How Generations X, Y, and Z May Change the Academic Workplace

By Sarah Brown  |  SEPTEMBER 17, 2017

When it comes to today’s students and how they use technology, Ajay Nair always feels a step behind.

Take Snapchat, says Mr. Nair, senior vice president and dean of campus life at Emory University. Many students use the social-media app to take photos and videos — which disappear after 24 hours — of new friends, parties, all-nighters in the library, and other aspects of their college experience.

For students, documenting their lives on the app is no big deal; it’s part of their routine. For Mr. Nair, a member of Generation X, it isn’t. "Snapchat is not comfortable for me, so it’s hard to incorporate it into my daily practice," he says. Sometimes younger staff members in his office — millennials, who are sometimes labeled Generation Y — are better able to bridge communication gaps with the next generation, he adds.

Colleges are starting to play host to that new cohort of students: the smartphone-wielding, social-media-addicted, financially conscious, emotionally sensitive members of Generation Z. Collectively, along with Generations X and Y, they will make up the faculty members and administrators of the not-too-distant future.

Diversity in Academe: The Age Issue

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Generations are notoriously difficult to define, but according to most researchers, the oldest members of Generation Z were born between the mid-to-late 1990s and the mid-2000s. At the same time, the nation’s 75-million-plus millennials are taking over an increasing number of faculty and administrator roles on campuses. Born between 1980 and the mid-to-late 1990s, millennials are tech-savvy and flexible, but also frequently labeled as entitled. Their influence in academe will continue to grow over the next decade as the youngest ones finish graduate programs and move into the academic workplace, and the older ones take over middle-management roles.
Their Generation X predecessors, like Mr. Nair, will move up the ladder, accounting for a larger share of senior professors, deans, provosts, and presidents. Born between 1965 and 1980, Gen X is a smaller group than the millennials, but its members have challenged the way the academy operates in significant ways. For instance, they’ve questioned what they describe as antiquated standards for receiving tenure and pushed for more transparency in the tenure process.

Meanwhile, many baby boomers (born 1946-64), and some members of the so-called Greatest Generation (or Silent Generation), born before the boomers, remain on campus. Baby-boomer professors in particular have a reputation for never wanting to retire. But the X, Y, and Z generations will soon dominate the academic work force.

What does that mean for an industry that is known for being slow to change? Here are four ways in which the X, Y, and Z generations differ from one another, and how administrators, faculty members, and students might bridge those gaps.

**Smartphone Use**

Smartphones are at the root of many of the differences between Generation Z and previous age groups, says Jean M. Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University. She’s the author of *iGen*, a new book exploring the early signs of what’s unique about Generation Z — which she has dubbed “iGen,” in reference to its prolific smartphone use.

Her research shows a clear dividing line between people born in the early 1990s and in the latter half of the decade. Significant shifts in teens’ behavior, attitudes, and mental health began to occur around 2012, she says, which is also the year when, for the first time, a majority of American adults reported owning a smartphone.

Most millennials didn’t own smartphones until they were adults, Ms. Twenge says. Generation Z members, on the other hand, have spent most — if not all — of their adolescent years in the presence of the devices. For this group, she says, "that crucial stage of developing social skills during adolescence was probably being affected by the phone."

That got student-affairs administrators like Mr. Nair thinking about how they need to adapt their approach in response. For instance, more students are sporting wearable devices, like Apple watches, so they should be able to pay for things on campus and to access residence halls with them.

He’s taking many cues from students themselves. That’s something that higher-education institutions have often neglected to do, he says. But students have plenty of good ideas — how to make academic advising more accessible, for example, and how to improve campus dining options.

"For most of us who are not part of this generation," Mr. Nair says, "the students are teaching us."

Whether it’s news of a problem on or near campus or the result of a particularly fraught presidential election, students now expect campus officials to put out the message quickly, says Lori S. White, vice chancellor for students at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Back in the day, if something happened, you had time to gather the troops," she says.
But what’s the best way to convey that message? Students typically don’t favor email, Ms. White says, and their Facebook use is decreasing. Many remain active on Twitter, “but then you have to think, Can you get across a credible message in 140 characters or less?”

Colleges may also have to deal with mental-health issues associated with high levels of smartphone use and how easy it is for students to compare their lives with those of their peers on social-media sites, Ms. Twenge says. She has found that members of Generation Z who spend more than two hours a day on electronic devices are significantly more likely to show symptoms of depression.

But with campus-counseling centers’ staff and resources already strained, it’s not clear whether colleges are prepared to fill that need, she says.

**Teaching Styles**

Given that younger millennial and Generation Z students are almost always online, it’s no surprise that most of them prefer that classes have some kind of online component and believe that the use of technology helps them succeed. That’s according to Educause, the higher-education-technology consortium.

But professors aren’t keeping up, says Veronica Diaz, director of online programs at Educause. Some 57 percent say they encourage online collaboration in courses, and 61 percent report using technology during class to make connections to learning material.

Many professors have banned laptops and other devices in their classrooms, arguing that they are distracting. Ms. Diaz says the best approach for faculty members is not to ban technology, but to make their classes more engaging and "to intercept the device."

