The Real Generation Gap

Marianne M. Jennings
Professor of Legal and Ethical Studies
Arizona State University

As Marianne M. Jennings attests, there are few experiences more terrifying than discovering what today’s students know and what they don’t know. At best, Generation X appears to be ill-prepared for the responsibilities of adulthood and the challenges of modern life.

Professor Jennings’ remarks were delivered during Hillsdale’s Shavano Institute for National Leadership seminar, “Heroes for a New Generation and a New Century” in Scottsdale, Arizona, last February.

Born in 1980, today’s college freshmen are part of “Generation X.” They came into the world long after Vietnam, Richard Nixon, and Watergate. They never saw Senator Sam Ervin’s eyebrows. Can you imagine? They were also born after Saturday Night Fever. They do not know John Travolta has had two movie careers. Nor do they know what it is like to live in a society in which marriage is the predominant social institution. Unfortunately, they do know about broken homes and “single-parent families.”

The members of Generation X know a lot about Madonna, Princess Diana, G.I. Jane, Michael Jackson, Michael Jordan, and Mike Tyson. They know nothing at all about Kate Smith, Mother Teresa, Rosie the Riveter, John Wayne, Babe Ruth, and Audie Murphy. Almost without exception, their favorite role models are the type of celebrities seen on MTV, ESPN, and the cover of People.
One disturbing poll reveals that nearly 100 percent of today’s youth can name the “Three Stooges,” but not even 1 percent can name three justices on the U.S. Supreme Court. Seventy-three percent want to start their own businesses, but 53 percent voted for small business foe Bill Clinton. Only 19 percent attend church regularly. Only 1 percent include a member of the clergy on their lists of most admired individuals.

What all these statistics tell us is that the gap between generations is wider than ever before. There are five areas in which the gap is most pronounced: skills, knowledge, critical thinking, work, and morality.

**The Skills Gap**

Iowa test scores have been a standard measurement of academic achievement for many decades. And what they have been measuring lately is frightening. Students who should be scoring at the 90th percentile are barely scoring at the 70th; those who should be at the 70th are hovering between the 30th and 40th. Between 70 and 90 percent of all students entering the California State University system have to take some form of remedial course work in basic subjects like English and math. Eighty-seven percent of students entering New York community colleges flunk the placement test— they can’t even pass the test that would put them into remedial courses! As New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani observed several years ago, if skills actually determined entrance into the New York system of higher education, three of every four students would probably be denied admission. (The state has recently begun to administer such tests, and it appears that Guiliani was right.) It is also a matter of public record that national ACT and SAT college entrance test scores are steadily declining despite “adjustments” designed to boost them artificially.

Yet one-third of many high schools’ students maintain 4.0 (straight A) grade point averages. Why? Because grade inflation, which occurs at every level of education, is rampant. My daughter Sarah has been in the public school system since the third grade, and she is living proof. She has consistently received good grades without the benefit of a good education.

When she enrolled in an algebra class in the eighth grade, I offered to help her with her homework. She took me up on this offer one evening when we were sitting together at the kitchen table. The first problem was “What is 10 percent of 470?” I was stunned to discover that Sarah couldn’t solve it without the aid of a calculator. Another problem involved determining 25 percent of a given figure. She not only didn’t know the answer, but she didn’t know that this percentage could be expressed as “one-quarter” or “one-fourth.”

Here was my own flesh and blood—my straight-A student! I couldn’t help asking, “Are the other kids this dumb?” Without missing a beat, Sarah replied, “Oh, they’re much dumber.” She may be right. On the most recent International Math and Science Survey, which tests students from 42 countries, one-third of all American high school seniors could not compute the price of a $1,250 stereo that was discounted by 20 percent.

**The Knowledge Gap**

Algebra is not the only area where today’s students have trouble. Hillsdale College President George Roche writes, “Tens of thousands of students do not know when Columbus sailed to the New World, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, or why the Civil War was fought.” Part of the problem is that most parents don’t realize that what is being taught in modern public schools is actually widening the knowledge gap between them and their children.

