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# Essential Demographics of Today's College Students

Today's teens and young adults are growing up in very different circumstances. Awareness of the scale and types of changes can lead to a better understanding.

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Lately a surprising number of college teachers have been busy analyzing or speculating about what makes current students different from those just a few decades ago. Much of this effort seems motivated by the puzzlement and frustration faculty experience in today's college classrooms. With this article, I hope to add to the effort by providing a set of baseline data from scholarly research and government reports that allows some comparisons across decades. I leave the analyzing largely tip to the reader, with the hope that awareness of the scale and types of changes can be a first step toward a better understanding.

Overall student demographics, preparedness, and attitudes toward college have shifted greatly over the last three decades, coupled with an increase in the number of college students. But probably more important are developments in our society that have created vastly different conditions for the maturation and development of today's teens and young adults. Stressful experiences in school and at home, combined with the unparalleled distractions of today's mass media and entertainment industry, create an environment that has altered the rules for academic learning forever. See for yourself!

## Increase in Student Numbers

Higher education was once reserved for a privileged few, and universities were designed to further the learning of those who were well prepared to begin with. All this changed with the GI Bill in 1944, which opened the doors to new types and much larger numbers of college students. Debates about academic standards and underprepared high school graduates have gone on since.

- ❑ The number of college students tripled between 1960 and 1975, then slowed to a 23% growth until 1990, and has stagnated during the '90s, until recently.
- ❑ The percentage of high school graduates age 16-24 enrolled in college rose from 46.6% in 1973 to 65.0% in 1996.
- ❑ The total numbers of students enrolled in public two-year colleges and public two-year colleges are practically identical now.
- ❑ Four out of 10 first-time, beginning community college students transfer to another institution, half of them to a four-year college or university.

- ❑ The number of bachelor's degrees awarded grew 26% between 1980 and 1994, and then dropped off slightly.
- ❑ Fields that lost in popularity since the mid '80s include some male-majority fields such as engineering (-32%) and computer and information sciences (-50%), as well as education, down 50% from the mid '70s to now.
- ❑ Fields that gained in popularity since the mid '80s include public administration and psychology, both increasing their enrollment by about 35% since 1990 alone.
- ❑ Fields with mixed developments include business management - almost doubling its enrollment in the '70s and '80s but losing 17% in the '90s - and the biological and physical sciences, both of which have turned their declines in the '80s around with 30-50% increases in female enrollment.

## Changes in Student Demographics

The sometimes reluctant new emphasis on teaching is due not only to increasing numbers but also to dramatic changes in student demographics. By approximately 2030, the proportion of non-Hispanic white high school students will drop to the 50% mark. Cultural and ethnic sensitivities will make the classroom a very different place from what it is today.

- ❑ The proportion of college students 25 and older increased from 28% in 1970 to 44% in 1995.
- ❑ Between 1985 and 1995, the number of college men rose 9%, while the number of women increased by 23%. The proportion of students attending college part-time grew from 32% in 1970 to 43% in 1995.
- ❑ The percentage of 16- to 24-year-old full-time college students who were employed rose from 36% in 1973 to 69% in 1995/96. Those working 20 hours or more increased from 17% to 37%.
- ❑ Enrollment of minorities in higher education rose from 15.7% in 1976 to 25.3% in 1995. Increases came mainly among Asian (moving from 2% to 6%) and Hispanic (4% to 8%) students. Enrollment in elementary and secondary schools of students from groups in the minority rose from 29.6% in 1986 to 35.2% in 1995.

## Indices of Student Preparedness

Although there are some signs of improvement, especially in elementary school, skill levels for basic academic tasks are still alarmingly low for a significant percentage of college students.

- ❑ The overall preparation level of students declined from the mid '60s to the early '80s, demonstrated by data from the SAT, the ACT, and other measures. More recent data show improved but still relatively low performance, both in absolute terms and by international comparison.
- ❑ In 1995, U.S. 12th grade students outperformed only two of 21 other countries in general knowledge of mathematics and science.
- ❑ Although the number of high school graduates completing a "core curriculum" (i.e., four years of English; three years of social studies, science, and math; two years of foreign language; a half year of computer science) has risen dramatically, it still included only half of all students in 1994 (compared with 18% in 1982).
- ❑ In the fall of 1995, 81% of public four-year colleges and 100% of public two-year colleges offered remedial programs. Of all first-time freshmen, 29% took at least one remedial course (24% math, 17% writing, 13% reading).
- ❑ In what may be a reaction to the increasingly competitive college admissions process, high school teachers are awarding more "A" grades than ever (31.6% in 1997 compared with 12.5% in 1969).
- ❑ Just 34% of freshmen report having spent six or more hours per week studying during their senior year in high school, an all-time low (compared with 44% in 1987). In fact, the average student spent only 3.8 hours per week in 1997, down from 4.9 hours in 1987.
- ❑ In 1993/94, 29% of public school teachers at the high school level reported that student absenteeism was a serious problem in their school, and 19.4% reported that tardiness was.

## Changes in Student Attitude

Despite often low levels of preparedness, students tend to be highly confident in their abilities. Whether due to years of grade inflation in high school (and college), misunderstood attempts to bolster children's self-esteem, or society's overall disrespect for the immaterial value of education, many students tend to look at academic accomplishment as just another commodity to be purchased.

- ❑ Freshmen increasingly overestimate their own abilities, rating themselves as "above average" in virtually all academic areas (e.g., 41% of students in 1997 rated themselves "above average" writer, compared with 27% in 1966).
- ❑ A high degree of academic disengagement exists. In 1997, some 36% of freshmen (compared with 26% in 1985) report having been frequently "bored in class" during their last year of high school.

