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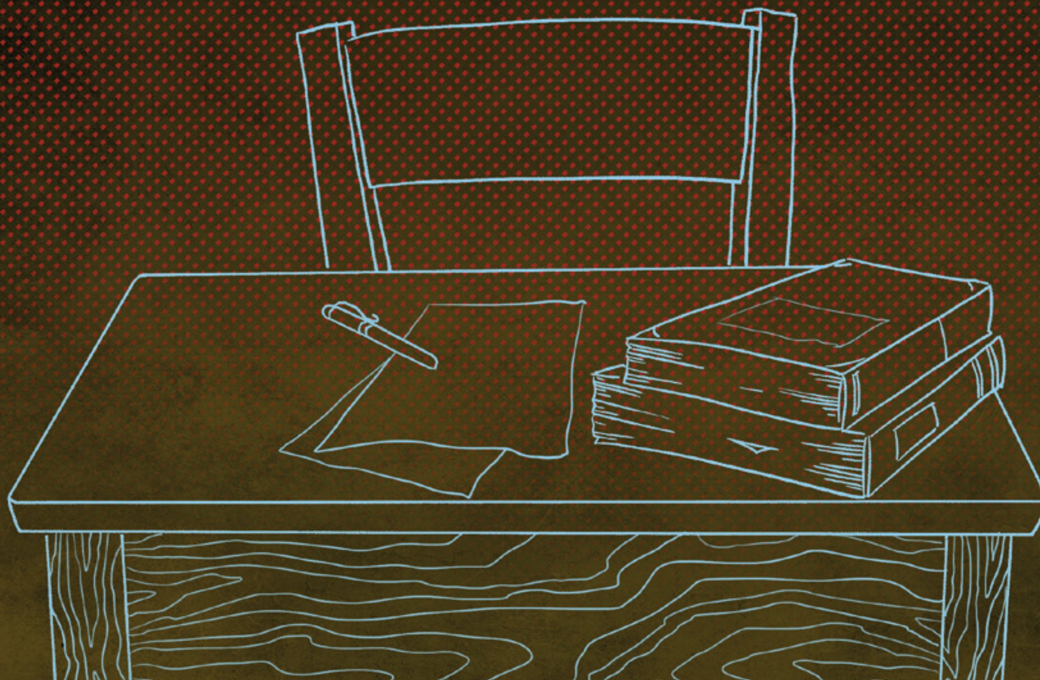

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5 Ways Today's Students Are Radically Changing Our Colleges

BY ARTHUR LEVINE AND DIANE R. DEAN

BOARDS OF TRUSTEES ARE DEALING WITH A PANOPLY OF *Star Wars*-like issues that their predecessors could never have imagined. Should our institution offer MOOCs? Does it still make sense to continue to build a physical plant or buy books for the library? How does our institution educate students to live in an emerging global society or to work at jobs that do not yet exist? Yet looming larger and more immediate is a change that has already occurred: Students on campus today are different from their predecessors in ways that have profound implications for colleges and their boards.

TAKEAWAYS

There are five primary differences between today's students and their predecessors:

1. Today's undergraduates are the first generation of digital natives.
2. Undergraduates today are older. Fewer live on campus and more attend part-time.
3. They are products of the worst economy since the Great Depression.
4. They are more immature, dependent, coddled, and entitled.
5. They are the most diverse generation in higher education history.

DOMINIC BUGATTO

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Those are the findings of a study we conducted between 2006 and 2012 of current undergraduates, including a survey of a nationally representative sample of 5,000 students; two surveys and interviews with chief student affairs officers; and focus group interviews with students on 33 campuses. (Comparable studies were carried out in 1969, 1976, and 1993.) Five differences between students today and their predecessors stand out.

1. Today's undergraduates are the first generation of digital natives.

The class of 2013 was born into a world in which Apple, Microsoft, and AOL already existed. There were already personal computers, CDs, mobile phones, e-mail, instant messaging, and the Internet. By the time those students were in kindergarten, texting, Web browsers, smartphones, DVDs, Yahoo, and the dot-com bubble were realities.

