

Original Paper

Educating the Elites: An Examination of the Characteristics and Social Impacts of Elite Universities and Students in the United States

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Abstract

Nowadays, going to elite schools becomes a fashion for students worldwide. However, there are also increasing concerns on the functions and social impacts of the elite education. This essay is going to discuss the following three topics: first, the characteristics of the elite universities and the reasons and implications behind; next is on the characteristics of the students who received elite educations from the top universities in the States; and last is on the social impacts and future of the elite education.

Keywords

elite education, social impact, the United States

1. Introduction

Nowadays, going to elite schools becomes a fashion for students worldwide. Most of the top students in different countries are most likely to choose to pursue their undergraduate studies in the Ivy League. This is largely because of the reputation of these elite universities and the promising futures they are going to offer. However, there are also increasing concerns on the functions and social impacts of the elite education. One of the examples is the book: *Excellence without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* published in 2006 by the former Dean of Harvard College, Harry R. Lewis. A more recent example is the book *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life* by Yale professor William Deresiewicz in 2014. They both address the underlying problems of elite education from the insiders' points of view and encourage further discussions on such topics.

This essay is going to discuss the following three topics: first, the characteristics of the elite universities and the reasons and implications behind; next is on the characteristics of the students who received elite educations from the top universities in the States; and last is on the social impacts and future of the elite education. Theories of Parker J. Palmer, Thomas Jefferson, human capital theory and so on will be applied to examine the limitations and possibilities of the elite education. Meanwhile, comparison with the elite educations in other countries will also be made to highlight the strong influences and social impacts that elite education can be made worldwide. Above all, this essay aims to examine the characteristics and social impacts of elite education and find out possible ways towards good education and trainings.

2. The Characteristics of Elite Universities in the United States

The usual first impression of elite schools will be the students who are super smart because not every one can get into such elite universities. This session is going to examine each of the unique characteristics of the elite universities in the States, namely strict admission, high ranking, research-based focus, the twisted grading system and powerful alumni which served as the source of capital and funding. These characteristics are closely linked to one another and have significant implications behind.

The admission process, as described by William Deresiewicz, the Yale professor who is also one of the members of Yale admission committee, is very strict and highly intense. The admission result needs to be decided with at least five people: one member of the college dean's office, the faculty representative and three admissions staff. At the mean time, the selecting criteria is also doubtlessly complicated and demanding: "SATs, GPA, class rank, numerical scores to which the letters of recommendation had been converted, special notations for legacies and diversity cases" (Deresiewicz, 2014).

What the elite universities values is the personal qualities, such as leadership, care for the community besides having good scores. The successful applicants need to be well rounded, for example having all the qualities mentioned above and is actively participated in all kinds of extra curricular activities or sports. In addition, the applicants need to have as many recommendation letters as possible in order to secure his or her chance of getting into the elite universities. If the applicant is not so well rounded developed, he or she need to win some national or international awards in some specific fields in order to stand out and get the offer.

The Ivy League has adopted the norm-referenced view of excellence here, which is when "the activity to be excellent in functions as an exchangeable commodity in a competitive environment" (Strike, 1985, p. 410). The applicants of elite universities have to compete with so many people in so many areas in order to stand out. Needless to mention that admission also has direct relations with race and class, this will be further discussed later in the implication part.

Another unique characteristic of the elite universities is they usually have very high rankings. There maybe variations each year but they are usually at the top 10. This implies that the elite universities are very familiar with the requirements and criteria of the ranking systems. Usually, the ranking system values the research and the number of publications done by the university professors. Therefore, most of the elite universities in the United States focus a lot on research, which is another characteristic of elite universities. They need research to contribute to their ranking, which also serves as an indicator to attract more college applicants in the future.

Since the elite universities focus very much on research, which may implies the professor may spend less time and energy on teaching. As revealed by Lewis in his book that the professors in Harvard have the freedom to teach what they want and can therefore reduce or avoid the difficult tasks (2006). Some professors may think the fundamental courses are too easy and they are more willing to teach seniors so that they can have more thoughtful discussions and inspirations for their research. Or the professor may think some of the necessary courses are not exact their expertise so they refuse to open such courses. All these can bring harms to the students because they are not receiving the whole and comprehensive education they are supposed to get.

The grading system and grade inflation is another characteristic of elite universities in the States. Professors are forced by students to give them high grades. Students can use evaluation to demand such request or some of the students will avoid certain courses if they know the professors are GPA killers. For example, in the University of Harvard, Lewis laments the fact that grades that are used to encourage excellence and it now changes to become “a game of strategy and score maximization” (Mendoza, 2007, p. 486).

The most crucial characteristic of elite universities is the donations from their alumni. Without sources of capital and funding, elite universities will not be able to maintain their research scale and quality, in addition, this will further affect their rankings and reputations, which will become less attractive to the top students around the world and then lose the possible source of future incomes. That also explains why the admission has to be strict and is related to the issues of race and class.

The history of Ivy League can explain why the elite universities have to choose students from specific race and class. The original purpose of the establishments of most elite private universities in the United States is not to serve the public but to serve the upper class as means to maintain and secure their status. The elite universities also adjust and change their admission plans over time to cope with the changing reality. For example, they welcome students from BRICS (Russia, China, India, Brazil and South Africa) countries because in the future, students from these five developing countries are most likely to become successful and able to contribute and donate back. However, as suggested by Deresiewicz, the most disadvantaged groups are working-class and rural white (2014).

