

David Brooks Misunderstands the Miseducation of Elites

 realclearpolitics.com/articles/2025/01/26/david_brooks_misunderstands_miseducation_elites_152250.html

Peter Berkowitz

COMMENTARY

Donald Trump won a return to the White House in no small part because America's progressive elites alienated significant swathes of working-class and middle-class Americans. For decades, progressive elites have exercised near-hegemonic control over America's highly selective colleges and universities. They have used that power to incubate ideas, hone rhetoric, cultivate sensibilities, refine manners, and inspire policies to enable their graduates to instruct and govern the nation. Instead, their graduates' ideas, rhetoric, sensibilities, manners, and policies drove a diverse array of ordinary Americans into the arms of Donald Trump's Republican Party.

It is dawning on some who run our elite colleges and universities – and the intellectuals whom they read – that their institutions desperately need reform. But the administrators and intellectuals assiduously avoid the core matter, which is the transformation of liberal education into progressive indoctrination. To promulgate and shield progressive shibboleths, our top colleges and universities discourage free speech and open inquiry. They pigeonhole people, allocating benefits and burdens based on race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and gender. And they organize the curriculum to inculcate progressive ideology and promote progressive activism.

The appalling response of numerous students, faculty, and administrators at America's most prestigious universities to the Iran-backed Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, massacres in southern Israel shocked parents, politicians, and donors. Long before then, universities had lost sight of their mission – to transmit knowledge about the humanities and sciences, enliven the moral imagination, foster civility and toleration, encourage the free and energetic exchange of opinions, and cultivate independent thought. But the outrageous statements and shameful conduct of key components of the campus community following the jihadists' barbaric assault on mostly civilian targets in southern Israel attracted national coverage. Nonspecialists could see for themselves the poisonous fruits of decades of educational malpractice.

For the rest of the 2023-24 academic year, a vocal minority of students celebrated Hamas' mass-murder of civilians. They occupied campus property in defiance of university rules but with the acquiescence of university administrators. And they advocated the globalization of the intifada – that is, extending the atrocities the jihadists perpetrated against allegedly settler-colonialist Israel to allegedly settler-colonialist America and allegedly settler-colonialist nations throughout the West.

Professors at Columbia, Cornell, and Yale cheered on the depraved jihadists. And university curricula featured courses resting on the odious dogma that settler-colonialist powers deserve whatever violence the oppressed can muster.

In their December 2023 congressional testimony, the presidents of Harvard University, MIT, and the University of Pennsylvania tried to have it both ways. They condemned student and faculty glorification of Hamas' monstrous war crimes, and they deplored endorsements of the jihadists' self-proclaimed mission, which is to destroy Israel. Yet the presidents insisted that free-speech imperatives barred them from punishing or prohibiting calls on campus for the genocide of the Jews. The presidents' hypocrisy was staggering. Their universities prided themselves on exquisite sensitivity to the feelings of non-Jewish and non-Asian minorities and of women (a majority of the nation's undergraduates). And they policed speech down to "microaggressions" – unintended and invisible-to-the-naked-eye slights deemed offensive to select minorities and women. Yet statements that called for the destruction of the nation-state of the Jewish people brought out administrators' hidden reverence for free speech.

David Brooks recognizes that America's progressive elites have lost their way. And he correctly identifies the nation's top universities as a chief cause. But the New York Times columnist and contributing writer at The Atlantic misdiagnoses the disease and advances a remedy that would make matters worse.

In "How The Ivy League Broke America," which appeared last month in The Atlantic, Brooks blames the vices – poor judgment, sanctimoniousness, scorn for dissenters from progressive orthodoxy – of America's leadership class on top universities' admissions standards. Led by Harvard University President James Conant in the mid-20th century, Harvard and other elite universities "set out to get rid of admissions criteria based on bloodlines and breeding and replace them with criteria centered on brainpower," according to Brooks. Their good intention was to form "a natural aristocracy of talent, culling the smartest people from all ranks of society."

