppings and we actually make our own peanut butter, uh, and bake our own breads uh, and that's all available at every meal.

MG: My guess is your college wasn't like this. Mine certainly wasn't.

KC: And as you can see, we always have a vegan and vegetarian item on for our hot soups, uh, and today, a favorite for hot lunches, a hot Turkey sandwich, an orzo and tofu salad.

MG: I worked in my college cafeteria as an undergrad, and just remembering that fact now is bringing the smell

of the dining hall wafting back. Grease, disinfectant, aging mayonnaise, cold fried eggs, oh, and some horrible combination. That was the 1980s. I don't think that anyone properly understood back then how crucial healthy eating was to a positive learning environment. Bowdoin is in a whole different class. It sounds like paradise.

KC: The deli special today is a smashed chickpea avocado and pesto sandwich. And we have a faro salad with asparagus and parmesan.

JS: Cool, so can we take a look at the kitchen? Are we allowed to go back there?

KC: As you can see, if you look down right here at this, at this area, we're preparing fresh rosemary, it's one of the ingredients in tonight's dinner, and they're cutting chicken. So everything really is done from scratch, uh, it has that personal touch.

MG: "Fresh rosemary and a personal touch." But here's what I want to talk about. The food at Bowdoin is actually a problem, a moral problem. I don't mean this in any way as a criticism of people like Kim Cardone. He's very, very good at what he does. Jacob, my producer, is a massive foodie and he was impressed. It takes a lot to impress Jacob. Nor do I mean that people, students in particular, shouldn't eat properly; they should. My point is that every choice you make, even if it's the right choice at that moment, has larger consequences, some of them unexpected and paradoxical and Kim Cardone's amazing food is one of those things.

My name is Malcolm Gladwell. Welcome to *Revisionist History*, my podcast about things forgotten or misunderstood.

This is actually episode 2 of a little three-part miniseries I've dropped into the middle of *Revisionist History*. It's a

reexamination of one of the most fundamental ideas in American life, that if you have some ability and work hard, you can make it to the top. The episode before this was about a kid named Carlos, a brilliant kid, and just how many obstacles stand in the way of his making it out of South Central Los Angeles. This episode is about what it takes for a poor kid to get a good college degree. And strange as it may sound, campus food at a place like Bowdoin is a big part of that problem.

Best way to understand this is to compare Bowdoin with one of its competitors, Vassar College. Vassar is in Poughkeepsie, just north of New York City, It's a lot like Bowdoin in many ways. They're both small, elite, northeastern liberal arts colleges. Lots of students apply to both schools; they're in the same category. But there are also some differences. Vassar is a little bigger and edgier, a lot more dyed hair and tattoos; Bowdoin is smaller and preppier. Bowdoin also has more money, not a lot more, but enough that it matters. And then there's the issue of food.

JS: How's the food at Vassar, would you say?

Student 1: Food? Um, it could be better and, you know, there's always room for improvement.

Student 2: The salad bar always makes me kinda sad, like.

Student 3: One time I was eating, like, a spinach kale stir fry that was prepared and I may or may not have found, like, an industrial sized staple in it.

MG: The president of Vassar College is a woman named Catharine Hill. She's an economist by training, tall, gracious, distinguished, a touch of gray. What you would expect from an academic leader. We met in her office on the Vassar campus, which is full of lots of gothic Greystone buildings and creaky oak staircases, huge

double sash windows, ancient rugs, all very 19th century. Before she was at Vassar, Catharine Hill was at Williams College, about two hours north of Poughkeepsie; she was the Provost. While she was there, Princeton dramatically expanded its financial aid and, suddenly, every liberal arts college in the country felt it had to examine its policies as well.

Catharine Hill: We had to figure out what we were going to do in response to Princeton announcing that they were gonna move away from loans.

MG: So Hill teams up with another economist and starts digging around in the data from the admission's office.

CH: A colleague of mine, Gordon Winston, and I asked the question, "Do we know what we're actually asking families to pay to come to Williams?" So we'd always assumed that we were doing just, you know, a great job with, with talented kids from all different economic backgrounds and what we found out was that we were asking students from lower-income quintiles to pay an awfully high share of their family income to come to attend, and we were also finding out that we weren't getting many, not surprisingly.

MG: Yeah.

CH: You know, I think we were finding that we were asking families in the bottom 40% of the income distribution to pay, you know, about 50% of their family incomes, pretax.

