

The Past Is a Foreign Country

*The past is a foreign country.
They do things differently there.*

—HARTLEY (1953)

THIS IS a portrait of the students who attended college between 2005 and 2014. They grew up at a time of profound, swift, continuing, and disruptive economic, demographic, technological, and global change and have lived their lives in a very different world than their parents. The world of their parents and professors was dying and their world was being born simultaneously.

This generation faces a situation reminiscent of an optical illusion commonly found in books of children's brain teasers and introductory psychology textbooks called *faces and vases*. It is a black-and-white picture in which one can see either two faces or a vase, never both at the same time. The faces are black and the vase is white. If one sees the white as background and the black as foreground, two faces appear on the left and right sides of the picture with a white space separating them. If one views the black as background and the white as foreground, a vase appears at the center of a picture bordered in black. The worlds of today's

college students and their parents exist in a similar fashion. For each, the world they grew up in is foreground. For adults there is an increasing realization that their world is receding into the background, often accompanied by a sense of loss, and that their children's world is emerging in the foreground. The parents have begun to live their lives straddling both worlds. Their children have less appreciation for what is happening; their parents' world was never foreground. It never existed for them.

The Worlds of the Class of 2012 and Their Parents

America's traditional undergraduates, represented by the class of 2012, were born in 1990.¹ A chronology of the major events in their lifetime can be found in Appendix A. Technologically, the parents of the class of 2012 are products of an analog world and their children grew up in a digital age, using a numerical rather than wave technology, which is cheaper, faster, more reliable, more accurate, and more productive. Apple, Microsoft, and AOL already existed when the class of 2012 was born. There were already personal computers, CDs, mobile phones, e-mail, instant messaging, and the Internet. By the time they were in kindergarten, texting, web browsers, smart phones, DVDs, Yahoo!, and the dot-com bubble were realities. Before they finished elementary school, Google, Napster, music file sharing, and the iPod had come onto the scene. Middle school brought Skype, Myspace, and Facebook. They had to wait until high school for YouTube, Twitter, and the iPhone.

Globally, the parents of the class of 2012 grew up in a time of nation states with two superpowers and a cold war. Their children were born into a world that was flattening as Thomas Friedman would proclaim when they were fifteen years old (Friedman, 2005). By the time the class of 2012 was three years old, the old

world order was collapsing. The Cold War, Soviet Union, and Berlin Wall were gone. The countries of East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist. The Maastricht Treaty, creating a European Union, had been signed. There was no Red China; the United States and China had normalized relations. A Muslim state had been established in Iran and the State of Palestine had been created. The Arab-Israeli conflict and initiatives to end it had been going on for four decades.

In contrast to their parents, the class of 2012 grew up in a global society, bounded together by the movement of information, money, jobs, trade, investment, and business, facing many common challenges. The United States was inextricably intertwined to that world. The independence of nation states was waning and national borders were becoming increasingly porous. The degree to which this was true was demonstrated vividly by the worldwide recession when class of 2012 turned eighteen.

The changes in the world caused different dangers and fears for parents and children. The parents grew up with the persistent threat of nuclear war by nation states. Their children lived with the reality of insurgent terrorism at home, carried out by networks rather than nations, fighting globalization and the fear that these organizations might detonate weapons of mass destruction in the United States. Before today's college students were born, their parents witnessed terrorism abroad, targeted at Americans. But their children saw terrorism come to the United States. When they were three, terrorists attempted to blow up the World Trade Center. Two years later, Americans carried out the then-worst terrorist attack in US history, bombing the Oklahoma City federal building, killing 168 people and injuring 450. The next terrorist attack was larger and more horrible. When they were eleven, terrorists belonging to al-Qaeda flew jumbo jets into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, killing nearly three thousand people. They watched it again and again and again on television—the

planes hitting the towers and the towers collapsing. Later, there were headlines trumpeting terrorist attacks in Madrid, London, Mumbai, and around the globe, continually reminding them of what might happen again at home. They heard accounts of failed terrorist attacks including a shoe bombing on a Detroit-bound plane and a car bombing in New York City's Times Square. They also witnessed another form of domestic terrorism in which students massacred fellow students at Columbine High School in Colorado when they were ten and at Virginia Tech seven years later. The United States has been at war since they were eleven years old for reasons ascribed to terrorism.

