

## Changing Student Characteristics: Implications for New Student Orientation

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College students have changed over the course of the history of higher education. In the early years of colleges and universities, only men benefited from higher learning. In 1800 only 2% of young men went to college (Horowitz, 1987). Today that number has grown to almost 15 million undergraduate and graduate students. By the year 2010, enrollments will reach nearly 17.5 million (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001). Given this change, all aspects of student affairs have had to re-examine their services generation after generation. Orientation programs are not exempt from this self-evaluation. In order to create programs that today's students will benefit from, it may be important to look at the history of the college student and explore the characteristics of the contemporary college student. Who are the students of today and how have they changed?

### The History of the College Student

In *Campus Life*, Horowitz (1987) recounted the history of the college student. Many of the first college students came from farms and went to college to become ministers. By the late 1880s, the population of college students had started to increase though it was still comprised of predominately young men. During the 19th century, new schools emerged that offered new ideas. For example, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 were enacted to increase agricultural studies and mechanical training by developing land-grant institutions. Within this same time period, small institutions for women and black students began to emerge as well.

After 1880 and through the 20th century enrollments steadily increased (Horowitz, 1987). The face of the college student was beginning to change. No longer were only wealthy young white men training for the clergy entering colleges. Women, blacks, and middle-class 18-24 year olds began to view college as an entry to the work force and as an arena in which they could explore ideas and gain general knowledge. Although increased numbers of underrepresented students were going to college, most were attending women only and Black colleges. Entrance to Ivy League and other more prestigious universities were using quota systems to keep minority enrollments to a minimum. Quotas limited the number of Jews as well as African-Americans in many colleges and universities (Horowitz, p.8).

World War II brought many changes to higher education. The need for highly trained scientists and engineers increased the number of students enrolling in colleges

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(Domonkos, 1989; Horowitz, 1987). Further, the G.I. Bill of Rights of 1944 changed the appearance of higher education significantly. The Serviceman Readjustment Act of 1944 or the G.I. Bill as it is popularly known, was enacted to allow veterans an opportunity to attend college with funds provided by the government. Enrollments increased as approximately 2,232,000 veterans attended the college or university of their choice (Horowitz, 1987). Although the Act increased enrollments, its impact was felt far beyond numbers. For the first time, a mass of non-traditional aged students entered the classroom as well as those with serious academic intentions. With the G.I. Bill elitism decreased, as veterans were able to attend even the most prestigious institutions. This trend paved the way for women and other underrepresented groups to attend the college of their choice (Horowitz, 1987).

Today's students have been directly influenced by the veterans of the post World War II era. In 1976, nearly 11 million students enrolled at American colleges and universities (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2000). Of those 11 million, a little over one million were African-American and almost 400,000 were Hispanic. By 1999, the total enrollment had grown to almost 15 million with the African-American population rising to 1.6 million and the Hispanic population exploding to 1.3 million (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001). Similarly, the age distribution of students has significantly shifted from the traditional 18 – 24 year old college student. In the fall of 1995, 18.3% of all full-time undergraduate students and 61.8% of all part-time undergraduate students were over the age of 24 (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 1997). This increase in older part-time students is a reflection of the changing face of the college student. The majority of today's college students hold a part-time or full-time job and many have family responsibilities (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

Throughout the 20th century each generation has been given its own label and identity. From the lost generation of the 1920s to the baby boomers of the 1960s, each generation has its own characteristics, attitudes, and beliefs. Hay (2000) suggested that educating each generation in the same manner is a mistake and that it is important for educators to be aware of the differences and the implications those differences have for teaching and learning.

Generation X (Xers) was a label given to those students born roughly between the early 1960s and the late 1970s and early 1980s (Haworth, 1997; Saunders & Bauer, 1998). These students were ethnically diverse (Saunders & Bauer, 1998) and portrayed as lazy, apathetic (Haworth, 1007), and pessimistic about the future of the country (Levine & Cureton, 1998). However, they were optimistic with regard to their own personal expectations and expected to do as well as their parents before them (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

The Xers was the first generation to go to day care. With both parents working outside of the home during the 1970s and 1980s, the term "latchkey kids" emerged from this group of children. On campus, Generation X was noted for being cynical and skeptical (Murray, 1997). They opted out of co-curricular activities in favor of employment (Saunders & Bauer, 1998). Generation X viewed higher education as a means to financial stability and as a way to support their avocational interests (Saunders & Bauer, 1998).