MG: Hill's saying that, at that time, if the family of a poor, smart kid wanted their child to go to Williams, they'd have to spend half their income on tuition, half. That's why there were so few poor kids at Williams. So while she's at Williams, the school starts making its financial aid a lot more generous. Then Hill becomes president of Vassar.

CH: Vassar was an institution that was committed to these kinds of issues, and when we looked at the actual data, it turned out that, compared to some of our peer schools; we, in fact, weren't all that diverse either in terms of socioeconomic diversity or racial diversity.

MG: So she decides to change Vassar's priorities. Students from the poorest families in the United States get a small \$5000 grant from the federal government called a Pell Grant. Hill decides she wants to accept way more Pell Grant students at Vassar.

MG: So what are you spending on financial aid?

CH: We're spending about \$60 million.

MG: \$60 million?

CH: Yeah. And when, when I started in '06, it was about 25 million.

MG: Oh, I see. So it's basically more than, *ÄöväÑ-ð*

CH: It's about double. And we have about 23% Pell Grant recipients, which makes us, I think, the highest amongst a very large group of schools.

MG: Yeah.

CH: And the lowest income kids.

MG: And Pell, when you started, what was, I think I read 11% when you started?

CH: Um, yeah, you know, I'm not.

MG: Yeah.

CH: I'm not even sure we were tracking it, so, *ÄöväÑ-ð*

MG: Yeah.

CH: But it was in the low teens.

MG: That was 10 years ago. Since then, Hill has discovered two things. The first is exactly what we

talked about in the last episode, there's a ton of smart poor kids out there. You can easily double the number that you accept at a school like Vassar and not compromise your academic standards. Okay, that's the first thing, the good news. Then, there's the bad news.

CH: I think a lot of schools said, "Okay, so, yeah, they're out there. Let's see if we can find some and, and recruit more." I think over time, I've come to realize that the main constraint, despite commitments on the parts of schools to do this, the reality is this, if you take a talented, low-income kid, you've got to offer significantly more financial aid and every dollar that you spend on financial aid is a dollar that you don't have to spend on something else. And that is ultimately the real challenge.

MG: Tuition at Vassar, including room and board, is \$62,000 a year. You let in some poor kid for free, you're out somewhere in the range of \$62,000.

MG: Give me an example of the kind of tradeoffs you've had to deal with because you wanted to increase your financial aid package.

CH: It would be spending more to renovate old dormitories and bathrooms, um, it would be better food in the dining hall. You know, many of those things are really good things and you're always making tradeoffs.

MG: Yeah.

CH: On the margin.

MG: Did you catch that? "Better food in the dining hall."

Right after my producer Jacob went to Bowdoin to check out their food, he went to Vassar.

JS: How often do you eat there?

Amanda: Uh, about twice a day.

MG: Jacob is talking to a sophomore at Vassar named Amanda.

JS: So lunch and dinner?

Amanda: Uh, usually I do, like, a quick breakfast and then dinner because breakfast is notoriously their best meal.

JS: And what about dinner? What's dinner look like?

Amanda: Uh, pretty terrifying sometimes. It, it's weird, it oscillates between sometimes they have really good ethnic food actually. They'll, surprisingly, put together a very good, uh, a meal. Um, and then there's other nights when you get there and it's kinda like pasta, very sad, like, meat sandwich thing you're not really sure about and, like, pizza and, ~~and~~ You'd end up with soup that night. It's, yeah.

JS: What would you say are, like, the most common complaints about the food from students?

Amanda: Um, usually a lack of variety of taste. Also, some people, it's kind of gross to talk about, but, like, claim it really gives them indigestion, like, they're not happy with the quality of the food.

JS: By indigestion do you mean it has, like, a, a laxative effect? Is that the complaint, because I've heard that elsewhere?

Amanda: Yeah, that's a 100% what I'm talking about. [Laughs].

JS: Um, if you could step in and make, like, sweeping changes to dining at Vassar, what would you change?

Amanda: Um, sweeping changes. I mean, my thing is, like, I know I'm kind of a spoiled cause I'm from California, so I'm used just to a higher quality of food in general, because, like, the salad bar always make me kinda sad, like. Or like, the nights where they're like, "We

have guacamole," and it's like, literally, just like, this pasty, disgusting, like, just, you know, they've obviously just pureed some, like, unripe avocados.

MG: Vassar has terrible food. Bowdoin practically has a Michelin star. Two otherwise almost identical schools that, on this one measure, couldn't be more different. And why? Because Bowdoin doesn't spend nearly as much on financial aid as Vassar does.

