

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

AUTHOR OF *A JANE AUSTEN EDUCATION*



EXCELLENT  
SHEEP

THE MISEDUCATION OF  
THE  
AMERICAN ELITE

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★ ★ ★ ★ THE WAY TO A ★ ★ ★ ★

MEANINGFUL LIFE

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# EXCELLENT SHEEP

*The Miseducation of the American Elite  
and the Way to a Meaningful Life*

WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

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*For my students and as always, for Jill*

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# Introduction

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This book, in many ways, is a letter to my twenty-year-old self. It talks about the kinds of things I wish that someone had encouraged me to think about when I was going to college—such as what the point of college might be in the first place.

I was like so many kids today (and so many kids back then). I went off to college like a sleepwalker, like a zombie. College was a blank. College was the “next thing.” You went to college, you studied something, and afterward you went on to the next next thing, most probably some kind of graduate school. Up ahead were vaguely understood objectives: status, wealth, getting to the top—in a word, “success.” As for where you went to school, that was all about bragging rights, so of course you chose the most prestigious place that let you in. What it meant to actually get an education, and why you might want one—how it could help you acquire a self or develop an independent mind, or find your way in the world—all this was off the table. Like kids today, I was processed through a system everyone around me simply took for granted.

I started college in 1981. The system, then, was in its early days, but it was already unmistakably, a system, a set of tightly interlocking parts. When I speak in this book 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, test-prep courses and enrichment programs; 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 BA; and the parents and communities, large and upper middle class, who push their children into the maw of this machine. In short, our entire system of elite education.

What that system does to kids and how they can escape from it, what it does to our society and how we can dismantle it—those are the subjects of this book. I was teaching a class at Yale on the literature of friendship. One day we got around to talking about the importance of being alone. The ability to engage in introspection, I suggested, is the essential precondition for living the life of the mind, and the essential precondition for introspection is solitude. My students took this idea for a second—introspection, solitude, the life of the mind, things they probably had not been asked to think about before—then one of them said, with a dawning sense of self-awareness, “So are you saying that we’re all just, like, really excellent sheep?”

All? Surely not. But after twenty-four years in the Ivy League—college at Columbia; a PhD at the same institution, including five years as a graduate instructor; and ten years, altogether, on the faculty at Yale—that was more or less how I had come to feel about it. The system manufactures students 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. In 2008, on my way out the door, I published an essay that sketched out a few of these criticisms. Titled “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education,” the article appeared in the

*American Scholar*, a small literary quarterly. At best, I thought, it might get a few thousand readers.

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Instead, it started to go viral almost from the moment it came out. Within a few weeks, the piece had been viewed a hundred thousand times (with many times that number in the months and years to come). Apparently I'd touched a nerve. These were not just the grumblings of an ex-professor. As it turned out from the many emails I began to get, the vast majority from current students and recent graduates, I had evoked a widespread discontent among today's young high achievers—a sense that the system was cheating them out of a meaningful education, instilling them with values they rejected but couldn't somehow get beyond, and failing to equip them to construct their futures.

Since then I have spoken with students on campuses across the country, corresponded with many others, answered these young people's questions and asked my own, and heard and read their stories. It has been an education in itself, and this book is a reflection of that ongoing dialogue. Where possible, I've used their words to help me talk about the issues we've discussed, but every page has been informed by my sense of what these kinds of students need and want to think about. A lot of books get published about higher education, but none, as far as I can tell, are speaking to students themselves—still less, listening to them.

I begin the book by discussing the system itself—one that, to put it in a nutshell, forces you to choose between learning and success. Education is the way that a society articulates its values, the way that it transmits its values. While I'm often critical of the sort of kids who populate selective schools, my real critique is aimed at the adults who've made them who they are—that is, to say, at the rest of us. Part 2 begins to explain what students can do, as individuals, to rescue themselves from the system: what college should be for, how to find a different kind of path in life, what it means to be a genuine leader. Part 3 extends the argument, talking in detail about the purpose of a liberal arts education, the value of the humanities, and the need for dedicated teachers and small classrooms. My aim is not to tell young people where to go to school so much as why.

Part 4 returns to the larger social question. The system is charged with producing our leadership class, the so-called meritocracy—the people who run our institutions, government, and corporations. So how has that been going? Not, it's clear by now, too well. What we're doing to our kids we're ultimately doing to ourselves. The time has long since passed, I argue, to rethink, reform, and reverse the entire project of elite education.

A word on what I mean when I speak of the elite. I don't intend the term as it is often now deployed, as a slur against liberals, intellectuals, or anyone who disagrees with Bill O'Reilly, but simply as a name for those who occupy the upper echelons of our society: conservatives as well as liberals, businesspeople as well as professionals, the upper and the upper middle classes both—the managers, the winners, the whole cohort of people who went to selective colleges and are running society for their own exclusive benefit. This book is also, implicitly, a portrait of that class, whose time to leave the stage of history has now so evidently come.



# PART 1

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*Sheep*

## The Students

“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 an apparent effortless, a serene self-assurance, that leaves adults and peers alike in awe. Today’s elite students, says David Brooks, project a remarkable level of “comfort, confidence, and competence.” In Jonathan Franzen’s novel *Freedom*, the kids at a prestigious liberal arts college “seemed cheerfully competent at everything.”

Such is our image of these enviable youngsters, who appear to be the winners in the race we have made of childhood. But the reality—as I have witnessed it among my former students, heard about it from the hundreds of young people who have written to me over the last few years, and whom I have met on campuses across the country, and read about it in places where these kids confide their feelings—is something very different. Look beneath the façade of affable confidence and seamless well-adjustment that today’s elite students have learned to project, and what you often find are toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation. We all know about the stressed-out, overpressured high school student; why do we assume that things get better once she gets to college?

