

Changing Demographics and Generational Shifts: Understanding and Working with the Families of Today's College Students

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The changing demographics of today's college students are examined in this article with specific focus on the unique characteristics of the Millennial Generation, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation. In addition, significant parental and familial influences on college students' enrollment, adjustment, and persistence are discussed. Based upon this literature review, a series of recommendations are offered, addressing the responsibility of student affairs and all higher education leaders to understand and meet the needs of the families of today's college students..

Colleges and universities across the nation are experiencing dramatic changes in their student populations. As a new generation of students arrives on campus, they bring new expectations regarding the relationships between higher education institutions and their families. For the purposes of this article, family serves as an inclusive term for parents, guardians, siblings, grandparents, partners, and other relatives. The level of all types of familial involvement in students' lives has increased significantly over the past decade (Forbes, 2001), and higher education leaders' recognition of varying family structures is critical in working with today's diverse college students and their families.

This article examines the changing student demographics, the significant impact of the new "Millennial Generation," and their families' influence on four-year, primarily residential college and university campuses. Recommendations for higher education leaders are offered to address the needs of this new generation of students and their families.

Demographics

What may have been considered a traditional student is no longer the majority on today's college campuses. Gone are the days of a majority student population described as white, male, middle-class, single, 18-22 years old, residing on campus and working less than 10 hours a week (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Today's college students are more likely to be racially and ethnically diverse, over 25 years of age, female, attending school part-time while working full-time, or commuting from off campus (College Board Online, 1999).

Higher education leaders pay attention to the U.S. Census projections regarding the number of 18-24 year olds in each state in order to anticipate and plan for enrollment increases and decreases (Keller, 2001). These higher education professionals note that the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the College Board anticipate significant increases in the enrollment of underrepresented populations in public, private, four-year, and community colleges. Utilizing the demographics of students taking the college entry exams each year, ETS estimates an increase of over three million college students by 2015. Underrepresented students will make up two million of that increase (ets.org, 2000). For definitional purposes, underrepresented students in these reports are identified as African American, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, and other diverse racial and ethnic groups (ets.org, 2000).

The ETS addressed the changes, challenges, and opportunities these new students bring to campuses across the nation, in a study entitled *Crossing the great divide: Can we achieve equity when generation Y goes to college?* (2000). This publication documents the anticipated increasing enrollments for each underrepresented population listed above. According to ETS estimates, Hispanic undergraduates will increase by one million students and will become 15.4 % of the college population by 2015. The Asian/Pacific Islander undergraduate population will experience the greatest percentage increase between 1995 and 2015, from 5.4% to 8.4%, with an anticipated increase of 600,000 students by 2015. Black undergraduate students will no longer be the second largest minority population on campus by 2006; the report estimates 400,000 more Black undergraduates by 2015 (ets.org, 2000).

Colleges and universities must recognize that many of these new students will be the first generation in their family to attend college. In 1999, approximately 36% of the students taking the SAT noted that their parents had not finished high school or had only achieved a high school diploma (College Board Online, 1999), whereas over 60% of the students reported that their parents attended some college. The levels of parental education has increased over the past ten years, with 58% of the students reporting that their parents attended some college in 1989 (College Board News, 2001). Interestingly, the students born in the late 1990s are more likely to have mothers who are better educated than their fathers (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This data presents a significant

gap between those students who are first generation college students and those who have parents or family members who have navigated their way through higher education. An awareness and readiness to support first generation students and their families, as well as providing different services to those students and families who are familiar with higher education, is critical.

In addition to varying parental educational levels, there are other social differences to describe the family backgrounds of today's college students. These significant differences pose new challenges for colleges and universities. For example, today's college students are more likely to be raised in a single parent household (32%), to experience living below poverty-level (23.1%), and to have a mother who works outside of the home (89.4%), than previous generations of college students (AAHE-Bulletin, 1998). Students may be choosing to attend college part-time (43%) and work more than 20 hours each week (37%) as a direct result of their high school years at home, managing their time between work and school to provide income to support their families (1998). Language proficiency is also critical for college student success. Nineteen percent of students report being bilingual or identify English as their second language, compared with 16% of students ten years ago (College Board News, 2001). In addition to the dramatic shift in student demographics, higher education is experiencing the arrival of a new generation of students and families to campus. Acknowledging the significant generational differences among this group is vital to understanding today's students.

