



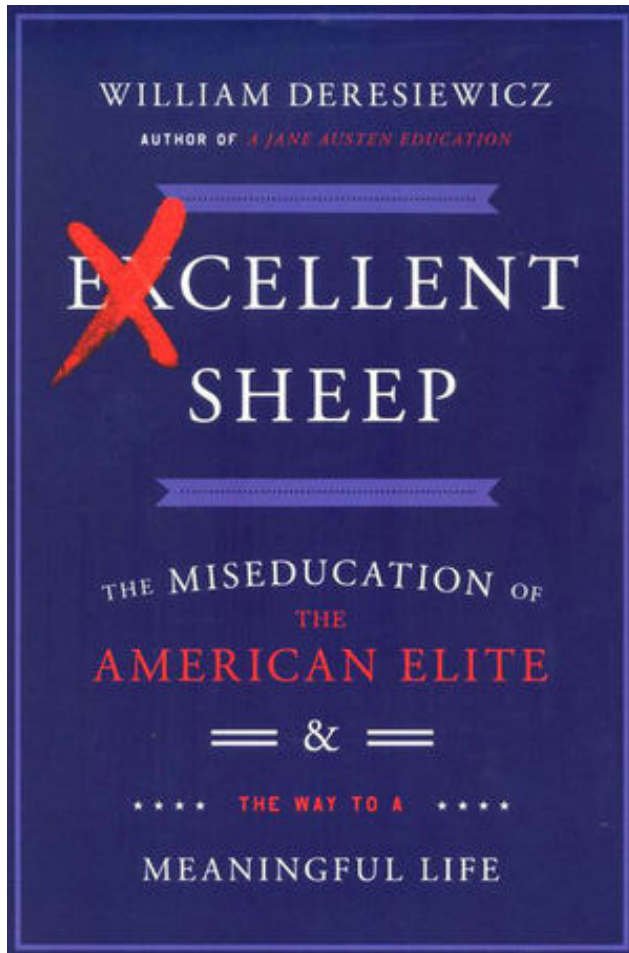
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PARK CITY DAILY NEWS

'Excellent Sheep' an enlightening work

Posted: Sunday, December 14, 2014 12:00 am

"Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life" by William Deresiewicz. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2014. 256 pages, \$26.



"Our most prestigious colleges and universities love to congratulate themselves on the caliber of their incoming students: Their average SAT scores, the proportion that comes from the top 10 percent of their high school class, the narrowness of the admissions sieve that lets them in, all the numbers U.S. News & World Report has taught us to worship," William Deresiewicz explains near the beginning of "Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life," the latest entry in a long line of disturbing critiques outlining the dismal state of higher education in the United States.

"And make no mistake, today's elite students are, in purely academic terms, phenomenally well prepared," he continues. "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 drawn to this book from the moment I inadvertently ran across an interview with

Deresiewicz on "BookTV," one of the more engaging offerings on C-SPAN. Obviously, a lot of the appeal has to do with my job at Western Kentucky University. I can probably relate to the subject matter more than the average person largely because I live what the author describes on a daily basis. College has become the academic equivalent of a treadmill for many students, and this has particularly ominous implications for future generations. In fact, we are already witnessing many of the consequences so eloquently captured in this exquisite volume.

"Excellent Sheep" consists of 12 chapters arranged in four major sections: "Sheep," "Self," "Schools" and "Society." Deresiewicz's treatise is extensively researched, although the source notes and reference section are not found at the conclusion of the main text; rather, they can be accessed at the companion website, excellentsheep.com. Incidentally, this seems to be an emerging trend in publishing as I have run across this same feature in several books I've reviewed in recent months.

Deresiewicz hits a nerve with “Excellent Sheep.” As a parent, faculty member and former college student, I can relate to many of the trends the author illuminates in such accurate detail: the heightened sense of anxiety visible in many students populating our campuses today, the overemphasis on academics and athletics that leaves them feeling adrift and without a true sense of purpose, and the almost irrational obsession with nurturing “leadership” without instilling a deeper sense of what it is or why it ultimately matters in more than a superficial, self-serving context. The author cautions that these observations and sentiments are not merely abstract constructs – they are very real, and the implications for society could be severe.

“In order to invent your life, you need to overcome that thing the system is so good at inculcating: fear of failure,” the author asserts in “Inventing Your Life,” the sixth chapter. “Never to have failed is a sign not of merit but fragility; it means your fears have kept you from doing or becoming what you might have. That is the difference between mere success – getting the A, measuring up to some generic benchmark that may not actually be very high at all – and true excellence.”

By emphasizing the wrong ideals, Deresiewicz argues, we have built an educational system proficient at producing individuals who are remarkably adept at finding their way through the maze but not very good at surviving in the wild. In order to reverse the unhealthy and ultimately counterproductive course we seem to be careening down at an accelerating pace, it is imperative we be honest with ourselves, our students and society at large. One pressing aspect of academia desperately needing to be addressed involves the central role teaching used to play in the priority structure of higher education. It is important to note that Deresiewicz is by no means the only writer trying to get us to come to terms with the hypocrisy lying just beneath the surface of our supposed emphasis on quality in pedagogy.

“There is only one problem with telling students to seek out good teaching in college,” Deresiewicz observes in “Spirit Guides,” the ninth chapter. “They’re going to have some trouble finding it, because academic institutions usually don’t care about it. Oh, they’ll tell you otherwise in their promotional material. But I advise you to be skeptical. The profession’s whole incentive structure is biased against teaching, and the more prestigious the school, the stronger the bias is likely to be.”

I would like to be able to refute this conclusion, but I’m afraid the evidence based on my 30-plus years at four institutions would be pretty weak. It’s never enough to be a great teacher; if you want to keep your job as a faculty member, you had better put most of your effort into research and publishing. Some seem to have the ability to do it all; most can’t. Consequently, those who are arguably the most proficient in the classroom are often overlooked for those who aren’t as good at instruction but know how to get manuscripts accepted in refereed journals.

Deresiewicz is a graduate of Columbia University who taught English at Yale for 10 years. His previous book, “A Jane Austen Education: How Six Novels Taught Me About Love, Friendship and the Things That Really Matter,” was published in 2012 and received critical acclaim. If you care about the future, you will no doubt find “Excellent Sheep” exceptionally enlightening.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.