



Titans Briefs

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Book: *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life*

Author: William Deresiewicz

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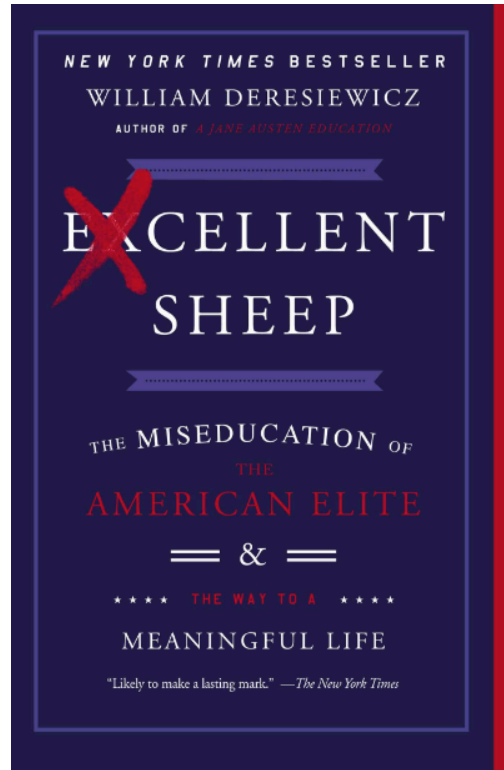
Summary:

Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite & the Way to a Meaningful Life, written by William Deresiewicz, attacks the elite academic institutions of America for not properly educating America's youth. Deresiewicz, having twenty-four years of experience in the Ivy League environment, uses his personal experience, statistics, and countless testimonies to break down why the current education system is failing students.

Referring to the students of the elite academic institutions, such as but not limited to, Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford, as "excellent sheep," Deresiewicz dismantles the current model of success and replaces it with a design of his own. He first targets the students, parents, and institutions that have supported the current model, meritocracy. He then explains the rise of meritocracy and discusses the power that it maintains today. Challenging everything from the admissions processes to parenting techniques, no stone is left unturned for why America's education system is failing the people.

The prominent universities of the United States have built a bureaucracy out of education, and this has in turn destroyed the value of knowledge obtained by the students. America's youth no longer thinks critically nor develops independent ideas. Instead, students get pulled in multiple directions at once in order to maintain a competitive edge over their peers. The admissions process is failing those that yearn to gain true knowledge and is instead supporting the students that have no skills in thinking.

Leadership and 'building a self' are two of the key ideas that Deresiewicz focuses on to portray what he believes should be the takeaways from a college education. As a message to his twenty-one year-old self, Deresiewicz uses this book to emphasize the importance of "building a self" in establishing a personal purpose in life. This purpose, or calling, is what should drive an individual's desire to learn and commitment to grow internally. Learning leadership is not academic learning. Leadership is comprised of embracing courage and opening one's 'self' to being imaginative. By combining courage and imagination, exemplifying leadership and building a 'self' has nothing to do with a degree plan or future job. Building a 'self' is about discovering what is right and true to one's morals and beliefs. Self-awareness, coupled with one's ability to think critically and challenge society's norms, leads people to finding a meaningful life.



EXCELLENT SHEEP

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Introduction

Excellent Sheep, written by William Deresiewicz, breaks down the faults and misconceptions of the elite academic institutions of the United States. Having spent twenty-four years in Ivy League programs, both as a student and a faculty member, the author understands and illustrates the excessive requirements that students must complete to be competitive for admission into an Ivy League school. As a Columbia graduate and a professor of English at Yale for 10 years, he refers to personal experiences to support his opinions and ideas of how these institutions are failing society by continuing down their current path.

Deresiewicz details how today's elite students are nothing more than "excellent sheep" following the trends and crowds of today's society. Today's students are "sheep" as Deresiewicz describes, because they are, "anxious, timid, and lost, with little intellectual curiosity and a stunted sense of purpose." Sheep have no idea where to go or what to do. They are herded easily, and pushed into whichever direction the shepherd feels appropriate. Sheep are vulnerable in a world where the lion dominates, and students no longer know how to become a lion. Deresiewicz builds a case for why today's elite students need to free themselves from the control of the shepherds and the lions to become independent, free-thinking members of society.