- ❑ In a national poll of 15- to 17-year-olds, only 25% said the "ability to formulate creative ideas and solutions" was extremely important; 33% said the same of the "ability to understand the historical, cultural, and philosophical background of a current problem"; and less than 40% said being "able to write well" was extremely important.
- ❑ "Developing a meaningful philosophy of life" has steadily decreased as an important objective for going to college (from 58% in 1989 to 41% in 1997).
- ❑ Students' political interest is at an all-time low. In 1997, only 27% considered it very important to keep up with politics, compared with 39% in 1992, and 58% in 1966.
- ❑ In 1993, 57% of undergraduates believed that the chief benefit of a college education is increasing one's earning power - an 11 percentage point increase since 1976.

Student data alone does not do justice to the enormous social changes that affect today's Youngsters. A look at a few statistics illustrates the magnitude of change that has transformed our society in the last few decades.

## Family Income and Time

Parents' time and financial resources play major roles in the social and intellectual development of their children.

Increasingly, students' high school years are characterized by relative scarcities in both areas.

- ❑ In 1991, 23% of families headed by an adult age 25-34 had incomes below the poverty level. Between 1973 and 1990, the median inflation-adjusted income of families with children headed by a parent under age 30 dropped by 32%.
- ❑ In 1970, just under 39% of children of two-parent families had mothers in the workforce; by 1990 the proportion was 61%.
- ❑ In 1997, almost 32% of families headed by a female had incomes below the poverty level.
- ❑ The mothers of today's freshmen are not likely to be full-time homemakers. The proportion dropped from 33.9% in 1976 to 10.6% in 1997.

## Divorce and Single-Parent Families

Family breakup has been a fact of life for many students. For some, this might lead to an accelerated maturation process, but for many others it leaves scars and distrust - maybe even cynicism - of adult authority figures.

- ❑ About 26% of freshmen in 1997 came from divorced families, three times as many as in 1972.
- ❑ Over the past two decades there has been an almost 40% increase in the number of female-headed households with children under age 18.
- ❑ The proportion of U.S. children living in single-parent families grew 2.5 times between 1960 and 1986. By 1997, 32% of all children lived with only one parent. This is far more than in other industrialized nations, and the gap is widening.

## Violence and Suicide

While the overall number of violent crimes in society has gone down in recent years, violence among children and adolescents remains extremely high, despite some progress. A considerable percentage of students have grown up in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation that has been carried from the streets into the schools. In addition, there is the particularly disturbing frequency of sexual assault on girls and young women.

- ❑ Between 1986 and 1995, most categories of violent crime increased substantially for U.S. youths under age 18: murder and manslaughter (up 89.9%), aggravated assault (up 78.3%), robbery (up 63.4%).
- ❑ In the early '90s, teenagers in the United States were at least four times more likely to be murdered as were their counterparts in 21 other industrialized countries.
- ❑ The suicide rate of 15- to 19-year-olds increased from 3.6 in 100,000 in 1960 to 11.1 in 100,000 in 1990, and has since remained relatively stable.
- ❑ The murder rate among 14- to 17-year-olds rose from 4.6 in 100,000 in 1976 to 12.3 in 100,000 in 1993, and has since moderately declined (to 11.2 in 100,000).
- ❑ More than one in four adult women report having been sexually assaulted at some time during their childhood or young adulthood.
- ❑ In 1995, 14.3% of males in grades 9-12 carried a weapon (gun, knife, or club) on school property on one or more days during any one month.
- ❑ The number of public school teachers who reported being threatened with physical injury or physically attacked by a student from their school during the previous 12 months increased from 10% to 15% between 1991 and 1994.

## Drug Use

This is another crime statistic that has declined in the general population but is on the rise among school-age children. Imagine the impact on students' learning and development when drug dealers and peer pressure combine on or off school grounds and students form habits with which most parents have no experience of their own.

- ❑ The proportion of 10th graders who reported that someone offered to sell or give them an illegal drug at school during the previous year has risen from 18% in 1992 to 32% in 1996.
- ❑ The proportion of 12th graders using illicit drugs dropped sharply from 37% in 1980 to 14% in 1992, only to increase again to 26% by 1997.
- ❑ A 1997 study of a nationally representative sample of college students showed that 42.7% of all students qualified as binge drinkers and 20.7% as frequent binge drinkers (half of whom forgot where they were or what they did while drunk).

## Mass Media

Young people are enthusiastic consumers of mass media, whose main themes seem to be fame, fortune, aggression, and sexuality, usually in excess, with rarely a thoughtful reflection of how to put them into proper perspective.

- ❑ By age 16, the average adolescent - who views approximately 35 hours of television programming per week - has seen 200,000 acts of violence, 33,000 of which are murders or attempted murders.
- ❑ Violence and gore are major themes of the Most Popular video games. Half of these are violent in content - more than half if sports games are included.
- ❑ Since its inception in 1981, MTV has been the fastest-growing channel in cable history because of its popularity with teenagers, for whose consumption it was designed. Two-thirds of MTV's characters are male, and only one-third are female. Half of the females wear "provocative clothing" and tend to be portrayed as objects for men to use.

Today's college students are different: Their numbers have increased, and so has their average age. Their academic preparedness is down, even as their confidence in their abilities is higher than ever. These factors are probably foremost on faculty minds when they insist that today's generation is a different breed. But as the data show, that difference is cultural more than academic. Statistics alone cannot do justice to the dramatic changes, but they at least focus attention on the developments that determine what types of relationships we might be able to establish with our students of tomorrow.

A full copy of this report, including sources for the data cited is available online at [www.emporia.edti/tec/t\\_idea8.htm](http://www.emporia.edti/tec/t_idea8.htm).

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