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"The Times, They Are A-Changin": Student Culture in the New Millennium

Stephanie Quade and Patrick Rombalski

A new generation is preparing to come to college - are the programs and services in place on our campuses ready? Two Student Affairs professionals offer their observations as well as insights from the current literature.

As another academic year begins, our newest students arrive on the campus, full of enthusiasm, energy, and potential. As seasoned Student Affairs staff members, eventually, cynically, usually about half-way through a busy orientation, we ask ourselves, "How long before the students who are already here ruin them?" What we are really asking, of course, is how many keg parties, skipped classes, and other occurrences we don't emphasize on campus tours have to happen before the prevailing campus culture removes the bloom from the rose of our incoming class.

As we consider the intricate interplay between peer pressure, adolescent development, and striving for independence, we wonder if the first year students' ambitions can immunize them from the sometimes-negative influences we have already seen in the returning, upper-class students. Reality sets in (somewhere around October) and we remember again the dangers of generalization: we see the goodness in the sophomores, juniors and seniors; we realize that the freshmen have brought some of their own "baggage" with them and that we cannot hold the other students responsible for their downfall.

But what if this year was different? What if the freshmen "mentored up" and had a positive influence on the upper-class students? Research, much of it longitudinal in nature, suggests that such a revolution may be about to take place. As the "millennials" come to college (those students born between 1980 and 2000), they may just bring enough ambition, optimism and strength of self-image to define their own niche on our campuses.

To describe our current students and those who we believe may be hitting our campuses over the next few years, we use four frames of reference: ambition, anxiety, release, and character. Ambition describes the strong desire of the current generation of students to

do well, to get good grades, and to secure an excellent job. We use anxiety because of the common knowledge that this group of students is reporting higher and higher stress levels. What contributes to this stress level and is there anything we can do to reduce it? Release might be described as those activities students engage in to relieve some of the anxiety in their lives. How do our students respond to the stress in their lives? Finally, how do high levels of ambition and anxiety impact the character of a student? Is character left out of the educational equation? Are educators (and parents) so consumed with success that we forget about developing character?

Throughout our histories as Jesuit institutions, we have been challenged to respond to the "signs of the times." As we begin another year, having promised to educate the whole person, do we really know who our students are? Using data gathered from several Jesuit colleges and universities, as well as current literature, we will explore characteristics of students currently on our campuses and predictions about the millennials. As one caveat, we are writing from the perspective of our current institutions and positions. To that end, many of our observations are particular to traditional undergraduate students.