Economically, the parents of the class of 2012 were the products of an industrial society that was shifting to an information economy whereas their children grew up in an information economy still transitioning from the industrial society. By the time this generation of college students was born, jobs in the manufacturing sector were declining and moving abroad. The historic manufacturing regions of the United States were commonly called the *rust belt*, a term popularized in the 1980s. There was already little economic future for high school dropouts. The jobs that paid salaries adequate to support a family required more education and greater knowledge and skills than ever before. High-paying jobs, demanding high levels of education, were on a steep rise.

Demographically, the class of 2012 grew up in a nation that was populated differently than their parents. In 1960, when many of their parents were born or soon would be, a majority of Americans lived in the Northeast and Midwest (56 percent). By the time the class of 2012 was born, the numbers had flip-flopped—55 percent lived in the South and West and the disparity continued to grow. The impact of the change is that parents came of age at time in which the United States was dominated by blue (and liberal Republican) states and their children grew up in an era in which the balance of power shifted to the red states (Gibson & Jung, 2002).

The US population aged between the parents' and children's generations. In 1960, slightly more than one out of eight Americans (13 percent) was over the age of sixty. In 2010, the proportion rose to nearly one in five (18 percent). By 2050, when the class of 2012 turns sixty, the numbers are projected to grow to one in four (26 percent). The result is that today's college students are facing a mounting financial burden for their parents' and grandparents' Social Security, Medicare, and other senior programs and the likelihood that these programs will be significantly changed by the time they are eligible for them (US Administration on Aging, 2008).

Current students live in a society in which immigration has reached the highest numbers in modern history, more than three times the rate their parents experienced growing up. During the 1960s, 3.2 million immigrants entered the country as legal residents. During the 1990s, the number jumped to 9.8 million and in the first decade of the twenty-first century it reached more than a million a year—10.3 million. The makeup of the immigrant population changed dramatically as well. In the 1960s, 35 percent of the immigrants came from Europe, 11 percent from Asia, and 21 percent from Latin America. Between 1990 and 2009, Europeans dropped by nearly two-thirds (13 percent) whereas Hispanics more than doubled (45 percent) and Asians tripled (32 percent) (Office of Immigration Statistics, 2011).

One of the consequences of legal and illegal immigration as well as varying fertility rates of different ethnic groups is that the class of 2012 lives in a far more diverse society than their parents. In fact, they are the most diverse college generation in US history. In 1960, 85 percent of the nation's population was white, 12 percent was black, 4 percent was Hispanic, and 1 percent was Asian. In 2010, the proportion of non-Hispanic whites dropped by a quarter (65 percent), blacks remained constant (13 percent), Hispanics quadrupled (16 percent), and Asians quintupled (5 percent). By

2050, whites are projected to make up a minority of the population (46 percent) in a nation in which Hispanics (30 percent), blacks (13 percent), and Asians (8 percent) constitute the new majority (Humes, 2011; US Census Bureau, 2002).

The parents of the class of 2012 were born into an America that had anti-miscegenation laws in sixteen states until 1967. In contrast, their children are living in a country in which 5.6 percent of children under the age of eighteen are multiracial (Mather, 2011).

With these changes, the class of 2012 watched as racial and gender ceilings cracked. Blacks and women had run for president and vice president before the class of 2012 was born. Women and people of color had served in legislatures, statehouses, and city halls. After the class of 2012 was born, they made further advances. When the class of 2012 was seventeen, the first woman was elected speaker of the US House of Representatives. A year later, a black-skinned, multiracial man was elected president of the United States; the Democratic nomination for president came down to a white woman and a black man and the Republican Party nominated its first female vice-presidential candidate. The year after that a Latina was appointed to the US Supreme Court.

In contrast to their parents, today's college students are a more diverse, digital generation living in an information economy with an aging, increasingly immigrant, migrating population, a majority of whom reside in the South and West. Their world is flat, financially troubled, and inflamed by religious, economic, and political differences. See Table 1.1 for a description of today's college students and their parents.

In *When Hope and Fear Collide*, the college students of the 1990s were described as a transitional generation, with one foot in the world of their parents and the other in the world being born. In contrast, the students of the twenty-first century have both feet in the new world, with an important caveat: their parents' generation is still largely in control of the nation's social

Table 1.1 Today's College Students and Their Parents

	<i>Parents</i>	<i>Students</i>
Technology	Analog	Digital
Globe	Dominated by nation states with two superpowers and a cold war	Flat with weaker nation states and terrorist opponents
Economy	Industrial economy transitioning to an information economy	Information economy transitioning from an industrial economy
Demographics	White, majority of population in Northeast and Midwest with middle-aged baby boomers	Diverse with majority of population in the West and South, aging baby boomers, and increased immigration

institutions—government, health care, education, finance, and to a lesser extent media.