Before today's students finished elementary school, Google, Napster, music file sharing, and the iPod had come onto the scene. Middle school brought Skype, MySpace, and Facebook. They had to wait until high school for YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone. The ubiquitous presence of such technologies has shaped students' understanding of the world. It has influenced their preferences and molded their expectations for how they will learn, work, socialize, recreate, and live.

The result is a growing and fundamental mismatch between our analog higher education institutions and the digital natives whom we enroll. The vast majority of American colleges operate on the concepts of fixed time and location. Most have physical plants, offer instruction based on credit hours and semesters, and provide services during scheduled office hours. They are provider-driven organizations, characteristically deliberative in their processes.

Digital natives, in contrast, operate on the concept of "anytime, anywhere." They expect access to people, goods, and services via their digital devices 24/7, from wherever they choose to be. They are consumer-driven and anticipate immediate responses to their requests.

Passive learning, like books and lectures, still holds sway in the majority of college courses. Faculty members came of age before the advent of the digital revolution and adapted to innovations during their adult lives. Predominantly abstract and reflective learners themselves, faculty members typically replicate their preferred learning styles in their own teaching. They focus on the organized delivery of in-depth information to help students master knowledge.

In contrast, digital natives prefer active and concrete learning involving practical applications, games, and collaborations. They focus on obtaining a breadth of information rather than gaining depth. Skilled gatherers, they are adept at and comfortable with finding information "just in time." A majority (78 percent) think undergraduate education would be improved if classes made greater use of technology and professors knew more about how to use it. Half would like more blended instruction in their courses, combining online and in-person classes. One-third would like more courses completely online. This fundamental mismatch is producing problems in the classroom. Faculty members complain continually about students who text, e-mail, take phone calls, and even listen to music and watch movies in class.

Academic integrity has also grown ambiguous in the digital age, expanding the possibilities for cheating and plagiarism. Deans of students across all types of institutions report increased instances of cheating and plagiarism among undergraduates, because growing numbers of students do not understand why plagiarism is wrong. Students routinely engage in file sharing and idea sharing of all kinds. They write and enjoy fan fiction, liberally using characters and settings without the original author's permission. Similarly, they make fan films and videos, and they "mash up" music, creating custom songs by blending pieces of existing music.

Such are the outgrowths of digital culture. What the academic code of conduct defines as plagiarism and cheating, students may misguidedly perceive as fan theses or mash-up midterms. So it should not be surprising that the deans of students at half of the campuses in our study reported that faculty comfort with today's students and their behavior has decreased, while faculty complaints about students and their behavior have increased.

Moreover, although students are linked with friends, family, and acquaintances 24/7 via social media, this generation is poor in face-to-face communication skills. Dean after dean described to us the phenomenon of students walking across the campus in a group, talking to other people on the phone but not to each other. That issue is particularly apparent with regard to conflict resolution, which students prefer to handle through the psychological distance of technology. Students argue via texting and "unfriend" each other via social media sites. Over two-fifths of the campuses we surveyed reported a growth in online incivility among students. Over half reported increased Internet or e-mail stalking and harassment, and two-fifths reported increased cell-phone stalking or harassment.

The challenge for colleges is not enlarging syllabi to define classroom decorum and academic dishonesty or teaching students how to more intelligently use digital media. It is understanding that they lag behind their students and the global, digital, information economy in which those students will live their lives. They remain analog institutions seeking to educate digital natives. They need to make fundamental changes.

2. Today's undergraduates are older. Fewer live on campus and more attend part-time.

When most people think of college students, they picture traditional undergraduates—those who are 18 to 24 years old, attend college full-time, and live on a campus. But such students make up less than one-quarter of all undergraduates.

Nontraditional students, the new majority of undergraduates, are older, primarily women, employed, and attend college part-time. Higher education is one of the many activities—including commitments to families, spouses, friends, and jobs—that they juggle each day. College is often not their principal priority.

Our research shows that nontraditional students are seeking a relationship with their college much like those they have with all of the other service providers in their lives—their bank, their Internet provider, and their supermarket. From all of them, students are looking for the same four things: conve-

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nience, service, quality products, and price.