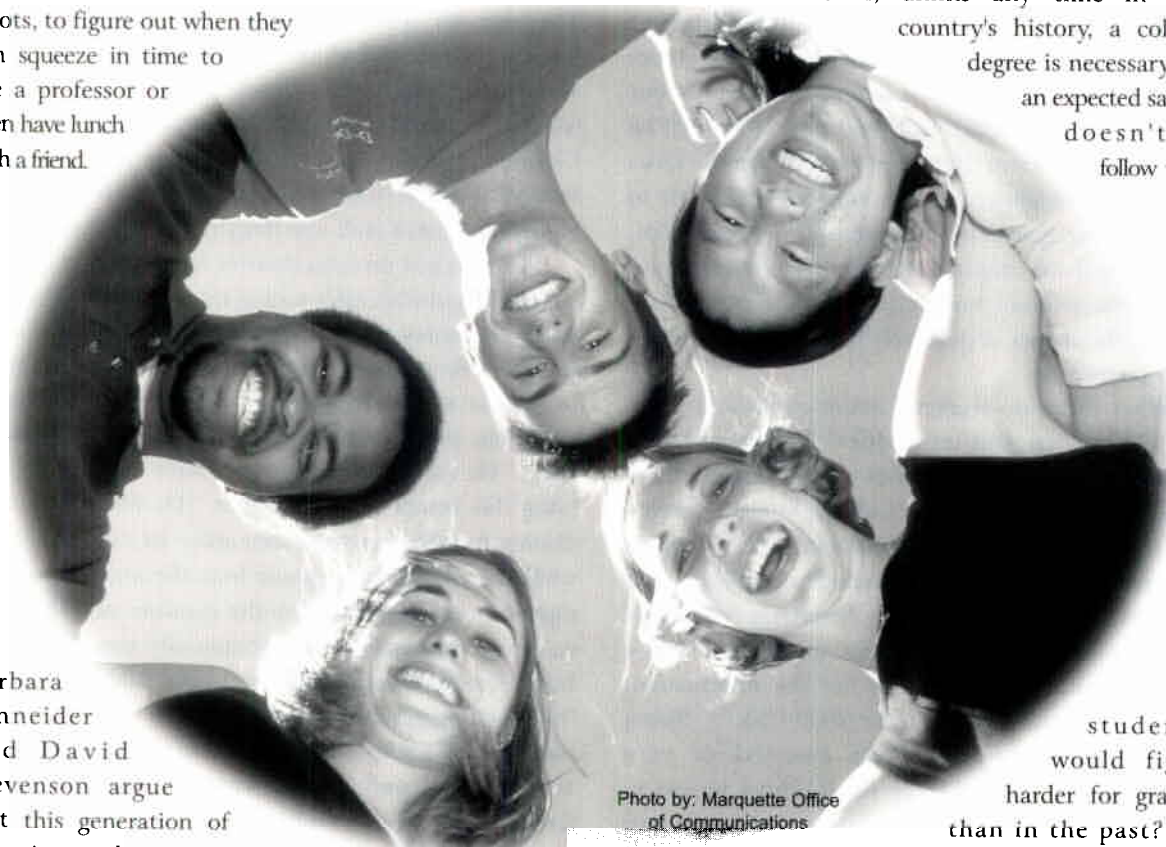
Ambition

We start with ambition because we believe that ambition is at the heart of the other three descriptors of student culture: both as a key motivation for current students and as a defining factor for millennial students. Ambition is why most students have always come to college: striving for higher learning, acquisition of skills, and entrée into the world of work. Externally motivated millennial students are portrayed as having been raised in a highly structured

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environment by their parents and trained to be group-oriented, deferential to authority, and obsessed with achievement.¹ These students are pressured by peers and lectured to by parents to do their best, to get top grades, and to build their resumé's. No wonder more and more students on our campuses seem to consult their calendars, some even their Palm

Pilots, to figure out when they can squeeze in time to see a professor or even have lunch with a friend.



Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson argue

that this generation of incoming students are not the "slackers" of Generation X: rather they are the most ambitious teenagers ever. In *The Ambitious Generation* they propose what many of us in higher education have already sensed; that college is no longer considered sacred ground and now represents the necessary step to take by young adults after high school in order to secure entry-level jobs. In fact, "The growing concern for most students in the 1990s is not whether to attend college, but how to pay for it."² So, perhaps unlike the past, this generation expects to come to college, and they further expect their degrees will land them good jobs right out of school. After all, is not this what parents and teachers have been telling them since pre-school? The ambitions of this generation (and their parents) may result in tremendous, potentially unrealistic, expectations for

the college graduate: high paying, fulfilling work, entrance into exemplary graduate or professional schools.

Are these ambitions and pressures at the root of the perceived epidemic of grade inflation in the academy? If young people are more directed to college and if, unlike any time in this country's history, a college degree is necessary for an expected salary, doesn't it follow that

students would fight harder for grades than in the past? If they have been told since age five or six that good grades are necessary, doesn't it stand to reason that they will do whatever is necessary for the best grade? But, what about the rise in grades with no marked increase in the SAT scores over the same period of time? If SAT scores also became a barometer that employers used to hire people, would SAT scores also climb?