The evidence says they do not. A large-scale survey of college freshmen recently found that self-reports of emotional well-being have fallen to their lowest level in the twenty-five-year history of the study. In another recent survey—summarized by the American Psychological Association under the headline “The Crisis on Campus”—nearly half of college students reported feelings of hopelessness, while almost a third spoke of feeling “so depressed that it was difficult to function during the past 12 months.” College counseling services are being overwhelmed. Utilization rates have been climbing since the mid-1990s, and among the students who show up, the portion with severe psychological problems has nearly tripled, to almost half. Convening a task force on student mental health in 2006, Stanford’s provost wrote that “increasingly, we are seeing students struggling with mental health concerns ranging from self-esteem issues and developmental disorders to depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-mutilation behavior, schizophrenia and suicidal behavior.” As a college president wrote me, “we appear to have an epidemic of depression among younger people.”

If anything, the already dire situation in high school deteriorates further in college, as students suddenly find themselves on their own, trying to negotiate an overwhelming new environment and responsible for making decisions about their future that their childhood has left them unequipped to handle. An increasing number cope by going on antidepressants or anti-anxiety (not to mention relying on stimulants like Adderall to help them handle the pressure); others l

taking leaves of absence—or at least, by dreaming about it. “If the wheels are going to come off a Pomona student has put it, “it’s going to be in college.”

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I have heard about this kind of misery again and again. From a graduate instructor at Princeton: “I just had an undergrad thesis-student faint in my office the other day because she was feeling so much pressure from her academic life.” From someone who was in the process of transferring out of Stanford: “For many students, rising to the absolute top means being consumed by the system. I’ve seen my peers sacrifice health, relationships, exploration, activities that can’t be quantified and are essential for developing souls and hearts, for grades and resume building.” From a student at Yale: “A friend of mine said it nicely: ‘I might be miserable, but were I not miserable, I wouldn’t be at Yale.’”

Isolation is a major factor. “People at Yale,” a former student said, “do not have time for real relationships.” Another told me that she didn’t have friends in college until she learned to slow down a little senior year, that going out to a movie was a novel experience at that point. A recent article in *Harvard Magazine* described students passing their suitemates like ships in the night as they raced from one activity to another. Kids know how to network and are often good at “people skills,” but those are very different things from actual friendship. Romantic life is conducted in an equally utilitarian spirit: hookups or friends with benefits to scratch the sexual itch, “pragmatic” “college marriages,” as Ross Douthat puts it, that provide stability and enable partners to place career first. “I positioned myself in college in such a way,” said a University of Pennsylvania student who was recently quoted in the *New York Times*, “that I can’t have a meaningful romantic relationship, because I’m always busy and the people that I am interested in are always busy, too.”

But the compulsive overachievement of today’s elite college students—the sense that they need to keep running as fast as they can—is not the only thing that keeps them from forming the deeper relationships that might relieve their anguish. Something more insidious is operating, too: a resistance to vulnerability, a fear of looking like the only one who isn’t capable of handling the pressure. These are young people who have always succeeded at everything, in part by projecting the confidence that they always will. Now, as they get to college, the stakes are higher and the competition fiercer. Everybody thinks that they’re the only one who’s suffering, so nobody says anything, so everybody suffers. Everyone feels like a fraud; everyone thinks that everybody else is smarter than they are.

Students at Stanford talk about “Stanford Duck Syndrome”: serene on the surface, paddling madly underneath. In a recent post titled “Meltdown” on an MIT student website, a sophomore confessed her feelings of shame and worthlessness and often “overwhelming loneliness.” The post went viral, eliciting recognition and gratitude from students at at least a dozen other schools. “Thank you for sharing,” said one comment. “We all feel this way more often than we would care to admit. Thank you for being brave enough to put this into words.” Students at Pomona, which prides itself on being ranked the “fourth-happiest” college in America (whatever that means), have told me of the burden that comes with that very self-image, as well as from the regimen of group activities with which the college seeks to reinforce it: the pressure that they feel to satisfy the happiness police by projecting an appearance of perfect well-being.

Isolated from their peers, these kids are also cut off from themselves. The endless hoopla of jumping, starting as far back as grade school, that got them into an elite college in the first place—the clubs, bands, projects, teams, APs, SATs, evenings, weekends, summers, coaches, tutoring—“leadership,” “service”—left them no time, and no tools, to figure out what they want out of life, or

even out of college. Questions of purpose and passion were not on the syllabus. Once they reached the shining destination toward which their entire childhood and adolescence had been pointed, once they're through the gates at Amherst or Dartmouth, many kids find out that they have no idea why they're there, or what they want to do next.

As Lara Galinsky, the author of *Work on Purpose*, expressed it to me, young people are not trained to pay attention to the things they feel connected to. "You cannot say to a Yale 'find your passion,'" a former student wrote me. "Most of us do not know how and that is precisely how we arrived at Yale, by having a passion only for success." According to Harry R. Lewis, a former dean of Harvard College, "Too many students, perhaps after a year or two spent using college as a treadmill to nowhere, wake up in crisis, not knowing why they have worked so hard." One young woman at Cornell summed up her life to me like this: "I hate all my activities, I hate all my classes, I hated everything I did in high school, I expect to hate my job, and this is just how it's going to be for the rest of my life."

If adults are unaware of all this, that's partly because they're looking in the wrong direction. Getting A's no longer means that everything's okay, assuming that it ever did. "We have students who, no matter what else is going on in their lives, know how to get those grades," Rabbi Patricia Karlin-Neumann, Stanford's university chaplain, has said. "It's important for us to take away the blinders that keep us from seeing their distress."

