

Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood

Christian Smith with K. Christofferson, H. Davidson, & P.S. Herzog
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Reviewed by: Kimberly C. Thornbury

Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith and his colleagues have followed up his *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (2009) with this portrait of 18-23 year olds beset by problems including a lack of moral reasoning, consumerism, alcohol and drug use, a culture of hooking up, and civic and political disengagement. This age period of “emerging adulthood” (or arguably “extended adolescence”) has developed from social forces including the rise in college attendance, the delay of marriage, and career exploration that often leads to several job changes in their young adulthood. Additional factors delaying maturity include the generous resources children receive from their parents between the ages of 18-37 (an average of \$38,340), the ability (and tools) to disconnect sex from procreation, and postmodern thinking.

In addition to these social issues, those serving in higher education should be aware of the verbal message emerging adults hear throughout adolescence. “The entire time we were growing up we were taught ‘that when you get to college, you’re *supposed* to party, be wild, get crazy, have fun, drink a lot. Their answer, in short, is: *we do exactly what we were told to do*” (142). Christian educators already know where this party culture leads: “...not far beneath the surface appearance of happy, liberated emerging adult sexual adventure and pleasure lies a world of hurt, insecurity, confusion, inequity, shame and regret” (193).

Higher education is well suited to be a part of the solution Smith prescribes; “teenagers and emerging adults desperately need other mature and concerned adults who genuinely care about and for them” (7). Though most American colleges and universities shifted from *in loco parentis* to *in loco “grandparents”* (teens now come to the ivy halls, make a mess and leave, with the institution smiling and cleaning up after them), Smith asserts “there is no reason why colleges and universities could not play a more proactive role in promoting and enforcing more responsible, healthy, and respectful lifestyles among their students than they do” (240). Perhaps *in loco grandparents* is too generous a term to describe what Smith discovers. Nowhere is there any wise, cookie-making grandmother, drawing these emerging adults to the kitchen table to talk. Smith explains:

One of the striking social features of emerging adulthood is how structurally disconnected most emerging adults are from older adults (as well as from younger teens and children.) This disconnect from full adults was clear to us already when we studied these same youths as teenagers. It became even more obvious when they became emerging adults. Most of the meaningful, routine relationships that most emerging adults have are with other emerging adults.... Their relationships with [older adults] are almost always restricted, functional, and performance oriented. And those adults usually disappear when class or work is over. Those are not their important relationships (234).

In addition to more adult interactions (which I like to call “intrusive care,”) there are other prescriptions well suited for higher education. Classes on moral reasoning should be required. Smith suggests that this class be taught in secondary schools, but until that happens, professors and student development professionals should not be surprised when students enter college with shockingly low levels of moral development. The navigation of sex and romance (or how to have a happy - *or at least functional* - marriage) should be discussed, as well as the role of alcohol, and citizenship.

One may think that all emerging adults are busy “occupying Wall Street.” However, “the idea that today’s emerging adults are as a generation leading a new wave of renewed civic-mindedness and political involvement is sheer fiction” (227). Smith quotes Wendell Berry: “There is, in practice, no such thing as autonomy. Practically, there is only a distinction between responsible and irresponsible dependence” (195). Places such as Union University are working intentionally to develop responsible Christian community. While some may deride the culture creation and intentionality of Christian campuses as a “bubble”, others may use the rich phrase “sacred canopy” to describe this sense of shared vision, environment for mentoring, and deep engagement with Christ-centered intellectuals. Successful graduates of such schools will have a sense of vocation – a calling and a career as well as a holistic sense of how to use their God-given gifts in the world.

Kimberly C. Thornbury, Ph.D.
Vice President for Student Services and Dean of Students
Union University