Those gaps could narrow as more millennials join the professoriate. One teaching style that may be nearing its end is the standard lecture, says Paul Harvey, a professor of management at the University of New Hampshire.

Many Generation X professors, like him, didn’t love the lecture format, "but it wasn’t terrible to us," he says. "We just figured that was how it was done." Millennial faculty members, however, tend to recognize that if you want students to absorb the material, "you can’t stand in front of the classroom and yak at them for an hour and a half."

Generation Z students also have spent a lot less time reading books, magazines, and newspapers than previous generations did, Ms. Twenge says. Most of their reading is texts and short articles linked from social media. Already, a significant number of students don’t complete reading assignments, and the problem may just keep getting worse, she says.

Mr. Harvey suggests that professors struggling to connect with today’s students spend more time listening and taking their feedback into account. "A lot of the things I’ve changed in my classes from one semester to the next have been [from] advice straight from the students," he says — particularly the addition of online and interactive components.

**The Value of College**

Generation Z students are more likely to question why they should be paying hundreds of thousands of dollars for a college degree, in part because they grew up during the recession and are more concerned with financial security, Mr. Harvey says.
The 5 Generations on Campuses Today

Here’s a look at the five generations now on campuses. While definitions and birth years for certain groups are debated, there is broad agreement about many of the generational distinctions.

**Silent Generation** (also known as traditionalists; named the "Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw): Born about 1925-46. Influences: Great Depression, World War II, the postwar boom, the GI Bill. Traits: job loyalty, share many values, cautious.

**Baby Boomers**: Born 1946 to 1964. Influences: television, assassination of President John F. Kennedy, rock ’n’ roll, first moonwalk, antiwar protests, birth control, sexual revolution. Traits: dedication, face time, team spirit, strongly identify as a special generation.

**Generation X** (also called "the Slacker Generation" and " latchkey kids"): Born 1965 to about 1980. Influences: parental divorce, feminist movement, MTV, rise of home video games and personal computers, fall of the Soviet Union, birth of the internet. Traits: cynical about authority, self-reliant, value autonomy, do not strongly identify as a generation.

**Millennials** (also known as Generation Y): Born around 1980 through the late 1990s or later. Influences: internet era, September 11 terrorist attacks, cellphones, Facebook. Traits: value feedback, recognition, work-life balance, and teamwork ("trophies for everybody"); sometimes criticized as "entitled"; grew up with highly structured activities.

**Generation Z**: Born roughly in the late 1990s through about 2010, making them today’s youngest college students. Influences: the recession, terrorism, smartphones, social media, multiculturalism, same-sex marriage, nation’s first black president. Traits: multitasking, technology-addicted, sophisticated social-media users.

That’s a point of frustration for baby-boomer and even some Generation X professors who teach today’s students, he adds. They often think, "How dare they not take it for granted that this is beneficial to them?"

The newest generation also tends to hold a more practical view of the purpose of college, Ms. Twenge says. Their thought process is, "You go to college to get a better job, not necessarily to get an education."

Political rhetoric about higher education is probably playing a role in that shift, says Vickie S. Cook, an associate professor and director of the Center for Online Learning, Research and Service at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Students and parents often are told by politicians and in their reading that colleges charge obscene amounts of money for liberal-arts degrees that have little practical value, Ms. Cook says. While that’s not true, she says, the notion leads students and parents to question, "If I get this degree, what can I do?"

There’s nothing wrong with asking that question, she says, but colleges shouldn’t devalue liberal-arts programs in response.

**Faculty Culture**

Generation X professors generally respect academic hierarchy and authority, Ms. Cook says. That’s begun to change as more millennials have joined the faculty ranks: "While not opposed to respecting authority, they have different expectations about what that means."

One solution for presidents, deans, and department chairs is to explain why they’re taking certain actions, she says. What’s less clear is how millennials’ attitudes may affect traditional faculty-governance structures, which have favored senior and tenured professors.

Some millennial graduate students, meanwhile, are abandoning the notion of securing tenure-track jobs at major universities, says Cathy A. Trower, a founder of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education at Harvard University’s Graduate School of Education. She’s now a consultant to nonprofit groups.

Fewer faculty jobs are available, and more competition for research grants has made it harder to get tenure. Another issue for graduate students, Ms. Trower says, is that "they don’t want to grow up to be like their professors, because their professors were miserable."

Moreover, millennials are known for frequent job-hopping, she says. For colleges, "the concern now is that we reward them with tenure and then they leave anyway."
Ms. Trower has advocated for greater flexibility in tenure standards and in academic workplaces more broadly. "The monastic lifestyle of faculty burrowing away in an isolated fashion in some far-off office or lab is just not part of Generation X," she says.

She’s pleased to see more colleges embrace interdisciplinary research and work-life balance. But she wonders whether millennial scholars will do away with some traditions that would be better preserved.

An example: Older professors are usually adamant about being addressed with a formal title. "Younger professors are like, Call me Cathy, it’s OK," she says. If the relationship between faculty members and their students becomes too relaxed, that could convey a lack of rigor and seriousness.

"There's something to be said," she says, "for the way things were."

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