

Where Are the Ivy League Comedians?

Comedy, General Intelligence, and Elite Credentials

October 2026

1 Summary

An online argument holds that comedy is orthogonal to general intelligence (g) and to elite academic credentials, and perhaps negatively related to them. The argument runs as follows. If comedy tracked either, virtually all of the best comedians would come from elite colleges, as the best mathematicians and lawyers do. They do not. Hence comedy is unrelated to g and credentials.

The inference fails on arithmetic. When a trait correlates moderately with g , most top performers still come from outside an elite that makes up 0.47% of the population. “Virtually all” requires a correlation near 0.8. The data contradict the conclusion as well. Among the 100 most prominent American stand-up comedians on Wikidata, 6% attended an Ivy-Plus college. That is far below lawyers (63%) and mathematicians (55%), similar to actors (5%), and about ten times the population base rate that orthogonality predicts. Laboratory studies find that humor ability rises with intelligence. Observed correlations with verbal ability average 0.38, and latent correlations reach 0.51–0.67. The elite comedy pipeline the argument looks for exists; it runs into writers’ rooms rather than onto stand-up stages.

2 Claims

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- C1 If comedy tracked g or credentials, virtually all top comedians would come from elite institutions.
 - C2 The best mathematicians and lawyers “nigh universally” come from elite institutions.
 - C3 Top comedians seldom come from elite institutions.
 - C4 Comedy is orthogonal to g and credentials, or negatively associated with them.
 - C5 The Harvard Lampoon produces about 120 elite comedy aspirants per decade, so where are they?
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3 Model: How Many Top Performers Should Be Elite?

Let $g \sim N(0, 1)$ and define the elite as the top $q = 0.47\%$ of g . This is the share of Americans who attend an Ivy-Plus college [1]. Treating admission as pure selection on g is generous to the argument. Let comedic talent be

$$T = r g + \sqrt{1 - r^2} \varepsilon, \quad \varepsilon \sim N(0, 1), \quad (1)$$

and let the top performers be the top fraction p of T . The elite share among them is

$$\Pr(\text{elite} \mid T > t_p) = \frac{1}{p} \int_{g_q}^{\infty} \phi(g) \bar{\Phi}\left(\frac{t_p - r g}{\sqrt{1 - r^2}}\right) dg, \quad (2)$$

where g_q and t_p are the corresponding thresholds and $\bar{\Phi}$ is the standard normal upper-tail probability. Orthogonality ($r = 0$) predicts an elite share of 0.47% at every level of talent. With $r = 0.3$ the elite share is 7.0% of the top one in 10,000 and 12.2% of the top one in a million. With $r = 0.5$ it is 24% and 44%. A share above 90% requires $r \geq 0.8$ (Figure 1). The model assumes that elite and non-elite people enter comedy at equal rates. Elite graduates have better outside options, so their entry rate is plausibly lower, and their share among top comedians lower still.

The premise of C1 is therefore false. A trait can correlate substantially with g while most of its top performers come from outside elite colleges. Failing to find “virtually all” tells us only that r is not close to 1.

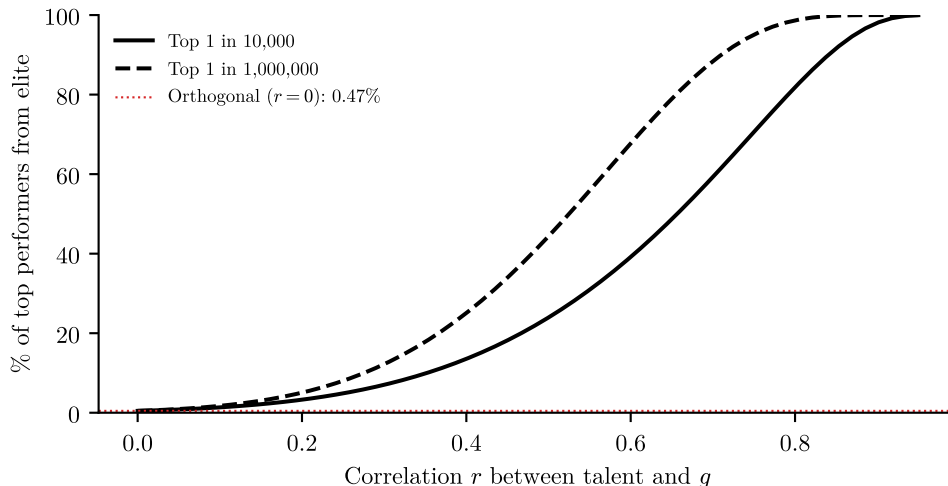


Figure 1: Predicted elite share among top performers as a function of the talent- g correlation r , with the elite defined as the top 0.47% of g .

