In his book, *Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life*, William Deresiewicz offers a vision of what it takes to move from adolescence to adulthood. Everyone is born with a mind, he writes, but it is only through introspection, observation, connecting the head and the heart, making meaning of experience, and finding an organizing purpose that you build a unique individual self.

This process, he argues, often begins in college, the interval of freedom when a person is away from both family and career. During that interval, students can throw themselves with reckless abandon at others and learn from them. Some from whom students learn are authors who have written great books. Others are professors who can teach intellectual rigor. And some are fellow students who can share work that is intrinsically rewarding.

Through this process, a student is able, in the words of Mark Lilla, a professor at Columbia, to discover “just what it is that’s worth wanting.”

Deresiewicz argues that most students do not get to experience this because universities are breeding grounds for career advancement. Students are too busy jumping through the next hurdle in the résumé race to figure out what they really want. They have been inculcated with a lust for prestige and a fear of doing things that may put their status at risk. The system pressures them to be excellent, but excellent sheep, according to Deresciewicz.

In response to Deresiewicz, Steven Pinker, the great psychology professor at Harvard, wrote: “Perhaps I am emblematic of everything that is wrong with American education, but I have no idea how to get my students to build a self or become a soul.” Pinker adds that while in graduate school he was never taught how to help students build a self, nor does the university at which he works evaluate his effectiveness as an educator on how well he can accomplish that mission.

Instead, Pinker suggests the university’s mission is cognitive. Young people should know how to write clearly and reason statistically; they should acquire specific knowledge: the history of the planet, how the body works, how cultures differ, etc.

What we have before us then, is three distinct purposes for a university: the commercial purpose (starting a career), Pinker’s cognitive purpose (acquiring information and learning how to think) and Deresiewicz’s moral purpose (building an integrated self).

Over a century ago, most university administrators and faculty members would have said the moral purpose is the most important. The most prominent Harvard psychology professor of that time, William James, wrote essays on the structure of the morally significant life. Such a life, he wrote, is organized around a self-imposed, heroic ideal and is pursued through endurance, courage, fidelity, and struggle.

Today, students have the same aspirations. But people in authority no longer feel compelled to define how they think moral, emotional, and spiritual growth happens, beyond a few paltry words that no one could disagree with and a few vague references to community service. The reason they don’t is simple. They don’t think it’s their place, or, as Pinker put it, they don’t think they know.

The result is that universities are strong at delivering their commercial mission. They are pretty strong in developing their cognitive mission. But when it comes to the sort of growth Deresiewicz is talking about, students seem to be on their own.

**Prompt:** After reading “Becoming a Real Person,” write an essay between 500 and 800 words in which you argue whether or not Cal Poly’s mission helps students build their own unique individual selves. If you believe the Cal Poly experience goes significantly beyond technical and cognitive training and includes meaningful opportunities for students to connect the mind and the heart, make meaning of experience, find an organizing purpose, and build an integrated self, then support your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond those points already offered in the article. If you do not agree that Cal Poly is strong at providing the sort of growth for which Deresiewicz advocates, then defend your position in detail and explain the strengths of Cal Poly's mission as you understand them. Your essay must demonstrate an understanding of the article without simply repeating it, and you should incorporate specific details from your own experience and knowledge into your response.