

# Generation NeXt Comes to College

## Today's Postmodern Student

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### Presentation

- Overviews the characteristics of Generation NeXt and their place within the current generational cohorts, and presents suggestions for helping them be successful in postsecondary education.

### Handout

- This handout is designed to supplement Dr. Taylor's presentation at the March 2006 OLN Conference. It is not intended as a stand-alone document so it should not be redistributed to non-attendees. A referenced article; [Generation NeXt: Today's Postmodern Student](#) is available from the *Resources/ Links* page at [www.taylorprograms.org](http://www.taylorprograms.org)

### Generation NeXt

- The current cohort of traditionally aged college students, aged 18 to 26
- Bring educational and social characteristics to campus that are challenging educators
- Product of a very different social reality than the members of the generational cohorts who predominate in college faculty and staff
- Their postmodern sensibilities and consumer approach to education are a remarkably poor fit with what schools traditionally offer.

#### **Other generational groups- Traditionals, Boomers, Xers**

- Generalizations about generational groups should not to be used as stereotypes but are modal trait descriptions to be compared with the reader's personal experience for each member of the cohort (don't stereotype, don't over generalize, compare with your own experience)

### Traditionals

- Born before 1944, they are 61 years old and older now
- Often "senior" administration, faculty and staff so the opinions of this small group has great importance
- Very impacted by World War II, and Depression, often called Silent generation
- Sandwich generation between the high profile Greatest and Baby Boom generations
  - Did not experience, contribute to or get the medals from the Depression and World War II, nor were they able to fully benefit from the social freedoms available to Boomers.
- Socialized in mostly premodern times with a religious values model.
  - Tend to value duty, discipline and thrift, expect to be called upon to make personal sacrifice and to delay personal gratification, and don't expect life to be fun.
  - Might value beliefs and personal philosophies over data.
- Understand traditional hierarchies with strict lines of vertical authority.
- Conformity is good and individuality is bad, possibly seditious.
- Some Traditionals have had values shifts and taken advantage of the social freedoms in modern and postmodern times, but their formative values exert a strong, if subliminal, influence.

- Might be resistant to or confused by recent developments in higher education including consumer orientation, shared governance, shifts to active learning methods and reliance on technology.

### **Baby Boomers**

- Born between the end of World War II in 1945 and 1964; between 41 and 60 years old now
- Comprise the vast majority of faculty and administration at many schools.
- Raised in the relative affluence of the USA in the decades following World War II.
  - New middle class in the new suburbs saw emergence television and many other new consumer goods.
  - The “Cleaver” family profile of dad working, and mom at home with children predominated (at least for majority/ White culture)
  - Experiencing the most care-free childhood of any generational group; special, advantaged, and lucky.
    - Spared the “children are seen but not heard” and harsh discipline of earlier generations, as well as the fractured family and day care stresses of later groups.
- Raised in modern times with social values of human development and progress through science and reason.
- Personally value individually, creativity and personal fulfillment.
- Relationship oriented, like teams, good at mission and vision.
- Troubled by student traits including career orientation, lack of interest or willingness to participate in traditional academic activities, lack of appreciation of “learning for learning’s sake” and disinterest in developing a personal philosophy of life.

### **Generation X**

- The 26 to 40 year old products of the “Baby Bust” of 1965 to 1979.
- Socialized in the shadow of the Baby Boom during the Consciousness Revolution of the 1970s and 1980s
- Raised in tough times to be a kid. Families were struggled to adapt to new social realities and expectations
  - women being widely expected to work out of the home
  - expectation that everyone personally actualize
  - the lack of requirement that adults have children.
- Many were low priority kids more likely to be seen as inhibiting parents’ growth than contributing to it.
- Tend to be more skeptical and less optimistic than Boomers.
- Good short term problem solving skills, and technology savvy.
- Tend to be pragmatic and adaptable, if skeptical and possibly cynical.
- Less relationship oriented than Boomers, tend to like feedback and evaluation but resent close supervision.
- Can work well with Gen NeXt if they will take time to develop relationships.

