Written Response to Levine and Dean

‘Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today’s College Student’

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1) What do Levine and Dean mean when they say that today’s ‘typical’ college students are a ‘generation on a tightrope’?

Each new generation of college students possesses a set of unique characteristics that we can use to describe and classify them. Though it is without argument there exist differences among each individual student, one can easily discover commonalities among the population that present both challenges and opportunities to faculty, administration and other important institutional constituents. Levine and Dean (2012), using both a 2009 Undergraduate Survey and interviews with Student Affairs officers, provide us with a comprehensive analysis of the most recent generation of students, often called millennials. Overall, the rapid growth in technology, social media and to a degree the way by which they were parented, all contributed to the development of these young men and women.

Levine and Dean (2012) describe today’s college students as being balanced on a delicate tightrope (p. ix). They live in a world enhanced and driven by technology and rapid change, yet function in a society where the infrastructure is lagging behind (pp. 159-160). They are digital natives and professors and institutions are, as they state, at best digital immigrants (p. 166). Additionally, students possess contradictory attributes and often struggle to find a balance between the life they hope and expect to achieve and the challenges that accompany the environment within which they live. They strive to be independent yet remain remarkably tethered to their parents and/or guardians (p. ix). Praise, applause, affirmation and confidence was instilled in them from birth which seems to cause them to become an emotional liability in the workplace (p. 188). Further, they trust in the American dream and seem convinced that without much difficulty, success can and will be theirs (p. 148). When they do not achieve these
things immediately, they become quickly dissatisfied. The recent recession, within which they found themselves studying at university, has created an economy ripe with uncertainty and difficulty; their optimistic attitudes can align poorly with our reality (p. 147). They were born into a world ripe with technology, where change occurs so quickly we do not know what may be available to us within the next few months. This particular situation creates complications as much of the current adult population still holds one foot in the less developed past. They seek and value community but often lack the interpersonal skills to develop relationships to an expected, adult-like level (p. ix). It is for these reasons, among many other, that Levine and Dean characterize the recent generation as living on a tightrope.

2) To what extend do you perceive that today’s ‘typical’ college students are:

A: ‘…global in orientation but [with] little knowledge of the world…’

The globalization of our world serves as an interesting topic of discussion, particularly in relation to college students today. I am not significantly older than the students surveyed in Levine and Dean’s book, and assert that I have always understood the interconnectedness of the world as we know it. I argue that today’s ‘typical’ college student thinks in a similar manner. Many of the products we use on a daily basis were built and developed abroad, and always have been. When I call a customer service representative, I expect that that individual does not reside or work in the United States. Most, if not all, of my classmates and the students I now know have traveled or studied abroad even if for only a week. We all speak of our desire to explore the world and become more familiar with its various cultures and ways of life. We are all keenly aware of issues related to the environment, such as global warming, the importance of recycling, etc. We have also been raised in a world where immigration has been a common political topic. We were raised to think of these and similar ideas as global issues that the USA alone cannot
solve. Students, however, are politically disengaged and frustrated (p. 128). They do not trust politicians or the political process to handle the problems appropriately and as students seek quick and immediate satisfaction, they decide to address the problems locally in order to ensure both a response and an impact.

B: ‘…weak in interpersonal skills, face-to-face communication skills, and problem-solving skills…’

Though the authors present a very strong case for the lack of communication and interpersonal skills that college students possess (p. 74), as a member of the generation I am hesitant to agree with most of their findings. Social media and technology have certainly provided us with different means of communication, though if you observe any set of young people congregated at a bar, party, or ‘hip’ restaurant, you will see a generation of individuals that value face-to-face communication, networking, relating to each other, and deepening friendships. One can guarantee that a photo will be taken with a smartphone and while it is likely that each person will check for updates on social media a few times during dinner, the focus will be on the present situation and the individuals surrounding the students.

My perception, however, of students’ problem solving skills aligns significantly with the findings in the text. As email, text, Facebook, and other means can easily replace a face-to-face conversation surrounding a difficult situation, students often resort to these methods. An email ensures that you can analyze the assertion, craft a response, record the conversation to recount later, and most importantly to avoid an awkward potentially uncomfortable situation. It has become increasingly harder for students to use critical thinking and problem solving skills to handle a delicate situation and ensure productive follow-through.

