

Understanding American Teens After High School: A Discussion with Timothy Clydesdale

Derek Melleby

One of the most helpful books written in the last few years concerning college transition is Timothy Clydesdale's *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (Chicago University Press). A sociology professor at The College of New Jersey, Dr. Clydesdale conducted a six-year study following students from high school into their first year after high school. His reflections offer a window into the lives of American teenagers and his conclusions and recommendations have major implications for how we prepare students for college. What follows is an interview with Dr. Clydesdale and three important questions that I think he raises as we consider how to prepare students for college.

Melleby: What motivated you to conduct the research for *The First Year Out*?

Clydesdale: In short, I had limited resources and a false hunch. The limited resources were a function of being a new assistant professor without research funds, but realizing the one source of data that I had in abundance was eager and willing college freshmen. The false hunch was that these freshmen would be undergoing as significant an awakening intellectually and religiously as I underwent attending Wheaton College after 12 years in the Philadelphia Public School system. Of course, I didn't know my hunch was false until I began collecting data. Once I began hearing how little freshmen felt they did change intellectually or with respect to their faith, I had a puzzle I had to solve.

Melleby: What was the most surprising thing you learned about teenagers from your research?

Clydesdale: I would say it was how open teens were to talking to a sympathetic adult listener. It was as if they yearned for a sounding board—a listening and engaged ear—and once they found it in the interview room, they poured out their hearts. Neither their parents nor their peers provided an unfettered place in which the teens could talk; it seems that the adults in teens' lives were more interested in telling them something than they were in listening to them, and that friends were likewise so caught up in their own concerns they didn't listen very much either. This reveals something about American culture—that we nurture individuals so consumed with themselves that we as a culture are losing our desire if not our ability to listen. Even well-meaning folks like teachers, parents and youth pastors get so caught up in conveying a set of ideas that they rarely let up on the barrage of information. Teens are drowning in competing claims for allegiance, and no one, it seems, is providing the time and space to sort through all of this.

Melleby: You suggest that most American teens keep core identities in an “identity lockbox” during their first year out. Briefly describe what you mean by “identity lockbox” and why you think this is a key insight into the world of today's teens.

Clydesdale: It is not so easy to “make it” in the U.S. anymore. Housing and transportation are less and less affordable, secure jobs with good benefits are rare, and achieving the “American Dream” has become a far more difficult accomplishment than it was, say, in the post-WWII era. Back then, a college diploma guaranteed one's place in the American Dream; today, that diploma may not even get you a job with benefits. Consequently, American teens take a highly practical view of their college education, prioritizing, like Americans as a whole, the management of everyday life. Taking a

moment to reflect about deeper matters, such as teen identities as persons of faith, as men or women, or as citizens, is not only distracting, it can be downright “dangerous.” That’s because such reflection can lead teens to an unpopular choice about one of these deeper identities, which in turn puts teens out of step with the American cultural mainstream, if not in jeopardy of never attaining one’s desired standard of living. In short, mainstream American life has become a relentless work-spend-borrow-consume cycle that discourages all questioning or reflection, and teens have become as caught up in this as adults are.

Melleby: You write, “Few and far between are teens whose lives are shaped by purpose, who demonstrate direction, who recognize their interdependence with communities small and large, or who think about what it means to live in the biggest house in the global village.” Did you notice any difference with Christian students you interviewed, or would you say that this is true for most teens, regardless of religious affiliation?

Clydesdale: I found this to be true of most Christian students, even those who say their faith is “very important” to them. It seems most Christian students want to keep their faith in a nice safe box: they attend church, they read the Bible & pray, but they largely pursue the same work-spend-borrow-consume lifestyle that their non-Christian peers do. The majority of Christian teens are content to sprinkle their suburban middle-class aspirations with evangelical faith (again, not unlike most adult evangelicals). I did find some Christian teens (say 10-25 percent) who are open to questioning whether these suburban aspirations represent the life of radical discipleship to which Jesus calls his followers. Such teens want to think deeply about their faith and engage it with the wider world. Unfortunately, few of these youth possess the mentorship that nurtures this sort of faith development, and without it, the tug of work-spend-borrow-consume may ultimately prevail.