Now, I don't want to single out Bowdoin as some kind of moral villain. There are lots of private colleges in the US that do a far worse job at educating low-income students. But just listen to these numbers: 23% of Vassar's undergraduates are on Pell Grants. That is, they come from the poorest part of American society. At Bowdoin, just 13% of students are on Pell Grants, so just over half as many as at Vassar.

The New York Times did something called an access index, which measures how good a job a college does at opening its doors to low-income students. The way the index works, an average score is 1. If you do better than average, your score is greater than one. Among all American universities and colleges measured, Vassar comes in 8th with a score of 1.36, behind only the University of Florida and the big schools in the University of California system. It is the most open and accessible private school in the land. Bowdoin is 51st, at 1.05, just above average. If you want an example of a school that does really bad in the New York Times index, New York University. NYU is a point 0.65, which ranks it at 156, which is appalling.

Now, why does this matter? We don't want all schools to be the same. What's wrong with a system where one school spends its marginal dollar on gathering the most interesting and diverse group of undergraduates possible and then another school spends its marginal

dollar on artisanal cheese? It shouldn't matter, right? But if you dig in to the way the university system works in the United States, you discover that it matters a lot. Bowdoin and Vassar are connected.

More in a moment, after this break.

Now, back to our story.

I'm back at Vassar; I'm sitting in a small conference room in the main administration building. In front of me is Robert Walton, Vassar's Vice President of Finance. Vassar might be the home of the edgy and the tattooed, but that's not Robert Walton. He's a numbers guy, white hair, carefully trimmed beard; he's got the school's budget open in front of him.

Robert Walton: So, if we look at our total budget, sort of what we actually spend, it's about \$175 million and if you think about it in just big groups, about two-thirds of that are fees that we collect from different sources and about a one-third of that budget comes from the endowment.

MG: Yeah. Now, the tuition bucket, how does that break down?

RW: You know, we are like many schools like us, we have sort of a barbell effect. It, it, that's a slightly inelegant metaphor, but it works. We tend to have a grouping at each end, those who have a full ability to pay and those who have low ability to pay.

MG: The math looks like this, there are 2450 undergraduates at Vassar. 1000 of them are on the wealthy end of the barbell, they pay full tuition or close to it. That comes to \$60 million a year in revenue. The rest of the students at the other end of the barbell, pay about half that much. They're the ones receiving some kind of financial aid. There's way more of them, but they contribute much less to the bottom line. So Vassar makes up for that lost revenue with money drawn for the

endowment. I've grossly simplified matters to the point where if Robert Walton hears this, he'll cringe, but that's basically how the finances at Vassar work.

MG: A couple of questions, uh, before you went, you made this shift which was, what roughly 10 years ago?

Marianne Begemann: Roughly 2007.

MG: 2007?

MB: Yeah, It happened mid-year sort of, so it's a little hard.

MG: That was Marianne Begemann, Vassar's Head of Strategic Planning. She's sitting next to Walton, formal, business suit.

MG: What would your percentage of full pay have been back then, in the earlier era, roughly?

MB: We were around 80, no, 75, 80 let's say.

MG: 75 to 80% of students paid full tuition back then. This is an important point. The barbell used to be heavily weighted on the high, full paying end and have almost nothing on the other end. When President Hill transforms Vassar, a decade ago, she basically switches that. She replaces hundreds of full paying students with students who pay very little. As a result, Vassar goes from a place that quite comfortably supported itself on tuition revenue to a place that has to rely really heavily on its endowment to make the numbers work. Now, Vassar is wealthy enough to pull that off. It all adds up but barely; they have no wiggle room. So the 1000 kids who pay full tuition, Vassar needs every single one. Without them, everything falls apart financially. I asked Walton what would happen if the number of full paying students dropped, if even 50 of that 1000 went elsewhere?

RW: That would be bad. That, that would be bad.

[Laughs]

MG: No wiggle room. Okay, now about the endowment.

Once again, Bowdoin College is a good comparison. Bowdoin starts 2015 with an endowment of \$1.4 billion. They make a healthy return on that, which they divide up. A quarter of it goes to pay for financial aid, three quarters of it goes back into the endowment. That three-quarters, incidentally, comes to \$120 million. So to put it another way, Bowdoin had \$120 million cushion last year. What I've just described explains how endowments at elite universities keep getting bigger and bigger. They earn way more in their endowment every year than they need to balance the books.

