

Who Are Our Students?

Most students starting college this fall were born in 1984. A few examples from Beloit College's annual "mind-set list" helps describe current college freshmen:

- Cyberspace has always existed.
- They grew up in minivans.
- They were born one year after the PC and the Mac.
- Cars have always had air bags, CD players, and eye-level rear brake lights.
- The United States and the Soviets have always been partners in space.
- South Africa's official policy of apartheid has not existed during their lifetime.
- They have always used e-mail.
- Genetic testing and DNA screening have always been available.
- Beta is a preview version of software, not a VCR format.

(The Chronicle: Daily News: 8/28/2002)

Today's college students are living through an accelerated historical period similar to the transition in the early part of the last century from an agrarian society to an industrial one. This generation exists in an age of information overload, complex issues, and changes in socialization. As faculty and staff, we need to understand who these students are and determine what they need to be successful in the 21st century. In this issue of *LDC Lately...* we will discuss the characteristics of two generational groups which are currently among the traditional college population. The first group is Generation X. They were born before 1982 and are currently "in the pipeline" of undergraduate education. The second group, the Millennials, are "at our doorstep" as they enter college this fall. It is important to understand the characteristics of both these groups and be aware of what they are bringing to the classroom in terms of academics, social attitudes, values, and principles. Those who work in higher education are straddling two generations, each with its own distinctive characteristics.

THE CONTEXT: AMERICAN EDUCATION PAST TO PRESENT

The Industrial Revolution heralded the public education system. Child labor diminished and school learning became available and eventually compulsory to children everywhere. In order to reach the masses, public K-12 education was characterized by an efficiency of logistics, curriculum and standards. Students gathered in a classroom where an authoritative teacher stood lecturing, imparting knowledge to students who were then tested to measure retention of this knowledge. Reading, writing and arithmetic were the basics. History, science, literature, foreign language, and higher level mathematics were added to this foundation. The K-12 model continued to be prevalent in late 20th century college classrooms. Even today, undergraduate education is largely characterized by lectures and tests.

Until the past few decades, attending college was a privilege that was largely unavailable to minorities as well as the economically disadvantaged. In 1947, the President's Advisory Commission on Higher Education estimated that 32 percent of high school graduates would be able to attend college for four years (*Learning and Development* 6). With increasing high school graduation rates, greater affluence among the middle class (especially with more dual income families), and expanding opportunities for funding college costs, the number of people enrolling in college

continues to grow. In 1994, 62 percent of high school graduates went directly to college following high school, compared to 47 percent in 1973 (*Learning and Development* 4). College students

Generations at a Glance

Baby Boomers.....	1943-1960
X ers.....	1961-1981
Millennials.....	1982-2002

today are more culturally diverse: enrollment for students of color increased almost 68 percent from 1984 to 1995; enrollment for Hispanics rose 39.6 percent from 1990 to 1995; and the number of Asian Americans in college more than doubled from 1984-1995 (*Learning and Development* 4).

In addition, other non-traditional populations have joined the influx to higher education, including students with disabilities, older adult students who often attend college part-time, and increasing numbers of immigrants whose first language is not English. From 1981 to 1993, college completion rates increased for all ethnic and racial groups. Graduation rates for females accelerated as well. (*Learning and Development* 5-6).

GENERATION X (IN THE PIPELINE)

In the 1998 book, *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student*, authors Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton describe the 1990s' undergraduates. They were a population more diverse and more

career oriented but in need of academic remediation. One contributing factor was grade inflation. High school teachers were awarding more "A" grades than ever (31.6% in 1997 compared with 12.5% in 1969). In 1996, the College Board adjusted the SATs, which brought scores up. However, impressive high school transcripts and higher SAT scores did not necessarily translate into promising college performance. By the late 1990s, nearly 73 percent

of college deans reported an increase since the 1980s in the number of students needing remedial education. By 1998, almost one third (32 percent) of undergraduates reported having taken a remedial or basic skills course in reading, writing, or math ("What We Know About Today's College Students" 8).

Students were also taking longer to graduate. According to the Higher Education Research Institute, fewer than two out of five students graduated in four years, a trend Levine and Cureton attribute to students working longer hours while going to school or attending college, part-time. For many students, financial concerns weighed heavily, with tuition rates rising much faster than inflation and federal support dropping sharply for undergraduates. As a result, students were borrowing more money to attend college, often graduating hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt ("What We Know About Today's College Students" 8).

