Looking at Generation Me

In 2006, Jean Twenge published a book titled *Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, and Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before.* The book has created significant stir among university faculty and Student Affairs professionals and has sparked a discussion about the interaction between GenMe students and university faculty and staff.

**Overview of Generation Me**

In *Generation Me*, Twenge focuses largely on the unproductive results of typical “GenMe” characteristics. Her somewhat one-sided portrayal has caused some readers to question the soundness of her representation of this generation. While Twenge’s arguments warrant more complex consideration of the multi-faceted dimensions of this generation, these discussions also help break into common assumptions and gaps between students and teachers, and help teachers plan pedagogical approaches that respond better to today’s students.

In her own summary of *Generation Me*, Twenge overviews her study by stating that people born in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s show a higher propensity to believe that “the self comes first” than any previous generation. Twenge points out that this tendency is not the same as being selfish; instead, today’s youth have been raised with some of the culture’s most deeply-held and saturating paradigms: “believe in yourself,” “be yourself,” and “you must love yourself first.”

Throughout her book, Twenge draws on her thirteen years of survey research encompassing 1.3 million young people in her argument that today’s youth are nurtured to possess extremely high self-esteem since childhood, led to believe they are special and can do anything throughout their primary and secondary school, and coached to set their expectations for life and career sky high. Twenge found in her survey that a whopping 98% of college freshmen agree with the statement, “I am sure that one day I will get to where I want in life.” Movies and television reinforce young students’ expectation that all it takes to be successful is to “believe in yourself.” However, these expectations often lead to disappointment and disillusionment. Twenge writes, “more than any other generation in history, the children of Baby Boomers are dis-appointed by what they find when they arrive at adulthood…today’s young people have been raised to aim for the stars at a time when it is more difficult than ever to get into college, find a good job, and afford a house.” Writer Cathi Hanauer sums up youth expectations in the words “we should have it all, do it all, and be it all, and be Happy.”

Extreme focus on the self and unrealistic life expectations have some troubling consequences for Generation Me, argues Twenge. Depression and stress are staples of life for many young adults. One out of three college freshmen reported feeling “frequently overwhelmed” in 2001, twice as many as in the 1980s. A 2003 government survey evaluating depression among high school students found that 29% of high school students experience unhealthy levels of depression.

The number of Americans describing themselves as lonely has risen four times since 1957, a trend Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*, attributes to a steep decline in social connections: GenMe is less likely to belong to clubs and community organizations, less likely to seek out networks of friends, and far less concerned with social approval than Baby Boomers.

Twenge found that GenMe is highly cynical about politics and feels powerless to impact social change. However, she also points out that in the last four decades, the U.S. has undergone a transformation of attitudes toward women, minorities, gays, and lesbians, a phenomenon Twenge calls “the Equality Revolution.” Twenge writes, “It is difficult to overestimate the enormity of this change…most people would agree that equality is the unmitigated upside of the focus on the self” (181). The principles of the civil rights movement are now simple realities for young people across the country.

**Results of faculty and student surveys at UW**

In March 2008, LeaRN developed surveys for students and faculty at UW in hopes of comparing UW students’ responses with Twenge’s research findings. Faculty and student surveys were sent out by email. Both groups were offered the opportunity to enter in a drawing for books and gift certificates for participation in the survey. We received responses from 275 faculty and 719 students (382 students responded to our first survey, and 337 responded to the second which contained some different
questions). About 65% of student responders were female, 35% male, and 55% from in-state.

Among faculty responders, 46% work primarily with freshman or 1st and 2nd year students, 42% work primarily with upperclassmen, and 13% with graduate students.

**Self-esteem and confidence**
In the areas of self esteem and confidence, our survey results largely support Twenge’s findings. We borrowed many of Twenge’s survey questions in this area and received the following results (the last question hints more at locus of control):

- 92% of students agree “I will get to where I want in life someday”
- 92% agree “I am an intelligent person”
- 88% agree “I want to be able to reflect on life later and say I followed my dreams”
- 61% agree “It’s important that I come first on my list of priorities”
- 95% agree “I take a positive attitude toward myself”
- 94% agree “I consider myself a responsible person”
- 54% agree “My success in school is not always connected to my own effort or abilities”

**Social approval and social norms**
About a quarter of UW students report having a tattoo or unusual body piercing. Twenge argues that among the students she surveyed, the majority reported getting a tattoo or piercing because they wanted to express their “individuality” or even to fly in the face of social appropriateness or approval. She finds that a majority of young people agree with the statement “I don’t care what others think about me.”

