THE NEW STUDENT

Who is the “millennial student?”
The author goes directly to the source for some enlightening answers and discusses the implications of his findings.

Students entering college at the beginning of this new century are a distinctive generation. Labeled millennials, Internet gens, generation Y, and baby boomers II, they have been described as ambitious, precocious, stressed, indifferent, wayward, technornerd, heterogeneous, politically conservative, and sexually active. These descriptions are only a portion of many qualities that make up the complex mosaic that is this generation.

The truth, of course, is that this generation deals with many of the same developmental issues that students have dealt with for ages: individuating from childhood influences, forming peer relationships, developing vocational skills, and determining a purpose and a path for future life. However, today’s students have grown up in a world in revolution, where rapid changes have provided a new expansiveness in information, a multiplicity of potential life experiences, advancing technological sophistication, and pluralistic social models to emulate. In many ways, this revolution has dramatically affected the attitudes, behaviors, and aspirations of students and altered how the college years function in helping students make the transition from adolescence to adulthood.

What are the trends in students’ behaviors and attitudes that differentiate these students from previous generations? My conversations

By Fred B. Newton
with faculty and student affairs colleagues confirm the view that indeed we have a new breed of students on campus. However, to pin down a profile of the new student is more difficult. Like the proverbial animal created by a committee, the qualities become more mythical than actual. Initially, I explored the question of student change by reading the published works of colleagues, such as Art Levine and Jeanette Curéton's *When Hope and Fear Collide*, or research reviews such as the "Annual Survey of Freshmen," a longitudinal study of entering college freshmen maintained for over thirty years at the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) by Alexander Astin and his colleagues. More recently, I tapped one of the richest sources of information—students' own stories. Students are excited to talk about their life and very willing to participate in focus groups and seminar discussion and to keep a journal of their college experience. They are also curious about their peers and willing to query other students through interviews, observations, and campus polls—methods they report on in class projects. Over the past two years, about two hundred students participated in a project that I directed at Kansas State University designed to explore the nuances of college life through students' personal vignettes and commentary.

The student information gathered during the project has subsequently been shared as observations with a number of faculty and staff in-service groups. Although I was cautious to explain that these subjective observations contain potentially refutable generalizations about a student population, the findings did offer a provocative stimulus for faculty and staff discussions. Colleagues representing over thirty college campuses have responded to my observations through discussion sessions in which they have enthusiastically added their own perceptions and reactions. What is most important is that they offered comments on what this means to the teaching and service functions of a campus and how the campus can become more responsive to student needs. What follows is a summary of the observations from students and the reflections from faculty and staff collected during the two-year project period.

**Characteristics of a Millennial Student**

A FEW YEARS AGO campus bookstores sold posters that depicted types of students such as the nerd or the jock. The nerd poster prominently displayed the props of wire-rimmed glasses, a pocket protector for pens, a slide rule on the belt, and an unruly haircut. The characteristics were generalizations that rang a certain bell of recognition in people's minds, but of course the poster was a stereotype that did not represent any real student. Similarly, the characteristics outlined below are a synthesis of qualities gathered from project data. I emphasize caution concerning stereotypes, as these characteristics represent tendencies now seen in students that may or may not exist in any given student.

*Students enter college having had greater exposure to and more experimentation with "grown-up" activity than any previous generation.* This group of students did not wait to start college to get out from under the wings of adults and experiment with matters such as sex, alcohol, drugs, spending money, or even different lifestyle options. I have heard that today the onset of puberty is now typical at closer to age ten than the old norm of thirteen as the age of passage. One implication of early maturation is that teenagers now have more time to experiment and act out as middle school and high school students well before arriving at college. They are also a part of the "home alone" generation, having spent many hours in the hands of television, the Internet, peer groups, and alternative parent figures. Parents, less influential in terms of emotional support, guidance, and physical time, frequently compensate by providing more in the way of material indulgence, which creates in the developing child a sense of personal privilege. One student described his transition to college as more of a "moving on" to meet new people and find different experiences than a new "freedom to party and play," which he felt had already taken place while he was in high school.

