Book Review: 'Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite' by William Deresiewicz

Students sacrifice all to grades and resume building—"I might be miserable," a Yalie noted, 'but were I not miserable, I wouldn't be at Yale.'

Many of the freshmen arriving on campus this month at golden institutions like Harvard, Yale, MIT and Stanford already have resumes that would make a corporate headhunter salivate. These future leaders have scored off-the-charts on their SATs and juggled—if not founded—a handful of extracurricular clubs. They aced their STEM classes while playing three varsity sports, and eked out the time to spend their summers volunteering in African orphanages.

For William Deresiewicz the rat race for college admissions—and, later, for entry into the top banks and law firms—has robbed these ultra-high achievers of their passion, intellectual curiosity, purpose and depth. Students today, he suggests, regard their education at elite institutions not as an opportunity to develop their character, but as just another credential, "an algorithm to be cracked in order to get to the next level," as one graduate of Deerfield Academy told the author. They chase "success" with no greater purpose to guide them. And the universities they attend, which regard them increasingly as customers rather than students, do little to provide one.

Mr. Deresiewicz has taught many of these students as a professor of English at Yale and as a graduate instructor at Columbia, where he received his doctorate. His book "Excellent Sheep" is a cri de coeur against the credentials arms-race that now defines young adulthood—and even childhood—for many Americans. But you don't have to take his word for it: The book features interviews and correspondence with students and recent graduates of elite institutions. Beyond their glowing transcripts and the fact that they have become "accomplished adult-wranglers," these students are anxious, depressed and searching for some deeper meaning in their lives. "For many students, rising to the absolute top means being consumed by the system. I've seen my peers sacrifice health, relationships, exploration, activities that can't be quantified and are essential for developing souls and hearts, for grades and resume building," one Stanford student told the author. A Yalie put it more succinctly: "I might be miserable, but were I not miserable, I wouldn't be at Yale."

The crisis Mr. Deresiewicz lays out is, at its root, a moral one. In the past, elite colleges were attended by students who were destined by their upbringing to inherit and occupy the rungs of power. Our finest institutions sought to develop character, intellect and instill "devotion to the benefit of others, not yourself"—in short, noblesse oblige.

But beginning in the 1960s, college admissions changed radically, shifting from "the old aristocracy to the new meritocracy: from caste, 'character,' and connections," writes the author, "to scores and grades." Elite universities today are more meritocratic, but they are also more materialistic. "In 1971," Mr. Deresiewicz writes quoting a study, "73
percent of incoming freshmen said that it is essential or very important to "develop a meaningful philosophy of life." That same year, 37% said being wealthy was important. But by 2011, the values of young adults had changed: Eighty percent said being rich is a very important priority, while only 47% were interested in life's big questions. Even in a decade of economic turmoil, about half of the graduates at Penn who pursue full-time employment, for example, go into finance and consulting each year.

This is not the purpose Mr. Deresiewicz has in mind for this country's best and brightest. He believes in an education that asks: "What is the good life and how should I live it?" It is as much an education in character as it is in critical thinking. The author chronicles the gradual process by which the traditional liberal arts education that was once a staple of these schools has given way to the research university agenda, where "fragmentation and specialization" define the curriculum. Rather than being taught the accumulated wisdom of the past through the great books, students now select from a bland a la carte menu of "distribution requirements" that leave them without a holistic understanding of the debates and issues that shaped the culture they now live in. "Nothing adds up," he writes, "because nothing is designed to add up."

In writing about the crisis in higher education, Mr. Deresiewicz is venturing into culture-war territory. Thankfully, politics and ideology don't bog down his book. In his chapter on the virtue of the great books, for example, Mr. Deresiewicz writes with spirit as he champions the crucial role the humanities play in cultivating young hearts and minds. "The humanities are what we have, in a secular society, instead of religion," he writes. They are where "educated people went to contemplate those questions of meaning and value and purpose" after the traditional source of that knowledge, religion, was discredited by science and skepticism.

The current system, Mr. Deresiewicz writes, is "exacerbating inequality, retarding social mobility, perpetuating privilege, and creating an elite that is as isolated from the society that it's supposed to lead—and even more smug about its right to its position—as the WASP aristocracy itself." Some of the solutions he offers will doubtless provoke parents currently shelling out thousands of dollars for SAT tutors. Chief among them: He encourages high-schoolers to look beyond the elite institutions of the popular imagination. Students serious about getting a real education, he argues, should apply to liberal arts schools like Kenyon and Sewanee that have stayed true to their mission, and to public universities, many of which have excellent honors colleges.

Mr. Deresiewicz also suggests replacing race-based affirmative action with class-based affirmative action. Some of the biggest losers in the current system, he rightly points out, are middle-class and poor white kids who don't stand a chance competing against their upper-middle class peers. These students would also offer campuses a diversity that's more than skin deep.

Ms. Smith, a writer based in New Haven, is the managing editor of the Hoover Institution Journal "Defining Ideas" and the editor of Acculturated.com.
The reviewer suggests that this book proposes putting BandAids on the deck chairs of the Titanic.

High on the list of idiocies of our era is the whole concept of consulting.

Think about what it means.

The high paid managers of big companies are too clueless to do the jobs they were hired for, and are too greedy to resign.

So they hire glib kids right out of school, with no experience in anything real -- i.e. consultants -- to pretend to do their jobs for them.

And who will complain?

Not their employees, not as long as their own paychecks clear.

Not their shareholders, who are mainly mutual funds and institutional investors that know little about the 500+ companies they have invested in.

Certainly not their customers, because no one listens to customers, and no customer expects to be listened to.

If your role includes hiring, you can help break this cycle. Don't hire consultants. Don't hire college granulates. Do hire veterans. Do hire people who are interested in YOUR business.
Michael K

It's also worth noting that both the author of this article and the author of the book she is applauding have a scant or amateurish understanding of science. Because if they really understood science and its foundation, they would be shocked to find out that science also rests on axioms that are to be taken by "faith". We don't call it faith though, we call them principles in science. But the same accusation that is used by amateur "know it alls" to discredit religion can be leveled to discredit science.

Jim Kellett

In my experience, highly technical jobs don't require the intellectually gifted, but experience in dealing with challenges of the organizational, systemic and personal kind, ie, how to get the job done, not how to do the job. OJT, creativity, positive attitude, interpersonal skills and willingness to absorb from others are way more valuable than the educational institution or perceived intelligence/memorization capability. Professional judgment is not learned in school. It is said the dumber think they are smarter than they are; this applies to the other end of the spectrum as well.

ESTELLE BRENNA

@Jim Kellett Professional competence and judgment require intellectual gifts and work. Don't confuse an intellectual effete with an intelligent person/

Jim Kellett

I wasn't trying to say intelligence isn't required, it is, and it can be found at all institutions, but rather that hyperintelligence alone isn't as valuable as a balance of capabilities, all of which aren't reflected in the sheepskin. And, to be sure, there are many from top tiered schools that have everything it takes. In my day, it was said the degree got you your first job, then it was your resume.