

When Teenagers Leave Home

Paul Attewell

Published online: 2 February 2008
© Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2008

Tim Clydesdale. *The First year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School*. University of Chicago Press. 2007.

Latty L. Goodwin. *Graduating Class: Disadvantaged Students Crossing the Bridge of Higher Education*. State University of New York Press. 2006.

It is always intriguing to read different qualitative studies of similar settings. Will alternative observers confirm one another's insights or will they offer divergent portraits and interpretations? These two books both provide qualitative interview studies of young people who have left home; however, their two populations are not the same. Clydesdale began with a panel study that interviewed about 75 high school seniors from suburban public schools across the Northeastern USA, and then re-interviewed them about a year later, when most were in college. About one-quarter was African American and there were small numbers of Latinos, but most were white. They spanned much of the SES spectrum from working-class to upper-middle class; but neither the inner city poor nor the upper-class were included. Although two longitudinal waves of interviews yielded rich information about the 'first year out,' Clydesdale then added an ethnographic year in one New Jersey public high school, beginning with lunchroom hanging out, transforming into a confidant who interviewed individual students.

Clydesdale comes from a Christian fundamentalist background, and he entered into this research with a strong interest in the religious and ethical views and practices of his subjects. However, while his teenage subjects mirror the American population in their belief in God and their commitment to ethical precepts, religion was not uppermost on their minds as they left home for the first time. The ethnographer wisely chose to follow their development and their interests, even if that required a shift in topical emphasis.

Clydesdale's impressive study yielded a rich and entertainingly told story of what young people are up to in their first year beyond the family nest. It is a superb book, convincing in its ethnographic realism, surprising in its findings, insightful in its analyses and discussion.

P. Attewell (✉)

Department of Sociology, CUNY Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Ave, New York, NY 10016, USA
e-mail: pattewell@gc.cuny.edu

We send our kids off to college, often at considerable expense, assuming that they are going to receive an education, hoping that their intellectual curiosity will blossom, that they will meet kids unlike themselves, and that their encounters with new ideas and people will cause them to reflect on their values and beliefs about the world. Dream on, deluded parent!

Teenagers “neither liberated themselves intellectually nor broadened themselves socially during their first year out.” College is a means to an end; the teen’s urgent goal is to become an adult, to learn to handle the daily challenges of living independently. This means using one’s time effectively; earning money and spending within a budget; handling credit cards and bills and financial aid checks; keeping records, submitting paperwork and meeting deadlines; and figuring out interpersonal relationships. Few freshmen pause for ethical or political reflection; few have any interest in public events. Religion (and other differences in identity) are put on the far back burner.

What students do invest in is a work-and-spend cycle. Work is a necessity, because most undergraduates have serious needs for cash that their parents do not fully cover. \$500 to \$1500 a month seems the norm. However, many students come to enjoy working, if only for the camaraderie and social aspects. A collegian’s lifestyle is costly: fun means buying movie tickets, or running a car, eating out or buying ones own clothes. Thus becoming an adult means learning to manage the work and spend cycle.

Most teens handle this transition from home to college quite well, and by the end of the first year out are quite proud of their new skills and accomplishments: their ability to coordinate and schedule classes along with work and leisure; to use drugs and/or drink in ways that don’t wreck the rest of their lives; to live within their means; to handle bureaucracies and inter-personal relationships and sex. Clearly the manifest function of college—getting educated—runs a weak second to its latent function—developing adult life skills and becoming immersed in a cycle of work and spend.

This overwhelming focus on the personal and the practical leads, in Clydesdale’s telling, to a devastating mismatch between students’ interests and college educators’ goals. “The overwhelming majority of teens I studied appeared culturally inoculated against intellectual curiosity and engagement. No idea or creative possibility seems capable of penetrating college going teens’ immune systems.... [Teens] remain underwhelmed by their education and view education as little more than a hurdle on the path to adulthood.”

By his account, college freshmen sit in large classes, often taught by adjuncts or graduate students. Their instructors remain anonymous figures and teachers’ attempts to challenge students’ ideas and norms fall on deaf ears. The students want courses to be career oriented. They don’t want to hear about class, race or gender inequities in American society or to question their own beliefs. They view college as a game of telling the instructor whatever s/he wants to hear, whatever is needed to get a decent grade. They don’t hesitate to cheat. These freshmen take gender roles as unproblematic and don’t see racial, ethnic or class differences as especially salient. To the extent that they do perceive social inequalities, the result is envy, and the lesson they draw is that they must strive hard for upward mobility.

This picture is not painted by a misanthrope. Clydesdale clearly enjoys the young people he studies, even though he values religious and political commitments. But only rare students—a few of whom he profiles—share his level of social or ethical engagement and awareness.

