

# CLASS OF 2017

Just outside New York City, school counselors at Hunterdon Central Regional High School (NJ) were at lunch discussing the students who would graduate from their sprawling suburban school this spring. Their thoughts echoed those from a variety of people who have worked with these seniors.

The 2017 graduates are confident, but need one-on-one support—“they need hand-holding,” is the way one counselor put it. They’ve been given more responsibility by parents, but still feel entitled and struggle sometimes with basic life skills. They’re anxious and stressed and very distracted. And repeatedly the counselors mentioned they are talented with technology, but suffer from “extreme FOMO,” as one counselor put it—a “fear of missing out.” It drives them to a near addiction to the internet.

“Phones are a lifeline and without them they are lost,” said Dana Kurilew, head of the Hunterdon counseling department.

And when it comes to college exploration, they’re perhaps more interested than past years, but that enthusiasm may not be matched by a willingness to thoroughly explore options and diligently apply.

“We’re seeing the hot potato syndrome—especially in the application process,” Kurilew said. “They’re interested, but they rush through the application to get it done instead of taking the time to do it well.”

Katherine Pastor, 2016 national School Counselor of the Year, also sees interest in college among her students at Flagstaff (AZ) High School, but a similar lack of effort.

“This fall, an overwhelming number had not completed an official college search and were not really sure what they were going to do,” she said.

Regardless, these counselors and others working with students in the class of 2017 say the students are also resilient, resourceful, creative, and positive, and want to change a frighteningly complex and troubled world. Interest in a shifting college application environment, flooding them along with tons of other data on their screens each day, may just get submerged. But it also may resurface.

“They may even be intentionally slowing things down,” said Carolyn Mulligan, an educational consultant in the Boston area, noting they may be avoiding what has been a growing use of the early decision process. She and other experts note such re-thinking could be evident in the growing number choosing gap years and colleges like Harvard recommending them.

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND WHAT'S NEXT

### BY THE NUMBERS

This class will be smaller. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) just released its latest report, estimating that while the number of graduates grew 30 percent from 1995 to 2013, the rate will level off over the next seven years, and decline this year by 2.3 percent. WICHE experts note that states in the south and west are likely to see future increases, while many states in the northeast and Midwest will see fewer grads.

The US Education Department recently documented a 22 percent increase in the number of high school grads in the decade ending in 2012, and projected the following decade will see a leveling, a small dip then a slow 3 percent rise.

“I think the best indicator of students on the traditional college path is the number of high school graduates, which has leveled off after decades of dramatic growth,” said Melissa Clinedinst, associate director of research for NACAC. “High school graduation trends and the stabilization of yield rates might signal the beginning of the end to the frenzy of more students and more applications.”

Lately, senior classes are more diverse, and that trend will grow. WICHE projects that five more states will become majority-minority by 2020.

### SPEEDING THINGS UP

An earlier October opening date for the FAFSA filing seemed to accelerate the application process this year, according to Cory Notestine, a counselor supervisor in Colorado. And Pastor, too, felt the process sped up—though several think overall it should be easier.

“Colleges and universities have done a phenomenal job at simplifying applications,” said Dana Karas, head of counseling at Franklin High School (NJ), noting, however, that students may not easily follow instructions or be patient. “In a span of five years, helicopter parents heard our message and are less involved, allowing students to complete their own applications. That, however, requires a new level of support,” she said.

By Jim Paterson



"These Gen Zs are living in the Snapchat era," ZeeMee co-founder Adam Metcalf said. "They share over 1 billion photos and videos every day on Snapchat. Sharing elements of their life is natural. The college application process can seem stale and antiquated to them."

While they may or may not struggle with applying, students in the class of 2017 want to attend, according to Notestine, who sees an uptick in interest.

According to ACT, 86 percent of test-takers aspire to attend college, though, they often are confused about a career choice or major. ACT reports that while 40 percent of high school graduates chose a career, only about one third chose carefully, which can lead to higher drop-out rates.

"I wish there was some better avenue to help them figure out what they are good at, what they want to do and what type of education they need to get there," Pastor said.