College has changed for today's students, and college administrators and faculty should take heed that courses, programs, and services on our campuses are responding appropriately to these students. Does this mean the "tail is wagging the dog"? Not if we insist that students are at the center of our enterprise -- a fundamental precept in Jesuit education. Students today look at college differently and pursue their careers with an intensity never seen before. We have

Photo by: Marquette Office of Communications

been privy to many conversations where college personnel lament the perception that students are only here to get good jobs. What else should we expect? This is what they have been hearing from their parents most of their lives. A parent called last spring, upset with the university for encouraging her daughter to change her major. The parent was clear in her expectation that college was not a time to question but more of a time to prepare for a career. When it comes to ambition, much of what students come to our classrooms and residence halls with may very well be learned behavior from the culture and the family. Does this mean that higher education must respond solely to the market and give in to consumerism? Of course not. Conversely, if we simply turn away from students on our campus who are "simply in it for the money," we abandon the chance of positively influencing one sector of our population.

What forms do students' ambitions take as they leave our colleges and universities? While ambition may be difficult to measure in an empirical study, there are some indicators on the College Student Survey (CSS) that might point to ambition. (The CSS is distributed each spring by hundreds of colleges and universities across the country. Stephanie Wernig of Creighton University summarizes the data of those Jesuit institutions that provide her the information. Seven schools participated in the 2000 CSS.³) "Being very well off financially" was essential or very important to 62.1 % of those Jesuit school seniors in this sample. In other areas that might give insight into ambition, 13.3% of our seniors said they were planning to do volunteer work after graduation; 29.0% said they would be attending graduate/professional school, and 67.4% indicated they would be working full-time after graduation.

Anxiety

There is little doubt that the anxiety and the pressure students feel today is greater than it has been in the last fifty years. Not only do you have to go to college, but you must also soak up all of the opportunities surrounding you as you grow up and progress through college. To make matters more difficult, college students seem to be working today more than they ever have, mostly to help pay for college tuition, and they are leaving with greater debt.

We know from both experience and from assessment done on our campuses that our students study hard and that they have schedules jammed with commitments. They volunteer in soup kitchens, go to club and organization meetings, work on and off campus, work out with their teams, attend classes, study late into the night, and keep an active social life. The pace for students today seems perpetual. The result is high stress, lack of sleep, and exhaustion. This stress is evidenced most clearly in counseling centers where the number of intakes increases each year. Counseling centers have to define more narrowly what services they can and cannot provide, or else they face an over-burdened staff and lengthy waiting lists.

There is just no extra time for most students. They are inundated with information from around the world on the economy, politics, natural disasters, crime, and sports. One student, after having worked for months to prepare a week-long series of programs about Iraqi sanctions, simply indicated at its conclusion, "I'm over Iraq." He could not devote any more time trying to bring this complex issue to light. He felt it was too distant for the campus community to embrace, and while there was great response from the community the night of the programs, when the speakers were done, it was clear that much of the community was also "over Iraq." Examples such as this led to our dubbing this the "move-along generation." They seem to go through their days like a businessperson goes through the news in *USA Today*, only quickly scanning headlines and a few graphs. This "multi-tasking" and concern for grades take many forms. As noted in a profile of students at Harvard protesting the wages for janitors at the University, "[w]hen Students for a Democratic Society occupied administration buildings in the 1960s, the abiding image was of long-haired hippies smoking cigars with their feet propped on the university president's desk. This year, many students brought books and laptops into Massachusetts Hall so they wouldn't fall too far behind in their schoolwork."⁴

The pressure to find social connections among fellow-students remains on all of our campuses. A sign of the times is that the very first task completed for first-year resident students in August is to set up their computers and establish connections through e-mail with high school friends. We suspect that the need to fit in and find like-minded friends will always

be a cause of stress for young people. But, since there seems to be less time for it, we wonder if it is a greater cause of stress than before and if establishing relationships takes longer. We had a conversation at the end of the last academic year with a student leaving the university because she did not find friends on campus. There was a group of students on campus like her, but she had been unsuccessful in finding them.

