When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student

By Arthur Levine and Jeanette Cureton
San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1998

Reviewed by
Les P. Cook

As a professional in academe, it is critical to have an understanding of the students who are on our campuses, employed in our offices, participating in our classes, and involved in our programs. Levine and Cureton's book, *When Hope and Fear Collide* (1998), provides us with an overview of the students in the nineties.

Levine, who has written extensively on students, painted a reasonably bleak picture of college students in the eighties in his book, *When Dreams and Heroes Died* (1980). However, in revisiting college campuses during the nineties, a shift became evident in the research. Levine discovered what he asserts to be a new emergence of student attitudes, beliefs, and values. Students are less concerned with material gains and more likely to seek out ways to make a difference.

It is not a new idea that students of the nineties are radically different from those of past decades. Levine and Cureton refer to them as "the generation without a name;" they are too young to be baby boomers and are not at all like Generation X of the eighties. This generation of traditional-aged students has been greatly affected by changing demographics, eroding economic conditions, higher crime rates, increasing significance of technology, and decay of the previous social foundation of family, religion, and neighborhoods similar to Mayberry.

The authors assert that today's students don't have strong foundations to which they can adhere themselves, and that they tend to be distrustful of national leaders. It is because they are distrustful, the authors argue, that they seek to make a difference on their own. Involvement in issues impacting the environment and a renewed emphasis on participation in community service seem to be more prevalent today than in the past. There is more localization of participation because students are reluctant to be involved when they sense that they will have little or no impact. While they are more interested in making an individual difference, they are less interested in participation in campus politics. Students, much like the rest of society, are no longer comfortable with ambiguity and are primarily interested in the bottom line.

Levine and Cureton found that most students view negatively the issues surrounding political correctness, multiculturalism and diversity. For many, these issues have been —

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and continue to be — uncomfortable topics. Some of this generation would argue that programs to help remedy the problems have actually created further uncertainty, and many tend to feel that too much time has been wasted on analyzing differences rather than identifying commonalties. Levine and Cureton assert that students often perceive they are being disadvantaged at the advantage of others.

Since there are obviously more part-time students, commuters, and working students enrolled in colleges and universities than in previous years, one would anticipate (and correctly so) dramatic changes in student bodies. Students today are frightened about crime, worried about money and financing their educations, and concerned about the lack of quality relationships in their lives. Levine and Cureton assert that these issues all affect students and eventually can lead to students becoming socially detached, overwhelmed, and dysfunctional. There are many different types of students and thus there are many different priorities, needs, and stresses.

The authors postulate that students today often attend college as an "insurance policy" on which they can fall back. During the eighties, students began attending college to further advance themselves in their careers. They were career oriented and it is argued that, for the most part, they placed little importance on the more idealistic reasons for attending college such as developing ideals and beliefs, opening one's mind, exploring new disciplines and being intellectually involved. Today, some students attend college and consider themselves continually intellectually stimulated, while others see their academic experience as weak and just another obstacle to their goals. In addition, there are increasing demands for remediation, as students arriving on our campuses tend to be less prepared than their counterparts of the seventies and eighties. Students are on a collision course trying to balance work, school, family, and relationships, which clearly illustrates why the value placed on academics may be quite different than in past decades. The formula for success appears to be that an education, no matter how intellectually stimulating and rigorous, equals a career. A career, in turn, may lead to financial satisfaction that equals a higher quality of life.

We know that students are worried about the future state of the economy. They are accruing large debts, and there is a tightening job market and a fluctuating stock market. They are uneasy about money, how to get ahead, and whether they'll be able to repay large student loans. In addition, they are concerned about social problems such as crime, homelessness, drugs, lack of education, and dysfunctional families, and they distrust American government and politics. Nonetheless, Levine and Cureton found that, although frightened about their futures, students continue to have faith in the American dream. The study indicates they hope to have good jobs, strong relationships (including children) and more money than previous generations. While they expect to be better off than their parents, they still worry they won't do as well as their parents. It is a frightening world; yet, the authors claim student's fears are not strong enough to outweigh the great hope for their future. The authors state that this generation is different from others and that they have different circumstances and characteristics. However, they argue that this generation is no better or worse off than any previous ones.

The authors believe that current students are in need of an education that provides them four things: hope, responsibility, acceptance of others, and efficacy. First, with a

life constantly changing, students need to feel a sense of hope for the future. They continually express optimism for the future and, although it's somewhat fragile, that hope can and should continue. Secondly, current undergraduates need education to reinforce the importance of giving back to others. Thirdly, in today's ever-changing society, it is critical students are respectful, accepting and appreciative of human differences. Lastly, the authors suggest the importance of efficacy. Students must realize that their opinions, no matter how obscure, count. They need to be heard and to understand that their actions, involvement in community activities, and participation in the workplace and at home do make a difference.

Orientation and higher education professionals should make an effort to read this book. It provides an insightful summary of today's student. As educators in institutions of higher learning, we must provide students with the desire to make a difference, the education and skills to succeed in their areas of study, and the support to have a positive educational experience. Levine and Cureton provide an in-depth examination of today's traditional-aged students, and the information provided in *When Hope and Fear Collide* can enable higher education professionals to help students become successful.