**Don't Bother With Yale: Even the Most *Excellent Sheep* are Still Part of a Herd**

Linda Flanagan, Freelance Writer, Huffington Post, 9.16.2014

I finished reading [Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life](http://www.amazon.com/Excellent-Sheep-Miseducation-American-Meaningful/dp/1476702713) after delivering my second child to his brand new life as a college freshman. Though our good-bye was bittersweet -- go find out who you are! (and don't dare forget to call) -- we shared an unambiguous joy that the "college process" was officially over. Testing, GPA worries, Naviance, rankings, personal essays, letters of recommendation, all of it accompanied by low-grade anxiety prompted, in part, by our community's Crucible-like hysteria surrounding admission to elite colleges: good-bye to all that, and good riddance.

The bliss was short lived. [William Deresiewicz's](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Deresiewicz) formidable and scathing book served as a bleak reminder of all that's wrong with the way we think about college and how we groom our kids for it. In Excellent Sheep, he joins the movement of [mental health experts](http://madelinelevine.com/), social critics and [filmmakers](http://www.racetonowhere.com/) who are challenging America's cultural fixation on the perceived imperative to attend a premier college. Deresiewicz has spent much of his life in and around the best universities, first as a student at Columbia and more recently as an English professor at Yale. His immersion in this milieu inspired the book, and what he reports will dishearten you. If you're a parent or teacher (or therapist) of one of the roughly 400,000 high school seniors who is scrambling for admittance any year to an elite college, what Deresiewicz calls "the egalitarian war of all against all," you already know enough to be infuriated.

Gaining admission to an elite college has long been grounded in exclusion. WASPS controlling the Ivy League after the Civil War made sure that the student body consisted mainly of rich white kids from the right prep schools; Jews, blacks and the hoi polloi knew not to apply. This aristocratic system finally gave way during the 1960s, when the president of Yale revolutionized admissions and made academic success trump family bloodlines. By eliminating quotas on Jews, opening admission to minorities and the academically-qualified poor and later admitting women, he transformed what it took to be admitted to Yale. Other top colleges followed suit. "Once the starting gun of meritocracy was fired," Deresiewicz writes, "it was everybody off to the races."

When [*U.S. News & World Report*](http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges) published its first now-famous ranking of the colleges in 1983, the quest to attend the best schools turned even more competitive, spawning an industry of tutors, college advisors and other experts dedicated to manufacturing Ivy applicants. College boards and presidents got sucked in by the rankings as well, quickly figuring out how to manipulate the U.S. News value metrics to elevate their standing. The ante for access was upped, and students responded by taking more A.P. courses, joining or creating more clubs, devoting weekends and summers to lacrosse and/or orchestra and carrying out more hours of selfless service work. "The only point of having more is having more than everybody else," Deresiewicz writes. "So like giraffes evolving ever-longer necks, our kids keep getting more and more deformed."

Deresiewicz goes on to detail the cheerless consequences of all this aimless striving, not only for long-suffering students but for the universities that perpetuate it. Kids lose their childhoods to appease the college admissions Gods (and their parents), endure record rates of depression and anxiety and arrive on campus stripped of curiosity or self-knowledge. They excel at following orders, hence they are "excellent sheep," but haven't a clue about what truly moves them. When it's time to declare a major, most follow predictable paths -- economics, finance -- and after graduation flock to business or law school. The most competitive universities might be aware of the distorting effect this game has had on their applicants, but it doesn't keep them from angling for a top spot in the rankings or rejecting applicants who don't fit the super-kid profile. As Deresiewicz makes clear, those at the top of the college heap have little reason to object to the system. After all, they get the "best" students, who later become the wealthiest donors.

Critics have complained that the book is a massive case of sour grapes, because Deresiewicz, was denied tenure at Yale many years ago, and that he's advocating a "do-as-I-say, not-as-I-do" approach to education. Would his arguments be more persuasive if he were a professor at Kean College? Uh, no. Would they carry more weight if he were a professor emeritus at Yale? Maybe, but those professors emeriti have other preoccupations they're indulging. Whatever his motives, he has facts and experience on his side, as well as a consuming interest in the purpose of education.