### **Generation NeXt or “Millennials”?**

- “Millennials” is label for the cohort of traditionally aged students from writers Howe and Strauss
- Predicted to be “the next great generation” taking the place of the GI or “greatest generation” in American society

Many in higher education are not seeing the characteristics ascribed to “Millennials”:

- “Extremely focused on grades and performance.”

- this may be the least studious cohort of students ever, most academically disengaged or even compliant college students ever
- all-time low measures for time spent studying
- all-time high measures for boredom and tardiness
- high school grade inflation leads many to believe they are better students than they evidence in college
- “Conventional conformists, respectful of norms and institutions.”
  - While there are high levels of “microconformity” within peer groups, few young people would be considered behaviorally or attitudinally conventional in any traditional sense
  - the incivility of today’s young people, and of society in general, is legendary and well documented
  - Record lows for measures of civic activity
  - Suggests poor inculcation of traditional social norms, and weak attachment to traditional social structures
- “Very busy in extracurricular activities” and “eager for community activities”.
  - Levels of activity are high for high school students but drop dramatically when students enter college
  - Some recent indications that entering students are expressing more interest in community activity projects in college
- “More interested in math and science, and less interested in the humanities.”
  - not particularly interested in math, science, or the humanities
- “Demanding of a secure, regulated environment”
  - few students are seeking more secure or regulated environments, especially as this might impact their individual freedoms, personal behavior and choices.
- Some “Millennial” characteristics might be more accurate
  - close with parents, talented in technology, ethnically diverse, majority female.
- Summary: This is not primarily a cohort of “Millennials.” Expecting our students to have these characteristics in significant numbers may create a serious continued mismatch between our services and their attendance, retention, learning, satisfaction and success.

### **Postmodern influences**

- Generation NeXt is the product of changing postmodern social influences
- Opinion and consumer interest have had more impact on value formation and day-to-day decision making than traditional values, including religious values and science
  - Most higher education is based on modern values, with its roots in the Enlightenment and the values of optimism, discoverable truth, reason, and science.
  - Postmodernism sees reality as individually and socially created, tends to be more pessimistic, values opinion and preference/ personal choice over truth or absolute meaning, experience over science or reason, and fosters a delegitimation of authority
- Postmodernism time have seen people break out of the “Clever” family profile and have led to changes within families
  - The outmigration of mothers into the workforce is the greatest change in the family since the Industrial Revolution, when fathers left the farm to work in industry.
  - The escalation in divorce rates created more, and made socially normal, single parent families
  - Day care increased and subjected children to as many socialization, parenting or supervision models as there were caretakers.

- More latchkey children, expected to fend for themselves after school from an early age, turning to television (increasingly violent and sexual) for companionship and guidance
- These multiple and fragmented socialization influences can be expected to have an impact on their expectations of higher education

### **Generation NeXt Model Traits**

It might be accurate, effective and practical in higher education to

- not expect young people to look like Millennials
- accept that Gen NeXt is the predictable product of our consumer-driven postmodern society
- describe their model traits accordingly and develop plans to work with them effectively.

### **Consumer orientation**

- As a core American value and dynamic, students bring a consumer orientation and the “consumer to producer” model to higher education
- Education is viewed as a commodity to be consumed, acquired, accumulated (credit hours), not as personal, created, transformational process
- Many colleges have adopted and promote customer service models
  - schools are having problems as students believe that their tuition pays for an outcome, not just an opportunity
  - students may believe they should define the structure and activities of their educational experiences
  - schools contribute to these consumer expectations by treating students like consumers in the recruitment and admissions process, especially in negotiating scholarship and aid packages and their packaging of the academic experience
- As with all consumer relationships today, students seek instant gratification, look for the best deal, want to negotiate and might become litigious if disappointed

### **Entertainment orientation**

- Expect everything, including education, to be entertaining, easy, and fun
- These expectations do not mesh well with the academic (studious) behaviors and effort required for postsecondary education, or lecture-based instructional methods
- Instructors complain of a lack of students’ self-direction in learning.