These college students of the 1990s were the tail end of a generation known as Generation

X. Gen Xers grew up as latch-key children who learned to survive in an era of family disruption, booming technology, mass communication, and unscrupulous politicians (Watergate, Clintongate). They have been dubbed as cynical, pragmatic, independent, and distrustful of government and large organizations. Their mantra, according to Howe and Strauss, is "Keep your eyes open; expect the worst; and handle it on your own" (quoted in DeBard).

In "The Stressed Student," Fred Newton describes five areas of concern for these Gen X college students of the 1990s and early 2000s.

1. Finding Social Connections

Connecting with people through e-mail and chat rooms has led to problems establishing relationships with real people in one's environment. We also have many students from nontraditional backgrounds who have no role models to rely on for how to interact and function on a college campus.

2. Overload and Uncertainty

Life is like channel surfing in that there are hundreds of choices, yet not enough time to sort through all the information and make quality decisions. Uncertainty in global events, the stock market, and the corporate world creates an unclear picture for young people making decisions about directions to turn, careers to pursue.

3. Pressure

Students are experiencing an emotional roller coaster with intermittent periods of pressure followed by moments of escape

and relief. Resulting behaviors can include heavy alcohol consumption, sleeping as a form of escape, disruptive behavior and computer addiction.

4. Negativity and Isolation

Students look toward the surrounding world with an attitude of wariness and a need to look out for oneself. They see their environment as neutral at best and possibly negative and hostile. They feel like a number in large universities and they feel isolated and disconnected from support services. Many are still embarrassed to seek services for fear of being seen as a failure. College bureaucracies seem sterile and devoid of human caring.

5. Survival

With this in mind, it is not surprising that students have adopted a "live for today" philosophy. Their survival tactic is to take one day at a time, one thing at a time.

ENTER THE MILLENNIALS

Teachers in elementary schools started noticing subtle changes in student behavior and attitudes in the late 80s. A few years later, high school teachers confirmed suspicions that a new generation was working its way through the grades. This fall, colleges and universities are opening their doors to the vanguard of the Millennials, including 2400 new RIT freshmen. Unlike their Baby Boomer parents and their older Gen X siblings, they are "more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and more ethnically diverse," and are "beginning to manifest a wide array of positive social habits that older Americans no longer associate with youth, including a new focus on teamwork, achievement, modesty, and good conduct." (*Millennials Rising* 4)

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey:

Over 1700 colleges and universities nationwide participate in The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey. This survey has been in existence since the 1960s. The Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), which produces the survey, currently houses the nation's largest body of research materials available on college students.

<http://www.qseis.ucla.edu/heri/heri.html>

According to *Millennials Rising*, an extension of Neil Howe and William Strauss' generational theory, the Millennials will rebel by "behaving not worse but better" (7). Raised in a time that has placed high value on children, they have been carefully supervised and protected. They respect authority, follow rules, and are optimistic about the future. The Millennials admire academic achievement: "It's cool to be smart" (9). They push themselves to meet their parents' (and their own) high expectations. They can't imagine a world without the technology that is integral to their academic and social lives. Howe and Strauss cite seven key descriptors of this generation: special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured, and conventional (43-44).

Other authors offer similar lists. For Merritt, the Millennials are increasingly diverse. They relate well to their parents, display a consumerism mentality, and are technologically sophisticated ("The Millennials" 1). Bentley describes the Millennials as pragmatic, globally aware, integrated, media savvy, and environmentally conscious ("The Millennial Generation: What" 1). Various web sites for fraternities and sororities suggest that Millennials desire to lead values-based lives and be involved with community service (The Millennial Generation: Implications 1).

As the Millennials become an increasingly larger proportion of the college population, they will change the atmosphere of the university. They bring with them a heightened level of tolerance,

The Chronicle of Higher Education Annual Almanac, August 30, 2002: Each year the Chronicle of Higher Education dedicates an issue to statistics concerning students in higher education institutions. The data is gathered from numerous places and references can be found on page 94 of the August 2002 issue.

cooperation, and personal values that will make them, as a group, delightful students. But they will also bring their generation's unique issues. Not all will be able to cope with personal or parental pressure. As consumers, they will have high expectations of the university, including living accommodations, support services, classroom instruction, and entertainment options. They have had little opportunity to develop patience, a quality often crystallized by "tough times." Until recently, these students have lived their lives in a period of economic growth, world peace, and relative stability.

