David Brooks Talks Character Development and Student Formation in an Interview with Executive Editor, Frank Shushok, Jr.
Best-selling author David Brooks shares his thoughts about the lost value of humility and virtue in higher education today.

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SHUSHOK: Thank you very much for this time together. The topics you write about are often the sorts of things of great interest to About Campus readers. I’m thrilled to have the opportunity to talk to you about some of your ideas about higher education, and especially your new book, The Road to Character (Random House, 2015). I would like to begin by asking you to reflect a bit about the David Brooks who was 20, the David Brooks who was 40, and now the David Brooks who is 54. How are you different, and what has happened for those changes to occur?

BROOKS: My first two years in college were extremely formative. I went to the University of Chicago, where we had a “great books” curriculum; we read Plato, Aristotle, and the like. I think I wrote 16 papers on Hobbes. Our teachers believed these were the books that held the golden key to truth. The fervor for those books moved and shaped me, and I’ve been going back to them and doing that kind of University of Chicago-type writing ever since.

Some things have shifted, and this happens with age. I think I’ve gotten more emotional as I’ve gotten older. The universities, especially Chicago, were not big on training the emotions. I think this is a problem with our universities, frankly. I hope I’ve also gotten a little deeper. So when I look at my books, each one is about the same sort of subject, but one level down. I wrote a book on consumption; then I wrote a book on residential settlement patterns; then I wrote a book about emotion; and this last book is about moral character. I’m going more in the spiritual direction, so it’s always one level deeper. As I’ve gone through life, I’m getting further and deeper into myself and deeper into more religious and spiritual subjects.

SHUSHOK: We spend a lot of time talking about making a heart–head connection at About Campus, and one of the challenges we have with writers is that they often write primarily from their academic training and their intellect. Do you have a sense of why universities stray away from the heart?
BROOKS: Yes, I do. You know the ethos surrounding universities these days is a research ethos, and that leads to hyperspecialization. That means there’s rarely time to step back and look at the whole of your life because you’re specialized on one small aspect. And then, we treat students often as “little brains on a stick.” Our job is to download information on our specialty into their brains, and we treat the heart and the soul like it’s behind the curtain. There are many schools that don’t do this, however. I’m going to meet some Virginia Tech cadets today, and I imagine that cadet training is especially about character. Baylor University, your alma mater, which I just visited, is a faith-based school, so it treats the heart and the spirit and the mind as all one thing. I like schools that do that. I think human beings should be educated in all aspects, and I think universities have some responsibility not just to teach people how to be good accountants or engineers but how to be better human beings—what it means, what a worthwhile life looks like. We’ve drifted away from that because a lot of academics don’t know what to say.

SHUSHOK: From the frequency with which you write about higher education, it’s clear that it’s important to you. In a recent piece, you wrote: “Universities are more professional and glittering than ever, but in some ways there is emptiness deep down.” What’s behind your perception? What hopes do you have for colleges and universities and the ways students learn?

BROOKS: The achievement culture has gotten so strong. To get into schools is so hard that students are jumping through hoops to get there. And when they do get there, they find there’s just no time for developing some of the stuff that is not on the curriculum. Sometimes, there’s not even time for friendships. One of my students told me the other day: “You know, my life is about putting out fires. If I have a paper due, that’s a fire. If I have to study for the LSAT, that’s a fire. But my friends are never on fire, so I don’t spend enough time on my friendships.” That’s missing out on something that is important.

As I go around the country, I find a lot of universities recognize that there’s something out of control in the achievement—competition ethos, and they are trying to find ways to counteract it. A lot of it is, frankly, that they are bringing nonacademics like me to teach. I find this is true where I teach at Yale University and is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. He is the bestselling author of The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement; Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There; and On Paradise Drive: How We Live Now (And Always Have) in the Future Tense. His most recent book, The Road to Character is a New York Times #1 bestseller. He has three children and lives in Maryland.

We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.

DAVID BROOKS TELLS FRANK SHUSHOK THAT DEVELOPING VIRTUES IN STUDENTS IS AMONG THE MOST IMPORTANT TASKS OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION. (PHOTO CREDIT: MATT EBERT)
SHUSHOK: At your alma mater, the University of Chicago, you’re on the Board of Trustees. What kinds of things are you thinking about as a member of the board, and in what ways are you trying to prod your own alma mater to think differently about higher education and the way we work with students? Chicago is certainly a place that is in the middle of the achievement ethos.

