Although the transition from high school to college is a predictable rite of passage for students in their late teens and early twenties, much about the nature of these students and their environments is changing.

New Challenges in Working with Traditional-Aged College Students

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Each year, millions of new students enter colleges and universities across the country. Although many of these students are older than the traditional age of college entry, the vision of a “college student” as represented in literature, legend, cartoon, film, television, and even scholarly research is still that of the young student fresh from high school. In fact, a significant majority of first-year students are traditional aged (Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, and Korn, 2007). These students seventeen to twenty years old who have matriculated to college directly from high school with little or no break in their educational experience (inclusive of winter admits and students engaging in a gap year experience) are the focus of this chapter.

Somewhat paradoxically, recent literature has indicated that the current crop of traditional first-year students is qualitatively different from their predecessors. Generational theorists, most notably Strauss and Howe (1991, 2006), have identified individuals born between 1982 and 2002, today’s traditional college students, as a new generation with a significantly different “peer personality” from its predecessors, a group that has earned the moniker millennials. According to Howe and Strauss (2000), millennials are optimistic, high achieving, civic minded, and moral, and they hold the promise of true greatness. Their potential lies in their extreme intelligence, enthusiastic involvement, group orientation, respect for authority, extraordinary drive, greater comfort with technology, and an increased experience with diversity with respect to both personal identity and in society at large (Brooks, 2001; Keeling, 2003; Newton, 2000; Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others, 2007). However, along with these good qualities also come others,
including a capacity to follow rather than to lead, an absence of true intellectual curiosity, excessive collectivism, a lack of true self-awareness, and relatively few sociopolitical passions (Brooks, 2001; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Keeling, 2003; Newton, 2000).

These generational characteristics and forces have led to a rethinking of perennial concerns in higher education such as effective pedagogy, student engagement, and personal development. However, other new issues that have an effect on the transition experience of today’s traditional-aged students are also gaining the attention of campus-based practitioners as well as the national media. Among these many issues, I focus on four that I believe are of particular significance: (1) the shift to a truly multicultural student body, (2) burgeoning mental and emotional health care needs, (3) students’ overwhelmingly vocational or utilitarian view of higher education, and (4) the integration of new technologies in the life of college students. Higher educational professionals, especially those who work with first-year students, have made these four issues the focus of recent research and writing (Koch and others, 2007). (Chapter Four in this volume addresses another important issue of contemporary campus life: parental involvement in the lives of today’s college students.)

**Multiculturalism**

Even when constrained by a focus on only traditional students, the dawn of the new millennium has seen a more diverse traditional first-year student population than ever before. Today this population includes greater representation of various cultures, religions, races/ethnicities, native languages, degrees of physical ability, sexual orientation, levels of academic preparation, socioeconomic backgrounds, family structure, and high school experiences and preparation (Crissman Ishler, 2005; National Center for Education Statistics, 2005; Pryor and others, 2007; Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, and Korn, 2007; Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Underrepresented racial and ethnic groups have made significant inroads with respect to college enrollment and persistence, such that they now represent more than 25 percent of the traditional college-going population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005).

Although most of these statistics are encouraging with respect to larger goals related to access and success for all first-year students, they do not fully explain the issue of how diversity affects the transition of traditional first-year students, whether they are members of a majority or minority group. A growing issue within the diversity dialogue is that many colleges and universities today enroll students who are part of different groups within and between categories of personal identity and background. These students interpret their own personal identity and gauge the diversity of their environments from a pluralistic viewpoint (Jones and McEwen, 2000). For instance, on the 2000 U.S. Census, 4 percent of the population under
age eighteen was identified as multiracial (Greico and Casssidy, 2001). Population projections indicate that multiracial individuals will make up 21 percent of the population at large by the year 2050 (Root, 1999; Harper, 2007). Although representation from diverse and multicultural backgrounds varies widely by region of the country, areas where there is the greatest diversity are truly the bellwether rather than the anomaly.

Higher education is attempting to capture these demographic changes among traditional students in assessment and reporting systems—most notably as students enter college and are identified in admissions and registration—as well as in the institution’s intervention strategies. However, students are constantly outpacing our capacity to categorize them. Colleges have never been less equipped with an effective vocabulary and schema to discuss diversity, and many higher education professionals are uncomfortable with the ambiguity that accompanies this topic. As such, millennial students who are in the earlier stages of personal development may not feel encouraged to examine all areas of their own identity or feel comfortable with their peers who integrate multiple aspects (race/ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth) into their core identity. Conversely, traditional-aged students who enter college with a core sense of self that integrates multiple identities may not feel they fit in the mutually exclusive categories typically used to track diversity in higher education. Furthermore, the transition experience of these students may be one in which they do not feel recognized, safe, and supported as they continue to hold on to and explore various elements of their core identity during their transition to the college or university.