By breaking down how America, as a culture infatuated with monetary success, has formed these educational models to achieve "success," he is able to challenge these schools' methods of operating. Ultimately, Deresiewicz suggests a complete makeover of America's educational infrastructure is necessary in order to make appropriate change.

After laying out the foundation of how these "excellent sheep" have come to be, Deresiewicz uses personal testimonies from students, parents, and Ivy League faculty to illustrate an environment of pure distress and lack of direction. A description of the effects of this stifling atmosphere is followed by what Deresiewicz believes to be the true purpose of college and what elements are lacking in today's elite education institutions.

Sheep

History

At first, it seems that these "excellent sheep" have only recently started multiplying and populating America's educational environments, but in reality, they have been around for many generations. "Excellent sheep" have been adapting and growing into the new, trending systems which have risen over the years.

The higher education model traces its roots to the time in American history referenced as the Gilded Age, the last decades of the nineteenth century. As immigration from the southern and eastern regions of Europe increased, the upper class of the United States wanted to establish an environment that ensured their continued prosperity. Due to their classification as WASPs, White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, they felt threatened by the large number of Jewish and Catholic immigrants moving into America. WASPs established "a range of institutions for themselves"

varying from exclusive resorts, country clubs, and social groups to prep schools, selective societies, and private institutions of higher education. WASPs created these establishments to prevent the rising population of predominantly Jewish and Catholic immigrants from gaining power.

This period is often referred to as the time of educational aristocracy where a person needed money to be involved in these elite institutions and societies. Private universities and schools, like Harvard, Yale and Princeton, had the flexibility and biased freedom to accept and deny whomever they felt were “fit” to attend.

These schools began to focus on entrance exams that catered to the private preparatory schools and their curriculum. “Because the subjects covered, particularly Greek and Latin,” were taught only at preparatory schools, the students from public schools were unprepared. In addition, the Ivy League schools could accept whomever it wanted, regardless of test scores. The method of selectively choosing students remained largely in place for many decades, and the “Big Three” (Harvard, Yale and Princeton) even took measures to prevent Jewish students from attending in large numbers. By altering the admissions process to require “letters of recommendation, alumni interviews,” and creating nepotism toward legacies, the Big Three were able to institute a process that established character by how an applicant looked and whether or not they maintained proper manners.

Educational aristocracy lasted well into the twentieth century. It took major changes, championed by reformers within these elite schools to alter the way admissions worked in America. These reforms brought about the concept of meritocracy, the system that controls elite institutions today.

Introducing meritocracy began with the efforts of James B. Conant, president of Harvard, and Kingman Brewster, president of Yale. Conant took a more gradual and reform-based strategy when implementing the SAT. Brewster, on the other hand, challenged the admissions criteria early on and with force. In the early 1960’s, Brewster focused on the “brilliant specialist[s]” of students while “reducing the preferences for athletes and legacies.” Within a matter of years, Brewster’s activism helped remove the Jewish quota, introduce affirmative action and allow for a coed institution of higher learning within Yale’s admissions process. As Deresiewicz stated, “Brewster had demolished the old system at a single blow.”

A nationwide movement toward meritocracy had begun. Although Brewster made some revolutionary changes within Yale’s academic structure, today’s education structure is not dissimilar from a century ago. Preparatory schools still exist and formulate students from a young age to be ready for the Ivy League schools. Parents hire SAT tutors and “application-essay ‘advisors’ (that is, ghostwriters),” and families still use donations and other sly maneuvers to ensure the acceptance of their children to these leading education programs.

Meritocracy generated a prosperous era of a newly educated generation that was able to strive to achieve their potential, and many people pursued even higher levels of education.

However, as meritocracy has developed over the last half-century, it has fallen into a cycle similar to the later stages of the aristocratic system. Only the 'haves' can support their kids in reaching these elite education institutions.

The Students, Training and Institutions

Today's students are expected to be great at everything, and particularly excellent in a few areas. These expectations put an immense amount of pressure on young people and stifle any chance they have to figure out their own personal aspirations. It pushes them in the direction that many feel is what 'they are supposed to do.' Success to the elite students of America means getting straight A's, being the best at something, and going to the "best school," with no desire to be better. The evolution of the students, the parents, and the institutions over the past century has made a major impact on why the American elites are being misunderstood, misguided, and miseducated.