One of the most popular history textbooks, produced as a result of the campaign for national education standards in the late 1980s, disparages the “Father of Our Country.” George Washington was not, the authors of The United States: In the Course of Human Events contend, really successful as a soldier, as a politician, or as a human being. Much is made of Thomas Jefferson’s subjective observation that Washington was possessed of “a heart that was not warm in its affections.” How is Generation X ever going to find out that Washington the general did more than any individual to win the war that established our nation? Or that Washington the president risked his reputation and his career to ensure that we would have limited government, a sound economy, and a virtuous citizenry? Or that Washington the man constantly performed acts of kindness and charity for others, including Jefferson? It certainly isn’t going to learn such important lessons from a textbook that claims Washington was not much of a man because he did not, in modern lingo, “feel our pain.”

Special sections in each chapter feature biographies of people who have made a difference in history. Almost all are politically correct.
minorities and/or females. One, for example, is a female astronaut. The authors allege that she was unfairly excluded from Project Mercury because she had no flight experience. This, of course, is characterized as an insufficient reason to deny her the "right" to participate.

The 17th-century English philosopher John Locke is not mentioned—there is no room, evidently, to discuss his significant role in bringing about the Enlightenment or the American Revolution. Famous religious leaders are also ignored, although the authors do bow to the ancient gods of primitive peoples. Pre-Columbian cultures like the Toltecs are praised for their lavishly decorated temples, their calendars, their games—so what if they practiced human sacrifice?

This best-selling textbook reveals a glimpse of the version of history—or rather, non-history—Generation X is being taught. I should know. Last summer, I took Sarah, then 14 years old, on a tour of Boston, Massachusetts. I carefully explained the historic significance of each site to her. After several hours, she said, "Now, Mom, what war was this?" While I was still in a state of shock we arrived at the Old North Church and listened to a tour guide tell the story of Paul Revere. Sarah's question this time was, "What side was he on?" I asked incredulously, "What exactly did you do in the advanced placement U.S. history class you just completed?" Her response was, "I made a great many charts, and I did a lot of little projects with painting."

I do not mean to pick on Sarah. She and her peers are victims of a pernicious system that has turned traditional liberal arts education on its head. The situation is no better in higher education. At some colleges and universities, professors deliver lectures on "The Apostle Paul as a Homosexual" and "Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto." Stanford University achieved notoriety a decade ago for its course, "Black Hair as Culture and History." A current survey on American religion at another school fails to mention Catholicism. One new cutting-edge psychology course is titled, "Gender Discrepancies and Pizza Consumption."

Before long, the loss of knowledge may even make simple conversation impossible. In my classroom, I cannot say, "Never look a gift horse in the mouth," or my students will give me a blank stare. I cannot say, "Me thinks thou dost protest too much," or at least one will inevitably respond,

"Excuse me, Professor Jennings, shouldn't that be, 'I thinks?'" The literary shorthand of our culture is being lost. This is no small loss either; for words are symbols of important ideas.

The Critical Thinking Gap

Indoctrination is partly to blame for the knowledge gap. This is not a new trend in education. When I was in school, I was taught about "global cooling," and my teachers predicted that the earth was going to be frozen over in a new ice age. Today, my children are told that global warming is going to bring on an ecological apocalypse. But the level of indoctrination has risen sharply. Environmentalism has become an obsession with the teachers of Generation X. They constantly bombard students with dire warnings about pollution, scarce resources, and weather-related disasters. A recent cartoon sums up the attitude the students typically develop. It shows a little girl declaring to her mother that her day in school was a bust: "We didn't do anything to save mankind or the environment. We wasted the whole day on reading and math."

Indoctrination makes students passive receivers of information. As such docile participants, most public school students are incapable of independent thought—of drawing logical inferences or exhibiting other critical thinking skills. They are also incapable of looking at a statement and determining its validity. I refer to this as the "frou-frou head" problem, because students are so lacking in skills and knowledge and are so indoctrinated by politically correct thinking that they are not able to think clearly or make sound, well-informed judgments.

High school freshman Nathan Zohmer of Idaho recently conducted an experiment in science class that reveals the serious nature of this problem. He told classmates and teachers that they should sign his petition to ban a dangerous substance, "dihydrogen monoxide," which causes excessive vomiting and sweating. He informed them that dihydrogen monoxide is a component in acid rain. In its gaseous state, it can cause serious burns. Accidental inhalation can kill. To make
matters worse, it contributes to soil erosion, decreases the effectiveness of automobile brakes, and its presence has been detected in some terminal cancer tumors.

Forty-seven of the 50 students and teachers signed the petition with no questions asked. Not one thought to inquire, “Just what is dihydrogen monoxide?” If they had, they would have discovered they had signed a petition calling for a ban on H₂O—water.

