Generation NeXt Comes to College: 2006 Updates and Emerging Issues

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Generation NeXt, our current cohort of younger college students (and graduates) up to around twenty-six years old, continues to challenge and confound many in higher education as we strive to help them move them toward personal and institutional learning and social goals. From issues of high school grade inflation in entering students, through academic disengagement and consumer expectations while they are in college, to difficulties entering the workforce and taking on adult roles when they graduate (if they graduate at all), evidence and publicity from 2005 and early 2006 indicate that we continue to struggle to effectively serve students. Real and looming social pressures and criticisms from both within and outside the academy suggest that the status quo is under especially significant attack. College administration, faculty, and staff are well advised to become more cognizant of these pointed critiques, which offer feedback, insight, and indications for reform. Changes in instruction and other services are certainly indicated.

Updates and Emerging Issues

Perhaps the most significant recent developments related to Generation NeXt in and after college have been in the following areas:

- The continued demise of the conventional, conforming "Millennial" as the prototypical college student (if that labeled cohort of student ever appeared on campus), replaced by the disengaged, entitled, student customer.

- Increasing evidence of the inability, or unwillingness, of significant numbers of graduates to effectively enter the workforce and to take on commensurate adult roles, creating a protracted, delayed adolescence that is becoming increasingly typical and normative.

- The increasing importance of technology in the lives of students and in all parts of college life.

- The pressures of internationalization that are placing colleges and graduates at the tip of the spear in our increasingly "flat" world (Friedman 2005), with higher education receiving blame for failures in current and future international competitiveness.

- The prediction of a frightening confluence of public evidence being critically examined by those outside the academy combined with finger pointing blame for these issues of student maturity and development, leading to calls for externally driven reform.

Higher education might be well advised to continue to a critical self-examination of our missions and methods with the anticipation of major and sometimes fundamental change and reform that is self-initiated, before the media, citizen groups, and legislative bodies force reforms on us. If we do not get our affairs in order to improve student outcomes, someone will order them for us.

In previous work (Taylor 2003; 2004; 2005), this writer has attempted to disabuse those in higher education of the expectation of admitting large numbers of Howe and Strauss' "Millennials" (2000; 2003). There is little evidence that the current cohort of young people is adopting the civic social roles vacated by the "Greatest" generation as Howe and Strauss expected (1993; 2002; 2003). Nor are they showing themselves to be the conventional conformists who are respectful of social norms and institutions, extremely focused on grades and performance, busy with and eager for extracurricular activities and community projects, interested in math and science, and demanding of a secure and regulated environment (especially as it impacts their personal freedoms) also predicted by Howe and Strauss (2000; 2003). In 2005, this writer visited and offered programs on teaching and serving these students, and visited with faculty and staff, at more than thirty colleges and universities across the country and at many professional meetings. No one in higher education is reporting seeing these Millennials in significant numbers.

Students might more accurately fit the "emerging stereotype" described by President William C. Durden in his convocation address August 2005 at Dickenson College: they expect high grades without significant effort and often just for showing up; demand comfort and luxury more than a rigorous education; see themselves as consumers and expect services, and extended and direct personal attention on demand; have little respect for authority and show distain for collegial and social rules of conduct, instead asserting personal privilege; fail to differentiate between civil exchange of reasoned ideas and shouting personal beliefs, yet grow defensive when faced with constructive criticism; and have a naïve sense of the future. He succinctly describes the postmodern college student where "facts don't really matter; what matters is the uninhibited, unedited, and immediate assertion of your egotistical options and thereby, the

preservation of your self-esteem at all costs. It truly is all about you." These bold and provocative statements ring true for many in higher education in 2006. That these students are a poor fit for traditional academic activities and expectations is an understatement.

Valuable insights into the mismatch between our educational beliefs, expectations, and services and the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors of our students was highlighted in 2005 in the book *My Freshman Year* by committed and observant anthropologist Kathy Small (aka: Rebekah Nathan) who attended classes and lived for an academic year in a co-ed dorm. The time pressures, difficulty in establishing community, and disconnect between what we think we offer academically and developmentally and what students actually want or receive were dramatically illustrated. Academic disengagement, the disconnect between students and college, was also discussed by Bauerlein (2005) who describes students as isolated within their social circuit, cut off from academic and larger social life. He states "the disengagement of students from the liberal-arts curriculum is reaching a critical mass (B8)."

