A GUIDE TO THE MINDSET LIST® FOR THE CLASS OF 2016
By Tom McBride and Ron Nief
Authors of The Beloit College Mindset List®
&

Spoiled or Conned?
Ask someone only five or six years older than members of the Class of 2016 how things have changed, and you may get an earful. You may learn that the new kids on the block have never had to listen to a rock station waiting for their favorite songs because they’ve always had I-Pods. You may find out that the old Napster file sharing has gone on steroids, so there’s almost nothing that isn’t “sharable” now. You’ll discover that now there’s less and less on TV that isn’t also available on laptops and I-Phones. It just so happens that over the past six years apps have emerged for just about everything from keeping up with social networks to consolidating your digital communications to organizing your day. Time, as usual, has powered change quickly.

So what are we to make of this class, which is suspected of addiction to digital technology but also pitied for their dubious economic prospects? Are they the “spoiled” generation about which Elizabeth Kolbert recently wrote in the *New Yorker*—pampered by parents who refuse to let them take risks—or might they be the generation that a letter writer to the magazine identified: sent off to college to pursue the American Dream, only to find out that their career path will be rocky and their debt load burdensome? This letter writer suggests that parents haven’t so much spoiled this generation as “conned” them!

Addicted & Anxious?
The Beloit College Mindset List® for the Class of 2016 portrays a generation that is very tribal: they are a high tech subculture that gets nervous when not in touch with members of their own gang on smart phones, via social networks, and through file sharing. They will think nothing of texting a friend whom they know is only a block away. The older generation is annoyed because in public places these young people never look up from their laptops or I-Pods.

But it is also an economically anxious generation, and no wonder. Since they’ve been born the unemployment rate has ticked up a full 2 percent with no prospect of plummeting any time soon. The number of children living insecurely near the poverty line, living in worry from day to day, has ticked up too. Class members and their parents have had to ask more than once whether or not college is “worth it,” given the high costs of higher education in America today. They are reassured to learn that the overall unemployment rate for college grads is a mere four percent, but then they also know
slightly older peers who have finished university and moved back in with their parents. Many of them are still there.

The iconic TV series for the previous generation was *Lost*, an endless and convoluted narrative about passengers who had survived a plane crash and were marooned on an island both weird and “meaningful” (if you could crack the code and read the signs). Iconic TV for the Class of 2016 is *Breaking Bad*, a far grittier show about a high school chem teacher with a fatal disease who turns to selling illegal uppers in order to care for his family. *Lost* would be an idle luxury during this Great Recession, where the globalized trade that seemed such a friend when class members were children has turned into a deadly foe—a monster that can make almost anyone’s skills irrelevant by outsourcing them to India or Indonesia at a much lower cost. *Breaking Bad*, with its motives of economic desperation, seems so much more appropriate now.

**Missing the Boat?**

The tense questions about the Class of 2016 would include the usual worries about cultural literacy. What are we to do with a generation that doesn’t know Billy Graham or Biblical allusions or George Herbert Walker Bush? But these issues seem to be beside the point of other concerns. One of them has to do with addictions to the Internet. The jury is still out on whether cyberspace is a great opportunity or a great threat. Does it produce endless and democratized access to information? Or does it turn out young people who are “alone together,” stunted in their face-to-face skills, lacking in well-developed emotional intelligence, unable to focus because they have always been distracted by hypertext or the next new website? Speculation about these questions is lively, but conclusions seem so far to be non-existent. Yet it’s clear that the Class of 2016 is in the crosshairs of this vital question.

Whatever its implications for academic learning and social intelligence, institutions are responding to this cyber domination in various ways. Some are insisting that every paper must have at least some “hard copy” sources. Others forbid documentation from Wikipedia. Others spend time in survey courses not just teaching sociology or history but also instructing students on how to navigate websites in these fields, so that they won’t be misled. Still others expect that it’s only a matter of time until lectures come to the students at home, via podcasts, and that in-class work will involve collaborative task forces and applied “labs” (defined broadly to include non-science courses). This is called a “flipped” classroom.

And then there’s the dismal science of economics. There have been previous generations in American life that have looked back on the generation before with envy: most recently when Generation X, born in the mid 1960s, looked back on the Baby Boomers and saw a generation that got to enjoy the party while they (Gen X) inherited no more than the hangover. It was Gen X that got the fragmentation, the divorces, and the stagflation that came out of the Sizzling Sixties. Are we about to repeat this pattern? Maybe we are, because the 1990s was a time of almost unparalleled prosperity. Economic bubbles abounded (dot com, housing). The Internet was new and productive. The Cold War was
over. It was a great time to be young: to have been born in about 1972. But now houses are under water, the Internet seems to be a cause of alienation and outsourcing as much as a creator of community, and China has replaced the old Soviet Union as a threat to American supremacy. Will the Class of 2016 look back and think bitterly that it missed the boat?