That means students want parking to be accessible near classrooms, courses to be available when they need to take them, and office hours offered at convenient times. They are looking for good customer service—admissions officers, financial-aid administrators, and registrars who are committed to helping students. They want high-quality instruction relevant to the real world, with up-to-date professors who know how to teach and who return assignments and tests quickly with comments.

And they want low prices. They are willing to shop around (although a good number have more money than time). They do not want to spend money on what they are not using. They tend to come to the campus just for classes—they ride in and ride out—and do not want to pay for the electives they are not taking, the student activities they aren't attending, or the athletics fields on which they aren't playing. They want a stripped-down version of higher education. These students are prime candidates for online degrees, and proprietary institutions, competing with traditional campuses, gear programs to their needs.

These students are markedly different from traditional ones who are asking for collegiate life with all the bells and whistles in facilities, services, and course offerings. In short, the current marketplace for colleges is composed of consumer-oriented populations with expectations and demands that are sharply opposed to what colleges traditionally have been offering.

3. Today's undergraduates are products of the worst economy since the Depression.

The students now enrolled believe the economy is the most important issue facing the country. It has determined whether, where, and how they go to college. One in four who previously lived on his or her own is moving back in with parents.

Across the spectrum of colleges we surveyed, a majority of deans (68 percent) reported that greater numbers of students are working, and they are working longer hours. Most working students (80 percent) say they need or want the money to pay for basic living expenses and tuition. Nearly half chose their colleges based on offers of financial aid. Yet two-thirds are leaving college with large student-loan debts, and a majority (72 percent) are concerned about repaying those debts.

Financial pressures force students to make choices that delay their college completion. Nearly half of the deans whom we surveyed reported increases in the numbers of students stopping out—taking time off from college—because of financial concerns. One-third said that more students on their campuses were taking fewer credits each semester or dropping out completely. Indeed, only one-third of undergraduates complete their B.A. degree within four years, according to U.S. Department of Education statistics.

Accordingly, students are making very pragmatic choices about their college studies. Most of the those we surveyed (83 percent) said that it is very important to them to be well-off financially. They are choosing majors based on their job prospects, regardless of what they would prefer to study or the career they would like to pursue. More than three-fifths say that the chief benefit of college is to increase one's earning power. And nearly three out of four, a proportion that has risen steadily since 1969, say obtaining a detailed grasp of a special field (74 percent) and training and skills for an occupation (73 percent) is essential. In fact, most students (75 percent) want their colleges to put greater emphasis on such things.

In short, today's undergraduates are more vocationally oriented, more likely to choose their college based upon cost, and less likely to live on the campus than their predecessors. They want programs that will provide them with jobs.

4. Today's undergraduates are more immature, dependent, coddled, and entitled.

This is a generation in which nearly everyone has won awards and few have been permitted to fail. They rely much more on their parents than their predecessors and have fathers and mothers who are more involved in what they are doing than ever before. Parents are far more important in all aspects of college life, from recruitment to graduation.

Two-fifths of undergraduates told us that they phone, e-mail, or text their parents daily. One-fifth said they contact their parents three times a day or more. Students routinely ask their parents for advice on college courses or assignments, issues with roommates and friends, and other intimate aspects of college life. Nearly half of undergraduates turn to their parents for such guidance.

Such fathers and mothers, often described as "helicopter parents" for their hovering behaviors, come to students' rescue. One-fifth of students told us that their parents have intervened for them in problems with professors, college administrators, roommates, or employers. What was once an exception is becoming the rule.

"I've had parents request to participate in disciplinary conferences or academic advising with their student using their cell phone, or appear in place of and on behalf of their student," one dean of students told us. Other deans recounted story after story of parents who wake their students up for classes, proofread assignments for them, or come to the campus periodically to clean their students' rooms and do laundry. One dean quipped: "This generation has grown up in a bubble. They've never been allowed to skin their knees."

Such a never-stumbled lifestyle is continuing into college. Current undergraduates are arriving on campus with weak academic skills. As many as 45 percent take remedial courses. Yet their college grades are higher than those of any other students since 1969. Today, 41 percent now have grades of A- or higher, versus 7 percent in 1969, and three out of five believe those grades understate the quality of their work. With such rampant grade inflation, colleges are advancing the "never let them stumble" ethos and promoting an exaggerated sense of accomplishment.