In contrast, students attending college in the 21st century have much different characteristics. This group enjoys many labels for the same generation: Generation Y, Baby Boomer II, the Net Generation, and Millennials.

## Today's College Student

Millennials, the generation born after 1982, can be defined by seven attributes. They are conventional, confident, special, sheltered, pressured, achieving, and team oriented (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In addition, this group enjoys greater parental involvement than previous generations (Brownstein, 2000; Skarra, et al., 2001). Alch (2000) described the Net Generation as different from generations before them. With the rising cost of education, the "netters" have held part-time jobs, some even while in high school (Alch, 2000; Keller, 2001, Newton, 2000). Netters also have a more "global orientation" than Generation X and they are more in tune to the changing definitions of the family. They understand that not all families look the same and that a non-traditional family is normal. Additionally, this group has experienced work-force reductions as their parents have been laid off. Finally, the Net Generation views change as commonplace and can adjust to different situations with relative ease (Alch, 2000). The Millennials are not preoccupied with career and money attainment (O'Reilly, 2000). Rather they are hopeful that they will be able to accomplish something with their earnings that their parents could not: raise a family with only one parent working outside the home (O'Reilly, 2000).

The Millennials are also concerned with personal safety (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This concern cannot be overlooked in light of the tragedy of September 11th. Not only are campuses responsible for safeguarding students against campus crime, they are now involved in creating a safe environment against terrorists (Mulhauser, 2001). Today's students are aware of the word around them, both on campus and in the greater global community.

One of the most important characteristics of this generation is the fact that this group of college students is the most technology savvy in history (Alch, 2000; Hay, 2000; Johnson & Miller, 2000; Newton, 2000; O'Reilly, 2000). Further, these students are more comfortable with technology than their parents or their teachers (Hay, 2000, Newton, 2000). Hence, this generation expects access to and availability of technological resources on campus (Johnson & Miller, 2000).

## Today's Demographics

Currently, 14,791,224 college students attend 4,048 institutions of higher education in the United States. Minority students make up 25.1% of the population at public 4-year institutions and 33.3% of the population at private 4-year institutions and 28.1% at all institutions of higher education (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001). Almost 40% of all students receive some form of financial aid totaling over \$68 billion in grants, loans, and other assistance programs distributed to college students.

Further, over 74% of freshmen surveyed in the fall of 2000 have an estimated

parental income exceeding \$40,000 a year (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001). A large majority of these students (over 80%) also plan to obtain a masters degree or higher. Additionally, about 52% of these first-year students consider themselves to be “middle-of-the-road” politically, over 82% attended a religious service over the past year, and 81% performed volunteer work (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2001).

### **What Does This Mean for Orientation Programs?**

New student orientation programs have historically been based on a system of previous year reflection rather than on a zero-base, that is, they rely on previous year experiences to modify what they choose to offer. In light of changing student demographics and trends, this practice must be radically addressed if orientation and transition programs are to achieve their potential. First and foremost, orientation programs and their leaders will benefit greatly from basic planning, thinking about what the intended outcomes of their experiences should be. Questions about retention, the technical aspects of course registration and campus life, and social integration all need to be addressed from a basic design perspective. These discussions can not take place in a vacuum and need to involve more than orientation team leaders. Orientation leaders must do more than invite representatives from academic affairs and facilities to the table for planning; they must engage them in identifying the key goals of orientation and transitional programming.

Second, orientation professionals need to develop a relationship with their institutional research and analysis personnel and get meaningful data about who is coming to college, how far they are coming from their homes, and what kinds of retention, persistence, class registration, and housing data can be identified. Additional information about developmental skill needs, the time to give financial aid and scholarships, and the need for housing can all be collected quite easily and can provide very important information in the orientation planning process.

And third, orientation professionals need to learn to observe the trends in the student population that is arriving on their campuses. These trends can have a substantial impact on what is offered, and perhaps more importantly, how it is offered. For example, students are arriving on campus with technological skills that far exceed institutional expectations. Orientation professionals need to look carefully at how they develop expectations for technology use. By ignoring technology, for example, the orientation program may be standing alone in conveying the message that technology is not important. Conversely, too much attention to email, computer labs, on-line registration and library use, etc., can alienate students and be detrimental to the orientation process.

There is a trend to do more and more with orientation programming, adding semester or year-long programs, peer and faculty mentor programs, specialized courses of study, etc. Perhaps the initial question, though, needs to focus on what do are the common expectations for orientation programs, and how can the entire campus work to strategically meet those expectations.

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