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THERE'S A NEW KID IN TOWN:

OBSERVATIONS ON THE NEWEST GENERATION OF MIT STUDENTS

One of the best things about being dean of admissions is that I get an annual peek into American teenage culture. From that perspective, I'd like to offer my observations of the change in culture we are currently witnessing at MIT. While 17-year-olds are always the same in some fundamental ways, the attitudes, values and activities of applicants do change quite dramatically every decade or so as a new generation arrives. A shift is occurring again. The leading edge of a new generation now fills all four MIT undergraduate classes, and its members are as different from us as we were from our parents' generation. Though their characteristics bode well for society as a whole, they are not necessarily ideal for MIT as it is today. The presence of this new generation will provoke a reevaluation of our purpose and mission as well as challenge all of us to lead in ways we are not expecting. These students will change MIT as surely as MIT will change them, though only time will tell how.

The generations. First, let's compare different generations by using categories and data drawn from "Cultivating New Leadership" by Jeffrey B. Cufaude, from the journal *Association Management*, which describes four 20th-century generations: Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials (or "Generation Y"). Of course, these generalizations are meant to capture the overall characteristics of a given population, not necessarily all individuals within it.

The first group, Matures, includes the World War II generation as well as the following Silent Generation. Matures, made up of 61.8 million people born between 1909 and 1945, were affected most by the Great Depression, the New Deal, World War II and the G.I. Bill. As a result, the key characteristics of this group are teamwork, commitment, sacrifice, discipline and financial and social conservatism.

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, used to be the largest single generation in U.S. history at 76.8 million members. They were affected by Vietnam, television, Woodstock, Watergate and, of course, sex, drugs and rock and roll. Boomers are characterized by idealism, individualism, self-improvement, high expectations and an intense self-centeredness.

Generation X, born between 1965 and 1978, is the smallest population of the four at 52.4 million members. They were at the epicenter of the cultural meltdown brought about by the Baby Boomers in their effort to separate from the Matures. As a result, members of this cohort are characterized by pragmatism,

diversity, entrepreneurial spirit, desire for high quality of life and savvy. They were most affected by AIDS, MTV, PCs, divorce and the Internet. This resourceful and resilient generation created the dot-com phenomenon.

Millennials, the newest generation, were born after 1979 and have eclipsed the Baby Boomers in size at 77.6 million members. Cufaude describes their markers as O. J. Simpson, Monica Lewinsky and multiculturalism. (I would add the Columbine shootings and September 11 to that list.) Key characteristics of this group are neotraditionalism, ritual, optimism, technological adeptness, volunteerism and busyness.

One way to assess the presence and impact of different generations at MIT is by observing the growth, over time, in campus activities—all of which have been started by students. Growth was steady between 1960 (60 activities) and 1980

(80). The number of activities doubled between 1980 and 1990 (150), as a result of Gen X students who found community through common interests. It doubled again between 1990 and 2000 (356), indicating the recent presence of the Millennials.

The following are my observations of this new generation through the lens of the MIT application process—changing trends in essays, activities, letters of recommendation and interview reports. I preface this with the clear understanding that I am discussing MIT applicants from the United States. I am also generalizing like crazy, since we are now seeing just the leading edge of this cohort, the largest contingent of which has just entered middle school. (Nationally, we will see a 15 percent increase in 17-year-olds over the next decade, which is probably why your public school district is pleading for a bigger budget.)

They are idealistically pragmatic. Combining the idealism of their Boomer parents and the pragmatism of Gen Xers, these students really want to make the world a better place and, most importantly, they have a plan.

They are group centered. As the population with the highest percentage of members in day care from an early age, they have learned good group skills and how to lead and follow as circumstances demand. They spend more time in groups and group activities than their predecessors.

They have no problem with authority. They have been raised in relative affluence in peacetime by Boomer parents. Most of their free time is spent in adult-supervised activities. They have little urge to push back against adults. In fact, they actually like adults and prefer to be

compliant rather than to alienate. This is shocking to both Boomers and Gen Xers, who still regard authority figures with suspicion, but Matures find a certain resonance with them.

