

THOMAS S. HIBBS

Thomas Hibbs is currently Distinguished Professor of Ethics & Culture and Dean of the Honors College at Baylor University, where he oversees a number of interdisciplinary programs, including the Honors Program, a Great Texts major, and the Baylor Interdisciplinary Core. As dean, Hibbs is involved with student recruitment, enrollment management, development of curricula, and faculty recruitment and development.

With degrees from the University of Dallas and the University of Notre Dame, Hibbs taught at Boston College (BC) for 13 years, where he was full professor and department chair in philosophy. At BC, he also served on the Steering Committee for BC's Initiative for the Future of the Church and on the Sub-Committee on Catholic Sexual Teaching. At Baylor, he has been involved in ecumenical discussions of the work of John Courtney Murray and John Paul II.

In addition to teaching a variety of interdisciplinary courses, Hibbs teaches in the fields of medieval philosophy, contemporary virtue ethics, and philosophy and popular culture.

COLLEGE KIDS GET BRAINS, NO SOUL

THOMAS HIBBS¹

“You are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?” – Plato, Apology

In the course of his trial, Socrates poses this challenge to his fellow citizens. For the first of all the great philosophers in the Western tradition, the “care of the soul” – the pursuit of knowledge and virtue – is the chief task imposed on us as rational human beings. Knowledge is both desirable for its own sake and as a means of forming citizens for freedom; in fact, the pursuit of knowledge is, for Socrates, one of the ways in which we can exercise responsible citizenship. In the early 21st century, in America’s elite universities, institutions renowned across the globe for “wisdom and power,” there is a growing mood of discontent. Having become increasingly skeptical about knowledge itself, our most prestigious educational institutions now find themselves ill-equipped to educate youth for the common good. Or so an emerging consensus would have us believe.

¹ Thomas Hibbs, “College Kids Get Brains, No Soul,” *Dallas Morning News*, Sunday, August 20, 2006.

Criticism of higher education is nothing new; among conservatives, it constitutes a sport that never seems to go out of season. Yet, in recent years, criticism has arisen from within mainstream liberal academia. Two books from Harvard administrators are signs of this spirit of self-criticism. Derek Bok, former and currently interim president at Harvard, has written *Our Underachieving Colleges*; and Harry Lewis, a former dean at Harvard, has just published *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education* – a central contention of which is the dismal judgment that the “ideal of liberal education lives on in name only.”

In much less detached prose, Tom Wolfe’s last novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, released in 2004, depicted undergraduates at an elite university (Mr. Wolfe called the place Dupont University, but rumors abounded that his target was Duke) as booze-saturated, athlete-worshipping, sexual libertines. Reviewers, particularly from the academic world, were less than generous. But, if we are to believe *Rolling Stone* magazine’s stunning recent expose, “Sex at Duke: Raging Parties, Random Hookups & the Girls Who Say the Lacrosse Players Aren’t Guilty,” Mr. Wolfe’s book is a fairly accurate description of drinking and mating habits in the elite social world of schools like Duke.

By comparison with an average night of partying in Duke’s fraternity system, the drinking bouts and sexual shenanigans of *Animal House*, the 1978 frat house party film, seem like the lost episodes of *Happy Days*. One frat hosts a “foam party,” described in *Rolling Stone* as “a sweaty, alcohol-soaked bacchanalia ... like taking an enormous bubble bath with hundreds of strangers.”

But there is an even more striking difference between Greek life at Duke and *Animal House*. The inhabitants of the film frat were academic failures: “Seven years of college down the drain,” was Bluto Blutarsky’s lament upon learning that he’d been expelled. By contrast, the rigorous amorality of the Duke party scene does not mean that these students are slackers. “Night Duke,” as it is known, gives way to “Day Duke,” during which time students are consumed by academic demands.

The two feed one another. What emerges from the *Rolling Stone* interviews with students is a unifying devotion: a craven desire for approval, from the classroom to the bedroom. The picture of Duke student life is a community that is completely structured, superficially successful and utterly vacuous. A glimpse into the emptiness can be had in one student’s confessional aside: “If there’s ever a time when I just sit around, I get horrible anxiety.” Beneath the shining surface of perfectly assembled appearances – the right clothes, the right schools, the right social connections – lurks anxiety and depression, the individual and social costs of which are dramatically detailed in Madeline Levine’s powerful new book, *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage Are Creating a Generation of Disconnected and Unhappy Kids*.

For all the youthful effervescence involved in the undergraduate penchant for turning sex into a “sport,” there is something chillingly unromantic about it all. *Rolling Stone* calls sex at Duke “a way of life, a source of constant self-scrutiny and self-analysis.” An attractive young woman comments, “I’ve never been asked out on a date in my entire life