*Students receive extensive and rapid exposure to a vast and ever-increasing level of informational activity, which makes them the most informed generation to have lived on the planet.* However, although students have more general knowledge, they come to our campuses with less experience in exercising the discipline and focus required to explore a subject in depth. In other words, quantity of information is not coincident with depth and quality of experience, qualities that may have greater value in life attainments. Life management skills including factors such as discipline, deferred gratification, and long-term directed effort—what Daniel Goleman describes as "emotional
intelligence”—are frequently deficient. One of my independent exploration classes carried out interviews with other students on life skill topics such as time management, financial budgeting, and long-term goal setting. They found that most students do not follow any systematic method for managing their resources of time, money, or even personal health, although these same students could identify critical moments when they were confronted with a problem and lacked the know-how for resolution. A colleague reminded me that it seems that “living by the seat of the pants” is a very typical stance that has characterized generations of students. Two factors make today’s situation different. One is that students have received less hands-on mentoring from parents or other adult figures on “how to” behaviors. The second factor is that students are under pressure to demonstrate these skills in order to advance their career opportunities. This point was made clear to me when I heard a health professions adviser talk to an orientation group of entering freshmen. She told them that it was extremely important that they manage their credit card use (which nearly all had) in a fiscally sound way. Why? Because, for applicants for most medical school programs, their credit rating will be just as critical as their grades when they are considered for admissions to a professional program that typically requires large educational loans.

Social connection and intimacy are taking on different patterns as students are less likely to be paired off in couples and more likely to participate in group activities, have brief intimate encounters, and experiment with many living options before settling down into an adult pattern. They defer commitment to marriage, considering it something that may happen much later, although many have already experimented with cohabitation relationships and shared living space, and talk about spontaneous intimacies such as in “shacking up.” Shacking up, a term frequently used in student journals and discussions, connotes freedom to experiment with overnight intimacies with a relative stranger.

Emotionally, students are experiencing increasingly high levels of stress and anxiety. Data from the 1999 UCLA incoming freshmen class, results of the Higher Education Research Institute study, indicated that students already are admitting to higher levels of stressful concern than any previous generation of students. Women students are especially stressed, as they arrive on campus with expectations to develop successful career paths in highly competitive fields. Yet they still maintain many of the traditional female values such as holding responsibility in relationships, social activity, child care, and many domestic tasks. During our interviews for this project, a group of senior women, reflecting upon their transitions during and after college, illustrated the pressures women face to succeed on many fronts. One senior woman commented, “I want it all, the career now [meaning upon graduation], the family [in five to ten years], the nice home with a comfortable lifestyle, and the enjoyment of travel and leisure activity.” The demand, in turn, has created greater incidence of stress-related disorders, including headaches, digestive problems, hypertension, and depression. An interesting comparison of the freshmen data shows that female students are expressing twice as much stress as their male counterparts. Male students, once noted for their competitive zeal on entering the workforce and high incidence of heart attacks and ulcers by middle age, appear more likely to escape into very low-stress activities such as watching television, engaging in sports, and playing video games. What does this mean? Perhaps the pressure to be successful on all fronts has women students feeling the need to stake out the various pathways of success as early as possible, while male students may be using college as a last escape before the settling-down years. What is clear is that we need to learn more about how changing gender role expectations are influencing the pressures and stresses felt by female and male students in this generation.

Students today are on the cutting edge of technological proficiency, and in most cases they are beyond their parents,

Today’s students did not wait to start college to get out from under the wings of adults and experiment with matters such as sex, alcohol, drugs, spending money, or even different lifestyle options.
We need to learn more about how changing gender role expectations are influencing the pressures and stresses felt by female and male students in this generation.

teachers, and potential bosses. It wasn’t long ago that I made the faulty assumption that rapid technological change was a major contribution to student anxiety. However, as Tapscott points out in Growing Up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation, it is now quite obvious that high-tech anxiety is proportional to age and found more frequently in older adults. Any student born after 1979 has grown up with computers in their schoolroom, sophisticated electronic games, the Internet as a search tool, and an overall comfort with technology. In fact, there is considerable evidence that these “Internet gens” command salaries in the work world very competitive and comparable to someone who has been “out there” for ten to fifteen years. This is exemplified by a recent front-page story in our college newspaper, which featured students who successfully launched Internet businesses from their dorm rooms. A surgeon demonstrating microsurgery on the Learning Channel aptly described the technological precocity of this generation. He asserted that this technology would reach its full potential when these young people, weaned on eye-hand-brain coordination via the Mario Brothers, enter the medical profession. This generation of students becomes the first test of how well the simulation of real life experienced via computer technology translates into actual skills. Whether the result is a new proficiency as a surgeon or a teenager capable of using automatic weaponry for a terrorist attack may be determined by issues surrounding the technology, including questions of ethics, appropriateness, and application.