Mainly, though, these kids are very good at hiding their problems from us. I was largely unaware myself, during my years at Yale, of the depth of my students' unhappiness. Only now that I am no longer in a position of authority do some of them feel comfortable enough to open up. The student who told me that she had no friends until her senior year had seemed, in everything, unusually healthy: funny, friendly, "real," not obnoxiously competitive or on the make, and a brilliant student, to boot. Another kid, equally great, equally well-adjusted for all that we could see, later confessed that she'd been miserable in college, depressed or stressed-out all the time. By the time they finish high school—after years of learning how to please their teachers and coaches, not to mention schmoozing with their parents' friends—elite students have become accomplished adult-wranglers. Polite, pleasant, mild, and presentable; well-mannered, well-groomed, and well-spoken (not to mention, often enough, well-medicated), they have fashioned that façade of happy, healthy high achievement.

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It would be bad enough if all this misery were being inflicted for the sake of genuine learning, but that is quite the opposite of what the system now provides. Our most prestigious colleges and universities love to congratulate themselves on the caliber of their incoming students: the average SAT scores, the proportion that comes from the top 10 percent of their high school classes, the narrowness of the admissions sieve that lets them in, all the numbers *U.S. News & World Report* has taught us to worship. And make no mistake; today's elite students are, in pure academic terms, phenomenally well prepared.

How could they not be, given how carefully they're bred, how strenuously sorted and groomed? They are the academic equivalent of all-American athletes, coached and drilled and dieted from the earliest years of life. Whatever you demand of them, they'll do. Whatever bar you place in front of them, they'll clear. A friend who teaches at a top university once asked her class to memorize thirty lines of the eighteenth-century poet Alexander Pope. Every single kid got even

single line correct, down to the punctuation marks. Seeing them write out the exercise in class she said, ~~was a thing of wonder, like watching Thoroughbreds circle a track.~~

The problem is that students have been taught that that is all that education is: doing your homework, getting the answers, acing the test. Nothing in their training has endowed them with the sense that something larger is at stake. They've learned to "be a student," not to use their minds. I was talking with someone who teaches at a branch campus of a state university. He said, "His students don't think for themselves, he complained. Well, I said, Yale students think for themselves, but only because they know we want them to. 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 the 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, one that they directed for themselves and for themselves.

I am far from alone in this perception. A friend who taught at Amherst mentioned a student who came to her for extra help with his writing—but only because he had already been admitted to medical school and now felt free to actually learn. If he were a freshman or sophomore, I said, he wouldn't have taken the time. Another friend teaches fine arts at a prestigious liberal arts college. His kids are eager to accept creative challenges, he's told me, but only as long as it will help them get an A. "I cannot imagine a Yale undergraduate spending an entire weekend lying in bed reading poetry or glued to a keyboard writing a breakthrough iPhone app," said a former colleague in the computer science department, who went to college in the late 1970s. "Yale when I was an undergraduate, people did things like that all the time; passionate weirdos were all over the place, and they were part of what made college interesting."

Students simply don't have time for that kind of headlong immersion. The frenzy of extracurricular activities has expanded to fill the available space, displacing intellectual pursuits as the focus of student energy. David Brooks and other observers have spoken about the death of the late-night bull session, the scarcity of spontaneous intellectual discussion. I've heard similar complaints from students at Brown, Penn, Cornell, Pomona, and Columbia. "I've never been able to justify to myself why I feel so much 'smarter'—more productive, more creative, more interesting (and more importantly, more interested)—during the summers than I ever do during the school year," a Princeton senior wrote me. A young woman from another school told 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.*

There are exceptions, of course: seekers, thinkers, "passionate weirdos," kids who approach the work of the mind with a pilgrim spirit, who insist, against all odds, on trying to get a real education. But their experience in college tends to make them feel like freaks. "Yale," one of them said, "is not conducive to searchers." Another said, about a friend of hers who'd transferred out

“She found Yale stifling to the parts of yourself that you’d call a soul.” Said a third, “It’s hard to build your soul when everyone around you is trying to sell theirs.”

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My examples tend to come from Yale, since that is mainly where I taught, but I do not mean to single out that institution. If anything, I think it probably deserves its reputation as the best among elite universities (as distinct from liberal arts colleges) at nurturing creativity and intellectual independence. Notoriously pre-professional places like Penn, Duke, or Washington University, or notoriously anti-intellectual ones like Princeton or Dartmouth, are clearly far worse. But that’s precisely what’s so frightening. If Yale is the best, then the best is pretty bad.

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Yet if I have learned one thing in the last few years, it is that today’s elite students do not arrive at college as a herd of sheep or army of robots, with a few rebel intellectuals off at the edges. Most of them are somewhere in the middle: idealistic and curious, like kids before them, hungry for purpose and meaning, like kids before them, but beset by psychological demands that are the inevitable products of the process that propelled them into college in the first place.

“Every educational system,” wrote Allan Bloom, “wants to produce a certain kind of human being.” Growing up elite means learning to value yourself in terms of the measures of success that mark your progress into and through the elite: the grades, the scores, the trophies. That is what you’re praised for; that is what you are rewarded for. Your parents brag; your teachers glow; your rivals grit their teeth. Finally, the biggest prize of all, the one that draws a line beneath your adolescence and sums you up for all the world to see: admission to the college of your dreams. Or rather, not finally—because the game, of course, does not end there. College is naturally more of the same. Now the magic terms are GPA, Phi Beta Kappa, Fulbright, MCAT, Harvard Law, Goldman Sachs. They signify not just your fate, but your identity; not just your identity, but your value. They are *who* you are, and what you’re worth.