In that book, the story of Rip Van Winkle was used as metaphor for the extraordinary pace of change our society was experiencing, that in a very short period of time an overwhelming amount of change can occur. That story also gives insight into the generational differences we are experiencing today. Washington Irving's 1819 tale is the story of a man who sleeps for twenty years and wakes up believing he's slept a single night. He walks through the village where he lives and not surprisingly does not recognize the homes, businesses, names on the doors, or the people he sees. Shocked, nearly mad, Rip Van Winkle cries out, "Everything's changed and I'm changed and I can't tell what's my name, or who I am" (Irving, 2011, line 242).

The story could have been told from a very different perspective, albeit a far less interesting one: from the point of view of the people who lived in the village. They would report that one day,

an elderly man with an old-fashioned gun, unlike any the young people had seen before, and clothing from back in the day, more appropriate to a costume party than a stroll through the village, appeared in town. He told an absurd story, claiming he lived in this village, though no one recognized him including the people who were his children. He was pitiful. They felt sorry for him and allowed him to stay. With time, acceptance grew to affection, though the old man remained a curiosity who continued to tell every stranger who passed through the village about the old days. As the years passed, he came to comprehend the changes that occurred while he slept, but only as one who has heard a story rather than living it.

In the first version, Rip Van Winkle is the native and the village is the stranger, shocking and incomprehensible. In the second, the village is the native and Rip Van Winkle is the stranger, old, disconnected, and out of touch. In many respects, this is our situation today. Many of us adults are Rip Van Winkles, natives of a dying world and immigrants in an emerging world. Our children are the natives of the new world and immigrants in the old, to the extent that they are aware of it. In his autobiography, Henry Adams offered this account of his own world, shifting from an agrarian to an industrial society, referring to himself in the third person:

The old universe was thrown in the ash-heap and a new one was created. . . . [Adams] and his eighteenth-century troglodytic Boston were cut apart—separated forever—not in sentiment, but by the opening of the Boston and Albany Railroad; the appearance of the first Cunard steamers in the bay and the telegraphic messages which carried from Baltimore to Washington the news that Henry Clay and James K. Polk were nominated for president (Adams, lines 17405 ff).

Key Events in the Lives of Today's College Students

Events define generations. There are occasions, happenings, circumstances, and shared experiences of such importance that they exert a formative impact on the young people who live through them. For example, the undergraduates of the 1930s might have said the Depression was such an event. The students of the 1940s might have selected World War II. When surveyed in the late 1970s, undergraduates chose Watergate, Vietnam, and the civil rights movement (Levine, 1980). The students of the 1990s identified an array of events that were significant but of lesser impact to their generation: the Persian Gulf War, the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Exxon Valdez oil spill, the Rodney King trial of police officers for using excessive force, the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the AIDS epidemic (Levine & Cureton, 1998).

In the 2009 academic year, we asked undergraduates about the key events that shaped their lives. We did this first in campus focus groups to learn the answers students would give and then we surveyed a nationally representative sample of college students (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). We gave them a list of fifty-two events, some occurring before they were born, most after, and asked how important they were to them, on a four-point scale ranging from a low of “not significant” to a high of “key event” in my life.

The events they rated as key are the advent of the World Wide Web and digital technologies that followed, the worldwide economic recession, the September 11 attack and its aftermath, and the election of Barack Obama as president. In a number of ways, these events reflect the differences between college students and their parents—technologically (the advent of the World Wide Web), economically (the worldwide recession), globally

Table 1.2 Key Events in the Lives of Undergraduates

	<i>Percent citing</i>
Launch of World Wide Web	42
Economy (gas prices exceed \$4 per gallon)	37
September 11 attack	29
Obama nomination and election	25
Mass use of cell phones	23
Launch of Yahoo!	20

Source: Undergraduate Survey (2009).

(September 11 and its aftermath), and demographically (the election of Barack Obama). Table 1.2 lists the six events cited by at least 20 percent of the students surveyed.