More students are taking part-time employment during college, while their commitment to school work appears to be diminished. There is evidence that a majority of all students are working in some type of employment, on or off campus. A large number of students indicate that work is a necessity to meet expenses of college and avoid accumulating heavy loan debts. However, it was interesting that students surveyed by their peers on how and where they spent money referred in their responses to “maintaining their lifestyle.” They included comments about as the importance of having “deluxe cable” television (ESPN, movie channels), the pressure from social groups to have “a wardrobe from Abercrombie and Fitch,” “keeping the car payments up,” “saving for a spring vacation trip,” or needing to have some “money to party.” Work often gets the first priority for time in the student’s life. Meanwhile, in my discussions with faculty on the topic, I have heard responses that parallel the findings of the freshmen survey from UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute: Students spend less time on homework, are more likely to skip class, and look for ways to get by with minimal effort in greater frequency than previous generations. Finding a part-time job today is easy for college students. The service industry utilizes them as a labor resource requiring modest pay, minimum benefits, limited training, and flexible work hours. There may be two interpretations of the increasing emphasis on part-time work for college students. At one level it is assumed that work activity may help to motivate students, increase their ability to manage time, and develop work skills. However, another conclusion is that too much work activity is a distraction from studies and is primarily motivated by the need to maintain short-term lifestyle gratification.

Students are ambitious in their career aspirations yet frequently have unrealistic expectations about what it takes to achieve these goals. Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson conducted a longitudinal study of eight hundred middle to high school students during the mid-1990s. Seventy percent of these students, now of college age, indicated that they were directed themselves toward college degrees, most aspiring to high-status careers such as engineering, medicine, business management, and computer programming. The researchers noted that student aspirations were not matched by realistic assessment of their ability or the demands necessary for achieving those goals. They estimated that only 20 percent of the high-aspiring high school students could achieve their goals. This gap between ambition and the components of successful achievement, which usually include both ability and effort, is often replaced in the college student mind by emphasis on a good appearance. For example, students frequently join clubs or volunteer for certain activities because they “look good” on a résumé. Creating the match between the student and the good job will eventually go deeper than getting “in the door” of
employment. Recently, the director of career employment services invited me to a luncheon meeting with an employment recruiter. This recruiter made it clear that her company, a major employer in the region, carefully tempered the company's potential for making an employment error by having trial employment periods, a situation through which over a third of all new employees are released after a year of evaluation and screening.

Students are well aware of campus and community rules, regulations, and political correctness. These rules are frequently perceived without personal or moral commitment, so that the challenge for students is to find a way around the rule, create the right appearance by hiding unapproved behavior, and live by a philosophy such as “cheating is OK if you do not get caught.” Discussions with students indicate that they feel little commitment to show up in a class if attendance is not kept and the consequences are not dire—such as missing a test. My campus found that cheating on tests was so pervasive that a task force was created to find a solution. Students are able to provide a list of politically correct standards and at the same time describe how they can disguise noncompliant discriminatory, illegal, or immoral behaviors. Students in many ways may be reflecting the tenor of the larger society, which has created more laws, regulations, and standards than ever before. Paradoxically, these rules are met with greater circumvention, indifference, and in some cases disdain because “we don’t think the rule is very important.” This observation raises interesting questions: Should the campus accept and reflect the behavior of the larger society? Or should the campus be a place that promotes a higher set of standards, such as rules that evolve from debate and dialogue in which participants share a level of commitment to their adherence? The decision to create a smoke-free residence hall will be most likely to succeed when the residents themselves initiate and carry out a plan to accomplish that end.

Many students do get involved in political activity and community service projects, but do so within a circle of influence that is familiar and connected to their local interests.

Students indicate that they help build Habitat for Humanity houses, participate in Big Brother and Big Sister programs, sign petitions for smoke-free environments, and join marches for local causes. However, they are much less likely to participate in movements of greater scope, tend to be cynical about national politics, and are usually unfamiliar with national and world leaders and their views. One of our students surveyed his classmates and found only about one-third had any expectation of voting in the next national election.

EXPLAINING THE DYNAMICS OF STUDENT CHANGES

WHAT EXPLAINS the trends and characteristics that are evident in the millennial student? To find out, we first must understand how a period of profound societal change has had a dramatic impact on individuals. The sociologist Felix Geyer posited that students in the postmodern era have been caught in the throes of a complex and rapidly changing society. The consequence of large-scale systemic change, when a chain of familiar patterns is disrupted, is the potential for individuals to become alienated and lose sight of purpose, become empty of meaning, and operate without a standard ethos. The instability, however, creates a tension for resolution away from alienation and toward a reformulated sense of coherence. Coherence for individuals is the attainment of a perspective that seeks and finds consistency, clarity, connection, and congruence in their lives.

