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## Teaching Courage

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In a [widely read cover piece](#) in *The New Republic* (and in his recently released new book *Excellent Sheep*), William Deresiewicz asserts that Ivy League and similar elite ("Ivies") schools fail to offer their students truly educational experiences due to a coddling mixture of elitism, social inequality, and admissions policies that create homogeneous classes of overachievers. One can reasonably take issue with much of Deresiewicz's criticism of Ivies, but his analysis provides a focused examination of the role of universities in preparing enlightened and productive participants in our constantly evolving and globalizing world.

Deresiewicz's piece cautions that American elite education today produces a generation of young people who are "anxious, timid, and lost." A related concern expressed by Deresiewicz and others is that graduates of elite universities tend to be uniform: "overachievers" in a very traditional and prescribed sense. Not only do they have top standardized test scores and high school grades, but they also build up (through the help of college advisers and parents) long lists of extra-curricular activities compete on who can be more "socially entrepreneurial." The scope of the "accomplishments" in setting up new nonprofits is breathtaking, although the actual social good created is not demonstrated in any way. What drives this, of course, is the way that the Ivies articulate what they seek: "hyperactive, socially conscious, overachievers."

Of course in a fundamental sense, this effort to be attractive to and accepted by the Ivies is not arbitrary, and their applicants are certainly intelligent and highly competent by many measures. The changes in the economy driven by technological advances and globalization mean that the relative value of the education, or at least the credential, that the Ivies provide has only become greater and will continue to grow. Our young people and their parents generally understand this, and thus applications to the Ivies have skyrocketed, while those to less elite places have floundered. But is the profile of those who aspire to the Ivies and whom the Ivies accept and graduate the right one or the only one?

The new emerging creative economy needs highly educated people who will not simply complete tasks, even highly intellectual ones. We need people who can identify and flexibly address and solve complex social and business problems.

Universities have generally done a terrible job in differentiating themselves and responding effectively to the changes that their graduates will experience throughout a career. There is a sense of "one size fits all" that dominates their consciousness and that of the young people who apply to them. We certainly need many of the type of student that the Ivies recruit and graduate. But we also need other types. We need people who are creative and cross-disciplinary, who can identify multi-faceted problems and analyze them from a number of perspectives, some often nontraditional, and generate creative and innovative solutions. That type of person is not everyone, and nor should it be. The world benefits from a portfolio of different types of talents and abilities underpinned by a strong sense of social responsibility.

We at The New School have focused on developing that type of person. In our admissions practices, we place creative potential and thinking differently ahead of test scores and GPAs. Thinking differently is not

always reflected as a 4.0 GPA or a perfect SAT score -- but it is a quality that indicates the capacity for innovation and the courage to create change. The result is a heterogeneous and dynamic academic community. New School students are a diverse group of artists, entrepreneurs, designers, social activists, tech geniuses, media makers, and revolutionary scholars. What unites them is their creative potential and their desire to both be different and *make a difference*.

Once they are here, we nurture and develop that creative potential so that they can courageously pursue their chosen path or field, and improve our world. Courage is at the heart of The New School's pedagogy -- a century-tested combination of challenging the status quo and experimenting to create positive change in the world. This courage is reflected in student projects such as [Phileas Fogg](#), which inverts traditional disaster response models by empowering citizens to collect and report crucial data, or [Articulo 6](#), a project that uses innovative clothing design and media to powerfully protest human rights abuses in Peru. Across fields and disciplines, this kind of bold, socially impactful work is the signature of a creatively engaged education.

In addition, our students develop a deep confidence in communicating and embarking upon new ideas. They must be able to see patterns in large swaths of information that others have difficulty seeing. Much of that confidence comes from embracing risk and learning from failure. Deresiewicz notes that failure is anathema in the world of elite academia. That orientation stunts the creative potential of our students. In order to succeed in confronting complex problems, our students cannot be afraid to experiment with the unfamiliar, reach across familiar disciplines where they know they are already strong, and rebuild after criticism and setbacks.

Our pedagogy is project-based and design-inspired. At The New School, you rarely see a large lecture class. Instead, you see studios, seminars, and performance spaces when students try out ideas, fail, pick themselves back up, and advance. Design-inspired education is all about learning how to organize objects, environments, and people to solve problems and make the world a better place to live. It is about thinking, making, and doing. This learning experience is not alive not just at Parsons, The New School's design school; it lives strong across the liberal arts and performance, social research, and professional graduate programs. To come to The New School is to have your creative potential developed and courage sharpened -- a lifelong skill necessary for the changing world. Creative education produces engaged, fulfilled individuals by celebrating what makes each person different, a far cry from Deresiewicz's "excellent sheep."

At its best, America's higher education system is unparalleled -- and our most elite institutions are still rightly regarded around the world as paragons of learning and research. However, a changing world has necessitated the rise of exemplary and pedagogically nimble colleges and universities to educate much of the next generation. American universities face challenges unique to the 21st century, and must prepare students for a future that is sure to look drastically different in even just a decade or two. The role of all universities and colleges is now to educate students to understand where our society is headed, and the capacities and convictions to shape a better future. Great ideas and great people are everywhere, from the Ivy League to community colleges. I am confident we are up to the task.