The Pursuit of Excellence

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College students are more stressed than ever before – activities, campus jobs, internships, friends, and the pursuit of a 4.0 GPA weigh heavily on students in elite institutions across America. William Deresiewicz, former professor at Columbia University and esteemed scholar, pulls back the curtain on these institutions that churn out high-achieving careerists in *Excellent Sheep*, a polemic affronting mind-washing elitist education. The sentiments of *Excellent Sheep* rouse readers with thought-provoking consideration, while simultaneously raising questions on the author's true intentions and society's grasp on the education of America's youth.

William Deresiewicz believes in the Ivy League system. He believes students at these universities are capable of changing the world, and possess the mental strength for the unthinkable. But he uses *Excellent Sheep* as a platform to criticize the lack of individuality found in students in these institutions. And he uses this platform well. Deresiewicz's argument breathes in the pages – I can picture his pen flying across a notepad, or his fingers typing feverishly at his keyboard. I see him wicking sweat from his brow, laughing and croaking with a wild grin that his work evokes. *Excellent Sheep* is a call to arms for students in the upper-ranks of the undergraduate education system. Deresiewicz begs students to experience college outside of their comfort zone, academically as well as socially, and criticizes the system that creates cookie-cutter versions of college students and implements their "stunted sense of purpose" (Deresiewicz 3). He argues that "moral imagination," the possession of the brain-power to imagine new and unconventional ways to live one's life, and "moral courage," the inner strength to actually live that life, are rarely found in the average over-achiever. These students all travel down the same career paths, and don't have the tools to pursue their passions. The intensity of Deresiewicz's argument is palpable and exciting, but is it well-founded?

Deresiewicz tries to empower students by criticizing a large, respected, and seriously envied institution, but he doesn't have a true grasp on the specific aspects of what he's criticizing. He uses broad and sweeping language to engage his audience. Some of his topic sentences are so abrasive and aphoristic that they would be laughable – if they weren't so captivating. He drops heavy lines in every paragraph, such as "Society is a conspiracy to keep itself from the truth" (80), and "Everybody does the same thing because everybody's doing the same thing" (21). This language is padded, as noted by reviewers Miller and Garner, but "rarely dull" (Garner). Deresiewicz uses these lines to distract and set an agenda for his argument, but they quickly reveal his shallow thinking. He constantly points out the lack of diversity in institutions, and cries for individuality, but in the next sentence discredits students, as well as readers, for pursuing a fake authenticity. How is this warranted? His contradicting criticisms made me second guess my own intentions. For the argument's sake, say I have always wanted to get a tattoo. I come to college, feel comfortable and daring enough to take the leap, and I get a tattoo. This should be great for me, but, according to his own argument, Deresiewicz would look down on me and say this does not make me an individual. Alternatively, what if I've always wanted a tattoo, but I decide not to get one bearing in mind that it might prevent me from getting a job in the future? In this scenario, I can picture Deresiewicz grabbing me by the shoulders, shaking me senseless, screaming, "Try harder to be an

individual! Take risks!" So what exactly does it take to separate myself from the crowd? What, in Deresiewicz's eyes, should I be doing to be the best possible version of myself?

Excellent Sheep garnered substantial critical attention for its contradictory argument, and the national context its conversation carries. The reviewers' opinions and intensity of their responses to the argument varied. Most of the reviewers comment on the heavy language Deresiewicz uses to present his argument, and the contradictions that so quickly follow the rigorous points he makes. Laura Miller, co-founder of *Salon.com*, points out elements of Deresiewicz's self-contradiction that I also found frustrating: "He urges students to pursue their quirkier dreams, such as becoming an organic farmer, then scolds them for thinking running an organic farm constitutes meaningful social engagement" (Miller). Deresiewicz goes at his audience with passion and vigor about the changes that need to be made to elite institutions, and the changes the students in these institutions must undergo to succeed. He criticizes so much of the institution, but, as reviewers Carlos Lozada and Douglas Greenberg egregiously point out, he is a product of his own criticism. They find him in the wrong for writing out of his own experience and excluding arguments that can be made for people of a lesser social status who don't have the opportunities he (maybe unintentionally) mocks in his book.