There are just enough exceptions presented in this book—kids who are budding intellectuals, students who do have faith or political commitments—that one is dragged unwillingly to accept that Clydesdale’s ethnographic portrait of the large majority of freshmen is probably well-informed and accurate. Besides, he carefully cites additional

evidence from survey and other studies to confirm his interview findings. But one does wonder whether this is a portrait of freshmen at non-selective state universities. Are students at Ivy or at selective liberal arts colleges equally un-intellectual in their orientation?

I look forward to a sequel to this fine study, a follow-up of these students in their junior or senior years in college. Can we hope that after the freshman agenda of growing up is completed, that education starts to have a more substantial impact on students' awareness and commitments? Or are we professors only props on an academic stage, where the drama is all about college students making friends, getting laid, and learning to pay the bills? From a student viewpoint, apparently, the unexamined life is well worth living.

Latty Goodman's book is the second volume in a project that has followed a small group of undergraduates from a Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP) in a selective residential private university, a wannabe Ivy. It traces 23 HEOP students through graduation. They were remarkably successful in that 22 out of 23 finished their degrees.

Out the outset then, one should note that these are not the typical minority students in higher education. The large majority of economically disadvantaged undergraduates (both minority and white) attend public institutions, usually commuter schools, and very few of them graduate in five years. Cycling in and out of college, while earning a living and supporting a family, is the national undergraduate norm. Many graduate a decade or more after starting college. That larger picture should not detract, however, from the value of a study like Goodman's of these most privileged among economically disadvantaged students who make their way into Ivy or near-Ivy private colleges.

Goodman divides her cohort into three groups. The first consists of foreign-born children of immigrants from Vietnam, Jamaica, Ghana, and elsewhere. These students are very focused on their families' and communities' needs, which they tend to prioritize above their personal goals. They tend to be conformist and obedient both to parental expectations and to school rules, leading Goodman to label them "the Pleasers." A second group consists of American-born children of Latino immigrants. In Goodman's telling these students are pulled between two identities or allegiances, and she calls them "the Searchers." The final group is comprised of third generation African-American students, from economically-disadvantaged often single-parent backgrounds whom she calls "The Skeptics" because of the "disillusionment and skepticism that they all voiced regarding the American Dream."

It is worth noting that African-American students with longstanding US roots constituted less than one-third of the HEOP program at this college, a figure consistent with other studies. This provides a larger context: very few African-American students make it to the top tier of private colleges. Affirmative action in that part of the educational world predominantly benefits immigrants to the USA and the children of immigrants.

All the students who entered this HEOP program were less prepared academically than the non-HEOP students in their college. These minority students had been creamed off the top of their public high schools, but in this selective college they quickly found themselves at a considerable academic disadvantage. The intellectual work was much more challenging than they had anticipated, and this came as a shock because these young people had come to think of themselves as top students in their high schools.

As a result, college was not fun. HEOP students were disappointed by receiving low grades and felt great pressure to succeed. Almost all changed their academic majors. For many this was because they could not succeed in academically demanding majors such as medicine and science; a few others rejected parental expectations regarding majors, as they developed their own intellectual tastes.

The HEOP students were not well integrated into campus life. In part this was reactive: there were several incidents of racist slurs and vandalism that deeply offended HEOP students, especially since campus authorities failed to find and punish the racists. But Goodman says that few of the HEOP students kept informed about what was going on campus. Mostly they settled outside the mainstream at their campuses, socializing with others of similar backgrounds. Unfortunately, they were unable to create a congenial climate even within this group. Although friendships were common, dating and intimate relationships were rare among this group.

Goodman clearly admires these HEOP undergraduates, and she deploys a theoretical framework that emphasizes their drive, persistence and resiliency. The students were justifiably proud that they had made it through to graduation. But it is difficult to read this book and feel optimistic on their behalf. The portrait is of people working very hard to keep up academically, having little time left for much else, of stressed out individuals who even at graduation lack confidence in their future prospects. Unless Goodman is tone deaf to the joyful side of these students' lives, these students pay a heavy emotional price for their educational opportunity. One wonders whether this wannabe Ivy, with its highly competitive climate, produces the same levels of stress and anxiety in its white students as among its HEOP students. Is this a story about undergraduate life in a demanding, competitive and unsupportive college, or is it an object lesson about the perils of being a token minority in a white institution?

Paul Attewell is a professor of sociology at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His main research interests are in social stratification and in the sociology of education. His most recent book (co-authored) is *Passing the Torch: Does Higher Education Pay Off Across the Generations?* (2007).