4 Data

- **Leadership benchmarks:** Chetty, Deming and Friedman [1], Figure 1. Undergraduate Ivy-Plus attendance (the eight Ivy League colleges, Stanford, MIT, Duke, and Chicago) among US leaders.
- **Wikidata** (accessed 15 October 2026). The population is people with a given occupation, US citizenship, and birth years 1940–1995. Prominence is measured by the number of Wikipedia language editions; the 100 most prominent are kept for each occupation. People also listed as politicians are dropped from the other occupations. An Ivy-Plus “educated at” entry at any degree level counts. Education is recorded for 91–100% of each list.
- **Robustness pool** (Wikidata and Wikipedia, accessed 15 October 2026). All US citizens born 1940–2000 in seven occupations with at least three Wikipedia language editions. The minimum is ten editions for actors and eight for musicians, to keep queries within server limits. People are ranked two ways: by language editions, and by English Wikipedia pageviews over the preceding 60 days.
- **Harvard Lampoon:** Wikipedia, *List of The Harvard Lampoon members* (secondary source).

5 Results

5.1 Elite dominance requires gatekeeping (C2)

In the Chetty et al. data, Ivy-Plus graduates are 71.4% of Supreme Court justices since 1967, 36.5% of US-born Nobel laureates, 24.0% of senators, and 12.5% of Fortune 500 CEOs (Figure 2). Only the most credential-gated post comes close to “nigh universal.” Even in science, nearly two-thirds of American Nobel laureates attended no Ivy-Plus college. In Wikidata the elite share is 63% for prominent lawyers ($n = 41$) and 55% for mathematicians. Both fields require a degree to enter.

5.2 Comedians look like other performers, not like a random draw (C3, C4)

The elite share is 6% among the top 100 stand-up comedians and 4% among the top 100 comedians in general. This is close to actors (5%) and musicians (2%), and below screenwriters (10%), television writers (15%), and novelists (20%). C3 is descriptively correct: elite graduates are a small minority of famous comedians. C4 does not follow. Orthogonality predicts an elite share near the 0.47% base rate, and a negative association predicts less. The observed shares are 8–13 times the undergraduate base rate. That rate is a lower bound here, because Wikidata also counts graduate degrees; a base rate covering graduate degrees is *to source*. Ivy-Plus alumni among the most prominent comedians include Conan O’Brien (Harvard), Jenny Slate and Kate McKinnon (Columbia), Mindy Kaling (Dartmouth), and Bill Maher (Cornell).