Given that the overall trend of diversification is expected to persist, campus personnel must continue to work toward shaping a truly multicultural college environment that facilitates diversity experiences for all students. This is a particularly important goal for first-year-experience programs since the first year is the point of students’ initial interactions with institutional culture. This period also sets the precedent for students’ interaction and comfort in the campus climate.

First-year-experience educators need to identify how their programs, policies, and pedagogies capitalize on the multiple perspectives traditional college students bring with them—perspectives that contribute to the total campus environment. To facilitate a successful transition for all students, educators should acknowledge elements of the historical and campus context related to the diversity and should understand the impact of institutional messages being conveyed about the value of diversity as it relates to new students’ personal identity and interpersonal interactions.

**Mental and Emotional Health**

As a result of tragic acts of violence on several college campuses, the nation has been made aware of the mental and emotional health care needs among
traditional-aged college students. These events have brought widespread attention to this issue, but higher education professionals have long been aware of this growing problem and have all but identified it as a hallmark of the millennial generation.

National data indicate that current cohorts of students are facing significant issues related to their overall health and well-being. However, while college students’ self-ratings of physical health decline during the first year of college and approximately one-quarter express some concern about their health, statistics related to students’ emotional health are far more troubling. In particular, self-ratings of emotional health among traditional first-year students experienced significant declines in the 1990s and have hovered at their lowest rates since 2000 (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others, 2007). These same national statistics reveal slight increases in depression among students during the first year and significant growth in the proportion of students who feel overwhelmed. In addition, students are engaging in fewer stress-reducing and leisure activities such as exercising and sports and reading for pleasure, and they are drinking and partying more often during the first year of college than they did in high school. Furthermore, current cohorts of traditional college students are relying more heavily on their parents for emotional support than their predecessors did (College Parents of America, 2007; Keup and Stolzenberg, 2004; Pryor, Hurtado, Sharkness, and Korn, 2007).

These increases in rates of depression and anxiety, coupled with decreases in self-ratings of emotional and physical health, are a concern in and of themselves. However, these statistics are only symptoms of a much larger issue: greater numbers of traditional college students are dealing with significant, and often more severe, psychological problems and emotional health issues than in previous decades (Crissman Ishler, 2005; Kitzrow, 2003; Levine and Cureton, 1998). While some of these issues emerge during the college years, more students are entering higher education with at least moderate, if not severe, symptoms of psychological distress. More specifically, findings from the 2004 National Survey of Counseling Center Directors at 334 colleges across the country are that during the 2003–2004 year, 2,200 students were hospitalized for psychological reasons and 137 students committed suicide. In addition, there were rising numbers of student self-injury cases and significant increases in the proportion of students who were already on psychotropic medications (Gallagher, 2004). Directors also reported that over 40 percent of their clients have “severe psychological problems [and] 8.7% have impairments so serious that they cannot remain in school or can only do so with extensive psychological-psychiatric help” (p. 2).

A certain level of stress and emotional discomfort can be expected for new college students and is even perhaps necessary for a meaningful transition. Test anxiety, arguments with roommates, homesickness, and romantic heartbreaks represent predictable rites of passage for first-year college students. Yet because traditional students have grown up in a youth
culture in which they have been shielded from failure, have developed less resiliency, and are less experienced dealing with conflict without parental intervention, the tipping point where regular stress turns into an emotional crisis is much lower than for previous generations. As such, it often seems as if the young men and women entering colleges and universities today are only a few bad days away from significant depression, debilitating anxiety, or substance misuse and abuse. Since emotional and mental health problems are associated with lower levels of social integration, academic performance, and persistence to the second year (Kitzrow, 2003; Perrine, 2001; Pritchard and Wilson, 2003), students’ mental and emotional health needs are of great concern to first-year-experience professionals.