In "The Stressed Student," Fred B. Newton makes recommendations for how colleges and universities can become a "responsive campus" to these stress levels.⁵ We find many of these recommendations to be characteristic of many US Jesuit schools. He suggests that students be taught skills needed to adapt to the proliferation of decisions; that we encourage counseling centers to expand to the degree necessary to handle many of the mental health problems prevalent on our campuses; and, that we provide the space and time for students to develop meaningful relationships and dialogue with faculty, staff, and peers.

On the 2000 CSS, nearly one-third (31.3%) of seniors at Jesuit universities (20.4% for men, 37.7% for women) frequently felt "overwhelmed by what they had to do."⁶ Given the Catholic, Jesuit mission of our schools, is some of this stress a result of perceived tension between the value of altruism we have tried to cultivate and the financial responsibilities of the real world? Or is this "overwhelmed" feeling simply the result of balancing work, classes, job hunting, graduation preparation, parental and peer group expectations, and fear of the unknown? If students are coming to us with high anxieties, it seems that at least some percentage are leaving us in a similar state. Do we have some responsibility for helping students see that it is a life-long journey to achieve balance between the personal and the professional, between their values and those they see in the dominant culture?

Release

The anxieties and stresses felt by students find their release in a variety of ways, including physical activity and socializing. Many studies of the millennial students have assessed the highly structured nature of their lives: this holds true in terms of release activities as well. For the high school students coming to our campuses over the next several years, participation in

I commuted my first year of college. I did not make close friendships, even though I was involved in many activities and clubs. I saw the bonds people made living on campus. So I worked three jobs during the summer, in order to live on campus the following year. I developed close friendships and my grades increased from C's to A's and B's. I think all students should try and live on campus their first year.

Anonymous response of a Seattle University student

organized team activities, music lessons, even academic enrichment programs takes up a great deal of their out-of-class time.

It appears that the students coming to college may be categorically different from our current students, even in terms of their social interests. Comparing groups from 1991 and 1998, high school students in the latter cohort were less likely to have been to a rock concert, watched football, gone to the mall, or watched TV every day. One rising activity, however, is computer use for purposes other than game playing (which is declining).⁷ Also noteworthy is that Schneider and Stevenson estimate that teenagers spend an alarming 20% of their time alone.⁸ This can be seen on our campuses in the spectacular rise of individual students using recreation facilities for strength and weight training, and a growing push to consider more single rooms in residence halls.

Any assessment of college student release must consider the use of alcohol and other substances among students. Howe and Strauss report that in 1979, 50% of teenagers reported consuming alcohol in the month prior; by 1998, less than 20% fell in this category. No doubt, this number in part reflects changes in state drinking ages in the 1980s. Perhaps more telling, the percentage of twelve to seventeen year-olds who claimed to have engaged in "binge drinking" has fallen from over 20% in the 1980s to less than 10% now.⁹ Substance use is generally seen as less self-destructive than in previous generations. In the 1980s, the death rate from drug-related overdoses was approximately the same for teenagers and adults in their forties. "By 1996, the teen rate was basically unchanged, but the rate for forty-somethings was ten times higher than it had been before."¹⁰ In many areas, adults, even parents, may not be providing the best examples when it comes to substance use. In a 1997 study of high school seniors, when asked which substances they had used in the presence of adults over age thirty, 60.5% indicated that they had consumed beer or wine coolers and 40% indicated that they had used illegal narcotics.

On our campuses, alcohol is involved in roughly 90% of student conduct cases, sometimes as the primary charge, and sometimes leading to much more serious charges involving fights, sexual assaults, vandalism, and so on. Drug use is not reported as frequently, but the numbers of marijuana cases at Marquette have remained in the forty to fifty range

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(number of students) per year, with no real signs of a slow down. It is wondered, with regards to both drug and alcohol use, how the impact of federal reporting expectations might impact these behaviors. Cases referred to university conduct systems -- even for simply being in the presence of alcohol -- are now a matter of public record. Will prospective parents and students use these numbers to compare institutions? Are those parents who drink with their sons and daughters going to be dissuaded by such figures?