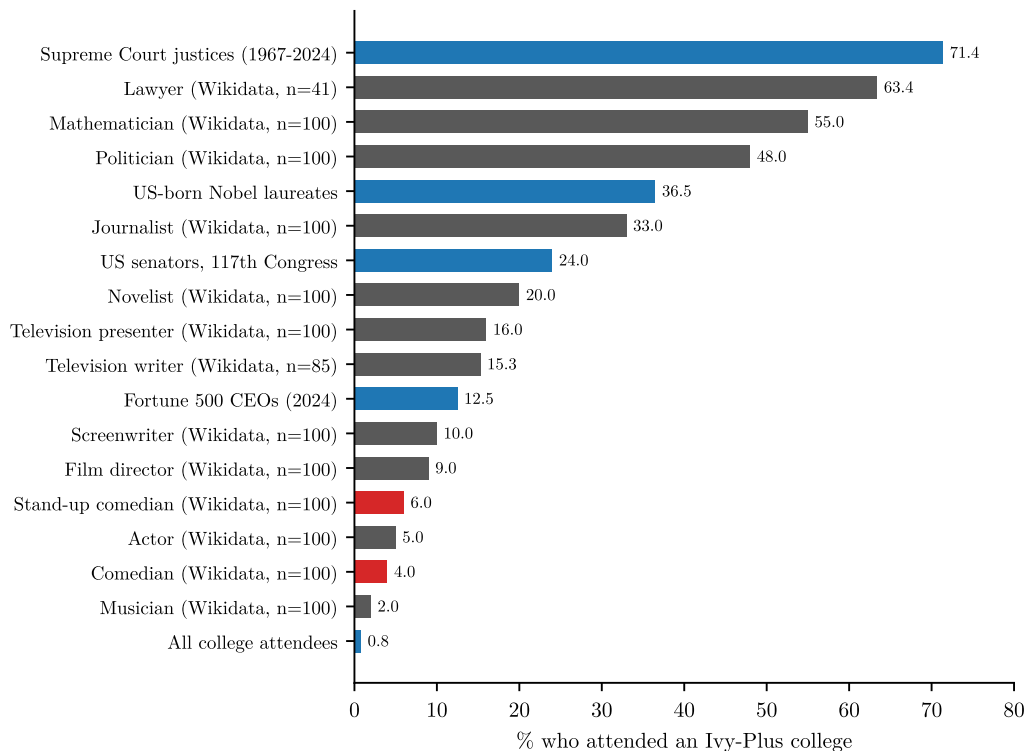


Figure 2: Share who attended an Ivy-Plus college. Gray: top 100 Americans per occupation on Wikidata (born 1940–1995; any degree). Blue: leadership benchmarks from Chetty et al. (undergraduate). Red: comedians.

5.3 Intelligence predicts humor ability (C4)

Seven studies measured both intelligence and humor production, mostly by having participants write funny captions for cartoons that independent raters scored (Table 1, Figure 3). Every general-population sample shows a positive correlation. With verbal or crystallized intelligence, the observed correlations are 0.37–0.41. The sample-weighted mean across three independent samples ($n = 698$) is 0.38. With fluid reasoning they are smaller, 0.13–0.29. Correcting for measurement error raises them. In structural equation models, latent intelligence predicts latent verbal humor at 0.67 in men and 0.51 in women [6], and higher-order g predicts humor ability at $\beta = 0.51$ [3]. These are the high values that circulate. They describe error-free constructs; a single test correlates with humor at about 0.3–0.4.

The largest sample is the weakest. In 1,363 TwinsUK adults the correlation was 0.14 [8], but intelligence was measured with the three-item Cognitive Reflection Test. Among 31 professional comedians it was -0.08 [2]. The comedians all scored high on vocabulary (comedians vs. students $d = 1.34$), so the range was restricted; and their caption scores did not predict how many weeks they worked on stage.

Study	n	Intelligence measure	r
Feingold & Mazzella 1991 [4]	147	Verbal ability tests (humor reasoning)	0.41
Howrigan & MacDonald 2008 [5]	185	Raven matrices (18 items)	0.29
Greengross & Miller 2011 [6]	400	Vocabulary / Raven (12 items)	0.38 / 0.25
latent model	184 / 187	Latent intelligence, men / women	0.67 / 0.51
Greengross, Martin & Miller 2012 [2]	31	Vocabulary, professional comedians	-0.08
Kellner & Benedek 2017 [7]	151	Gc / composite / Gf	0.37 / 0.30 / 0.13
Christensen et al. 2018 [3]	270	Latent Gc / Gr / Gf; higher-order g (β)	0.49 / 0.38 / 0.22; 0.51
Greengross et al. 2025 [8]	1,363	Cognitive Reflection Test (3 items)	0.14

Table 1: Correlations between intelligence and humor production ability. Values transcribed from each paper (`processed/humor_iq_correlations.csv`). The student sample of Greengross et al. (2012), $r = 0.39$, overlaps Greengross & Miller (2011) and is omitted.

These correlations sharpen the puzzle in Section 3. Under the tail model, an observed $r = 0.38$ implies that 12% of the top one in 10,000 humorists and 22% of the top one in a million come from the g -elite. A latent $r = 0.51$ implies 25% and 47%. The observed Ivy-Plus share among famous comedians is 4–6%. Laboratory humor ability is therefore not the main determinant of stage success, or elite graduates rarely enter stand-up, or both. The comedian data point the same way. Among professionals, caption-writing ability was uncorrelated with weeks booked, and vocabulary dropped out of the regression predicting bookings [2].

