IT'S HARD to like the current cohort of undergraduates. Not only are many inadequately prepared for college-level work, but the majority have crass, instrumental attitudes about what higher education is for. William Willimon, the Duke University chaplain, believes that "their developmental and educational agendas are very different from the ones we had." Willimon's observation suggests a widespread misunderstanding about college students today: that what they want from college differs substantially from what previous undergraduate cohorts desired. This analysis is both true and false. It is true in that students of the 1990s differ in some important ways from those of the 1960s. It is false in that students of the 1960s are arguably the only cohort from which today's students differ appreciably in terms of their goals for college. That is, today's students seem different because they are typically compared to their counterparts from the 1960s, a period that is—for better or worse—a historical aberration in terms of college student attitudes.

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) at the University of California–Los Angeles is the primary source of much of what is known about students' attitudes. Two items on its annual survey of beginning college students are now frequently cited to demonstrate a lamentable, worrisome shift in students' reasons for going to college. They are the percentages of students who say they want to develop a meaningful philosophy of life and of students who say they want to be financially well off after college. Though these views are not necessarily mutually exclusive, the former has come to represent for many a constellation of desirable intellectual and personal development outcomes, and the latter self-interest and conspicuous consumption. As CIRP data show, the proportion of students indicating that developing a meaningful philosophy is important declined precipitously from 83 percent in 1967 to 41 percent in 1997. Being well off financially has essentially reversed position with the importance of a meaningful philosophy of life. In 1997, it was held by 75 percent of students, contrasted to about 43 percent in the late 1960s. These bellwether indicators, along with other social attitude measures, have spawned numerous unflattering labels for traditional-age undergraduates. College students today are, depending on the source, materialistic, self-centered, disengaged, cynical, disaffected, self-abusive, lazy, angst-ridden, whiny, apathetic. But compared with whom at what point in time? Except for about a ten-year period between the early 1960s and the early 1970s, what today's students want from college is not all that different from the goals of the vast majority who have gone to college before and since then.

In American colonial days, most parents sent their children to college more to polish their manners than to sharpen their wits. The colleges aimed higher, of course, and tried to inculcate moral sensibility into their young charges. There is little to suggest that their efforts succeeded. According to historians John Brubacher and Willis Rudy, before the Civil War, college student life "was dominated by the three Rs—rowdies, riots, and rebellions." Bored students frequently clashed with their "hapless clergymen-professors," who demanded conformity in all matters, requiring students to master a fixed body of classical knowledge delivered in Latin and Greek. Brubacher and Rudy liken the college environment in

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those days to that of “a low-grade boy’s boarding school straight out of the pages of Dickens,” an atmosphere hardly conducive to developing a meaningful philosophy of life, even if students were interested or up to the task.

There was a period between 1800 and 1850 when, on many campuses, students’ interests approximated those of their counterparts in the 1960s, at least with regard to acting on political and social concerns. Frustrated with an ancient course of study and heavy doses of piety and discipline, students formed debating clubs and literary societies to add some intellectual zest to dull, monotonous academic routines. In Frederick Rudolph’s words, “the literary societies . . . imparted a tremendous vitality to the intellectual life of the colleges,” which were better at “denying intellect than refining it.” But the zeal driving these much-needed diversions evaporated several decades later, in large part because such activities were almost always discouraged by colleges. Many such groups evolved into a far less intellectually vibrant form of social system that persists today, the fraternity.

During the post–Civil War decades most students aspired to mercantile and industrial positions and wanted colleges to emphasize the practical arts. According to Helen Horowitz, there was little serious intellectual activity among students during this period. Around the turn of the century the number of highly motivated students matriculating increased, which helped quiet the rebellion and rowdiness that dominated undergraduate life at most colleges. The majority of these students, however, gravitated to institutions that were supported financially by the federal Morrill Act in the late 1800s, which stimulated the introduction and expansion of applied courses of study by designating or establishing at least one college in every state that would offer agricultural and mechanical arts programs.

Our present preoccupation with retention was first apparent during the early decades of the twentieth century, when substantial proportions of students left school early because they did not see a connection between their studies and life after college. In fact, business leaders at the time sharply criticized the colleges for offering a curriculum that was irrelevant; some went so far as to say that a college education was a liability, not an asset, for people wanting jobs in commerce and industry. Nevertheless, college life still appealed to many young men, but not because of an intrinsic interest in the life of the mind. Horowitz cites Vincent Sheean’s description of the majority of his classmates at the University of Chicago just after World War I as “frivolous . . . a couple of thousand young nincompoops whose ambition in life was to get into the right fraternity or club, go to the right parties, and get elected to something or other. In the 1930s, a small fraction of students at more than a few institutions engaged in political action, but they hardly represented the majority of their classmates.

