

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 12 | Number 12

Article 9

2013

Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student

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Recommended Citation

Arens, Tim (2013) "Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Student," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 12 : No. 12 , Article 9.
Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol12/iss12/9

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*Generation On A Tightrope:
A Portrait of Today's College Student.*

Levine, Arthur, & Dean, Diane R. (2012).
San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reviewed by Tim Arens



Each fall we take our resident assistants and other student leaders on a leadership retreat to get them prepared to face the challenges of their roles and to serve the students at Moody Bible Institute. At one such retreat during some free time, I noticed a number of students engaged in an activity that was new to me. They had a one inch wide nylon strap attached to two trees which were approximately 20 feet apart. The strap was somewhere between two and three feet off the ground. The students would take turns jumping onto the strap and attempting to maintain their balance. Some who were more skilled walked along the strap and performed various stunts. After some observation and inquiry, I was told that this practice is called *slacklining*—and it was obvious to me that it required balance, agility, courage, and practice for one to become adept at the task. While slacklining differs in some significant ways from tightrope walking (most notably the height the rope is from the ground!), it is a modern day example of the skills necessary to walk the tightrope.

Generation On A Tightrope is a result of Arthur Levine and Diane Dean's research of traditional undergraduate students who were enrolled in college between the years 2005 to 2014. The authors used three sources of data from which they drew their conclusions. First, they surveyed 5,000 students from representative institutions across the country. Second, they surveyed senior student affairs officers at 270 institutions. Finally, they conducted site visits at 31 colleges and universities that were selected to represent the diversity existing in higher education. The students ranged in ages from 18 to 25 and attended classes full time.

Levine and Dean use the metaphor of a tightrope to describe the tenuous environment in which the students of this generation find themselves. While students are seeking security, stability, economic opportunity, a career path, and pursuit of their dreams, they are faced with a world of continuous change, economic instability, career uncertainty, and pessimism about the future. *Generation On A Tightrope* is a book which identifies and elaborates on the issues making this a tightrope walk for today's students.

The authors begin the book with a lengthy preface providing an overview of their findings about today's student and the implications for institutions, parents, government, employers and others who touch students' lives. Levine and Dean identified eight profound differences between these students and those who have gone before. They note that these students are the first generation of digital natives; the most diverse generation to attend college; are at once more connected and more isolated; face the worst economy in recent memory while having unrealistic expectations for the future; are more immature, dependent, coddled, and entitled; live their lives in a nation of unrelenting change never before experienced; grew up in a world dramatically different from their parents; and will see the pace and scale of change accelerate. The authors adequately use their observations as a foundation throughout the remaining chapters of the book.

The first chapter, “The Past is a Foreign Country,” compares the students’ world with that of their parents. Most notably their parents grew up in a world with two super powers, a cold war, and the possibility of nuclear war. By contrast, these students live in a country that is intertwined with the world in a global society of information, finances, and business. This is further demonstrated by the influence that the World Wide Web has had on everything in the lives of these students. To say that the students’ and parents’ worlds are different is an understatement.

Issues related to academics, life outside the classroom, parents, and multiculturalism are also discussed. Levine and Dean do an excellent job making the research very practical for faculty, administrators, parents, and employers. For instance, in the chapter on academics, Levine and Dean discuss the remaining divide between the students (digital natives) and the faculty (termed digital immigrants) who are frantically trying to catch up with the technological advances.

As a student development professional, I was most curious about the chapter related to life outside the classroom, titled “The New Tribalism.” The onslaught of social media use by students expands their social network to what Levine and Dean call a virtual tribe consisting of all manner of individuals from different walks of life. They address the decreased involvement in campus life, what students do for fun, and their virtual life. Reading some of the statistics about alcohol/drug abuse, changing sexual perspectives and practices, and the isolating tendency social networking can induce gives any student development professional a sense of concern for how to adequately reach this generation.

The growing involvement of parents in the lives of current students is not neglected by this research. Levine and Dean provide an excellent description of how students and parents relate and how that relationship is affecting the college environment. Put simply, the smartphone is blamed for increasing over involvement by parents. The insight of the student development professionals’ experience in this area also was emphasized which added credibility to these results.

The authors take one chapter to discuss the issue of multiculturalism and this generation. Levine and Dean (2012) concluded that “the multicultural divide is less deep; the gap between diverse groups is less wide” (p. 99). They cite a number of factors for this, such as all students are more satisfied with their college experience, the declining polarization among different racial and ethnic groups, and females’ belief that the opportunity for women has improved. Levine and Dean cite increased diversity on campuses, more interaction between diverse groups, and people generally being more comfortable and accepting of differences as key factors in this changing tide.

The concluding chapter of the book offers an excellent summary of the global society in which these students are living. In addition, Levine and Dean give a nice review of their characteristics including the unique strengths this generation possesses and the significant deficits which haunt them. Levine and Dean follow up with some suggestions for higher education in this digital, multicultural, and information laden society. The authors finish the book with some practical advice for employers, parents, and government with which to engage and help these students become the well-rounded, successful citizens the country needs for the future. If one were only able to read one chapter of the book, this final chapter offers a good review of the findings along with some well-constructed suggestions for practice on the college campus.

There are many publications related to the student of the day. Levine and Dean’s research, interpretation, and conclusions certainly offer a very helpful perspective on the topic. *Generation On A Tightrope* effectively offers insight to those serving this complex generation. 

Tim Arens serves as the Dean of Students at Moody Bible Institute.