Generational Shifts

The various generations in the United States have been researched and well documented over time (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Generations "are defined by common tastes, attitudes, and experiences...particularly telling are a generation's defining moments..." (Zemke et. al, 2000, p.16). Although these characteristics may appear as stereotypes, social demographers examine traits of numerous individuals within each age group to determine general descriptors of each cohort (2000).

Higher education leaders can identify such generational differences as the Millennial generation entering college in 2000 and colliding with the Generation X students

(Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001). Accounts of demanding parents, extended long distance phone calls from families, and increasing familial interference have caused higher education leaders to examine the re-emergent influence and increased expectations placed on staff members by the families of the Millennial students (Forbes, 2001).

Millennial Generation

The Millennial generation consists of individuals born 1982 - 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). When abcnews.com posted an online survey to name this new generation, there were numerous suggestions: "Generation Y," "Generation Whatever," the "Boomlets," the "Echo Boomers," "Generation Next," the "Oh-Ohs" (referring to the new decade), and "Generation Tech" (p.6). Overwhelmingly, this generation prefers to be called the Millennials, signifying the technological, political and historical significance of this new generation and their distinct differences from Generation X (2000).

Howe and Strauss (2000) describe the Millennials as "special," "sheltered," "confident," "team-oriented," "achieving," "pressured," and "conventional" (p.43-44). Millennials tend to respect their elders, follow the rules, and seek to create positive changes in their local communities. This generation has grown up with service-learning projects since elementary school. Rather than rebel against family values and beliefs, "most teens say they identify with their parents' values, and... 'trust' and 'feel close to' their parents" (p.8). The Millennials can best be described with the use of a visual image of the "baby on board" placard in the back of the mini-van driven by the soccer mom, her children going to soccer practice with their shin-guards and mouth-guards already in place. The Millennial generation has always known seatbelts, car seats and bike helmets, and is the most cared for and overprotected generation of children in U. S. history (Howe & Strauss, 2000). "Today's parents are going to unprecedented lengths to avoid their worst fear--that harm will befall their child" (Forbes, 2001, p. 12), and thus, students are sheltered from the important learning that takes place when making mistakes.

The Millennial generation is accustomed to hypervigilance, in part because families are smaller. "The median number of siblings related to each child has fallen from two to one (meaning that over half of all kids today have one or no sibling)" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p.81). Children from large families learn how to share and resolve conflicts. However, because Millennials tend to be only children, they lack the familial experiences to learn

how to share, as well as develop much needed conflict resolution skills within the family structure. Nonetheless, as previously mentioned the Millennials bring forth a number of exciting and positive characteristics which are welcomed by higher education leaders weary of the Generation X students on campus.

Generation X

The descriptors are significantly different for Generation X, who are viewed as "castaways," "at risk," "neglected," "aggressive," "slackers," and "alienated" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 44-50). Generation X students were born between 1961 and 1981, tended to be raised in day-care, and were set aside to make room for their parents' fulfillment. They have excelled in underachievement according to all societal perceptions (2000). The lack of societal standards amidst the major political, social, economic, and cultural turmoil of the past twenty years is considered a major contributor to the demise of Generation X (2000). The authors of *Generations at Work* ask, "Breathes there a cohort group with a soul more dark or with such an edgy skepticism about them?" (Zemke, et al., 2000, p. 21). The Generation X students are characterized as selfish, apathetic, complaining, and alienated, hardly a population to celebrate on campus.

Baby Boomers

As the Millennials are characteristically different from the previous Generation X students, the Baby Boomer parents are radically dissimilar to parents of previous generations as well. Baby Boomers, the parents of the Millennials, were born between 1943 - 1960 (Zemke et. al., 2000). Baby Boomers are older parents, most having delayed starting a family until they achieved their own personal and professional accomplishments (or are still working on their personal and professional accomplishments). Planned parenting for later-born Baby Boomers meant using fertility drugs rather than contraception (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This delay in child rearing has numerous implications for the Baby Boomers as well as their Millennial children, not to mention higher education institutions.

Baby Boomer parents are now "sandwiched" between their children and their aging parents. Kingsmill and Schlesinger (1998) coined the term "cluttered nest" to describe the phenomenon of adult children who return home, as well as aging parents taken into

the home for additional care. Baby Boomer parents may have been prepared for the "empty nest syndrome," only to be confronted with a "cluttered nest" that requires constant vigilance.

