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HEAD OF SCHOOL

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Head Lines

A DEFINING MOMENT

I met an older man toward the end of summer as I stood in a line at Bailey's Bubble, one of Wolfeboro's famously delicious ice cream places. I soon learned he was visiting from New York, and after I gave him my advice about flavor and size selection, he asked me what I did in town. I explained that I worked at Brewster Academy, the boarding school up the road.

He looked askance at me and then asked a great question: "Is that one of those elite schools?"

I was initially struck dumb and then did what any teacher uncertain about how to answer would do: I turned the question back at him.

"What is an elite school?" I asked. He tried in vain to answer as I tried to think about how to respond; we were both saved by the server asking for his order.

In the weeks since, his question has been gnawing at me, and I've been struggling to think through my response. Is Brewster an elite school? What is elite?

Musing over these questions, I was reminded of a 2008 article by William Deresiewicz published in *The American Scholar* titled "The Disadvantages of an Elite Education" and through the wonders of technology, I had a copy printed and in hand within a few moments.

Reading Deresiewicz's article again after several years, I was frustrated at first because Deresiewicz never explicitly defines what an elite school is. Rather, he does so subtly by focusing on what elite schools do and the val-

ues they reinforce. To Deresiewicz, an elite school selects for a narrow band of intelligence, gathering a cognitively homogeneous population, and teaches in a manner that cultivates a singular type of intelligence – the analytical. The elite school, moreover, reinforces a sense of entitlement that grows from the profound selectivity of the institution and the culture of exclusivity that is a natural consequence of this selectivity. Consequently, those who imbue the values of an elite education assume that success and authority are theirs for the taking and that failure is both unlikely and to be avoided.

Having attended and worked at a few educational institutions Deresiewicz would argue are elite, I saw his point, perhaps stingingly

(even though his generalizations inevitably eclipse the strength and integrity of many of the people I've known who work and learn in such institutions).

But as I turned my attention to Brewster, the school I'm proud to call my home, I came to an answer I wish I had been armed with while standing in line for ice cream. What Brewster does and the values it reinforces would not by any means qualify Brewster as an elite institution. Here's why.

BREWSTER ACADEMY is selective, but we select for kids who possess a range of cognitive profiles. Given how our academic program functions, cognitive diversity is critical. We believe in the central importance of having students work alongside students who are truly and deeply different from each other. Of course, we have racial and cultural and socioeconomic diversity in our community, and we embrace and celebrate these differences, but even within this diversity we also have a remarkable range of learning types, and we select actively for all of this diversity in the admission process.

BA understands that students (and the world) need more than just analytical strength. The evolution of our program is driven by a simple question: What do we need to do to prepare our students ever more fully to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the communities they enter? Everything we do speaks to our desire to serve the totality of student needs. In particular, we explicitly emphasize collaboration, structuring our lessons so that students practice this skill in the classroom each day, while implicitly reinforcing this commitment in our residential, athletic, and arts programming. We are also explicitly committed to teaching the affective skills necessary for healthy growth through our emotional intelligence curriculum and residential life programming.

BA challenges students to know and trust themselves. Given how student-centered Brewster is – how Brewster teachers know their students so well and the program is so thoughtfully engineered that each student's education is customized to support and challenge appropriately – Brewster students are less consumed by both competition and its consequences. Given the opportunities here to both fail and succeed, students become ever more themselves here. And

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VERBATIM

“Let this school make you think who you are and how you need to act, not just for yourself, but for your family, for your friends, for the people in the community, for those you don’t know in the broader world. That’s your real work this year.”

Head of School **CRAIG GEMMELL** at the first All-School Assembly of the year.



ON VIEW

As Craig Gemmell concluded his opening assembly remarks on September 11, he asked students if they knew for whom Palazzo Field was named. And then he shared “Tommy Palazzo ’75, who died in the World Trade Center; and Fry Field is named for Peter Fry ’83, who suffered the same fate.

“Why am I bringing this up? It’s not just an abstract concept that exists in the broader world. This is us. This is our world.”

Head Lines continued ...

when the college admission process rolls around, a calm purposefulness seems to be the defining tone – not a relentless scramble by the seniors for places at just a very few of the literally thousands of exceptional colleges and universities around the globe.

BA is inclusive rather than exclusive. Using Deresiewicz’s definition, Brewster would not be considered elite. However, Deresiewicz surely doesn’t have exclusive claim on the word. Here is the Oxford dictionary’s definition of elite: “A select part of a group that is superior to the rest in terms of ability or qualities.” In this way Brewster Academy is, I contend, an elite school, one so very different from many other exclusive ivy-covered institutions. John Brewster committed the Academy to an ethos of inclusion early on when he stipulated that “No restrictions shall be placed upon any person desiring to attend and receive instruction from ... the Academy on account of his or her age, sex, or color, provided only he or she is of good moral character” ... “Good moral character” continues to be a driving factor in our admission process, and we continue to work on ways for our students to connect with, not separate themselves from, the larger local and global communities. This type of commitment to inclusion and collaboration is distinctive – an “elite” of which we can all be proud. /BA/