However, according to Brooks, their meritocracy based on intelligence and open to all unintentionally produced a system bewitched by a one-dimensional conception of excellence. Status-obsessed parents deprived their sons and daughters of well-rounded childhoods to ensure that they obtained high grades, excelled on standardized exams, and filled their resumes with activities prized by admissions offices. Elite universities reinforced students' conviction that they had earned their exalted positions and deserved wealth, prestige, and power. Graduates went off into the world more arrogant and more convinced that superior intellect was inseparable from sophisticated moral reasoning and that sophisticated reasoning was the essence of morality. And they justified their preeminence with the self-serving belief that a technocratic elite concentrated in coastal metropolises could solve a diverse and transcontinental society's problems, regardless of whether society liked the elite's solutions.

Brooks identifies “six deadly sins of the meritocracy.” First, it overrates intelligence and underrates character. Second, it falsely supposes that success in school promises a full and satisfying life. Third, it favors wealthy parents who provide their children the tutors and training to compete successfully for the scarce openings at elite universities. Fourth, it creates a caste system of its own in which elite-institution graduates lord their supposed superiority over the rest. Fifth, it damages the elites by teaching them from childhood that their worth revolves around mastery of the intellectual and self-presentation skills thought essential to professional success. And sixth, it provokes populist rage among those passed over by elite universities, who resent having been consigned by society to its lower tiers.

To cultivate a more tolerant, capable, and responsible elite, Brooks proposes three reforms of American meritocracy. First, he advises, change the definition of merit to include not only intellectual excellence but also good character, particularly curiosity, drive, cooperativeness, and practical wisdom. Second, high schools should emphasize “project-based learning,” in which students cooperate to produce work that is valuable beyond the classroom. Third, colleges and universities should assess a wider range of applicants’ accomplishments, going beyond grades and test scores to encompass candidates’ papers, speeches, and projects.

Brooks’ well-meaning reforms, however, will do little to improve our universities for at least three reasons.

First, they reinforce and disguise the status quo. Admissions officers have for at least two generations recognized that intelligence alone is an inadequate measure of fitness for success in life and therefore also have required applicants to provide information that sheds light on their character. Yet students and faculty have only grown more intolerant. That’s in part because most admissions officers will have internalized campus orthodoxy that equates good character with progressive preferences. It’s also because universities, contrary to Brooks, have demoted merit while elevating a peculiar conception of diversity that gives priority to those members of racial and ethnic minorities and to women who subscribe to progressive opinions.

Second, few ordinary people resent that they lack Ivy League diplomas. However, they do dislike the scorn elites show them – professors, journalists, and entertainers – and efforts from the distant capital city to remake their beliefs, practices, and associations.

New York Times columnist Brooks commits the same error as did Harvard professor of government Michael Sandel a few years ago in “The Tyranny of Merit: Can We Find the Common Good?” Brooks and Sandel suppose that ordinary people envy positions like theirs near the top of the progressive-elite pyramid. Yet for all his praise of curiosity and judgment, Brooks misrepresents the regular men and women whose outrage he claims to understand and wishes to reduce. He cites scholars at prestigious universities who study ordinary people, but he gives little appearance of speaking to those who live outside bright-blue enclaves like the greater D.C. metropolitan area and Cambridge, Massachusetts. They are

seldom envious of high achievers like Brooks and Sandel. They do not often aspire to opine from the New York Times' pages or hold forth in Harvard lecture halls. They don't generally yearn to send their children to the Ivy League or see them chasing fame and fortune in Manhattan, Hollywood, or Silicon Valley. Most of the time, they prefer to be left alone by the people who think that their degrees from fancy universities and success in waxing eloquent for a living equip them to manage other people's lives.

Third, elite universities corrupt students primarily through what they don't teach and what they do preach. Elite universities neglect the teaching of American ideas and institutions; the West's military and religious history and its literature, philosophy, economics, and politics; and the seminal ideas and events of other peoples, nations, and civilizations. Meanwhile, elite universities encourage students to curtail speech; to judge based on race, ethnicity and sex; to believe that oppression of non-white people and women defines America and the West; and to think that progressives have all the answers. Small wonder that our elite universities have produced a haughty, bungling, grasping, illiberal, and anti-democratic elite.

The formation of an elite worthy of the American people hinges on reclaiming liberal education.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. From 2019 to 2021, he served as director of the Policy Planning Staff at the U.S. State Department. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on X @BerkowitzPeter.