Deresiewicz challenges these traditional notions of success by pointing out that many people considered successful feel no purpose in life or self worth. As Lara Galinsky, author of *Work on Purpose*, is quoted saying, "You cannot say to a Yale 'find your passion,'" The traditional Ivy student has been told their entire life to work hard, strive for greatness, and deliver results. Following a passion, such as in the arts or in history, does not deliver results indicative of future success, so these passions have been unsupported and withheld from America's youth.

Students blindly follow the paths that their parents have laid out for them. They are raised to set and achieve specific goals that have been ingrained in them starting at a young age. Deresiewicz ridicules today's generation of parents for demanding their children to be the best while also commanding the schools to give their children the scores they "deserve" and telling schools what their kids should and should not learn in the classroom. The overbearing mindset of today's parents is an epidemic that is hindering students' abilities to build character and challenge the status quo of society. Deresiewicz goes on to say,

Pressuring your kids to get an A in calculus when they are seventeen is essentially the same as tying their shoelaces for them when they are eight. Both are ways of treating them as if they can't do anything for themselves.

He challenges parents to release their overbearing grip that they have on their children's lives and let them fail. Without failure, they will never learn how to succeed. Not all students are meant for higher levels of education. For a child to understand their true calling, it will take time and independence to uncover.

The misguided notions of parents are derived from influences outside of a family environment. One of the biggest factors in the growing pressure students feel to exhibit early success is spawned from the institutions themselves. The elite academic institutions are so obsessed with their own reputations and profit margins that they have lost sight of the most important benefits that students gain from their education and experience: finding purpose.

While parents play an instrumental role in shaping their children, the academic institutions themselves put immense pressure on the students to achieve ‘success’ to maintain their own reputation.

Over the last few decades, universities have moved away from focusing on broad liberal arts degrees. Instead they have begun offering specialized degree paths of more specific knowledge. Deresiewicz states:

So when kids get to college, they hear a speech or two that urges them to ask the big questions. And when they graduate, they hear another speech or two that urges them to ask the big questions. And in between, they spend four years taking courses that train them to answer the little questions: specialized courses, taught by specialized professors, aimed at specialized students.

Having specialized courses is not in itself detrimental to the students. However, demanding students to learn in a particular manner, under a specialized professor limits their horizons and outlooks on the subject matter. Deresiewicz supports students pursuing liberal arts degrees because it does not demand a rigid structure, and it supports freethinking and creative ideas. Fluidity of thought allows the student to delve into the depths of the knowledge that they find most intriguing and fascinating.

The challenge with supporting and promoting these liberal arts programs is the lack of funding that they regularly face. The Ivy League universities thrive off their elite reputations and exclusivity. To maintain their prestige, they ensure that their students look impressive on paper. By comparing average SAT scores, extra-curricular activities, and leadership roles of their applicants, only the extremely credible and most achieved students have the opportunity to attend.

These students have thrived off of ‘checking the boxes’ to reach the next step. Upon graduation, the students feel pressure to continue completing the goals that they have been told that they must reach such as: graduate with a high-paying job, climb the ladder to management, and give fiscally to the university that built their success. This system generates money for the university, but it does not create a finished product that knows how to think critically and learn for itself.

Harry R. Lewis, former Harvard dean, writes, “[Universities] have forgotten their larger educational role for college students.” The “larger educational role” that Lewis refers to is the duty to lead students in a way that aids them in their journey to find their purpose. This lack of guidance has evolved the education model to more closely resemble a business model that profits off of students. Lack of direction continues to benefit the universities as they enroll an increasing amount of students within their graduate programs.

The relationship between today’s students, parents, and institutions creates a never ending cycle of greed. Institutions raise expectations for their applicants, which pushes the parents to expect more out of their children. The parents push their children to become excellent students,

and this increases the “quality” of the institutions’ applicants, all while destroying the students’ focus of their purpose and passions in life. With no purpose, the students resort back to more education, which supports the institutions and their profits.

Today’s education system is reaching a breaking point and will eventually have to change.

