

The Challenges Facing Today's Young People

Monday, April 27, 2009 • The Tavern at Lake Oconee

Good evening, and thank you for the invitation to talk with you about today's college students and some of the challenges they face and some of the things we are doing at the University of Georgia to help them with those challenges.

I commend you for hosting this lecture series, although I must admit that the title makes me a bit uncomfortable. In fact, when I told Mary that I had been invited to deliver a "Great Minds" lecture, she asked me if you didn't mean to invite one of the other four Michael Adams on campus, perhaps the world-renowned biochemist Michael W. Adams, whose work focuses on microorganisms which grow near volcanic outlets on the ocean floor at temperatures above the boiling point.

Nothing like the person who knows you best to bring you down to earth.

This kind of series is a far-too-rare opportunity for informed discourse on important issues. I have had the privilege of attending a few of the previous lectures and have always learned something. I hope you will feel the same way when you leave here tonight.

I will begin with a glaringly obvious thesis: College life today is far different from what most of us experienced. Unless you attended college from the late 1980s until today, you were a student in a very protected environment.

The legal term is *in loco parentis* – in the absence of parents, the institution functioned as the parent and guided the transition into adulthood.

If you attended UGA during a certain period, you know that dean William Tate was the embodiment of this practice. It is said that he knew the name of every student on campus and most of their parents. He functioned much like a high school principal; getting called to his office was generally not a good thing.

Beginning in the late 60s, with the social activism of the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War, and through the 70s, with the granting of the right to vote to 18-year-olds, the doctrine of *in loco parentis* began to weaken.

Students now saw themselves as young adults not in need of parental or institutional oversight. They wanted the freedom to make more decisions and, for the most part, to accept the consequences that resulted from those decisions. One of the most significant impacts of this transition at UGA was the flight of students to off-campus housing. Until the opening of the East Campus Village in 2004, we had not constructed a residence hall since the late 1960s.

But today, students want to live on campus, and we are trying to meet that demand. We are also learning how to work with this Millennial Generation – and their parents.

Let me tell you a little about this year's freshmen. Each fall, Beloit College in Wisconsin publishes what it calls the Mindset List, "a look at the cultural touchstones that shape the lives of students entering college." I encourage you to look at the full list for the Class of 2012 on the Internet, but here are a few samples:

Most of them were born in 1990

GPS navigation systems have always been available.

Clarence Thomas has always been on the Supreme Court.

IBM has never made typewriters.

The Tonight Show has always been hosted by Jay Leno. (Until his retirement this year.)

They have never heard a gas station attendant ask, "Want me to check under the hood?" They likely have never seen a gas station attendant at all.

Michael Milken has always been a philanthropist promoting prostate cancer research, instead of a junk-bond felon.

In the search for a little bit more information about the Millennial Generation – so named because their span of years crosses the 21st century – I turned to Wikipedia. If you don't know Wikipedia, let me first say that it is the most appropriate place to turn for this information because it is a product of this generation.

Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia which can be edited by anyone. You heard me right – anyone. So, much of the information is notoriously unreliable (I take issue with some of what has been posted about me), yet it is often the first place that students turn when they have to do research for a class.

Having said that, here is some statistical information about Millennials from Wikipedia:

97% own a computer, 94% own a cell phone and 56% own an iPod or some other MP3 player, according to a 2007 book.

76% used instant messaging

40% reported that television was their primary source of news, with 34% using web sites. Only 11% said newspapers.

28% have a blog, or online journal open to anyone, and 44% read blogs.

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69% have a Facebook page. Facebook is an online social networking site.

They talk to their parents an average of 1.5 times per day.

If you have teenage children or grandchildren, all of this is probably familiar to you. They are writing their biographies online as they live. They live in an instantaneous world, and they expect instant answers and instant resolution to their concerns.

These expectations, the expectations and involvement, frankly, of their parents in their daily lives, and the particular challenges of young adulthood in the 21st century have caused us to make changes in how we relate to students as an institution.

This generation has jokingly been called the “trophy generation,” for the tendency to reward everyone on sports teams with a trophy simply for participating.

That is, however, a catchy symbol for a cohort of young men and women who have been highly praised for simple accomplishments; who have largely been shielded from the opportunity to learn from mistakes; and who often do not see the value in accomplishing difficult tasks.