The result is what we might refer to as credentialism. The purpose of life becomes the accumulation of gold stars. Hence the relentless extracurricular busyness, the neglect of learning as an end in itself, the inability to imagine doing something that you can’t put on your resume. Hence the constant sense of competition. (If you want to increase participation in an activity, Stanford professor told me, make entry to it competitive.) Hence the endemic academic corner-cutting that Douthat describes in *Privilege*, a memoir of his time at Harvard, where all the intellect is put to the service, not of learning as much as possible, but of getting away with doing as little as you can. Hence the vogue for double majors. It isn’t enough anymore to take a bunch of electives in addition to your primary focus, to roam freely across the academic fields, making serendipitous connections and discoveries, the way that American higher education was designed (uniquely, among the world’s systems) to allow you to do. You have to get that extra certification now, or what has it all been for? I even met a quadruple major once. He seemed to think that meant that he was very smart.

With credentialism comes a narrow practicality that’s capable of understanding education only in terms of immediate utility, and that marches, at the most prestigious schools, beneath a single banner: economics. In 1995, economics was the most popular major at three of the top ten universities or top ten liberal arts colleges on the most recent lists in *U.S. News*. In 2013, it was the biggest at a minimum of eight and as many as fourteen. Among the universities, it was the biggest at Harvard, Princeton, Penn, Dartmouth, and probably Columbia and the University

Chicago (determinations are sometimes difficult because of changes in reporting). It was the biggest at four of the top ten liberal arts colleges, places that are supposed to be about a different sort of education—Williams, Middlebury, Pomona, and Claremont McKenna—and probably also at Amherst, Swarthmore, Carleton, and Wellesley. It was almost as popular among the next ten schools on each list, the rest of the top twenty, representing the largest major at as many as six of the universities and six more of the colleges, for a grand total of 26 of the 40 schools on the two lists combined. Sixty-five percent, for just a single major: a stunning convergence.

Meanwhile, not coincidentally, finance and consulting have emerged as the most coveted careers. In 2007, about half of Harvard seniors who had full-time jobs lined up for after graduation were going into one of those two industries. The numbers softened a bit after the financial collapse, but not by much and not for long. By 2010, nearly half of Harvard graduates were still going into one of those fields, as well as more than half of those at Penn and more than a third at Cornell, Stanford, and MIT. In 2011, 36 percent of Princeton graduates went into finance alone.

At Yale it was only about a quarter, between the two fields, in 2010, but as junior Marin Keegan put it the following year, in an essay that went viral on the Web, why should that be “only”? “In a place as diverse and disparate as Yale, it’s remarkable that such a large percentage of people are doing anything the same—not to mention something as significant as the postgraduate plans.” And it is all the more remarkable, she went on, given that students arrive at college innocent of either intention. “I conducted a credible and scientific study . . . earlier this week—asking freshman after freshman what they thought they might be doing upon graduation. Not one of them said they wanted to be a consultant or an investment banker.”

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The question, then, is why. Why do so many elite students end up choosing one of those two fields, and what does that tell us about their peer group as a whole? Greed alone is not the explanation. Remember that these kids have been conditioned, above all, to jump through hoops. That’s what feels familiar; that’s what feels safe; that’s what feels like the right thing to do. In high school, everybody had the same objective, to get into the most prestigious college possible, and the hoops were all lined up to lead you there. But once you get to college, things are not so certain anymore. Directions multiply, and many of the paths are foggy. As Keegan suggested, being a musician does not have an application form. How do you become a social entrepreneur, a politician, a screenwriter? How do you get to work at the State Department, in Silicon Valley, for the *New York Times*? How many options are there that you haven’t even heard of, and how do you get a job work, anyway? It isn’t any wonder, as graduation draws near, that a lot of students scurry frantically around, looking for another hoop to jump through.

And speaking of options, these kids have all been told that theirs are limitless. Once you commit to something, though, that ceases to be true. A former student sent me an essay he wrote a few years after college, called “The Paradox of Potential.” Yale students, he said, are like stem cells. They can be anything in the world, so they try to delay for as long as possible the moment when they have to become just one thing in particular. Possibility, paradoxically, becomes a limitation. “My friends and I didn’t run sprinting down a thousand career paths, bound for all corners of the globe,” he wrote. “Instead, we moved cautiously, in groups, plodding down a few well-worn trails so as to ensure that two or four years down the road, we could be stem cells

again, still undifferentiated, still brimming with potential.”

That’s the situation that consulting firms, especially, have learned to exploit. Their recruits descend upon elite campuses in force. They make it easy to apply—but they also make it hard to get selected, which is even better. The job looks great on your resume, and you aren’t foreclosing any options, since you can still do anything you want to after you leave. As for the work itself, it’s pretty much like college: rigorous analysis, integration of disparate forms of information, clear and effective communication. You don’t even have to have studied economics; firms are often happy to hire humanities majors. They’re looking only for exactly what the colleges were looking for: intelligence, diligence, energy—aptitude. And of course, they offer you a lot of money.