BROOKS: Yes, it’s very competitive. Chicago has the advantage of having the great books program, so philosophy is at the core of the university. Mostly, what I try to do as a trustee is to make sure that philosophy stays at the core. Preserving that ethos is important, and it’s important to the people there, so they don’t really need my reminding. But I have to tell you, when you are a trustee, the thing you care most about is the thing you don’t actually get to talk about. We don’t do curriculum; we don’t deal with the academic stuff. We deal with what the buildings are going to be like and some of the community relations and things like that. It’s more about the substructure of the university when you’re a trustee.

SHUSHOK: As you might imagine, moral development is something that’s of profound importance to many of us who work closely with college students. It’s my understanding that you recently taught a course at Yale on philosophical humility and that this experience was the catalyst for your new book, The Road to Character (Random House, 2015). Can you share what motivated you to pursue this project and what you learned from it? From where you sit, what counsel do you have for colleges and universities hoping to strengthen character development as an outcome of a graduating college?

BROOKS: I do think this generation has many, many great qualities—and it’s inspiring to be around them—but humility is not necessarily one of them. One of the statistics I cite is that in 1950, high school students were asked “Are you a very important person?” Twelve percent said yes. Then, in the 1990s, students were asked the same question, and about 80 percent said “yes, I’m a very important person.” We’ve trained a generation to think highly of themselves. We’ve told them how great they are, how special they are. But I think humility is the queen of the virtues. To me, humility is just being honest about yourself; it’s radical self-awareness from a position of other-centeredness.

What I was trying to do was assign a bunch of readings and have a bunch of classroom discussions where people would have the tools to see examples of people who really took a look at themselves. They may have started out totally pathetic at age 20 but became kind of amazing by age 70. They saw their life as a project to become good and moral people. Sometimes, that meant confronting their own centralness and challenging that, and sometimes, it meant lives of devoted service, but they somehow built themselves up. So, we just went through a bunch of exemplars and explored how these people developed, whether it was George Marshall, Samuel Johnson, or St. Augustine. We explored how these people were living when they were college age, but by their deaths, how impressive their lives came to be. I want it to be concrete, but I want it to be built around this virtue of humility, which is a lost virtue in the age of self-esteem.

SHUSHOK: I’ve heard you express concern about the kinds of relationships students have these days and feeling a sense of trouble about what this looks like up close. Can you share your perspective on college students and their relationships?

BROOKS: I would say that when I went to college, we were at the tail end of one sort of style of having relationships, of dating, things like that; since then, all those norms of behavior—what you do in asking people out, going on a date, how you relate to people at parties—these norms are all gone. So, there is anarchy. In my experience—and my students talk to me and write a lot about this subject—there are no rules, and they don’t know how to interact. There is a sort of semi-hookup culture in a lot of institutions, and they never know quite where they stand with other people, what friendships matter, and what romance matters. There’s a great deal of distrust.

Within some period of time, a new set of rules will come into being, but right now, there are no rules. It’s hard to live that side of your life and develop good relationships with peers and romantic partners if there is no script. You get a lot of people who feel let down by their friends. My students talk a lot about two subjects: how hard they find it to be vulnerable with each other (because they are always checking each other out—who’s doing what on Facebook) and friendship—how much time to devote to it, how to cultivate it, and if they’re here to make lifelong friends.

I think humility is the queen of the virtues. To me, humility is just being honest about yourself; it’s radical self-awareness from a position of other-centeredness.
One of the points I try to make to them—I have a bunch of speakers come in who are 26, 27, 28, who have done college plus five years—they come in and say, “This is what the next five years of your life are going to look like. It’s hard. Everything is structured up to now. Then suddenly you’re out there in the world. You are going to have periods of unemployment. You are going to have some really bad bosses. You are going to have romantic breakups, and you really need your friends to get you through that. So, work on friendship here!”

In my experience, my students don’t pay much attention to friendships until the last four months of senior year, so I try to encourage them to think about it earlier, about making those kinds of connections that they can carry on through life.

SHUSHOK: David, if you were to create your own university from the ground up, what kind of things would you do that you think are different than what we are doing now?