Technology

This is the first generation of digital natives to attend college. Three of the top six events they cited were new technologies: the World Wide Web, cell phone, and Yahoo! They rated the launch of the World Wide Web as the key event in their lives. Nearly three-quarters (74 percent) said it was either very important or key to them (Undergraduate Survey, 2009).

When we asked college students how they adapted to the tidal wave of new technology, one explained, “It’s only technology if it happened after you were born.” (At the time, the comment seemed to us a confession of ignorance with the potential to someday grace the bumper of a car as opposed to a very wise observation.) If the technology exists before you were born, it’s a fact of life, a given. The question would be the equivalent of asking their parents or professors how they adapted to the telephone, radio, or automobile. They didn’t have to. These things were just there.

The speed of adoption of new media by this generation has been extraordinary. At the time of Undergraduate Survey, Facebook was four years old and Myspace was five. They would have to be considered relatively new technologies. Yet 85 percent of college students reported using them or other online social media. Half said they were using them one or more times daily and a quarter said one or more times a week for an average of nearly four and a half hours a week (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). We suspect those numbers would be much inflated today. The rapid adoption has to be put into context. The basics were already in place when this generation born or very young and many of the popular innovations represented changes in degree rather than kind, little more than the difference between the detergent Tide and new blue Tide.

Over and over students said, "It will definitely be technology that defines our generation. . . . It's what we have grown up with." "If you remove the computer, text messages, e-mail, cell phones, BlackBerries . . . I will probably die." They asked, "How did you live before?" On three different campuses, students reported giving up Facebook for Lent.

No change is larger or will have greater impact on higher education than this generation's use of digital technology. It is what differentiates current undergraduates from the students who came before them and separates them from the older adults on campus and at home. The reasons go far beyond the hardware and software they own, the applications they use, the websites they flock to, and the social media that have become nearly universal.

There are fundamental differences between today's undergraduates and their colleges, rooted in the new technologies. Digital technologies have made current college students a 24/7 generation, operating around the clock, any time, any place. However, they attend colleges with fixed locations and fixed calendars—semesters, course schedules, and office hours. How many of us

have gotten e-mails at 3 AM from students who are annoyed when they do not receive a response within a few hours?

Digital technologies place an accent on learning and encourage group activity, shared work products, and consumer-driven content. But current undergraduates are enrolled in universities where the emphasis is on teaching, individual work products, and content is university or producer driven. How many of us have faced students who have committed plagiarism and, having grown up with file sharing, say they don't understand why it was wrong?

Digital technologies permit multitasking and individualized and interactive learning. The preferred content and modes of learning for students are concrete (practical) and active (hands on). But professors favor serial tasking, doing one task at a time, and passive (hands off, for example, reading) and abstract (theoretical) learning. How many of us have shaken our heads in dismay as we watched a student in a coffee shop sitting with a friend, talking on a cell phone with another person, and working on a class assignment and wondered why our students have so much trouble with Plato and Tolstoy?

Digital media produce a shallow ocean of information and encourage students to gather and sift. Of course, they can go deeper if they wish. But they matriculate into analog universities, populated by academics who are hunters, whose interests and work generally emphasizes depth over breadth. How many of us are still surprised when students cite *Wikipedia* as the primary source in papers and neglect to check even the most basic academic resources? See Table 1.3 for a contrast between the focus of traditional universities and this generation of digital students.

The impact of technology goes far beyond the classroom. It changes student communications and relationships with peers, parents, and colleges. One dean explained that his office no longer knew how to contact students living on campus. They either don't have or don't use room phones. They have cell phones. They

Table 1.3 Traditional Universities and Digital Students

<i>Traditional Universities</i>	<i>Digital Natives</i>
Fixed time (semesters, credits, office hours)	Variable time—24/7
Location bound	Any time, any place
Provider driven (university determined)	Consumer driven (student determined)
Passive learning (hands off)	Active learning (hands on)
Abstract	Concrete
Analog media	Digital media
Teaching (process)	Learning (outcome)
Individual	Group (collaborative)
Depth focus (hunting)	Breadth focus (gathering)

don't answer e-mail coming to their college accounts. They have several other accounts and often don't check those regularly, preferring to text. New technologies change the way students meet, entertain, protest, get their news, shop, participate in politics, spend their time, and use the campus. They change the rules for how people conduct their lives, establish new standards of decorum, and create new opportunities for incivility. Between 2008 and 2011, 46 percent of campuses surveyed reported increased levels of technology-based infractions and misbehavior and 44 percent had increases in technology-based incivility (Student Affairs Survey, 2011).