Self

Purpose of College

In order to improve America’s elite education system, key questions have to be answered. The first question that Deresiewicz poses to the reader is, “What is college for?”

Today’s generation of students have been told what to do and how to do it since birth. When they get to college, the new found freedom that is thrust upon them can be overwhelming. Many students have never needed to think independently, and find that they already have a plan for their future as soon as they touch campus. The idea of a pre-packaged life scares Deresiewicz. Attending and graduating from college should not be about fulfilling a requirement or bolstering a resume. It should be about embracing the search for purpose in life.

There is a moral obligation to view college as an opportunity to bring greater meaning to one’s life. For the first time in many of these students’ lives, they are living away from the rigidity of their parents’ influence. They have the ability to figure out who they are and what they want out of life. Sadly, one major obstacle that stands in the way of a student’s path is degree curriculum.

Degrees in today’s colleges require large amounts of effort that many students feel is unnecessary and useless to their future. The mindset of today’s students spawns from their inability to detach themselves from the idea that getting a job is the most valuable part of going to college. Students have reached a point in higher education that prioritizes completing a task over learning to think. Socrates once said, “Teaching is the reeducation of desire.” In today’s American elite institutions, desire is lacking, and this deficiency of desire is having a detrimental effect on the students.

Turning the tide that is already moving so rapidly throughout the educational culture will be difficult to accomplish if the elite circles of academia do not support the movement. The current system is too precise and specific. Deresiewicz says, “The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think.” He is not referring to understanding derivations for calculus or memorizing chemistry compounds. He “means developing the habit of skepticism and the capacity to put it into practice.” In other words, learn to challenge the status quo.

Deresiewicz urges students to understand the basics before reaching for the details so that they can understand that they have the capacity to challenge information. Many ideas formed in students’ minds could be overlooked due to their complacency and the trust that they have put into concepts. One approach to counter complacency is the, “trust but verify” approach. Many people walk into the college environment with preconceived notions that are more debatable than what

they have been exposed to in their early years. Deresiewicz challenges people of all ages to confront their own conceptions and beliefs.

The second answer to “what is college for?” is finding your soul. Not only does it take personal effort to ‘find’ your soul, but it takes a conscious effort to “build a self.” Enhancement requires the establishment of “communication between the mind and the heart.” For many people the ‘communication’ takes years to develop and understand. Building a self promotes a personalized philosophy that can be applied at any point in time, with little-to-no doubt of how the consequences will affect the future. Having the confidence to trust in one’s ‘self’ is key to finding purpose in life.

Although Deresiewicz admits multiple times throughout “Excellent Sheep” that he is not a religious man, he states, “that only a religious language has sufficient gravity to do these questions justice.” The ‘self’ that is built within these formative years is as influential on one’s life as a religion should be.

The reformer James B. Conant once said, “Education’s what’s left over after you’ve forgotten everything you’ve learned.” Conant refers to a deeper purpose within education. He supports a message that more can be harvested from the educational garden than knowledge.

One’s inner being is more important than the facts and equations that are learned, and finding the passion within that ‘self’ is what education should support and cultivate on a student’s journey to adulthood.

Leadership

Leadership in the United States is generally associated with being at the top or being the best. Many people believe that a leader requires the capacity to make decisions and maintain control. Deresiewicz challenges today’s view of what makes a leader by expressing that leadership starts from within. Young students try to become leaders simply by obtaining a title, instead of by empowering those around them. The actual work done by the leader is not discussed, but the effort to be a ‘president’ or ‘founder’ of a club inherently illustrates signs of leadership.

Deresiewicz disagrees with the type of work that automatically qualifies an individual as a leader. He believes that when people consider leadership today, they are really evaluating “a talent for maneuvering.” The “talent for maneuvering” to a superior title and belittling the people around them is counteractive to the values of leadership. Rather than say that leadership is about the accolades or the accomplishments of one’s abilities, Deresiewicz relates leadership back to the process of creating a ‘self.’

For what goes for inventing your life goes equally for leadership. The crucial elements are courage and imagination. The crucial task is to create a self: something there that, when the world pushes against you, is capable of pushing back.

According to Deresiewicz, two major factors that are crucial to becoming a leader are courage and imagination.

