

Arthur Brooks was invested as a member of the American Academy of Sciences and Letters in 2024.

In [this video](#), Academy Executive Director Greg Forster interviews Prof. Brooks about how the personalities and experiences of college students have changed dramatically in a ten-year period, the virtues of “hopeful pessimism,” and why we shouldn’t give up on reforming the American university.

Greg Forster, American Academy of Sciences and Letters

Hello everybody. I'm Greg Forster with the American Academy of Sciences & Letters, and this is our latest member interview. We are talking with Arthur Brooks at Harvard University. Arthur, thank you so much for being with us.

Arthur Brooks, Harvard University

Thanks, Greg. It's great to see you. You and I go back a long ways, don't we?

Forster

It's been a few years! Arthur's the author of the new book, *The Meaning of Your Life*. A narrow topic that has a very, very small technical range. Arthur, let me begin by asking, what do you see as the one or two most important challenges that universities are facing now?

Brooks

Well, there's institutional challenges and then the challenges inside the university with what students are experiencing. And they're not completely disconnected. I'm more worried about the suffering of students, believe it or not. And there's a tendency for people to kind of pooh-pooh that and say, "Oh, what a bunch of precious snowflakes, what's wrong with them," et cetera, et cetera. But the truth is that anxiety and depression as a clinical matter have skyrocketed over the past 15 years. And this has been especially acute for people who have the most going for them, which is to say people under 30 with elite education or even not so elite education. With education, you find that those are the places that have the highest levels of mental illness and mood disorders. So I'm really, really concerned about that. That's highly concentrated in the university ecosystem – not entirely, but it's highly concentrated there, and that's where I see it.

For me, it was especially striking because I left academia at the end of 2008 to go be the president of the American Enterprise Institute. And I came back eleven years later in 2019, and it was like a plague had gone through my village. It was the happiest place in America, and it looked like the unhappiest place in America when I came back. I mean, people on campuses – as a behavioral scientist, I say this as an empirical matter – were happier than the rest of the country in 2000, even as recently as 2008. And in 2019, they were significantly more miserable, more depressed, lonelier, more likely to engage in self-harm, more anxious, et cetera.

And so the result of it is that when I came back to academia, when I came to Harvard in 2019, I set about actually studying exactly that. Now that was contemporaneous with what's affectionately known as the Woke Apocalypse, which came through academia and which activism kind of turned over the boat from inquiry. Advocacy and inquiry have always gone together inside universities, for sure. And there's an equilibrium that can persist when inquiry is a lot higher than advocacy. But when advocacy

starts to get too high, the boat flips, and that's what happened at the same time. So you had really miserable students who were depressed and anxious, and at the same time you had angry activism that in a lot of places was kind of the vehicular language of the academic culture. And those were the two things that we see, and those are the two things that have kept me up at night as a lifelong – no, a multi-generational academic. I'm a third-generation academic, and it is the part of the American economy and American society that I truly love the most.

Forster

You're making me think about where C.S. Lewis says if you put something that should be second first, and the thing that should be first second, you not only lose the thing that you demoted, you also lose the thing that you're putting too high, because you ruin it by making it the first, most important thing. And as you were talking about inquiry and activism both having a place in the university, but there being a natural kind of ordering to that, where the university is for inquiry first. You put the activism first, the activism also goes awry.

Brooks

That's absolutely right. And C.S. Lewis was talking about that with respect to faith and politics, for example. And when you actually put your politics before your love of God, you wreck your religion and you wreck your politics. That was his key point, but that's true in any institution. In your marriage, if you want your marriage to be successful, it is the deep, abiding, companionate friendship that you have with your spouse has to come first. And anything else that you put above that in the institution, even if your children are more important than your friendship with your spouse, it's going to be a problem for your kids and a problem for your marriage. So that is absolutely the case.

Forster

And universities have the same sort of need to keep first things first. Let me ask you my next question. What would you say to people who don't trust the university to help students grapple with the biggest questions in life?