Is he truly in the wrong? What is someone supposed to write about, if not their own experiences and opinions? These critics agree that Deresiewicz is in the wrong in his lack of self-awareness. Lozada, editor of 'Outlook,' the opinion section of *The Washington Post*, describes *Excellent Sheep* as a "how-to guide to anti-elitism, except it caters to elites themselves" (Lozada). Deresiewicz's scope is narrow, and he caters to his audience by giving them abundant space and opportunity, while tip-toeing around the unspoken truth that these opportunities are greatly specific and lost upon so many people who may deserve them. Other reviewers empathize with Deresiewicz's points. Miller gives credit to Deresiewicz's thesis "because it matters" (Miller). She argues that students from these elite universities directly affect the lives of the everyday citizen because they end up being the innovators and advocates that lead our nation. By paying attention to these "excellent sheep," we may learn more about ourselves.

Sometimes Deresiewicz's criticism seems to be unfounded and maybe even wrong in the context he frames his arguments. Miller's argument has its merits, but logically, how will the everyday reader, student, and citizen benefit from understanding ideologies and "struggles" of Ivy Leaguers? Deresiewicz is not pointing his argument towards the average citizen, and barely even to me. He is talking directly to the elite, willing them to break free, despite the freedom they already possess. Lozada and Greenberg ruthlessly attack Deresiewicz's argument. They resent his condescension and claim his argument leaves little room for the likes of the students falling short of the class line he blatantly targets. Lozada and Greenberg's arguments may be intense, but they are necessary. Shining light on the rigid structure of elitism that keeps so many in our country from rising to their potential is critical.

For Thanksgiving break I travelled home to New Jersey with a few friends from high school who go to college in the D.C. area. The conversations we had reflected thoughts I've had in my first semester of college and questions of my own potential I've poured over while reading *Excellent Sheep*. An AU student, two students from Georgetown, and a student from Catholic may be experiencing education differently at the moment, but our insights into our college experiences

thus far mirrored each other's. We were returning home for essentially the first time since the summer, so we had much to talk about - new friends we've grown to love, classes and professors that excite us and those that make us fall asleep, the pantries in our homes that we'll immediately scour when we sprint through our front doors, and our education so far and how it has compared to our experiences at Red Bank Catholic High School. Our majors varied - a Georgetown theater major, a Georgetown English major and theater minor, a Catholic University finance and computer science double major, and me, an undeclared AU student. But we all seemed to have similar thoughts on future careers and the way college is pushing us towards adulthood. We talked about following a vocation and the philosophy behind education. As an undeclared student, I fear that I'll end up declaring a major that will leave me jobless and hopeless in the future, or that I'll face the adverse possibility of majoring in something that will lead me to a successful career, but have me hating my job and subsequently my life: a future of regret and what-ifs. I fear the possibility of finally realizing my "calling" too late in my college career and having little time to pursue a dream. Is there a time-limit on the pursuit of fulfillment? I don't want to settle for a career I do not have a strong passion for, but what if I never find my true passion? I do not want to continue down a path of discontentment or, even worse, settle for small sparks of contentment sparsely scattered through long streaks of gray.

We pondered the ambiguous, sometimes blind, direction we trudge towards the completion of our education. There is simply not enough time in these eight semesters to take the most exciting classes, get the best internships, and have the most fun. And what if you spend substantial time at school pursuing something and sometime down the line you abruptly realize you no longer have an interest in that track? Aidan, the student from Catholic, no longer wants to pursue his double-major in finance and computer science, but he's terrified he wasted credits on those classes. The fear of wasting time weighs heavily on freshmen, even in the very first semester of college.

