

# Book reviews

## Portrait paints thought-provoking picture

### WHEN DREAMS AND HEROES DIED

A Portrait of Today's College Student

by

Arthur Levine

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By Donald F. Young

The author studied data from national surveys of 95,000 undergraduates during the 1960s and 1970s, a study of institutional policies regarding students at 586 representative colleges and universities, and in-depth interviews with student leaders at 26 diverse institutions. He presents the first fully documented statement regarding today's undergraduates, explaining what they are like, why they are the way they are, and what they want from life after college. His discoveries are vital for anyone interested in college students and in understanding and helping them attain their educational goals and objectives, and who seriously desires to develop plans, techniques, and strategies in order to assist students, many of whom who have overly self-centered interests, concerns, and pursuits.

Dr. Levine explains today's myths of previous college generations—particularly the 1960s—seriously clashing with what these generations were in reality, noting "with

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time and distance, generational images evolve into caricatures and myths . . . As years have passed, the students of the sixties have grown larger than life, their concerns have become more altruistic, and their commitment to change has been exaggerated. . . . only 28 percent of college students had participated in a demonstration of any type while in college . . . and during the week of the most widespread campus unrest in history following the Kent and Jackson State shootings, 43 percent of the nation's colleges and universities were unaffected. . . . Like other periods, the '60s had their share of athletes, fraternity members, and vocationally oriented students [with] 49 percent of all undergraduates in 1969 [seeing] the chief benefit of a college education as increased earning power . . ." He indicates real differences exist between the college student of today and of the 1960s, in three ways: (1) "the number of college students has increased substantially"; (2) "the composition of the student body has changed" now representing a variety of backgrounds that were largely unknown previously with many more blacks, many poor people, many more people who are handicapped, and now women are a majority of today's college students; and (3) ". . . student character has changed. . . ."

The author indicates "between 1959 and 1964, national expectations about our personal futures and the future of our country rose, but after 1964 both began to drop, and both reached lows in 1979. What is especially important to note though is that personal expectations have fallen just slightly, while expectations for the nation have plummeted. . . ." The average college freshman was born in 1963, when President Kennedy was assassinated; he was five years old when Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. were assassinated, when several American cities were burned in race riots, and when Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" ended. He was about eleven when the United States left Vietnam and twelve when the President of the United States resigned in disgrace facing charges of high crimes and misdemeanors. Since then, he has continually seen economic reversals and diminishment of American prestige and power throughout the world. Thus, the college student of today has not lived, nor is he living, in a time of optimism. He has seen his heroes (John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and music hero, John Lennon) and the dreams for society that they represented die. He has also seen two attempted assassinations of President Ford (and now the shooting of President Reagan). He has few dreams now for his country. "To escape an inhospitable world, students, like much of the rest of the country, are turning inward. For many, the one remaining refuge is 'me.' . . ."

Dr. Levine notes "For this generation, Watergate and Vietnam have defined the nature of the world. . . . One student said, 'Vietnam and Watergate go together. They really did something to people our age—so much, we don't even think about them anymore.' . . . Student litigation and serious threats of lawsuits have increased on more than one-third of the nation's campuses. . . . student bodies at a number of institutions from coast to coast have hired staff lawyers or created legal services offices. . . . [and] encouraged what might be called student-interest litigation. . . ."

The author explains "In the course of research for this book, nearly 2,000 people were asked how college students had changed since the 1960s. By far their most common answer was that undergraduates are more career-oriented today. . . . When undergraduates were asked in 1969 what was most essential for them to get out of college, they ranked learning to get along with people first and formulating values and goals for their lives second. . . . Top among the reasons freshmen [gave in 1979] for attending college is to get a better job. . . . When undergraduates were asked what advice they would give a high school senior planning to attend college, consumer advice topped the list, advice such as 'You're doing the paying; make sure professors give you what you want.' . . . The rapid and dramatic emergence of consumerism in higher education is a consequence of the changing relationship between students and their colleges, as well as the prominence of consumerism in other sectors of society. . . ."

Dr. Levine indicates "This is a socially liberal generation. A majority supports expanded roles for women, legalized abortion, and the overturning of prohibitions on homosexual relations. About half favor legalization of marijuana, liberalization of divorce laws, casual (as distinguished from promiscuous) sexual relationships, and living together before marriage. . . . larger portions of the student body spend less time at college, have well-developed social lives before enrolling, and shoulder other concerns outside of college which have equal or greater importance to them. . . . [Drinking clearly ranks (77 percent) first today] when college students are asked what they do for fun . . . Drinking is definitely up, and students are starting to drink earlier . . . alcohol abuse is on the rise at colleges from coast to coast. . . . liquor is the number-one drug problem on campus today, arising from a combination of the need for release from academic pressures and an epidemic of despair sweeping the nation's young people. . . ."