A former student wrote me this:

*The real problem is that Yalies and our peers now feel like they’re somehow wasting their degree by taking a job that doesn’t pay 100K the first year, or ever. I think consulting in particular appeals to this perverse fantasy that most Ivy Leaguers harbor deep down inside, which is that someone should pay them for simply having gone to Yale or Harvard or wherever. All of the various reasons I’ve been given by my peers to explain why they’re consulting next year boil down to the same thing: “because I can.” Few people have the balls to walk away from that.*

Nor is it consulting firms alone. Most of what is true of them is also true of the investment banks. “What Wall Street figured out,” another student wrote me, “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.” Nor is law school essentially different, even if the financial rewards are delayed for several years. Nor, in many ways, is Teach For America, by far the most popular postgraduate destination among the nonprofits: heavy recruitment, clear path, competitive application process, limited time commitment, looks great on your resume, doesn’t foreclose options, very impressive, another gold star—and you can always do Bain or Morgan afterward, as some alumni of the program do. TFA is worlds away from Wall Street, morally speaking, but the overriding problem, when it comes to the kinds of choices that elite students make after college, is not greed; it is inertia. If love of money tends to win out, that is largely because so many kids leave college without a sense of inner purpose—in other words, what else might be worth their time.

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The irony, then, is this. 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. Whole fields have disappeared from view: the clergy, the military, electoral politics, teaching, even academia itself, for the most part including basic science. It is true that today’s young people appear to be more socially engaged as a whole, than kids have been for several decades: more concerned about the state of the world and more interested in trying to do something about it. It is true, as well, 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 very big “if”—they tend to be played out within the same narrow conception of what constitutes a valid life: affluence, credentials, and prestige.

What I saw at Yale I have continued to see at campuses around the country. Everybody looks



extremely normal, and everybody looks the same. No hippies, no punks, no art school types or hipsters, no butch lesbians or gender queers, no black kids in dashikis. The geeks don't look that geeky; the fashionable kids go in for understated elegance. Everyone dresses as if they're ready to be interviewed at a moment's notice. You're *young*, I want to say to them. Take a *chance* with yourselves. Never mind "diversity." What we're getting is thirty-two flavors of vanilla. I am not lamenting a bygone era of student rebellion; college used to be understood as a time to experiment with different selves, of whatever type. Now students all seem to be converging on the same self, the successful upper-middle-class professional, impersonating the adult they've already decided they want to become. "However much diversity Yale's freshman classes may have," a former student wrote, "its senior classes have far less."

Everybody does the same thing because everybody's doing the same thing. A former student talked to me about the "salmon run." A University of Michigan graduate spoke of the "conveyor belt." The operative principle is known as triangular desire: wanting something because you see that other people want it and assume that it must be valuable. "There was," wrote Michael Lewis about the salmon run of his own day, "a sense of safety in numbers."

The key word there is "safety." Beneath the other factors—the entitlement, the lack of direction, the desire not to close down options—the force that drives the salmon run is fear. It's the exact fear (and more than fear: the panic, the often crippling anxiety) that lies behind the façade of serene achievement that elite college students learn to show the world. So extreme are the admission standards now, so ferocious the competition, 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, defeats them. They have been haunted the whole lives by a fear of failure—often, in the first instance, by their parents' fear of failure. 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. That is one of the reasons that elite education has become so inimical to learning. As Harry R. Lewis, the former Harvard dean, has written, nobody wants to take a chance on a class they might not ace, so nobody is willing to venture beyond the things they already know and do very well. Experimenting, exploring, discovering new ways to look at the world as well as new capacities within yourself—the things a college education is supposed to be about—fall by the wayside. Nobody wants to let any of the dozen balls they're juggling drop; nobody wants to lag behind in the credentials race. When 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.

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Senior year is when this training in playing it safe meets the need to start making real decisions about your life, and that large population of kids in the middle begins to assume the shape of a herd. Remember what my student said before, about how difficult it is to make a different choice. And that's before you start to see that everybody else is making the *same* choice. Many kids have spoken to me, as they navigated their senior years, about the pressure they felt from their peers—to conform, from their *peers*—to justify a different kind of life. You're made to feel like you're crazy, they've told me: crazy to forsake the sure thing, crazy to think it could work, crazy to imagine that you

even have a right to try.

Nor does graduation make these issues go away. While some kids make a choice and don't look back—for good or ill, whether they have chosen from conviction or desperation—many continue to struggle with all the same feelings and pressures. I have seen students stumble for years, as many bright young people do today, unwilling to submit to doing something that they can't feel passionate about but still not knowing where their passion really lies. One spoke of continuing to struggle not only with anxiety and fear, but also with ambition: not, that is, with a genuine desire for excellence, but with the feeling of being a failure if you don't continue to amass the blue-chip names, the need to keep on doing the most prestigious possible thing—and the constant awareness, over your shoulder, of all the prestigious things that your former classmates are doing.

Another student went to work some years ago for a consulting firm. He used to look me up every once in a while when he came back to campus on recruiting trips. Every time I saw him, he would tell me that he wanted to get out and do something creative instead, something meaningful, but that he didn't know how, any longer, because he couldn't imagine surrendering the lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. In other words—I have heard this a lot—he had become addicted to the money.

Yet another recent graduate, a talented writer who *is* sticking by her guns, and who has always been indifferent to the race for wealth and status, wrote me this:

*Every day, I fight a compulsion to find a good ladder and scurry up it for the next fifteen years, because I can tell from the dread in my gut that this is the wrong thing to do. If I became a senior editor at the New Yorker without having taken a circuitous and ultimately interesting route, I would be unhappy. And yet most days I am bombarded by little capsules of guilt, moments that explode and spread over me like a net. I must find some way to get away from the compulsion. It is so hard to think when it's on me, let alone write. I knew this kind of ambition afflicted other people at Yale, but it hadn't affected me until now.*

The whole elite predicament, it should be said, is not confined to the United States. The system is global and in many ways, at this point, interconnected. About a tenth of students at America's most prestigious colleges come from overseas today. Our admissions standards have diffused across the world; kids in Shanghai, Seoul, and Mumbai now are jumping through our hoops. I have heard from people in Canada, the United Kingdom, and especially South and East Asia: India, Singapore, China, South Korea, the Philippines, Japan. "I wanted to thank you for writing the most perfect, damning indictment of modern education," said one correspondent. "I'm at medical school here in Canada and your sentiments apply beyond the Ivy League." "We have our own Ivy League in India," said another. "We call them Indian Institutes of Technology (IIT) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIM). Every single thing you mentioned I have witnessed happening in practice."