When the authors expressed surprise at the level at which college undergraduates use technology, students often remarked, "you should see my younger sister or brother." Among adults eighteen to thirty-four years old, 95 percent have cell phones, 74 percent have iPods or other MP3 players, 70 percent have laptop computers, 63 percent have game consoles, and 5 percent have iPads or other tablets. Only 1 percent had none of these devices.

No age group had a higher percentage in any of these categories (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011), except their younger brothers and sisters (ages twelve to seventeen), who have more iPods (79 percent) and game consoles (80 percent) (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2011). They text more often (104 versus 62 daily) and have more personal blogs (60 percent versus 43 percent) (The Digital Future Project, 2011). These are the young people coming to college next.

The Economy

The first wave of surveys for the 2009 survey was sent out in October 2008. At that time, the dimension of the recession that would follow was still unclear, though momentous events had already occurred. International financial firms had written off more than \$500 billion in assets in August and the International Monetary Fund predicted that the actual need was \$1.5 trillion. In September, the US government took over Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, Lehman Brothers failed, and Merrill Lynch was sold to Bank of America. On October 3, President Bush signed a \$700 billion federal bailout bill.

The student survey included two economic issues—gas prices rising above \$4 a gallon in July and the subprime mortgage crisis that began in 2007 but was only becoming apparent to the nation in fall 2008. Of the students surveyed 37 percent said increased gas prices was the key event in their lives and 9 percent selected the subprime mortgage crisis (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). Our conversations lead us to believe they were proxies for the troubled economy.

Students were living through a severe international recession that produced high unemployment, foreclosures, bankruptcies, increased national debt and oil prices, the loss of 8.5 million jobs, and declines in home prices, consumer confidence, international trade, and credit. The subprime mortgage crisis left major banks,

insurance companies, and manufacturing firms teetering at the edge of bankruptcy, saved only by federal bailouts.

This is a generation that is highly critical of business. They overwhelmingly believe private corporations are too concerned with profits and not enough with public responsibility and CEOs do not deserve the high salaries they receive. This is discussed more fully in Chapter Six (Undergraduate Survey, 2009).

The recession has had a very large impact on whether, where, and how students attend college. Historically, college enrollments have grown when the economy is weak. Attendance hit record levels in 2009–2010, when 74 percent of female and 63 percent of male 2009 high school graduates enrolled and the jobless rate for high school graduates not enrolled in college rose to 33 percent. A year later when economic conditions improved slightly, enrollment rates dropped slightly (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

The economy affected where students went to college. More than three out of five 2010–2011 college freshmen (62 percent) said the current economic situation affected where they went to college. Almost half (46 percent) chose their college because it offered financial assistance versus a third (34 percent) in 2006 before the recession began (Pryor, 2007; Pryor & DeAngelo, 2010).

The economy changed the way students attended college. Between 2008 and 2011, two-thirds of senior student affairs officers (67 percent) surveyed reported increases in the number of students at their universities who were working longer hours. A quarter or more said students were stopping out (taking a hiatus from college with the intent of returning) (48 percent), living at home (48 percent), choosing or changing majors (36 percent), dropping out (33 percent), and taking fewer credits (31 percent) because of the economy (see Table 1.4) (Student Affairs Survey, 2011).

In 2009, 69 percent of all college students surveyed were working at paid jobs, up from 60 percent in 1993 and 54 percent in 1976. Almost half (46 percent) of those with jobs were working

Table 1.4 Impact of the Economy on Students by Percent of Institutions

	<i>Remained</i>		
	<i>Increased</i>	<i>the Same</i>	<i>Decreased</i>
Working longer hours due to the economy	67	33	
Living at home due to the economy	48	48	4
Stopping out due to the economy	48	41	11
Dropping out due to the economy	33	51	11
Taking fewer credits due to the economy	31	58	12
Choosing or changing majors due to the economy	36	64	

Source: Student Affairs Survey (2011).

twenty-one hours a week or more. When asked the primary reason they were working, 16 percent said they wanted money to help pay tuition or basic living expenses and 64 percent said they needed the money for that purpose (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). In 2010, full-time students were half as likely to be working as their part-time peers (US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

Student affairs officers described their students as more stressed and anxious, more academically driven, more frequently using psychological counseling services, and in a hurry to finish college. They were also more career focused, spent more time in the career counseling office, and were eager for internships, particularly paid ones or anything else that would give them an edge in the job market (Student Affairs Survey, 2011).

