

Humiliation and Resilience in Higher Education

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Higher education in the 1950s was hardly perfect. Although things could have been improved, it never occurred to most of us who were students to complain, except to each other. We were grateful to be allowed to attend the college of our choice, even though we were well aware that women were tolerated but not treated as equal to the men at our university. Although at the time I wasn't paying much attention to books written about higher education, I doubt if as many negative accounts were produced as they are today.

For example, when you run into a title such as *Is College Worth It?*, it is not surprising that the cover claims that William J. Bennett and David Wilezol "expose the broken promise of higher education." Interestingly enough, in the list they give of "Schools Worth Attending," they begin by listing religious schools, several of which were unfamiliar to me, and in part two, The Elites, they include The University of Chicago, Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford, but not Yale. Unfortunately, they also include a list of three "For-Profits," beginning with Phoenix, which has been exposed in the newspapers as not worth the money.

But times have changed. Because college costs have increased so dramatically and getting into an elite college is now so much more difficult than it was in my day, serious writers have provided a critique of higher education that is worth considering. Therefore I would like to discuss three books. The first by William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, (2015) has received a good deal of attention because before the book was published, he wrote some dramatic exposés

of the Ivy League in magazines such as *The American Scholar*, “The Disadvantages of an Elite Education” and *New Republic*, “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League.” Not surprisingly the titles attracted an audience. He taught for ten years at Yale but did not receive tenure. If Yale follows the example of Harvard, they only award it to a person that they regard as the best in the country, making tenure out of reach for most academics. The second is by Frank Bruni, who primarily writes op-ed pieces for the *New York Times*, and has published two other books. This one is called *Where You Go is Not Who You’ll Be* (2015). The third is a scholarly book by Andrew Delbanco, *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (2012). Delbanco is the Mendelson Family Chair of American Studies and the Julian Clarence Levi Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University. Given the disparate backgrounds of these three men, it is not surprising that their books are quite different.

The three books aim to attract different audiences. *Excellent Sheep* appeared in 2015. It was published with no footnotes, bibliography, or index. As a result, when I was reading it, I wondered who the writers were whom Deresiewicz discussed. At the end of the acknowledgments he suggests that anyone who wants source notes should go on line to excellentsheep.com. I don’t know whose idea it was to put the notes on line and not in the book, but the problem with this decision is that the book seems like a screed rather than a work of scholarship. Endnotes and an index would have emphasized the author’s extensive reading.

In contrast, Bruni, whose book came shortly after *Excellent Sheep*, has an index but no endnotes or bibliography. Since I had read many of his op-ed pieces in *The New York Times*, I really was not bothered by the absence of notes. Besides, he interviewed many young people to get their stories of problems they faced trying to get into the college of their choice. In many cases they were turned down by the places they thought would suit them, but despite the

humiliation of the rejection, they were resilient enough to discover that the college which accepted them actually to their surprise provided a good fit.

Andrew Delbanco's book was published in 2012 three years before the other two. It is more scholarly than the other two, having endnotes, an index, but no bibliography. To his surprise while he was working on the project, he reports that his colleagues were not very supportive of his choice of topic. Some acted as if they felt the subject matter not worth the effort. In fact, several chapters of the book draw on his knowledge of early American writing. I found the frequent references to Emerson especially fascinating because he often anticipated the arguments of the present day.

The early chapters of *Excellent Sheep* are particularly hostile to the efforts that students make to create a high school record that will entice an elite college to accept them. The parents, Deresiewicz insists, are equally to blame because they think that their status will be enhanced if their child gets into an Ivy League school. Years ago some parents condescended to me when I told them that my daughter was going to Carleton College, rather than what they considered to be an elite institution. Our academic friends, in contrast, knew that Carleton gave a fine education, and as it happened it suited our daughter very well. Besides putting students through a ringer in order to matriculate, colleges try even to entice inappropriate high schoolers to apply so that when they are inevitably rejected the college will appear to be more selective than it actually is. He points out that because of the hold that *U. S. News & World Report* has on the ranking system, colleges are now inclined to treat students like “customers”, people to be pandered to instead of challenged. As he puts it, “instead of humanities, students are getting amenities” (Deresiewicz, 2015, 69). Besides the ubiquitous climbing walls that appear in fitness centers, the colleges take seriously student evaluations despite knowing that they lead to grade inflation.