Unaddressed, these issues ultimately lead to the kind of midlife crisis that is typical of high achievers. William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard's longtime dean of admissions, has put it this way:

*It is common to encounter even the most successful students, who have won all the "prizes," stepping back and wondering if it was all worth it. Professionals in their thirties and*

*forties—physicians, lawyers, academics, business people and others—sometimes give the impression that they are dazed survivors of some bewildering life-long boot camp. Some say they ended up in their profession because of someone else's expectations, or that they simply drifted into it without pausing to think whether they really loved their work. Often they say they missed their youth entirely, never living in the present, always pursuing some ill-defined goal.*

What then, finally, is it all for? Our glittering system of elite higher education: students kill themselves getting into it, parents kill themselves to pay for it, and always for the opportunities it opens up. But what of all the opportunities it closes down—not for any practical reason, but just because of how it smothers you with expectations? How can I become a teacher, or a minister, or a carpenter? Wouldn't that be a waste of my fancy education? What would my parents think? What would my friends think? How would I face my classmates at our twentieth reunion, when they're all rich doctors or important people in New York? And the question that exists behind them all: isn't it beneath me? So an entire world of possibilities shuts, and you miss your true calling.

That is, if you even have an inkling what your calling is. "You cannot say to a Yale 'find your passion.' Most of us do not know how." It is indeed reasonable to say, as many students have, that you might as well go to Wall Street and make a lot of money if you can't think of anything better to do. What is not reasonable is that we have constructed an educational system that produces highly intelligent, accomplished twenty-two-year-olds who have no idea what they want to do with their lives: no sense of purpose and, what is worse, no understanding of how to go about finding one. Who can follow an existing path but don't have the imagination—or the courage, or the inner freedom—to invent their own.

## The History

How did we get here? How did the college admissions process, the fulcrum on which the system turns—casting its shadow back over childhood and adolescence and forward over college and career, shaping the way that kids are raised and thus the people they become—how did it assume its present form? It is not a phenomenon of the last ten or fifteen years. The difference between today's elite students and those of twenty or forty years ago, despite what many like to think, is only one of degree. If we want to understand where the system comes from—which means, where *we* come from, because at this point most of the American professional class has gone through it—most of its upper middle class, most of its leadership class, the people who direct our government, our economy, our culture, and our institutions—then we need to go back to the start.

In fact, we need to go back before the start, to the Gilded Age, the last decades of the nineteenth century. Contrary to popular belief, the Ivy League colleges were not always the rich boys' finishing schools they later became. Before the Civil War, they were relatively small, relatively local institutions. The few young men who went were certainly gentlemen's sons, and gentlemen-in-training themselves, but a lot of rich boys didn't bother, and besides, in a large agricultural society that was still fragmented into regional economies, there weren't that many rich boys to begin with.

After the war, as E. Digby Baltzell tells the story in his classic study, *The Protestant Establishment*, things began to change. Industrialization exploded, creating new fortunes and a new plutocracy. The railroad knitted the country into a single economy. The old regional elite became aware of themselves as a national elite and began to take steps to reinforce their class identity. New money needed to be socialized into gentility; all money needed to defend its social boundaries against the great unwashed, many of them Catholics and Jews, who were flooding the cities from Southern and Eastern Europe. Anti-Semitism and anti-Catholicism took hold in the upper class. The caste that Baltzell would eventually make famous as the WASPs, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants—another phenomenon we regard as eternal, but that dates, in fact, from this time—began to crystallize. “Anglo-Saxon” was very much part of the point: the English aristocracy, which the nation had rebelled against a century earlier in the name of equality, became the model for a new, American aristocracy.

The WASPs created a whole range of institutions for themselves. Exclusive resorts like Bar Harbor and Newport were up and running by 1880. The first country club was founded in 1881. Groton, not the first New England prep school but the first to be established in emulation of the venerable English public (that is, private) schools, opened its doors in 1884. *The Social Register* began publication in 1887. The Daughters of the American Revolution was founded in 1890. Soon the aristocracy was fleeing the cities for new suburban enclaves like the Philadelphia Merion Line. The country day school movement followed.

One institution the WASP aristocracy did not create but did transform. Now was the time when Harvard, Yale, and Princeton assumed the moneyed shape of legend: the Harvard of the “Gold Coast” of private dormitories; the Yale of *Stover at Yale*, a famous campus novel of the time; the Princeton of F. Scott Fitzgerald (which gentrified its name from the College of New Jersey in 1896). Elite colleges, where affluent young men could mingle with their peers from across the country, played a crucial role in inculcating mores, establishing connections, and certifying graduates as members of the leadership class. As colleges sought to entice a new kind of customer by dispelling their bookish image, extracurriculars—especially athletics, and more especially the “manly” sport of football, which was invented in its current form at elite schools exactly this time—began to play a central role in campus life. Business boomed; Harvard expanded from 100 students a year in the 1860s to more than 600 by 1904. Academics were out—something only “drips” or “grinds” would bother with. Parties, pranks, and snobbery were in, as social life was taken over by the prep school crowd, which came to dominate numerically, as well. The Big Three, as they were baptized in the 1880s, became “iconic institutions,” in the words of Jerome Karabel, setting the fashion for campuses across the country.

