Meet the Students: Finding Common Ground between Student and Institutional Goals

Mark Taylor

There are gaps between the traits, expectations, and desired outcomes from their college experience for students, especially our traditional-aged students from Generation NeXt, and what higher education institutions hope for the academic behaviors and outcomes of these same students to be. These differences in perspective and goals affect student and institutional success and outcomes. Suggestions for closing the gap for improved student and institutional outcomes will be offered.

With all due respect to the student-centered, learning, outcome, and accountability improvement initiatives in place at most colleges and universities, there remain serious issues in student persistence and completion, meaningful learning, and workplace readiness at many schools (Bok 2006; Hersh and Merrow 2005, Levine 2005a,b; Newman, Couturier, and Scurry 2004). Some of the reasons for these ongoing concerns may be traced to the gap between students' traits, expectations, and short- and long-term goals, and the expectations, practices, and desired outcomes for students of the rest of the institution. For maximum student benefit, which is in fact institutional success and contributes to accountability and outcome measures, it might behoove everyone to be working toward shared, understood goals with shared process expectations. This session and paper will attempt to explicate these gaps and issues between students and school and offer some suggestions on improving instruction and services in ways that both align goals and improve outcomes.

The modal traits of the young people of Generation NeXt, born after about 1980, with appropriate caveats against overgeneralization, have been described by this writer and others (Kearns and Shirley 2006; Levine 2005a,b; Taylor 2003, 2004a,b, 2005, 2006a,b; Twenge 2006). The predictable product of postmodern social influences where opinion and consumer interest have tended to have more impact on value formation and day-to-day decision making than traditional values, including religious values and science, these uber-consumers tend to feel a sense of entitlement, want to negotiate, and will protest vigorously (or leave) if their expectations of ease and instant response, excellent service, and painless success are not met. Generation NeXt has little evidence that it is not all about them. (Durden 2005; Lyotard 1988; McAllister 1999; Sacks 1996; Taylor 2003; Twenge 2006) Generation NeXters themselves report that, for people their age, the most important life goals are fortune and fame, that they are disengaged from civic life and the political process (focusing instead on personal or internal issues), and that they are more likely to have casual sex, resort to violence to solve conflicts, use drugs, and binge drink (Pew 2007).

Goals, Persistence, and Completion Gaps

Even in areas where there should be high congruence between students and institutions, like the need for students to stay in school and reach academic goals, gaps appear. Both students and institutions want degrees to be awarded, though ideas about what happens between admission and graduation are miles apart, and the operational definition of education as a construct of processes and outcomes is very different to postmodern consumer students and more developmentally oriented faculty (Hersh and Merrow 2005; Sacks 1996; Taylor 2005; Twenge 2006).

For all constituencies in higher education, student persistence and degree completion are a major goal. Unfortunately, 45 percent of bachelor's degree-seeking students fail to earn degrees in six years, and 70 percent of two-year students fail to do so in three years (Tinto 1993; U.S. Department of Education 2007). Also according to the U.S. Department of Education, fully 30 percent of students do not return for a second year of college. While student attrition is the result of many factors, dropout and completion failure rates are significant measures of school success.

Attrition may result from gaps between our educational beliefs, expectations, and services and the beliefs, expectations, and behaviors of our students. These differences were highlighted in *My Freshman Year* by anthropologist Kathy Small (aka Rebekah Nathan 2005) who attended classes and lived in a coed first-year residence hall for an academic year. The time pressures, difficulty in establishing community, and disconnect between what we think we offer academically and developmentally and what students actually want or receive were dramatically illustrated. Academic disengagement—the disconnect between students and college—was also discussed by Bauerlein (2005), who describes students as isolated within their social circuit and cut off from academic life. These writers describe a critical gap between the most fundamental elements of what institutions offer educationally and the experiences of students.

The view of students as customers is rebarbative to many in higher education, especially faculty members. However, students and many others on campus accept customer service as a fundamental dynamic of higher education. Some members of the faculty may question whether the ability and authority to set agendas and goals can appropriately be assigned to students. Where students may prefer to be delivered an education by amassing credits and earning degrees with as little effort as necessary, faculty members tend to expect greater personal investment by students in the form of real interest, time, and energy expended and the acceptance of faculty outcome goals (however vaguely identified those goals may be).