Elite universities in the States value the idea of diversity. However, the diversity is intentionally selected and presented. The system of the elite education is problematic and promoted further inequality and reduce the chance of upward mobility. Hence, again, comes back to the point of admission. The elite universities will select those students that are well-rounded developed or has outstanding achievement in one particular area. It implies that the students either are super smart in one area or they are able to afford the money to develop their interests and skills. Hence, the local American families will send their children to private high schools if they want their children go to Ivy League and provide them with sports trainings, music classes and international service opportunities.

3. The Characteristics of Undergraduate Students in the Elite Universities

After examining the characteristics of elite universities in the States, it is important to look at what kind of students do they produced. The characteristics of the elite students are discussing in this session and to reveal the problematic side of elite education in the United States.

The elite students are those who have successfully fulfilled the admission requirements and they are trained to be a leader that shows strong devotion to community and services, good at some sports or musical instruments, with good academic results and usually have a decent family background. This is actually similar to the Asia's top students who are only good at obtaining good grades because requirement of university entry is good grades. The elite students in the States are also following the requirement of the admission of elite universities. Some of them are told to join the services, to join the student committee, to join the sports club so as to have a higher chance of getting into his or her ideal universities. Therefore, one of the most noticeable characteristics of elite students is conformity. They follow the rules.

It is interesting and ironic to see that most of the elite universities tell their students to pursuit their own passion and they can be whatever they want to be, but most of them will end up choosing similar things. Finance and consulting have become the most popular choices for top school students in the United States. Again, it proves that most of the elite students dare not to take some unusual paths and they are just like the sheep, which is good at following the crowd.

Another similar characteristic is the elite students are actually lack of confidence to find their true self or be their true self. University is a place where you start to realize who you are and to develop and become yourself. It serves as a platform for students to meet others, to read books and exchange ideas and engage in intellectual debates and discussions. However, some of the elite students would rather choose to learn particle skills that can is good for his or her future career development. They like to talk about return on investment and do all sorts of calculations (Deresiewicz, 2014).

On the other hand, because the elite students have almost never experienced anything but success, they are actually very afraid of failure. The environments and surroundings of the elite universities are usually quite intense and competitive. Elite students can be quite stressful from academic life; they care about their GPA and are willing to choose easy courses to avoid failure. Additionally, there is also a sense of insecure and anxious among the elite students, they will worry about questions like whether their internship opportunities is as good as their peers, whether they are “networking” or they sound “brilliant” enough. They do care a lot about their self-images but they are actually vulnerable inside.

4. The Social Impacts and Future of Elite Education

Education is about educating the people who are going to build up the future of our society. From the above analysis, it is clear that the standards set by the elite institutions in the United States are problematic and severed to their own purposes. Most of the elite students are also doing what they are told and become I-banker or consultant or other well-paid jobs. However, this will further strengthen the problems of inequality. The American dream is that everyone has the right to work hard and get what they want, however, they are actually be placed in this kind of invisible social hierarchy.

What is more important is that elite education still serves as a desirable education that the general public is longing for. For the upper class, elite education serves as a compulsory education for their children to think like the rich, act like the rich and socialize with the rich in order to enhance their elite circle. For the middle and lower class, elite education severs as a form of upward mobility so they can climb the social ladder through education.

Additionally, the elite universities in the United States also serve as the role model for other universities in other countries to look up and learn from. However, if other universities also focus a lot on research and value little on the teaching, it will be problematic for students as a whole. The ranking is another reason why foreign universities are longed for, but after examining the logic behind, it is important for universities not to focus too much on ranking but to teach students with passion.

The future of the elite education is still a question mark but it is important to fix some of the problems before too late. There are two ways to change the current situation of the elite education, one is through the institutions, which is the Ivy League, and the other one is through individual, means every single one of the students in the elite universities. As for institution, the reform of admission process still need to take some time, but what can be changed in the institution is also the individual, which is the professor.

Parker J. Palmer stress on the identity and integrity of a teacher (1994). In his point of view, a teacher needs to teach with his or her heart and to stir the souls of the students. If the professors in the elite universities are willing to put efforts into building up healthy relationships with the students, to engage in students' lives and help them become who they are, and to open the courses that are necessary for students' comprehensive education. These together can solve a lot of problems. Furthermore, the

grading system can also be improved if the professors work collaboratively with the schools to avoid the threat from students.

As for the elite students themselves, they have more flexibility and chances to make efforts to fix the current problems of the elite education. For example, they can give up their entitlements as Ivy League students but to choose to transfer to public schools. They are two types of theory on equity and excellence: “the human capital theory allocates educational resources on the basis of ability to profit [and] the Jeffersonian ideal allocates educational resources on the basis of need” (Strike, 1985, p. 415). The American government should consider to put more resources in public schools in order to produce an equal results to compete with the elite institutions.

The individual students can also make an effort to find out whom they really are and face their true selves. For example, because one of the admission requirements is to do service work, they can start to questions why they are doing the service works besides getting the chance to enter elite universities, they can discover their unknown selves if they start to think and reflect upon the works they choose to do. They can also choose to study in liberal arts colleges to leave the burden as a so-called elite student. Elite institutions like to train students with practical skills that are necessary for the success in their later career lives. But according to Professor Lewis, the students who go to universities is to come away with a way of thinking about the students’ whole lives. Students need to be responsible for their own lives and realize where the actual problems lie and not to escape from the problems.

Additionally, a question that the elite educators need to ask is what kind of qualities they need to promote for the future. The answers to that can be further assist in the process of admission reform. Another question to ask is how to evaluate the qualities. There are some extreme examples that a Chinese student who want to get into Ivy League flied to Tibet and teach the children for one day and took photo as evidence for service working. It is always difficult to change the system; especially we are still living in a meritocracy. In order for the society to change and progress, the secret actually lies in us, it is in our willingness to discuss on the topics and make changes.

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