Students can develop this sense of coherence in at least three ways. The first is by establishing a personal worldview, or organizing structure, which helps them make sense of the complexity of their lives. Students can develop this structure through a variety of means, including the process of primary group socialization, the prescription of societal rules and guidelines, and, more recently, extensive exposure to electronic media, which has opened up a myriad of additional worldviews that would have seemed remote to a previous generation.

The second feature is to promote for students a sense of manageability. Manageability is experienced as

This generation of students becomes the first test of how well the simulation of real life by computer technology translates into actual skills.
Should the campus accept and reflect the behavior of the larger society? Or should the campus be a place that promotes a potentially higher set of standards?

a sense of control. For students, it is connecting the learning experience to future utility. Control in this sense means not being overwhelmed by all the surrounding influences, but being able to selectively acknowledge what is within one’s reach and capability. Part of the management process is understanding the utility of what is already known and recognizing the gaps where one can learn and be taught. Skills of manageability include knowledge of how to get access to information, information discrimination, problem solving, resource management, strategic planning, time management, and recognition of the need for personal balance—that is, maintaining harmony among the mental, physical, social, and spiritual elements of life.

The third feature of adjustment is achieving a sense of meaningfulness. Meaningfulness is the extent to which people believe and experience that the expectations, demands, and activities of their lives are worthy of commitment and engagement. Meaning provides the higher-level motivation to follow with commitment and rigor a path that is determined to have value. Meaning can be achieved by a conscious personal search for internal truths that fit a lifestyle of activity in work, play, and social contact.

HAVING AN INFLUENCE ON THE MILLENNIAL STUDENT

THE HIGHER EDUCATION environment has historically provided many of the conditions that will be helpful to these students. It can be a place of exploration, dialogue, and experimentation within a context where expectations, systematic feedback, and protective boundaries afford a level of security. Accepting the fact that most college campuses already have in place much of the philosophy and appliance that will help the millennial student achieve comprehension, what further emphasis needs to be made to improve this potential? The following are suggestions:

Faculty and staff may need to recognize that students are already different in their attitudes and behavior as a result of the social and technological revolution. Jeffrey Arnett, in a recent article in American Psychologist, postulates the need to consider a new conceptualization of development for individuals in the eighteen-to-twenty-five age group. He says that present-day demographics show that these years are the beginning of not simply a brief transition between adolescence and early adulthood but also an extended period that he labels emerging adulthood. He describes it as a time of profound change in which there is relative freedom to experiment, explore, and try out behaviors in avenues that include interests, work, love, and values. The settling-down behaviors of adulthood, such as marriage and childbearing, are being deferred to later years of life, thus creating a wider seam of years for exploration and experimentation. Students I have interviewed illustrate such a pattern by "stopping out," changing majors, spending intermittent periods living at the family home, taking a semester abroad, working a year at a resort, or living in a communal rented house with a group of friends. These types of activities may be more typical than the traditional trajectory we imagine of students entering college, completing a degree in four years, and beginning an adult career upon graduation. I sometimes wonder whether experimentation has become a lifestyle in its own right that carries on into later years or whether it is a testing ground that affords the new student plenty of time to determine priorities and thus make choices that are more stable and aligned to tested and deeply held values. It seems important that educators begin to recognize that this longer period of deferred adulthood is a significant period for formulation of life goals among emerging adults, not just a brief pause between childhood and adulthood.

A campus must still offer deliberate classroom and out-of-class opportunities for student personal awareness and exploration to take place. A value of the academy is to promote exploration, discussion, and personal awareness. I was not surprised at the level of student enthusiasm for sharing stories and offering opinions in our class and focus group discussions. However, it was more surprising
to hear students claim that it was rare for them to be in a class that promoted discussion beyond strict content questions. Faculty, in contrast, complained that it was hard to engage students in dialogue or discussion during classes, indicating that they often needed to find ways to prod enthusiasm and connection to the learning topic. As for students, in their journals they described difficulty in talking directly with faculty members during office hours, citing reasons such as “they were not there,” “they were busy,” or it would be “too embarrassing” if the faculty member thought the question was stupid or a waste of time. Many students found a less direct approach to faculty through e-mail, which avoided the concerns with intrusion and the embarrassment of a face-to-face encounter. Though class discussion may still be the hallmark of distinction for a good liberal arts education, there is evidence that the press to cover more material and be objective and not personal in the classroom has diminished the dialogue. The seminar group, the class discussion period, and the Socratic teaching method are time-honored class processes that need to be applied, not abandoned.

