Generation on a Tightrope
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Generation on a Tightrope

A Portrait of Today’s College Student

Third Edition

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We dedicate this book to our spouses, Linda Fentiman and John Giglio, both educators, and to our children, Jamie Levine, who is teaching today’s college students; Rachel Levine, who graduated from college in 2010 and is one of the people we are writing about; and Andy and Katy Giglio, who are the college students of the future. We love you very much.
PREFACE

It’s a straight line. Which rolls on itself.
Which sways. Which sags.
Which vibrates . . . Ready to explode.
To dissolve. To dissolve me.
To choke me. To swallow me.
To throw me silently across the void . . .


THIS IS A portrait of a generation on a tightrope. Today’s college students are struggling to maintain their balance as they attempt to cross the gulf between their dreams and the diminished realities of the world in which they live. They are seeking security but live in an age of profound and unceasing change. They desperately want the economic opportunity their parents enjoyed but are coming of age during a deep recession with reduced career prospects. They want to believe in the America Dream and are optimistic about their personal futures but they are pessimistic about the future of the country. They want to be autonomous grown-ups but seem more dependent on their parents and the adults around them than any modern generation. They want intimacy—a partner and a family—but they are isolated, weak in face-to-face communication skills and live in a
hook-up culture. They want to play by the rules but they don’t know the rules and the rules are in flux because of the dramatic changes in our economy, the rise of new technologies, the condition of our public and private institutions, and a world growing flatter. They want to live in an Internet world, a digitally connected globe but the adults and social institutions around them are analog or digital immigrants, including their blackboard universities.

This is a generation that thinks of itself as global citizens but knows little about the world and acts locally. It is the most diverse generation in collegiate history with the strongest relationships between races but they have limited interest in talking about race or reaching across political or generational divides.

This is a story about how we help today’s undergraduates cross the abyss that threatens to dissolve and swallow them, and how we can work with them to ensure that they will help us all to create the diverse, global, digital information economy of the twenty-first century.

This book seeks to portray a generation of college students who were born, grew up, and will live their lives in a nation undergoing a transformation from an analog, national, industrial society to a global, digital, information economy. The portrait is a composite, a picture of a generation, not of the individuals who make up that generation. The portrait is multifaceted, a report on a generation’s attitudes, values, and experiences replete with the contradictions and inconsistencies that are part of the lives of all human beings. The portrait is complex, looking backward and forward across a span of more than two centuries with multiple historic anchor points and a number of different comparison groups.

This preface is intended to provide an overview of what we learned about today’s college students in the course of our research and to touch briefly on the implications of what we found for parents, schools, colleges, government, employers, and the host of institutions that touch the lives of young people.
What we discovered about this generation is that, though it is significantly different from its predecessors, it shares much in common with them. Today’s undergraduates and the students who attended college before them were optimistic about their personal futures, pessimistic about the nation’s future, committed to the American Dream, little involved in campus life, disenchanted with politics and government, more issue oriented than ideological, engaged in community service, utilitarian in their goals for college, weak in academic skills, beneficiaries of inflated grades, heavy users of psychological counseling services, consumer-oriented regarding higher education, and partial to sex and alcohol, among other things.

This finding challenges the American tendency to view every generation of college students as unique and to focus on the characteristics that distinguish them from their peers of the past. It also points to work that remains incomplete. Many of the challenges facing current college students were challenges for their predecessors but we have not come to grips with them. Parents have not been able to teach their children to be more responsible about their health. Schools have not improved their students’ academic skills. Colleges have continued to inflate undergraduate grades. Our political leaders have not given college students any more reason to trust government or be hopeful about the future of the country. It’s a finding that reaffirms the critical roles of parents, schools, colleges, government, and all of the other institutions in the lives of young people. They are responsible for raising, educating, developing, enabling, and supporting our children to live satisfying and contributing lives to the fullest extent of their capacity as individuals, family members, neighbors, workers, citizens, followers, and leaders.

We also discovered many things that are significantly different about today’s college students. They are described in the following sections.
Today’s Undergraduates Are the First Generation of Digital Natives

The students of the 1990s were a transitional generation straddling old and new worlds—analog and digital, national and global, industrial and information economies. In contrast, current students have their feet firmly planted in the new world. This poses an extraordinary challenge to most colleges and universities, which remain largely in the old world, educating an Internet generation in a culture of blackboards. Higher education lags far behind its students technologically and pedagogically and must transform itself if it is to educate current undergraduates for the world in which they will live.

Today’s College Students Are the Most Diverse Generation in Higher Education History

Current undergraduates are more diverse demographically than their predecessors; they grew up in a nation in which many of the historic glass ceilings that existed for women, people of color, and gays have cracked; they believe the country has made real progress in race, ethnic, and gender issues; and they are more comfortable than past students with multiculturalism and diversity. Undergraduates are global in orientation but have little knowledge about the world. These findings present colleges and universities with an opportunity to translate their rhetoric about multiculturalism and diversity into reality and the need to internationalize their programs.

Contemporary Undergraduates Are at Once More Connected and More Isolated Than Their Predecessors

Today’s college students have extraordinarily close ties with their parents and are in 24/7 contact with a tribe of friends, family, and acquaintances via social media, yet they are more alone in many of the activities they pursue. The image that comes to mind is a group of students walking across campus together, each on their
cell phone chatting with other people. Today’s undergraduates are weak in interpersonal skills, face-to-face communication skills, and problem-solving skills. This finding raises red flags for parents, schools, colleges, and employers with regard to child-rearing, education, and personnel policies.

