Foreword

THE NET GENERATION AND THE FUTURE OF LEARNING

Is it possible that colleges can turn their current and future students into independent, critically thinking, self-motivated, pro-active learners or will they remain academically adrift with limited learning on college campuses as the title of a recent book suggests? Are there successful academic learning concepts and practices that can be employed successfully with this new student generation to prepare them for their future independent learning?

This book is a must read for educators who are interested in the future of learning at all levels, but especially in higher education. The measurable behavioral differences between the Net Generation (aka Millennials), and previous generations, have stimulated these educators and researchers to develop theories, as well as identify and test different technologies and pedagogies that may work more effectively and be better motivators. As a bonus, some of the new learning technologies and pedagogies may also prove more effective with preceding generations. As you read through these papers, and I encourage you to do so, please note that the evidence of what works may change the focus of where college and university students spend their in-class and out-of-class time.

I have conducted more than sixty Net Generation focus groups of college students in most states and even three foreign countries, most of them in front of live audiences consisting of college faculty and administrators. Using published research about Net Gen behaviors, I ask questions of a random group of 8 to 14 local college students questions in front of their faculty and administrators to prove or disprove the study results. The results, by and large, are confirmed; the Net Generation students do behave differently. Net Gen communication, gaming, and learning behaviors are different in many statistically significant ways. They expect much more personal interactivity, gaming, personal attention from expert faculty, collaboration with their fellow students, social networking, and balanced integrated learning technologies. Since college students do not behave the same as previous generations or learn in exactly the same fashion, is it possible to motivate these students to become independent self-learners?

The chapters in this book offer many questions and answers about what actually works and also what might work to improve Net Generation learning. For example, here are a few questions that have been raised and answered or investigated. Does heavy Internet and concurrent media usage impact Net Gen student ability to focus? Has the very nature of knowledge creation, stewardship, and propagation changed? Do Net Gen college students show a higher preference for play oriented educational material than older groups? Do students still want and need face to face education? Does interactive online instruction produce different results from traditional static instructional models? Does introducing interactive functionality in instructional technology and lesson content encourage students to pay closer attention,
work harder and study longer? Do students generally have positive views about learning technologies when they are used appropriately? Do only a small percentage of Net Gen students prefer group work? These are only a small portion of the questions raised.

Many faculty teaching at colleges and universities throughout the United States, and some internationally, have noticed the change in their current college students from those a generation ago. Faculty have typically had one of three reactions. First, some faculty are in denial; in spite of compelling evidence, they do not believe this student generation is substantially different in any way that matters. Second, other faculty members recognize that this generation is different in significant ways, but they have been teaching for, say, XX years “effectively,” and have no intention of changing. Third, the remainder of faculty recognize that this student generation is different in important ways and are looking for successful teaching and learning practices to deal with these differences effectively. This book is for that last group.

The future of learning is not limited to just what happens in the classroom, but rather, how current students develop their curiosity, critical thinking, and independent, proactive learning. The reason we should listen to such studies and ideas presented in the collection of papers in this book, is that the faculty and teachers on our campuses and schools will surely help shape how these students might become successful in their ever changing future learning environments.

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Richard Sweeney is the University Librarian at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and also leads the Department of Instructional Technology and Media Services. His career experience is extensive, spanning Vice Provost (for Libraries and Information Services at Polytechnic University in Brooklyn), Executive Director in libraries in Ohio, and positions in libraries in Flint, MI and Atlantic City. Rich has served on the Board of Trustees of Thomas Edison State College (NJ), has taught at the high school, college, and graduate levels, and as an Executive Committee member of VALE (Virtual Academic Library Committee of New Jersey) for over eleven years. Rich is a frequent speaker and consultant. As a speaker, he has conducted over 60 Millennial generation panels in front of live audiences in higher education and industry in over twenty states. His Millennial research has been featured in the Chronicle of Higher Education, the NJ Star Leger, and others. He has published a number of articles in journals.

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