C: ‘…more immature, dependent, coddled and entitled.’
The level of maturity, independence, etc depends greatly on the student him/herself and their specific situation though I do perceive that college students today exhibit these characteristics in a pronounced fashion. We have always had access to quick and easy answers, whether that be through technology like search engines or Facebook or through our parents as they were more involved in our lives than previous generations. This reality breeds individuals who first and foremost think of the easiest and most efficient way to handle difficult situations. The answer is very often parents, which reinforces the idea that students are coddled. The entitlement stems from the independent and success-driven mentality that was analyzed above. Students believe deeply that with a small amount of time and effort, they will receive praise, promotion, acknowledgement, and more. Students must be forced to undergo challenging situations without the assistance of a parental figure in order to develop the skills necessary to handle them in the future. These changes will occur eventually though at much later stages than previous sets of students.

3) To what extent do you agree with the contention in the book that: ‘Today’s college students will need a very different education than the undergraduates that came before them.’

Levine and Dean (2012) present some very interesting findings regarding the expectations that undergraduates have for their education (p. 148). I agree with them in that today’s and future students will require an education unlike anything we have offered before. First and foremost, this generation is pragmatic and career-driven; I perceive that the dramatic increase in the cost of college has contributed to these behaviors. Students and parents now see a university experience as a way to guarantee a strong salary and a satisfying professional life. Students value relationships and community and are no longer interested in an educational
method so individualistic. They value the connections that they can and will make with both their professors and their fellow students. They also seek instant gratification and satisfaction, which with many of today’s assignments and readings can be difficult to achieve. The rapid growth in technology also necessitates change in the classroom, as students experience both hardware and software that changes their lives monthly. This quickly shifting world, in my opinion, has taught students to appreciate projects and scenarios that they can apply in their lives at a moment’s notice. As a result, initiatives like the Stanford dSChool will likely become increasingly commonplace in our universities. Further, the authors’ recommendation to create practical, skills-based minors and departments can and will change the face of higher education today. Those institutions that do not adapt in these ways will have difficulty attracting and retaining students as pragmatism and career-oriented behaviors are unlikely to dissipate.

I found the authors’ final recommendations for adapting education to be particularly impressive and intuitive. The three Cs that they outline, combined with group learning and technological adaptation, will ensure that students are prepared for the rest of the 21st century (p. 164). As technology changes, hard skills can become obsolete and thus employers will be required to search for individuals that contain the soft skills that are conducive to the fast-paced nature of the workplace. The three items mentioned in the book (critical thinking, creativity and continual learning) are those skills, which transcend majors and allow students to attack the uncertainty of our world with an educated ease.

4) To what extent do you think that ‘events define generations?’

I provide a simple answer to this important question: I do not believe that events define generations. I believe that generations can develop certain behaviors and attributes because of an overall cultural response to significant local or world events, but the events in and of themselves
do not define the students. It is our culture’s reaction in a particular context that leads to generational commonalities regarding events. For example, the election of Barack Obama was a significant milestone in American history but it did not specifically affect the millennial generation any more significantly than older generations. To posit that the election of an African-American is somehow more poignant or meaningful to young voters than individuals of my parents’ age serves as a simplistic and narrow view of the event itself. Rather, the installation of Barack Obama changed the psyche of the nation and taught us to think about the political process differently. It gave hope to many Americans of all ages and races. This cultural response, combined with the availability and application of social media and technology during the campaign, affected the millennial generation though it does not singularly define them.

The recession and economic downturn serves as another example of my opinion that events do not define generations but rather change our culture. I have already discussed that students today are more pragmatic and career-driven than in the past, which has roots in both the rising cost of college and the economic realities of the past decade. Students on average graduate with approximately $30,000 in debt and the media present a multitude of stories about the, apparent, rampant underemployment of millennials (Kingkade, 2015). These unfortunate events have changed the entirety of American culture. The authors also discussed the rise in online and for-profit education and the need to adapt to a non-traditional audience; these realities are not unique to millennials (p. 160). Further, it is my understanding that everyone believes and understands that a college degree is the key to a successful future and as a result we all approach higher education with greater scrutiny. It is not only the students themselves, but perhaps more so the parents who are demanding more pragmatic, applied, and career-focused education. The
recession was an event that adapted the landscape for all Americans rather than serve as a defining event for the most recent generation of college students.