BROOKS: That’s a very good question. I’ve never thought about that. I think I’m a product of my background. I believe in the great books. I’d create a common core that every student had to go through. I think I would keep philosophy at the center of it, but it would also include a little science. I would educate them in the different moral ecologies that have been passed down. We tell our students, “Come up with your own value system,” but unless your name is Aristotle, you can’t really do that. There are a bunch of value systems we have inherited through our history, and you should just know what they are. There’s a Greek system based a lot on courage. There’s a rational scientific system based on pure reason. So, here are all these systems you’ve inherited—pick one, then see what fits for you.

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I would encourage them to explore three final things. First, I would have courses in beauty because when we find something beautiful, we chase that thing. There’s a passage by Plato where he says if you fall in love with a beautiful person, then that reminds you that ideas are even more beautiful, and that reminds you that justice is even more beautiful. See, there is sort of hierarchy of beauties, and so beauty really arouses things in us.

The second is fear. I have a friend who goes around and asks “What would you do if you weren’t afraid?” That’s a useful question because a lot of us are really afraid of getting judged by other people, and that inhibits us. So confronting those sorts of questions—what are you afraid of?—is a helpful exercise.

The final thing is one that I’ve told many college presidents to consider, but they never listen to me. The biggest decision you are going to make in life is who to marry. Every college course should be about whom to marry, the neuroscience of marriage, the literature of marriage, the sociology of marriage. Obviously, the students are probably 8, 10, 15 years away from that actual decision, but it’s a useful thing to have thought about and to have some vocabulary for how to make that very important decision.

SHUSHOK: David, let’s say that I’m a huge benefactor, and I’m ready to make that university come about. You know the first criticism is going to be that the education you just described doesn’t lead to jobs. That’s the whole conversation now—getting jobs. What’s your response to that kind of critique?

BROOKS: I’d say first that being a good person and being good inside is more important than the job. If you’re a crappy person, you’ll be miserable, you’ll make people around you miserable, and you probably won’t have a good career. And so educating the emotions, educating the virtues is the most important thing.

And the second thing I’d say is how many people end up getting careers in their undergraduate major? It’s a small minority—you don’t know what you want at age 20. So you do a major and that you’re likely to shift from to do something else. One of the things I think you do in a university is widen your repertoire of things you love. You go, and maybe you love soccer, or you love math. But then you get surprised by university. “Oh, I actually like poetry.” Or “I like engineering.” “I find math problems beautiful.” So, being surprised by things you didn’t know you loved should be part of the experience.

SHUSHOK: I know something you care about is the political climate, and I’m curious about what your sense is of how your students see the political climate. In my observation, our students are troubled about it. They don’t know what to do about it; they traverse back and forth from hope to despair. In moments of hope, they want to change the world, and in moments of despair, they want to disengage because nothing will change. I wonder what you would say to students who want to make a difference and care about things like
justice and civility and character at a time where it seems like a lot of that is missing.

BROOKS: The first thing is that our political system is broken—I grant that. There is a lot of work to be done there. But second, that it is really important. A lot of students want to go be Bono and start an NGO or something like that. That’s all important, and you can do really good work, but especially around the world, unless you get the government right, there’s a limit to how much you can do with an NGO unless there’s law and order, unless there’s justice. That requires good politics. When the politics break down, everything else breaks down.

And I would just say personally, living in Washington, I obviously know a lot of people in politics, and when they’re done, they talk about their years of government service with great intensity. There’s great responsibility, the amount of money you are throwing around is huge, the effect you can have is huge. I have a friend who served in the Bush administration who was really one of the champions of a program called PEPFAR, which addressed HIV in Africa. This guy played a central role in a program that has probably saved, I don’t know, 20 million lives. That’s just an amazing impact.

So I think government service still remains a very noble thing. A lot of government workers, a lot of the public servants working on housing issues or working on poverty—they are in it for the right reasons, and they are very impressive people. They find their jobs very rewarding, and they have big effects. So, I’m a big defender of politics as a basically noble profession that just happens to be stuck in a stupid atmosphere right now.

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SHUSHOK: So you are optimistic about the future?

BROOKS: I think so, yes. It’s always a mistake to underestimate America’s ability to bounce back. You know, we have our problems in our country, but I can’t think of another country better positioned for the 21st century than we are. We have great institutions; we have great universities and creativity. We have all these big industries and tech industries that are just walloping the world. I think the students will live their lives in a pretty great country as soon as we get our political situation straightened out.

