The Next-Generation Student

More than ever, planning for success means knowing and understanding students

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Who are the students entering college next fall? They are the millennial generation, sometimes called NetGeners. Born since 1982, they gravitate toward group activity, identify with their parents' values, and spend more time on homework and housework and less time on television than those a few years older. Their formative years were spent in highly structured environments. They grew up acculturated by terrorism, heroism, patriotism, and globalism. They're almost completely unaware of a time before the Internet. They're confident and self-assured. They believe it's cool to be smart. And they're fascinated by new technologies.

The NetGen bridges two cultures, being comfortable in traditional classroom-based learning environments yet accustomed to having access to online learning materials and being attached to cell phones, instant messaging, and e-mail. NetGeners – and their parents – expect their learning environments to meet their specific needs and adapt to their personal preferences. They do best when their learning is socially constructed and contextual, structured yet self-paced, and outcome oriented. Given their differing learning styles – and their acceptance of those differences – their learning environments cannot be one size fits all.

It is Students, Not Technology, Who are Changing Education

While a fair amount of focus is on the influence and impact of technology on higher education, it's really learners, not technology, who are changing education.

According to symposium participant and student Andrew Payne, today's traditional college students – generally defined as 18- to 22-year-old full-time residential students – are avid users of the Internet for file sharing and leisure-time activities as well as for research. They expect the classroom experience will be enhanced through technology, that technology will be used to facilitate communication between professors and students, that all aspects of their course work will be available online, that professors will be proficient in e-learning, that the university will provide educational and technical support, and that required courses will have a direct connection to their degrees. And yet, with all of their acceptance of technology, Payne and his peers are not convinced that it represents an educational panacea. "*Some students prefer the traditional classroom experience*," he says.

What's more, today's students see themselves as customers with choices. And they're highly sophisticated customers at that. According to Carol Scarafiotti, dean of instruction at Rio Salado College, "*Our students look for a certain level of service, or they won't stay.*"

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Differing learning styles are hardly the exclusive domain of a new generation. A multitude of generations make up the 14 million students enrolled in colleges and universities today, so generalizations about students can be misleading. Last spring, Microsoft brought together a diverse group of higher education leaders, experts, and students to identify the defining characteristics of next-generation students. What we learned is that our assumptions about students may not be correct; students challenge our assumptions about what is traditional and what is nontraditional. Students today are not necessarily different because they're younger or older; they're different because they bring to education a much clearer sense of who they are and the learning goals they want met. They are a confluence of generations that cannot be generalized.

Service comes in many forms. For distance learners, it means courses offered every few weeks, automated registration, flexible enrollment, asynchronous instruction, 24/7 help, and, in the case of Rio Salado, a promise that courses will never be canceled. For the many other nontraditional students – who represent three-quarters of all undergraduates, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics – it's about educational quality and having a successful educational experience.

For traditional students, service means easy access to information that allows them to select an institution. It means integrated admission, registration, and financial aid systems and the ability to build an electronic portfolio and track progress toward graduation. It also means classrooms that are both wired and wireless, as well as instructors who understand how to use technology to enhance their courses.

The NetGen Student, Technology, and Higher Education

While technology is neither the theme nor the point of education, it is intricately tied to the process of education because of its ability to help us respond to needs and change. Research reveals that people learn best when they're engaged, when they're thinking critically, when they're solving problems, when they have choices, and when they're making decisions. The technology tools available to NetGeners – which, it is important to note, are seen more as extensions of themselves than as accessories – enhance those activities and encourage the development of skills they'll need later in life. Pat Wasley, dean of the College of Education at the University of Washington, says that while there are basic characteristics inherent in how people learn that cross generations, NetGeners expect more personalized attention and freshness of approach. "*They can figure out routines quickly*," Wasley warns.

While the characteristics of the next-generation student are at the heart of educational transformation, it is the technology that creates new options for accommodating a wide range of learning needs. Technology has made it possible for institutions to expand where, when, and how education can be delivered, all according to what students need. And it makes it possible for newer types of educational institutions to meet the needs of specific markets.

Higher education has made great strides in transforming itself. To be successful, students, faculty, administrators, and staff must work together – with a view toward a better understanding of the new and older generations of students, their learning styles, and educational options – to ensure that the next generation of students will be the best-educated generation yet.

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