Their greatest immediate concern was money. Family circumstances have changed. Of college students surveyed 24 percent said that someone whose income they depended on had been unemployed while they were in college (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). The price of college and the cost of textbooks has escalated. Between the 2009 and 2011 academic years, college tuition and

fees rose more than 15 percent at community colleges, 11 percent at public four-year colleges, and 9 percent at four-year privates (College Board, 2011). Loans were harder to obtain and frightening for students to assume. More than seven in ten students (72 percent) who had college loans reported some or major concern about their ability to repay them (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). Student affairs officers told us “financial assistance is just never enough.” There are continuing pleas for more financial aid and jobs (Student Affairs Survey, 2011). One institution told us its pool of full-pay applicants had fallen by 70 percent and its full-need group had doubled. In a November–December 2011 survey of college students by the Harvard University Institute of Politics, 70 percent said the economy is the issue that concerns them most (Institute of Politics, 2011)

A small number of student affairs officers said the economic downturn politicized students at their colleges, turning their attention to issues such as sustainability, ensuring a “living wage” for the lowest paid employees on the campus, income inequity, and protesting the governor’s proposed budget. Others saw just the opposite impact—isolating students because they were working so many hours and forcing their heads down to focus on their own problems (Student Affairs Survey, 2011).

September 11

When the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked, the class of 2012 was eleven years old. The United States has been at war half of their lives, since they were in sixth grade. In the minds of many students, September 11, the War on Terror, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are intertwined and very difficult to separate. “9/11 [was] the domino,” said one student. Others highlighted the dominoes that fell after September 11 include the wars, the Patriot Act, Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay prison, and rendition (the practice of transporting terrorist suspects to other

countries for interrogation or imprisonment). There were deep divisions over immigration, civil liberties, foreign students, discrimination, human rights, and globalization. A student newspaper editor at a northeastern liberal arts college said, “9/11 unified the country . . . the war then tore it apart.”

The wars have had a disillusioning effect on undergraduates. More than three out of five held negative opinions of former president Bush (66 percent) and former vice president Dick Cheney (61 percent). Sixty-one percent believed meaningful social change could not be achieved through traditional politics. They wanted the wars over. More than two-thirds thought the US government was wrong to send troops into Afghanistan in the wake of September 11 (68 percent) and 69 percent wanted an immediate withdrawal of US forces from Iraq (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). In fact, the last US troops left Iraq in a staged withdrawal concluding in December 2011.

Contrary to media portrayals, the death of Osama bin Laden did not produce an orgy of giant keg parties and a Mardi Gras atmosphere at America’s colleges. Half of the site-visit campuses had little or no visible reaction, which surprised several of the senior student affairs officers. At the other half, there were palpable expressions of relief and happiness. On one campus, the reaction was solemn—students placed flags on the quad for every life lost due to September 11. On several others, the responses were split with impromptu parties and e-mail blasts inviting students to gather and celebrate with libations and counter e-mails, texts, and discussion saying it was wrong to throw a keg party in response to such an incident (Student Affairs Survey, 2011).

In focus-group interviews, students who were in high school in 2001 were far more likely to say, “My generation is defined by 9/11” than those still in elementary school. As one student government president explained, “for younger people [September 11] tends to not come to the forefront as much. They tend to focus more on the impact of having troops in Iraq.”

However, all across the country, students, whether they believed September 11 to be a defining moment for their generation or not, told us it was a day they will never forget, frequently comparing it to the assassination of President Kennedy for their parents.

- “I know where I was when I heard about it, which is what you always hear about Kennedy.”
- “I remember where I was and what I was wearing and what clip I had in my hair.”
- “I just think that our generation is gonna say I know where I was when that happened. . . . like my parents know where they were when the Kennedy assassination [occurred].”
- “You can literally ask anyone on this campus—where were you when you heard the towers had been hit and every one of them will have their story to tell. It’s just like JFK for our parent’s generation. Everyone can say where they were when JFK was assassinated to this day and it will be very much the same for our generation for 9/11.”

Students spoke of the horror of watching the event endlessly on television, seeing the planes hit the World Trade Center and the towers collapse. But there is a difference between having an event seared into a generation’s memory and that event having a major impact on their lives.