SHUSHOK: You recently offered two pieces of profound advice to a student. You told him to calibrate risk and pursue friendship. Could you unpack those two ideas?

BROOKS: Your first year out of college is special. Your job is probably not going to be so great. When you are a student, you have your friends, professors who are listening to you, and you get to think about what you want to think about. In the first year out, you are at the bottom of the totem pole: you are bringing coffee, doing Xeroxing, whatever it is. So your job your first year is to widen your horizon of risk. It’s to take some job or go off on some adventure that is totally outside the norm. If you do that, if you go to some part of the country you’ve never been to and do a job you’ve never done, if you go to a part of the world you’ve never been to, then for the rest of your life, you’ll go with a wider horizon of risk. You’ll know that “I can take risks, I can handle that.”

But if you go to a normal job that is very predictable, your horizon of risk will be narrow, and so for the next 30 years, you’ll be within your little zone. So it’s really important, I think, to just be able to handle risk, and that means walking into fear sometimes. One of my students walked across Iran. Another of my students was from an upper middle class neighborhood, and she went to West Texas and hung around frackers. That just takes you out of your comfort zone, and that makes you a risk-taking person! I will say this, I notice and I tell my students “70% of you will be more boring at age 35 than you are right now. You will settle into some boring job, and get into a routine, and you don’t want to be that person! You want to keep getting more interesting as you get older, not less.”

SHUSHOK: How are you thinking about the rest of your life?

BROOKS: I figure—I hope—I have 30 years left, and I hope I have at least 25 of work. I write, so I don’t have to do any physical labor for that. I think I’m called to move the public discussion a little more into the moral sphere, introduce moral categories into public discussion. I think as a culture, we’re overpoliticized and undermoralized, so I’d like to start a conversation. A lot of people do that in a religious context—in a church or in a synagogue or a mosque—but I’m a secular writer; I do that in a secular world. So I’d like
to get people in my world to be thinking about moral subjects, with a vocabulary they are comfortable with. That's more or less what I feel called to do.

**SHUSHOK:** You talk a lot about how faith and religion often provide the moral compass. What are your thoughts in the public realm, the public university? Do you have any thoughts about how we might talk about these sorts of things, to be more inclusive of faith and religion in the public sphere?

**BROOKS:** I think that our various religious traditions have come up with words that are very useful. Talking through words like grace, redemption, and even sin is useful. You don't have to always express these things in a religious context—like sin, for example. One definition of sin is Saint Augustine's “disordered love.” If a friend confides something in you, and you blurt it out at a dinner party, you've put your love of popularity above your love of friendship, and that's getting your loves out of order. Or grace—sometimes when you're hurt or you're suffering a trauma, friends show up for you, even people you didn't know would show up for you. That's unmerited love, or grace. These words from religious traditions are valuable.

Some advice from the religious traditions is valuable even if you are not a religious person. When I took my job, I'd never been hated on a mass scale. I get just tons of hateful remarks in the comments section and emails, or people just lambast me with criticism in other ways. I discovered the only way to survive is to love my enemy, to realize these people are doing something for me, and treat them as if they are giving me a gift, even though it seems so harsh. That comes from the mouth of Jesus, but I found it a practical way to get through a normal day in a secular context. I do think that introducing people to faith traditions and some of the practical wisdom from them is useful for universities.

**SHUSHOK:** You've used the word “sin” as a way of thinking about growing older and understanding a part of you that is broken. Can you unpack this line of thinking?

**BROOKS:** When one is younger, you think “I've got a little golden figure inside, and I should be in touch with my true self, and I should march to the beat of my own drummer, and I should listen to the voice within.” Then, I think, if you grow up in a certain tradition, or as you get older, you realize, “My true self is kind of screwed up!” So when you make that realization, you have a tendency to do things that you shouldn't do. You get your loves out of order. You prioritize shallow things like achievement and status over deeper things. Then, that forces you to reflect on what's sort of screwed up inside, and the word for that is sin. I think that puts you on the path to moral development because you have to wrestle with it and you have to try to defeat it. If you don't have the concept of sin, then you don't have character building; it just falls apart. Being honest about that is the very beginning of the process of trying to build yourself into a decent person.