### **Entitlement**

- Record high levels of high school grade inflation without commensurate learning achievement create expectations for academic success with little academic effort.
- Might feel that they deserve to receive course credit, or even an excellent grade, simply for having paid for a class
- Might expect for “the product” to be delivered to them in their desired ways
- Instructors complain of expectations for good grades with little effort, expectations by students and administrators for grade inflation and lower academic standards.

### **Negotiation**

- If nothing is absolute in the postmodern world, then everything is negotiable.
- Colleges teach students, starting with recruitment and admission practices on, to expect to bargain in academics, conduct and finances.

### **Value Free**

- In postmodern culture the traditional models of premodern religion/belief and modern science/reason are losing to postmodern’s consumerism/entertainment and

hedonism/immediate needs gratification, public displays of political conservatism not withstanding.

- Creates problems for “moderns” in academics who promote science and reason.
- Freedom from guilt based bonds might be liberating, but also makes it difficult for young people to evaluate the propriety or impacts of their behavior on themselves and others.
- It might be noted that, especially post 9/11, some students seem to be seeking more conservative values models and come into conflict with their more liberal faculty. Students with well developed conservative beliefs appear to be a vocal minority.

### **Instant gratification**

- See many daily examples of and encouragement for the immediate gratification of needs.
- Very little perceived value in the traditional value of delay of gratification
- Fewer limits on the needs they gratify and how they meet those needs
- Especially problematic given the protracted effort required to obtain a degree

### **Short event horizon**

- Notoriously poor critical thinking, problem solving and long term planning skills
- Might be a failure to be inculcated into the modern values of reason, logic and planning
- Along with “instant gratification” might represent serious and significant deficits in major cognitive and emotional intelligence skill sets.

### **Adaptability and pragmatism**

- Adept at adjusting to various situations and expectations, as a result of varied socialization environments.
- Tend to be open and pragmatic in their immediate problem solving, doing whatever works in each situation utilizing available resources
- May not be especially resilient and may complain or flee when faced with obstacles

### **Excellence**

- Socialized with a focus on esteem building over skills development
- Might have been rewarded for effort over excellence, or even attendance over effort
- High school grade inflation in the face of low academic achievement leads many students to come to college expecting academic success with little effort
- Many have culture shock when faced with the academic expectations and challenges of college
- May have trouble when achievement, including grades, must be earned and deserved
- Some colleges are experimenting with grading students’ attendance and effort, as well as academic achievement.

### **Self-interested**

- Look independent
- Many expect to take care of themselves, having done so in day care settings from an early age
- Many have been intrusively taken care of by parents, which also leads to a high level of self-interest and self-importance, but without the “street” skills.

### **Skepticism**

- Question authority, experts, and the information they are given
- Place greater importance on subjective and personal experience than data

### **Cynicism**

- Many view the social institutions of government, the media, religion, and business/economy as corrupt and untrustworthy.
- Right and wrong seem less important in our culture than the ability to spin the message or impose an agenda on others.
- Why should they trust higher education when no other institution has proven trustworthy?

### **Safety issues**

- Protective and overprotective parents, and others, have taught them that the world is a dangerous place and to be wary and cautious for their own protection.
- Evidence of increases in bullying and hazing from peers
- They will not automatically view the campus as a safe place and may not take responsibility for their own safety
- Safety is a prerequisite to higher ordered cognitive activities like learning

### **Stressed**

- Tend to be stressed, though it may be masked
- Work, money and debt, and academic stressors can be overwhelming
- The vast majority of college students report having felt overwhelmed
- Counseling centers report a decrease in visits for relationship issues, but a rise in visits for anxiety and depression (more traditionally “adult” problems.)
- Few have sufficient skills or links to social or institutional refuge to manage this stress

### **Civility/ caring issues**

- Many NeXters, like society in general, are famously uncivil.
- Incivility is frequently rewarded while civility is not; the “squeaky wheel” motif
- They may appear emotionally repressed and difficult to engage; look like they don’t care

### **Intellectually disengaged**

- As noted, NeXters may be the least studious cohort of students ever
- “Knowledge” is not major goal for many students
- 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.

### **Reduced self-efficacy**

- May believe that fate or coincidence have more impact on their lives than their own efforts; “Life is random”
- Many have opted for a willful naiveté and appear disengaged
- Neither naiveté or a belief in luck are positive contributors to academic success
- Parental over-involvement can influence beliefs about personal effectiveness.