Current Students Are Facing the Worst Economy in Recent Memory with Unrealistic Aspirations for the Future

Today’s undergraduates believe the economy is the most important issue facing the country. More are working and more are working longer hours. They are taking fewer credits and require more time to graduate. Two-thirds are leaving college with large student loan debts. One in four who previously lived on his or her own is moving back with parents and one in eleven is unemployed. However, there is a mismatch between student aspirations and the economic realities they face. An overwhelming majority of undergraduates, a slightly higher percentage than in the 1990s, expect to be at least as well off financially as their parents.

This finding suggests that colleges and universities need to enrich their programs and services to better prepare students for today’s economy and that government should invest a greater share of its resources in financial aid grants as well as providing a safety net for students with large financial aid burdens and limited job prospects.

In Contrast to Their Predecessors, Today’s College Students Are More Immature, Dependent, Coddled, and Entitled

This is a generation of students who have not been permitted to skin their knees, rely much more on their parents than their predecessors, and have fathers and mothers, often described as helicopter parents, who are more involved in their lives and college
affairs than ever before. Parents, schools, colleges, and employers have major roles to play in reversing this situation.

Today’s College Students Were Born into and Will Live Their Lives in a Nation Enduring Unrelenting and Profound Change at a Speed and Magnitude Never Before Experienced

The United States is undergoing the third of the great revolutions in human history: the agricultural revolution, the industrial revolution, and whatever historians choose to name the transformation we are living through today. For the United States, this has been a time of dramatic demographic, economic, technological, and global change, which has in a very few years substantially altered many aspects of our lives from how we are conceived to when we die and seemingly everything in between—from how we communicate, entertain ourselves, and shop to how we date, bank, and work. It is a world in which all of our social institutions—government, media, health care, business, and education—appear to be broken. They were created for a different time and no longer function as well as they once did or as well as we need them to. They need to be remade for a new age. This is also a time when much that Americans took for granted is no longer true. Most Americans assumed their jobs, salaries, pensions, homes, and retirements were secure. When they woke up in the morning, they expected there would be a Soviet Union, a life-and-death struggle between Communism and capitalism, and the morning newspaper. Today’s college students have and will be living in a time of constant change. The implication of this finding is that schools and colleges need to educate these students in the skills and knowledge essential for such an era, which might be called the three C’s: critical thinking, creativity, and continual learning. This book suggests how this might be accomplished.
Current Undergraduates Grew up in a World Dramatically Different Than Their Parents

The parents of today’s college students grew up in an analog, national, industrial society and their children grew up in a global, digital, information economy. The parents came of age in a world bereft of digital devices whereas their children were born after the advent of Apple, Microsoft, personal computers, CD’s, mobile phones, e-mail, instant messaging, and the Internet. The parents grew up in an era of two superpowers and the threat of nuclear war and their children grew up on a flattening planet of weaker nation states and the promise of terrorism. As youngsters, the parents lived in an urban, white, more liberal country with its population concentrated in the Midwest and Northeast and their children came of age in a diverse, more conservative, suburban nation with a swelling immigrant population, concentrated in the South and West. This generation gap affects every institution and every adult who touches the lives of today’s college students.

The Pace and Scale of Change Will Accelerate for the Nation and Its College Students

America’s transition from an analog, national, industrial economy to a mature global, digital, information economy is not something that has occurred or will occur in two generations, no matter how different current undergraduates are from the adults in their lives. In the United States, the industrial revolution from launch to maturity was a six-generation process. The current revolution is likely to be shorter in duration if for no other reason than that the length of a generation has increased between revolutions and also because the speed of change is so much faster today. Nonetheless, the United States would have to be considered to be in the early stages, the infancy of the revolution, what might be called global, digital, information economy 1.0.
If the industrial revolution is any guide, the most profound changes occurred in the second half of the revolution—when water and steam power yielded to petroleum and electricity; when wood, stone, and iron gave way to steel; when railroads crisscrossed the country and telegraph and telephone lines knitted America into a nation; when the oil well, lightbulb, mass production steel mill, and assembly line were created; and when the great metropolises boomed and the modern corporation, bank, factory, and public regulatory system were established.

Today’s college students will live their adult lives during the next stage in the development and flowering of the global, digital, information economy, the 2.0 world and beyond. Theirs will be a world that grows continually flatter; experiences new applications of existing technologies and a burgeoning of new technologies—nanotechnology, biotechnology, robotics, cognitive science, artificial intelligence, and infotechnology—and creates the mature information economy. All of these things are question marks for us today. We do not know what a flat world or a mature information economy looks like. We don’t know what impact new technologies will have. And the greatest limitation of all is that we don’t know what we don’t know.

But here is what we do know. Today’s college students will not only need to learn to live successfully in a world hurtling between its 1.0 and 2.0 versions but they also will have to create it.

Today’s college students arrive on campus poorly prepared for this world, lacking in skills, knowledge, and attitudes that it will require though they bring strengths their predecessors lacked. Today’s college students will need a very different education than the undergraduates who came before them, an education that prepares them for the twenty-first century. The colleges and universities that educate them are ill-equipped to offer that education today and will have to make major changes to provide it.
We also know that our own future depends on how well today’s college students are prepared to meet the challenges ahead—living as engaged citizens in an evolving information economy, a diverse global society, and a digital age in a time of profound and relentless change. Therefore, this portrait of a generation also suggests specific ways we can better shape and collaborate with the next generation, who will then change the future.

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