After all, students tend not to like professors who give them low grades.

A little more than half way through the book, however, Chapter 8, called Great Books, becomes more positive. Deresiewicz makes a convincing case for the usefulness of the humanities in the task of “creating a self, inventing a life, developing an independent mind.” Rather surprisingly, considering how few students major in English these days compared to my college experience, he insists that liberal arts graduates are “highly valued in the workforce” because among other things they have learned to educate themselves. According to a blog that he cites from *The Wall Street Journal*, employers believe that “critical thinking, communication and problem-solving skills” are more important than one’s choice of major (Deresiewicz, 2015, 149-151).

I realized after finding the endnotes on-line that I had formed a negative impression of the book that was partly a reaction to the absence of citations. Moreover, as the book progresses, Deresiewicz’s positive suggestions about the usefulness of the humanities impressed me more than I had expected. As he points out, reading literature can teach empathy, the idea that no one is the “center of the universe” (Deresiewicz, 2015, 163).

In contrast, Frank Bruni’s *Where You Go is Not Who You’ll Be* impressed me from the beginning because of his emphasis on the resilience of students who face rejection. Some of them find that their less highly ranked colleges offer them a chance to shine, whereas in their high school they appeared to be almost mediocre students. Bruni urges readers not to be overwhelmed by what he calls “the admissions game” because he insists that “the nature of the student’s college experience” matters far more than the name of the college (Bruni, 2015, 9).

Rather than complaining about how parents pressure their children to excel, as

Deresiewicz does, he cites examples of parents who offer their children support when it is badly needed (Bruni, 2015, 9). Moreover, the successful people he interviewed found mentors in college, most of whom were their professors. In my case, it was a senior my freshman year, named Emily. She took me under her wing when she found out that I was taking Humanities 6 from Reuben Brower, her favorite professor. She spent a great deal of time in the dorm living room teaching me how to do well in Brower's class and to respect his method of close reading. As a result, I shifted my choice of major from Government to English, where I have been very happy.

One reason that Bruni believes that the quality of one's education is not inevitably linked to an elite college, is that he chose to attend the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, instead of Yale. Of course, he had received a Morehead , a highly competitive scholarship that covered all of his expenses. Although his parents wanted him to go to Yale, he probably wanted to get away from home to a place where he might come to terms with being gay. His only regret, he says, is that he didn't work as hard as he might have at Chapel Hill, but then many of us who went to elite colleges were equally lazy (Bruni, 2015, 101). He had some wonderfully supportive professors at Chapel Hill and joined the school newspaper, which "was an ambitious one" that provided him with "an enduring posse, as well as what has become an enduring career (Bruni, 2015, 102).

A good deal of the book consists of making a case for universities such as Arizona State and the University of Wyoming, which are not regarded as prestige schools. Bruni points out that ASU, despite having a low graduation rate, can offer talented students a fine education. As he points out, "elite colleges don't have all the best teachers, students and facilities" though they

have more than their share of them (Bruni, 2015, 122). He also reports that the National Science Foundation has ranked colleges by how many graduates earn a PhD in science and to my pleasure Carleton, my daughter's college, was ranked sixth (Bruni, 2015, 126). Unlike Deresiewicz, who reports that a *Wall Street Journal* blog claims that humanities majors are well prepared for jobs in the "workforce" (Deresiewicz, 2015, 151), Bruni says that majors, not the choice of college, can make a difference in the salary that one earns (Bruni, 2015, 140-41). Heaven knows my salary history as an English major confirms Bruni's hypothesis.

In Chapter 8, *Strangled with Ivy*, Bruni discusses the arguments made by Deresiewicz, against elite schools. His chief complaint, according to Bruni, is that elite schools overpraise their students. To make matters worse, Deresiewicz reports, so many students major in Economics that many other majors have almost disappeared. Bruni cites others who report that the intelligent students head towards "banking or consulting" because "that was the vogue." Fortunately some of them have second thoughts later on and get training in another field (Bruni, 2015, 162-63).

Although Bruni agreed with much that Deresiewicz and others reported about the Ivy League, when he had a chance to teach a course at Princeton, he was more impressed by his students' intellectual curiosity than Deresiewicz had been with his Yale students. On the other hand, Bruni got an unambiguous message that he should treat his students as his "clients," and that he owed them "support" rather than the idea that they owed him anything. He was told to "intervene" if a student seemed headed to a B minus or a C plus. When a student cheated, he was told "to give the student a do-over." He thought the students were oblivious to their good fortune and did not work hard on the writing assignments that he gave (Bruni, 2015, 166-70).