Much of students' engagement to each other and to their learning is through technology. The ubiquity of the Web and the cell (which have now been merged), and now the iPod has turned these "digital immigrants" (Prensky 2001) into the Net Generation (Carlson 2005). The relationship of today's young people to technology is fundamentally different than the relationship any other generational cohort has with technology and is hard for most instructors and administrators to understand. Many of their interpersonal relationships exist primarily online, and the lines between the online and the live (what we might consider the virtual and the real) are blurred or nonexistent. The explosive growth in enrollment in online courses, even by native and resident students who can take "live" classes, indicates their preference for life online, and frequent lack of interest in traditional live academic activities. Podcasting, unheard of until very recently, is now discussed even in Newsweek as a "Professor in your pocket" as students increasing demand to impact the where, when, and how of instructional services (Tyre 2005). Rather than complaining that students are engaged online, rather than on our campuses, we need to embrace technology and leverage it for our academic and developmental ends.

Many graduates have difficulty entering the workforce successfully. There is a recently publicized and dangerous gap between what the public needs from higher education and how colleges and universities are serving those needs, largely caused by schools' efforts to improve institutional prestige and revenue instead of working to improve graduates' skills and knowledge (Newman, Couturier, and Scurry 2005). A significant disconnect exists between the skills students need to be successful at work and what they think they need to be successful, as well as downtrends in career ambition (Smith 2006). They might work to live but will not live to work. There is, in fact, a pandemic of workplace unreadiness as today's graduates are unable to think long-term, handle details, or delay gratification (Levine 2005).

The *TIME* magazine's cover story January 24, 2005 let America "MEET THE TWIXTERS, young adults who live off their parents, bounce from job to job, and hop from mate to mate. They're not lazy...THEY JUST WON'T GROW UP" (emphasis theirs)." *TIME* described young adults' delayed entry into adulthood and protracted adolescence, significant numbers of whom are distressing their parents by moving back home. Perhaps the most chilling message offered to parents and others "is that most colleges are seriously out of step with the real world in getting students ready to become workers in the postcollege world" (Grossman, 45). While these might not be the our typical graduates, this is very public criticism and blames higher education for outcomes that are surely not the sole responsibility of colleges.

Students' parents do take their share of criticism. Colleges struggle to develop tactics and strategies for dealing with intrusive parents that balance students' developmental needs and retention issues (White 2005). Parents take a beating for their hyperprotective and supervigilant management of their kid's lives during a sanitized childhood that keeps these children and teens from developing important skills or a belief in their own efficacy, thereby making them fragile and anxious and contributing to their delayed adolescence, creating a "nation of wimps" (Marano 2004). Parents are driving public school teachers crazy (Gibbs 2006). Between our colleges and their parents, it might be easy for the public to conclude that our students don't have much of a chance.

The fact that our students are not competing only in a national parochial league, and are not doing well in international competition, is made abundantly clear. In the national bestseller *The World Is Flat,* the conclusion is that many American college students, when compared with their counterparts in other countries, lack the drive and intellectual competencies to be competitive (Friedman 2005).

The PBS special and book *Declining by Degrees* (Hersh and Merrow 2005) further explicates problems in higher education from athletics to consumerism, to the curriculum, to failures with students of color, going so far as to accuse the faculty of colluding with students to lower standards. They focus most chillingly on the "free pass" we have reportedly been given in the media and basically warn that if the media gets interested in processes and outcomes in higher education, they will not paint a pretty picture and lead to calls for reform. If the image in the media is reflected in and influenced by *TIME* cover stories, Tom Wolfe's portrayal of college life in *I am Charlotte Simmons* (2004) as a drunken, sex-filled romp, and PBS's assertion that we are doing very little well at all, this could be a long decade. Certainly, a better understanding of who our students are would help us drive reforms internally to our instructional and other systems.

It might be noted that these "new" issues and criticisms did not emerge against a blank background. Higher education has a fairly long and well-documented history of recognizing fundamental difficulties in bringing about meaningful student learning and lasting student change (Barr and Tagg 1995; Gardiner 1994, 1998; Tagg 2004). Much of college instruction continues to be a loosely organized, unfocused curriculum with undefined outcomes, in classes that emphasize passive listening with lectures that transmit low-level information, and assessments that demand only the recall of memorized material or low-level comprehension (Gardiner 1998). Students are not learning

even basic general knowledge, are not developing higher-level cognitive skills, are not retaining their knowledge, and there is limited evidence of a significant difference between students who take courses and student who do not (Gardiner 1998; Tagg 2004).