This is a bit of an aside, but here's a really extreme example of the endowment cushion: Princeton. They start 2014 with \$20.6 billion in the bank. Let me repeat that, \$20.6 billion in the bank. They make 2.1 billion on their investments over the course of the year. After they've covered their costs and payed for all their financial aid, they had \$700 million left over. And after you add in all the other money they raised, Princeton ends the year with an endowment of \$22.7 billion. Princeton is a perpetual motion cash machine. There is literally no way they can ever run out of money. If they wanted to build a half a billion dollar dormitory with marble staircases, mahogany floors, and solid gold bathroom fixtures, they could pay for it out of petty cash and still bank \$200 million. That's wiggle room.

By the way, given that fact, you might wonder why anyone would ever give money to Princeton. Good question. I have way more to say about this subject. That's what next week's episode is about. But let's go back to Vassar.

Things are a lot more complicated there; they have about \$1 billion in their endowment. That's less than Bowdoin. But for Vassar to cover their expenses, they need to take

out significantly more from their endowment than Bowdoin does so they don't have the same kind of cushion. Last year, in fact, Vassar had a bad year and ended up withdrawing more than they earned. You can't keep doing that year in and year out and survive as an institution. No wiggle room.

So what are Vassar's other options? Well, they could get smaller. One of the reasons Bowdoin is in such better shape is that Bowdoin has only 1800 students. Vassar is more than a third larger. If Vassar were Bowdoin's size, then, suddenly, they'd have 650 fewer students to subsidize with their endowment.

MG: If I said to you, completely hypothetically, "I want you to run this college in such a way as to maximize the amount of financial resources available." Would you shrink the student body?

RW: In a perfect world, that would be the technique I would prefer.

MG: That's Vassar's VP, Robert Walton, again. Note that he says, "In a perfect world." But of course, that's the last thing Vassar would ever do. It would be totally self-defeating. The whole point of Catharine Hill's transformation of Vassar was to try and educate as many poor, smart kids as possible because America has a huge problem with not providing opportunity for poor, smart kids. If you cut 650 spots, then you're part of the problem again.

RW: I'm a fiscal conservative but she's convinced me. We don't pay any taxes in terms of to the feds or the state, and so we are a tax subsidized entity. So, one would logically conclude that if you have a larger endowment, you really have an obligation to provide a public good; not just to educate the rich.

MG: This is something people always forget: universities

don't pay taxes. We subsidize them, you and I. When Princeton makes that \$2.4 billion return on their endowment, they don't pay a dime of capital gains taxes on it. And Walton's putting out something really, really crucial, which is that if you get that kind of subsidy from society, you're supposed to give back. Cutting 650 spots is not giving back. All right, how about this? Cut back on faculty, bigger classes. No, no, no. That also defeats the purpose. The whole point of the Vassar experiment is to give students of all backgrounds the best possible education. If you make the education worse in order to pay for the students who need a good education, then you're right back where you started from.

The point of Vassar is that the best education comes when you mix students from all backgrounds. When the child of an investment banker sits in class next to the child of a janitor, the two of them have a learning experience that they could not have amongst people just like themselves. That's what they're trying to protect. So what do you do if you're Vassar and you're trying to protect that idea of what an education is? You have only one option. You tighten your belt as tight as you can. You don't do anything extravagant.

RW: I worked with a college at one time, that I sure won't name, that opened a new residence hall in the last 5 years that was all singles but had double beds.

MG: Basically, the dorm was a high-end hotel.

RW: You know, they're these amenities that some schools do that're just kinda crazy and over the top. But they do all kinds of things, uh, you know, they have more money for speaker series than we do. We can't pay Bill Clinton to come speaker for 300,000, like my prior institution did. Things like that.

MG: Bill Clinton, the ultimate college amenity. The problem with belt tightening, though, is attracting those

1000 full pay students, the ones whose money Vassar desperately needs. Who are they? They're the children of professionals, upper-middle class and upper class. Manhattan, Beverly Hills, Boston, San Francisco; they grew up privileged. They have certain expectations about lifestyle. Those amenities that Bob Walton says are kind of crazy and over the top, that's what these kids are used to. So this is what keeps Catharine Hill up at night. How can she keep those wealthy kids coming to Vassar if she can't provide them with the lifestyle that they're used to?

