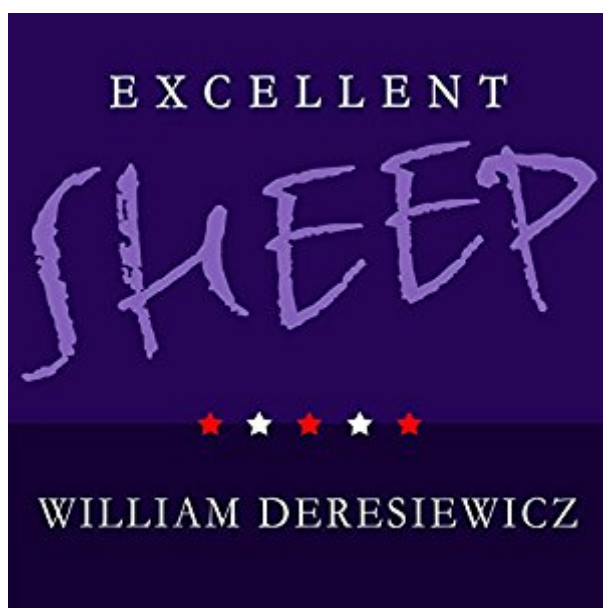


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# Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation Of The American Elite And The Way To A Meaningful Life



## Synopsis

As a professor at Yale, William Deresiewicz saw something that troubled him deeply. His students, some of the nation's brightest minds, were adrift when it came to the big questions: how to think critically and creatively, and how to find a sense of purpose. *Excellent Sheep* takes a sharp look at the high-pressure conveyor belt that begins with parents and counselors who demand perfect grades and culminates in the skewed applications Deresiewicz saw firsthand as a member of Yale's admissions committee. As schools shift focus from the humanities to "practical" subjects like economics and computer science, students are losing the ability to think in innovative ways. Deresiewicz explains how college should be a time for self-discovery, when students can establish their own values and measures of success, so they can forge their own path. He addresses parents, students, educators, and anyone who's interested in the direction of American society, featuring quotes from real students and graduates he has corresponded with over the years, candidly exposing where the system is broken and clearly presenting solutions.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 8 hours 34 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Tantor Audio

Audible.com Release Date: August 19, 2014

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00MI62SK4

Best Sellers Rank: #96 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Education #212

in Books > Education & Teaching > Schools & Teaching > Education Theory > Philosophy &

Social Aspects #526 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Nonfiction > Social Science

## Customer Reviews

This book piqued my interest because my son just graduated high school and is entering college. His classmates range from the "Super People" (author William Deresiewicz's phrase for the highest achievers) who are on their way to elite universities, to the more typical students who are starting their higher educations at community colleges. In each book review I try to include a few well-written sentences that concisely illustrate an author's point of view. This book is so well written that I could

have chosen just about every sentence. Here are some of the best:=====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. Isolated from their peers, these kids are also cut off from themselves. The endless hoop-jumping... that got them into an elite college in the first place--the clubs, bands, projects, teams, APs, SATs, evenings, weekends, summers, coaches, tutors, leadership, service -- left them no time to figure out what they want out of life. 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. "I hate all my activities, I hate all my classes, I hated everything I did in high school, expect to hate my job, and this is just how it's going to be for the rest of my life." 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...the constant sense of competition...to be played out within the same narrow conception of what constitutes a valid life: affluence, credentials, and prestige. 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's a pretty dreadful assessment, but Deresiewicz is a former Professor of English at Yale and member of its admissions committee, so he must have seen plenty of it first-hand. He is surely right about those of us who went to college in the 1970s no longer recognizing the admissions process. I graduated Georgia Tech in 1979. He praises students of our era as "passionate weirdos." That certainly fit my class, although I'd prefer to call us "competent eccentrics." We were engineering nerds. I was recruited because my ACT/SAT put me in the top 2%. I had zero extracurricular activities. Fast forward 40 years and it seems that colleges cater to "credentialed conformists." Applicants have to show that they are not only academic stars, but social butterflies involved in numerous group activities. Even the "party schools" require students to write an essay explaining why they want to be admitted. The only requirement to be admitted to the party schools of the 1970s was that you had to have tuition money and a pulse. What caused this change from universities prizing "passionate weirdos" to "credentialed conformists?" Perhaps it has to do with these factors: 1. We have become more litigation-conscious. Companies can't afford to hire "loose cannons" who create potential legal liabilities. Nowadays people are easily offended by many words and deeds that were ignored in the past, and they are quick to hire lawyers who will seek to recover damages on their behalf. So companies value conformists who follow the book more than they used to. 2. Flattening of management. A company