A member of my staff has a son in the ninth grade who was enrolled in a very difficult honors American government class, taught by a teacher who held the students to high standards. Very early in the semester, parents of some of the other children in the class began trying to organize a meeting with the principal to protest the level of work and the standards demanded by the teacher.

The person on my staff told them he was glad the work was difficult and saw it as the first step in preparing for high-level college work. He was not popular among the other parents.

I call it country club acceptability. You want to be able to tell people your child is in Honors, but if the work is too difficult, you want to take them out?

Of course, this is not true for all UGA students, many of whom challenge themselves daily. But as a group, these are the tendencies we are seeing.

Dr. Rodney Bennett, Vice President for Student Affairs, has shared with me part of a presentation he has developed about trends in UGA student life, and I would like to share some of that with you.

This is the largest generation ever to go to college – some 33% larger than the Baby Boomers. It is also the most diverse generation, and we are making progress in representing that diversity at UGA.

UGA students are high achieving – which leads to some of the challenges I will get to shortly – and are academically successful, but not always ready for the rigor of a place like UGA.

And as I mentioned earlier, they are very savvy about and comfortable with technology.

There are four primary issues we see in these students.

First is parental involvement. On the surface, parental involvement may sound like a good thing. Most of our students have very close relationships with their parents, often more like friends than parents.

I don't know about you, but when I went to college at Lipscomb in Nashville, my parents essentially dropped me off and said, “Call us once a week.” They loved me, of course, and there never was any doubt about that in my mind. But they trusted the college's *in loco parentis* role and knew that I was beginning an important phase of my transition into adulthood.

Not so today. We have orientation sessions for parents that run parallel to the sessions the students take. We have parents calling faculty members about grades. We have parents who want to sit it on interviews for internships or graduate school.

The higher education term for them is helicopter parents – they are literally hovering over their children. They have told this trophy generation that it is special and wonderful; they have protected it from harm and solved its problems; and they are not going to simply turn them over to some college administrator and hear from them every Sunday night.

The downside is clear. Students who are buffered from the consequences of their mistakes, who don't form adult relationships and deal with people as adults, who are allowed to avoid that which is difficult are going to have a much more hard time making the next transition, off campus into the “real world.”

The academic subject matter is important, of course, but college used to be a time of learning how to be an adult. I still want it to be that way, but students who are in almost daily contact with their parents, who allow their parents to make even the most routine decisions for them and to intervene when things don't go well are not learning how to be adults.

The second issue is communication and relationships. Technology is producing a sort of “remote intimacy” – conversations that once took

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place face to face and one on one now take place through text messaging over cell phones or instant messaging over the Internet. The danger there, as any expert in communication will tell you, is that some 80% of communication is inflection and facial expression and gesture and body language, none of which are conveyed in the written word.

We also find that some students are using the technology in ways that violate our academic honesty policy. They can text answers to each other, to the point that some faculty have threatened to confiscate cell phones during exams. I will have more to say about this phenomenon in a few minutes.

The final relationship concern is that they have trouble understanding that “no” means “no.” They question authority and policy by going up the chain seeking the answer they want, whether it’s contacting a dean about a grade or e-mailing a vice president about a residence hall issue. And yes, their parents often get involved in these issues as well.

The third issue is that students have very high expectations of what we will do for them, a sort of consumer mentality, if you will. They bring a sense of entitlement to campus, which grows out of the trophy mentality and the stream of praise they have enjoyed since pre-school

They want to know what UGA can offer them. In the past two decades or so there has been something of an “arms race” in student services and student life; as students and their families began to shop for college based on factors other than academics and financial aid, institutions began responding by building nicer and nicer residence halls and intramural facilities and the like.

We’ve done it at UGA. The Ramsey Center for Student Physical Activity was named the best in the country by Sports Illustrated, and I would invite any of you who are interested to visit the residence halls on East Campus. Trust me, they are not the dorms you probably remember.

Students also expect immediate response to their inquiries and immediate resolution of their problems. It’s not just what can you do for me – it’s “What can you do for me right now?” The faculty tell me that they receive e-mails from students 24 hours a day, and they expect immediate response – even to e-mails sent at 2 a.m. (The Miller Learning center is open then, and so is one of our dining halls. Today’s students operate on a very different schedule than I do.)

The final issue, and one that I want to spend a little more time with, is the mental health of today’s student. There are four areas of concern here: learning to fail, being overextended, depression and medication.