Courage, by definition, is the ability to do something that frightens oneself. It takes courage and confidence to reach a role as a respected leader. Courage comes from within and without maintaining and supporting that courage, leadership cannot be obtained. It takes courage to be an independent thinker, and these independent thoughts, coupled with imagination, grow into leadership.

Imagination is not in reference to fairy tales. It takes a creative mind to embrace new ideas. Leadership is born by combining the courage of challenging the status quo and the creativity of establishing independent thoughts and solutions to a situation.

This generation was brought up to hold composure and treat each other politely, whilst ignoring their true emotions and opinions. The lack of honest communication between people inhibits the ability for human progression and improvement on the current problems faced today. It takes courage to confront an idea, knowing that it will distress and upset others. It takes imagination to create a solution. It takes imagination to understand ideas. It takes imagination to see both sides of an issue.

The ability to engage in conflict, confrontation, and resistance is viewed as a negative trait within society. However, without confronting the problems that plague humanity, there will be no solution.

Before leaders learn to exhibit courage and support the progressive thoughts of others, they must see these traits within themselves. Leadership is a function of understanding one's inner being with confidence, in order to maintain composure and conviction when others resist. Being unpopular is required of leaders when needed. Hesitation must not be a factor when it comes to demonstrating leadership.

One Brown professor said, "Kids want to save the world, but their idea of doing so invariably involves some form of getting to the top." The quote illustrates the impact that the educational system and parents have on people's perception of leadership. Deresiewicz does not believe that leaders must be the most talented in their respected field. Nor do true leaders have to reach a threshold of income in order to have an impact on the world. Still, the elite academic institutions' infatuation with money has driven the United States' students to a belief that without wealth, there is no impact on society.

Higher learning institutions have created a large gap between the "haves and have-nots," while also bringing a sense of disempowerment to the middle and lower classes in society. Instead of supporting solutions to improve education for everyone, these establishments have supported the ideas of charity and service, which in some cases, gives more satisfaction to the server than the served.

Deresiewicz challenges the reader to consider what he considers, “justice.” Justice focuses on “working together toward a larger good that embraces us all.” It requires “every person...to find their own path, when it comes to working for a better world, and so does every generation.” As a culture, America has to decide whether it will continue down the current path of meritocracy and lackluster leadership or shift directions and bring justice to all through the empowerment of others.

Schools

Great Books

One of the most important factors missing in the elite universities’ programs is the emphasis on liberal arts. Deresiewicz stresses that current students are too specialized. Liberal arts degrees are not designed to find the student a job, a key disadvantage in today’s competitive work environment. Instead, liberal arts are meant to develop the student and cultivate a yearning for knowledge that can be found within each individual person.

The liberal arts drive a personal journey through life, constantly challenging the ‘norms’ of today. This is not a requirement of studying liberal arts, but it should be treated as a responsibility to one’s personal growth. Also, spending college studying the liberal arts is not nearly enough time to devote to adapting a new mentality. It has to be cultivated and nurtured for years throughout all aspects of life, personally and professionally. As Deresiewicz states,

Four years is scarcely adequate to make a decent start—of learning to analyze the arguments of others and to make your own in turn: to marshal evidence, evaluate existing authorities, anticipate objections, synthesize your findings within a logically coherent structure, and communicate the results with clarity and force.

It is human nature to disagree on topics, and it is a personal right to hold independent viewpoints. Unfortunately, younger Americans, referred to as millennials, are afraid to communicate with force. Leadership is about developing the courage to be able to “push back” when the world decides to challenge one’s own convictions. The importance of a liberal arts education is focused on understanding arguments, relating to opposing positions, and building a personal arsenal of ideas and opinions that are developed through deep thought and introspection.

Spirit Guides

Guidance is needed in order for one to more effectively “build a self.” It can be exhausting and demoralizing to attack deep and intricate ideas by oneself. “Spirit Guides,” or teachers, can aid in the development of the drive to probe complex ideas. Teachers today, particularly at the university level, have much of their time invested in their personal interests. The importance of independent research and monetary gains displayed by today’s professors damages a student’s ability to capture the full potential of the college experience.

