

*The Ambitious Generation*, by Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson

reviewed by [David F. White](#) in the [September 22, 1999](#) issue

Adolescence has a relatively brief history. It did not emerge as an identifiable life stage until the early 20th century. Perhaps the most important influence on its development was capitalism's second technological phase, which rendered the unskilled labor of youth unnecessary and unwanted. This called for the creation of an institution to contain the young, now exiled from both childhood and adulthood.

Twentieth-century adolescence has developed in close alignment with the entertainment industry, which has assimilated youth into an all-pervasive consumer culture. At the same time, the shifting demands of global capitalism have narrowed their occupational options. Secondary and higher education has become increasingly abstracted from the rest of life: it is an insufficient but necessary credential.

Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson base their book *The Ambitious Generation* on the findings of the Alfred P. Sloan Study of Youth and Social Development, a comprehensive study of more than 7,000 youth. The five-year study was designed to "gain a holistic picture of adolescents' experiences within their various social environments—schools, families, and peer groups." Schneider, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, and Stevenson, former deputy executive director of the National Council on Educational Standards and Testing, focus on the relationship of youthful ambitions to occupational goals.

Drawing upon multiple studies, questionnaires and interviews with youth, parents and school administrators, the authors argue that today's teenagers are even more ambitious than those of earlier generations. More than 90 percent of high school seniors expect to attend college, and more than 70 percent expect to work in professional jobs. Their career aspirations set up fierce competition. For example, the number of teenagers who want to be doctors is six times greater than the number of new jobs for physicians projected for the year 2005.

During the 1950s most high school students focused on their social lives. Gender roles were highly differentiated, in anticipation of young people's social futures as workers, spouses and parents. In the '90s most of them hope to build an academic

record that will make them strong college applicants. Today's adolescents believe acquiring a college diploma is the first step toward obtaining meaningful work and the first hurdle separating winners from losers in the job market. And indeed statistics indicate that the gap in real earnings between high school and college graduates has grown from 27 percent in 1979 to 44 percent in 1995.

Schneider and Stevenson seek to correlate youths' ambitions to educational strategies for realizing those ambitions. Of the youth in the Sloan study, 43.7 percent have "aligned ambitions"—that is, their educational strategies correspond appropriately to their occupational goals. Another 40.7 percent have a "misaligned overestimate of education." Their educational plans exceed what is necessary to qualify them for their chosen work. Finally, 16.1 percent have a "misaligned underestimate" of the amount of education required for the work they hope to do. Adolescents with aligned ambitions know how the adult world works. They think of their lives as sequentially organized, with present actions shaping future possibilities. These young people have a life plan. They seek out challenges, create solutions, mobilize resources, manage time well, work hard and pursue their own aims.

Schneider and Stevenson explore the roles of various institutions—secondary schools, work, peer friendships and colleges—in shaping the ambitions and educational expectations of youth. Some high schools offer more than 350 courses—a curriculum more like that of many colleges than of the high schools of the '50s—making informed course selection more crucial. High schools vary widely in their attempt or ability to give youth wise counsel about preparing for the future. Adults often share adolescents' high ambitions, yet fail to provide concrete advice and strategic help with educational and career planning. While young people want support and direction from their parents, many parents expect their children's schools to provide that direction. The result is that many youth have inadequate educational plans. The Sloan study encourages schools to provide more career guidance through such things as internships and to teach acceptable behavior and time management (a suggestion that also could be used by leaders of church youth groups).

Schneider and Stevenson are much more concerned with the individual and interpersonal dynamics inhibiting success than with the economic and political structures that inhibit life. They aptly discuss the decline in real wages and the growing job instability among white-collar workers that have resulted in the rising

ambitions of young people and their parents. At the same time, the new financial autonomy that older adults have gained through the greater government benefits they receive has made them less willing to invest in children's education. The authors suggest that older adults must more responsibly fulfill their obligations to the young.

But Schneider and Stevenson fail to raise questions about the deeper structures responsible for the narrowed prospects of young people. They don't question the consumer market that fuels the desires and ambitions of youth and adults, nor the mercurial movements of corporations that create the stiff competition for lucrative jobs, nor the obstacles that stand in the way of those who want to pull themselves out of poverty. The exploitation of youth who staff the service industries is only one manifestation of corporate greed.

The church's concerns go well beyond assimilating youth to existing structures. Nevertheless, Schneider and Stevenson make clear how urgent it is to help youth set vocational goals and to honor and nurture their gifts, passions and possibilities.