

# Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League

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

BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

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In the spring of 2008, I did a daylong stint on the Yale admissions committee. We—that is, three admissions staff, a member of the college dean's office, and me, the faculty representative—were going through submissions from eastern Pennsylvania. The applicants had been assigned a score from one to four, calculated from a string of figures and codes—SATs, GPA, class rank, numerical scores to which the letters of recommendation had been converted, special notations for legacies and diversity cases. The ones had already been admitted, and the threes and fours could get in only under special conditions—if they were a nationally ranked athlete, for instance, or a “DevA,” (an applicant in the highest category of “development” cases, which means a child of very rich donors). Our task for the day was to adjudicate among the twos. Huge bowls of junk food were stationed at the side of the room to keep our energy up.

The junior officer in charge, a young man who looked to be about 30, presented each case, rat-a-tat-tat, in a blizzard of admissions jargon that I had to pick up on the fly. “Good rig”: the transcript exhibits a good degree of academic rigor. “Ed level 1”: parents have an educational level no higher than high school, indicating a genuine hardship case. “MUSD”: a musician in the highest category of promise. Kids who had five or six items on their list of extracurriculars—the “brag”—were already in trouble, because that wasn't nearly enough. We listened, asked questions, dove into a letter or two, then voted up or down.

With so many accomplished applicants to choose from, we were looking for kids with something special, “PQs”—personal qualities—that were often revealed by the letters or essays. Kids who only had the numbers and the résumé were usually rejected: “no spark,” “not a team-builder,” “this is pretty much in the middle of the fairway for us.” One young person, who had piled up a truly insane quantity of extracurriculars and who submitted nine letters of recommendation, was felt to be “too intense.” On the other hand, the numbers and the résumé were clearly indispensable. I'd been told that successful applicants could either be “well-rounded” or “pointy”—outstanding in one particular way—but if they were pointy, they had to be *really* pointy: a musician whose audition tape had impressed the music department, a scientist who had won a national award.

“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.

When I speak of elite education, I mean prestigious institutions like Harvard or Stanford or Williams as well as the larger universe of second-tier selective schools, but I also mean everything that leads up to and away from them—the private and affluent public high schools; the ever-growing industry of tutors and consultants and test-prep courses; the admissions process itself, squatting like a dragon at the entrance to adulthood; the brand-name graduate schools and employment opportunities that come after the B.A.; and the parents and communities, largely upper-middle class, who push their children into the maw of this machine. In short, our entire system of elite education.

I should say that this subject is very personal for me. Like so many kids today, I went off to college like a sleepwalker. You chose the most prestigious place that let you in; up ahead were vaguely understood objectives: status, wealth—“success.” What it meant to actually get an education and why you might want one—all this was off the table. It was only after 24 years in the Ivy League—college and a Ph.D. at Columbia, ten years on the faculty at Yale—that I started to think about what this system does to kids and how they can escape from it, what it does to our society and how we can dismantle 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.

Religious colleges—even obscure, regional schools that no one has ever heard of on the coasts—often do a much better job in that respect. What an indictment of the Ivy League and its peers: that colleges four levels down on the academic totem pole, enrolling students whose SAT scores are hundreds of points lower than theirs, deliver a better education, in the highest sense of the word.

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.

Experience itself has been reduced to instrumental function, via the college essay. From learning to commodify your experiences for the application, the next step has been to seek out experiences in order to have them to commodify. *The New York Times* reports that there is now a thriving sector devoted to producing essay-ready summers, but what strikes one is the superficiality of the activities involved: a month traveling around Italy studying the Renaissance, “a whole day” with a band of renegade artists. A whole day!

I've noticed something similar when it comes to service. Why is it that people feel the need to go to places like Guatemala to do their projects of rescue or documentation, instead of Milwaukee or Arkansas? When students do stay in the States, why is it that so many head for New Orleans? Perhaps it's no surprise, when kids are trained to think of service as something they are ultimately doing for themselves—that is, for their résumés. “Do well by doing good,” goes the slogan. How about just doing good?

