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“Tim Clydesdale provides a new and powerful vision of America’s young people. He opened my eyes to realities I never imagined even though I have been studying the nation’s college students for the past twenty-five years.”

**Arthur Levine, President of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation**

“Tim Clydesdale has done a remarkable job of getting inside the minds and lives of American teenagers. I know of no other study that provides as rich and up-to-date insights into the decisions teenagers make as they leave high school and enter the work force and college. The stories are riveting. The candid confessions about doubts and anxieties are sobering. *The First Year Out* is an example of sociological research at its best.”

**Robert Wuthnow, author of *The Next Wave: How Young Adults  
Are Shaping American Religion***

# The First Year Out

Understanding American Teens after High School

by Tim Clydesdale

**Publication date: 15 May 2007**  
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Based on his analysis of 125 in-depth interviews and a year of field research, in *The First Year Out* sociologist Tim Clydesdale describes the day-to-day lives and shared culture of American teens who graduated from high school between 1995 and 2003. Clydesdale reveals how day-to-day life consumes teens’ attention, and that teens stow deeper identities—political, religious, racial, or otherwise—in “identity lockboxes” in exchange for admission into mainstream American culture. In a sense, teens board a “cultural river boat,” enjoying food, entertainment, and boat life, but ignoring the boat’s missing captain and unspecified destination. While there are exceptions to this pattern, found among the unlikely combination of religiously skeptical and religiously devout teens, powerful economic and cultural forces limit teens from thoughtful and purposeful living.

### **Additional Claims:**

1. *The Columbine Generation*: September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 did not impact American teens beyond a few days of initial shock and anger. It did not, Clydesdale discovered, because a much earlier series of tragic events already had: the violent, deadly school rampages that culminated at Columbine High School in April of 1999.
2. *Managed Gratification*: Clydesdale found little delay of gratification among American teens, but a striking capacity to *manage* gratification. Using the analogy of a beach party, Clydesdale describes “surfers,” “waders,” and “sunbathers,” who variously partake in the “ocean waters” of gratification. While “surfers” command attention because of their boisterous activity, most teens stick to “wading” and “sunbathing”—much like their older American counterparts do.
3. *American Teen Lifestyle*: Teens have little awareness of the time they devote to pursuing the “American Teen Lifestyle.” This escalating standard of living demands cars, clothes, technology, meals and snacks, and entertainment—at a monthly cost of \$500 to \$1500. Clydesdale observes how many teens abandon voluntary activities in exchange for paycheck stubs, a stack of receipts, and consumer debt.
4. *Practical Credentialists*: Teens do not attend college to become well-rounded persons. They attend because life at college is, aside from the coursework, a generally desirable way to launch (or delay) one’s adult years. The exceptional students who deeply value learning are chiefly of two sorts: religious skeptics and religious “emissaries.”

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