5) For each of the following chapters in the book (academics; life outside the classroom; parents; multiculturalism; politics; the future), identify a finding that was surprising to you, a finding that was NOT surprising to you, and a finding that significantly concerns you.

Academics

The most surprising finding within this section of the book was the fact that students’ choices in majors have not changed or adjusted dramatically over the past forty years (pp. 40-41). Given the current climate, where skill sets and technical and career-focused education have become a prevalent part of the conversation, I expected to observe a greater number of students earning professional degrees. As students are greatly focused on outcomes, such as salary, the relatively stagnant data surrounding engineering and business degrees is particularly noteworthy. Further, healthcare has increased by two percentage points and I would have expected the rise to be more substantial.

I am not surprised at the rapid decrease in the number of students that attribute a university education as a) a key to formulating life values and goals and b) essential to learn to get along with people (p. 39). In the current economic and political climate, particularly given the current generation’s attributes and attitudes, higher education is viewed more practically by students and families. Further, with the advent of social media and constant access to means of communication with friend groups, it seems logical that students would no longer see college as the time to develop interpersonal or social skills.
Grade inflation concerns me as it does not accurately account for students’ academic ability or performance. It also creates worrisome inconsistencies if B- or C- level work is noted as higher and undermines the efforts of A-performing individuals. While grade deflation would prove unpopular and problematic as today’s students expect ongoing positive feedback, it would serve as an important step in the right direction in revamping our current system of higher education.

Life Outside the Classroom

During my undergraduate career, I and most of my peers were heavily involved in on- and off-campus activities. As a result, the data surrounding engagement on campus surprised me (p. 55). I understood that the average student did not participate in as many activities as I, though I anticipated a higher figure. Institutions must address the fact that less than a third of undergraduates attend on-campus events as we utilize many staff and financial resources in order to develop and implement meaningful programming.

I was raised in a middle-class household where my parents were able to afford the tuition at an in-state research institution however I earned additional money to cover costs such as housing or meals. Many of my peers were from similar financial backgrounds and worked, as I, 20-25 hours per week in on- and off-campus jobs. As a campus staff member, I also interact with many student workers and as such, the data surrounding part-time employment for undergraduates was not alarming to me. I was also not surprised by the statistics regarding alcohol and drug usage on campuses as it mirrored the student experience at my alma mater almost exactly as I experienced it (p. 58). As I reflect further upon my own undergraduate experience, I know of many individuals who made poor choices that affected their ability to earn
decent grades and graduate on time. For our increasing dependent and coddled undergraduates, these issues will become potentially more debilitating.

The most worrisome piece of information in this chapter was the information related to students’ use of and addition to technology (p. 69). Though I graduated in 2009, my experience differs greatly from that of current undergraduates. Almost no one at my university owned a smartphone while we studied and thus, while we enjoyed the use of Facebook and other such sites, our ability to utilize these resources ended at our laptops. Students’ reliance on technology can affect relationships but more so it seems to inhibit their ability to ask for help and to utilize and take advantage of on-campus resources. As with student activities, institutions exert significant resources to support their students and ideally, students would take proactive measures to have conversations with these valuable university administrators.

Parents

I have spent six and a half years working in admissions and financial aid, thus the data on helicopter parents is all too familiar to me. Most of my conversations are with parents and not students and much of the conversation at admissions’ conferences is related to how and when we should engage current parents in the process. It often appears that we are recruiting parents and no longer students. I am not shocked by the rapid increase in parental involvement with university administration, campus visits, or law suits (p. 80).

I found the information as to why parents act in this manner to be particularly meaningful and useful for me and my work. I have always pondered the reasons for the increase in parental involvement and I now have some answers to my questions. The authors note that smartphones and the ease of communication have contributed, in addition to the simple fact that today’s parents have worked tirelessly to ensure that their children do not ‘skin their knees’ too badly
Parents, understandably to some degree, do not want their children to suffer or experience much hardship however that limits the student’s ability to handle life’s many difficult situations. These reasons were surprising to me but provide me with a more informed context for my work.