that had 20 branch managers 40 years ago, now has only 1 regional manager, thanks to advances in computers and Internet communication. So, if 95% of the management jobs are gone, then companies have to find discrimination-neutral ways to winnow down the pool of candidates applying for that one job. Inflating the job requirements with credentials, no matter how bogus, is one way to do it without running the risk of discrimination lawsuits.<sup>3</sup> Maturing of industries. A century or so ago people were allowed to practice Law even if they had no formal education. It used to be that way in fields like auto repair and computer systems development. Now that these industries have matured and there is no longer a shortage of applicants, credentialization is the most efficient way to cull the herd. The important question is whether all this credentialing and hoop-jumping is counterproductive to success in college and in life. I don't think it necessarily is. Corporations operate on these principles. So it is not unreasonable that colleges should give the highest priority in admissions to those who are likely to perform well in corporate employment. Credentialing and hoop-jumping only becomes counterproductive when it is forced upon people whose natures are NOT motivated by peer-group competition. This may include most nonconformist, creative-minded people who prefer to blaze their own trail through life rather than walk on someone else's. And we must remember that credentials are not the primary currency of success. Most of the worthwhile things we obtain in life come from our souls. We prosper mostly from the goodwill we create by doing things for others without thinking "how am I going to get paid." Layering credentials on top of that principle strengthens your credibility and amplifies your reach. But if you have a defective character then credentials will only lengthen the height from which you fall. A lot of hotshots on Wall Street who were long on credentials and short on integrity are costing their companies tens of billions of dollars in fines for defrauding the public. Those who exchanged their souls for tickets to a rat race will die neither wealthy or respected. I recommend that students and parents should read this book as an "alarm bell" to warn themselves when they may be pushing the hoops-and-credentials envelope a bit too far. William Deresiewicz makes fundamental points that are too often perceived only at the end of life's journey: Keep your priorities straight. Perfect your own soul first, then jump through the hoops if you feel you have to. But, really, your objective should be to induce life to jump through the hoops YOU build. Never be afraid to take the risks that success requires. Never be afraid of failure. And always do what is right. If your soul is deep and rich, your life will be deep and rich. But if you seek to cover a shallow soul with credentials, then your life won't be worth the paper those credentials are printed on.

When I saw William Deresiewicz's New Republic piece, "Don't Send Your Kids to the Ivy League," I

jumped at the opportunity to read it. As a partial Ivy League apostate myself, the thought of somebody -- a former Ivy League professor at that! -- calling out the cultural problems within these institutions excited me. The piece made waves, with students and professors alike responding, and getting people excited for Deresiewicz's book, *Excellent Sheep*. It worked. I bought his book and worked my way through it, hoping for an intricate analysis of a serious cultural issue and a nuanced solution. While at an Ivy League university -- the University of Pennsylvania, in my case -- I see many of the issues that Deresiewicz identifies in his *New Republic* piece and in interviews on the book. Students who came to school wanting to change the world and make it their own place, to be in the driver's seat of their lives, quickly fell into an assembly-line-like mold. They may have entered school wanting to start a business and offer a new service, or to write a book, or to become a professional speaker, but by their second or third years, many had their eyes set on the crown jewels of the Ivy League experience -- On Campus Recruiting (OCR). They designed their resumes and schedules around exactly what recruiters from Goldman Sachs or Morgan Stanley would want and slowly extirpated the things they had passions for coming in to school. They became barely identifiable with their starry-eyed freshman selves. It wasn't infuriating as much as it was sad. The problem is not necessarily that students want to go work on Wall Street after their time at school -- if that is truly your dream and what you believe will make you come alive, then by all means, please go pursue that! The problem is something at these schools is driving young people to settle and choose careers they don't find fulfilling. I was hoping Deresiewicz would identify what that something is. In short, I was disappointed. Deresiewicz correctly diagnoses the disease that is this cultural issue, but his diagnosis is shallow, lacks detail (he relies almost entirely on anecdote and quoting English literature), and misses the deeper issue of pre-college schooling almost altogether. Even worse, his prescription for the problem -- accessible liberal arts education at schools like public honors colleges (outlined in Part III of the book) -- stems from his romanticized view of the academy, an unrealistic view of how public honors colleges operate, and an economically illiterate view of admissions reform (please see Steven Pinker's review, "The Trouble with Harvard." Pinker points out that the issues that students face at elite schools -- anxiety, depression, unfulfilled potential -- are suffered at higher rates by students at public universities, and that Deresiewicz's admissions reform recommendations would fail to address the perverse meritocracy he attacks, among other things). *Excellent Sheep* has sections that are worth reading, and can be an enjoyable book at times, but the reasoning and argumentation behind it is flimsy and frustrating. Once one digs through the literary fluff that makes up a good half of the book, one walks away dissatisfied. If a reader is interested in something on each of Deresiewicz's main goals -- the unfulfilled lives of

young people, finding one's passions, and higher education reform -- there are better books out there. Consider Peter Gray's Free to Learn, Roman Krznaric's How to Find Fulfilling Work, and Bryan Caplan's forthcoming The Case Against Education.

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