

# DAVID BROOKS

## QUESTIONS:

This essay serves as a good introduction to discuss the kind of student we are educating at St. Thomas. How would you evaluate Brooks' description of university life at Princeton? Does Brooks' description of the Princeton student describe your experience with the St. Thomas student? Utilizing the vision of a Catholic university in *Ex corde ecclesiae*, how would you evaluate Brook's critique of Princeton?

David Brooks is a senior editor at *The Weekly Standard*, a contributing editor at *Newsweek*, and a commentator on NPR and *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*. In his bestselling work of "comic sociology," *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (Simon & Schuster, May 2000), David Brooks took a serious look at the cultural consequences of the information age and heralded the rise of bourgeois-bohemian culture. In "The Organization Kid" Brooks investigates young people at today's elite colleges and universities who are workaholics, happy to toe the line and bear no resemblance to the disaffected student revolutionaries of recent decades.

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## THE ORGANIZATION KID

DAVID BROOKS<sup>1</sup>

*The young men and women of America's future elite work their laptops to the bone, rarely question authority, and happily accept their positions at the top of the heap as part of the natural order of life.*

A few months ago I went to Princeton University to see what the young people who are going to be running our country in a few decades are like. Faculty members gave me the names of a few dozen articulate students, and I sent them e-mails, inviting them out to lunch or dinner in small groups. I would go to sleep in my hotel room at around midnight each night, and when I awoke, my mailbox would be full of replies—sent at 1:15 a.m., 2:59 a.m., 3:23 a.m.

In our conversations I would ask the students when they got around to sleeping. One senior told me that she went to bed around two and woke up each morning at seven; she could afford that much rest because she had learned to supplement her full day of work by studying in her sleep. As she was falling asleep she would recite a math problem or a paper topic to herself; she would then sometimes dream about it, and when she woke up,

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, "The Organization Kid," *The Atlantic Monthly* (April 2001) 40-6, 48-54. Used with permission.

the problem might be solved. I asked several students to describe their daily schedules, and their replies sounded like a session of Future Workaholics of America: crew practice at dawn, classes in the morning, resident-adviser duty, lunch, study groups, classes in the afternoon, tutoring disadvantaged kids in Trenton, a cappella practice, dinner, study, science lab, prayer session, hit the StairMaster, study a few hours more. One young man told me that he had to schedule appointment times for chatting with his friends. I mentioned this to other groups, and usually one or two people would volunteer that they did the same thing. “I just had an appointment with my best friend at seven this morning,” one woman said. “Or else you lose touch.”

There are a lot of things these future leaders no longer have time for. I was on campus at the height of the election season, and I saw not even one Bush or Gore poster. I asked around about this and was told that most students have no time to read newspapers, follow national politics, or get involved in crusades. One senior told me she had subscribed to The New York Times once, but the papers had just piled up unread in her dorm room. “It’s a basic question of hours in the day,” a student journalist told me. “People are too busy to get involved in larger issues. When I think of all that I have to keep up with, I’m relieved there are no bigger compelling causes.” Even the biological necessities get squeezed out. I was amazed to learn how little dating goes on. Students go out in groups, and there is certainly a fair bit of partying on campus, but as one told me, “People don’t have time or energy to put into real relationships.” Sometimes they’ll have close friendships and “friendships with privileges” (meaning with sex), but often they don’t get serious until they are a few years out of college and meet again at a reunion—after their careers are on track and they can begin to spare the time.

I went to lunch with one young man in a student dining room that by 1:10 had emptied out, as students hustled back to the library and their classes. I mentioned that when I went to college, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, we often spent two or three hours around the table, shooting the breeze and arguing about things. He admitted that there was little discussion about intellectual matters outside class. “Most students don’t like that that’s the case,” he told me, “but it is the case.” So he and a bunch of his friends had formed a discussion group called Paidea, which meets regularly with a faculty guest to talk about such topics as millennialism, postmodernism, and Byzantine music. If discussion can be scheduled, it can be done.

The students were lively conversationalists on just about any topic—except moral argument and character-building, about which more below. But when I asked a group of them if they ever felt like workaholics, their faces lit up and they all started talking at once. One, a student-government officer, said, “Sometimes we feel like we’re just tools for processing information. That’s what we call ourselves—power tools. And we call these our tool bags.” He held up his satchel. The other students laughed, and one exclaimed, “You’re giving away all our secrets.”

But nowhere did I find any real unhappiness with this state of affairs; nowhere did I find anybody who seriously considered living any other way. These super-accomplished kids aren’t working so hard because they are compelled to. They are facing, it still appears, the