As with many other challenges in higher education, recognizing this issue and finding the resources to deal with it effectively are very different matters. Data show that fiscal and human resources dedicated to campus counseling centers have not experienced increases commensurate with growing need among millennial students (Gallagher, 2004; Kitzrow, 2003). As such, student psychological services are often taxed beyond capacity. This leaves a significant number of students who are dealing with more predictable emotional crises with only the help they can find from concerned faculty, staff, and peers who, however well intentioned, are often unprepared to address emotional and mental health care needs.

Since points of transition represent a time when individuals are more prone to psychological distress, first-year programs and personnel are in a position to lead institutional and national efforts to address this issue effectively. Preterm orientation, extended orientation-style first-year seminars, and residential life programs for new students have incorporated programs that familiarize students with campus physical and emotional health services. But relegating information about these services to a single program or class session is not enough. Entire campus communities must become more aware of students who exhibit warning signs and symptoms of emotional distress and must provide essential resources to support their psychological health and well-being.

**Redefining the Purpose of College**

Why do students attend college? Of the several possible answers to that question, many of today’s first-year students are likely to respond “to get a job” or, more specifically, “to get a good job.” Educators often assume that community or technical college students are more likely to focus their education on job preparation than are students at baccalaureate campuses. But this same vocational perspective is voiced by many first-year students, whether they begin college in the two-year or four-year sector. New students are often intolerant of courses or activities not directly related to their intended major or career path, and they complain bitterly about what they refer to as “irrelevant” general education courses such as history, foreign language, or even English.
composition. This disinterest in broad liberal learning results in disengagement in many first-year classes and diminishes the quality of the academic transition through the first, and perhaps even the second, year of college.

Over forty years ago, Burton Clark and Martin Trow (1966) identified four dominant student subcultures in higher education, which remain particularly useful descriptors for traditional college students (Feldman and Newcomb, 1969). These subcultures emerge from the combination of two variables: students’ involvement with ideas (much or little) and students’ identification with their college (much or little). The academic subculture represents students who are invested in their college and in ideas; nonconformists share the academics’ interest in ideas but not their identification with the institution. Students in the collegiate subculture are very engaged in the institution, but are typically involved outside the realm of academics, and students in the vocational subculture are not invested in the intellectual ideas of the institution and do not identify with the institution.

While this typology of student subcultures was developed at an earlier time of generational shift, it is still useful for today’s traditional student subcultures. Today many traditional-aged entering students can be characterized as belonging to the vocational subculture. They are no longer “intellectual blank slates that are ripe with intellectual curiosity and hungering for their consciousness to be awakened” (Lang, 2008, p. C1).

National data sources on traditional-aged first-year college students indicate significant shifts in students’ core values over the past several decades that help explain this phenomenon. In the late 1960s, “developing a meaningful philosophy of life” was reported as being very important or essential by the majority of entering students (86 percent). Only 42 percent indicated that “being very well off financially” was a core value (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others, 2007). In the 1980s and 1990s, these benchmark core values essentially switched places, and financial interests have remained a greater personal priority for the majority of traditional college students ever since.

In 2006, just over 75 percent of entering traditional college students reported that the desire to “learn about things that interest me” was a very important reason in deciding to go to college, but approximately 70 percent of the same students indicated that the ability to make more money, get a better job, and gain training in a specific career were similarly important motivators for their pursuit of a degree (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others, 2007).

The fact that traditional first-year students appear to be entering college for the primary purpose of career training, professional or graduate school preparation, and financial security should come as no surprise given the extremely high costs to attend college and the significant educational debt many students face at graduation. And to some, this push and pull between liberal education and the more utilitarian vocational interests of students may represent opposite ideals. However, our challenge with respect to serving today’s traditional students is to blend these two worlds and make the exposure and skill development that is gained from a liberal arts education relevant
to students’ interests and aspirations. Carol Geary Schneider (2006), president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, wrote about this challenge:

Today’s college students should not be presented with a false choice between either vocational preparation or liberal-arts education defined as nonvocational personal development. It is time to embrace a far more purposeful approach to college that sets clear expectations for all students, cultivates the achievement of a set of essential skills and capacities, and enables every student to place his or her interests—including career aspirations—in the broader context of a complex and fast-changing world [p. B17].

