

The Fragile Generation

Managing New Complexities

By JANE GENOVA

The members of the “fragile generation,” along with their parents, psychiatrists, future employers and lawyers, have created a variety of new business issues for higher education.

For example, administrative time handling student/parent concerns has increased. Mental health staffs are increasing. According to Mark Oppenheimer in *The Wall Street Journal* (July 14, 2006), in-house legal departments at many universities are today “the equivalents of small law firms.”

A more worrisome cost may be the brand capital that’s sacrificed when fragile generation issues are not handled well. The news media aggressively feature such hits, and the publicity can hobble recruiting of students, faculty and administrators, fundraising, and relations with the community and employers.

When a higher educa-



tion institution is viewed or treated as one of society's special cases, the response options can be limited. Despite challenges, the core mission must be preserved and nourished, emphasizes Johns Hopkins University President William Brody.

Are best practices emerging?

Johns Hopkins may itself be producing "best practices" for the fragile generation. Here's one principle they follow: Stretch to accommodate the unique needs of this generation, but don't cave on basic values or standards. In short, take the high ground.

Yes, there have been a suicide and two murders on the JHU campus. Yet, admissions applications are up 28 percent. Private philanthropy and research grants are continuously rising.

Employers want to hire the university's graduates.

Generational challenges aren't new to higher education. The GI-Bill generation shook up the institutional DNA, and it was beneficial. That generation helped make

education more democratic. What about the Woodstock generation? Did higher education cave? Were similar generational benefits forfeited as a result? We're still awaiting a clear answer.

Robert Avery is general counsel at Roger Williams University. He believes there is a unique opportunity to harness the power of the fragile generation's aggressive, relentless questioning. Do it, and America could be back on the innovation track. As an attorney, Avery knows the value—and necessity—of going to the mat and taking on conventional assumptions.

When the fragiles meet their campuses

Before innovation benefits come to pass, this generation must be educated and launched into the world of work. Not so easy, reports Dr. Jean Twenge, a researcher and associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University. Twenge's unique intergenerational study of how those born after 1981 differed from earlier generations became her book *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before*. Her recommendations in its Chapter 8,