The first wave of Millennials will combine their own perspectives with those of the preceding generation. They will be struggling with the changing structure of the American family, career expectations, and evolving equality issues. They are suspicious of government and big business, and are quick to point out hypocrisy in

the behavior of their elders. What shines through, though, is their attitude of optimism, hope, and confidence. This is a "can-do" generation.

"Whassup? A Glimpse Into the Attitudes and Beliefs of the Millennial Generation," a recent article printed in the e-journal of College and Character (www.CollegeValues.org) gives a closer look at this transition cohort. Two student services professionals analyze the thoughts and values of students entering college, offering insights into

today's college students' beliefs and how they influence campus interactions.

The students surveyed for this study believe that technology, especially television and computers, have had adverse effects on their family life. They believe that their parents' careers have negatively impacted the time they spend together and their familial environment. In 1998, 60% of families had dually employed parents. This has led to today's students growing up with time issues and seeing careers as impediments to family life. In addition, as of 1998, one out of two students has come from a single parent home. This fact, coupled with our nation's high divorce rate, has led students to believe that they are not as likely to marry at the early ages their parents did. They intend to put off marriage and establish their careers to allow themselves a chance to keep better balance in their lives and have higher marital

success rates. “We don’t want to make our jobs our whole life. I think if we look at our parents, we see that you have to sacrifice family if you want to have a successful job” (“Whassup?”5).

Today’s students state they are under extreme pressure from parents to attend college immediately after high school, with some even going as far as to say their

article, “many students stressed that the problem with dead end, low education jobs was not just that they often paid poorly, but that they also seldom provided personal fulfillment” (“Whassup?”10).

Today’s students have strong views on societal issues, religion, community service and politics. They are more environmentally conscious and describe themselves

as “much more spiritual than religious.” They believe that going to church services is becoming obsolete. They have little faith in politicians, but feel they can make a difference at the grassroots level. Today’s students are participating in community service

activities much more than ever before, and they claim to be doing so for multiple reasons. Some say they do it for personal satisfaction. Some say they do it deliberately before college to “build admissions portfolios.” High schools urge students to participate; some schools even require it. However, forcing students into community service may detract from their enjoyment and fulfillment. For the most part, students believe community service will allow their generation to make a difference in the world.

While today’s students value service, leadership, and activism, they are the most disenfranchised generation when it comes to politics. In spite of a lack of desire to be involved, they feel they will need to be politically active in order to solve the problems left

over from previous generations. Today’s students state they have much higher intentions to vote than previous generations.

SO WHAT? WHAT DO OUR STUDENTS NEED FROM US?

Changes in student populations have implications for our teaching approach, our interactions with students and parents, and our decisions about curriculum and services. Here are some suggestions:

- **Be aware of subtle but significant generational differences.** The optimistic Millennial may be teamed up with a more individualistic Gen Xer.
- **Offer challenge, but offer support along with it.** RIT’s College of Science Learning Center is a wonderful example of providing academic support for challenging coursework.
- **Use technology.** Today’s college students are much more sophisticated technologically. They expect smart classrooms, wired residence halls and distance learning opportunities.
- **Use collaborative techniques in the classroom.** The new college students have grown up in collaborative settings – everything from day care to soccer teams. Plus, brain research suggests learning is as much a social phenomenon as it is a cognitive phenomenon.
- **Be aware of the consumerism mentality.** Whether or not we know it, working in higher education is a part of a consumer

Chronicle/RIT Stats of College Students

	NATIONAL	RIT
Women	56%	33.7%
Minority	28.1%	12.6%
Foreign	3.5%	9.1%

parents picked the student’s major and career field. In fact, “every student interviewed offered personal examples of this pressure” (“Whassup?”10). This pressure extends past college and into students’ professional lives. While students feel high levels of pressure placed on them by their parents, they share the belief that a degree is necessary and valuable. Students agreed that their number one reason for attending college is to prepare for a career, which matches RIT’s vision to “lead higher education in preparing students for successful career development over their lifetimes” (1994). Millennials expect that a college degree will give them financial stability, and they also want to utilize their career to help find personal satisfaction and fulfillment. According to the

relationship (college provides a service that is consumed by students) and expectations will be high (from both students and parents).

- **Expect a stronger parental presence.** The Millennials are the “Babies on Board” generation. They’ve been coddled and, more than ever before, their parents want to know what is going on. This issue has been heightened by the Shin versus MIT lawsuit over the suicide of Elizabeth Shin at MIT in April of 2000. Here at RIT, Dawn Murley took on the newly created position of Parent Liaison a few years ago in order to provide a contact for parents of RIT students.