Technology

In the not-too-distant past, discussions of technology in the college environment were primarily limited to computer access. It has actually been during the lifetime of millennials that a personal computer became virtually universal for students at colleges and universities. In 1985, fewer than 30 percent of students reported frequent use of personal computers; by 1995, this percentage was over 50 percent (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others, 2007). Recent statistics show that 86 percent of first-time, first-year students at four-year universities reported using a computer frequently, and nearly all reported using it at least occasionally (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others 2007). Furthermore, at least 85 percent of college students own a computer (Junco, 2005). Although there are still inequities with respect to technology access and utilization among minority racial/ethnic groups, as well as students from rural areas and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, today’s traditional college students overall have been exposed to a wide array of personal computing options and technologies and enjoy easy access to them.

During these past few decades, higher education has incorporated technology into the learning process. For example, faculty communicate and counsel by e-mail, online enrollment is becoming the norm, library materials are being moved to online formats, electronic academic portfolios are gaining in popularity, and nearly 80 percent of traditional first-year students report that they use the Internet for research or homework (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, and others, 2007). While faculty and administrators at higher education institutions often express concerns that technology is replacing face-to-face faculty-student contact to the detriment of learning, students perceive that these technologies, particularly those related to the Internet, are academically beneficial. Just under half report that e-mail allows them to express ideas to a professor that they would not express in person, approximately two-thirds subscribe to a listserv related to their academic discipline, and 79 percent report that the Internet has had a positive impact on their academics (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2000). These perceived
outcomes on the part of the student are triangulated by recent data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007) that when “used appropriately, technology facilitates learning and promotes collaboration among peers and instructors” (p. 47).

A more recent trend among millennials is their use of computer and telecommunication technologies in the social realm. The more widespread use of e-mail and the birth of social networking sites and instant messaging capabilities have changed the way that today's students meet and socialize with their institutional peers, maintain contact and connections with family, and stay in touch with high school friends in other locations. More and more students maintain multiple e-mail accounts, social networking sites, and phone numbers, and they use instant messaging and text messaging daily. These advancements in communication technology have been cited as one of the primary reasons for college students' continuing reliance on their parents during the first-year transition and the emergence of “helicopter parents” (Henning, 2007).

The ease with which students communicate and share information is changing their process of integration during the transition from high school to college, their connection to the campus community, and expectations regarding interpersonal communication. Information technologies are a significant contributor to the consumer mentality of today's college students (Levine and Cureton, 1998). Anecdotes exchanged around staff and faculty coffee klatches on campus often include complaints of students who were irritated because their 3:00 A.M. e-mail to a professor was not answered by the start of morning class that same day, misuse of professors' home and cell phone numbers so that students can get an immediate answer to their questions, or students' fielding cell phone calls, e-mails, and text messages during class.

Residential life staff can contribute their own stories about how information technologies have changed the nature of students' interactions with roommates, neighbors, and staff as students choose virtual means of communication and conflict resolution over face-to-face interactions. Who has not heard the anecdote about the two roommates who sat back to back in silence while they argued using instant messaging, or the story about students who were outraged at being disciplined for violating campus policy regarding the posting of offensive pictures on the public portion of their social networking sites?

While at times these examples may be humorous, they also illustrate significant challenges of managing students' expectations about interaction with one another and the college or university. In its most benign form, more social uses of technology represent a challenge to students' time management, and in a more serious light, they represent the potential breakdown of interpersonal skill development, conflict resolution, and management of one's personal information and safety. The challenge is that the development of interpersonal communication skills and personal management, which may be lost due to technological advances, rivals, if not surpasses,
knowledge about the many applications of technology as critical to future personal, professional, and educational success.

Conclusion

When this generation of students has left the college or university for life beyond and when those of us who serve them are facing retirement, these four issues—multiculturalism, mental and emotional health care, students’ narrow perceptions about the purpose of higher education, and technology—will be remembered as some of the greatest challenges confronting both students and educators in the early years of the twenty-first century. Yet these issues also give rise to significant contributions of knowledge and best practice for future generations of educators.

In dealing with these challenges, it is important to remember that students and their development are at the foundation of our work. It may be tempting to think about these issues first from the perspective of their impact on institutions rather than their impact on students. For example, students’ mental health care needs often lead to concerns about institutional liability, and conversations about technology often focus on campus capacity and service delivery. Similarly, conversations about student diversity initiatives may drift into a discussion of admission policies and retention rates, and expanding on students’ vocational perception of college is relegated to a career center or considered a failing of general education. In all of our attempts to work with traditional students, first-year-experience professionals have the opportunity to focus or refocus conversations, campus policies, and resource allocation on the essential task of easing students’ educational and developmental transitions.

References


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