It is not a teacher's role to force-feed thoughts down a student's throat and make them think a certain way. By comparing teachers to "guides," Deresiewicz explains that teachers should help develop the skill of critical thinking. Intellectual thought cannot be learned by reading about or watching a tutorial. It takes personal experience and commitment to truly master the range of skills associated with thinking. Elite students are often frustrated and demoralized if they do not succeed on their first try of understanding a concept or method. Spirit Guides force students to improve, not by accepting thinking as a completion of a task, but rather as a progression in the appropriate direction. The continuous repetition of stretching mental boundaries can improve the clarity in which one sees the world.

Unfortunately, "Spirit Guides" are few and far between in America's education system. With the growing influence of standardized testing and the stress on learning facts rather than broad ideas, teachers have lost the ability to guide students because the respective institutions of higher learning do not support it.

Society

America's Obstacles

One of the key challenges faced in today's society is entitlement. Students that find themselves in the elite academic environments of Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford, to name a few, have a level of entitlement that breathes, "academic excellence is excellence." More often than not, this mindset is supported by the universities and the faculty. Students are reinforced in their belief that they are better than everyone else, for the sole reason that they were accepted into Harvard or Yale. Schools are so caught up in making themselves look good, they are making their product look bad.

Entitlement is bred throughout these programs, because the universities are constantly fighting to be the best. Within a competitive environment, students challenge the fact that they could ever fail, and when they are faced with adversity, they feel that they are unaccomplished and lackluster. As the elite students of America, they should embrace these challenges and learn to love the adversity in the name of self-improvement.

America has to challenge entitlement by changing the very environment that breeds it. Over the last half-century, meritocracy has become cyclical, and the 'new blood' that was brought into the system in the 1960s and 1970s has slowed. The gap between the elites and the plebeians of the United States is growing wider.

Overcoming Meritocracy

Meritocracy in academics supports those capable of participating. Just as the aristocracy of the early twentieth century became outdated, meritocracy is approaching its expiration date. Deresiewicz acknowledges that, "some level of inequality is inevitable," but the major goal for the

future of the United State's education systems should be to "prevent inequality from being handed down."

Deresiewicz's major movement is based around "equalizing funding nationwide." By setting an equal playing field from grades K-12, children should have the opportunity to know for themselves whether they want to strive for a college degree. Instead of affirmative action being based on racial inequality, Deresiewicz believes that it should be reformatted around socioeconomic factors. To execute this plan, spending in education programs must be increased greatly. The sense of total equality, or the attempt at it, is directly related to democracy.

Clearly there are issues within the current system that must be reformed or even revolutionized. Although Deresiewicz's plan seems extreme, the underlying principles are not ludicrous. The entitlement of today's students, the failure of cultivating leadership, and the lack of purpose in life, are some signs that the current structure is failing the consumer.

As contributing members of society, Americans have the responsibility to themselves and their children to take action. Deresiewicz concludes with,

We don't have to love our neighbors as ourselves, but we need to love our neighbor's children as our own.

It all starts with finding one's 'self' and establishing a sense of courage and imagination to drive the development of leadership. By challenging each other to develop a better educational system, and pushing back when pushed, the United States can, and will, find a solution.

Personal Reflection

Excellent Sheep challenged some of my preconceived ideas and caused me to consider ideas that were new to me. Although I could not relate to his views on specific Ivy League programs and admissions, the portion of this book that had the biggest effect on me was his idea of leadership. I had always believed I was capable and willing to be a leader, but his definition of leadership challenged and uprooted my previous understanding. To find and establish a 'self' is becoming increasingly important to me, especially as I near entering the professional world. I now value my curiosity for certain topics more, and I know that encouraging that curiosity can only improve my sense of purpose.

Although I disagree with many of Deresiewicz's political and religious views, his foundation of building one's 'self' through introspection is respectable and logical. We, as a culture, need to embrace a movement toward self empowerment rather than rote acceptance and methodological progress down a path to nowhere. Education needs to pave the way to a meaningful life. I agree that major reform is necessary, but I believe the motivation to want to learn starts at home, not with an institution. Without supportive and loving parents, I would not have the knowledge and drive that I maintain today. I will owe every ounce of any future success that I hope to achieve to them.