A Call to Change

These newest developments and criticisms, especially when combined with the "old" criticisms, call for nothing less than far-reaching educational reform in how we view students, how we develop learning and change related goals with and for them, how we articulate these goals to students and elicit student ownership of goals, how we engage students in their personal, developmental, lasting change, and how we assess and document these changes. All of this writer's suggestions and recommendations will not be reiterated here, but are available to the interested reader (Taylor 2003, 2004, 2005). The following are presented as absolutely critical.

Accept Generation NeXt as a Cohort of Postmodern Students

Generation NeXt is the predictable product of postmodern social influences upon which opinion and consumer interest have tended to have more impact on value formation and day-to-day decision making than traditional values, including religious values and science (Lyotard 1988; McAllister 1999; Sacks 1996; Taylor 2003). According to Vaclav Havel, former president of the Czech Republic, "We live in the Postmodern world, where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain" (Havel 1992). Most higher education is based on modernism, with its roots in the Enlightenment and the values of optimism, discoverable truth, reason, and science. Postmodernism tends to be more pessimistic, sees "truth" as individually created, to value opinion and preference over truth, experience over science or reason, and to foster a delegitimation of authority (Anderson 1990; Lyotard 1988; Sacks 1996).

Here in brief summary are several important characteristics of Generation NeXt. These are described in more detail elsewhere (Taylor 2003, 2004, 2005).

- **Consumer orientation.** In educational settings, as in every other area of life, the "producer to consumer" dominates, both in student goals and in the students' relationship with the school. As with most customers today, students seek instant gratification, look for the best deal, want to negotiate, and might become litigious if disappointed (Sacks 1996; Taylor 2003).

- **Entertainment orientation.** Starting with *Sesame Street,* Generation NeXt has been led to believe that education is supposed to be entertaining, easy, and fun. Instructors complain of expectations for good grades with little effort, expectations by students and administrators for grade inflation, lower academic standards, and lack of self-direction in learning (Levine and Cureton 1998; Sacks 1996).

- **Entitlement.** NeXter students might feel that they deserve to receive the product (course credit), or even an excellent grade, simply for having paid for a class, especially if they also attended a significant number of class meetings.

- **Instant gratification.** There is very little perceived value in delay of gratification. Young people see many daily examples of and encouragement for the immediate gratification of needs. This is especially problematic given the protracted effort required to obtain a degree.

- **Short event horizon.** Many in Generation NeXt have notoriously poor long-term planning skills, critical thinking, and problem solving skills. These are deficits in major skill sets that have an impact on their academic and social lives.

- **Adaptability and pragmatism.** Generation NeXt is adept at adjusting to various situations and expectations. They might also be open and pragmatic in their problem solving, doing whatever works in each situation.

- **Excellence.** The importance and even primacy of helping children establish high self-esteem, even in the face of less than excellent achievement, has become a societal norm. High school grade inflation in the face of low academic achievement leads many students to come to college expecting academic success with little effort.

- **Skepticism.** Many factors have contributed to a delegitimation of authority, experts, and other traditional sources of knowledge. This fall from grace is a core feature of postmodernism (Lyotard 1988) and leads students to question the veracity of information they are given and to place greater importance on subjective and personal experience than on science or faculty opinion.

- **Cynicism.** Many from Generation NeXt view major social institutions as corrupt and untrustworthy (Galston 2001; McAllister 1999). Right and wrong is less important in a postmodern culture than the ability to spin the message or impose an agenda on others. A legitimate question might be "Why should they trust higher education when no other institution has proven trustworthy?"

- **Safety issues.** Generation NeXt has learned that the world is a dangerous place. Protective and over protective parents have taught children to be wary and cautious for their own protection. We cannot assume that they will automatically view the campus is a safe place, nor, unfortunately, that they will take responsibility for their own safety.

- **Stressed.** The pressures on today's students of work, money, and debt issues, as well as the academic stressors of college can become overwhelming (Kadison 2004). It could easily be argued that few young people today have adequate skills to handle the stressful expectations placed on them.

- **Civility issues.** Many of today's young people, like society in general, are famously uncivil. They may appear emotionally repressed, especially as compared to other generational cohorts, and difficult to engage.

- **Intellectually disengaged.** This may be the least studious cohort of students ever (Astin et al. 2002). They are the most academically disengaged, or even compliant college students with all-time low measures for time spent studying and all-time high measures for boredom and tardiness. They do show a distinct interest in exactly what they will be graded on and what will be necessary to achieve their specific grade goals.

