Op-Ed from The Times of Trenton

Life after high school: The real challenge

BY TIM CLYDESDALE

Ah, the great American high school graduation speech: "Follow your dreams, explore your world, live in peace; class of 2007, today is not an ending — it is our beginning!" Across the nation, earnest senior class presidents will take these familiar words, add a few stories from the prom, sprinkle them with a heartfelt tribute to their own families, and deliver them into humming public address systems to an audience of peers, family members and local officials. It is an American moment as predictable as it is joyous.

I do not wish to diminish this happy ritual in any way. Yet I cannot help but observe that few high school graduates will give any attention to peace, the world or even their dreams for the entire year to come, if not longer. From scores of conversations with high school graduates and years spent following and observing them, I can report that the lived priorities of American teens bear little resemblance to these familiar ideals.

The real challenge of the first year after high school is much less lofty. It involves learning, without school or family intervention, how to manage everyday life. By this, I mean navigating semi-adult relationships with parents, peers and partners; managing personal gratifications of sex and substance use; maintaining a costly American teen lifestyle; and, almost as an afterthought, meeting the requirements of post-secondary educational programs. With today's complexity of relationships, lifestyles and instantaneous communication, this has become a feat more challenging than it was a generation ago.

The good news is that one year after graduation from high school, the majority of working to upper middle-class American teens do learn, more or less successfully, to manage their daily lives. Most moderate their consumption of alcohol, avoid illegal substances, seek a monogamous partner, value friendships and pursue a comfortable future oriented toward rewarding work and a satisfying family life. In contrast to images from films such as "Animal House" and "Girls Gone Wild," teen values are remarkably similar to those of their parents — about whom they speak quite favorably, by the way.

The troubling news is that daily life so preoccupies teens during the first year after high school that matters requiring deeper, wider or longer-term consideration get ignored and even resisted. It is as if graduating teens place political, civic, religious, gender and racial identities into an identity lockbox, never to be touched again during their year-long journey into adulthood. Thus, the very identities that can give shape to dreams, direction to explorations and passion to public life are left dormant during this critical year. And there's little compelling evidence that this pattern alters much once it gets established.

Macroeconomic and cultural forces propel this phenomenon. The global realities of the American economy make higher education an instrumental necessity, not a reflective opportunity. Popular American culture, meanwhile, socializes youth into a pragmatic individualism that maintains that happiness is to be found in intimacy and individual consumption. Combined, these economic and cultural forces leave teens with little incentive to open their identity lockboxes and strong incentives to prioritize daily life. After all, "wrong" (read: "unpopular") identity choices could jeopardize one's culturally mainstream future.

There are, to be sure, exceptions. Exceptional teens possess a critical perspective on popular American culture and refuse to use the identity lockbox. Some of these exceptional teens are the future intelligentsia, that is, the next generation of professors and allied professionals such as psychologists and journalists. A few are religious skeptics and atheists. But the rest are what I call religious emissaries, that is, deeply religious teens who reject compartmentalized faith and are driven instead to understand it and engage it with the world. The existence of this last category here may surprise some, but scholars of contemporary American religion demonstrate that religious communities thrive in American pluralism because they engage it thoughtfully, they do not retreat from it.

About one out of five working to upper middle-class American teens is exceptional. These exceptional high school seniors will hear their graduation challenge to follow their dreams, explore their world and live in peace — and actually make an effort to do so. They represent the true spirit of America, and I give them my heartiest congratulations. I just wish America produced more like them, and fewer content to settle for lives of daily efficiency, private intimacy and personal consumption.

Tim Clydesdale, associate professor of sociology at The College of New Jersey, is author of "The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School."