The information revolution has created the need to reduce pressure on students to accumulate a personal knowledge base and instead emphasize the development of process tools for information retrieval. It is imperative that students gain skills for locating and screening informational sources. Students also must develop methods to discriminate regarding information authenticity, integrate knowledge with situational components, and solve problems.

Students need to have skills to manage their daily life. Time and again students reported in our focus groups that their biggest concerns were basic day-to-day skills such as how to manage time, finances, relationships, and stress. Frequently these needs were mentioned because of an immediate crisis of survival, and students lacked the foresight to come up with a long-term solution. A financial aid officer who mentioned to me her ideal strategy for working with students illustrates this concern. She said that while students may initially be worried whether they have enough money to make it through the month, what they really need is to understand the big picture, which includes a cost and investment analysis of their education and career future. The financial aid officer indicated that she felt it would be just as beneficial for her office to offer short courses in personal finance as to distribute scholarship and loan packages. Similar scenarios could apply in other areas of self-management.

Campuses need to provide opportunities for students to explore the meaning and purpose of their life activity. It is popular on many campuses to provide retreats, workshops, and even courses in the areas of leadership, peer helping, team building, and service activity. Although these activities are not new to college campuses, there has been a burgeoning interest. Much of the demand comes from students who have been introduced to the idea and have gone back to their student groups and promoted further experiences within clubs and living groups or as cross-cultural experiences. One student writing a journal that included a time line of the high and low points during the year indicated that his peak learning experience occurred at a leadership retreat.

We need to understand, nourish, and find ways to influence the peer culture. A recent book by Malcolm Gladwell entitled The Tipping Point, is a source of interesting reading and powerful insights on how a few significant people can have tremendous influence on the initiation of trends, fads, and social behavior for the many. His principles may apply even more dramatically to a college campus than to society at large. Gladwell argues that the emergence of new social behaviors is most frequently the result of a few individuals who are able to create a “tipping point” of difference within a rather large sphere of influence. He suggests there are some factors that identify those few who are the influence makers. “Tippers” are people who have large networks of contact with people. They are able to connect in ways that cross many different subgroups. Tippers are also sensitive detectors of the interests and whims of their peers. They seem to access the pertinent signals and are able to anticipate the likes and inclinations of the population. This factor makes it easy for them to be the trendsetters. A third characteristic Gladwell describes as the “stickiness factor.” The person with tipper potential is able to communicate a message in a manner that sticks, so it will be remembered by others. Gladwell’s points are interesting reading and also provide some possibilities for identifying students on a campus who can be resources as sounding boards, message carriers, and potential change agents. One way for professional educators to have an impact on college students is to understand and make use of the principles and tools of influence. I am currently working with a group of colleagues on a grant with which we hope to create an advisory board of students with tipper qualities to provide reactions, inputs, and message development ideas for our project.

Understand and utilize how students are affected by what they perceive as the normative behavior of their peers.
in the social environment. We know that social norms sway individual behavior; however, the problem is that students frequently have a distorted view of the norm. Student alcohol consumption is a good example. For many reasons—including the media hype on student drinking episodes, the bravado of students’ “morning after” stories, and even campus programs that operate from an “ain’t it awful” perspective—the information that students receive about drinking tends to overemphasize the extreme alcohol consumption behaviors of a few students. That exaggeration becomes perception of what is happening on campus. Sociologist Wes Perkins has developed a model for using the social norms approach in alcohol and drug prevention programs. Education programs to counter erroneous perceptions are based upon surveys of actual student behavior, which indicate that most students drink moderately and take steps to protect themselves from problem drinking situations. Several campuses, including Northern Illinois University, University of Arizona, and the University of Missouri, have implemented variations of this model and demonstrated success in reducing binge drinking rates over a period of several years through education and message dissemination about the actual normative drinking behavior on those campuses. Finding ways to provide students with accurate information about responsible peer behaviors, and demythologizing attention-getting extreme behaviors can provide a better social anchor for prevention in many areas of student risk, including smoking and violent activity.

Economic necessity and the need for time efficiency frequently become values that affect the higher education system. A faculty member feels this when he or she must choose between spending office hours with a student or developing a grant project. The efficiency factor is manifested in the proliferation of regulations to govern all manner of student behavior and the computerization of scheduling and advising functions. Higher education can operate as a sound business in many ways; however, we must not lose sight of the values that make the academy a place where students develop fully as citizens and not as robots following a prescribed set of behaviors with a bottom-line economic value. Human contact is essential, discussion is imperative, exploration desirable, scrutiny helpful, correction educational, and reflection meaningful to the examined life.

NOTES