Students' instant gratification expectations, short event horizons, high self-esteem, and concomitant defensiveness to criticism explain many persistence and retention issues. Record high school grade inflation in times of record low time spent studying may logically lead students to expect academic success with little effort in college. While fewer than 15 percent of first-year students report having studied more than ten hours a week during high school, and two in three reported studying less than six hours a week, a breathtaking 95 percent reported grade point averages of A or B (Pryor et al. 2007; Kuh and associates 2007). Faculty members should take some comfort in knowing that, when these same students get to college, their weekly study time increases to between thirteen and fourteen hours on average (Kuh and associates 2007).

Willingness to spend time studying is affected by compliance, interest in the topic, and perceived value of the class outcomes. While faculty members do often offer meaningful intellectual growth, and even transformation, to engaged students willing to devote significant amounts of time and effort, these same students may not recognize either value from or need for such learning and change and may be unwilling to devote significant time to the efforts (Bok 2006; Kuh and associates 2007; Twenge 2006). Where customer-oriented students may expect ease, entertainment, immediate delivery, and acquiescence to their preferences in when, where, and how they receive all services (including instruction), faculty members tend to expect student compliance, industry, and effort as they teach in ways they prefer as opposed to using methods most likely to engage students and offer meaningful opportunities for deep learning and significant change (Tagg 2004). Students are apparently not willing or required to do what is expected of them, do not care sufficiently about class topics or material, or value intended class outcome goals at expected or desired levels. On the most fundamental levels, students' high self-esteem, self-importance, and self-interest, exacerbated and perpetuated by the consumer-service orientations of institutions, may logically lead students to see little need for meaningfully personal development. If your opinion is right anyway, what can anyone ever teach you? If you are good enough already, why change (Olson 2007; Twenge 2006)? Gaps are critical as retention and subsequent completion are seriously impacted by students' limited adoption of developmental goals, acquiescence to faculty agendas, and expenditure of significant effort (Kuh and associates 2007; Pryor et al. 2007).

Engaging this current cohort of students from Generation NeXt in the meaningful and often taxing processes toward significant learning and developmental outcomes is a core gap in higher education and critical to reaching meaningful outcomes. Persistence and retention are functional and necessary prerequisites to completion.

Closing the Gap in Goals, Persistence, and Completion

Increasing Future Orientation and Goal Setting

The short event horizons, entertainment orientation, and expectation of immediate gratification of Generation NeXt all conspire to keep students from Generation NeXt from meaningful planning and goal setting (Taylor 2005). Every person in the institution should have an agenda of improving future orientation and goal setting. Inquiries about student goals can be made during every campus interaction. A relentless effort to make students focus on their goals forces them into a future orientation. This future orientation increases students' goal-directed behaviors as they can better see connection between today's behaviors and some future desired outcome. Students' ability to see themselves in the future helps more of today make sense, especially the less-fun parts. Instruction, to be addressed in greater detail later, must help students' future orientation and goal setting by helping them establish the utility of learning related to their future goals.

Increasing the Clarity of Shared Outcomes

Learning and developmental outcomes for students, especially beyond grade attainment, should be clearly and operationally stated. Outcomes should relate to observable and ideally measurable student competencies and change. If colleges are interested in developing behavioral, personal, community, and citizenship competencies, as well as academic competencies, these should be spelled out and quantified with clear codes of conduct and transcripting of community service, student leadership, and civic activities. Linking these desired developmental goals and outcomes to students' desired outcomes can increase persistence and completion.

Increasing Realistic Goal Setting

Many young people have been subjected to relentless self-esteem programming, leading them to believe that they can do anything and be anything and that their opinions are very important (Twenge 2006). They tend to believe they have talent, though they may overrate their own skills and aptitudes (Astin et al. 2002). In fact, while most students can succeed, their options are probably not limitless,

and there are careers and opportunities for which they are better suited. Realistic goal setting must include meaningful career-related assessment of talent and aptitudes by appropriately credentialed career counselors so students can focus their efforts on those areas most appropriate to them as they move from developing a generalist to a specific, and workplace-effective, skill set (Levine 2005b). These skills, related to students' unique goals, can also help future orientation and are outcomes to which faculty members should focus their applications.

Increasing Opportunities for Interpersonal Involvement

Higher education has made tremendous advances in better understanding the conditions for preventing attrition and increasing student persistence and completion through impacting integration and engagement (Kuh et al. 2005; Tinto 1993). These opportunities should include active interaction in classes, informal interaction with instructors during regular office hours and at other places on campus, active and intrusive developmental advising, and an array of other student services, including active and involving clubs and organizations. Involvement increases students' connections to the campus, and so their retention, completion, learning, and development (Kuh et al. 2005; Tinto 1993). Offering myriad opportunities for involvement is critical to closing retention and achievement gaps.