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.

The irony is that elite students are told that they can be whatever they want, but most of them end up choosing to be one of a few very similar things. As of 2010, about a third of graduates went into financing or consulting at a number of top schools, including Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell. Whole fields have disappeared from view: the clergy, the military, electoral politics, even academia itself, for the most part, including basic science. It's considered glamorous to drop out of a selective college if you want to become the next Mark Zuckerberg, but ludicrous to stay in to become a social worker. “What Wall Street figured out,” as Ezra Klein has put it, “is that colleges are producing a large number of very smart, completely confused graduates. Kids who have ample mental horsepower, an incredible work ethic and no idea what to do next.”

For the most selective colleges, this system is working very well indeed. Application numbers continue to swell, endowments are robust, tuition hikes bring ritual complaints but no decline in business. Whether it is working for anyone else is a different question.

It almost feels ridiculous to have to insist that colleges like Harvard are bastions of privilege, where the rich send their children to learn to walk, talk, and think like the rich. Don't we already know this? They aren't called elite colleges for nothing. But apparently we like pretending otherwise. We live in a meritocracy, after all.

The sign of the system's alleged fairness is the set of policies that travel under the banner of "diversity." And that diversity does indeed represent nothing less than a social revolution. Princeton, which didn't even admit its first woman *graduate* student until 1961—a year in which a grand total of one (no doubt very lonely) African American matriculated at its college—is now half female and only about half white. But diversity of sex and race has become a cover for increasing economic resegregation. Elite colleges are still living off the moral capital they earned in the 1960s, when they took the genuinely courageous step of dismantling the mechanisms of the WASP aristocracy.

The truth is that the meritocracy was never more than partial. Visit any elite campus across our great nation, and you can thrill to the heart-warming spectacle of the children of white businesspeople and professionals studying and playing alongside the children of black, Asian, and Latino businesspeople and professionals. Kids at schools like Stanford think that their environment is diverse if one comes from Missouri and another from Pakistan, or if one plays the cello and the other lacrosse. Never mind that all of their parents are doctors or bankers.

That doesn't mean there aren't a few exceptions, but that is all they are. In fact, the group that is most disadvantaged by our current admissions policies are working-class and rural whites, who are hardly present on selective campuses at all. The only way to think these places are diverse is if that's all you've ever seen.

Let's not kid ourselves: The college admissions game is not primarily about the lower and middle classes seeking to rise, or even about the upper-middle class attempting to maintain its position. It is about determining the exact hierarchy of status within the upper-middle class itself. In the affluent suburbs and well-heeled urban enclaves where this game is principally played, it is not about whether you go to an elite school. It's about which one you go to. It is Penn versus Tufts, not Penn versus Penn State. It doesn't matter that a bright young person can go to Ohio State, become a doctor, settle in Dayton, and make a very good living. Such an outcome is simply too horrible to contemplate.

This system is exacerbating inequality, retarding social mobility, perpetuating privilege, and creating an elite that is isolated from the society that it's supposed to lead. The numbers are undeniable. In 1985, 46 percent of incoming freshmen at the 250 most selective colleges came from the top quarter of the income distribution. By 2000, it was 55 percent. As of 2006, only about 15 percent of students at the most competitive schools came from the bottom half. The more prestigious the school, the more unequal its student body is apt to be. And public institutions are not much better than private ones. As of 2004, 40 percent of first-year students at the most selective state campuses came from families with incomes of more than \$100,000, up from 32 percent just five years earlier.

The major reason for the trend is clear. Not increasing tuition, though that is a factor, but the ever-growing cost of manufacturing children who are fit to compete in the college admissions game. The more hurdles there are, the more expensive it is to catapult your kid across them. Wealthy families start buying their children's way into elite colleges almost from the moment they are born: music lessons, sports equipment, foreign travel ("enrichment" programs, to use the all-too-perfect term)—most important, of course, private-school tuition or the costs of living in a place with top-tier public schools. The SAT is supposed to measure aptitude, but what it actually measures is parental income, which it tracks quite closely. Today, fewer than half of high-scoring students from low-income families even *enroll* at four-year schools.

