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, 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….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. …

…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 sweetest job market in the nation's history. Investment banks flood the campus looking for hires. Princeton also offers a multitude of post-graduation service jobs in places like China and Africa. Everyone I spoke to felt confident that he or she could get a good job after graduation. Nor do these students seem driven by some Puritan work ethic deep in their cultural memory. It's not the stick that drives them on, it's the carrot. Opportunity lures them. And at a place like Princeton, in a rich information-age country like America, promises of enjoyable work abound--at least for people as smart and ambitious as these. "I want to be this busy," one young woman insisted, after she had described a daily schedule that would count as slave-driving if it were imposed on anyone.

The best overall description of the students' ethos came from a professor in the politics department and at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Jeffrey Herbst. "They are professional students," he said. "I don't say that pejoratively. Their profession for these four years is to be a student."

That doesn't mean that these leaders-in-training are money-mad (though they are certainly career-conscious). It means they are goal-oriented. An activity--whether it is studying, hitting the treadmill, drama group, community service, or one of the student groups they found and join in great numbers--is rarely an end in itself. It is a means for self-improvement, resume-building, and enrichment. College is just one step on the continual stairway of advancement, and they are always aware that they must get to the next step (law school, medical school, whatever) so that they can progress up the steps after that.

One day I went to lunch with Fred Hargadon, who has been the dean of admissions at Princeton for thirteen years and was the dean of admissions at Stanford before that. …he, like almost all the other older people I talked to, is a little disquieted by the achievement ethos and the calm acceptance of established order that prevails among elite students today. Hargadon said he had been struck by a 1966 booklet called "College Admissions and the Public Interest," written by a retired MIT admissions director named Brainerd Alden Thresher. Thresher made a distinction between students who come to campus in a "poetic" frame of mind and those who come in a "prudential" frame of mind. "Certainly more kids are entering in a prudential frame of mind," Hargadon said. "Most kids see their education as a means to an end."

They're not trying to buck the system; they're trying to climb it, and they are streamlined for ascent. Hence they are not a disputatious group. I often heard at Princeton a verbal tic to be found in model young people these days: if someone is about to disagree with someone else in a group, he or she will apologize beforehand, and will couch the disagreement in the most civil, non-confrontational terms.
available. These students are also extremely respectful of authority, treating their professors as one might treat a CEO or a division head at a company meeting….

…. The new elite does not protest. Young achievers vaguely know that they are supposed to feel guilty about not marching in the street for some cause. But they don't seem to feel guilty…Two years ago the administration outlawed the Nude Olympics, a raucous school tradition. Many of the students were upset, but not enough to protest. "It wasn't rational to buck authority once you found out what the penalties were," one student journalist told me. "The university said they would suspend you from school for a year." A prudential ethos indeed….

…this is also what life is like at other competitive universities today. In the months since I spoke with the Princeton students, I've been at several other top schools. Students, faculty members, and administrators at those places describe a culture that is very similar to the one I found at Princeton. This culture does not absolutely reflect or inform the lives and values of young Americans as a whole, but it does reflect and inform the lives and values of an important subset of this generation: the meritocratic elite. It is this elite that I am primarily reporting on in this article, rather than the whole range of young people across the demographic or SAT spectrum. It should also be said, though, that the young elite are not entirely unlike the other young; they are the logical extreme of America's increasingly efficient and demanding sorting-out process, which uses a complex set of incentives and conditions to channel and shape and rank our children throughout their young lives.

It will surprise no one who has kids to discover that social-science statistics support that description…Kids of all stripes lead lives that are structured, supervised, and stuffed with enrichment. Time-analysis studies done at the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research provide the best picture of the trend: From 1981 to 1997 the amount of time that children aged three to twelve spent playing indoors declined by 16 percent. The amount of time spent watching TV declined by 23 percent. Meanwhile, the amount of time spent studying increased by 20 percent and the amount of time spent doing organized sports increased by 27 percent. Drive around your neighborhood. Remember all those parks that used to have open fields? They have been carved up into neatly trimmed soccer and baseball fields crowded with parents in folding chairs who are watching their kids perform. In 1981 the association U.S. Youth Soccer had 811,000 registered players. By 1998 it had nearly three million.

Today's elite kids are likely to spend their afternoons and weekends shuttling from one skill-enhancing activity to the next. By the time they reach college, they take this sort of pace for granted, sometimes at a cost. In 1985 only 18 percent of college freshmen told the annual University of California at Los Angeles freshman norms survey that they felt "overwhelmed." Now 28 percent of college freshmen say they feel that way.

But in general they are happy with their lot. Neil Howe and William Strauss surveyed young people for their book Millennials Rising (2000); they found America's young to be generally a hardworking, cheerful, earnest, and deferential group. Howe and Strauss listed their respondents' traits, which accord pretty well with what I found at Princeton: "They're optimists ... They're cooperative team players ... They accept authority ... They're rule followers." The authors paint a picture of incredibly wholesome youths who will correct the narcissism and nihilism of their Boomer parents. ….

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