### **Selective risk takers**

- Short event horizons, many extreme models from sports to sexuality and lack of internalized or social limits manifest in risk taking and “bad” choices
- Fear might be interpreted not as a warning of danger, but as a sign to move forward and through.
- Ironically, they do not seem particularly adventurous academically.

### **Relationships**

- Show much relationship experimentation including on-line and virtual relationships
- Hazing and bullying can make their peer groups less than safe
- Might have difficulty with long term intimacy development

- Evidence that their observations of relationship failures and fear of their own failure in relationships leads to an unwillingness to risk emotional investment.

### **Conformity issues**

- Though many options are seemingly available, and NeXters do not appear to be conventional conformists, within their peer groups there is high conformity
- Especially post-Columbine, individuality can be seen as a sign of social dysfunction
- Academically there is little tendency to think “outside the box”, and NeXters may see few rewards outside meeting clear academic expectations
- This self-limitation and reliance on peers for expectations and identity is especially disturbing given the increases in bullying and hazing (noted above).

### **Parent issues**

- Parents are very involved and are “doing for” their children, to the detriment of NeXters’ own skill development.
- The “helicopter parent’s” hovering runs through the competence continuum
- Consumerism and FERPA raise questions about who we are serving
- Developmentally, parental interventions since an early age may have given NeXters the core message that they can not handle life on their own, and so impact self-efficacy.

### **Commitment reluctance**

- Admissions and recruitment officers report a desire by many NeXt students to keep as many options as possible available as long as possible, if not longer
- Though NeXters may look impulsive in some choices, in major decisions they can be very slow to choose
- They may miss the benefits of early choice in admissions and scholarships as they wait until the best choice is obvious (which then makes the choice look impulsive)
- Even after a decision has been made, they may want to reverse as necessary if they see something they like better, tweaking class schedules until the last possible minute (or beyond).

### **Diversity issues**

- A more ethnically diverse group
- Tend to be more comfortable with cultural, racial and sexual orientation diversity than earlier generational groups, but some disturbing signs of voluntary, de facto segregation.
- Predicts a future with possibly less stratification based on ethnicity; more stratification between social classes

### **Technoliterate**

- Wired since birth and comfortable with technology. Many are gadget connected most of the time.
- Omnipresence of audio, video and even tactile input, much of it very high-stimulation, has contributed to their needs for high levels of external stimulation, and general external orientation
- Impatient with a lack of technological sophistication in others, instructors or schools.

## **Postmodern Education for Generation NeXt**

Everyone in higher education needs to recognize and respond to influences and student characteristics beyond their preparation and outside the experience of many educators. Pedagogy is the study of teaching methods and activities, especially those that contribute to improvement in student learning. Few graduate programs address pedagogy in meaningful ways. "Postmodern pedagogy" is the application of learning centered and active learning philosophies and techniques with specific recognition of and respect for these characteristics of Generation NeXt.

### **Adopt a developmental perspective**

- Offer activities to bring students from where they are to where they need to be
- 1. Accept where they are realistically without criticizing them for not being our imagined "ideal" students, or more like previous cohorts of students
- 2. Start where they are academically, socially, and in character development
- 3. Articulate all goals for the academic experience
- 4. Assist them in making step by step progress toward these goals

### **Articulate all desired outcomes.**

- Outcomes should relate to desired outcome student competencies and changes.
- Behavioral, personal, community and citizenship competencies, as well as academic competencies, should be spelled out and frequently articulated.
- Maintain a developmental perspective toward all desired outcomes by accepting and starting where students are and working with them incrementally toward all desired goals.

### **Establish clear behavioral expectations, and communicate these expectations early and often.**

- Gen NeXters have adapted to a wide variety of circumstances and environments that have not provided clear expectations for desired outcomes or behavioral expectations.
- Exploit the adaptability of Generation NeXt by giving them clear expectations to adapt to.

### **Be consistent.**

- Communicate and hold students to consistent behavioral expectations.
- Increase consistency across the campus.
- Engage students in the establishment of community standards and expectations.