Maybe We Should All Calm Down?

We should put these troubling questions in some context. Every new technology has created fears about its impact. When the telephone came along, there were dire predictions that no one would ever visit anyone in person ever again. Television was accused of forestalling educational progress forever. Those worries were overblown, as well might be the fretting about the Internet.

And while the Great Recession has been no one’s idea of a picnic, it pales in comparison with the Great Depression, in which the unemployment rate was not eight out of a hundred but one out of four! The great indebtedness that has taken so much money out of the American economy will one day come to an end, too. And college graduates will be far better off than those with only a high school diploma.

Meanwhile, members of the Class of 2016 are subtly learning some good economic habits. The male members of the class are, not uncommonly, pretty good cooks of inexpensive organic food. “Eating in” is very important to this class, because doing so is a lot more affordable than going out. Watching TV and movies everywhere but on cable or in movie theaters is also economical. D-E-B-T is a four-letter word to this bunch, and they see the stock market as no more than a form of gambling. This is a generation more likely than many others to be prudent and financially literate. Despair about them—and the future—is probably as pointless as it is facile.

When we were researching and writing The Mindset Lists of American History, which takes a generational approach to the American story, we were struck by how desperate olden times seemed to those who lived through them, and how down-in-the-mouth older generations were about the character and prospects of the young. Well, we made it through and often emerged better and stronger. There is no slam-dunk reason to think it can’t happen that way again.

Suggestions for College Counselors

*Share the Mindset List for the Class of 2016, plus the Guide, with your colleagues. You’ll find that even if you don’t agree with all our characterizations, both the List and the Guide will be great conversation starters about today’s up-and-coming youth—and especially about the next college class: 2017!

*Sit down with your new counselees this fall and use the current List as an “icebreaker. “We’ve found that the Lists are excellent ways to thaw out inter-generational discussions. But here are two words of advice: First, be aware that some young people resent the Lists as “adults” talking about them condescendingly behind their backs (so make sure they
Second, be sure to share what it was like when you were eighteen. We have discovered that it’s when the conversation is two-sided that the ice is really fractured and mutual discovery and friendliness begins.

*Finally, let us know the results! How did you find the Beloit College Mindset List for the Class of 2016 helpful, and what suggestions would you make for how it could be made more helpful for future classes? On the other hand, what didn’t work? And what did we get wrong about the class of 2016? Of course, feel free to tell us what we got right, too! Thanks! Happy Counseling! We need you!*

**Suggestions for Teachers**

*Short-Term Project: Spend a classroom day on The Mindset List for the Class of 2016. It’s an excellent icebreaker between teachers and students, especially early in the term. Be aware that students sometimes resent the List as an example of “adults” talking condescendingly about them, so make sure they know the list isn’t a judgment but a portrait with which they are free to disagree. Above all, make sure you make your own contribution by relating to them what was “normal” when you were eighteen. This two-sided conversation produces a lively and informative inter-generational discussion.*

*Medium Term Project: Ask your students to sit down with their parents, grandparents and older siblings and ask them what was “normal” for them by the time they were eighteen. What was “always” or “never” true for the students’ living ancestors during their first eighteen years? Then ask your students to write a Mindset List for their parents’ or grandparents’ or older siblings’ generation. Finally, have students compare their Lists as a basis for class discussion about American social change.*

*Longer Term Project: As in the previous project, begin by asking your students to do a Mindset List for their living ancestors based on oral history and interviews. But also send them to genealogical websites such as ancestry.com in order to find out about ancestors no longer living; and have them study The Mindset Lists of American History in order to find historical context for generations of eighteen year olds going back to 1880. Finally, have them write a Mindset List for their great grandparents or even great-great grandparents. The goal is to blend family history, as found on the website and through oral history, with larger context as found in The Mindset Lists of American History, thereby learning family history through national social history, and vice-versa. Again, have students compare their finished Lists as the basis for classroom discussions and perhaps further assignments.*

*Lastly, let us know the results! How did you find the Beloit College Mindset List for the Class of 2016 helpful, and what suggestions would you make for how it could be made more helpful for future classes? On the other hand, what didn’t work? And what did we get wrong about the class of 2016? Of course, feel free to tell us what we got right, too! Thanks! Happy Teaching! We need you!*