

Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student

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Rating: Three Stars

In *Generation on a Tightrope*, authors Levine and Dean have provided the reader with clear data and detail on the habits, values, wants, needs, challenges, and aspirations of the college student population. From beginning to end, their book is full of research findings that are based on extensive rich conversations and comprehensive field research across two-year and four-year institutions throughout the US. Fundamentally, this book is about becoming familiar with “who” is attending our colleges and universities and how these colleges and universities can be more responsive, supportive, and, most importantly, how they can continue to evolve the way a college or university delivers a top-rate education.

The book would bring strong value to parents, government leaders, and other stakeholders connected directly or indirectly to the success of the post-secondary student. However, the information presented by Levine and Dean would be especially insightful to those who work in the higher education environment such as presidents, administrators, and professors. As an undergraduate professor of management and chair of the management department at my institution, this book has been extremely helpful in providing me with additional perspectives on how to more accurately understand the needs of my students. This book has provided information that can equip professors to accelerate personal support, cultivate creativity in the way material is presented in the educational setting, enhance the acquisition and application of specialized knowledge, and maintain an ongoing connection with students as they move forward in their academic and professional careers.

I found this book to read smoothly and quickly. Because Levine and Dean provide extensive data, charts, and tables to support their statements, the reader, in the case that they work in a higher education context, can easily spend additional time in any particular area mining the data and thinking through how the authors' findings might help to deepen and broaden their own perspective and approach to their work. From an administrative level, this book offers substantive grist to fuel conversation (and possibly some disagreement) in meetings involving strategic thinking and acting as it relates to almost every aspect of student services and support as well as the effective delivery of instruction.

The structure of the book includes an introduction, eight chapters, three appendices, and a reference and index section. Each chapter represents a particular snapshot of the college student population between 2005 and 2014. Chapter one speaks to the massive shifts in the worldviews and experiences of college students today and how these shifts are radically different from anything their parents or adult authority figures experienced. Students today see the past as a “foreign country” (p. 11) argue the authors. These shifts are represented in four dramatic disruptive changes: from analog to digital, from superpower domination to a flatter world characterized by smaller powers and the rise of terrorism, from an industrial economy to an information economy, and from the demographics of homogeneity to massive diversity and increased immigration. The authors go into further detail in each of these four areas by addressing the impact of the World Wide Web, the economic collapse, the September 11 attacks, Obama’s election, and the rise of the cell phone.

Chapter two hones in on how academics have been radically altered by internal and external forces. What students are wanting out of an education has trended toward employability and specialized career and occupational knowledge and away from a process to define values, goals, and community identity. Majors that focus on business, health, and the sciences have increased while majors connected to the humanities have remained flat or slightly declined. Within the classroom the increased and more effective use of technology (a change in response to the “digital natives” orientation) has tended to drive and reframe many instructional processes.

Chapter three is a rich description of “the new tribalism” that takes place beyond the classroom. This chapter is a strength of the book as it paints a detailed picture of how technology has shaped the social life, connectivity, and community of the college student population. The traditional notion of “campus life” has undergone major deconstruction argue the authors. There is less need to participate in college-sponsored events and more need to “make a living.” Beyond the challenge of making a living, the American college student has undergone a liberated perspective on alcohol, drugs, sex, and romance. Social life is defined, created, and sustained by social technology platforms leaving the typical student, according to the authors, somewhat socially and relationally underdeveloped.

The issue of brooding, hovering, and micromanaging parents is the subject of chapter four. Though I was somewhat aware of this trend of over-involved parents, the depth of the problem and the subsequent challenge presented to college administrators was completely unfamiliar to me. This was as much an entertaining chapter as it was informative. A student population that, in many respects, has been raised under the protection and adulation of Baby Boomer parents, is bringing their parents along or, to say it differently, the parents of these digital natives are inserting themselves into their children’s college experience (with the tacit approval of their children) to ensure they are nurtured, supported, and properly defended.

This new dynamic is forcing many institutions to accommodate these more intrusive parents and the rise in dependency of their children.

Multiculturalism is the topic addressed in chapter five. The college student population of today has a radically different picture of diversity than their parents did in the 70s or 80s. For example, students, as a general population group, are more diverse than any American college cohort that has preceded them. There is a greater sense of community and affiliation found within this diversity. Polarization between different groups had declined.

Levine and Dean focus on the college student population and politics in chapter six. Overall, there has been a trend toward less interest in college politics and campus activism coupled with an increased disenchantment with the national political system and politicians. The government is viewed as a broken and dysfunctional system. Social institutions, such as the media, the family, the courts, and health care are also viewed as damaged. There is less interest in ideological positions and political engagement and more attention paid to issues that impact students personally. There has been an increased interest and involvement in environmental and sustainability issues. Globally, students feel more connected and involved, noted the authors. There continues to be strong involvement in study abroad programs, which cultivates a growing connection to international issues (and less attention paid to domestic concerns). Despite this connection to global concerns, the authors found that undergraduates are acting more locally and individually in a way that connects them to community issues and causes. This level of engagement is often out of view, passionate, personal, and focused.

In chapter seven, Levine and Dean explore how the college student population views the future...a future that in many ways appears rather ominous and perilous with a poverty of economic opportunities. Clearly, the years of education for the American college student studied in this research have been characterized by severe economic hardships. Graduates are entering a very difficult job market which is generating anxiety and stress. Yet they still embrace the possibilities and promises of a life that is hopeful and optimistic. They want to be successful in relationships, to have children, to acquire money and possessions, and to be at least as well off as their parents. Perhaps most poignantly, the centrality of and connection to parents and family remains a vital linkage to the realization of the hopes of these students.

The final chapter of the book turns attention to how educational institutions can respond in the twenty-first century. Levine and Dean offer a number of recommendations that are directly connected to the findings of their research. First, colleges need to prepare students to live in a time of massive change that is continuously disruptive. This includes focusing on the “three Cs” (p. 164) of critical thinking (problem solving), creativity (bringing new solutions to existing problems), and continual learning (renewing skills and the infusion of new knowledge). Second,

continue to prepare students to thrive in a digital society. Third, provide students with the tools to successfully live in and engage with a diverse global society. Fourth, provide an education that allows students to evolve in an information economy. Fifth, help prepare students to practice civic engagement. Sixth, offer resources that prepare students to succeed in a transitioning and challenging job market. Finally, support parents in their responsibilities to cultivate responsibility and independence in their college-aged children.

In summary, the research and findings of Levine and Dean are a powerful resource for anyone associated or connected to the life and education of the American college student population. On a personal level, many of the insights in this book continue to work their way into my approach to instruction and inform my interaction with students and colleagues at my university. Without any reservations, I highly recommend *Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student*.