The pragmatic concerns of World War II veterans attending college are well documented; understandably, “learning for earning” was a nontrivial matter, as many had spouses and children to support. Through the 1950s, “passivity characterized the student mind,” leading Brubacher and Rudy to dub this cohort “the silent generation.” Surveys of students during this decade showed that the majority wanted to obtain good paying jobs after graduation. After reviewing the available information at that time, Philip Jacob concluded that students in the 1950s were “unabashedly self-centered,” though there were then as now substantial variations in student attitudes across institutions.

Everything changed in the 1960s. Because of a confluence of social, political, and economic factors, this watershed period produced “the most portentous upheaval in the whole history of American student life,” according to Brubacher and Rudy. The leading edge of the baby boom swelled enrollments. The civil rights movement and the Vietnam War fueled demands for a more “relevant” curriculum. Few institutions escaped the distal effects of the political turmoil of the times, which manifested on some campuses as student activism that occasionally interrupted classes. Reducing the age of majority from twenty-one to eighteen realigned student-institution relations from in loco parentis to client and educational provider. Dozens of commissioned reports and scholarly treatises appeared in an effort to understand and explain the surprising attitudes and frequently bizarre (and worse) behavior of college students. The robust economy essentially guaranteed a good job to any college graduate, making it possible for large numbers of students to challenge the status quo without jeopardizing their postcollege earning power.

As Alexander Astin and I have both documented, today’s undergraduates are more diverse in most ways than any previous group, including the 1960s “benchmark cohort.” On average, they are older and less likely to live on campus or attend school full time. They also watch more television, read and study less, and work more. Even so, many of the things they want from college are remarkably similar to what students in previous eras wanted. The CIRP data show, for example, that about the same proportions of students in the late 1960s and the late 1990s went to college to get a better job (74 percent) and to gain a general education.
(60 percent) and think it is important to influence the political structure (16 percent), raise a family (71 to 73 percent), and be recognized as an authority in their field (63 to 66 percent). Among the more counterintuitive differences is that almost a third of the students in the late 1990s say they want to become community leaders, compared with only 15 percent in 1970.

All this is to say that even though students in the 1990s may look very different in many ways from their predecessors, with regard to certain key goals they are not that different. Every generation has equated a college degree with an advantage in the job market and with a broader understanding of oneself and the world in which one will live and work. And every generation has its fraction of intellectually inclined students, those whose academic interests set them apart from most of their peers. This is the group that spawns the majority of academics and explains, in part, why faculty members tend to perennially complain about the quality of their students: the measuring stick they typically use is themselves, not their classmates who pursued other careers. Indeed, students of every era have fallen short in the eyes of their faculty members. This is inevitable, perhaps, as students typically reflect the values of the larger society, which Tocqueville succinctly characterized as “anti-intellectual.” In the 1930s, Alexander Meiklejohn of the University of Wisconsin opined that one of the greatest challenges the academy faced was a student body shaped by a pragmatic American culture that did not hold books in high regard. As Christopher Jencks and David Riesman explained in their classic 1968 book, The Academic Revolution, faculty members prefer undergraduates who “act like graduate apprentices, both socially and intellectually. . . . Because only a minority of undergraduates have the talent or the motivation to act like apprentice scholars, many professors disclaim responsibility for the majority.”

Acknowledging this does not mean we should be sanguine about what students today want from college. Indeed, our best work is engaging them in ways that compel them to rethink their values and aspirations for higher education and their life’s work. And there is plenty of evidence that we succeed. Students know more when they leave college than when they start; moreover, they exhibit higher levels of critical thinking and problem-solving ability. They are able to communicate more effectively orally and in writing. Of course we could and should do better in these and other areas. But on balance, going to college changes for the better how students think about their world and what they contribute to it.

The next time you read or hear critical or cynical commentary about this “utilitarian,” “self-interested” generation of college students, remember that in certain respects they are much like the majority of those who went to college before them. And remember too that our role is not to lament who they are but to help them cultivate habits of the mind and heart and acquire the skills and competencies that will enable them to be productive, self-sufficient, and civically responsible in an increasingly complicated world.

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