### **Develop meaningful citizenship/ character development goals and activities.**

- Many schools fail to adequately articulate meaningful personal, community, citizenship or character development goals for students, though faculty and staff frequently complain about uncivil behavior
- Agree on standards of civic behavior that would support and be supported by school's mission, rules and codes to increase students' personal and civic development and work developmentally toward those.

### **Stress the role of the scientific method**

- in understanding, as well as the potential abuses of science and data.

### **Move to a learning centered academic paradigm.**

- In spite of the vast literature on the value of learning centered models over teaching centered models, many schools continue to function on a teaching model.
- 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 should be applied.

**Use active and creative methods to facilitate significant learning experiences**

- Faculty development in active methods is needed on all campuses for full-time and part-time instructors
- Active learning techniques increase student investment, ownership and the attribution of significance

**Teach "up" educational taxonomies**

- Knowledge level factoids are available in print, on-line and from any cell phone and should not be the focus of instruction
- Incorporating facts into application, application to 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

**Provide meaning through real life application.**

- Learning is more effective when knowledge/ content is tied to application
- Any topic, class or field that cannot demonstrate its utility and meaning to each student will be suspect

**Avoid the expectation of blind acceptance of academic authority**

- As a subjectively oriented cohort, they are more likely to believe what they experience than what they are told by an "expert", so learning activities should be planned accordingly

**Maintain technological sophistication** for learning, connections and credibility.

**Expand the parameters for class projects**

- From the traditional paper to other types of demonstrations of research and learning to increase student ownership of the processes and outcomes.

**Offer many opportunities for interpersonal involvement.**

- Interpersonal relationships and involvement increases students' connections to the campus, and so their retention, learning and development
- The opportunities for connections with faculty, staff and between students should be intentionally programmed in and out of the classroom.

**Appreciate diverse viewpoints.**

- All, even discredited, perspectives must be allowed air space to allow for each to be dispassionately examined for accuracy, veracity and utility
- Protective and safe speech polities can make the "protected" parties feel patronized.

**Increase flexibility in course schedules, semesters, and flexibility in entry and exit.**

- If all the course outcomes are truly important then allowing students to exit before they have true mastery is counterintuitive, as is keeping students after they have demonstrated mastery
- Many students prefer alternatives to the 16 week term

**Recognize trust and safety issues.**

- Students need to feel that they are in a safe environment and in the care of trustworthy people for any learning to happen, especially on residential campuses.

### **Moderate a customer-based service model.**

- Articulate expectations for academic success. No rational customer expects to "get something for nothing" and the customer is not always right.

### **Develop student services and programming based on institutional and student needs.**

- All schools are struggling with the consumer orientation of the postmodern student
- Listening to students' requests for programs and services leads to the most well received programming
- Students will legitimately expect a variety of options for most services, from admission to counseling, with a menu of high tech-high touch alternatives
- "Niche" programming meets the special needs of subgroups of students
- The purposes and desired outcomes, whether independent "free standing" goals or in support of the academic mission, need to be clearly articulated for administrative and extra-departmental support
- Student services may be expected to take the lead in citizenship/ civic education and character education initiatives and activities
- Integrate academics, service learning and citizenship/ character development into student activities, programming and services. Even activities that are "just for fun" and designed primarily to facilitate retention can facilitate other goals as well.

### **Lighten up.**

- It is a difficult life for NeXters who have numerous many stressors
- Statistically, student success is fragile at most schools
- Fear based learning is not effective or appropriate
- Failure by instructors to appreciate other life priorities is an additional, and possibly academically fatal, stressor

### **Expect their best.**

- NeXters are adaptable and do significant educational and social development needs
- It is incumbent on us in higher education to engage them in ways that will significantly promote their development and meet these educational needs
- College may be the last coordinated hope for Gen NeXt to experience significant personal development, develop appropriate skills and to make plans for life-long learning and a meaningful, contributing life.

A referenced article, *Generation NeXt: Today's Postmodern Student* published in a Collection of Papers by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in 2005 is available as a free download from the Resources link at [www.taylorprograms.org](http://www.taylorprograms.org).

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