

Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Students

by Arthur Levine and Diane Dean

Published by Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2012, 256 pages.

Reviewed by

Annie Olson (olsonam@umn.edu) is an Assistant Residence Director at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

The term “millennial student” has become a common phrase used to describe today's college students. Students entering higher education today are bringing unique experiences and perspectives to our campuses, often very different from those of mid-level or senior professionals. *Generation on a Tightrope*, a compilation of research on current students by Arthur Levine and Diane Dean provides a summary of these differences. This review summarizes Levine and Dean's findings and shares suggestions of how this information can inform the work of professionals working in student transition programs.

Utilizing similar approaches to Levine's (1980) previous work, *When Dreams and Heroes Died*, and Levine and Cureton's (1998) *When Hope and Fear Collide*, Levine returns 14 years later with Diane Dean to paint a picture of the millennial generation in *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student*. The authors frequently reference the first two publications in an aim to identify key similarities and differences between previous generations and students today. In doing so, Levine and Dean uncovered four events that greatly impact undergraduate students in aspects of college and student life: arrival of the web, the recession, the attacks on September 11, and the election of Barack Obama. The authors describe how these events impacted students' academics, life outside the classroom, relations with others, political and social attitudes and activities, and hopes and anticipations for the future.

To create a portrait representative of today's diverse student population, the authors gathered information through three main sources: undergraduate student surveys, senior student affairs officer surveys, and campus site visits. The researchers selected campuses and participants based on institutional type, size, control, location, degree level, demographics, and religious orientation, among other variables, to reflect the composition of American higher education.

Levine and Dean organized their findings into six chapters, each outlining a different topic: academics, life outside of the classroom, parents, multiculturalism, politics, and the future. Through these chapters, the authors report changes in student perspectives and characteristics from past generations studied in the previous two books. Comments from students, faculty, and staff members are used

in combination with site visit observations to identify the key concepts for higher education professionals.

The development of technology arose as a difference that distinguishes this generation from past generations. Today's students have grown up being consistently rewarded and expect to receive high grades. With various resources at students' fingertips, levels of plagiarism and cheating have increased; however, students do not understand that their abuse of technology is unacceptable unless professors explicitly state what technological behaviors are appropriate. Students are also frustrated by educators' poor use of technology, such as one-dimensional PowerPoint slides, creating a divide between generations in the classroom. Life outside the classroom for this generation of college students varies significantly from past generations. More students are working and working more hours, fewer students are living on campus or participating in campus activities, and binge drinking and drug use is increasing. Students are also less engaged in their communities, spending less time volunteering and avoiding political activism. Diversity is no longer a concern, as students of various ethnic backgrounds, racial identities, and gender identities are more satisfied with their college experience. The use of technology—especially social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which are replacing face-to-face interactions—and sharing of prescription drugs are unique characteristics of this generation of students. These behaviors, both similar and new, have implications for new student programs and transitions.

Another common term that often accompanies the discussion of millennial students is helicopter parents. Parents of college students today hover over their children and are overinvolved in their children's lives. As with other aspects of students' lives, this over involvement is encouraged by technology. Email, text messages, and social media, along with other forms of instant communication, allow students to be in constant contact with their parents.

Through their analysis, Levine and Dean reveal that higher education is no longer meeting the needs of this generation. The approaches used inside and outside of the classroom are not targeting the outcomes necessary for students to become successful and engaged citizens in a diverse, digital society in a time of profound change. The authors challenge professionals to address existing mismatches between how we educate and how students learn, while capitalizing on the strengths this generation brings yet still helping them develop necessary skills and knowledge.

Levine and Dean provide a very frank portrait of today's college students. They avoid talking around topics, which made the book a very eye-opening read. For example, instead of only describing the typical campus life experienced by many students at large four-year institutions, the authors speak directly to the low engagement of all students, regardless of institutional type, and how this differs from previous generations. Another strength of the book was its comprehensive approach. The authors did not limit their research to the college experience. They included information about who students are in various aspects of their lives; for instance, the authors describe a part-time employee and full-time student and what experiences people in those circumstances are bringing with them to

college campuses. The acknowledgment of parental influence and connection to employment following graduation added value in challenging professionals to understand students more holistically rather than just people attending an institution.

While Levine and Dean provided an encompassing description of the millennial generation, their findings were often presented through a pessimistic perspective. In multiple chapters, the authors identify gaps in higher education but frequently describe the issues as a result of the changing student population, rather than institutions failing to adapt to the needs of the changing population. For example, the authors discuss decreased interaction between students and faculty members. Much of this discussion focuses on students' failures to reach out to faculty during office hours or following class rather than addressing the fact that faculty members are not adjusting their instruction methods or communication styles to better relate to a digital generation of students.

New student orientation and welcome programs are often students' first glimpses at their higher education experience. For this reason, it is important that professionals working in student transition programs understand the current generation of students. As professionals, there are many opportunities to use Levine and Dean's findings to guide our work. For example, their description of parent engagement reemphasizes the need for transition programs to address student and parent concerns. Also, many students view their parents as their heroes and expect to find support from them during their college career. Therefore, professionals should train staff members on how to effectively challenge students as they transition into higher education without devaluing students' relationships with their parents.

Levine and Dean's findings also contribute to the work of orientation, retention, and transition professionals by outlining the expectations students have as they continue their educational career. Students of the millennial generation have been raised in a consumer-dominated culture. Understanding this common experience can help professionals as they design transition programs and engage with students today. Professionals must now face the challenge of helping students who have been coddled by their parents and other adults their entire lives become more independent through their college transition. Since students are already interacting through various social media outlets, transition programs can use this to their advantage in helping connect students with one another or to share information between traditional orientation and transition programs. However, it is important that social media be used to enhance interaction and not to replace face-to-face relationships building, as this is an area that challenges many students of this generation.

Levine and Dean provide a useful portrait of today's generation of college students and describe the changes occurring within the student population. It is clearly written and well researched, and the information is applicable to anyone working in student orientation, retention, or transition programs. As professionals, it is important that we challenge ourselves to learn more about this ever-changing generation and adjust our work to best serve students today.