But soon there was a problem, as Karabel explains in *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*. Admissions were based on entrance exams. On the one hand, kids from feeder schools would often be let in no matter how badly they did. (Of the 405 Grotonians who applied to Harvard from 1906 to 1932, the school rejected only three.) On the other hand, because the subjects covered, particularly Greek and Latin, were not available in public schools, the majority of high school graduates—and back then, there weren't that many to begin with—were automatically excluded. The social tone was preserved, but academic standards plummeted. By 1916, all three colleges had dropped their classical language requirements. Enrollment from public high schools soared—but public high schools, especially in the big cities, were increasingly populated by Jews. Columbia, the cautionary example, cut its proportion of Jews almost in half, from 40 percent, in two years, but not before experiencing a permanent exodus of upper-class families.

The Big Three were not going to let that happen to them. A whole new set of admission criteria was developed to hold back the Semitic tide by making sure that the “right sort” of student got in: letters of recommendation, alumni interviews, the preference for athletes and “leaders,” special treatment for sons of alumni (that is, “legacies”), an emphasis on geographic distribution, and a devaluation of pure academic ability. Better midwestern Protestants, even if they weren't all the sharpest tools in the shed, than “greasy grinds” from Brooklyn. Princeton started requiring applicants to submit a photo, since you couldn't always tell from the name. “Character” became the explicit ideal: manners, looks, tone, being a “Yale man”—all once guaranteed by where you went to school, now enforced through a subjective process of evaluation (and the admissions offices that had to be created to conduct it).

The system endured, largely intact, until the 1960s. The Big Three continued to be dominated by prep school graduates; most of their students still came from wealthy families; unofficial quotas kept the Jewish numbers down; the old-boy, handshake, feeder-school culture remained in place. As late as 1950, Harvard received only thirteen applications for every ten spots, while Yale's acceptance rate was 46 percent. You knew if you were welcome, and if you weren't you didn't bother to apply.

But already by the 1930s, forces had started to gather that would eventually destroy the old way of doing things. James B. Conant, newly installed as president of Harvard, began to talk

steps to raise academic standards, increase access, and tap the nation's talent pool. To identify the bright young men who would, to be sure, only supplement the school's existing clientele, he turned to a recently developed "psychometric" test: the SAT. Conant was a reformer, not a revolutionary. Change was incremental over the next three decades. The average SAT score at elite colleges before World War II was around 500, right in the middle of the distribution; by the early 1960s, it had risen to about 625.

The revolution came at Yale that decade under Kingman Brewster. Like Conant, Brewster recognized that if the American elite was going to retain its position (and the country it led, its preeminence), it would have to make itself accessible to rising social groups—and that, if for no other reason than their own self-interest, the colleges that trained that elite would have to take the lead. Changes were happening in American life that the Big Three could no longer ignore. Within a couple of years of assuming the presidency of the university in 1963, Brewster had elevated academic promise to supremacy among admissions criteria, shunted aside the ideal of the well-rounded man in favor of the "brilliant specialist," reduced the preferences for athletes and legacies, eliminated the checklist of physical characteristics that had played a role in the admissions process (resulting in a drop of nearly half an inch in the average height of the incoming class), ended the college's cozy relationship with its feeder schools, removed the Jewish quota, and instituted need-blind admissions. Affirmative action was introduced by the last year of the decade. In 1969, the school became coed.

Brewster had demolished the old system at a single blow. The school's alumni forced him to reverse a few of his reforms, particularly those concerning athletes and legacies, but the point was no return had been passed. Nineteen sixty-five, the year of Brewster's revolution—which was also right around the time the baby boomers started to arrive on campus—can be taken as the pivot in college admissions, from the old aristocracy to the new meritocracy: from caste, "character" and connections to scores and grades.

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And that is the origin of the system that we are still living with today. Yet things are not as different from the old procedure as they seem. Never mind the preferences for athletes, legacies and others. Brewster, and everyone around the country who followed his lead, expanded access on a monumental scale, but they didn't really discard the old criteria, for the most part; they simply supplemented them. We don't ask applicants to do something different now; we ask them to do almost everything they used to have to do, plus a whole lot more.

Think of what we want from kids today, if they're going to be admitted to an elite college. We want them to be, not athletes exactly, not performers at the highest level, but sportsmen, in the old term, people with a certain skill and grace—a demand they satisfy, in some cases, by playing games that derive from the prep school tradition (fencing, crew) and that exist nowhere else in American life. We want them to develop a measure of artistic ability, to engage in the kind of idiosyncratic self-cultivation that was a hallmark of the upper-class ideal, with its resources of leisure and culture. We want them to be personable—or as people used to call it, clubbable—so we still require an interview and letters of recommendation. We want them to demonstrate commitment to "service," which is nothing other than a modern echo of noblesse oblige, and generally undertaken in the same spirit of benign condescension. And we want them to be "leaders." It's not enough to participate in student government, say; you have to run it. You have

to be president of the theater club, or captain of the baseball team. You have to come across, in other words, as an oligarch in training, just like the private school boys of a century ago.

But to all this now, to an admissions process that was designed to select for an upper-class profile, we have added Brewster's requirements for academic excellence—which, as we saw, was decidedly not a part of the upper-class profile. Now we have the whole regime of SAT, AP, GPA, National Merit, and so forth. Now our kids must have the qualities of both an old aristocrat and a modern technocrat. No wonder they're so busy, and so frantic.