The Work Ethic Gap

Then there is the work ethic gap. In a recent survey, 80 percent of Generation X respondents said they want an active social life, while only 37 percent admit success at work is important.

More adult males are living at home with their parents than at any time in our country’s history. Why this staggering statistic? Moms and dads provide comfortable room and board while salaries can be used for fun. The desire for independence is missing along with the drive for achieving that independence.

There is no longer a stigma attached to joining the welfare rolls or reneging on financial obligations. Personal bankruptcies are at an all-time high. What is unique about these bankruptcies is the fact that the majority are not the result of the loss of a job or health problems; they involve one or two wage earners who have simply overextended themselves. Credit card debt, which has skyrocketed in recent years, is mainly held by those whose annual income exceeds $50,000. Evidently, the willingness to save and to delay gratification, the drive for success, and the concern for reputation are fast disappearing in a culture that condones irresponsible spending.

The average time for completion of a bachelor’s degree is 5.5 years, so most students are not on a fast track. And they have developed some bad habits by the time they get into college. One is whining. As long as there have been students there has been whining—about workload, about subjects, about grades. But now there is preemptive whining. Even before the semester begins, even before papers and tests are handed back, students come into my office at Arizona State University with a laundry list of complaints.

Last year, one-third of my students protested their grades. In my first twenty years of teaching, not a single student questioned my judgment, but I expect half of my students to do so in the next ten. They are infected with an entitlement mentality. Good grades are not earned by hard work and subject mastery but by signing up to take the class.

I once counseled a graduate student who was doing poorly by saying: “Look, the problem is that you have a lack of depth when it comes to your studies. You have no knowledge base on which you can draw. You are going to have to start reading.” He said with some surprise, “What do you mean? Books?”

A recent study analyzing the habits of elementary school children revealed that the average time spent on homework is ten minutes. Worse yet, the same study found that schools are increasingly adopting a “no homework” policy. Perhaps the saddest aspect of this situation is the reason more assignments are not given: Parents complain about the work their children are given.

Following last spring’s final exams, a student came to my office and said, “You made us stretch to the maximum. It wasn’t a bad feeling.” Unfortunately, most students do not understand the pride that comes with conquering what seems to be impossible. Generation X is filled with self-esteem but bereft of knowledge.

In the math survey mentioned earlier, students from around the world were asked how they felt they had done upon completion of the exam. While the scores proved that the United States finished in the bottom third of all countries participating, it did finish first in terms of students’ perception of personal performance. Americans exhibited the highest self-esteem while students from Japan and Singapore, who finished in the top two slots, were the least arrogant about their performance.

The Morality Gap

The most grievous problem is the morality gap. Sarah is a basketball player and a devoted fan of Sports Illustrated. Recently, she shared with me one of the magazine’s top stories, which summarized a poll of one thousand Olympic athletes. One of the questions posed was, “If we could give you a drug that would guarantee your victory at the Olympic Games but would also guarantee your death in five years, would you take it?” Fifty-four percent said yes.

Another survey conducted by the Lutheran Brotherhood asked, “Are there absolute standards
for morals and ethics or does everything depend on the situation?” Seventy-nine percent of the respondents in the 18-34 age group said that standards did not exist and that the situation should always dictate behavior. Three percent said they were not sure.

If this poll is correct, 82 percent of all students believe that right and wrong are relative terms and that morality is a ridiculous concept. This is the den of lions into which I walk every day. It is called the modern American classroom.

When I finish teaching a course, I ask my students to fill out a written evaluation form. Many of them comment, “This business ethics class was really fascinating. I had never heard these ideas before.” Mind you, I am not teaching quantum physics; I am presenting simple, basic ideas and principles that should be followed in the marketplace: Be honest. Treat other people the way that you want to be treated. Work hard. Live up to your obligations.

Comedian Jay Leno revealed during one of his street interviews on the Tonight Show that the same young people don’t seem to know the Ten Commandments. What they do know about morality is what they have picked up in scattered, disconnected bits from parents, friends, television, and magazines. And a good deal of this is immoral rather than moral. As a result, Generation X lacks a solid moral foundation for its views on school, work, marriage, family, and community.