- **Offer community service opportunities.** Millennials want to act out their values. Courses based on service-learning can be very successful. Here at RIT, Professor Loret Steinberg has organized her photography course around collaboration with local agencies.

- **Honor global awareness.** Make an effort to use global examples. Today’s college students, largely due to mass media, think of themselves as citizens of the world.

- **Broaden perspectives.** Diversity is not so much a goal as it is an assumption for most of today’s college students.

- **Anticipate students’ developmental and social immaturity.** Today’s young people have relied on computers for much of their social interaction. As a result, they often feel awkward in face-to-face

situations. When it comes to communicating with professors, many college students would rather e-mail than pick up the telephone or visit during office hours. Also, the instances of disruptive behavior in the college classroom have increased. Faculty need to establish an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in their classes that will facilitate the students’ social development as well as build their content knowledge.

- **Be prepared for the “sound bite” mentality characterized by a short attention span.** Help students get beyond the 30-second focus and think longer and more deeply about what they are learning.

- **Be aware that students are affected in many ways by the growing complexity and accelerated rate of change in society.** Newton feels that students need to cultivate a high level of tolerance for ambiguity to thrive in the contemporary arena. They need to generate a positive outlook and learn to rely on their intuition and problem solving skills.

- **Understand that today’s college students are psychologically more complex.** In a 2001 survey, 85% of colleges reported “an increase during the past five years in students with severe psychological problems” (Peterson 7D). Many stu-

dents arrive on campus already medicated, then rationalize that once they’ve left their ‘crazy’ home environment, they can stop their medication in favor of alcohol and recreational drugs (7D)—a recipe for disaster. Help students to explore their values, define their identity and find meaning in their lives. There is a need to provide opportunity for dialogue outside the classroom.

- **Create an environment/ community that is personal, responsive, caring and respectful.** Include improvement in living units, opportunities for community service, leadership training and better personal interactions with faculty and staff.

- **Help students develop “adaptive skills for living.”** A variety of things to consider are discipline, persistence, assimilation of data, information retrieval methods, complex problem solving, cooperation and communication with diverse populations.

- **Provide awareness of and services for mental health problems and other disability areas.** Meet all accommodations required by law and engage positively in the intervention.

Look for an electronic evaluation form which will be sent to ritstaff so you can give LDC your feedback about LDC Lately...

Profiles ...

Donna McKeown is not a new face at RIT. She originally worked at the Financial Aid office and, after taking twelve years off to stay at home to raise her family, Donna is now back at RIT in the HEOP Department. Donna is a life-long resident of Avon and resides there with her husband Dan and their three sons, Patrick, Jacob and Luke. For the last twelve years, Donna has been raising her children and working part-time to keep up with current office technology. She is very involved in her community. She is currently a member of the Avon Braves Youth Football Board, a member of the Avon PTA, and has been a member of the Circle Nursery School Board for six years. Donna is very happy to be back at RIT.



Donna McKeown, Lisa Fraser & Kristy Mooney Graves

Lisa Fraser has worked for RIT's Learning Development Center for nine years. She began as a Learning Support Specialist for the Structured Monitoring program. Students in this program meet with a learning specialist on a regular basis throughout the ten-week quarter. In addition to administrative duties, Lisa develops and teaches workshops for faculty through the Institute Effective Teaching Committee and has also presented workshops in the areas of Learning Styles and Brain-based Learning for the LDC. Lisa also teaches Time Management and Transition Seminar for the College Restoration Program. Along with the other instructors in the LDC, Lisa taught various classes for the new freshman orientation week, including Time Management and Notetaking skills. She continues to be involved with local school districts by providing workshops and training on related topics for special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

Kristy Mooney Graves is an RIT alumna and was the first co-op student in the Academic Accommodations Office back in 1999. She has returned to fill in for Bernadette Lynch who is on extended maternity leave. Kristy rejoins the LDC after finishing her MS in Higher Education at Florida State University. Kristy also teaches in the FYE program and mentors CRP students. She is excited to be back at her alma mater and enjoys showing students the wealth of resources RIT has to offer them.

of Students registered with the Office of Disability Services:

451 AY 98-99
555 AY 99-00
668 AY 00-01
658 AY 01-02
679 AY 02-03*

*incomplete

354 Students used the Math Lab this past year

597 Students used the Writing Lab this past year

All Math Lab packets are now on-line. Students can download review packets for Algebra, Trigonometry, Calculus and Differential Equations.

LDC Web address:

<http://www.rit.edu/LDC>

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