Many of UGA’s students were among the very best in their high schools. They had GPAs of 4.0 or better, if they took enough honors classes. They made very high SAT scores. And they get to UGA and the academic rigor is such that, for the first time in their lives, they may make a C.

One of our tasks is to help them understand that a C is not the end of the world, that being challenged is a good thing, that life is not always easy. Many of them have been shielded from difficulty and have not learned to navigate through life’s challenges.

One of the reasons they may struggle with academics is that they often overextend themselves, continuing the resume building pattern they set in high school. They get involved in too many activities, they join too many organizations, they agree to too many projects outside of the classroom.

Of course, a certain level of extracurricular involvement is a good thing, and I encourage students to find an organization or two to join. But the purpose of enrolling here is to earn a degree, and that must be a priority.

Our goal is to help the student strike a balance in this new life as a college student and to manage successfully the multiple transitions involved in the life of a freshman.

The third issue, again flowing from the first two, is depression. Our students often feel overwhelmed, stressed and anxious, all of which can be normal for freshmen but can also be symptoms of clinical depression. We have a very strong counseling and psychological services program, which I will discuss in a few minutes, which helps students manage both the usual stresses of college life and the more serious.

The recent economic downturn has added financial stress to many students who have never experienced that before.

Finally, this is easily the most medicated generation in history. The statistics show an increase in the numbers of students with mental health problems even before they get to college; an increase in the number of students with long-term psychological problems; and we have seen an increase in the number of students using our counseling services.

Again, not all students are struggling with these issues. Not all parents are hovering. They’re not all

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on prescription medication for depression. But there are enough of them that it demands a response from us.

So what are we doing?

First, our University Health Center, which we have recently expanded by almost one-half, is one of the best in the nation and one of the few campus health centers certified by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations.

Two offices in the health center take a proactive approach to student physical and mental health. The Health Promotion Office works to educate students about threats to their physical health – tobacco, alcohol, poor nutrition, sexually-transmitted diseases and stress.

Counseling and Psychological Services, which I mentioned earlier, employs about 20 psychologists, psychiatrists and post-doctoral students to provide service for our students. I am told that they are simply overwhelmed with the demand for appointments.

The health center also provides routine general medical care, a pharmacy, an allergy clinic and a range of other medical services with the convenience of an on-campus location. Our students are well taken care of.

All new students must complete the My Student Body.com alcohol education program by the end of their first semester or they cannot register for classes for the second semester. This, frankly, is one of the greatest challenges we face. The availability and abuse of alcohol is a serious, serious problem for us and one that we struggle to address effectively.

We have students who come to UGA who are already accomplished drinkers, to be perfectly honest. We also have students who have never had a drink who find themselves in situations, whether it be downtown, in a residence hall or at a fraternity or sorority house, where alcohol is available and they overindulge.

There is a culture of excess, in this and other areas, that worries me very much.

Our current policy requires parental notification for the first violation of the alcohol policy and six to 12 months' probation. For a second offense while on

probation, the student is suspended for the remainder of the current semester and all of the subsequent semester.

We are also asking the faculty to be partners in this challenge by being careful about how they discuss their own social behavior and by not socializing with students when there is alcohol involved.

Student Affairs began several years ago the Dawgs After Dark program, which offers alcohol-free on-campus entertainment and events as an alternative to the downtown scene.

I want to close by talking to you about how my own spiritual beliefs guide my decision-making within the context of leading a public institution and the attendant caveats that entails. I am a member of Athens First Christian Church and have been active at both the church and denominational level, most recently chairing the national finance committee. I grew up in the church and my value system is rooted in the Judeo-Christian ethic, although I have learned much from my friendships with people of other faiths.

My decision-making is based on the Golden Rule, which exists in some form in most major faiths. I try to remember that all my decisions have an impact, both positive and negative, on real people, so I ask, "How would I want to be treated?"

I also understand that I am the only one who is required to see the whole picture at UGA. Others involved in the discussion rightly come from narrower points of view and advocate for one area or another, but as president I must see the whole.

As a result of that, my first question is always, "How will this affect students?" My second thought is, "How will the faculty react?" And finally, "What will be the impact on the overall institution?"

If I can answer all three of those questions to my satisfaction, I can be at peace with the decision I have made.

I hope that I have given you a sense of the challenges facing life as a college student in 2009 and some of the ways we at UGA are trying to help them meet those challenges. I would be happy to take your questions.