Meanwhile, a 2011 survey by the American College Health Association also found that current students consume health and psychological services with greater frequency

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and for longer periods of time than their counterparts in the past. Although students are in constant contact with peers via social media, a majority of undergraduates (61 percent) say they feel lonely. They say they are overwhelmed by all they have to do (87 percent), feel psychologically exhausted (79 percent), and experience overwhelming anxiety (61 percent). Nearly all undergraduates (98 percent) say they experience stress while in college, and more than half characterize their stress as tremendous or greater than average.

In sum, the students whom colleges are educating are more dependent on adults, communicate poorly face to face, expect continuing approbation for their work, have inflated perceptions of their strengths, and require significantly more psychological and emotional support.

5. Today's undergraduates are the most diverse generation in higher education history.

Students now on college campuses have grown up in a nation in which many of the historic glass ceilings that existed for women, people of color, and gay people have cracked. They believe the country has made real progress in race, ethnic, and gender issues. They have close friends of other races and most are comfortable with interracial dating and marriage.

Current undergraduates are also environmentally green and global in orientation. Still, they have little knowledge about the world. For example, most were unable to recognize the names of the leaders of China, France, and Iran. Those findings present colleges and their boards with an opportunity to translate their rhetoric about multiculturalism and diversity into concrete plans and to make internationalization of their programs a priority.

Implications for board members

These changes in undergraduates suggest to us five questions board members should ask about their institutions.

1. What is the mission of our institution?

In 1828, after the Connecticut legislature condemned the curriculum of Yale College for its irrelevance and cut the college's financial support, Yale issued a report. That report was an account of a college being pressured to change as the nation was transformed from an agrarian to an industrial economy. It asked whether Yale should change a lot or a little, quickly or gradually. Yet the authors concluded that was the wrong question. The right question, was "What is the purpose of a college?"

That is still the correct question, and all others should follow from it. Should a college offer MOOCs? Should it build buildings, change the composition of its faculty, or increase its budget in one area as opposed to another? In today's financial environment, few campuses can do everything, and mission is the true compass for choosing one priority over another.

2. What types of students does our institution seek to enroll?

Different student populations demand different things of their colleges. Our research found that traditional and nontraditional students are, in fact, making diametrically opposed demands. Students are not fungible. Institutions need to plan carefully which populations they want to enroll, then gear their activities to their mission and that student body.

3. Beyond pocketbook issues, what does the board need to know about our institution's students?

Boards should ask for annual dashboards with key indicators about their students and their activities. Those indicators might include those concerning demographics, admissions, financial need and aid levels, classes and courses, attendance patterns, remedial requirements, grades, parental involvement, graduation rates, time to degree, post-college employment, and student and employer satisfaction.

4. Does our institution have established plans in areas such as its digital future, diversity, internationalization, affordability, and career services?

Given today's students and the global transition to a digital information economy, these areas are essential for college action. Institutions and their boards can better address them through long-term plans than by drift and accretion.

5. How can our board best monitor the effectiveness and relevance of our institution's policies and programs vis-à-vis student needs?

You can accomplish that in many ways—externally, by means of accreditation or periodic visiting committees, or internally, through continuing institutional research. The mechanism is less important than an institution's commitment to gather and act upon this information.

Higher education is facing urgent and disparate pressures to change. Tensions exist among boards, presidents, and faculty members, and colleges may, in fact, address some of those tensions—and maintain their own vitality—by taking the necessary steps to deal with new and complex student needs.

Boards should ask the fundamental questions rather than being distracted by the fad du jour, collect data rather than relying upon anecdotes and personal predilections, and encourage their institutions to develop long-term plans rather than drifting or adopting a succession of piecemeal changes. While the challenges facing colleges today are great, this is also a moment of unprecedented opportunity. No generation in modern memory has had a better chance to shape the future of higher education. ■

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T'SHIP LINKS: George D. Kuh, "Four Ways Boards Can Help Students Succeed." November/December 2011. Gregory T. Eells, "Rx for Students' Mental Health: What Boards Can Do." September/October 2011.