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## The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School

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## The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School

Tim Clydesdale; (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

Reviewed by Donald D. Opitz

I have worked with adult students, graduate students, and undergraduate students, and the biggest challenge I have encountered is getting first-year students to engage in critical reflection about course material. I have redesigned syllabi and experimented with various teaching methods, but I still find it difficult to set the hook with most first-year students (okay, maybe I should not envision them as trout to be caught). To the chagrin of our admissions staff, I have been recommending to high school students and their parents that perhaps college should be postponed at least for a year. While this certainly is not the solution for everyone—and what one does in that “tweener” year is crucial—I have noticed time and time again that the student with some real work and real world experience is several steps ahead of the high school graduate who is simply taking the next step: college.

Tim Clydesdale’s book, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School*, describes students who are taking the next step. According to Clydesdale, only one out of every ten first-year students is really ready to take advantage of college, and yet most curricula are designed for that ready tenth. What should be done to prepare the other 90% for college and to ensure that they are able to glean some valuable lessons during their first year?

Clydesdale, a sociology professor at The College of New Jersey, conducted field research in a suburban New Jersey high school for a year. He conducted 125 in-depth interviews (90-120 minutes each) with 75 different students that graduated from high school between 1995 and 2003. Data was also collected using a focus group of 12 students discussing relationships and substance abuse and through an open-ended survey of 24 students to explore violence in the wake of the Columbine killings. Several interviews with students from other regions in the country were conducted, and these interviews suggest that the research findings are not unique to these Jersey teens.

Perhaps some of you who work with first-year students have observed the same things that Clydesdale has systematically captured and reported. I thought that I was paying attention, and that I understood student culture, but I was surprised by his findings, learned a great deal about first-year students, and was challenged to consider anew what I could do to respond to their needs. According to Clydesdale, typical first-year students:

- have been “schooled” so much that they are bored in the classroom.
- have been “consumerized” so much they are obsessed with image, fad and status.
- have learned not just suspicion regarding institutions, but cynicism and even contempt.
- believe that higher education is good for upward mobility (getting the good job) and little else (their parents happen to reinforce this same view).

- have locked their identity in a lockbox, so that there is little hope of deep reflection or personal transformation.
- spend their time managing relationships, personal resources, and daily life.
- expect to find fulfillment, satisfaction, and happiness, just like they have been promised by everyone who loves them and by millions of commercials.

College marketing materials announce that these critical years are a dynamic time of change, experimentation, and growth. Clydesdale suggests that this is a myth; at least during the first year. “The first year out, rather than being a time when behavior patterns and life priorities are reexamined and altered, is actually a time when prior patterns and priorities become more deeply habituated” (p. 15). These students focus on getting through the first year successfully: managing their time and money, connecting with their friends, and passing or getting good grades in the right courses. First-year students are not likely to wrestle with significant religious or social or political questions. Most of the students in the study “neither liberated themselves intellectually nor broadened themselves socially during their first year out” (p. 2). Clydesdale reports that “the overwhelming majority of teens [he] studied appeared culturally inoculated against intellectual curiosity and creative engagement” (p. 152).

We should not blame first-year students for their approach to life and learning. Clydesdale sees these patterns not so much as choices but rather as the fruit of a culture. What we are seeing is the fruit of the late-modern American worldview; the patchwork quilt of individualism, pragmatism, and consumerism. On this score, Clydesdale echoes Robert M. Bellah, Richard Marsden, William M. Sullivan, and Ann Swindler’s renowned *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition, University of California Press, 2007). He also points out that these students are learning these values *from us*; from adults who embody the very same values (p. 6).

If these students are “culturally inoculated against intellectual curiosity and creative engagement” (p. 152), what is the antidote? Clydesdale does not express much hope for the success of the typical first-year program. Core courses that focus on worldview formation or a broad framework in the humanities may be of interest to the ready tenth, but the other 90% will take little away from such approaches, at least when they are scheduled early in the student’s college experience. Clydesdale suggests that working *with* students, giving attention to their culturally-shaped interests (life management, relationship networks, goal setting), is more likely to win trust, open the identity lockbox, and lay the groundwork for deeper reflection. While Clydesdale does not offer particular suggestions for successful first-year programs (his research is not designed to explore this), successes at various benchmark institutions suggest that these modes of student engagement may help: learning communities, service learning, hands-on field work, adventure and experiential education, gift discernment, and study abroad. Of course each institution will have to craft an approach that fits its own student body, mission, and program resources.

Those of us working in Christian higher education imagine that this first year is a crucial time for faith formation. We believe that faith is troubled and often lost in the secular academy, and that on campuses like ours faith is strengthened. Clydesdale reports that while college students do shun church at an alarming rate, and that this

defection may last for many years, the faith of most Christian students is maintained but at a rather paltry level. Christian students have generally not been disciplined or prepared to pursue faithfulness during the college years. Clydesdale commiserates with Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, authors of *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005), that the perspective and attitude most consistently embraced even by Christian students can be described as “therapeutic moralistic deism.” Clydesdale has a hunch that Christian students and an intentional Christian approach to education (like his *alma mater* Wheaton College?) might fare better. “I argue that the more removed teens are from popular American moral culture, the less they use the identity lockbox and the more they avail themselves of educational opportunities” (p. 153). If Christian students were more thoroughly formed as disciples, it would stand to reason that they would contest the “patterns of the world” (even the ruts of higher education) and that they would earnestly pursue the “renewing of the mind” (Romans 12:2). Unfortunately, such discipleship is rare and most churches do precious little to help students develop a viable Christian perspective that will serve them well in the academy. Program planners at Christian colleges cannot ignore the obvious need for deep discipleship, and plans must be put in place to carry this work forward. Such plans may include chaplains, campus ministry programs, residence life staff, student-led Bible studies, a local church network, and ideally, a rich combination of these allies.

We cannot neglect the one in ten; the students who are eager and ready for academic engagement. Our colleges and universities should offer honors programs or other voluntary options for students who are ready to reflect, engage, and debate. But we cannot neglect the nine of ten. We cannot simply pass the buck: “if only parents would . . .” or “if only they had learned \_\_\_\_\_ in high school.” We must work hard to love the students that we have, with personal investment, with a curriculum that addresses (and collides with) their world, and with challenging programming. The implications of this provocative book have troubled me and made me a staunch advocate of curricular and co-curricular reform for first-year students at my own institution and elsewhere in the academy.

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