

***Excellence vs Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals***

Written by Allan Ornstein

Reviewed by Art Stellar

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With so much that has been written about the tension between achieving *excellence* while ensuring *equality*, Allan Ornstein's treatise makes a significant contribution in explaining the origins and continuing conditions for the differences of opinion about these aspirational concepts. Scholars and practitioners alike have been having weighty conversations about excellence and equity for years, and it is likely that the debate will continue well into the future, even as this piece adds some clarity.

As a reviewer, my hope is that in such works, the author will answer the inherent obvious or hidden dilemma or questions posed to the readers or, at a minimum, provide some solace with a first step towards a solution that comes next. With some exceptions, this author leaves those tasks to the reader.

Ornstein, a noted professor at St. John's University, takes his readers on a guided history through education and sociology, starting with the ancient Greeks through about 2015. Much of his lens for both education and excellence is related to economic outcomes. He reminds his readers that there has been a "top two percent" in every society, whose status appears to be uninfluenced by additional dollars for education. Furthermore, the research he quotes

does not support the general improvement of excellence or equality with increased education funding.

The book's subject is timely with a national conversation focused on the income divide as described by such current contrasts as "Wall Street" vs "Main Street", "1 percent" vs "99 percent", "Tax Payers" vs "Takers". Ornstein writes:

In a high-passion debate we often hear from all kinds of professionals, pundits, and self-styled experts, arguing (1) whether safety nets and social programs are necessary, (2) whether "job creators" should be taxed (and how much), (3) what steps are needed to stabilize the financial system, (4) whether banks and corporations need to be regulated (and to what extent), (5) why we cannot end poverty in America (and in other parts of the world), (6) whether opportunity and mobility still exist for ordinary people in America or elsewhere, (7) how to improve schools, employment, and income and other economic

conditions over the long- term, and (8) who should attend college, how do we make colleges more affordable, and how can private colleges provide more need-based assistance, while balancing the competitive advantages of awarding merit-based assistance without exhausting their resources. (p. 1)

In the main, changing the aforementioned conditions may make little difference if one believes as the author does that, “The problem is, we are becoming a society of inherited wealth, not self-made people, just when we thought we had put behind the idea of heredity privilege and old patterns of aristocracies, family caste and class” (p. 9). This is an example of the kinds of topics, along with race and gender differences, the author claims Americans prefer not to discuss. Ornstein presents a litany of evidence and examination of the influence of inherited wealth.

The author shows how growing talent gaps between countries demonstrate that the United States is losing ground to the rest of the world in the preparation of qualified professionals with little hope of turning the situation around. This trend exacerbates family background playing a more significant role in one’s achieving excellence than that of self-determination. As U.S. corporations hire high quality employees from other parts of the world, fewer aspirational jobs are available here, making family connections more prominent.

A brief historical note with some scholarly quotations suggests that in the last few centuries the West has dominated most professional fields and has led in the production of “excellence.”

The West has peaked according to many economists as new countries are emerging as leaders. The West has no monopoly on innovation or entrepreneurship. Those at the top of the American dream have the resources to remain there as “excellence” expands globally.

However, the middle class and the poverty class in this country do not have the tools or the will to compete in this new reality. As it seems to be playing out, global gaps are being reduced while gaps within Western societies are widening. The author proposes that students who come to study at U.S. universities should be encouraged to stay as foreign-born residents and are three times more likely to secure a graduate degree than those who are native-born.

Americans have other means of reaching excellence, at least financial excellence, by exhibiting unusual talent in the arts, athletics, or other endeavors. Luck is also a factor. Experience, social skills, and judgment can be helpful as well. Obtaining educational credentials was once more important than it is today.

Ornstein summarizes the history of education in the United States from the point of view of excellence and equality. Education was a means for the masses to learn basic skills for employment and a way for the more privileged to advance and contribute to society.

Relying mainly upon the massive Coleman study and the equally comprehensive Jencks research, *Inequality*, the author suggests that additional education funding makes no difference on educational outcomes for students.

Schools do almost nothing to impact equity among student subgroups or to what

extent they become successful, according to these studies. This reviewer was somewhat alarmed that other more recent educational research was not cited.

While it may be true that most schools do not make a profound difference on student learning, Ron Edmonds and others in the “Effective Schools Movement” discovered high poverty schools that enhanced students’ opportunities for excellence and equality. Many more such schools have been validated in the last decade.

If one accepts the premise that school expenditures do not make a difference on excellence or equality, then what does?

Enabling more high quality productive immigrants to enter the United States is implied; however, there is the potential political backlash from current residents.

With the current national ideological split, that is not a feasible solution. Family background has some potential; however, that

takes generations to upgrade to the point of fostering excellence and reducing inequality.

Eliminating poverty may take wholesale redistribution of wealth which the public would likely not find acceptable. The alternative to excellence and equality may be a “just and fair society” (p.74).

Everyone would have opportunities for mobility within a narrower range between the bottom and the top. This would require some agreement on compensation limits at both the top and the bottom of the economic scale. Ornstein describes the liberal and conservative arguments against imposing economic floors and ceilings for citizens.

The answer to the question in the book’s title—*Excellence vs Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?*—can only be answered by society itself and through a democracy.

The current divide in this country is partially fueled by this dilemma; therefore, it may take decades until people can reflect and compromise upon viable solutions.

### Reviewer Biography

Art Stellar is vice-president of the National Education Foundation. He has served as a superintendent for 25 years becoming a life member of AASA in 1972. He has received three national awards from AASA: Distinguished Service Award, the Dr. Effie Jones Humanitarian Award and Leadership for Learning award. He has served as president of ASCD, the Horace Mann League and the North American Chapter of the World Council for Curriculum and Instruction, as well as vice-president of the New York State PTA. He has authored over 500 publications and consulted with many educational organizations. He can be reached at [artstellar@yahoo.com](mailto:artstellar@yahoo.com).

*Excellence vs Equality: Can Society Achieve Both Goals?* was written by Allan Ornstein and published by Routledge, New York, in 2015, 208 pages, softback price is \$49.95.

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Issue	Deadline to Submit Articles	Notification to Authors of Editorial Review Board Decisions	To AASA for Formatting and Editing	Issue Available on AASA website
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