

Publication: Jnl Final Edition 8/2005-today; Date: Aug 19, 2008; Section: News; Page: B3



Think Jay, Not Johnny

List reminds teachers to update their cultural references

By Dinesh Ramde The Associated Press

Students entering college this fall have lived their whole lives in a digital world — where GPS has always been available, phones have always had caller ID and tax returns could always be filed online.

The incoming freshmen, born mostly in 1990, also grew up knowing only Jay Leno on “The Tonight Show.”

Those are some of the 60 cultural landmarks on the Beloit College Mindset List, an annual compilation that offers a glimpse of the world as seen through the eyes of each incoming class.

This year’s list is being released today by the private school of 1,300 near the Wisconsin-Illinois state line.

The school started producing the list in 1998 to remind professors that references familiar to them might draw blank stares from their students.

“Watergate used to be a common reference,” said Ron Nief, the school’s director of public affairs, who assembles the list. “But a few years ago I asked some students if they knew what Watergate was and they said that was where Monica Lewinsky lived.”

Some entries on this year’s list are products that have been around for the lifetimes of the class of 2012, including karaoke machines, plastic soft drink bottles, Windows 3.0 and higher and the Nintendo Game Boy.

Other cultural markers are all but unknown to them — IBM typewriters, Roseanne Barr’s tortured version of the national anthem, Pee-wee Herman’s “Playhouse” and gas-station attendants who fix flat tires or offer to check under the hood.

The purpose of the Mindset List goes beyond reminding professors to update their references, said Tom McBride, an English professor at Beloit who helps Nief compile the list.

“It also prevents students from thinking that the way something is now is the way it’s always been,” he said.

For example, one entry had to be updated within the past month after the Green Bay Packers traded quarterback Brett Favre to the New York Jets after a 16-year career in Wisconsin. “The Green Bay Packers (almost) always had the same quarterback,” reads the revised No. 46.

That stunned incoming freshman Ben Zook of Seattle, who said Favre is one of his generation’s athletic idols, along with Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods.

“I mean, for as long as I can remember, Brett Favre was the man there,” said Zook, 18. “It’s almost

crazy to think he could retire or be with another team.”

New freshman Dana Wierzbicki, 18, said her favorite item on the list was the first: “Harry Potter could be a classmate, playing on their Quidditch team.”

“I’m a huge Harry Potter fan,” Wierzbicki said. “I wish it was sort of true — being on Quidditch with him would be kind of cool.”

Every time the list comes out, McBride said, the school hears from people around the world who say it makes them feel as though life is passing them by. “We say join the club. It makes us feel old, too,” he said.

Time seems to pass more slowly for kids because they’re doing more things for the first time, he speculated. But when a person gets older and does the same things over and over, the routine makes time seem to speed up.

When the 2006 list came out, McBride reassured people by telling them it was the trends and fashions that had grown old, not them.



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