5.4 Where the Lampoon goes (C5)

The notable Lampoon members listed on Wikipedia went mostly into writing and producing comedy, not into stand-up. They include the Simpsons writers Al Jean, Mike Reiss, Jon Vitti, George Meyer, and Bill Oakley; Greg Daniels (*The Office*, *Parks and Recreation*); Michael Schur (*The*

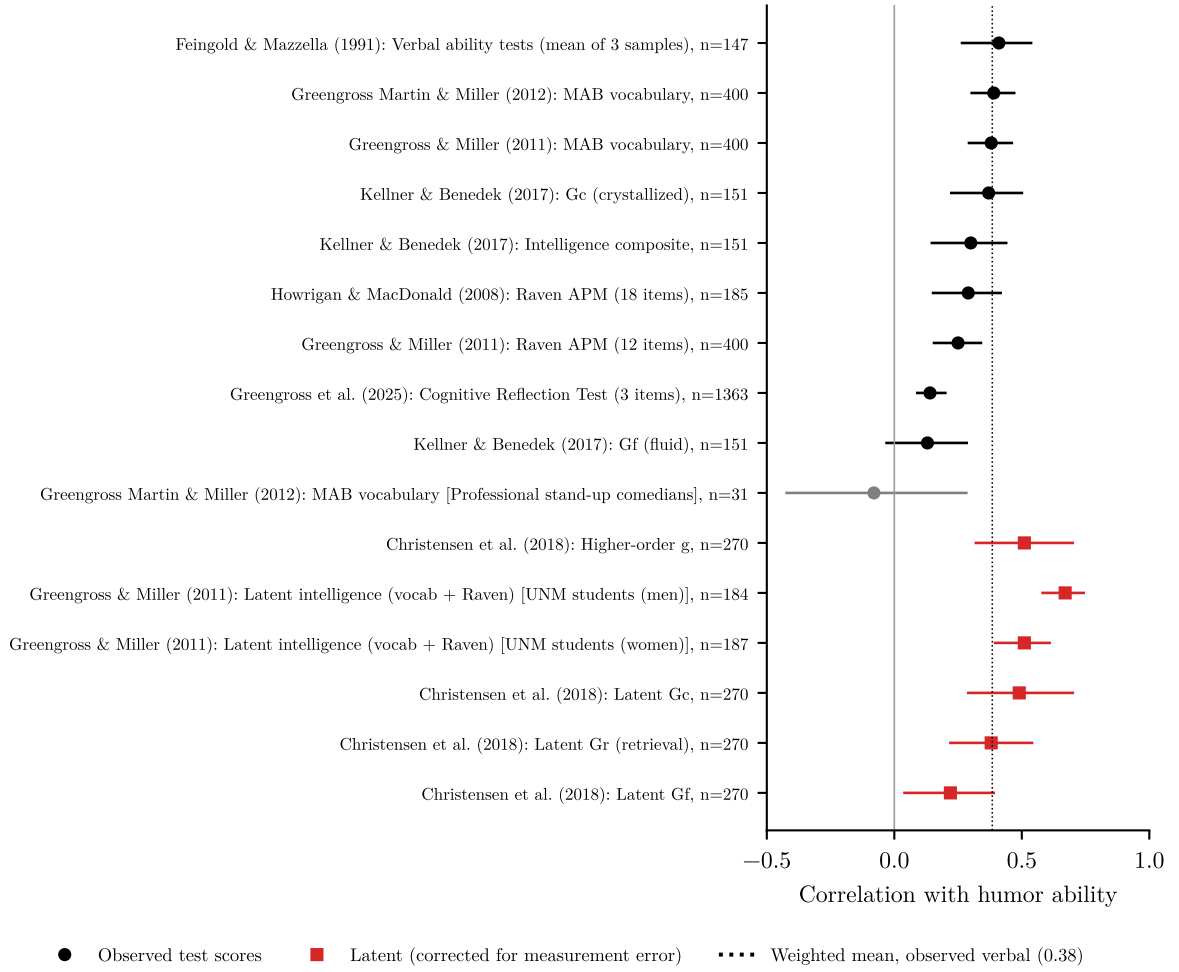


Figure 3: Reported correlations with 95% intervals. Black: observed test scores (Fisher- z intervals). Red: latent correlations (published intervals for Christensen et al.; Fisher- z approximations for Greengross & Miller). Gray: professional comedians. Dotted: weighted mean of observed verbal correlations (0.38).