In contrast to Twenge’s findings, only 25% of students who responded to our survey agreed that they “don’t care what others think about me.” And, of those who reported having a tattoo, 21% described the tattoo as affiliated with a tradition or mark of belonging with family or friends. 18% cited “personal” reasons for the tattoo, 9% attributed it to a religious faith, 10% “liked the art,” 13% wanted to commemorate a life lesson, 12% gave no reason. Only 3% described individuality or shock factor as the reason for a tattoo.

Similar to Twenge’s findings, 85% of students we surveyed agree there is “no single right way to live.”

**Political attitudes**
45% of students agree they are cynical about politics, but 91% indicated they plan to vote in the next presidential election.

**Accepting criticism:**
Because of the way they’ve been socialized in school and at home, says Twenge, GenMe has a tougher time accepting criticism. Our survey results support this trend. In our survey, 53% of students responded they have difficulty accepting criticism occasionally during a semester, and 21% responded they have difficulty accepting criticism “many times.” On the bright side, only 10% of students indicated they “often” disagree with criticism from an instructor. When allowed to choose the ways they prefer to get criticism, students responded in the following way:

- 95% Want to know exactly what is wrong so they can fix it
- 85% Want to be able to have a conversation about their work
- 67% Like work to be complimented first, then given suggestions

64% of students agreed “if I don’t receive the grade I expect, I should be able to dispute it.” On the faculty side, 53% of faculty indicated they experienced a student argument for a higher grade “occasionally” during a semester, 15% indicated they experienced this “many times.”

85% of instructors indicated that students are generally open and receptive to feedback on class projects and exam results during class time.

**Formality of behavior and communication**
Twenge believes that GenMe students are less likely to adopt formal behavior and communication with authority figures, which leads them at times to talk to teachers the same way they talk to their friends. 70% of faculty in our survey indicated that they are occasionally or often surprised by inappropriate
informality in communications from students in emails, discussion, online postings, etc. Of the 183 faculty who wrote in with example(s), the focus of the examples included the following (some examples included more than one focus):

- 40% No salutation/signature (unknown writer)
- 31% Slang or text message language
- 22% Use of teacher’s first name or an invented nickname
- 16% Demanding or entitled language
- 14% Vulgar or inappropriate language
- 12% Little concept of boundaries

When we asked students how often they alter the formality of their language when they communicate with an instructor, we received the following results:

- 25% always alter formality
- 45% indicate formality depends on the instructor
- 22% sometimes alter formality
- 6% never alter formality

From: soccergrrrl@whatever.com
Sent: Monday, April 14, 2008 12:28 PM
To: William Smith
Subject:

Hiya smith
Can you tell me what I got on the xam? When ru going to post the grades?
P.s. I won’t be in class tomorrow so can I get the notes :P

Attitude toward college
Echoing Twenge’s findings, in survey comments several faculty used the word “entitled” to describe the way students approached their course and the broader value of a college education. 81% of faculty indicated that they encounter students every semester who continue to believe they should be given opportunities to catch up even after missing too many assignments or classes. On the flip side, in students’ comments about the negative experiences they’ve had in college courses, many expressed disappointment with teachers who they believe don’t communicate well with students, don’t value student thought, or don’t support student success by attempting to make assignments and exams clear.

In the student survey,
- 74% agree “college courses will positively impact the way I think and live after college”
- 38% agree “college is like a business; I am paying for a degree and expect to receive one”

Interestingly, in the student comments, a couple students stated that they believe it is the University that promotes a business model of education, caring more about “money” than “discovering yourself as an individual.”
Implications for faculty
While it’s not usually possible (or advisable) for teachers to upend their teaching style to address generational differences, awareness of the framework students’ bring to coursework can assist in making key adjustments. The following suggestions draw on our survey responses and conversations with faculty and students.

- Incorporate guidelines in the syllabus and/or in class discussion about appropriate ways to communicate with instructors in different contexts. Students often frame the way they communicate with instructors based on sometimes unintended cues they receive from instructors in class.

- Be aware that taking criticism well is a difficult and lengthy learning experience (for everyone) and that GenMe students have perhaps had varying experience with criticism in their primary and secondary schooling. Students tend to respond better and learn more when they perceive the instructor as genuinely caring about their success, and when instructor feedback acknowledges strengths or effort (if appropriate) before suggestions.

- GenMe students are increasingly accustomed to learning that involves choice and connection to the issues they are concerned with. When lectures, assignments, and class discussions begin with a connection to “why this might matter to students personally and professionally,” students will engage at a higher level.

Resources