Managing Esteem Issues

The inflated yet fragile self-esteem of many students from Generation NeXt, compounded by their overrating their own skills, can be a serious mismatch with the conditional and often critical world of academic grading and feedback. Few if any faculty members give excellent grades for poor work to help maintain students' egos. When Generation NeXt students do get negative feedback, the cognitive dissonance may lead them to discount the "opinion" of the faculty member or simply leave (Twenge 2006). Faculty members should be sensitive to, though not necessarily accommodating of, these esteem issues and try to offer suggestions for academic improvement along with some praise for effort with the expectation of future academic success—feedback that always relates to students' own goals. Offering students opportunities for success early in classes may help engage them in ways that will help them weather future criticism.

Technology Gaps

While most campuses struggle to keep up with the technology preferences, expectations, and demands of students, major gaps remain between the technology ubiquity of the lives of students and the realities of institutional services, especially learning services. Tech sophistication is also necessary to satisfy the requirements of accreditors, who require that the same services be made available to distance learning students as are available to native students, and it has become a fundamental part of having credibility with students.

The relationship of Generation NeXt, the "digital natives" of "Generation Net," to technology is fundamentally different than the relationship any other generational cohort has with technology and is frequently hard for instructors and administrators to understand (Carlson 2005; Prensky 2001). For Generation NeXt, the lines between the online and the live—the virtual and the real—are blurred or nonexistent, and many of their interpersonal relationships exist primarily online. The explosive growth in enrollment in online courses, even by native and resident students who can take live classes, indicates their preference for life online and their frequent lack of interest in traditional live academic activities. Podcasting, unheard of until recently, is now discussed even in nonacademic publications like Newsweek as a "professor in your pocket" as students' increasing demands to impact the where, when, and how of instructional services (Tyre 2005). Unfortunately, the preferences for face-to-face services of many staff members and administrators leads to the continued creation of staff-intensive services. Students may be required to see a staff person live when they would prefer and better benefit from online, asynchronous contact.

Closing the Gap in Technology

Embracing Technology

Rather than complaining about students' technology and online preferences, schools need to embrace technology and leverage it for academic and developmental means and ends. Many faculty members, staff members, and administrators can remember the consternation and predictions of doom when online registration actually allowed students to register themselves for classes. The world did not end when technology empowered students to select classes, instructors, and times, and no one is suggesting a return to the old ways. Improvements have been seen in all areas that have made major shifts to online and technology-augmented services. Offering technology options in everything from career counseling and financial aid to payments and advising has benefited students and has freed the time of staffers to see students who actually prefer live contact, making their time more efficient and effective. Recognizing technology preferences is also respectful and customer-centered as students see that institutions are giving them what they need and want in the ways they want it.

Bringing Technology to Teaching and Learning

The next great frontier in technology will see instruction leverage technology tools and preferences. Hardwired youth have little patience for educational methods they see as outdated, like unidirectional lecturing to rows of passive listeners. It might be easy for these students to assume that an instructor who is not aware of modern technological trends might be equally unaware of current issues in his/her own field. It was reported that a student opined about a faculty member "why should I think that he knows anything about economics when he can't even use PowerPoint?" (Berry 2005). Meaningful faculty development in meeting and teaching through the Web, PDAs, and cell phones; asynchronous discussion and other media via Webcasting, podcasting, identification of useful and reliable Web resources, and posting must be provided on something more than a volunteer basis to interested faculty members, as is often the case. Most simply, all educational practices used in distance learning should be leveraged by live faculty members to close the technology gap with students.

Gaps in Teaching and Learning

Many of the gaps in student outcomes can be traced to issues with the most fundamental activity of the institution; instruction. Higher education has a well-documented history of recognizing fundamental difficulties in bringing about meaningful student learning and lasting student change (Barr and Tagg 1995; Gardiner 1994, 1998; Tagg 2004). To quote from the report of the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education: "Many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined" (U.S. Department of Education 2006, 1).