The Silent Generation

Growing numbers of the Silent Generation, born between 1925-1942, are serving as the heads of households in the place of the Baby Boomers who are single parents or unable to raise their children for other reasons (Howe & Strauss, 2000). One study determined that grandparents are raising an estimated 2.2 million grandchildren (Keller, 2001). Grandparents are more involved with their grandchildren, visiting each week, providing regular day care or are actually raising their grandchildren in their own home. Some hypothesize that the Silent Generation may harbor some guilt for their parenting style in raising the Baby Boomers, and thus are trying to reestablish ties by becoming more involved in their grandchildren's lives (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Significantly, Millennials have demonstrated a return to the Silent Generation's values and beliefs, identifying also with their grandparents' generation (Zemke et al., 2000). Previously, higher education institutions considered grandparents only in terms of potential development or fundraising constituents rather than stakeholders in the academic lives of their students (Hill, personal communication, November 29, 2001).

These generational shifts are dramatically impacting today's college campuses. Higher education leaders have been caught off guard by the changing demands of families of their enrolled and prospective students. Understanding and acknowledging these changes provides for a more proactive approach when working with the Millennial students and their families.

Familial Influences on Enrollment, Persistence, and Achievement

Older, more financially stable, and focused on fewer children, the Baby Boomer parents of today's college students are more involved college parents than ever before (Johnson & Schelhas-Miller, 2000). The 1980's and 90's concept of "letting go" as a popular mindset for parents sending their children to college has been replaced by a new attitude of 'stay involved and protect our children from harm' (Coburn & Treeger, 1992).

In Loco Parentis

The shift in parental involvement expectations may signal a pendulum swing back to the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, or "the idea that the university stands in for parents" (Boyer, 1997, p. 5). This framework for defining the relationship between the university and the student originated in the 1600s as universities closely monitored students' behavior in and out of the classroom. *In loco parentis* was focused on the "power of the college or university to control and discipline students" (Forbes, 2001, p. 12). In the late 1960s students protested against curfews, dress codes, and other forms of supervision, gaining independence and self-governance. Some researchers (Boyer, 1997; Forbes, 2001; Johnson & Schelhas-Miller, 2001; Nuss, 1998; Weeks, 2001) suggest that in this new millennium, colleges and universities are experiencing an adaptation of *in loco parentis*, best described as acting in the place of the uncle, *in loco avunculi*. An assumption is made that the uncle has the best interests of the student in mind, but has the benefit of familial distance for perspective (Nuss, 1998).

The irony of the well-fought battle for independence and the end of *in loco parentis* for the Baby Boomer college students of the 1960s is not lost when viewing these same Baby Boomers as parents, holding tightly to the reins of control over their college-age children (Johnson, personal communication, August 27, 2001). This phenomenon requires more exploration and awareness of the parents' motivations and behaviors.

Changing Perspectives of Parents on Their Child's College Experience

The dynamic of parents perceiving their college students as children rather than adults is well documented and discussed (Arnett, 2000; Conneely, Good, & Perryman, 2001; Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001; Elkind, 1994; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Johnson & Schelhas-Miller, 2000). Lengthening adolescence has enormous implications for the involvement of families and the willingness of the Millennial generation to allow their families to continue to make decisions and control their lives well into the college years. The return of *in loco parentis* may be more focused on "nurturing and protecting" students (Forbes, 2001, p. 12) and partnering with families, as the parents of today's students believe their children are less capable of self-regulation than in the past (2001).

The president of the Pennsylvania State University, Graham Spanier, speaks to the dilemma regarding parental communication about students, "We do not want to make

them more childlike. But parents are constantly contacting us asking what is going on with their kids. They want *in loco parentis*" (Bonner, 1999, p. 1).

In a recent study, Arnett (2000) found that individuals in their early twenties did not identify themselves as adults because they did not believe they could be characterized as "taking responsibility for one's self, making independent decisions, and becoming financially independent" (p. 474). These characteristics mark the transition to adulthood, according to those individuals studied. This new category of individuals, aged 18 to 25, has been coined "emerging adulthood" (p. 469).

The college experience is also perceived differently by Baby Boomer parents than the parents of previous generations of college students. Parents are no longer willing to allow their children to attend college in order to find themselves. The college experience is seen as an investment rather than a time for self-discovery and growth, even though the Baby Boomers were afforded this option in the 60s. Utilizing current rates, the tuition for a Millennial student's four-year degree may be second only to the family's investment in their home (Oluwasanmi, 2000). A consumer-mentality has led to increased accountability for higher education professionals to deliver on the expectations of not only the enrolled students, but their families' as well (Scott & Daniel, 2001).