Bruni ends that section of the book quoting a letter responding to a column in *The New York Times*, written by Andrew Delbanco, the next writer I will discuss. Delbanco argued “that elite colleges bred self-satisfaction.” In response to the column, the letter writer reported that in athletic events, Ivy League students would shout at the opponents ““Safety school! Saaaaa-fety school! (Bruni, 2015, 173). Bruni ends the book agreeing with Deresiewicz and Delbanco that hard work is more important than the label of an elite school.

Yet, sadly, parents advertise on Facebook when their child gets into the college they desire. Partly because college is so expensive, families insist on the best for their children. Since America is not longer a dominant power in the world, getting into a good college, they think, will assure a child of a worthwhile career. That has become even more important than it was in the past. Bruni concludes his book deploring the “admissions mania” partly because it denigrates the importance of hard work (Bruni, 2015, 201). Although he has no way of combating this mania, the many stories that he has told about students who found themselves at less than elite schools sticks with the readers and leaves us with a positive message.

Perhaps because Andrew Delbanco has a secure job at Columbia, he is more positive about the state of education in America at the present time than Deresiewicz. Moreover, his style of writing is quite different from either of the two younger men. He insists that the condition of college is not “dire,” and then points out that the “cry of crisis is very old,” citing a letter of Abigail Adams written in 1776. Nonetheless, he recognizes that colleges are “going through a period of wrenching change” caused by economic problems in the world , and “perhaps most important, the collapse of consensus about what students should know.” He points out that places like MIT and Carnegie Mellon have developed on-line courses, which are useful for science but

less helpful for the humanities (Delbanco, 2012, 4-5).

Because of his interest in early American literature and culture, Delbanco places the current situation of colleges in a rich context, more elaborate than that constructed by Deresiewicz and Bruni. At the same time he is well aware of the influence of modern technology on educational practice. The primary purpose of college, he insists, is economic. College is good for the “economic health of the nation” and “for the economic competitiveness” of those who “constitute the nation” (Delbanco, 2012, 25). Having said that he insists that we should care about college not because of its influence on the economy, but for “what it can do for individuals, in both calculable and incalculable ways” (Delbanco, 2012, 28). Besides, the practical end of education provides “a hedge against utilitarian values” and “has no room for dogma.” Instead it encourages debate because “knowledge of the past helps us to think critically about the present” (Delbanco, 2012, 32-33).

One interesting way Delbanco uses literary texts is a story he invents about two students who go to see *King Lear*. One comes out unmoved; the other finds his ideas about his father and the possibility of having children completely turned upside down by seeing the play. “The world has been transformed for him,” but not for his friend (Delbanco, 2012, 49). Moreover, when one has learned about the scholarship of the past, we discover that ideas that we think are new, were discussed cogently by William James in the nineteenth century. Delbanco quotes a long passage from James about what he called “*jammed* memory,” our inability to recall the name of someone until we relax and let the name float into our mind. James mentions that he got the idea of jammed memory from Emerson, indicating the history of the idea, which those of us that are aging thought was unique to our generation (Delbanco, 2021, 52). Again mentioning Cotton

Mather, Delbanco points out that our idea that students have something to learn from each other is hardly a new concept (Delbanco, 2012, 54). On the other hand, however, sometimes students can get carried away in their interpretations, so Delbanco says not to forget “to bring one’s bullshit meter to class” to keep the group from going off the rails (Delbanco, 2012, 60). The proof that college can have an effect on people’s thinking is demonstrated by the fact that according to James McPherson, 80 percent of the abolitionist leaders had been to college (James McPherson cited in Delbanco, 2012, 71).