They are attracted to large social movements. In this they are similar to their Boomer parents, but they look for ways to make contributions on a local level, more like Gen Xers. They are expected to volunteer in their communities, working side by side with adults who teach them competence and effectiveness. Consequently, they know how to work the system, and they always have a plan B.

They are not as likely to study subjects for pure pleasure. They are not as likely to focus on one thing, because they are the busiest students in U.S. history. The average MIT applicant now carries upwards of eight extracurricular activities in high school, in addition to a stiff course load. Millennials have essentially been trained to be generalists. As a result, they prefer relevance and purpose to pure fun.

They desire instant gratification and have a high expectation of service. They are used to surfing the Web, and they prefer AOL's instant messaging to the phone for the sake of efficiency. (Why have a conversation with just one friend when you can speak with eight simultaneously?) With Boomer parents who demand top service and strive to meet their children's every need, these kids expect what they want when they want it from all of the adults in their lives.

They may not see or accept the consequences of their behavior. Adults are always saving these kids, intervening on their behalf. Parents do much of the negotiating with admissions offices now, regularly weighing in on every piece of the process on behalf of their busy children, taking on an almost eerie quality of parent-as-applicant. Student time is all carved up, given away to multiple and competing demands that please adults, while the adults in the students' lives race to protect them from failure.

Is MIT a good match for this generation? In many ways, MIT is a good match for them. They are hard workers, carrying up to one-third more courses in high school than we did at their age, so the MIT workload isn't as big an issue to them. They can balance competing demands. They are diverse and require diversity. They can lead or follow as required. They desire relevant work. They are intensely busy.

As good as all of that sounds, however, there are some problems with the match. First, while these Millennials are busy, they are "diverse" busy, spreading their energies over many activities, instead of the "focused" busy of the classic Techie, who eats, sleeps and dreams his/her passion. While Millennials expect choice (they were raised on the World Wide Web and 90 channels of cable), they also expect time to evaluate their choices (they are savvy consumers). The old MIT housing structure of picking a living group in the first few days on campus doesn't work for them.

Perhaps the biggest mismatch, though, is that Millennials who have been raised on praise and positive reinforcement expect that to continue at MIT. They have been groomed to high

Q & A with Marilee Jones, Dean of Admissions BY CARLY KITE

TR: When did you first see this new generational shift? How did you identify it?

JONES: I've been here for 22 years reading more than 1,000 cases a year, admitting every member of every class. Since the application itself is about the same as it has always been over that period of time—even the essay questions are similar—it's easy to sense a shift in the tone of essays, in the topics, in the activities students do, in the whole profile of the students. And every once in a while, probably about every 10 years or so, I have noticed a more distinctive shift. I noticed that about three years ago. Something just seemed different to me, and the difference was that students seemed more optimistic about their world. They were cheerier. They were more interested in saving it, in identifying the big problems and in solving those problems relative to 10 years ago, when students were more focused on themselves—their futures, their future incomes, the quality of their lives. I have compared classes entering in '60, '70, '80, '90 and last year using similar metrics, so I could see any differences and then try to come to some conclusions.

TR: When you say the population has changed, is it lower quality?

JONES: No, no, no. Quality has gone up in every way. In terms of the coursework—the level of courses taken, the grades of the courses taken, the number of courses taken—all up. In terms of SAT scores—all up. It's remarkable how academically strong these students are, and if you look at their activities, the number of activities per student has increased. The distinction level within those activities has gone up. Honestly, if I could show you a student today versus a student in 1970, you wouldn't believe the difference. But it's not that suddenly we've changed what we're doing in terms of admission, it's that the population has changed. You didn't see thousands and thousands of kids in the applicant pool in 1970 who looked like this. It was a different world then. The world has changed.

TR: Have faculty told you that they see students changing?