Parental involvement in the workforce is a concerning reality (p. 93). These students are adults that have completed university degrees and parental involvement in their professional lives creates conflicts of interest for the students. When the young person should speak to a human resources professional to remedy a situation, they may address their parent. It could also call into question the individual’s loyalty and in some cases, there may be proprietary and privacy issues related to parental involvement in the workplace. I do not employ or supervise any individuals at this time though as I hope to do so in the future, I worry about parents throughout the process.

**Multiculturalism**

Levine and Dean (2012) noted that students of multicultural or historically underrepresented backgrounds find themselves more satisfied with their overall college experience (p. 101). These students feel that they are able to express themselves and find support and guidance from their institution. These facts, to me, align with the reality of the current state of higher education in the United States. While more recent events regarding race relations and diversity have challenged this notion, comparatively and over time, institutional climates seem to have improved for underrepresented populations. These recent uprisings support the notion that while the gap between diverse groups is not as wide, the statistics remain constant (p. 97). These findings reflect my own experiences both as a student and a professional.
Through the research presented, the authors assert that the racial gap seems to have narrowed as young men and women cite similar events and individuals as influential or notable during their lifetime (p. 108). I do not agree with the proposal that these data necessarily imply greater racial or ethnic integration. I present the recent student uprisings as examples of the fact that while there has been improvement, we still have significant challenges regarding race and ethnicity in the United States (Thompson, 2015). Students with multicultural backgrounds do not feel as though they belong on many campuses which will prove a challenge for institutions moving forward.

Students today identify themselves in a serious manner and additionally, feel very strongly about these self-identifications. The authors describe this process and note that identifications are becoming more nuanced and are transcending traditional notions of belonging (p. 114). In one sense, this change constitutes a significant improvement in the lives of young people and it reflects that students both want and are able to ask for environments where they feel supported and valued. However, this reality proves quite challenging for institutions of higher education and I feel concern moving forward as to how to address these situations. How does an institution appropriately serve students that identify in, perhaps, hundreds of different ways? For example, must the institution provide a safe space for every possible ‘box’ into which a student has categorized themselves? These questions challenge us significantly as higher education administrators that seek to create inclusive and supportive campus communities.

Politics

Levine and Dean (2012) note that overtime, we notice decreasing interest among students in campus decision-making and governance (p. 118). This particular finding surprises me, particularly given the recent events on college campuses or many of those seen in documentaries.
like Ivory Tower. Given that students are issue oriented and locally politicized, I would expect to see greater campus involvement over time.

We see in the data that students attack problems more impersonally and increasingly use social media to air their grievances (p. 119). This fact does not surprise me as I see these actions reflected at my alma mater and my current institution. The University of Kansas, where I attended, is engaged in intense conversations about race on campus and almost all of the dialogue is funneled through an anonymous social media account called ‘Rock Chalk Invisible Hawks’ (Shepherd, 2015). Further, at my current institution Franklin University Switzerland, students recently posted an anonymous petition online to remove one of the university’s prominent student life staff members. I do not find these facts surprising but I do find them troubling as we move forward as institutions. These methods remove any accountability and do not allow for the campus to engage in meaningful dialogue to affect change within the community. It is very difficult to help students feel more comfortable and supported on campus if you do not know who they are and you cannot discuss the problems directly with them. The anonymity certainly makes it easier for students to express frustration but long-term it will serve as a considerable roadblock.

The Future

As I have mentioned previously, my tenure as an undergraduate occurred during the course of the study upon which the book bases its findings and observations. I watched the economy crash, tuition rates increase quickly, student loan indebtedness climb, and my peers obtain mediocre employment or move home with their parents. Not everyone was subjected to such harsh realities, though the stories are too familiar. The data presented in the chapter regarding the future match my expectations and reflect the experiences of my classmates (p.
What surprises me is the contradictory data presented regarding the viewpoints of today’s college students; in particular, that students believe that life isn’t fair and that people will take advantage of you and yet that with hard work, 73% believe that they will earn more than their parents (p. 149). I suspected a reality more in line with the first set of data, that students approach the world with at best pragmatism, at worst skepticism. I worry about the negativity felt about the state and future of our country, as today’s college-educated students and graduates represent the future of the nation (p. 150). To see the United States with such pessimism could produce unfortunate side effects as we move from the analog to the digital age. Optimism and creativity will ensure a brighter future and to achieve it, we must believe it.