The author indicates that "college students are optimistic about their personal futures but pessimistic about the future of the country. . . . When asked what they are apprehensive about, undergraduates . . . were fearful of the economy, pollution, energy, crime, morals, and nuclear war. They were concerned about nuclear power, corporations, greed, illegal aliens, and the right wing. . . . Students were worried about drugs, increased regulation, permissiveness, reduced standards of living, the environment, and the justice system . . . There is a sense among today's undergraduates that they are passengers on a sinking ship, a Titanic if you will, called the United States or the World. Perhaps this is part of the reason why suicide has become the second leading cause of death among students in the 1970s, exceeded only by accidents. . . . today's fatalism fuels a spirit of justified hedonism. There is a growing belief among college students that if they are doomed to ride on the Titanic, they ought at least to make the trip as pleasant—make that as lavish—as possible. . . . The fact of the matter is that almost half of all college students feel helpless to control the world in which they live. . . ."

Dr. Levine notes "Today's college students, taken in the aggregate . . . resemble every other college generation in some respects and are unlike any other in other ways. . . . some of this generation's characteristics are unique. . . . the dominant campus group, culturally if no longer numerically, remains white males of upper- and middle-class background . . . Some nontraditional students have

always sought higher education . . . Students' reasons for attending college have not changed much, even if the preference for certain colleges and the character of the colleges themselves have. Student activism, once euphemistically called rowdiness, existed in the earliest colleges and continues to the present. Then as now, however, activists comprised only a minority of undergraduates. The extracurricular life of students continues as it always has to supplement the academic life of the college. . . . Fraternities, which date back to the 18th century, are alive and well today, and residential college life remains vibrant, though a bit the worst for wear. . . . The present [college] generation is unique in the following ways: . . . The post-1960s college generation has endured restlessness for a longer period than any other group in this century with the possible exception of the depression/World War II cohort. This may help to explain the pervasive apathy among college students today as well as the Titanic mentality. . . . The post-1960s college generation is the largest ever to enter higher education. It is . . . more heterogeneous in background and experience than any of its predecessors. There is . . . less of a shared collegiate culture than among previous generations. [There is a] decline in campus residence life [and more] diversity in academic practice. . . . There is less college loyalty, more transferring among schools, more variation in academic ability, and a rise in nontraditional attendance patterns . . . The proportion of older adults attending such institutions may increase. . . . As the number of older students grows . . . [This] is the first generation both to have the vote and to live in a time when the principle of *in loco parentis* is moribund. . . ."

[From the preceding,] what can one conclude about current college students? Most generally, . . . they form a special generation—like all others. More specifically, . . . on the average they are: self-concerned and me-oriented; nonideological; disenchanting with politics; moderate in political attitudes; liberal in social attitudes; weak in basic skills; career-oriented; competitive; diverse in lifestyles and background; concerned with personal development (physical and spiritual); optimistic about their individual futures; pessimistic about the future of the country; interested in material success; friendly and pleasant; [and] pragmatic. . . ."

Dr. Levine, at the end of the last chapter, presents a prescribed recommendation toward the improvement of liberal education and, thus, toward the solving of the problems of today's college students. He proposes the following four-year program of undergraduate study: "The entire first year would be spent studying a common interdisciplinary core on the theme of social issues or problems. The core would rely upon a combination of lectures, seminars, and tutorials, rather than a collection of traditional courses. Particular attention would be given to instruction in writing, speaking, research, and problem-solving skills. Students would major in a problem area, such as health, the cities, hunger and nutrition, criminal justice, or the environment, and minor in a discipline like economics, sociology, biology, art, or English. Students would spend one full semester and two summers in career-related internships. They would enroll in a preparation seminar before entering the internship and in a return seminar after completing it. A placement office would be an integral part of the program. Students would be required to write a senior thesis in a social problem area, defend the thesis, and pass a senior-year comprehensive ex-

amination in order to graduate. . . . Social problems and ethical concerns would be at the heart of the program. Even if undergraduates chose not to work in the public sector, and many would not, they would nonetheless receive an education that immersed them in questions of ethics and values and that equipped them for informed

participation in our society. . . .”

Dr. Levine has written an incisive and thought-provoking work rich in data about the college student of today. The Carnegie Council on Policy Studies in Higher Education and Dr. Levine have provided a real service to American higher education with this excellent book.