When we asked about the effect of September 11 on student and campus life, the answers varied dramatically. A frequent response from student affairs officers (29 percent) in an unstructured survey question was little or none. (Student Affairs Survey, 2008). One dean put it this way: there were “immediate effects, but responses have returned to normalcy.” A student government president said, “I think a lot of people have forgotten already.”

Students who dismissed the importance of September 11 did so for a variety of reasons, some understandable and others troubling. They said it was like Oklahoma City; it happened across the country; it has happened in other countries as well: the United States killed more people; it happens all the time in my neighborhood: people get killed; it happened when I was in fifth grade; it didn't involve anyone I knew; it was overshadowed by more recent and continuing events—Afghanistan, Iraq, and the War on Terror; and echoing the student government president, it was a long time ago.

At the same time, we were also told campuses and students had changed in a number ways in the aftermath of September 11. Without a doubt new courses on September 11, the wars, and Islam were added to the curriculum as well as more international content to existing courses at colleges from coast to coast. There are annual memorials of one sort or another at some of the site-visit colleges, though the number has declined over time.

Undergraduates talked about feeling the world after the attacks was “scary,” “sketchy,” and “dangerous.” Student affairs officers said students had a diminished sense of well-being, became closer to family, and were more fearful and suspicious. When surveyed, 35 percent of the senior student affairs officers said their campus initiated enhanced security measures and safety plans as a consequence (Student Affairs Survey, 2008). This was no doubt reinforced by the student murders at Virginia Tech in 2007. In this area, September 11 may have had more impact on colleges and universities than students. Whether a consequence of the increased security on campus or changing times, a declining percent of students worried about becoming victims of a violent crime—22 percent in 2009 versus 33 percent in 1993 (Undergraduate Survey, 1993, 2009).

The other frequently mentioned consequence of September 11 noted by deans and students was a growing international focus

on the part of undergraduates. Students confirmed that interest. More than four out of five students surveyed said they were “very interested in global issues (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). However, their interest was not matched by knowledge of the world. When given a list of current heads of states and asked the degree to which they held positive or negative opinions of them, a majority of students did not know the names of Hu Jintao of China (80 percent), Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (72 percent), Nicolas Sarkozy of France (69 percent), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran (60 percent), and Kim Jong Il of North Korea (60 percent) (Undergraduate Survey, 2009).

This underlines a very important characteristic of current student politics and worldview. They are indeed more interested in international issues than their peers interviewed in the prior studies but their interest is not geopolitical. It is not deep and does not rest on historic institutions. It is more of a sense of being citizens of the world and recognizing that some issues such as population and climate control are global and require concerted international action. Today’s students are issue oriented and very “green.”

The Election of Barack Obama

The 2008 presidential election brought out 62 percent of college-educated voters aged eighteen to twenty-nine and two-thirds of those young people voted for Barack Obama (CIRCLE, 2008, 2009). Obama appealed to college students for five reasons.

First, Obama’s message was change, “change you can believe in.” At the time of the election, most college students had lived through three presidencies—Bush, Clinton, and Bush—in a nation deeply divided over religion, economics, social mores, civil liberties, the role and scale of government, and fundamental values. Each of the presidencies was embattled—one over taxes and the economy, a second ostensibly over a sex scandal, the third over war and the economy. For most of their lives, government

had been gridlocked. College students wanted change. More than four out of five college students (82 percent) said Americans were not doing enough to bring about changes in our society (Undergraduate Survey, 2009).

Second, Obama focused on the issues students cared about most. Undergraduates said their biggest issues in the 2008 campaign were the economy (42 percent) and the wars (15 percent). No other issue rose to the double digit levels of concern (Undergraduate Survey, 2009).

Third, Obama represented generational change. Ten successive presidents beginning with Franklin Roosevelt and concluding with George H. W. Bush had served during World War II. Bill Clinton and George Bush were early baby boomers. Barack Obama was at the tail end of the boom, born a decade and a half after them.

Fourth, Obama used digital media to communicate with young people. S. Craig Watkins in his book *Young and Digital* described the extent and impact of these efforts (Watkins, 2009). In 2006, Bowdoin student Meredith Segal created a Facebook group, "Students for Barack Obama." Eight months later, there were eight chapters and sixty-two thousand affiliated college students. One member, Farouk Olu Aregbe, created a site, "One Million Strong for Obama." In an hour, there were one hundred members; in five days ten thousand members; in three weeks nearly two hundred thousand members; and on inauguration day, over 940,000 members. In 2007, Senator Obama gave a little-advertised speech at George Mason University, expecting an audience of perhaps one. There were 3,500 in attendance owing largely to Facebook publicity.