JONES: Yes. I've been hearing that for a number of years. As long

achievement, fêted by their schools and communities, have been featured in *USA Today* and in local papers and have been cheered in their games by adults. Nearly all have earned at least state-level distinction in something. They come to

But Millennials need MIT. Despite their many good qualities, these people need to learn to think analytically and to question more often. They need a sense of context to help them sort through the dizzying whirlwind of information they

that they are just as attractive to liberal-arts schools as they are to us. And everywhere, universities are buying top talent. In short, we now have to work aggressively just to hold our base.

We need to increase the inspiration factor to balance all of that perspiration we're so famous for. To me, it all comes down to this thought: Our competition tells its students that one day they will inherit the world as it is. We need to remind our students that one day they will *fix* the world on behalf of the others who can't. This is not only the truth, but it is the clarion call to this generation. I believe that if we remind our students on a regular basis that we fix this world, that we do what others think is impossible, that we "apply science for the benefit of humankind" as MIT was founded to do, and that they are part of that effort, IHTFP will dissolve within five years. And the best of our kind of student will continue to come to MIT for another generation. It has been a sad fall, but the future looks bright. If we apprentice them well, then the world will be in good hands with the Millennials. 🔲

Key characteristics of the Millennials are neotraditionalism, ritual, optimism, technological adeptness, volunteerism and busyness.

MIT ready for us to lead them and position them for the next logical progression in their lives, and they can quickly disengage from us if we do not recognize their strengths. These are not the Boomers or Gen Xers who reacted to this phenomenon by angrily pushing MIT faculty and administrators away and creating their own islands of support. These students wonder why we glorify the "Big Screw Award," why the only campuswide community sentiment is IHTFP, why we tolerate the "Tech Is Hell" lifestyle. They wonder why anyone would go to a school he or she hated. They wonder why they turned down Stanford to come here.

confuse for knowledge. And they need to realize that actions have consequences, so that in the future they will be less likely to hand over their privacy—and ours—for the sake of efficient consumer service. Most importantly, they want to save the world—and we can help them do that.

Why should we care or try to change?
It is no surprise that I am writing this as dean of admissions. We are in a tough period in college admissions. Our competition (Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Yale) is actively recruiting our kind of students—Techies—at a time when these students' portfolios are now so balanced

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as I have been here, I have heard faculty complain about students. They say, "They're not as good as they used to be." But in the last few years there have been fewer complaints, and they have been different. They have been more like, "Why are you taking such conventional students? They seem boring in the classroom. They act more entitled or spoiled. Why are you admitting those people? Yes, they get good grades in the end, but they're not really very much fun to teach." What I say to them is that what is conventional and what is entitled might in fact just be busy.

TR: Is "busyness" a bad thing for MIT?
JONES: I think it's a challenge for MIT. The challenge is to convince these young people that it takes time, discipline and consistent effort to be really good at anything. Nothing good comes easily. The other piece that's missing—and this is my fear now—is that the students coming in are not quite as thoughtful. They don't seem to have enough time to themselves to dream about the future. They're more active. They're more physically involved with multiple things. Now, that has always been true at MIT relative to other schools. We've been much more of an action place, and there's not a very contemplative lifestyle here, but it's even ratcheted up, in my experience. And I don't know what that

means for the future of these [engineering] fields. I don't know what that means for them as individuals. I don't know what that means for civilization.

TR: Do you think these students drive themselves harder than students in the past?
JONES: I do. I believe they drive themselves harder, but not necessarily for their own interests. I think this is a difference between students beginning to come in now versus students in the past. They are self-motivated, but in fact, there's more of an emphasis on pleasing the adults in their lives, because they spend nearly every waking hour supervised by adults. Adults set up avenues of competition so that they can become distinctive. So many things that students do, they do because adults expect that of them or they think adults expect that. I got an e-mail yesterday from a student who wrote, "When I was in high school I wanted to take this particular class, but my teachers and my guidance counselor and my parents said, 'No, it would be a fluff class. It wouldn't be seen [as] right,' so I took an AP Finite Math class instead." I think that's indicative of what's happening. Are they doing this for themselves, or are they doing this to please other people? Do they know the difference? I don't know. Time will tell. 🔲