She said more students appear to be interested in business than in the past, and ACT data suggests that about half of the students taking the test intend to pursue STEM careers and more are paying attention to college value.

"Students are more concerned about job prospects than ever before," said educational consultant Nancy Federspiel. "They are asking more questions about internships and the reputation of the college than about the fit and feel."

Eileen Antalek, associate director of Educational Directions, an educational consulting firm in Rhode Island, worries that such a practical way of thinking might sound promising, but may also devalue the experience.

## A TEST REST?

Federspiel said changes in standardized testing didn't seem to phase her students and ACT and SAT officials report it didn't decrease their numbers.

ACT reported a nearly 9 percent increase in the number of tested high school students to over 2 million. The College Board likewise reported its new SAT was favorably reviewed by test-takers, with 80 percent saying they liked it better than the old version. SAT reported that from March to June 2016, about 180,000 more students took the new test compared to the number taking the old test in the same period in 2015. ACT reports that the number of minority students taking its test dramatically increased, with 44 percent more Hispanics and 23 percent more African American students participating.

ACT and the College Board reported, however, that test scores and college readiness levels were down slightly, blaming the broadening pool of test takers.

"PSAT-related assessments indicate that there are still far too many students not on target to be college ready," said Cyndie Schmeiser, chief of assessment for the College Board. "We have much work to do."

Meanwhile, Antalek, said she believes this group of students is deemphasizing college admission tests.

"In some ways they are more savvy, and not preparing for these exams as much, learning that it's just one more part of the admission game. Frankly, this is one thing I'm happy about."

## GETTING AID

While Notestine and Pastor worried about the early window for FAFSA, early reports show submissions were up 21 percent, according to the National College Access Network (NCAN), though it also reported recently that overall only 44 percent of grads apply.

"More FAFSAs completed during that first four weeks is evidence that the goal of the recent change (an earlier submission date) will be achieved: Students are finding out earlier what they'll be eligible for," said Carrie Warick, director of policy and advocacy for NCAN. "If the trend continues then the goal of increasing the number of students who complete the form will also be met."

She said, however, that increasingly complex verification rules can hinder participation, citing a TICAS report that shows "the tremendous hoops low-income students are asked to jump through to prove once again that they are poor."

"There is still a lot of work to be done on that front," Notestine said.

Antalek, said students in this class ask more often about financial aid and are considering other options.

"Not necessarily just community college, but public institutions over private colleges, or one near home to commute, or a Canadian college, or using their gap year to work and save money. These graduating students have to be more creative than ever about financing an American college education."

## TECHNOLOGY IS IT

While everyone seems exceedingly aware of the internet's influence, those working with high school students still sound surprised and frustrated by its power, and the resulting short attention span and limited patience.

The Pew Research Center reports more than 90 percent of teen go online daily, and 24 percent say they are online "almost constantly."

Therapists have begun talking seriously about internet addiction. When LINK International Center for Media and the Public Agenda researchers asked 200 students to avoid electronics for one day, the comments were telling: "I clearly am addicted and the dependency is sickening," said one. "...that I was not able to communicate with anyone via technology was almost unbearable," another said.

Facebook about a year ago was the most prevalent platform (71 percent of all teens) while half use Instagram and 40 percent use Snapchat, Pew reported.

Kurilew said her counselors find it all leads to students having "no down time; no depth of thought," affecting college applications and performance.

Researchers working at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence have developed a variety of studies about young people today, and Julia Moeller, a researcher at the center, said colleges should understand that 75 percent use negative language about school.

She suggested that college officials "combine motivation interventions that teach them how to deal with adversity with wellness interventions that focus on sleep, relaxation techniques, and stress management" when talking to students.

## THE BRIGHT SIDE

High school officials note that despite concerns, these students perhaps are more inquisitive and resourceful than previous graduates. They have a unique perspective, are more accepting of diversity, and not as concerned about the impression they make.

And, perhaps most notably, they are more concerned about their community and their world than any class in some time.

"They are very much interested in having an impact in their community, more than in any prior years, and that is good to see," said Notestine. "They want to change things." □

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