Obama hired a young staff to create a new media strategy for his campaign, taking the pioneering efforts of the 2004 Howard Dean presidential campaign of 2004 to a whole new level. They made use of Facebook, Myspace, YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Black Planet, Flickr, and much more. There were Obama games

and ads on the hottest, biggest-selling digital games such as *Guitar Hero III*, *NBA Live 09*, and *NASCAR 09*. The campaign e-mailed, texted, tweeted, and hosted YouTube videos. They texted the choice of vice president, posted on Flickr personal family pictures taken on election night, and e-mailed the Obama agenda after the election. By election night viewers watched more than thirty times as many hours of Obama videos as McCain videos. When the campaign ended, the communication continued.

Fifth, Obama was a black-skinned, multiracial man and the young voters were a diverse generation for whom historic racial divisions were weakening. The overwhelming majority of college students reported having at least one close friend of a different race among Asians (86 percent), whites (80 percent), Hispanics (79 percent), and blacks (70 percent). They were comfortable with interracial dating and marriage (81 percent), more so than the students in the previous survey (64 percent) (Undergraduate Survey, 1993). The comfort extended across races: whites (82 percent), Hispanics (81 percent), blacks (80 percent), and to a lesser extent Asians (68 percent) (Undergraduate Survey, 2009). They were at the vanguard of a nation in which 15 percent of all marriages were interracial in 2008, 9 percent of white marriages, 16 percent of black, 26 percent of Hispanic, and 31 percent of Asian marriages, which is somewhat at odds with the opinions expressed by Asians about intermarriage (Pew Research Center, 2010). The parents of current college students were the generation that broke the religious barriers to intermarriage. Their children may be the group that breaks the racial divides.

Obama received a majority of white (54 percent), Hispanic (76 percent), and black (95 percent) votes from persons aged eighteen to twenty-nine (CIRCLE, 2008).² When asked how important a number of factors were in choosing whom to vote for in the 2008 presidential election, policy positions finished first (84 percent) and race was last (11 percent), as shown in Table 1.5 (Undergraduate Survey, 2009).

Table 1.5 Important Factors in Voting for a Presidential Candidate in 2008 (by Percent)

Proposed policies or strategies	84
Political party	42
Leadership experience	42
Vice-presidential running mate	36
Age	22
Race	11

Source: Undergraduate Survey (2009).

Conclusion

The campuses we visited and the students we encountered during the course of this study were more like their counterparts of the 1970s and 1990s than they were different. However, four events had a powerful impact on current undergraduates, which was palpable in every aspect of college and student life that we examined—academics; life beyond the classroom; how students spend their time and relate to one another and their families, professors, and others; their political and social attitudes and activities; and their aspirations and expectations for the future.

The nature, scale, and duration of the impact of each are likely to vary substantially. The advent of the web and the fact that this is the first generation of digital natives promises to be the most fundamental, even disruptive change, with the capacity to transform higher education and the nation in the years to come. The consequences of the recession are so far short term and typical of previous economic downturns though far more severe and wide ranging—bringing about shifts in enrollment patterns, curriculum choices, financial need, time use, and life expectations. However, the repercussions are as yet uncertain, and not to be melodramatic, they may be far more profound, affecting

career choices, economic opportunity and attainment, and the future of the American Dream. September 11 and its aftermath can be seen primarily in student political attitudes and interests, their beliefs about government, and their outlook regarding the future. The Obama election is reflected in the state of campus diversity, the call of public service, and perhaps ultimately generational succession.

The chapters that follow describe the current generation of college students—in the classroom, outside the classroom, their relationships with parents, their diversity, and their views regarding the future. The final chapter paints a picture of a future of profound change in which today's students will live their lives, explains why students are ill prepared for that world, and proposes an education needed by students to prepare them to live in that world. It finds that colleges and universities will have to change substantially if they are to provide students with that education. Parents, government, and employers will also need to act.

Notes

1. The character Harry Potter, who was ten years old when the series began, was born three years before the members of the class of 2012 (Rowling, 1997).
2. Data on Asians were unavailable.

