

The Social Animal Goes to School

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- Introducer: **Molly Corbett Broad**, President, ACE
- Speaker: **David Brooks**, Columnist, *The New York Times*

Overview

Universities will be one of the primary financial victims of a dysfunctional Congress, as unchecked entitlement spending and mindless cuts crowd out deliberate, long-term social-policy investments. Politicians, however, only reflect the broader American culture, which stresses fame, self-expression, and group polarization over more traditional modesty, self-restraint, and compromise. Universities should respond by re-emphasizing the humanities' role in shaping moral character and personal balance. Online education, which has its place, will test whether the university can re-establish its function as a unique social-learning environment.

Context

Writer and social observer David Brooks shared his views on how universities reflect cultural change in America. At the speech's conclusion, he took questions from the audience.

Key Takeaways

- **Washington's irresponsible gridlock has direct and dire implications for universities.**

The recent budget "sequestration" process represents a fundamental failure on the part of both Democrat and Republican policymakers to do their job, which is to allocate limited resources deliberately and after negotiation. In contrast, the sequester mindlessly automates budget cuts without regard to competing social priorities.

Since entitlements such as Medicare are nearly untouchable by law, discretionary funding on investments in education is disproportionately affected. Entitlements represent 48% of the budget but absorb just 4% of the cuts, while discretionary spending, which is 14% of the budget, accounts for 44% of the reductions.

Unbridled entitlements spell the end of social policy, as long-term investments in the future are sacrificed to short-term spending in the present. Universities, which benefit from intelligent social policy, are directly threatened.

"Every generation has an incentive to spend on itself and charge it to the future, but no generation until ours has actually done it."

—David Brooks

Politicians have lost a traditional spirit of moderation and compromise in which all sides recognize that no one owns 100% of the truth, and that balanced deals are essential to good governance. At its base, however, the problem is cultural and moral rather than political. Politicians are simply reacting to what their constituents tell them in polls. Poll show that 80% of Americans are unwilling to cut entitlements by a single penny, and 98% object to any tax increase

- **To combat a culture that lacks balance and self-restraint, universities must stress the humanities again.**

Before the 1950s, which introduced books like *The Power of Positive Thinking*, leaders and celebrities were notably modest about their achievements. In a "Command Performance" radio show broadcast on VJ Day, singer Bing Crosby and journalist Ernie Pyle were humble about the victory and hoped that the nation could sustain the peace. Today, in contrast, an NFL defensive back performs "a victory dance in honor of himself" after tackling an opponent.

A culture of self-effacement and self-restraint has become one of self-advancement and self-expression. Only one of the 23 men and women in the Eisenhower cabinet penned a memoir; recently, the rate has been around 60%.

Where "character" used to be about choosing between right and wrong—in a religious context, between good and evil—it now is about persistence, strength, and ultimately professional success. Students no longer have the framework or vocabulary to discuss moral dilemmas, let alone sin.

"When I talk to students about these sorts of things, they want to take out all talk about morality and virtue and vice. They want to use the language of the market. They have trouble thinking outside the language of utility."

—David Brooks

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik wrote about the Book of Genesis' "two Adams":

- *The majestic Adam.* Adam I wanted to build things, subdue nature, and seek growth, dignity, and happiness. With a spontaneous, exploratory, and optimistic mindset, he seldom doubted himself.
- *The humble Adam.* Adam II, on the other hand, sought to enjoy nature but restrain his own desires in accordance with moral laws. His conscience and his inner life mattered greatly.

The World War II-era heroes maintained a balance between these two archetypes. Eisenhower's self-control, which he learned at an early age, was balanced by his boldness and ambition. After civil-rights leader Bayard Rustin was embroiled in a scandal, he apologized to his followers for letting his ego and his weakness create a distraction that set back their goals. Contemporary leaders lack a similar vocabulary of self-reproach.

Despite all her success and influence, Catholic pacifist and labor activist Dorothy Day had an enormous capacity for self-criticism, again exhibiting the balance between the two Adams that is largely absent today. Adam I dominates in today's public arena, and students are trained to adopt his outlook without Adam II's humble, introspective tempering.

In 1950, 12% of high school seniors thought they were important; today, 80% do. Scientists administering a "narcissism test," whose scores have risen 30% in the last 20 years, learned that fame is now one of students' top three life goals. By three to one, high school students would rather be Justin Bieber's personal assistant than president of Harvard. When a Notre Dame sociologist asked college students to describe their last moral dilemma, two-thirds were unable even to characterize what that might be. These excellent students lacked the moral categories to articulate the difference between good and bad behavior.

In cultural terms, this gradual diminishing of the Adam II side has led to:

- *Self-inflation.* This Adam I over-confidence brings a willingness to assume greater debt at both personal and national levels. As a percent of GDP, personal debt was 45% for decades; now it is 145%.

- *Shamelessness.* When newspapers started publishing outsized CEO compensation, they expected the exposure would cause the CEOs to ask for less. It didn't work.
- *Polarization.* Without an awareness of one's own moral limitations, people and groups no longer need others who disagree with them as a counterweight to imbalances and blind spots.

What can schools do, pressured as they are to pursue the "big money" of science and technology? The humanities have an important role to play, because they focus on inner struggle rather than outer achievement. They give students a moral vocabulary to process and articulate Adam II-like moral quandaries. By the same token, the humanities are poorly suited to social activism on race, class, and gender—which has been the social sciences' modern emphasis. Universities must cultivate both Adams, consciously supplementing the sciences and engineering with the humanities.

- **Online higher education will test the university's purpose.**

Research shows that students learn better face-to-face, as they pick up and mirror subtle cues of gesture, smell, and intonation from teachers and fellow students. One experiment found that online students using email to collaborate were unable to solve a math problem that a classroom group quickly cracked. People are social animals, and social connections determine everything from how much we eat to whom we marry.

That said, online education clearly has a role to play. It is an efficient and scalable job-skills and technical-knowledge factory, but a university needs to be more than this. When a college truly nurtures both Adam I and Adam II, it creates psychological experiences that transform the course of its students' lives, and each school leaves a unique mark.

If, on the other hand, a university functions as little more than a signaler of status, then a handful of elite schools will retain their positions while most others gradually become mass online academies.



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