Character

In their 2000 study of character-development in colleges and universities, Astin and Antonio posit the following definition of character: "values and behavior as reflected in the ways we interact with each other and in the moral choices we make on a daily basis."¹¹ Reflecting the dynamics at play in most conversations with students involved in conduct cases, the authors emphasize individual behavior within a social context. As we meet students charged with violating our standards of conduct, we typically try to gauge their appreciation of the impact of their choices and behaviors on themselves as well as on the larger community. A primary goal is to help students consider how their values comport with particular negative choices and to assist them in living more in concert with their values.

It is precisely this two-pronged question -- what do I believe in and how does it shape who I am -- that is at the core of the "character education movement." And this question has extended far beyond the purview of the campus judiciary. Of particular concern for campuses that claim to be values-centered, there is a growing sense, reflected in the annual CIRP surveys, that colleges and universities have lost a sense of moral authority in developing character in students. As studies indicate that students are no longer expecting college to help them develop a philosophy of life (from 85% in 1968 to lower than 50% by 1998), campuses have responded by a renewed interest in character education.¹² Many of these efforts have been chronicled, as well as supported, by major private foundations. In fact, in 1997, the John Templeton Foundation established an annual "Honor Roll for Character Building Colleges," recognizing individual

institutions for establishing seminars, centers and even courses that "inspire students to lead ethical and civic-minded lives."¹³

As we consider whether behaviors reflect these ideals, we will again look to some of the research on millennials. As in many other areas, adults are clearly raising the behavioral standards for this new generation. In response to violence, drugs, and other disruptions in classrooms, many school systems have adopted zero tolerance policies that leave very little room for discretion on the part of administrators responding to problems. This can be seen in colleges and universities in "three strikes and you're out" type policies relating to alcohol offenses, and the "relaxing" of FERPA regulations to allow parental notification in cases of alcohol and drug use. One fascinating thesis suggested by Howe and Strauss is that while students recognize that they may be held to a higher standard than adults (particularly when examined through the celebrity culture), they are not phased: in fact, "today's teens want more discipline and order in schools."¹⁴

External standards do not necessarily reflect inner values, however, and so it is unclear if students are rising to these higher standards because we are succeeding in terms of character education, or simply because they are responding to authority. Much of the research and theory on millennials portrays the students as rule adherent, even "disconcertingly comfortable with authority."¹⁵

One area of research, also at the center of the character movement, shows a trend worth considering: cheating. 71% of high school students surveyed in 2000 by the Josephson Institute of Ethics indicated that they had cheated on an exam in the last year, up from 61% in 1992; studies at colleges and universities estimate that as many as 80% of students reported one or more incidents of cheating.¹⁶ Studies of cheating have continued to show an increase in the behavior and a parallel decrease in concern for the morality of the behavior -- even among parents (reported by 22% of students in a high school study as having completed assignments turned in by students).¹⁷ Trying to help students learn from the disparity between values and behaviors is difficult if the behavior is seen as acceptable. As anyone who has ever dealt with a case of academic dishonesty knows, students are quick to excuse their behavior because of anxiety about grades. Is this the "dark side" of the ambitious generation? As

Paul Krouse, publisher of *Who's Who Among American High School Students*, states: "If this is the value system - that what you achieve is far more important than how you achieve it -- that is a value system that is going to lead our nation into trouble."¹⁸

Considering the authority-oriented nature of today's teens, perhaps part of the remedy to cheating and other "epidemics" of poor decision-making is to ensure that authority figures clearly articulate and enforce standards of behavior. Of course, simply creating statutes, codes, and creeds does not help students internalize the values underlying these structures or create good character: good habits, however, can develop into virtues!