Data indicate that Generation NeXt may be the most academically disengaged cohort of students ever (Astin et al. 2002). Many students see higher education as a process of memorizing content, trading content for points on a test, and redeeming those points for a grade (Nathan 2005). Much college instruction continues to be a loosely organized, unfocused curriculum, with undefined outcomes, in classes that emphasize passive listening to lectures that transmit low-level information and assessments that demand only the recall of memorized material or low-level comprehension (Gardiner 1998). Students are not learning even basic general knowledge, are not developing higher-level cognitive skills, and are not retaining their knowledge, and some would argue (based on data) that there is limited evidence of a significant difference between students who take courses and students who do not (Gardiner 1998; Tagg 2004). Content-based instruction to passive students, still the norm in most classes on most campuses, does very little to develop the skills needed in the workplace, especially critical thinking (Gardiner 1998; Tagg 2004). Many faculty members are apparently reluctant to relinquish their expert, "sage on the stage" role to allow for meaningful exploration and construction of learning and application that is necessary for retention.

Closing the Gap in Teaching and Learning

Moving to a Learning-Centered Academic Paradigm

Much has been written about maximizing undergraduate learning by developing learning-centered environments and experiences. The effectiveness of learning practices that focus on reaching student learning outcomes, on offering a variety of learning options, on objectively quantifying student change, on increasing student activity, and on helping students establish meaning for learning has been repeatedly demonstrated (Astin 1993; Chickering and Reiser 1993; Fink 2003; O'Banion 1999; Pascarella and Terensini 1991, 2005). Generation NeXt has little patience for educational methods it sees as outdated, such as unidirectional lecture to rows of passive listeners. Most graduate programs, while providing excellent foundations in a discipline's knowledge and theory, do little to prepare graduates in methods of effective pedagogy. Faculty development in active methods for creating significant learning experiences is needed on all campuses for full-time and part-time instructors to close the gap between current and best instructional practices and outcomes (Fink 2003).

Obligating Students to Bring Content to Class

Class time is too valuable to spend transmitting information that is available elsewhere—in the textbook, through the library online database, on the Web, on the campus online support resource, in the archive of recorded lectures and faculty presentations, or through a podcast, for example. If students bring the knowledge-level content to class, they can spend class time working with the application and meaning of the information. Instructors who complain that "students don't do the reading now" might not be truly obligating them to bring the information to class. For example, if students must pass a content-based quiz at the beginning of each class to participate in that day's learning activities, and so to receive the quiz and participation points for that day, they might be more likely to come to class prepared to deeply learn.

Offering Multiple Learning Options

Multiple learning styles, student preferences, and our obligation to bring about student learning by any means necessary all suggest that we must offer students multiple options for learning, especially in how they access the information they are obligated to bring to class, how they demonstrate their personalization of the applications, and how they develop meanings. Technology does, and will increasingly, provide opportunities to make learning available at nontraditional places and times and must be exploited for desired outcomes.

Providing Meaning through Real-Life Application

All instructors must be challenged to articulate rationales for the necessity of their subjects based on some real-world application. Any topic, class, or field that cannot demonstrate its utility and meaning to each student will be suspect. "You have to know this because it will be on the test" or "you must take this class because it is part of the core" is guaranteed to discredit both the information and the instructor as it tends to show that there is no other use for the information than to meet meaningless requirements, without concern or connection to student need.

Conclusions

Closing the gaps between students and institutions in goals, persistence and completion, technology, and learning is critical to the success of both students and institutions as both seek student success. Unfortunately, many institutional practices are based more on tradition than on demonstrated outcome benefit or student preference; even new classrooms are often designed for lectures and not student activity. Higher education, which should be among the most progressive, data-based, and outcomes-oriented of all the social institutions, is often among the most recalcitrant to change. In this age of globalization and international competition, ineffectiveness and inefficiency in the higher education of our citizens are not luxuries we can afford. It is unconscionable for anyone to spend valuable taxpayer, contributor, and tuition resources on anything other than what has been shown to work, or is being meaningfully evaluated for effectiveness. It is even worse to waste students' time during such developmentally ripe windows of opportunity, or our professional lives. Using best practices to close the gap between students and institutions will lead to improved outcomes for all higher education constituencies.

Notes

People interested in improving instruction and services should start with Ernest Pascarella and Patrick Terenzini, *How College Affects Students, Volume 2: A Third Decade of Research* (2005), an encyclopedic analysis of research in higher education with an emphasis on what changes students and how.

More information about Generation NeXt is available from the Resources/Links section of Mark Taylor's Web site at http://www.taylorprograms.org.

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Mark Taylor *is Adjunct Faculty at Arkansas State University-Beebe.*