Change Initiatives

Articulate all desired outcomes. Learning outcomes for students, beyond grade attainment, should be clearly and operationally stated. Outcomes should relate to significant student competencies and change, not just the ability to recite knowledge level factoids. If colleges are interested in developing behavioral, personal, community, and citizenship competencies, as well as academic competencies, these should be spelled out and quantified with codes of conduct and transcripting of community service, student leadership, and civic competencies and activities. If we accept that many in Generation NeXt have difficulty with delay of gratification, for example, we should articulate that as a goal and program to help students develop meaningful skills in wants management.

Establish clear expectations, and communicate these expectations early and often. Generation NeXt has been required to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances and environments. Many, if not most, of these environments have not provided clear expectations for desired outcomes or behavioral expectations. Their adaptability might be one of their greatest strengths. The goal on campus might be to exploit the adaptability of Generation NeXt by giving them clear expectations. Increasing consistency across the campus will also increase effectiveness, as will engaging students in the establishment of community standards and expectations.

Develop meaningful citizenship / character development goals and activities. Many schools, especially public colleges and universities, fail to adequately articulate meaningful personal, community, citizenship, or character development goals for students, though many in these same schools do complain about student behavior and (in)civility issues. Schools are encouraged to engage in dialogues about the citizenship qualities graduates should display, and what civic behaviors are necessary to be a member of the college community. The worth to students, in the workplace, and to culture in general, of the values of thoughtfulness and critical thinking, responsibility and conscience, caring and fairness, honesty and integrity, idealism and justice, respect and diversity, and even morality and humanism should be easy to articulate. Schools that devote time to helping students reach citizenship goals might reap a benefit in spending less time addressing uncivil behaviors.

Maintain technological sophistication. Hard-wired youth have little patience for educational methods they see as outdated, like unidirectional lectures to rows of passive listeners. It might be easy for these students to assume that instructors who are not aware of modern technological trends might be equally unaware of current issues in their own field.

Offer many opportunities for interpersonal involvement. These should include active interaction in classes, informal interaction with instructors available during regular office hours and at other campus locations, active and intrusive developmental advising, and an array of other student services, including active and involving clubs and organizations. Involvement increases students' connections to the campus, and consequently so will their retention, learning, and development.

Postmodern Education for Generation NeXt

It is not easy for experienced instructors to recognize that the way they were taught and the way they have taught is not effective for Generation NeXt. The pedagogical skills necessary to effectively engage and change today's postmodern students are largely outside the preparation and experience of many educators and continue to fail to gain the attention of many graduate programs that produce faculty. Meaningful faculty development will need to be, become, or continue to be, a central focus of all schools.

End the Teaching Pedagogy

The instructor acting as the "sage on the stage" who is lecturing, especially when those lectures share knowledge-level information, is a discredited model providing an educationally ineffective service. Even lecture combined with "class discussion" is not effective because the discussion tends to involve few students. The focus can no longer be on instructor behavior (the teaching model); it must be on student change (the learning model).

Move to a Learning-Centered Academic Paradigm

Much has been written about maximizing learning and developing learning-centered environments and experiences (Astin 1993; Chickering and Reiser 1993; Fink 2003; O'Banion 1999; Pascarella and Terensini 1991). In spite of this vast literature on the value of learning-centered models over teaching-centered models, many schools continue to treat teaching as the constant and learning as the variable, rather the focusing on student learning outcomes and exploring the most appropriate instruction method to reach these goals. The basic learning principles of a focus on reaching student learning outcomes instead of a focus on teaching activities, offering a variety of learning options, a focus on objectively quantifying student change, and helping students establish meaning for learning (the "whys?") should be applied to all educational activities. Active learning methods mesh especially well with the importance of subjective experience to Generation NeXt. They are less likely to believe or appreciate if told, so they might better be served by being helped to discover for themselves (to paraphrase Galileo).

Focus on Student Engagement

One of the many valuable contributions of the work of Lee Shulman and his colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation as a result of their examination of instruction in the professions has been the recognition of the importance of student engagement (Shulman 2005). Learning begins with student attention and engagement and ends when engagement is broken. Effective pedagogy with postmodern students requires that every student be engaged at all times. While there are techniques to facilitate engagement in large, lecture-style classrooms, student activities in dyads, triads, and other small groups should become standard practice in most classes.

Use Active and Creative Methods to Facilitate Significant Learning Experiences

Generation NeXt has little patience for educational methods it sees as outdated, such as unidirectional lecture to rows of passive listeners. Most graduate programs, while providing excellent foundations in a discipline's knowledge and theory, do little to prepare graduates in methods of effective pedagogy. Faculty development in active methods for creating significant learning experiences is needed on all campuses for full-time and part-time instructors (Fink 2003). Students can only connect the course's content to their own lives, in application and meaning, if they are given the opportunity to actively work with the material. The time pressures on many students obviate this happening outside class, so it must happen in the classroom.

