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FIRST PERSON

The Myth of First-Year Enlightenment

It's time to figure out how to work with the freshmen we have, rather than the ones in our admission brochures

By JAMES M. LANG

You'll recognize this story: Intelligent but naïve high-school graduate heads off to college, hoping to earn a degree, party all the time, and make lots of new friends. Instead, our hypothetical heroine — in late-night bull sessions in the dorm, in encounters with students from backgrounds different from her own, and in mind-expanding general-education courses — discovers how limited her worldview has been. Her consciousness is awakened. She emerges from her first year of college a changed human being, with more thoughtful views on religion, politics, and her own identity.

That plot should sound familiar to those of us in the academic world; many of us have lived a version of it. The story has permeated our culture as well, in the form of movies, television shows, and books about the first year of college.

Our institutions, too, hawk the tale to prospective students and their parents on Web sites, in brochures, and on campus tours: You will come back from your first year a changed man or woman. You will be on the path to your new and more enlightened life. You will have had the best four years of your life.

Not so, according to Tim Clydesdale, an associate professor of sociology at the College of New Jersey, and author of *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens After High School* (University of Chicago Press, 2007). Tim sent me a copy of his book in response to a request I posed in this space a few months ago, in which I asked readers for ideas on how to convince students that our courses matter.

It has always seemed to me that, if we really want our students to learn what we have to teach, we have to convince them to care about our courses. We have to find a way to answer a question that students pose to us, either directly or indirectly, when we present them with new ideas: "So what?"

The First Year Out

seemed like it would surely offer some new answers to that question. Clydesdale interviewed a large sample of teenagers during their senior year at New Jersey High School, and then interviewed them again — asking questions about their identities, values, religious and political views, and more — at the end of their first year of college. (He supplemented his interviews at his primary field site with dozens more interviews at different high schools and colleges.) He hoped to discover the extent to which freshman year affected students.

He reveals early in the book that his own freshman year offered just the sort of mind-opening experience that colleges would like us to believe is their stock in trade. He left his blue-collar, fundamentalist Christian home for a college where people took intellectual life seriously. He was so drawn into that life that it spurred him on the path to become a sociologist, focusing on religion and education in America. But what Clydesdale found in the students he interviewed bore little resemblance to his own experience.

"Most of the mainstream American teens I spoke with neither liberated themselves intellectually nor broadened themselves socially during their first year out," he writes. "What teens actually focus on during the first year out is this: daily life management."

In other words, freshmen spend most of their time and intellectual energy figuring out how to handle life without parental restraints and support: how to deal with money; negotiate newfound freedoms with sex, drugs, and alcohol; and determine how

much time to devote to studying, working, and playing.

But what freshmen don't do during their first year of college comes as more of a (perhaps depressing) surprise: "Most American teens keep core identities in an 'identity lockbox' during their first year out and actively resist efforts to examine their self-understandings through classes or to engage their humanity through institutional efforts such as public lectures, the arts, or social activism."

Put more succinctly: "Contemporary teens are practical men and women. They ... manage their daily lives fairly well. But they are not, by and large, thinking men and women."

You might react to that thesis as I did initially — with skepticism. After all, the story of your first year might be, like mine, of the liberation and enlightenment variety. And indeed, Clydesdale did find students whose narratives fit the culturally established pattern. But he came to view those students not only as the exception to the rule, but also as the very students who went on to perpetuate the myth of first-year enlightenment.

"Only a handful of students on each campus find a liberal-arts education to be deeply meaningful and important," he writes, "and most of those end up becoming college professors themselves. ... And so the liberal-arts paradigm perpetuates itself, while remaining out of sync with most college students."

As I read Tim's analysis, my reactions wavered between resignation (some part of me knew that his findings were true of most of my own students) and depression (wishing that wasn't the case). Like most faculty members, I dream of making a difference in my students' lives — not just passing along skills that will help them write better business memos. When I wrap up a class on Theodore Roethke's "My Papa's Waltz," I want students to look back at their own complex relationships with their parents and consider what it says about the human condition for a child to hold love and fear in such a delicate balance.

Clydesdale's book suggests that, for the most part, that just isn't happening. And, to some extent, he also found that depressing.

"On some days," he wrote to me in an e-mail message, "especially those that involve grading, I can grow cynical that my efforts to hone the minds of youth would be better directed toward some form of personal gain."

But mostly he takes a more practical approach: No point in cursing the cards we've been dealt. Best to roll up our sleeves and figure out how to work with the students we have, rather than the ones in our admissions brochures.

I asked him what practical effects his study had had on his own classroom, and he outlined several, two of which struck me as especially interesting.

First, he has shifted his learning objectives away from content retention and toward skill development. "Little of the content of liberal-arts courses will be used in the careers of our graduates," he said, "but the thinking, writing, speaking, and analytical skills these courses hone have enormous utility for the careers and the lives in general of our students."

That's why he has virtually eliminated lecturing in his classroom, since its primary purpose is to convey content that students tend to quickly forget anyway. Instead, he spends classroom time "discussing issues, contrasting perspectives and interpretations, and working on semester-long projects that require ongoing development and revision."

Second, he no longer claims (among the learning objectives listed on his syllabi) that his courses will broaden a student's worldview. His research has convinced him that such objectives simply don't translate into any meaningful learning for freshmen.

Those changes make sense to me and fall in line with what most teaching experts in higher education would recommend: Minimize lecturing in order to emphasize active learning strategies, and don't promise students something you can't realistically deliver.

That might be the reality of teaching freshmen, but just because it's true doesn't make it any less depressing. I doubt I'll delete the world-broadening objectives from my first-year syllabi. For me, as I would guess is true for many of you, those deeper and less tangible objectives helped inspire me into the profession.

But Clydesdale's book has convinced me that such big-picture objectives have to take a back seat to the development of practical skills in reading, writing, and communicating. And he has also convinced me that freshmen certainly deserve no blame for their general unwillingness to open themselves up to what higher education might offer them.

Few and far between, writes Clydesdale, are freshmen "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."

But it's equally true, as he points out, that "few and far between are American adults" who could be described in those same lofty terms.

In other words, the practical-minded teenagers we find in our classrooms — cognitively sharp but intellectually immune, to borrow a trenchant phrase from the book — are nothing more than quintessential Americans.

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