We learn about this passion when he discusses his own recovery from the culture of achievement. The Jewish son of immigrants, his father an Ivy League professor, Deresiewicz grew up in a household where visible success was the only permissible path. But he struggled with depression and alienation, finding peace later in life only after digesting Alice Miller's classic work, [*The Drama of the Gifted Child*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Miller_(psychologist)). Deresiewicz worries that his experiences -- his Sisyphean quest to be "loved" for his achievements, the attendant mood swings from grandiosity to despair (or what he calls the "hot shit/piece of shit" mentality), the useless envy of others' successes -- will afflict this next generation of strivers even more acutely than it did him, not least because even more is expected of kids today than of his generation.

Boo-hoo, the poor upper-middle class strivers, some jaded readers might mutter; kids without hovering parents and demanding schools are worse off. Maybe so, but the challenges of the underprivileged don't nullify the struggles of their more fortunate peers. Both merit attention. And when you work or live with these stressed-out kids you can't help but doubt that the central organizing principle of their lives needs a little adjusting.

Perhaps I found myself agreeing with so much of the book because Deresiewicz and I grew up at the same time and under similar circumstances. Like the author, I battle an internal voice that demands socially-approved successes, and still work to resist the false logic that equates merit badges with the good life. My awakening occurred while tending to three young children, none of whom was impressed with my graduate degrees or mile time. Wiping down high chairs, mediating sibling squabbles and tending to all the routine drudgery of rearing children doesn't jive with conventional notions of achievement, and living this way forces you to rethink how you measure it. But for many parents, what makes the most sense is to simply perpetuate in the next generation the mad dash for achievement that (kind of) worked for them. Anyway, that's what everyone else seems to be doing.

Some [thinkers](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/opinion/david-brooks-becoming-a-real-person.html?smid=nytcore-iphone-share&smprod=nytcore-iphone&_r=0) have used the book as a jumping off point for a high-minded discussion about the purpose of college, but what worries me most about the issues Deresiewicz raises is the deforming effect on kids who find themselves thrust in this race. Because it's the kids, after all, who are marched down this grim gauntlet, starting at ever-younger ages. Everyone wants more from them -- coaches, teachers, tutors, parents -- without considering what's lost. Here, Deresiewicz is clear: "The cultivation of curiosity, the inculcation of character, the instillment of a sense of membership in one's community, the development of the capacity for democratic citizenship, let alone any emphasis on the pleasure and freedom of play, the part of childhood where you actually get to be a child -- all these are gone." I would add to that any kind of normal family life, where children are neither the misplaced focal point, with adults arranging their lives around their kids' sports schedules, nor miserable tools, clambering to please others and alienated from themselves.

What even the winners get out of this system is a lethal dose of cynicism. They've learned that lying to themselves and others is the ticket to getting ahead, and that doing things "because it looks good for college," an oft-heard rationale, is reason enough to stick with the field hockey team or join the debate club. They've become skilled at the art of bullshit, gifted at spinning their rare failures into tales of redemption and casting their occasional hobby as a burning passion. Asked by a college interviewer what he would do if he had an extra hour every day, the son of a friend said, "I'd help my brother with his homework." Moral philosopher [Harry Frankfurt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harry_Frankfurt) reminds us that spewing bullshit is more pernicious than lying. In [*On Bullshit*](http://www.amazon.com/On-Bullshit-Harry-G-Frankfurt/dp/1419348876), he argues that truth-tellers and liars share an understanding of what the facts may be, but a bullshitter "is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false....He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose." How will kids brought up to fake what they think and feel navigate their lives? Note to psychology majors: when all those kids grow up and need therapy, your education will have paid off.

Deresiewicz calls on the young to challenge the way they think about their college years, inviting them to welcome more risks, take time off and embrace disloyalty as the necessary route to independence. He also encourages us parents to be better shepherds of the young, to step back, let them screw-up and work harder to muffle our inner status-seeker. Early reports from my new college freshman suggest that all is well, though he's taken to ignoring my texts. This is a good thing, right?