The Parent Project, a two-year research study, specifically asked parents about their hopes and goals for their students' college experiences (Turrentine, Schnure, & Ostroth, 2000). The study was conducted at one public and one private Southeastern university, utilizing an interactive webpage set up on two computer terminals in a residence hall lobby during the summer orientation programs at both institutions. Parents' most frequently mentioned goals for their children concerned career and job preparation, while the least mentioned goals related to developing a faith and clarifying values. Clearly, today's college students are expected to capitalize on their parents' educational investment and graduate with a job and/or specific career goals. Students may establish a clear set of values, ethics, and beliefs after career goals and a job offer are realized and if time avails.

Family Dynamics

Respectful of their parents, the Millennial generation also demonstrates a return to strong attachments with their families (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Attachment theory posits "that the nature of children's relationships with their attachment figures (parents, other primary caregivers) shapes many aspects of their social-emotional and intellectual development" (Strage, 1998, p. 18).

Parenting style is another component influencing children's ability to adapt, self-regulate, and achieve. Through numerous research studies, Baumrind (1991) identified and categorized three parenting styles. Authoritative parents are "both demanding and responsive to their children" (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000, p. 11). Authoritative parents display high expectations as well as constant communication and feedback. Authoritarian parents are "demanding but unresponsive" (p. 11), holding their children to extremely high standards while withholding emotional support. Permissive or laissez-faire parents who "do not place high demands but are responsive" (p. 12) to their children, tend to delay their children's development and independence. Strage (1998) suggests that authoritative parenting "seems best for equipping students to meet the challenges of academic contexts" (p. 19). Further, authoritarian and laissez-faire parenting styles appear to fail to enable children to develop a range of self-directing, self-monitoring, and self-regulatory abilities undergirding success in academic contexts" (p. 19).

Identifying the significant adaptation skills required for students to successfully transition to college, one study examined the influence of parenting style, perception of mutual reciprocity, and several other measures and variables on college students' academic persistence and achievement (Wintre & Yaffe, 2000). Mutual reciprocity is experienced when "individuals perceive each other as relative equals, respect each other's point of view, and are involved in ongoing and open communication" (p. 12). This study found a positive indirect effect of authoritative parenting style and student adjustment, suggesting that the transition for college students is eased when parents are both demanding of and responsive to their children. The study also demonstrated a positive influence on adjustment when families exhibited mutual reciprocity and engaged in discussions regarding the university experience with their children. Finally, the study confirmed that men and women respond differently to the various factors related to the social adjustment and academic achievement processes.

Family composition may also play a significant role in college choice, enrollment, and persistence. Lillard and Gerner (1999) found that children from "disrupted families" (those families that experience divorce, death of a parent, or only one parent present in the household) are less likely to enroll in college, less likely to enroll in a selective college, and less likely to persist to graduation than those students from "intact" families. The researchers emphasized the lack of a direct cause and effect relationship, however, citing factors such as socioeconomic status, size of family, and the level of academic performance in the high school, as "a complex combination of factors, all of which are correlated with family disruption" (p. 721).

Some may point to the socioeconomic impact of being raised in single parent households as the determining factor in students' enrollment, persistence, and achievement in college (Lillard & Gerner, 1999). However, good parenting continues to be the best indicator of success. Parents who teach and role model the important life lessons of "determination, diligence, healthy habits, and a respect for learning" give their children the greatest opportunity for collegiate success (Keller, 2001, p. 229).

The adjustment and transition experiences for students who are the first generation in their family to attend college are intensified by a lack of familial support systems that understand the nuances of higher education. Although many first-generation students initially feel support and pride from their families, they may also experience a fear of success or guilt stemming from leaving the familial culture to "sell out" to the educated, middle-class way of life. When first-generation students persist and obtain a degree, they have broken the cycle and create a path leading to higher education for other family members in the future (Hayes, 1997).

These findings support Tinto's (1987) landmark research on college attrition and persistence factors. Tinto emphasized the necessity of acknowledging race, gender, and socioeconomic backgrounds of students and their families, as well as identifying the social adaptation and academic achievement skills necessary in the first year of college. Predictors for persistence and achievement continue to be "the degree to which students become academically and socially integrated into their environment" (Strage, 1999, p. 198). Students' families have a dramatic impact on their collegiate academic and social integration, through the families' varying levels of support and willingness to

allow their children to successfully meet the developmentally appropriate challenges on a college campus. Higher education leaders must recognize the significant influence of families on college students' enrollment, persistence and achievement in order to develop programs and services that appropriately challenge and support today's college students.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made with the caveat that higher education leaders must conduct ongoing assessments of enrolled students and their families in order to respond to the specific needs and expectations of both groups. These recommendations focus on changes needed in institutional culture, communicating with families, and programs and services for families of today's college students.