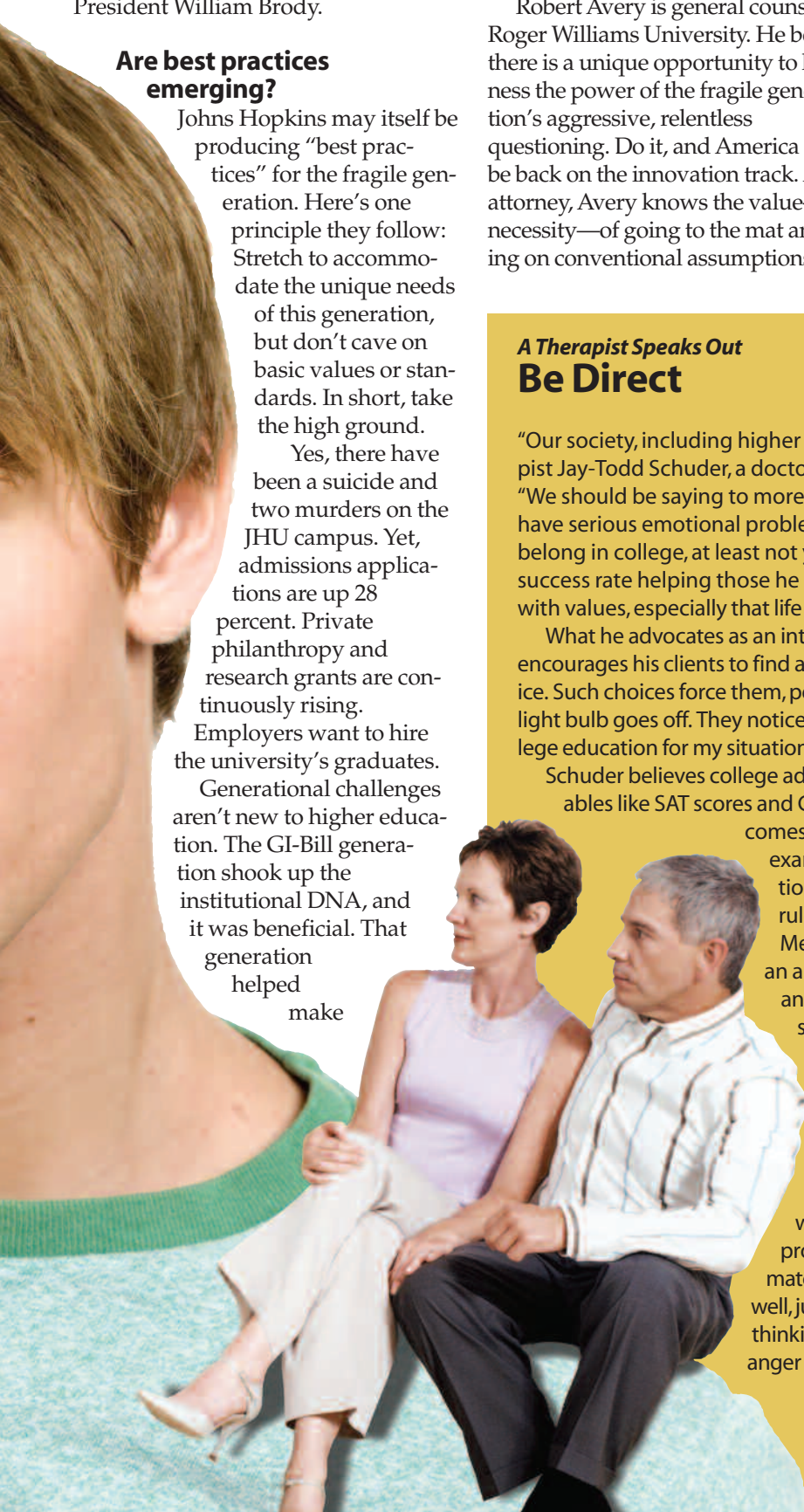
A Therapist Speaks Out Be Direct

"Our society, including higher education, isn't direct enough," says psychotherapist Jay-Todd Schuder, a doctor who treats addictive disorders in Newington, CT. "We should be saying to more young people, but with compassion, that they have serious emotional problems. And because of those problems, they don't belong in college, at least not yet." In practice since 1988, Schuder has a high success rate helping those he calls the "disconnected generation" to connect with values, especially that life has a purpose.

What he advocates as an interim step is not the conventional "gap year." He encourages his clients to find and keep a full-time job or enlist in the military service. Such choices force them, perhaps for the first time in their lives, into reality. The light bulb goes off. They notice how the world works and figure, hey, I need a college education for my situation to improve.

Schuder believes college admissions offices pay too much attention to measurable things like SAT scores and GPAs and not enough to the human being who comes with a life story. Often missing from that story, for example, is a part-time job—something other generations had during high school. Today's parents often rule it out, pushing for academic performance. Meanwhile, if there's even one question mark whether an applicant can handle the complex developmental and intellectual tasks of going to college, Schuder suggests an interview should be required.

Young clients wind up in Schuder's office for one or all of three reasons: Depression, chemical dependency or a nonexistent or broken relationship with parents. A divorce or parental inability to deal with their own issues usually sets it all in motion. Then there's a pile-on of disappointments with all institutions, ranging from government to the promise of the American Dream. He mixes and matches healing tools, ranging from neo-Freudianism to, well, just talking directly. At the core of the dysfunctional thinking and behavior he usually finds anger. Under that anger is fear, particularly of abandonment.



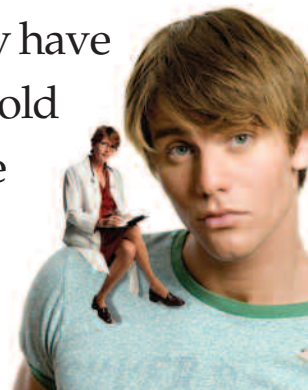
“Applying Our Knowledge: The Future of Business and the Future of the Young,” could produce a wealth of best practices for preventing the problems embedded in this generation.

Twenge discovered that most people under age 35 today have been or are still being continuously told by teachers and parents that they are special and can achieve anything they dream. It’s no surprise then that they score high in narcissism.

Psychologists often view that personality trait as pathological, because self-absorption leads to a distorted perception of reality. It’s often accompanied by low people skills and/or emotional intelligence. When parents shelter such children in a bubble of structured activities and regularly bail them out of trouble, a generation inept in self-reliance and problem solving can result.

Twenge also points out that this generation has been reared on multimedia, and is not receptive to the old lecture method of teaching. Is it surprising that when the protective bub-

“ Most people under age 35 today have been or are still being continuously told by teachers and parents that they are special and can achieve anything they dream. It’s no surprise then that they score high in narcissism.



ble is removed, and young people find themselves at college and preparing for the competitive world of work, there’s bound to be trouble?

In 2004 the American College Health Association reported that 40 percent of college males and 50 percent of college females said they had been so depressed they couldn’t function. Before the advent of psychiatric medications, some of these students would not have been able to attend college. But now they’re on campus. Each year 1,100 of them manage to

take their own lives as alleged in the MIT Elizabeth Shin’s case. (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services). Lots more of them have suicidal ideation like George Washington University’s Jordan Nott.

Both situations have plunged higher education into a search for better diagnosis and treatment of mental problems. Both situations have also ensnared those institutions in lawsuits.

