

# DIPLOMAS AND DISCRIMINATION

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We are all familiar with the saying “knowledge is power,” but have you ever considered its larger implications? What kind of power does knowledge give us? Is it the power to rise above others by knowing more than them, or is it the ability to make smarter life decisions? I believe power is the ability to overcome obstacles through problem solving and innovation, but I also recognize that knowledge on its own isn’t enough to give us power; we also need the ability to think. Thinking and building upon the knowledge we already have creates progress. Education systems were created with the purpose of teaching the young about the ocean of knowledge we have already accumulated over the ages, as well as encouraging them to add into it. But how effective is the education system in America achieving these aims? Are we still teaching students how to think and how to unlock this power?

William Deresiewicz certainly doesn’t think so. In his essay “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League,” Deresiewicz gives the impression that the education system today has turned schools into factories that churn out individuals without individuality—students who don’t know how to use the power that knowledge should give them. The Ivy League is the golden standard for ‘Elite Education’ in the United States. Getting into an Ivy League school, or any other ‘elite school’ for that matter, symbolizes that one has achieved excellence across many aspects of life. Almost every student who cares about their education has an Ivy League or equivalent elite university listed as their dream school. The rigorous admissions process ensures that students who enter such prestigious institutions have accomplished good grades, community service, leadership experience, and have interesting personalities. But what is the cost of reaching this point? Deresiewicz writes that “our 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” (2). Deresiewicz also claims that the admissions process has become so competitive that “kids who manage to get into elite colleges have, by definition, never experienced anything but success” (4). This creates a sense of paranoia about potential failure; students who get into elite

universities have never experienced any kind of educational setback in their time in high school. Of course, these are the only kind of students that such prestigious universities can afford to accept; anyone short of perfect would damage their reputation. Having worked on an admissions committee for Yale, Deresiewicz demonstrates that the admissions process has tried to be meritocratic. Students who have made the most of their time in high school, whether it be through earning excellent grades or with outstanding extracurricular experiences, and who have demonstrated their ability to excel in all that they do, have the highest chances of getting into a prestigious university.

But what are some unintended consequences of admission to and education from the Ivy League? Students seem to be less willing to take risks and think for themselves, as “very few [students] saw college as part of a larger project of intellectual discovery and development” (3). Deresiewicz also provides an example of a student at Yale who, after three years at the university, became “painfully insecure,” worrying about things that students at less prestigious public schools wouldn’t even think about, such as not networking enough or the stigma attached to eating alone. He also describes the students at these institutions as hiding “toxic levels of fear, anxiety, and depression, of emptiness and aimlessness and isolation” (2-3). The unwillingness to discover more outside of the textbooks and classrooms for fear of failure shows that the education in these schools has failed at encouraging students to “think outside the box” or develop their own ideas. In other words, students are not unlocking access to the “power” from the knowledge they have so painfully attained throughout high school and college, ironically because they have obtained too much knowledge.

This problem is not limited to the U.S. Halfway across the world in China, students face the same issue across all levels of education, not just at university. Megan Stack of the *Los Angeles Times* writes about this in an article on Chinese education: “Students rise at dawn, disappear into school until dinnertime and toil into the late night over homework in preparation for university entrance exams that can make or break their future” (1). In China, education is compulsory only until 9th grade. In order to progress to high school, students take a citywide standardized test, the *Zhongkao*, to assess if and where they can attend high school. After three years of high school, the same thing happens again, with students taking the notorious *Gaokao*, a national standardized test. I had a chance to experience this for myself when I attended middle school at a public institution in

China a few years ago. It was a shocking contrast to what I had experienced in elementary school in the U.S.: Every minute of every day was focused on preparing for the test that would decide the path of our futures. At first, P.E. seemed to be a time where we could relax and have just have fun out-side, but what seemed to be an escape from the maze of educational expectations was in fact just another dead end: physical performance was also a part of the exams.

China's education system offers an interesting comparison to the college application process in the U.S.; everything from grades to life experiences and extra-curricular participation is taken into consideration. Needless to say, neither I nor any of my Chinese classmates had many interests outside of school. Developing our own thoughts was out of the question; we were taught to be questioned, not to question what we were taught. Looking back on my high school experiences today, I can't help but feel disappointed about how that turned out for me: I had not discovered any new interests, nor had I developed the interests I already had. Stack explains why this focus on academics limits the potential of students, quoting a Chinese education expert as saying, "In the long run, for us to be a strong country, we need talent and great creativity. And right now, our education system cannot accomplish this" (1). The students have so much potential to make a change in the world, yet they have no way of obtaining those qualities. In China, the education system has become like kryptonite to a student's individuality and potential. Could this be the same case for elite universities in the U.S.?

