Going But Maybe Not Gone

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Well, it's that time of year--the very favorite time of year for millions of parents of college-age students. Why, they're going back to school. All across America the cars, vans, and SUVs are loaded up for the ritualistic return to the nation's college campuses. We have witnessed the scene many times. The overloaded vehicles pouring into campus parking lots, with wide-eyed freshman both nervous and exhilarated about the experience that lay before them while their campus-savvy upper-class mates eagerly look up old friends.

Parents and family have the usual ambivalence about this event; on the one hand, the obvious concern that leaving the family nest brings to mind, and that school and career will take their darlings out in the cold cruel world all too soon. On the other hand, WOW! the house is ours again.

Hey, not to worry. Just when you thought they were gone, they're back. Yes, the kids are returning to the nest in numbers not seen since the 1950s. Why they are returning need not detain us here - but coming back they are. Before, however, you spout the perennial parental refrain --"This is my house and as long as you live here, you'll live by my rules"--you may want to consider some of the changes that have occurred in the emerging generation. Some of them are, as they themselves might put it, "just awesome."

In the good old days, for example, parents feared that some liberal professor might turn their child into a card-carrying commie or at least a respectable socialist. But this apprehension has receded into the hoary past as both professors and students have become more conservative. And no one talks about stupid goldfish swallowing episodes anymore. These and many other hallowed traditions of the collegiate experience have been traded in for a collection of new attitudes and activities that mark today's young adult.

Let's start with some behaviors you will probably recognize. They might well hang around the house, seemingly as indolent as before, oblivious to the countless entreaties of "wellness instructors" (that's physical education if you're a gray beard) to exercise and to be fit. Physically active they are not. For young adults membership in health clubs as well as fitness and sports participation is in a major free fall. It's older folks who now have almost one in four health club memberships. So, get used to stocking the fridge with their favorite beer and don't bother to try to find the remote.

And speaking of the remote, don't plan to have company when you watch your favorite news program. You won't find much interest from your recently arrived couch potato. Young people are less likely to watch news on television or pay attention to public affairs matters than any other age cohort. They didn't care much when they were in college, and they don't care much now.
There is actually some good news here. Despite the proselytizing of our finest liberal professors, most students escape college unfazed by the efforts of the lefties to replicate themselves among the student population. More than half of the nation's professorate are self-described liberals compared to only a quarter of the country's college students--proof either that many students are brainwash-proof or that liberal academics are selling a package that few are buying.

Actually a student's subject major is a major influence on political ideology. If your recent college graduate picked the right major, there might be no escape. The most liberal are those professors who teach in the social sciences and humanities, followed by the scientists in biology and physics, but conservatives reign in business and law.

Whether an individual student escapes the liberal clutches or not, students overall today are generally more conservative on many issues than they were several generations ago. In fact, they may be more conservative than you in many areas. You might be surprised for example to learn that they want tougher crime fighting measures--they overwhelmingly favor the death penalty--think the courts are too lenient on criminals, and oppose the legalization of marijuana, in spite of an occasional dalliance with the proscribed weed.

Their political views, however, are somewhat academic because they don't vote. Alas, that expensive education has not made them more likely to vote. Despite their new sheepskins and starting salary, for the moment anyway, your recent graduate is not likely to be found at the polls on election day. They have the lowest turnout of any demographic category. Politicians--for whom the targeting and harvesting of votes has become a science--know that young people do not vote, and consequently tend to discount the political opinions of younger voters.

By and large the younger generation is pragmatic and applied. They won't waste too much time communing with nature or reading Sartre or as earlier generations might put it, trying to find a meaningful philosophy of life. They are far more concerned about their future financial success to look for a larger meaning in life. They can be seen in their freshman year taking seminars in the proper construction of a resume long before there is anything to put in it.

This generation has known no big war or really bad economy, as did virtually every earlier generation in the 20th century. Instead, other so-called "generation effects"--the influence history has on each generation--have shaped much of their worldview. Their attitudes have been shaped with the necessity to obtain a college education for the purpose of finding a job and to compete in an ever-changing economy; factors that help explain why many students have little interest in pure academics or value learning for its own sake.

But while they are conservative on crime, fiscal issues and the role of government, today's students trend more liberal than the population as a whole on other social issues. They are more likely than the general population to support gay rights, to favor affirmative action, and to be less judgmental of their peers. In many ways, the traditional liberal-conservative political spectrum doesn't capture their views well. If anything, they resemble "small 'l' Libertarians," conservative on fiscal issues and the role of government, and liberal on issues of personal freedom and lifestyle. If they maintain these views when they eventually get around to voting, they could bring about dramatic changes in public policy.
So, if you are one of the millions of parents around the country today who is hauling your college progeny back to school--beware. It may well be a two-way trip. And if you do get to welcome a new college grad back home, don't despair. You will find that they just don't make college kids the way they did in the past. Consider it a learning experience.

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