

Today's students: same as always, but more so

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They're not that different from undergraduates of the past, but they face a changed world.

There is a popular expression in Thailand: "same same, but different." It means just about anything the user wants it to mean. In this case, it's a good description of today's undergraduates. After conducting a four-year study of college students, we found them similar to their predecessors of the past 20 years, but also unique in ways that have important implications for higher education.

What is familiar is that current undergraduates are little involved in campus life, disenchanted with politics and government, more issue-oriented than ideological, engaged in community service, utilitarian in their goals for college, weak academically, frequenters of psychological-counseling services, eager consumers, and partial to sex and alcohol. Just more so, in each category, than their predecessors.

What is different is that there are stark contradictions between student beliefs and the realities of their lives; a gulf between their dreams and the diminished conditions of the world in which they live. Consider this:

- Most college students (89 percent) say they are optimistic about their personal futures but pessimistic about the future of the country (65 percent).
- Three out of four undergraduates expect to be at least as well off as their parents, but four out of five do not expect Social Security to be available when they retire.
- Current undergraduates have the most inflated grades in 40 years, but a majority (60 percent) believe their grades understate their academic ability, even though nearly half (45 percent) have had to take remedial courses. (Forty-one percent have grades of A-minus or higher, compared with 7 percent in 1969, and only 9 percent have grades of C or lower, compared with 25 percent in 1969.)
- Undergraduates want change, but they are timid rule followers. They are politically disengaged. More than four out of five believe meaningful social change cannot be achieved through traditional American politics. Only one in nine has ever participated in a demonstration, the lowest level in more than 40 years of research.
- Today's students are simultaneously the most connected and disconnected generation in collegiate history. They are connected online 24/7, have reduced the historic campus racial and gender barriers, and aspire to have traditional lifelong relationships with a partner and children at higher rates than their predecessors. But their face-to-face communication skills are poor. They live in a world that emphasizes hookups and one-night stands.

They substitute impersonal communications--texting and parental intervention--for difficult personal conversations such as breaking up and confronting a roommate. Accounts of roommates sitting in the same room facing away from each other and firing angry texts back and forth but refusing to talk are legion. The classic image of this generation is a pack of students walking across campus together, each one on a phone communicating with others.

Our research, which included surveys of undergraduates and chief student-affairs officers as well as interviews with student-life staff and student focus groups on 39 diverse campuses, found that the contradictions were being driven by three competing forces:

1. Parents who coddled, protected, and lavishly praised their children and made them more dependent than any generation in 40 years. Our data show that two of every five students are in at least daily contact with their families, while three-quarters of colleges report increased parent involvement in their children's lives and in college affairs--the

rise of overly intrusive helicopter parents. The result is an immature generation, inexperienced in dealing with adversity, and expecting applause for all it does.

2. The prolonged economic recession, which has forced more students to work longer, take fewer courses, live at home, temporarily drop out, and give up on institutions and political leaders unable to deal with the problem.
3. A digital revolution that produced higher education's first digital natives, who are better at communicating online than in person and often are more closely connected to a virtual social-media community than to the physical campus community. There is a mismatch between them and their colleges on issues as fundamental as when, where, and how education should occur. Often students do not understand fundamental academic conventions, such as the definition of plagiarism, or what constitutes appropriate decorum in a classroom. This create a growing tension between students and faculty.

This generation of college students is no better and no worse than those who came before them, but these students require an education geared both to their unique strengths and weaknesses and to the times. At the simplest level, that means colleges and universities must be explicit about their expectations and the rules of the academy. They cannot assume that students know them.

It means that students need an education that will focus on building the independence and communication skills they lack, and that parents must be taught about their appropriate roles in their children's lives and collegiate affairs. Colleges need to be honest with students in identifying their strengths and their weaknesses. Curbing grade inflation is a good way to begin.

It means providing students with both an understanding of the realities of the world and the skills and knowledge to thrive in a time of profound, accelerating, and continuous change as this country makes the transition to a global, digital-information economy.

The greatest challenge for colleges is to transform themselves for the emerging society. Only once has higher education faced a challenge this large: when America made the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society and the 17th-century college gave way to the university. If colleges do not act on our suggestions, the risk is that they will inadequately prepare their graduates for living. If they fail to accomplish the transformation, they risk becoming irrelevant.

Fonte: Chronicle of Higher Education, Vol. 59 Issue 3, p. 20, 14 Sept. 2012 [Base de Dados]. Disponível em: <<http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail?sid=abb3e764-b927-4dd7-ab3f-035f69b385ca%40sessionmgr110&vid=1&hid=126&bdata=Jmxhbmc9cHQYnImc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZl#db=tfh&AN=79968211>>. Acesso em: 28 Sept. 2012.