Those lawsuits and associated public relations fallout reflect the idea that suing has become “sexy,”



Unique Generational Research

BY JEAN TWENGE, PH.D.

Generation Me: Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—And More Miserable Than Ever Before (Free Press, 2006) presents unique research about differences among generations in America.

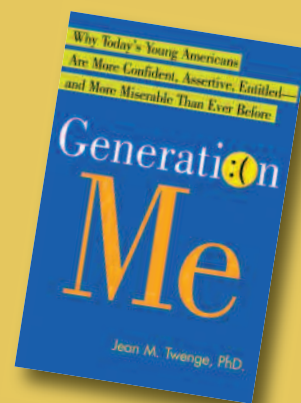
The author is Jean Twenge, a researcher and associate professor of psychology at San Diego State University. During a period of 13 years she analyzed the findings from 12 studies of 1.3 million young people performed over 6 decades. She focused on personality traits such as assertiveness and

self-esteem and attitudes such as tolerance towards gays and equal rights for women.

Her analysis uncovered significant differences between the generation which is currently under 35 and earlier generations in America. With its many labels—Generation Me, the Millennials, the Fragile Generation, the Strapped/Debt Generation.—these young men and women have been and are still being reared by parents who encourage them to “be yourself.” Their school system aimed to build self-esteem and high expectations about their futures. No surprise that this generation, compared to earlier ones, scores high in narcissism or excessive self-focus.

So, when self-importance and high expectations collide with reality, as they often first do in college or in a job hunt, anxiety and depression can follow. Chapter 4 of *Generation Me* is titled “The Age of Anxiety (and Depression, and Loneliness): Generation Stressed.” According to Twenge, during the 1990s, the average college student experienced more anxiety than 85 percent of those in the 1950s and more than 71 percent in the 1970s.

This inter-generational data also provides interesting insights about other generations such as the Boomers. This American brand of individualism is being continually exported as part of American pop culture. As a result, reports Twenge in *Generation Me*, the under-35 in other western nations from Canada to Germany are becoming more self-focused. She predicts “developing countries might well be next.”



explains Avery. "And the media feeds it," he adds. Given the apparent wealth of some universities, higher education is being perceived as another deep pocket.

— and later, their employers

Yet this generation has reasons to be depressed. In *Strapped: Why America's 20- and 30-Somethings Can't Get Ahead*, Tamara Draut chronicles their plight. In a changing U.S. economy, reports Draut in her book, the good jobs aren't where they used to be. Just look at the imploding auto and film industries, where no job is secure. Yet basic living costs have increased, and a typical student graduates with \$20,000 in debt.

Yet this generation seems to be in denial about this reality. A *TIME* magazine poll found that 71 percent of them consider job security essential. Are they attempting to replicate their parents' charmed careers?

While employers have become more selective of those they hire, this generation either doesn't know how to put its best foot forward—or doesn't bother. A modern classic is the story of the young job applicant who slowly finished his cellphone conversation while the interviewer was kept waiting.

Matt Whittle, Senior Recruiter at Friedman Williams Group in New York City, is downright dismayed that young job hunters don't "take the direction I give or follow up in a timely fashion." They don't seem to realize, reports Whittle, how important the *process* of applying is. Many of them lack specific computer skills required by the job they're seeking.

When asked how the employer's organization could use the skills, both technical and intellectual, that they do have, they display an inability to think strategically and creatively to craft an answer. There is often a dismaying disconnect between their credentials and their ability to communicate how an employer might profit from them. This could be a generation which doesn't know how to sell.

Both Whittle and John Challenger, CEO of Challenger, Gray & Christmas,

A Parent Speaks Up

Demonstrate You Care and Are Accessible

"When we shop for a college for our son, we'll apply what we learned when our daughter had what I guess you would call a 'breakdown' at University of California Santa Cruz," reports ReBelle Tarumoto, a Carmel, Calif. parent and former entrepreneur. "What matters is this: Sure, higher education no longer functions *in loco parentis*. But, right from the get-go, the school has to communicate they care and are accessible to students and parents when trouble happens."



The Vice Chancellor at Santa Cruz did just that during parent orientation. Tarumoto says he passed out his card and said that he would personally take a phone call from any parent. When her daughter's grades and relationship with the family crashed, Tarumoto and her husband knew where to start their search for help. Of course, the Vice Chancellor respected the student's privacy and stuck to the letter of the law. But he also creatively worked around all that to build "for her and us a lifeline back."

The story has a happy ending. Tarumoto's daughter not only has a successful career at age 25, but also recently snagged a major promotion. Yet it might not have worked out so well. The Tarumotos vividly remember a different era when higher education considered its mission to be primarily intellectual. Her husband's roommate at Stanford leapt to his death three months into his freshman year. Yes, the so-called fragile generation might require special supports. However, observes Tarumoto, maybe some of those supports should have been in place years ago.