CH: We are operating in an economy right now where income inequality has increased over the last 30 to 40 years. So, we are looking to attract talented students from high income families, these are, these are kids who have grown up with their own bedroom and their own bathroom and, when they come looking at college campuses, those are some of the things that the families are looking for.

MG: Vassar asks those kids to do without some of the luxuries they were raised with and that's a hard sell.

CH: Every time another school with which we compete makes a different decision and doesn't spend it on financial aid, then it puts us in the position of hav-, being in a tougher position to compete for the full pay students.

MG: Oh, I see. You mean if another school spends less and builds a fancier X, and you don't have the fancy X.

CH: Yeah. Then, they're, they're gonna take some of those kids away from us who you want the fancy X.

MG: Hill didn't name any names, but you know who she's talking about. She's talking about Bowdoin. And the kids she worries that Bowdoin will take away are the kids from Beverly Hills and Manhattan who grew up on

beautifully ripe avocados and freshly cut rosemary.

Robert Walton serves on something called the Parents Advisory Committee at Vassar, which is basically the parents of the rich kids, and he hears it all the time.

RW: They come and, you know, they want to talk to the senior officers about, you know, their observations, you know. It's sort of a, you know, tough love kind of meeting. They always ask about food, they always ask about housing, they always as-, you know.

MG: Do they, what do they say when they bring up food? Do they complain about food?

RW: Yeah, basically. And so my reaction is, we need to make food better, and we actually are gonna make food better, but if the food is really important to you and if housing is really important to you, don't come to Vassar. That's not what we focus on; that's just not what we're into. You know, and no apologies for that. I mean, that's just not what we do.

MG: This is why I said, at the beginning, that food is actually a moral issue because how long do you think Vassar can continue to do this? To say to parents and students, "If food is really that important to you go somewhere else"? Those kids come to Vassar for a campus visit and eat a soggy piece of pizza. Then, they go to Bowdoin, where Chef Cardone is the god of the dining hall. He's got amazing resources, a bigger endowment, 650 fewer students, half as many kids on Pell Grants and every day he's taking it up a notch in the kitchen. How long can soggy pizza hold up against Ken Cardone?

When my producer Jacob was on his culinary investigation of Bowdoin, the students talked about the food at their school like they were in Paris.

Student 5: In the beginning of the year, the ice cream

didn't really taste that, Well, like, it was, like, kinda watery. And so I know someone, like, wrote a complain card, like, "Guys!" And then now, it's, like, so much, like, they just fixed it.

JS: I've heard good, I've heard things about the dessert. Is it good?

MG: How do you compete with this?

Student 6: On first day of campus there's this lobster bake, uh, where every student on campus has a choice of having a lobster for dinner, or a steak, um, or a vegetarian option. It's really phenomenal.

JS: If I were, like to ask you, maybe, like, a prospective students was coming to campus, and they were to ask about the food, what would be your, like, your one sentence pitch or how would you describe it?

Student 6: It's sort of indescribable in the way that you can't explain to someone how it's always changing and it's always fresh and it's always different and pushes you to try new things. Um, which is, I think, what college is all about; just experimenting and reaching out to new worlds and, you know, the fact that the food here helps you do that as well is incredible.

MG: I cannot get over how excited this kid is about the food at Bowdoin. Do you think he talks this way about his professors?

JS: Oh, have you tried things that, like, you wouldn't have tried otherwise? Like, what kind of, what kind of meals or dishes?

Student 6: Oh, wow. Um, yeah, the other night I had an eggplant parmesan pancake. You know, I don't think I could even told you that was a real thing until I had it. You know, I walked past and then grabbed one and went, "I might as well," and, it was phenomenal. I had six,

actually.

MG: "Eggplant parmesan pancake." I mean, this is completely absurd. This is everything that's wrong with American colleges.

Student 6: We had venison here during deer season. It was really just fresh, locally sourced different kinds of meats that I would never expect to see in a college dining hall.

MG: There's only one solution. If you're looking at liberal arts colleges, don't go to Bowdoin, don't let your kids go to Bowdoin, don't let your friends go to Bowdoin, don't give money to Bowdoin or to any other school that serves amazing food in its dining hall. Because every time you support a school that spends its money on amazing food, every time you cast a vote in favor of eggplant parmesan pancakes and lobster bakes and venison during deer season, you're making it harder and harder for someone like Catharine Hill to create opportunities for poor kids.

Suck it up and go to Vassar. Send a message to the Bowdoins of the world about what really matters.

Amanda: Fresh fruit is atrocious. Sometimes