Digital Natives and Their Customs

Interview by TAMAR LEWIN

FOR more than four decades, Arthur Levine has been exploring the psyche of college students, a quest that has led to three books on different generations’ behaviors and beliefs. The latest, “Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today’s College Student,” written with Diane R. Dean, covers 2006 to 2011, distilling information from surveys and interviews with both undergraduates and student-affairs officials at 31 campuses nationwide.

Dr. Levine, the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and former president of Teachers College at Columbia University, said his new book grew out of a mistake: his (incorrect) assumption that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were a watershed that had reshaped their lives.

If 9/11 wasn’t the biggest thing for this generation of college students, what was?

To my shock, when we asked about the key event in their lives, they said it was the advent of digital culture. No. 2 was the economy, and 9/11 was third. This shouldn’t have been a surprise, since this is the first generation of digital natives in college, students who are accustomed to using Google and Yahoo and cellphones and Skype. When we asked how they adapted to the tidal wave of new technology, one student said, “It’s only technology if it happened after you were born.” It was only later that we realized how wise a statement that was.

Over all, how is this generation of college students different from earlier ones?

They’re much more pragmatic. They say their primary reason for going to college is to get training and skills that will lead to a job, and let them make money. They’re willing to have a major they’re not really interested in if they think there will be job growth in that field. They’re much less likely than their predecessors to say they’re in college to develop their personal values, or learn to get along with different people. There’s been a real shift in race relations. In the last two rounds, it was like black and white students had grown up in completely different worlds. When we would ask about different figures, blacks liked the ones whites didn’t like — like Jesse Jackson and Spike Lee — and vice versa. But now they tend to like and dislike the same people. This whole generation named the election of President Obama the fourth most important event in their lives. Also, this generation is very optimistic about their personal futures but almost equally pessimistic about the future of the country. And they have a great
fear of failure.

Why do you think they are so optimistic?

This is a generation that was not allowed to skin their knees. They got awards and applause for everything they did, even if it was being the most improved, or the best trombone player born April 5. So it makes sense that they think very highly of their abilities, and expect to go on getting awards and applause. The grade inflation on college campuses plays into that. Two out of five students have a grade-point average of A- or better, almost six times as many as in 1969, and 60 percent of them nonetheless say their grades understate the true quality of their work. Only 5 percent have a G.P.A. of C or less, even though almost half have had to take remedial courses.

Have parent-child relationships fundamentally changed?

Kids now talk with their parents about their sex lives, their drugs and drinking, their classes, their social uncertainties, every aspect of their lives. One in five college kids are in touch with their parents three or more times a day, and 41 percent are in touch every day. And students who say they have heroes usually name their parents as their heroes, maybe because so many of the public figures who they might have seen as heroes in previous generations have been shown to have feet of clay.

What about the whole helicopter parent thing? Have offspring finally left the nest?

Student affairs officials told us amazing stories. We heard about the mom who called 15 times in a single afternoon, all the way up to the president, when her son had trouble with his wireless connection. One mother called to report that her daughter was caught in an elevator; the daughter never called the elevator service people, whose number was posted in the elevator. Another mother complained that the college, in assigning roommates, should match the parents as well “to make sure the other mother is of the same culture I am so we can support each other.” One student came in for a heart to heart about whether to join a fraternity and, at the end, whipped out his cellphone, and said, “Now tell my mom.” And one mother whose son had a dispute with another student called the college to ask how it would be handled. When told that the dean of students’ office would contact the boy to arrange a meeting, the mother responded that her son was too busy to meet with the dean’s office, but “she would do so on his behalf.”

You write that there’s a lot more sex on campus than romance. What do you mean?

This generation is not very good at face-to-face relationships. The image that comes to mind is two students, sitting in the room they share, angrily texting each other, but not talking. They
all want to have intimate relationships, they want to get married and have kids, but that’s hard to do if you don’t know how to talk with another person. Just under half of freshmen said they’d been on a date. Relationships often begin with two people meeting at a party and hooking up. Then the next day they check each other out on Facebook, and if they like what they see they might send a message saying they’re going to a party the next night — but not inviting the other person. And if they both show up, and hook up again, that might go on for a while, and then they’d consider posting on Facebook that they were in a relationship.

What are this generation’s strengths?

These are kids who come with real digital skills, who are interested in global issues and who deal with diversity better than any generation before them.

This interview has been condensed and edited.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 11, 2012

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of Arthur Levine’s co-author. She is Diane R. Dean, not Deane.