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**SHUSHOK:** Related to this, colleges and universities spend a lot of time talking about inclusion, environments where people from diverse backgrounds—religious backgrounds, a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, international backgrounds, and racial/ethnic backgrounds—can feel like they have a place on a college or university campus and flourish. Do you have thoughts about ways we can do that more effectively?

**BROOKS:** It is one of the great achievements of our universities. The place I teach used to be a bunch of rich, white males. Now, the class I taught last term was 40 percent international—Ghana, Brazil—along with African Americans and Jews who had been under a quota many years ago. So it is a great achievement. I think universities do a pretty good job of this. I think K-12 education doesn't prepare enough students to really perform at universities. But universities are getting more aggressive in “reaching down” and giving the preparation, so they can succeed at higher education.

We can pick at our universities for being unfair to different groups, and there's latent racism, and I accept all that. But compare them to corporate America; compare them to the world of finance; compare to K-12 education and how segregated that is; compare to the churches, which are pretty segregated. If you compare them to other institutions in American life, I think universities are doing reasonably decent job at inclusion.

The one thing I would say, though; social media is creating a new sort of moral system based on inclusion and exclusion and less on guilt and virtue. And so, what I think we are developing now on college campuses is a shame culture, where students are fearful of being excluded. They're fearful that the social media world will attack them and that they'll be cast out and that they'll look at parties on Facebook, and they won't be invited. The problem with that, always desiring to be included, always desiring to win the approval of
people around you, is that you are perpetually insecure. You just need others’ approval to feel good about yourself, and there’s never a situation where you would go against the crowd for the sake of some higher cause. I notice this on a lot of college campuses, that the fear that you might be attacked, the fear of the social media world just descending upon you, is a very prevalent fear. The vocabulary of the guilt-virtue culture is being sort of lost.

SHUSHOK: Knowing the people who will read this conversation will be faculty members, administrators from entry level to senior administrators, people who are in the field of higher education because they believe it plays a role in forming human beings, what hopes, advice, or counsel you have for them?

BROOKS: First of all, I find teaching enormously fun. I go out to dinner with my students every week, and it’s just great to be around them. They keep you young; they’re fast, they’re funny, and I just think it’s a noble and very enjoyable profession. The bit of advice that comes to mind is not mine but was emailed it to me. I had written a column about how hard it was to teach and to really touch students in a classroom, and this guy said that it’s very hard to touch students who are thinking about their next test, or their girlfriend, or their job applications. They are distracted. Then, someone wrote to me and said “Never forget what the wise person says is the least of that which he gives – what gets communicated is not the things that come out of the mouth, but the totality of their being, which is expressed in small gestures of kindness or care. Never forget the message is the person.” Those two sentences sort of leapt out at me and stayed with me, that what a wise person says is the least of that which they give…the message is the person.

When I think back to my professors, I sort of remember the content of their courses, but what I really remember is the way they were, and their little small gestures either of kindness or unkindness, and I do think those are the things that get remembered, just their ways of being a professor. The lesson from that is that we should all try to be a notch more intimate with our students than we want to be. I find, for myself, that I always want to “be the professor, have a little distance.”

I remember I once told my students I had to cancel office hours because I had a little personal issue I had to deal with, and I had to go home. I didn’t say what the personal issue was, but with just the fact that I said that, a bunch of students sent me emails saying they were thinking about me, or they were praying for me or something. Just the fact that it opened the door into the human nature of my actual life…it broke a little barrier and changed the trajectory of the course. I think achieving a more peer-to-peer relationship and then showing just how you are—having students over to your house for dinner and that kind of stuff—that’s what gets communicated, and that’s where a lot of the teaching happens, by example.

SHUSHOK: Was that easy for you? Was it natural?

BROOKS: Yes. You don’t want to get too intimate, of course, so it felt a little unnatural. I have some delusion where I think I’m 22, like I go on college campuses and think the faculty is really old, and I’m really one of the kids! I know that’s not true, but that’s sort of my attitude, so I feel close to the kids. That’s maybe a case of arrested development in my case.

SHUSHOK: Thanks for continuing to advocate for colleges and universities, and I really appreciate you making time to talk to us. This has been a fun and stimulating conversation.

BROOKS: I really enjoyed this. It’s been a good conversation!