Fortunately, the American application process pays attention to more than grades, trying to admit students who also have strong interests outside of the classroom and demonstrate an ability to do well under pressure. An article comparing the two country's admissions process from *USA Today* explains that "in the United States, SAT and ACT scores often provide the initial cutoff for the admission process, but the scores are one of many things on the application. For the Chinese, the scores are the only factor in the admissions process" (Collins). But there is a strange overlap: In America, extracurricular participation has just become another box that admissions officers tick off when they go through applications. Doesn't this negate the whole purpose of extracurricular activities, which are supposed to enrich one's life with new discoveries and interests?

Ultimately, both countries seem to have a shallow criteria for admissions. This has led me to wonder: Is the high level of academic achievement I have

learned to pursue in China adequate to grant me admission to a good university in the U.S.? Likely not. Even so, it can be seen in both cultures that the applicants still standing at the end of the admissions process are rewarded with highly coveted jobs at famous firms and businesses in the U.S., or a job in the almighty government in China. It is not uncommon to see leaders in our world today come from prestigious universities. President Obama, for example, attended Columbia University and Harvard, both prestigious Ivy League schools. However, Deresiewicz questions the true meaning of the phrase “Harvard is for leaders,” saying, “What these institutions mean by leadership is nothing more than getting to the top” (5). But is this leadership only attainable through getting a diploma from elite universities? And is “getting to the top” the ultimate goal of education today?

Malcolm Gladwell questions these standards for admission in his essay “Getting In.” In order to illustrate the way elite universities “produce leaders,” he gives the example of two different institutions: a modeling agency, which he refers to as a “selection-effect institution,” and the Marine Corps, which is referred to as a “treatment-effect institution.” A selection-effect institution produces successful models by making sure they admit beautiful people; the Marine Corps on the other hand are confident that the training soldiers’ experience will turn them into successful soldiers. Gladwell argues that the rigorous admissions process for elite schools has turned them into selection-effect institutions—for the Ivy Leagues to “graduate winners” they have to “admit winners” (8). But what does it mean to be “a winner”? Gladwell seems to judge this based on income later on in life, comparing incomes between students who were admitted into an elite university and chose to not go, as well as the incomes of athletes in elite schools compared with their peers.

Deresiewicz would call this conception of a successful life—filled with “affluence, credentials, prestige”—narrow (5). And indeed it is: I believe there are so many other factors that can make a person successful. Having certain qualities like a vivid character, an outgoing personality, or a positive outlook can take you very far in life. Gladwell provides the example of law schools to illustrate how a diploma can only get one so far in certain careers. Lawyers are some of the most respected people in society, possibly because they have high incomes, but also because their work requires so many different qualities in a person. But prestigious law firms only hire from prestigious law schools, and such schools rely

heavily on the LSAT. Gladwell makes the point that “there’s no reason to believe that a person’s LSAT scores have much relation to how good a lawyer he will be” (10). There are other factors, such as research skills, questioning skills, and passion, all of which good lawyers need to have.

If students aren’t able to learn such skills, then how can we produce people who actually are able to contribute to society? Gladwell makes the fitting comparison between “Good lawyers” and “Good law students” (10). If prestigious universities are indeed selection-effect based, then we are likely only choosing good law students and ignoring those who may have more potential to be better lawyers in the future.

In America, we tend to believe that the Ivy League student is smarter or more capable than the student from a community college or a religious college. But this needs to change. According to Mercedes Schneider, who writes about the education systems in the U.S. and China for *The Huffington Post*, the cost of manufacturing students with knowledge yet without thinking skills is “the death of the joy of learning. The death of ingenuity. The death of creativity. The pressure to cheat. The sad and dangerous sacrificing of the youngest generation of Americans to the data-driven god of emptiness” (Schneider). Yes, knowledge can be power, but being forced to absorb so much of it without knowing how to use it has eaten up our character and individuality.

With everyone learning the same things from first grade to senior year of high school, it is justifiable to claim that we all have more or less access to the same knowledge. But how many of us have the ability to think about and question what we learn? How many of us can unlock the “power” that comes with active thinking?

Deresiewicz calls for a more democratic system, with everyone having access to a first-rate education at any institution, so that we are not just enabling those to get into the Ivy League. But I believe his plan can be broadened even further: I believe our conception of first-rate education being a standard of credibility needs to be eliminated. Indeed, a diploma from Harvard or Yale does say a lot about a person, but businesses who are looking to hire should not ignore the diploma from Penn State or the City University of New York. Does the difference in the school that a student attended mean that the Harvard student worked harder than the student from Penn State? We already all have access to knowledge, but we need to have access to the power behind that knowledge—the power

to see problems in the world and understand how to use our knowledge to solve them. We need to understand that it doesn't matter where we obtained our knowledge or education; it's about how we use it.

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