**Closing the Generation Gap**

Are there ways to close the yawning generation gap, which is really the sum of all these smaller gaps? Of course there are. We live in a miraculous age. Great changes have revolutionized the way we live. I started law school with an electric typewriter—state-of-the-art back then. Now I have a computer, a fax machine, and electronic mail. The tools of high technology allow for improved education, wider access to knowledge, more work productivity, and greater freedom to make moral decisions. But these same tools also demand greater personal responsibility.

Is Generation X ready? I don’t know. Remember the 1986 disaster at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Ukraine? The world’s worst nuclear accident did not happen because nuclear power is a flawed technology. It happened because a handful of young, cocky engineers chose to disregard established safety parameters while performing a routine test of equipment. Ironically, the test was designed to provide power to operate the reactor core cooling system in the event of an emergency. The engineers’ carelessness and arrogance, which caused the release of large quantities of radioactive substances into the atmosphere, has since caused the death, pain, and suffering of innocent victims in Belarus, Ukraine, and Russia.

Look at what happened to Barings Bank, the venerable institution that financed the Napoleonic wars. It went bankrupt in 1995 because one trader, 28-year-old Nick Leeson, was able to sit in front of his computer and violate the prime ethical rule of banking: You don’t take other people’s money and recklessly gamble with it. He made a $27 billion bet that the Japanese stock market would rally after the Kobe earthquake. The market dropped instead, and Barings’ losses reached a staggering $1.3 billion.

At the end of 1997, 29-year-old Marisa Baridis entered a guilty plea when she was charged with selling inside information. For $2,000 to $10,000 a tip, she and her friends made a dramatic impact on the stock market by using nonpublic information to take advantage of others. Ms. Baridis, who profited handsomely from such cheating, was the compliance officer for the investment bank and brokerage house of Morgan Stanley. She enjoyed a great deal of technological access to confidential information and a great deal of unilateral authority. In a tape-recorded conversation, she referred to insider trading as the “illegalist [sic] thing you can do,” but, lacking the basic values of fairness and honesty, she easily dismissed the law she was responsible for enforcing. She also cost shareholders and companies millions of dollars.

High technology demands more individual judgment and more moral accountability. Generation X boasts thousands of techno-wise youth. But it is missing real wisdom, informed by a strong education and a strong spiritual ethic.
everywhere, and that it has been considered vital to
civil society for centuries. I challenge them to name
one country in the world where bribery and cheat-
ing are legal and approved by the populace. I tell
them to examine the most basic ethical principles of
Moses and Jesus and compare them to those of
Aristotle, Confucius, and Mohammed. The major
religions of the world are
in agreement on certain
universals that have stood
the test of time.

One such standard of
universal morality is what
is referred to by Christians
as the “Golden Rule”: Do
unto others as you would
have them do unto you.
The same notion of fair-
ness can be found in the
basic tenets of Buddhism,
Judaism, Hinduism, and
even in philosophy in the
form of Kant’s “categorical
imperative.” Throughout
time, this simple test of
ethics has been recognized
in various cultures as a
means of preserving civili-
y, decency, and morality.
Its beauty lies in its sim-
plicity. Its profundity lies
in its universal recogni-
tion and adherence.

Most important, we
must restore the twin
notions that being
judgmental is not the
same as being nar-
row-minded and that
expressing moral out-
rage is not a form of
“hate speech.” What
a different world
would have if choos-
ing right and reject-
ing wrong were not
considered fanatical!

Parents as Teachers

As parents we have to stand up and be
counted. When our children come home
from school, as my daughter did one day,
spinning yarns about Ethan Allen and the
“Green Mountain Persons,” we have to set the
record straight. Truth matters. It was Ethan Allen
and the “Green Mountain Boys,” and this fact is
not a slight to women. When pre-schoolers are
exposed to storybooks on “alternative” lifestyles
and early sex education (endorsed by the National
Education Association, by the way), we must sound
our objections loudly and clearly. We must exert
pressure on superintendents, principals, and
teachers. We must take the initiative and run for
positions on school boards and city councils.

We must also seize moments of morality with
our children to teach them the difference between
right and wrong and impose punishments when
they stray from moral principles. Most important,
we must restore the twin notions that being judg-
mental is not the same as being narrow-minded
and that expressing moral outrage is not a form of
“hate speech.” What a different world we would
have if choosing right and rejecting wrong were
not considered fanatical!