Brooks

There's all kinds of good reasons to not trust them. I understand that. It's not as if that lack of trust was not earned. But it's not irremediable. It is absolutely the case that we can actually fix that. And what I tell them is if they have an alma mater that they care for at all, or they want a good intellectual future for the United States – which by the way, the American university system is the envy of the world, still, notwithstanding all the ways that we've done to degrade it – then they should get in there and try to help fix it. They should actually think about what a better one would be, as opposed to walking away from it and saying that the whole thing is stupid. That's just the wrong attitude. On the contrary, this is one of our great treasures as a nation. And in point of fact, it's our source of strength and our gift to the world. So let's not let it get away from us.

Forster

There are record levels of philanthropy out there now and it's only going to go up. I just read an article about how the big AI companies are going to start doing corporate philanthropy and it's going to increase by many billions the amount of money.

Brooks

Yeah, that's right. No, it's unbelievable. I mean, I remember back in the old days when I first came out of my PhD in the late '90s, and I was a specialist in philanthropy. That's what I was studying in those days as a behavioral economist. And we were amazed because it was going to be \$40 trillion coming down the pipe by 2050. Uh-uh, are you kidding me? It's going to be more like \$130 trillion. And in bequests and living philanthropy and corporate philanthropy – man, it's going to be the Niagara Falls of money, is what it comes down to. And what we don't want is for it to be given blindly and ignorantly. What we don't want is for it to fund things that are actually bad for the country. We want it to be given to good things. And I don't mean that just because I have particular opinions. I want it to do what universities are supposed to be really, really good at, which is, to quote Matthew Arnold, the greatest that has been thought and said, which is the definition of culture itself.

Forster

There's been a lot of indiscriminate giving, and we don't want to see that giving stop. We want it to become discerning. Let me ask you my last question, and this is always my favorite question to ask: What has pleasantly surprised you in the last five years?

Brooks

About academia or just anything in life?

Forster

Sure.

Brooks

I'm pleasantly surprised a lot, and not just because I'm actually a pessimist. The truth is that I'm actually a very hopeful person, and so I have my antennae up. I'm a specialist in happiness, and to not be pleasantly surprised for me would be kind of off brand. So for me, it's this persistence inside academia of students and faculty and administrations, and actually whole schools, that are willing to stand up when the cost is high and say, "This thing is too good to let get away."

I'm also pleasantly surprised at how things are starting to turn. It's amazing. And I shouldn't be. I mean, fads and panics, they tend to end, for sure, but you're always a little bit surprised when what would've been toxic five years ago no longer is. That's really, really a pleasant surprise. Just in general, I'm always pleasantly surprised at the durability of our institutions and the durability of our nation. We've done our level best to screw up this country. We have leaders, populist leaders who are dedicated to little more than power, and yet it persists.

I guess the most pleasant surprise I have overall is that the guiding principle that keeps us on the track in this country and including our institutions is the free enterprise system. It just is. The free enterprise system sees a dumb policy like indiscriminate tariffs, and it just drives around it. It's just a behemoth. It's so strong and it's so good for actually helping us to instantiate the positive goals that we actually have as a culture. It continues to lift people out of poverty in every corner of the world and pay, through not just taxes but also philanthropy, for some of the most important things that we could possibly have. I guess the greatest ongoing, beautiful surprise that I could possibly find is that even though we do our level best to screw up this beautiful country with its great system, we seem unable to do so.

Forster

As an economist, you'll be familiar with Herb Stein's Iron Law: If something cannot go on forever, it will stop.

Brooks

Yes indeed. And by the way, Herb Stein said that at AEI. He was an economist at the American Enterprise Institute, but before my time.

Forster

They mail you a nickel every time you mention AEI.

Brooks

I know.

Forster

Arthur, thank you so much for being with us. I really appreciate it.

Brooks

Thanks again for what you're doing at the Academy, for bringing a new form of community for all of us who are dedicated to the life of the mind, what we're trying to do for our country and around the world. And I love to see all the wonderful people that are signing up to be part of this group.