The only thing that's changed since the mid-1960s is that everything has gotten inexorably worse: the admissions rates lower, the expectations higher, the competition fiercer, the pressure on students greater. Once the starting gun of meritocracy was fired, it was everybody off to the races. Already by 1968, acceptance rates at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton had fallen to around 20 percent. By 1974, according to Nicholas Lemann in *The Big Test*, "a whole culture of obsession with SAT scores had developed in American high schools (a fact that I remember well from the talk of my older siblings, who were going through the system at exactly this time). The expansion of the college-age cohort in the 1970s intensified the pressure, as did the number of students actually finishing their degrees, since the more BAs were out there, the more imperative it was felt to be to distinguish yourself by going to a big-name school.

By the end of the decade, Lemann says, affluent families had started to game the system with SAT tutors, application-essay "advisors" (that is, ghostwriters), strategic alumni donations, and other tactics. Colleges were letting it be known that they wanted to see as many Advanced Placement courses as possible on high school transcripts—and if you were going to be ready for APs by junior or senior year, you had to start accelerating as early as middle school. As the baby boom passed out of the system in the early 1980s, colleges began to recruit prospective applicants more intensively. The deregulation of the airline and telecommunications industries helped make the higher education market fully national, since now it was cheaper to send your child across the country and to stay in touch once she was there. Early admissions programs, which lock kids into specific schools, grew ever more important as a way for colleges to gain an edge against their rivals.

Then came the earthquake: *U.S. News & World Report*, a weak third among American newsweeklies, debuted its college rankings in 1983. Admissions statistics had long been regarded as a measure of institutional prestige, but now there was a single set of figures that encompassed every college in the country, a single number that defined the status of a school. Already in 1980 a delegation of college presidents asked the magazine to stop, but it was too late, because it was too profitable. Now the madness shifted to a higher gear. The decade saw the explosion of the college admissions industry: test prep, tutors, guidebooks, consultants. The writer Caitlin Flanagan mentions a book called *How to Get Into an Ivy League School* (1985), among the first of its kind. According to Tom Wolfe, "the pandemic known as college mania" began "to show its true virulence" in 1988.

The point is not which date is right. They're all right. Pick any moment over the last half century and things will be worse afterward than they were before. In the last couple of decades the admissions pool has gone from national to global. The decline in the college-age population reversed itself in 1997, reaching boomer levels once again within a decade. Schools are ever more adept at juking their admissions stats, using aggressive marketing practices to gin up larger and larger numbers of applicants, many of whom they know they'll never admit (the so-called "attract to reject" strategy), just to lower their acceptance rates. Nor is it only a matter of status; school

like other businesses, borrow money, and credit rating agencies take admissions statistics in account. No less than corporate profits, the numbers are expected to get better every year.

Perhaps most crucial, in creating the feeling that the last couple of decades represent something new, is the fact that we're into the second generation now. The parents of the kids who have been going through the system since the early 1990s are products, increasingly, of the system themselves. People who sent their children to elite colleges in the 1970s and '80s were much more likely to have gone to less prestigious, often public universities, or not to have gone to college at all. Now we're dealing with a cohort of meritocratic professionals for whom a different sort of life is inconceivable. What was once an opportunity has become a necessity. There is only one definition of happiness, and only one way to get it.

Since 1992, admissions rates have fallen by more than a third at 17 of the top 20 liberal arts colleges in the current *U.S. News* ranking, and by more than half at 18 of the top 20 universities. They have fallen from 65 percent to 14 percent at Vanderbilt, from 45 percent to 13 percent at the University of Chicago, and from 32 percent to 7 percent at Columbia. Early applications rose at Duke by 23 percent in 2011 alone, on top of a 14 percent increase the previous year. In 2011, Harvard, Stanford, and Columbia, which each admit fewer than 2,500 students, all received more than 31,000 applications, over 50 percent more than they had only six years earlier.

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If those of us who went to college in the 1970s and '80s no longer recognize the admissions process, if today's elite students appear to be an alien species—Super People, perhaps, or a race of bionic hamsters—that is only because the logic of the system that was put in place in the 1960s, when the genteel bigotry of the old boys' network gave way to an egalitarian war of all against all, has been playing out for that much longer. When I graduated from high school in 1981, the kids who got into the most prestigious colleges took about three AP courses and did about three extracurricular activities each. Now the numbers are more apt to be seven or eight of the former and nine or ten of the latter. When I sat on the Yale admissions committee in 2008 (faculty members rotate through for a single day), kids who had five or six items on their list of extracurriculars—the so-called “brag” in admissions lingo, it was the first thing the officer would mention when presenting a case—were already in trouble, because that wasn't nearly enough. In *Privilege*, Ross Douthat refers to a fellow student who had twelve, “a typically jam-packed Harvard résumé.” I once had a freshman advisee who had done eleven APs.

None of this, I should say, is the fault of the admissions offices, which are acting on instructions from on high. During my day on the committee, I was deeply impressed by the staff. Admissions officers not only plow through thousands of folders during the long winter months, they are intimately conversant with the geographic areas for which they are responsible. We were doing eastern Pennsylvania that day in my subcommittee—suburban Philadelphia, essentially—and the junior officer in charge (it was only one of his regions), a young man who looked to be about thirty, was familiar, to a remarkable level of detail, not only with the high schools and their guidance counselors, with whom he had developed relationships over countless recruiting trips, but also with the alumni interviewers and outside readers who assisted with the territory.

It was spring; early admissions had already been done. Applicants, each represented by a long string of figures and codes (SATs, GPA, class rank, numerical scores to which the letters of recommendation had been converted, special notations for athletes, legacies, diversity cases, and



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