The problem isn't that there aren't more qualified lower-income kids from which to choose. Elite private colleges will never allow their students' economic profile to mirror that of society as a whole. They can't afford to—they need a critical mass of full payers and they need to tend to their donor base—and it's not even clear that they'd want to.

And so it is hardly a coincidence that income inequality is higher than it has been since before the Great Depression, or that social mobility is lower in the United States than in almost every other developed country. Elite colleges are not just powerless to reverse the movement toward a more unequal society; their policies actively promote it.

Is there anything that I can do, a lot of young people have written to ask me, to avoid becoming an out-of-touch, entitled little shit? I don't have a satisfying answer, short of telling them to transfer to a public university. You cannot cogitate your way to sympathy with people of different backgrounds, still less to knowledge of them. You need to interact with them directly, and it has to be on an equal footing: not in the context of "service," and not in the spirit of "making an effort," either—swooping down on a member of the college support staff and offering to "buy them a coffee," as a former Yale once suggested, in order to "ask them about themselves."

Instead of service, how about service *work*? That'll really give you insight into other people. How about waiting tables so that you can see how hard it is, physically and mentally? You really aren't as smart as everyone has been telling you; you're only smarter in a certain way. There are smart people who do not go to a prestigious college, or to any college—often precisely for reasons of class. There are smart people who are not "smart."

I am under no illusion that it doesn't matter where you go to college. But there are options. There are still very good public universities in every region of the country. The education is often impersonal, but the student body is usually genuinely diverse in terms of socioeconomic background, with all of the invaluable experiential learning that implies.

*U.S. News and World Report* supplies the percentage of freshmen at each college who finished in the highest 10 percent of their high school class. Among the top 20 universities, the number is usually above 90 percent. I'd be wary of attending schools like that. Students determine the level of classroom discussion; they shape your values and expectations, for good and ill. It's partly because of the students that I'd warn kids away from the Ivies and their ilk. Kids at less prestigious schools are apt to be more interesting, more curious, more open, and far less entitled and competitive.

If there is anywhere that college is still college—anywhere that teaching and the humanities are still accorded pride of place—it is the liberal arts college. Such places are small, which is not for everyone, and they're often fairly isolated, which is also not for everyone. The best option of all may be the second-tier—not second-rate—colleges, like Reed, Kenyon, Wesleyan, Sewanee, Mount Holyoke, and others. Instead of trying to compete with Harvard and Yale, these schools have retained their allegiance to real educational values.

Not being an entitled little shit is an admirable goal. But in the end, the deeper issue is the situation that makes it so hard to be anything else. The time has come, not simply to reform that system top to bottom, but to plot our exit to another kind of society altogether.

The education system has to act to mitigate the class system, not reproduce it. Affirmative action should be based on class instead of race, a change that many have been advocating for years. Preferences for legacies and athletes ought to be discarded. SAT scores should be weighted to account for socioeconomic factors. Colleges should put an end to résumé-stuffing by imposing a limit on the number of extracurriculars that kids can list on their applications. They ought to place more value on the kind of service jobs that lower-income students often take in high school and that high achievers almost never do. They should refuse to be impressed by any opportunity that was enabled by parental wealth. Of course, they have to stop cooperating with *U.S. News*.

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.

The changes must go deeper, though, than reforming the admissions process. That might address the problem of mediocrity, but it won't address the greater one of inequality. The problem is the Ivy League itself. We have contracted the training of our leadership class to a set of private institutions. However much they claim to act for the common good, they will always place their interests first. The arrangement is great for the schools, but is Harvard's desire for alumni donations a sufficient reason to perpetuate the class system?

I used to think that we needed to create a world where every child had an equal chance to get to the Ivy League. I've come to see that what we really need is to create one where you don't have to go to the Ivy League, or any private college, to get a first-rate education.

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.

Deresiewicz, William. "Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League." *New Republic*. New Republic, 21 July 2014. Web. 24 Aug. 2016.