

## THE PROBLEMS OF THE ELITE HIGH EDUCATION

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Like so many kids today, I went off to college like a sleepwalker. You chose the most prestigious place that let you in; up ahead were vaguely understood objectives: status, wealth — “success.” What it meant to actually get an education and why you might want one — all this was off the table. Ivy League colleges are often viewed as the gold standard of colleges in the US and worldwide. The interesting thing about the Ivy League is not how popular they are but how did the league’s membership of universities remain the same and considered as the best ones.

My education taught me to believe that people who didn’t go to the university weren’t worth talking to, regardless of their class. I never learned that there are smart people who don’t go to colleges or universities. I never learned that there are smart people who don’t go to college at all. I also never learned that there are smart people who aren’t “smart.” The existence of multiple forms of intelligence has become a commonplace, but however much elite universities like to sprinkle their incoming classes with a few actors or violinists, they select for and develop one form of intelligence: the analytic.

One of the Ivy league graduate once wrote, ‘It didn’t dawn on me that there might be a few holes in my education until I was about 35. I’d just bought a house, the pipes needed fixing, and the plumber was standing in my kitchen. There he was, a short, beefy guy with a goatee and a Red Sox cap and a thick Boston accent, and I suddenly learned that I didn’t have the slightest idea what to say to someone like him. So alien was his experience to me, so unguessable his values, so mysterious his very language, that I couldn’t succeed in engaging him in a few minutes of small talk before he got down to work. Fourteen years of higher education and a handful of Ivy League degrees, and there I was, stiff and stupid, struck dumb by my own dumbness. “Ivy retardation,” a friend of mine calls this. I could carry on conversations with people from other countries, in other languages, but I couldn’t talk to the man who was standing in my own house.’ [1].

Elite colleges relentlessly encourage their students to flatter themselves for being there, and for what being there can do for them. The advantages of an elite education are indeed undeniable. You learn to think, at least in certain ways, and you make the contacts needed to launch yourself into a life rich in all of society's most cherished rewards.

“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 a serene self-assurance that leaves adults and peers alike in awe. These enviable youngsters appear to be the winners in the race we have made of childhood. But the reality is very different. The system of elite education manufactures young people 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 [2].

The first disadvantage of an elite education is that it makes you incapable of talking to people who aren't like you. Elite schools pride themselves on their diversity, but that diversity is almost entirely a matter of ethnicity and race. With respect to class, these schools are largely homogeneous.

The second disadvantage is that an elite education inculcates a false sense of self-worth. Getting to an elite college, being at an elite college, and going on from an elite college—all involve numerical rankings: SAT, GPA, GRE. You learn to think of yourself in terms of those numbers. They come to signify not only your fate, but your identity; not only your identity, but your value. It's been said that what those tests really measure is your ability to take tests, but even if they measure something real, it is only a small slice of the real. The problem begins when students are encouraged to forget this truth, when academic excellence becomes excellence in some absolute sense, when “better at X” becomes simply “better” [1].

The first thing that college is for is to teach you to think. That doesn't simply mean developing the mental skills particular to individual disciplines. College is an opportunity to stand outside the world for a few years, between the orthodoxy of your family and the exigencies of career, and contemplate things from a distance.

Elite schools like to boast that they teach their students how to think, but all they mean is that they train them in the analytic and rhetorical skills that are necessary for success in business and the professions. Everything is technocratic — the development of expertise — and everything is ultimately justified in technocratic terms.

The irony is that 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. As of 2017, about a third of graduates went into financing or consulting at a number of top schools, including Harvard, Princeton, and Cornell. Whole fields have disappeared from view: the clergy, the military, electoral politics, even academia itself, for the most part, including basic science. It's considered glamorous to drop out of a selective college if you want to become the next Mark Zuckerberg, but ludicrous to stay in to become a social worker. "What Wall Street figured out," as Ezra Klein has put it, "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."

Learning how to think is only the beginning, though. There's something in particular you need to think about: building a self. The notion may sound strange. The job of college is to assist you to begin to do that. Books, ideas, works of art and thought, the pressure of the minds around you that are looking for their own answers in their own ways [2].

Another problem is that universities have a linear learning model. You must follow a curriculum. Start at point A, end at point B. Check the boxes and get the degree. A typical university education is linear - teacher focused, not student focused. The process of learning is controlled by the teacher, just as the process of getting a degree is controlled by the university.

The problem is that linear learning is expensive, both in terms of money and in time. As a student, the path to a degree is set. Student choice is available, but mostly limited to electives. In the classroom, lectures are a “one-size-fits-all” approaches to learning. There is no tailoring to individual learning styles or interests.

This makes higher education more expensive than it needs to be. It’s not only the cost of tuition - the cost of housing, food, and transportation for the duration of the college experience add up to compound the problems of the linear model.

Students learn better when they control their experience. We can empower students by giving them choice in the classes they choose and in how they wish to learn. Marketplaces are the epitome of self-expression. They allow for personal expression without the heavy hand of an entity who thinks it knows better. And marketplaces are key for self-directed learning to take place. Students choose what they want to learn, when they want to learn it. With teachers competing for students, teachers will innovate and students will choose to take classes from the best teachers. The low-cost delivery of virtual classrooms means education does not have to cost an arm and a leg or 20 years of debt. And teachers can make a great living teaching classes. This open learning model puts the student at the center of education, not the university [3].

The sign of the system’s alleged fairness is the set of policies that travel under the banner of “diversity.” And that diversity does indeed represent nothing less than a social revolution. Princeton, which didn’t even admit its first woman graduate student until 1961 — a year in which a grand total of one (no doubt very lonely) African American matriculated at its college — is now half female and only about half white. But diversity of sex and race has become a cover for increasing economic resegregation. Elite colleges are still living off the moral capital they earned in the 1960s, when they took the genuinely courageous step of dismantling the mechanisms of the WASP aristocracy.

## **References**

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