Help Students Develop Meaning through Real Life Application

Any topic, class, or field that cannot demonstrate its utility and meaning to each student will be suspect. "You have to know this because it will be on the test" or "you must take this class because it is part of the core" is guaranteed to discredit both the information and the instructor as it tends to show there is no other use for the information than to meet meaningless requirements, without concern or connection to student need.

The ability of each instructor to articulate a rationale for the necessity of their subject based on real world application is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for students to develop such necessary applications and subsequent value. Pedagogical activities must be available so each student can apply information to her/his own past, present, and future life.

Teach "Up" Educational Taxonomies

Generation NeXt is probably even less inspired than earlier cohorts of students by the expectation that students memorize and regurgitate unapplied knowledge-level factoids, and may actively rebel against doing so. This is especially true in a wired age when most "facts" are readily retrievable online from any cell phone. Unfortunately, many educational and some accountability efforts that rely on standardized tests tend to perpetuate low-level learning (Tagg 2004). Incorporating facts into theory, applying theory to real life, and demonstrating the worth of information can contribute to student learning at process, not just content, levels, and can improve critical, creative, and practical thinking (Bloom et al. 1956; Fink 2003). Shulman's simple but critical taxonomy of (1) knowledge and information, (2) skills and application, and (3) value and meaning is applicable to every class in every subject (2005). What is the foundational knowledge and information students need? What can they do with it; what skills do they need to utilize this information in their own lives? Why should they care? What value will they attach to this utility that will encourage them to use the information and possibly seek out more knowledge? Again, this cannot be passively transmitted to students. They must actively construct learning, especially their personal applications and meanings, and can only do this through active methods.

Obligate Students to Bring Information to Class

Class time is too valuable to spend transmitting information that is available elsewhere; in the text, through the library online data base, on the Web, on the campus online support resource, in the archive of recorded lectures and faculty presentations, or through a podcast, to name a few. If students bring the knowledge level information to class, they can spend class time working with the application and meaning of the information. Instructors who complain that "students don't do the reading now" might not be truly obligating them to bring the information to class. For example, if students must pass a content-based quiz at the beginning of each class to participate

in that day's learning activities, and so to receive the quiz and participation points for that day, they might be more likely to come to class prepared to deeply learn.

Multiple Learning Options

Multiple learning styles, student preferences, and our obligation to bring about student learning by any means necessary all suggest that we must offer students multiple options for learning, especially in how they access the information they are obligated to bring to class, how they demonstrate their personalization of the applications, and how they develop meanings. Technology does, and will increasingly, provide opportunities to make learning available at non-traditional places and times.

Meaningful Assessments

Instructors communicate what is important through their assessments, on which they base grades. Objective tests with a predominance of multiple choice, true/false, fill in the blank questions, or content-heavy essays communicate that the knowledge level factoids, details, and minutiae are what matter. Open ended evaluations, portfolios, and projects that require students to demonstrate their understanding of knowledge-level learning through application and establishing meaning not only communicate and assess higher-level learning, but also facilitate this same learning as students must actually do application and meaning-based learning to complete the assessment. It might be worth noting that one major risk of externally mandated change and accountability efforts would be a reliance on standardized testing, as has been seen in accountability efforts in public schools. These tests tend to foster a focus on low level, content-heavy instruction at the expense of higher level thinking and learning (Sacks 2002).

Conclusion

This model of postmodern education might face some criticism from experienced instructors vested in the teaching model. In anticipation of and response to some of these criticisms, the following might be considered. This model is not a pandering to consumer-oriented students; rather it reflects and respects the realities of how people learn and what is necessary to help students make meaningful changes. This model is not a "dumbing down" of the curriculum. It actually helps students move to higher-order thinking and more sophisticated learning goals. This model certainly does not reduce the value of the instructor, though relinquishing the "sage on the stage" role will be difficult for many. It recognizes the instructor as an expert in both content and educational process and may even increase the likelihood that students will come to value instructors' subject area expertise as students value the material through their personal construction of application and meaning.

Pressures from inside and outside the academy will continue to challenge even our best efforts to bring about meaningful change in the students from Generation NeXt. Continuing the status quo of the teaching model is not an option for any college that wishes to remain, or become, effective, vital, and meaningful in 2006 and beyond. While faculty must recognize the necessity of changing methods, administrations must recognize the absolute necessity of investing in faculty development to improve the ability of instructors to bring about meaningful learning and changes in our postmodern students from Generation NeXt.

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