When I graduated from law school, a speaker
offered nine words I have never forgotten: “Truth
is violated by falsehood but outraged by silence.”
The past 25 years have
been filled with falsehoods
about our history and our
culture. Generation X has
never lived in a time of
truth. Condemning
immorality has become
virtually the only sin, so it
has not even witnessed the
courage of conviction. We
have been silent as an
entire generation has seen
truth repeatedly violated.

There is a difference
between holding beliefs
and being valiant in
defending beliefs. As par-
ents, struggling to close the
generation gap, we must be
valiant in defending our
beliefs. Indeed, this is a call
to action for all who guide
our youth and offer
them instruction. When
immorality and adultery
are described as “private”
and therefore “irrelevant” in the public square, with
no impact on character and leadership, we must
shout from the rooftops; “Personal conduct is char-
acter! Character does matter!” When the lessons of
history, literature, science, and religion are distort-
ed, attacked, or lost in the shuffle, we must rescue
them. It is time to break our silence and confront
those who have perpetrated so many myths, so
much fraud, and so little substance for so long.

It is still possible to reclaim Generation X from
the hopelessly flawed indoctrination it has experi-
enced. But reclaiming our children will require
the type of introspection that results in moral
credence and is followed by the expression of moral
outrage. One of my students commented to me at
the end of a semester, “You’ve dispelled so many
myths. Now I know morality in business is not a
crime.” And I responded, “It’s even better, son.
Neither is the moral life a sin.” Breaking our
silence will allow truth to emerge, and its rare and
illuminating quality will attract the attention and
devotion of a generation trained and raised in
amoral darkness.
HILLSDALE COLLEGE:

Providing a Traditional Education for Making a Life as Well as a Living

By providing a value-based education grounded in the Judeo-Christian heritage and the traditions of the Western world, Hillsdale College prepares students to make a life as well as a living.

By sharing our belief in a traditional education with a prospective student, you can help that student choose a positive and rewarding experience that is unique in higher education.

If you know a student who might benefit from a Hillsdale education, please call or write:

Jeffrey S. Lantis, Director of Admissions
Hillsdale College
Hillsdale, Michigan 49242
(517) 437-7341

Hillsdale College was recently ranked number one in the new U.S. News and World Report survey of “Top Teaching Colleges” and was cited by National Review and the John Templeton Foundation Honor Roll for providing a traditional, character-building education.

Do you know students interested in admission to Hillsdale College? We’ll lend them a video at no charge! To order “Hillsdale College Video Visit,” call 1-800-255-0384 (Orders only: not an information line.)

Do we have your correct address? Indicate changes on reverse side, or call: 800/437-2268

Boxes for More Information:

☐ On-campus seminars of Hillsdale’s Center for Constructive Alternatives
☐ Off-campus seminars of Hillsdale’s Shavano Institute for National Leadership
☐ Admissions
☐ Athletics
☐ Gift and Estate Planning or Hillsdale Hostel
☐ Freedom Library books and tapes
☐ Hillsdale Academy Reference Guide
☐ Dow Leadership Development Center

☐ Enclosed is my tax deductible contribution to Hillsdale College for: $ _____________

IMPRIMIS: (1-10 copies $.75 each
25–$10    50–$15    100–$25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qty.</th>
<th>Author/Title</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michigan residents, add 6% sales tax</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FREE SHIPPING!
(Please make checks payable to Hillsdale College)

Credit Card Donations/
Orders Welcome!
VSA/ MC / Discover

Expiration mo/yr

Signature

800/437-2268
Superior Stewardship = Superior Returns

Hillsdale College Gift Annuities

A re you one of the many Hillsdale College supporters who would like to receive guaranteed income in exchange for your gift?

If you are, we suggest you consider a Hillsdale College Gift Annuity. Now is the ideal time to participate, because Hillsdale College recently raised its annuity rates.

For more information, please call 800/334-8904 and ask for an information packet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>NEW RATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90+</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IMPRIMIS (im-prɪˈmɪs), taking its name from the Latin term “in the first place,” is the monthly publication of Hillsdale College. Executive Editor, Ronald L. Trowbridge; Managing Editor, Lissa Roche; Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. Illustrations by Tom Curtis. The opinions expressed in IMPRIMIS may be, but are not necessarily, the views of Hillsdale College and its External Programs division. Copyright © 1998. Permission to reprint in whole or part is hereby granted, provided a version of the following credit line is used: “Reprinted by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College.” Subscription free upon request. ISSN 0277-8432. IMPRIMIS trademark registered in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.