She suggests that higher education's recruiting process should spell out the school's expectations in terms of life skills, ranging from simple things like doing laundry to the more complex, like coping with disappointment. The message should be: Bring those skills with you. College is too overwhelming for young people to simultaneously learn how to take care of themselves and intellectually compete at a whole new level.

have concerns about ethics. Whittle has encountered misrepresentations of qualifications. Challenger surmises that these competitive young people have never considered the ethical implications of how they achieve their goals. It just isn't on the radar screen.

Additionally, in an entry-level position, explains Challenger, a young employee is expected to be a "good apprentice." That means, as Whittle points out, being able to follow directions. It also involves people skills, emphasizes Challenger. Many in this generation don't excel in such emotional intelligence.

Parachuting in from the helicopters

These career woes are producing another new wrinkle. Here come the helicopter parents to the rescue! Many times they accompany the job applicant right into the interview. More often, they contact the interviewer after a job offer is made to renegotiate it. Employers are currently tolerating the behavior. But you can be sure that policies controlling parents are being hammered out in corporate HR departments.

The good news: Despite all the challenges, students are learning how

to learn and to become productive members of the global community. Many institutions are smoothly handling trouble before it becomes a lawsuit. Costs are being contained and reputations are being protected. How is this happening? Here are some of the best practices.

Accommodate but don't cave.

Twenge preaches this gospel from campus to campus. She emphasizes that since a course syllabus spells out requirements and functions as a legal contract, students know the score—and no one can sue. She recommends flexibility in the syllabus—one exam can be made up—but no exceptions. And, yes, institutions are gradually abandoning the straight lecture method, adding other ways of delivering instruction. However, academic standards should remain the same. Caving, observes Twenge, is doubly bad. It is a disservice to the developmental needs of the student, and it shows disrespect for the time of the faculty and administration.

Keep lines of communication flexible and open.

Johns Hopkins Dean of Student Life Susan Boswell applies that principle to everything from student-parent orientation to creating policies for student behavior to intervening when problems arise. Good communications usually prevents a problem getting much worse.

For example, if a student becomes seriously depressed, Boswell slips into the role of the young person's advocate. She then pursues solutions for his or her particular situation. Frequently she obtains permission from the student to involve the parents. When a medical leave of absence is advisable, the full semester tuition is refunded. At Johns Hopkins there is no academic penalty associated with medical leave.

Her efforts create a relationship that most often avoids litigation. That's because, explains Boswell, "we are able to treat each situation as unique." Lawsuits usually result from bad or non-existent relationships.

“ Career woes are producing another new wrinkle. ...Many times [parents] accompany the job applicant right into the interview. More often, they contact the interviewer after a job offer is made to re-negotiate it.



Make the ambiguous crystal clear.

In a period of great change, ambiguity is likely—but dangerous. Take the time to clarify language, policies and expectations. Reap a profound payback in smooth operations. For example, at Johns Hopkins, students are introduced to the general topic of plagiarism during orientation. Then in classrooms, individual instructors drill down to what plagiarism might be in their courses. For one course, a project completed by a group might be a requirement. In another it could be viewed as unethical sharing of information.

Boswell believes such clarification is useful in helping graduating students and employers work together productively. She notes that many companies simply don't indicate their expectations. Because of lack of experience, entry-level employees can't figure those expectations out for themselves. Perhaps employers should spell out that parents are not included in the hiring process.

Broaden understanding of the new economic realities. Provide opportunities to re-interpret the American Dream.

Leaders in higher education agree that much of the pressure on students comes from anxiety about careers. And much of the anxiety stems from lack of knowledge about how the new economy operates and how the "new barbarians" succeed. Those new barbarians (*Forbes*, September 18, 2006) are essentially entrepreneurial, not followers of old-line career paths. Their fresh approaches and risk-taking can

wind up producing new forms of competitive advantage. This generation, as Avery observes, is capable of such breakthrough thinking.

More undergraduate and graduate schools are providing courses and opportunities for entrepreneurial learning. Internships might be wisely created at start-ups, rather than among the Fortune 1000.

Nurture strengths, and the weaknesses usually take care of themselves.

Behavior experts ranging from Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania to Gallup consultants Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton have been producing amazing results by focusing on the positive. Instead of diagnosing and addressing weaknesses or deficits, they encourage the use of strengths. In their book *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, Buckingham and Clifton explain that only 20 percent of people in organizations feel that their strengths are valued and therefore used.

If higher education does more out-of-the-box thinking, perceived weaknesses could be viewed as strengths. Consider: Many of the movers and shakers in American society and business were and are narcissists. Alexander Hamilton kept George Washington cooling his heels. ■



JANE GENOVA, writer and marketing communications consultant, is widely published in media such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* and her own blog, which is located at blog.janegenova.com.