College Is a Journey, Not a Competition

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By Naomi LaChance Aug. 28, 2014 (excerpted)

Today’s college students waste their college years by being too productive. Rather than using the time to play and make mistakes, they gauge each day by how it will appear on a resume, according to William Deresiewicz, an author and former Yale English professor. In his new book, “ Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life,” Deresiewicz argues that higher education is contributing to a greater societal problem of soulless overachievers. Students, he says, should use college to explore what excites them, not to rise to the top of a career field. Deresiewicz recently spoke with U.S. News about how students, parents, professors and even politicians can come together to fix higher education. Excerpts:

You say in the book that you’re writing a letter to your 20-year-old self. What advice are you offering him?

The most practical thing you can do is to give yourself a real education where you learn not just to think, which is hard enough to learn in college, but how to make smart choices for yourself. How to find an inner compass, an inner sense of purpose because you know this is going to last you the rest of your life. College education isn’t just for [your] first job, although that’s obviously important. It’s for the rest of your life.

What should college students do differently?

They need to stop worrying about constantly accumulating credentials. They need to stop worrying about competing with the person next to them. So I would say find good courses, find good professors, and take them seriously. Don’t just do the minimum you need to get by, or even the minimum you need to get an A, which is often kind of easy – or not nearly hard enough – at these schools.

What can higher education institutions do to create some sort of change?

They need to change their admissions policies because it’s the admissions policies that have been driving all of this. And those admissions policies reward the most skillful, energetic hoop-jumpers. They also need to recommit themselves to their core missions that they’ve really gotten away from. And the first one is teaching, because at most of these schools professors are incentivized for their research and not for their teaching. Teaching duties, in fact, are often assigned to nontenured and sometimes part-time adjunct professors who are not well-supported, who are not well-paid and, in some cases, not well-trained.

How do you think these problems are impacting society as a whole?

These elite colleges have been given the responsibility for training our leadership class. They are the people who are producing the leaders and the people who are running our institutions. I think it’s become clear in the last 10 years at least that our leadership class is failing on a massive scale, and it’s failing in all the ways that you would predict from the system that produced it. Our leaders are risk-averse, narrow, timid and self-serving, and I think they’re leading us off a cliff. So this is an issue that everybody should be concerned with whether or not they have kids who plan to apply to Harvard and Yale.

Are any institutions transforming higher education for the better?

Well, I think that there are some colleges that are doing better than others. But the truth is that there are movements to transform higher education now, and most of them are going in precisely the wrong direction because they’re basically about cutting costs. People want to move to online courses. They want to continue to degrade the quality of the teaching faculty. I’m not terribly optimistic right now, although I think that we have the power to reverse course.