Melleby: “College transition” is currently a hot topic in youth ministry these days. Churches are reporting that more and more students walk away from the faith during the college years. What do you think are the implications of your research for youth pastors as they prepare students in their youth groups for college?

Clydesdale: Those who “walked away” from their faith during college made the decision to do so long before their college years—they just waited for the freedom of college to enact that choice. In many cases, these teens reported having important questions regarding faith during early adolescence (12-14 years old) that were ignored by their parents or pastors rather than taken seriously and engaged thoughtfully. It is in early adolescence that faith trajectories (along with other life trajectories) are set, thus early adolescence is the point when preparation must occur. Middle and late adolescence are increasingly similar, as college represents less of a qualitative change and more of a quantitative change. In other words, there are few ideas and freedoms available to college students that are not also available to high school students—college students simply experience ideas and freedoms in greater quantity. Hence, early adolescence is the time when churches must prepare their youth, and must do so fully aware that youth now arbitrate among many claims for their allegiance. Sadly, most youth ministries are long on fun and fluff and short on listening and thoughtful engagement. The former produces a million paper boats; the latter produces a handful of seaworthy ships. Launching a million paper boats is an amazing spectacle on a clear summer day, but only a ship can weather storms and cross oceans.

What are the takeaways?

Here are three questions that I think this insightful interview forces us to ask:

First, are our youth groups seen as unfettered places in which teens can talk? Students need a listening ear and Dr. Clydesdale points out that many students lack a safe place to have meaningful conversations. This also confirms the important research Kara Powell is doing at Fuller Theological Seminary. She has drawn this conclusion from her current six-year study of transitioning students: “The more students have the chance to express their doubts in high school, the higher their faith maturity and spiritual maturity in college. Thus the key is not to get kids to say the right things before they graduate to the ‘big bad world,’ but to help them think through the tough questions and verbalize some of their faith and personal struggles before they hit the ups and downs of the college transition.” As Dr. Clydesdale explains, “Teens are drowning in competing claims for allegiance, and no one, it seems, is providing teens the time and space to sort through all of this.” Keep in mind that many teens who “walked away” from faith in college “reported having important questions regarding faith during early adolescence that were ignored by their parents or pastors rather than taken seriously and engaged thoughtfully.” We need to make sure our teens are being heard.

Second, do we preach a Gospel of radical discipleship to Jesus or one that allows teens to simply sprinkle their suburban middle class aspirations with evangelical faith? In all of the discussion about students leaving the faith in college, this question is most pressing. What is the gospel that the majority of youth are responding to? There is a lot of activity among many youth ministries: large group gatherings, retreats and service projects. But are these events about connecting students to Christ or growing the numbers of attendees? I know this is nearly impossible to measure, and we certainly don’t want to exclude teens from taking part, but we constantly need to evaluate our motivations. Teens are not transitioning well out of many of our youth groups and that should force us to reconsider what is or isn’t being taught at our meetings.

Third, are we intentional about countering the “work-spend-borrow-consume” narrative of life? Many teens assume this cycle is simply the way the world is supposed to be. In the minds of many teens, to not live by the “American Dream” story, with its own demands and parameters, can be costly. Do we counter this idolatrous narrative or do we simply baptize it and present the Gospel as a nice “add-on” to a comfortable lifestyle? A life following Jesus is one of sacrifice and self-denial, not comfort and materialism. Students who have embraced a counter-cultural Gospel of life transformation have a much better chance of transitioning well to college. As Dr. Clydesdale alludes, offering this message may not lead to a “successfully” large youth group, but it will lead to teens being successfully prepared for the challenges after high school.

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