Conclusion

As administrators responsible for campus discipline programs, we are not particularly vulnerable to overly-optimistic predictions about student behavior. We approach the beginning of another year with explicit questions about our students but also with explicit questions about our institutions. What is it about our campus culture that challenges students to live lives of good moral character? What about our campus culture only exasperates the annual parade of problems from alcohol misuse to cheating? How do we proceed as administrators, faculty, and staff at Jesuit institutions? Do we merely sit and hope that the next wave of students to hit our campus will live up to the ballyhoo from much of the research?

These are extremely difficult questions that require specific campus solutions. One of the most pervasive problems is the fact that students lead the culture on most of our campuses. There is a notable absence of older adults and mentors in the lives of students, especially after all of our offices close. This is substantially different from the days when many of our residence halls were filled with Jesuit counselors. Too often our culture is left unattended, and we sometimes only respond in a time of crisis. We organize task forces and committees. We write position papers and call in consultants. We point the finger at other administrators or faculty. And, these days, we do assessment and release the findings. While all of these are valuable efforts, they cannot and should not replace the one-on-one interaction between a student and an older adult. As the calendars for faculty become filled

with research and publishing and the hours for the administrator become filled with program development and emergency response, who is left to influence our students one at a time?

Our suggestion is to attempt to maintain a good balance between informed practice and personal approach. For people in student affairs, we recommend that you become the campus experts on student culture. This expertise should not be grounded in anecdotal findings but in sound assessment and intentional student contact. Current knowledge is needed to combat assumptions that may lead to well-meaning, but improperly delivered or designed, programs and services.

Personal approach is not pampering students or succumbing to the whims of the culture. Personal approach is the intentional action of an individual or an office to assure that relationships with students are tantamount to how we measure the success of our work. Fred B. Newton uses the word "tippers" when referring to those students who have the potential to have an impact on student culture due to their wide reach into the student community.¹⁹ Who are the "tippers" on our staff or faculty who intentionally build bridges between student culture and the other segments of the university? These people and approaches are needed if we are going to be successful in guiding student cultures into a place where we think they should be.

There seem to be unending new initiatives on our campuses for assessment, testing, curricular reform, mission and identity, and research. Our fear is that our campuses may have become mechanical in the approach to the students' welfare. While all of these efforts certainly have the potential to make us better institutions of higher learning, we cannot abandon the "whole student" education of our mission. If we do not intentionally make room for it, this hallmark of a Jesuit education may simply end up "blowin' in the wind."



Photo by: Marquette Office of Communications

ENDNOTES

- ¹ David Brooks, "The Organization Kid," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2001, 287, 4; 40-54.
- ² Barbara Schneider and David Stevenson, *The Ambitious Generation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 33.
- ³ 2000 College Student Survey, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, as compiled by Stephanie Wernig, distributed to participating institutions.
- ⁴ Jodi Wilgoren, "Allow Us to Demonstrate: Student Protest Comes of Age," *New York Times*, 13 May 2001:section 4, page 1.
- ⁵ Fred D. Newton, "The Stressed Student," *About Campus* 3.2 (1998): 4-10.
- ⁶ 2000 College Student Survey, Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA, as compiled by Stephanie Wernig, distributed to participating institutions.
- ⁷ Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Generation* (New York: Vintage Press, 2000), p.171.
- ⁸ Schneider and Stevenson, 192.
- ⁹ Howe Strauss, 203.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 205.
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- ¹² College and Character website: www.collegeandcharacter.org. May 16, 2001.
- ¹³ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁴ Howe and Strauss, 197.
- ¹⁵ Robert Wuthnow, cited in "The Organization Kid," *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 2001, 287, 4; 40-54.
- ¹⁶ Jane Eisner, "A College Test: How to End The Epidemic of Cheating Students," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 22, 2001.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁹ Newton, 8-15.