**Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League:**

The nation's top colleges are turning our kids into zombies

William Deresiewicz

“Super People,” the writer James Atlas has called them—the stereotypical ultra-high-achieving elite college students of today. A double major, a sport, a musical instrument, a couple of foreign languages, service work in distant corners of the globe, a few hobbies thrown in for good measure: They have mastered them all, and with a serene self-assurance that leaves adults and peers alike in awe. A friend who teaches at a top university once asked her class to memorize 30 lines of the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope. Nearly every single kid got every single line correct. It was a thing of wonder, she said, like watching thoroughbreds circle a track.

These enviable youngsters appear to be the winners in the race we have made of childhood. But the reality is very different, as I have witnessed in many of my own students and heard from the hundreds of young people whom I have spoken with on campuses or who have written to me over the last few years. Our system of elite education manufactures young people who are smart and talented and driven, yes, but also anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose: trapped in a bubble of privilege, heading meekly in the same direction, great at what they’re doing but with no idea why they’re doing it.

A young woman from another school wrote me this about her boyfriend at Yale:

*Before he started college, he spent most of his time reading and writing short stories. Three years later, he’s painfully insecure, worrying about things my public-educated friends don’t give a second thought to, like the stigma of eating lunch alone and whether he’s “networking” enough. No one but me knows he fakes being well-read by thumbing through the first and last chapters of any book he hears about and obsessively devouring reviews in lieu of the real thing. He does this not because he’s incurious, but because there’s a bigger social reward for being able to talk about books than for actually reading them.*

I taught many wonderful young people during my years in the Ivy League—bright, thoughtful, creative kids whom it was a pleasure to talk with and learn from. But most of them seemed content to color within the lines that their education had marked out for them. Very few were passionate about ideas. Very few saw college as part of a larger project of intellectual discovery and development. Everyone dressed as if they were ready to be interviewed at a moment’s notice.

Look beneath the façade of seamless well-adjustment, and what you often find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation. A large-scale survey of college freshmen recently found that self-reports of emotional well-being have fallen to their lowest level in the study’s 25-year history.

So extreme are the admission standards now that kids who manage to get into elite colleges have, by definition, never experienced anything but success. The prospect of *not*being successful terrifies them, disorients them. The cost of falling short, even temporarily, becomes not merely practical, but existential. The result is a violent aversion to risk. You have no margin for error, so you avoid the possibility that you will ever make an error. Once, a student at Pomona told me that she’d love to have a chance to think about the things she’s studying, only she doesn’t have the time. I asked her if she had ever considered not trying to get an A in every class. She looked at me as if I had made an indecent suggestion.

There are exceptions, kids who insist, against all odds, on trying to get a real education. But their experience tends to make them feel like freaks. One student told me that a friend of hers had left Yale because she found the school “stifling to the parts of yourself that you’d call a soul.”

“Return on investment”: that’s the phrase you often hear today when people talk about college. What no one seems to ask is what the “return” is supposed to be. Is it just about earning more money? Is the only purpose of an education to enable you to get a job? What, in short, is college for?

The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think. That doesn’t simply mean developing the mental skills particular to individual disciplines. College is an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family and the exigencies of career, and contemplate things from a distance.

Learning how to think is only the beginning, though. There’s something in particular you need to think about: building a self. The notion may sound strange. “We’ve taught them,” David Foster Wallace once said, “that a self is something you just have.” But it is only through the act of establishing communication between the mind and the heart, the mind and experience, that you become an individual, a unique being—a soul. The job of college is to assist you to begin to do that. Books, ideas, works of art and thought, the pressure of the minds around you that are looking for their own answers in their own ways.

College is not the only chance to learn to think, but it is the best. One thing is certain: If you haven’t started by the time you finish your B.A., there’s little likelihood you’ll do it later. That is why an undergraduate experience devoted exclusively to career preparation is four years largely wasted.

Elite schools like to boast that they teach their students how to think, but all they mean is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions. Everything is technocratic—the development of expertise—and everything is ultimately justified in technocratic terms.

At least the classes at elite schools are academically rigorous, demanding on their own terms, no? Not necessarily. In the sciences, usually; in other disciplines, not so much. There are exceptions, of course, but professors and students have largely entered into what one observer called a “nonaggression pact.” Students are regarded by the institution as “customers,” people to be pandered to instead of challenged. Professors are rewarded for research, so they want to spend as little time on their classes as they can. The profession’s whole incentive structure is biased against teaching, and the more prestigious the school, the stronger the bias is likely to be. The result is higher marks for shoddier work.

It is true that today’s young people appear to be more socially engaged than kids have been for several decades and that they are more apt to harbor creative or entrepreneurial impulses. But it is also true, at least at the most selective schools, that even if those aspirations make it out of college—a big “if”—they tend to be played out within the same narrow conception of what constitutes a valid life: affluence, credentials, prestige.

If there is one idea, above all, through which the concept of social responsibility is communicated at the most prestigious schools, it is “leadership.” “Harvard is for leaders,” goes the Cambridge cliché. To be a high-achieving student is to constantly be urged to think of yourself as a future leader of society. But what these institutions mean by leadership is nothing more than getting to the top. Making partner at a major law firm or becoming a chief executive, climbing the greasy pole of whatever hierarchy you decide to attach yourself to. I don’t think it occurs to the people in charge of elite colleges that the concept of leadership ought to have a higher meaning, or, really, any meaning.

More broadly, they need to rethink their conception of merit. If schools are going to train a better class of leaders than the ones we have today, they’re going to have to ask themselves what kinds of qualities they need to promote. Selecting students by GPA or the number of extracurriculars more often benefits the faithful drudge than the original mind.

High-quality public education, financed with public money, for the benefit of all: the exact commitment that drove the growth of public higher education in the postwar years. Everybody gets an equal chance to go as far as their hard work and talent will take them—you know, the American dream. Everyone who wants it gets to have the kind of mind-expanding, soul-enriching experience that a liberal arts education provides. We recognize that free, quality K–12 education is a right of citizenship. We also need to recognize—as we once did and as many countries still do—that the same is true of higher education. We have tried aristocracy. We have tried meritocracy. Now it’s time to try democracy.

William Deresiewicz is the author of [*Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite* *and* *The Way to a Meaningful Life*,](http://www.excellentsheep.com/) coming out August 19 from Free Press. He taught at Yale from 1998 to 2008.

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