Don't Send Your Kid to the Ivy League

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

BY WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ July 21, 2014

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. ← Comment on the current state of ~~them~~ student purpose, or lack of

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.

Summary.

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. ← Proposed plan in the works?

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