6) Levine and Dean suggest that, for today’s ‘typical’ college students, both the past and future are ‘foreign countries.’ Explain what the authors mean by this, and muse about the implications of this observation for your efforts in higher education.

Levine and Dean (2012) mention that students today are digital natives, in a world still dominated by digital immigrants and an infrastructure that has not kept pace with technology (p. 166). Students today do not have many experiences of the analog world of their parents and as such, do not understand it. In this sense, the past is truly a ‘foreign country’ that students have not visited. Further, they will never visit it as it barely exists except in the outdated framework of many of our social systems. Perhaps it is this fact that compels students to have fairly negative view of politics and the state of our nation. Our society is built upon and around processes that do not align with the realities of the modern world.

Technology has changed so rapidly and so quickly that we no longer know what to expect within the next calendar year. Levine and Dean note that our lives in relation to technology are ‘hurting toward 2.0’ and yet we do not know what that will mean (p. 158). Every
month, a new social media platform seems to be born, a new TV channel is created, or a new app developed that eases an antiquated process (Uber, Venmo, etc). This situation means that the future is unknown and preparation for it virtually nonexistent. It is in this sense that they assert that the future is a foreign country for today’s undergraduate students.

Higher Education has two clear responsibilities regarding the aforementioned claims: to educate students about the past and to prepare them for an unknown future. While our students will never fully understand previous generations, we have a duty to provide them with a historical framework upon which to progress and grow as individuals and future professionals. Further, in the same way that you prepare for a trip to an unknown place, we must instill in them the valuable skills of adaptability, creativity, critical thinking, communication, technological acumen, and group learning. It is only with these specific skills that students can approach and navigate our complicated and complex future.

7) At the conclusion of the book, Levine and Dean offer advice for ‘educating today’s college students for the 21st century.’ Evaluate their advice. To what extent is it novel? Appropriately responsive, given the characteristics of students that emerged in their findings? Practical? ‘Right?’

In many ways, Levine and Dean (2012) present practical, plausible solutions to the predicament within which we currently find ourselves as institutions of higher education. Today’s college students are living on a tightrope – they are digital natives within a world of unprecedented change. Many of the authors’ proposals will ensure a better future for us and our young people; many may not. They note that in order to ensure success for our students personally and professionally, we must teach them skills that transcend all: critical thinking, creativity and continual learning (p. 164). While it is certain that these things will prepare
students for our ever-changing world, I posit that it may be difficult to instill critical thinking and continual learning in a generation quick to both receive answers and make decisions. Creativity will come naturally – the others may be a challenge without properly utilizing technology.

In terms of both employment and parenting, Levine and Dean make some interesting observations. Firstly, they posit that the workforce must make sweeping adaptations to adjust to the incoming generation (pp. 188-189). While I agree that extended internships, prolonged orientations, clear rules and guidelines and plans for parental involvement are a valuable remedy, they are an unlikely reality. Rather, I believe that expectations for the workplace must be taught and instilled at an earlier level so that young men and women know what to expect and how to believe. This process would ensure clear rules, as the generation needs, and a mutual understanding between students and employers. Regarding parents, I disagree with the sentiment that students should not consider their parents as ‘friends’ (p. 191). It is quite possible to be both taught and challenged by a friend, perhaps even more so than a parent at the age of a young adult. There can exist a balance between raising a child and being their friend and the valuable skills of independence and accountability can be established through honest and meaningful conversation (p. 191). Lastly, as Levine and Dean assert, I also believe that there must be greater implementation of technology in higher education (p. 185). For a generation of digital natives, the technological imbalance that exists on many of our campuses will serve as a detriment to our and our students’ future success.
References