Institutional Culture

Institutions must determine the type of relationship they want to create with students and their families. Establishing a family friendly campus culture, with clearly articulated boundaries regarding institutional roles and responsibilities, supports the Millennial students and their families (Coburn & Woodward, 2001). Ensuring this consistent message across all offices and services prevents families from working the system to exert control over the institution or its processes (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001).

Faculty must be educated regarding the changing demographics and generational shift occurring on college campuses today. Informing faculty of the return of the significant influence and on-going role families play in the lives of the students in their classrooms assists in creating a comprehensive institutional culture to work with students' families (Scott & Daniel, 2001).

Communication with Families

Admissions, financial aid, residence life, and other key offices must take additional time and care in working with families of first-generation college students. Intentional efforts to assess the "amount of college knowledge" (Lange & Stone, 2001, p. 24), followed by providing resources to help families play a supportive role with their college-bound and enrolled children, is crucial. Ensuring institutional publications and forms are translated into families' first language, as well as avoiding educational jargon, supports their need for information and ultimately leads to the admission and retention of first generation

students. Providing staff members who can translate during orientation sessions and family programs also signals a willingness to build relationships with diverse ethnic families.

In every institutional publication and program, the varying definitions of family must be considered. Recognition of blended and stepfamilies, single parents, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered families, extended families, grandparents, and guardians provides a sense of inclusion for the Millennial student and their families (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001).

Prospective students and their families are accessing information online now more than ever, and first impressions of the campus are often made through technology rather than the traditional campus tour (Ontiveros, personal communication, October 10, 2001). Websites, listservs, and email newsletters can communicate the institution's values and principles, as well as provide ongoing support and resources for families while their students are enrolled.

Programs

It is crucial to acknowledge that all members of the family experience the college transition. Family orientation sessions must include an overview of the various transition stages family members may experience, in addition to the developmental processes of college students. Incorporating a component regarding separation issues and healthy adult interdependent relationships between parents and students is also helpful (Coburn & Woodward, 2001). An additional session assisting Baby Boomer parents in exploring and articulating the differences between their college experiences in the 60s and those of the current Millennial generation is also recommended (Conneely, et.al., 2001).

Recognizing that not all families can or will attend orientation sessions, providing literature and online resources regarding transition issues will be helpful in reaching a larger audience of students and families.

Higher education leaders must anticipate the increasing information and involvement needs of families, and therefore designate an office and/or staff person dedicated to serving families and developing family programs (Johnson & Schelhas-Miller, 2001). Intentional connections with families are more effective than relying on reactive, crisis-related interactions (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001). Goodwill is communicated when the

institution is proactive and thoughtful in the type and frequency of communication with students' families. Families are more likely to trust the institution if they feel that they have been treated with respect and are kept informed of the happenings on campus. Arizona State University's distance education course entitled, "Student passages: A decision-making course for parents" encompasses many of the above recommendations. Parents of ASU students can log on once a week and dialogue with other parents of first year students and, with the assistance of trained professional staff members, can tackle the tough issues parents and students face on a daily basis in the college community (Carr, 2000).

Conclusion

As the demographics of college students change and the influence of families on college students' enrollment and persistence increases, higher education leaders must be on the cutting edge of creating programs and services to meet the needs of students and their families. Institutions must first assess enrolled students and their families in order to know and understand their individual and subgroup needs and expectations. Institutions must also define the relationship they will have with parents and families of their students and communicate this message consistently. *In loco parentis* may have been replaced with a self-governance paradigm in the 60s, but colleges and universities must be prepared for the "post *in loco parentis*" (Boyer, 1990, p. 5) of the Millennial generation and develop their programs and services accordingly.

Higher education leaders must not be swayed from the historical values of delivering quality education and supporting students' personal development. Higher education leaders may get distracted from the core values of the institution when trying to respond to the overwhelming familial demands for increased technology, renovated facilities, convenience services, and student safety. Although families may exert a consumer mentality, it is crucial for leaders in higher education to maintain their allegiance to students' academic and personal success. If institutions articulate a consistent message of care for students first, families will develop a trusting relationship with the college or university and are more likely to become supportive partners in students' collegiate experiences.

Additional research is necessary to more clearly articulate the needs and expectations of today's college students and their families. Pinpointing the varying levels of parental and familial influence on majority and minority students' enrollment, adjustment, and persistence will also benefit leaders in higher education and student affairs as they design programs and services for the changing student and family populations on today's college campuses.

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