When discussing the development of universities out of colleges, Delbanco mentions one important difference between the sciences and humanities. Science has a big advantage when competing for money from the university. The reason is that progress in science adds to our knowledge rather than “re inventing things that are old” (Frederick Winslow Taylor cited in Delbanco, 2012, 94). In contrast, the humanities attempt to preserve “truth by rearticulating it” rather than “by discarding the old in favor of the new.” Moreover, science has other advantages, namely “the experimental method” and its effect on the lives of all of us. Of course, Delbanco remarks, sometimes science has been used in evil ways, such as the attempt of the Nazis to exterminate all the Jews in Europe using what was then modern scientific techniques (Delbanco, 2012, 95-96). Science, however, has its limitations; it “tells us nothing about how to shape a life or how to face death, about the meaning of love, or the scope of responsibility.” Despite the limitations of science, the influence of humanities has diminished in the modern university. Ironically, Delbanco comments, humanities “are establishing themselves in medical, law, and business schools.” Moreover, “great works of art can be antidotes to loneliness.” Reading a poem that captures one’s feelings can make the person feel a part of society (Delbanco, 2012, 99-100).

Some changes in universities have benefitted undergraduates. When Abbott Lawrence Lowell decided that the undergraduate college was losing ground to the university, he obtained a big gift to start the undergraduate houses at Harvard. Not many colleges imitated Harvard's example because they lacked the financial resources. Yale established a system of colleges similar to the Harvard houses, but Princeton demurred. The eating clubs interfered. Delbanco was even-handed in his analysis of Lowell's effect on the lives of Harvard students. On the one hand, Lowell restricted the number of Jewish students who could matriculate and refused to let black students live in residence halls. On the other hand, the house system reduced the difference between rich and poor students; they all lived together under one roof (Delbanco, 2012, 103, 106).

Delbanco also discusses the problems of student admission to selective universities, making much the same arguments that Deresiewicz and Bruni echoed later on. He discussed the influence of the rankings in *U.S. News & World Report*, the rising costs of running a university, and the reduction of tax money to cover costs. He also notes that wealthy parents can hire people to help their children prepare college applications and study for their SATs. Meantime community colleges where many poor students attend are so short of cash that they reduce hours in libraries and laboratories, hire adjunct faculty, and offer little advising, tutoring, or day care centers despite having many single parents (Delbanco, 2012, 120, 123).

In the next-to-last chapter Delbanco points out that when the Ivy League colleges began to increase the number of Jews, blacks, and other minorities, "it was the sons of the old tribe who opened up their tribal institutions. . . to the larger world." The pace of change, however, differed from college to college. Harvard kept a fairly steady pace, Princeton was slow, but Kingman

Brewster, who was president of Yale from 1963 to 1977, dramatically increased black and female enrollments. As Delbanco put it, “narrow old Yale was destroyed by large-minded Yalies” (2012, 129-30).

In the final chapter, Delbanco says that he will not create the genres that most writers have used to describe the parlous state of higher education: the jeremiad, elegy, call to arms, or the funeral dirge. On the other hand, he argues that to a certain extent a funeral dirge is appropriate. The number of students who leave home to reside in a college is much fewer than those who live at home ”to attend a commuter school, without anything resembling traditional college life” (Delbanco, 2012, 150-51). Not only do most students not have a typical college experience, but many faculty members are left out of the academic culture altogether being underpaid and overworked adjuncts (Delbanco, 2012, 153).

As we found in the work of Deresiewicz and Bruni, Delbanco finds it easier to describe the problems facing higher education than to solve them. One issue that persists is the conflict between research and teaching. Some critics think that too much research is of no importance and suggest that people be hired just to teach (Pearlstein, 2015, November 25). Delbanco is not hostile to research, but he points out that graduate students are asked to teach without any training in what that might entail. As he points out, failing to treat teaching as part of graduate education would be the equivalent of a medical school that failed to ask students to have clinical rotations. Noting that some physicians talk of “patient-centered” medicine, Delbanco suggests that PhD programs should “provide ‘student-centered’ doctoral education.” Although most practitioners are aware that their research enhances their teaching and vice versa, he wonders why oral examiners don’t ask PhD candidates how an author might be of interest to a student ”

(Delbanco, 2012, 167-70). If faculty members did care about the connections between literature and student interest, then Deresiewicz, who showed a real ability to bridge that divide, might have been allowed to receive tenure.

In conclusion, all three of these books provide insight into the strength and weaknesses of contemporary higher education. We learn about the problems facing the academic community and have read stories about people, like Deresiewicz, who have shown signs of genuine resilience in spite of humiliating rejection. All of these authors have done a fine job explaining how undergraduate education should be improved. If administrators take the time to read these works, there is some hope that things will improve in the future.

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