On Thanksgiving Day I snuck from room to room at the family party I attended trying to avoid probing questions from cousins, aunts, and uncles. I know they all meant well, but each question I answered evoked a different response about what I should be majoring in, what activities I should join, what job I should aim to get when I graduate. At one point in the evening I was cornered and asked if I planned on attending law school after college. I haven't even declared a major, nor have I booked my train ticket to return to AU on Sunday, so no, I have not made a decision about law school. These inquiries from family members shouldn't surprise me, but the content of the conversations always catch me off guard. I find the general public opinion towards college students is they have it all figured it out: they know exactly what they want to major in and what career they want to pursue, and they've carefully assembled their ten-year-plan. These assumptions nearly bring me to tears because they leave little room for students who are trying to take their education day-by-day and are not quite sure how they want to spend their lives. I feel sometimes it takes moral courage and some moral imagination to field these questions from family and friends. Many times I lie; I drop names of random majors I've entertained the idea of but have no intention of really pursuing. I talk at length about my friends and their pursuits to draw the attention away from me and my reddening cheeks. And then I remember that lying is exhausting, and I respond with the truth: "I don't know what I want to do with my life."

Deresiewicz's assumes that students in elite institutions aren't given the chance to think about their own passions and pursue their dreams, but he disregards that many students may not realize their

vocation apart from the crunch of the university system. His sentiments and critiques can apply to a wide audience, but the specific group he narrowly tries to attract limits the truth in his work. I find truth and fault in his argument, but I don't necessarily fit into the crowd Deresiewicz targets. I still feel the stress of academics, the college experience, and figuring my life out, but I don't attend Harvard, Yale, or Columbia. In Deresiewicz's eyes, does this detract from my experience? At times I wondered if I should even have been reading *Excellent Sheep*. The razor-sharp lines Deresiewicz drew in his argument seemed to slice me and so many others out of his target audience. Regardless of my personal connection, this book is a passionate and exciting plea to think and act on a grander scale. But that doesn't detract from the fact that the book idealizes much of what the college experience can and should be, begs for a change to institutions that already have great global exposure and reach, and weighs on students to extend themselves farther than they already have for the system.

My peers at AU have varying attitudes towards their academic pursuits. There are students who do it all for the grade and treat college as an ongoing battle between them and their GPA. There are those who rarely go to class, but talk frequently about their future career at the United Nations. I don't know where this attitude will lead these people, but I can't help but respect their confidence. This is naive of me to feel, but I envy the fiery ambition that some have instilled in their being that I have trouble channeling in myself. If I can't get out of bed for my 10:20 a.m. class (which I've undeniably been at fault of), can I expect myself to be ready and raring to work five days a week in five years, if that is where I find myself? As of now, indications point to no. Some of my classmates seem to have it all figured out - they have good grades, are involved in activities they love, somehow got the internship that everyone fought for, and manage to balance their social lives seemingly with ease. Is this authentic, or is it a facade? Deresiewicz describes these students as "Super People." They've balanced their grades, hobbies, activities, and social life "with an apparent effortlessness, a serene self-assurance" (Deresiewicz 7). A student like this may have it figured out to someone like me, who has taken steps through college with extreme varying levels of confidence and uncertainty, but maybe "The Girl Who Has It All" finds herself drowning under the stress of keeping up the image of completion.

No matter where you go to school, college is challenging. The expectations laid across students' backs to perform and succeed are crushing, and may be stunting the natural process of learning, and therefore preventing a more affluent society from growing. While I argue that college students today are curious thinkers, forging their path through the academic wilderness, you may say that these students are privileged floaters. You may say that these students have no real sense of direction and only a sense of entitlement and expectations. Still, I believe that these achievers are driving forces in their own destiny, despite whether they know who they want be after college or not. At 18, 19, and 20, we're not meant to be complete. We're meant to be figuring it out. And if the image we have today of completion does not come into fruition, who cares? At least we tried.

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