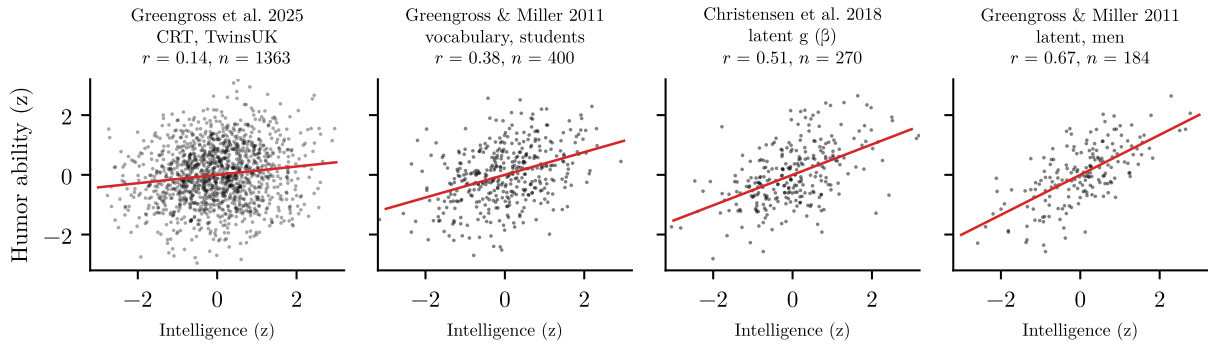


Figure 4: **Simulated** data. Each panel draws n bivariate-normal points with exactly the reported correlation, to show what each effect size looks like. The original participant data are not public.

Good Place); David Mandel (*Seinfeld*, *Veep*); Robert Carlock (*30 Rock*); Jim Downey and Colin Jost (*Saturday Night Live*); and Conan O’Brien. Fame rankings of comedians count performers, so they undercount the writers. Among prominent television writers on Wikidata, the elite share is 15%. The claimed figure of 120 Lampoon members per decade is *to source*.

6 Robustness to Objections

A reader raised five objections to the Wikidata comparison. Each is tested below.

Is the number of language editions a valid measure of prominence? It is an established measure of global fame. Pantheon 1.0 uses it and finds that it correlates highly with measured accomplishment in tennis, swimming, car racing, and chess [9]. But it measures fame that crosses languages, which favors film actors over verbal, US-only stand-up. It also accumulates with age. Shane Gillis illustrates the bias. He is the most-viewed comedian born after 1980 on English Wikipedia (789,000 views in 60 days), yet his article exists in only nine languages, so he fell below the original sample’s cutoff. The two measures nonetheless agree fairly well: among 980 comedians the rank correlation is 0.76, and 64 of the top 100 coincide. Ranked by pageviews, the Ivy-Plus share of the top 100 comedians is 6%, and of stand-up comedians 5% (Figure 5). The conclusion does not depend on the measure.

Did the internet make comedy meritocratic? If elite connections inflated older comedians’ prominence, and recent fame is meritocratic and favors low g , the elite share should fall in the internet-era cohort. It does not. Among the 100 most prominent comedians born 1980–2000, the share is 8% by language editions and 4% by pageviews. Among stand-up comedians born 1980–2000 it is 7.3% ($n = 41$) on both measures. Actors move in step (8% and 7%). Recent cohorts are small, but none of the estimates falls toward the 0.8% that the objection implies. Ivy-Plus alumni among the most-viewed recent comedians include Colin Jost, Jenny Slate, Allison Williams, and Whitney Cummings.

Legacy admissions. Chetty et al. report that legacies are 2.5% of Ivy-Plus applicants and are admitted at three to five times the rate of comparable applicants [1]. Legacies are therefore roughly 7–11% of admits. If every Ivy-Plus comedian were dropped in that proportion, a 6% share would become 5.3–5.6%.

Shouldn’t wealth and connections make the expected share higher than 6%? Elite graduates’ advantages in wealth, health, drive, and contacts apply to every entertainment career. The relevant benchmark is therefore other open-entry performing fields, not lawyers. Comedians (4–8%) sit between musicians (2–4%) and actors (5–9%) on both measures and in both cohorts. Writing-based fields are higher: screenwriters 8–11%, television writers 14–16%, novelists 13–29%. Comedy shows no Ivy deficit relative to fields with similar entry conditions.

