

Research Brief No. 1

“We misread and therefore mismanage countless developing minds.”

- Mel Levine, in *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*

Introduction

Lack of adequate high school preparation, poor study skills, financial need, employment and family demands are among the reasons why college students interrupt their studies. Yet, there is another reason. Simply put, young adults today are characteristically different from those even five years ago. What worked with new first year students then may not hold with this newest group. Being consciously aware of these differences among young people may hold promise for keeping more CCC students on track to graduation.

The Changing First-year Student

At colleges across the country, “hovering and hyperinvolved helicopter parents” are tying up administrators’ time and hampering students’ development of self-reliance and responsibility.ⁱ A number of colleges have opened new offices to communicate with parents, provided material for parents during student orientation, and keep parents at bay when advisors meet with students. Perhaps more important than liaisons with parents are the effects that this parenting style have upon student learning.

Strauss and Howeⁱⁱ describe a new generation of students born in 1982 or later as “trophy kids” who are overprotected, sheltered, pushed to excel, and taught to avoid personal risks. Maranoⁱⁱⁱ echoes the sentiment and derides hyper-sensitive parents for developing children into a “nation of wimps.” These are children who have become fragile and dependent young adults; controlled/organized play, liberal diagnoses of disabilities (mental health and learning disabilities), and over-emphases on self-esteem prevent them from developing important leadership and decision-making skills.

Also of note is the role of the cell phone “as an umbilical cord”^{iv} that keeps students in perpetual contact with their parents if something goes wrong—preventing the development of coping strategies to deal with the responsibilities of adulthood. While bike helmets, minivans, and laptops have set apart the home life of this generation, their worldviews have been shaped by continuous military conflict (anybody remember Kosovo?) as well as a culture of violence in the U.S. According to [the Beloit College Mindset List](#) for 2007, the incoming class of students share a mindset such that Iraq has always been a problem, AIDS screening tests have always been available, that they have always had a PIN number, and automatics refer to weapons instead of transmissions.^v

Scholars in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, depict the incoming generation of students. Librarian Richard T. Sweeney refers to this new generation of students born between 1980 and 1994 as “Millenials” characterized by their use of portable techno-gadgetry, a desire for multi-sensory multi-media curricula, a preference for hands-on and collaborative learning, and a practical multi-tasking attitude.^{vi} Their attitude, according to linguist Naomi Baron, is self-centered; when faculty cater too much to “Millenials” learning styles, the students do not learn how to solve problems on their own or how to

communicate effectively. Instead, they learn that “what matters is how you express yourself, not whether anyone can understand what you have expressed.”^{vii} An interviewed student chimes in as well, acknowledging that her generation is known for attention deficit disorders yet warning that technology and “pretty pictures or some interesting digital format” are appealing to students who have poor study habits.^{viii}

Pediatrician and well known author on adolescent development Mel Levine describes in *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes* a long-term feeling of entitlement in new groups of young adults who evaluate their college courses in terms of “how much fun they were” rather than on the level of academic challenge. Levine further elaborates that these young adult learners are not productive thinkers who “inspect a challenge” and “consider how best to tackle it.” Today’s young people have underdeveloped decision-making abilities, and as a result many make decisions too impulsively. Their rash decisions are made frequently without much thought to consequences. **Levine also argues that colleges have not yet made an effort to understand the mind-set of the new generation. He concludes “we misread and therefore mismanage countless developing minds.”**^{iv}

A newer parenting style combined with a sense of uncertainty in the world is influencing the character of first-year students. Our erroneous perception is that these learners are the same as incoming students from the past. We do not recognize that their characteristics have changed substantially from earlier generations. We are prone to lump them in with all the others we have known and we fail them easily. There may be a propensity towards defeatism or humiliation when students fail to meet an instructor’s expectation, causing them to flee from the specter of failure.

Conclusion

A proactive step toward assisting these students is to increase college awareness that a larger segment of incoming students than in the past are prone to flee at the first sign of adversity. Nearly all of these students have the ability to succeed at CCC but many leave after experiencing a single point of difficulty their initial semester and many more after the end of their first year of study. Understanding that this segment of youth was raised differently than previous groups of students may lead to less of a tendency to, using Levine’s term, “misread” these teenagers. The likelihood that most will stay and graduate from CCC increases dramatically if they return for their second semester, and then their second year of study.

There also may be lessons present in the epistemological and pedagogical principles found among the disciplines of the college that may well serve these developing minds. Seeking ways to influence these students before they move out of reach will not only assist CCC with retention, it may provide a critical positive difference in the intellectual and personal maturation of these young people.

ⁱ Pope, Justin. (2005). “Colleges Try to Cope with Copter Parents.” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug 30.

ⁱⁱ Howe, Neil & William Strauss. (2000). *Millenials Rising: The Next Great Generation*. New York: Vintage Books.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marano, Hara Estoff. (2004). “A Nation of Wimps.” *Psychology Today*. November/December, 37(6): 58-70, 103.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Beloit College Mindset List, 2007, available online <http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/>.

^{vi} Levine, Mel. (2005). *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

^{vii} Carlson, Scott. (2005). “The Net Generation in the Classroom.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct 7.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{viii} Ibid.