Is the association negative only above a threshold of g ? No study of humor tests for a threshold. In the closest analogue, creativity, segmented regression finds that the positive slope flattens above roughly IQ 100–120 on tests of creative potential, without turning negative. For real-world creative achievement no threshold appears at all [10]. Professional comedians scored 1.34 standard deviations above students on vocabulary [2]. Within that high-scoring group the correlation with humor production was -0.08 (95% CI -0.42 to 0.28 , $n = 31$). This is consistent with a plateau but far too imprecise to show a decline. A flattening at high g is plausible; a negative relation is not supported.

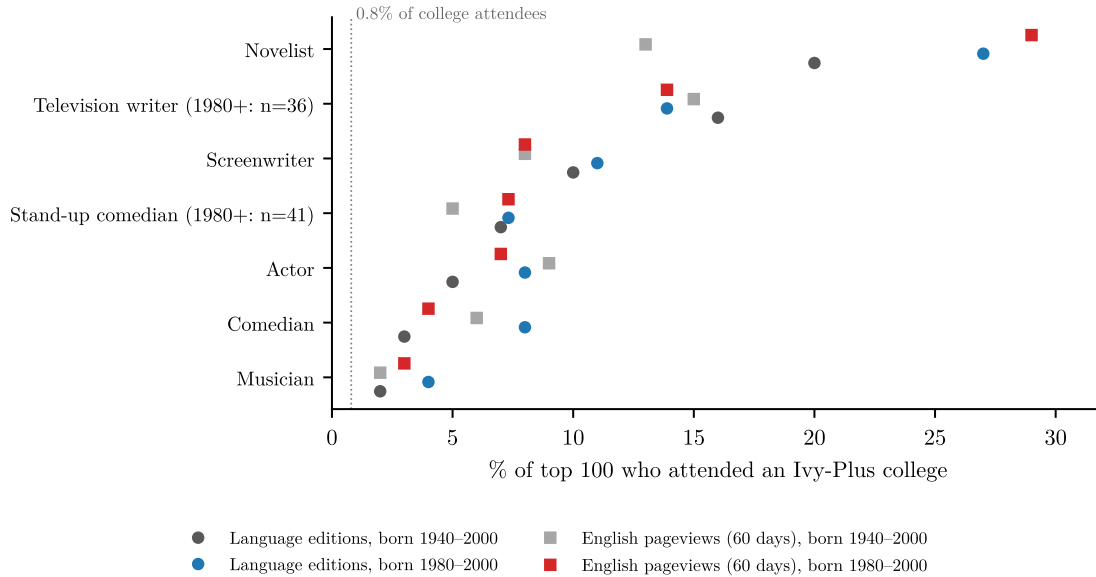


Figure 5: Ivy-Plus share of the top 100 Americans per occupation, by prominence measure and birth cohort. The pool includes everyone with at least three Wikipedia language editions (ten for actors, eight for musicians). Politicians are excluded. Dotted line: Ivy-Plus share of college attendees [1].

7 Verdict

Claim	Finding	Verdict
C1	“Virtually all” requires $r \geq 0.8$; moderate r gives a small elite share	Invalid inference
C2	71% of Supreme Court justices, 37% of Nobel laureates, 13% of CEOs	True only where credentials gate entry
C3	4–6% of top comedians are Ivy-Plus	Supported
C4	8–13 times the base rate; $r \approx 0.38$ observed, 0.51–0.67 latent	Contradicted
C5	Lampoon alumni concentrate in writing rooms and hosting	Answered; count to source

The data are consistent with a moderate positive association between humor ability and g , filtered through occupational choice and diluted by the many other traits that stage success requires. Elite graduates who enter comedy disproportionately write it. Stand-up rewards traits that neither g nor credentials capture, and its open entry places no premium on degrees.

8 Limitations

Laboratory humor tasks (cartoon captions rated by students) are not stage comedy, and most samples are students. Wikipedia language editions and pageviews measure fame, not quality. Wikidata’s “comedian” label is applied loosely; it includes, for example, Jake Paul and Oliver Tree. Occupations overlap: many comedians are also actors. Wikidata education entries contain errors

and include graduate and drama-school attendance. The model is illustrative; the true talent- g correlation for professional comedy is unknown.

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