

Assignment: Write a brief formal report profiling Harper College students. Focus on an interesting student trait or feature of campus life. Gather information through interviews, surveys, and reading. Draw conclusions based on your research.

**Tough Times Ahead for Harper College
Students—and Their Professors**
by Larry Barnett

Statement of the Problem

Before heading off to college last fall, I had the usual advice sessions with my parents when they tried to tell me what to expect and how to cope. Inevitably, it seemed they would drift to the old familiar “When we were in college . . .” themes, which stressed how hard they had to work in school and how uncertain their job outlooks were back in the 1970s. Now that I’ve been here for a few months, I can say that college looks little like their descriptions. Nor do today’s college students fit the picture my parents painted of themselves. Even students who graduated only a few years ago seem different from today’s students in their self-assessment, behavior, and outlook.

I wondered whether others had a similar impression of differences between college “generations” and whether there was any hard information to support this impression. In particular, I wanted to find out about contemporary college students’ self-assessment, their post-graduate expectations, and how those assessments and expectations matched the reality of college life and life on the job.

Background

To investigate my topic and test my impressions, I asked eight long-time Harper professors and two Harper administrators to compare contemporary college students with those of ten years ago. I interviewed twenty-seven students in three of my classes, asking them how they ranked themselves as students (top ten percent, twenty percent, and so forth); how they ranked their abilities in math, English, and science classes; and what they expected to earn following graduation. To compare Harper students with those on other campuses, I also gathered information from a recent Higher Education Research Institute survey of 252,090 students at 464 colleges and universities.

Results and Discussion

Student Dreams

In contrast to my parents’ self-descriptions but similar to those of more recent graduates, today’s college students believe their academic and job prospects are bright. According to students surveyed at Harper and elsewhere, fifty-six percent rank themselves in the top ten percent in academic ability. Fifty percent expect to get at least a B average. Of interest to English teachers, forty percent rank themselves in the top ten percent in writing ability. Twenty percent, up from eleven percent ten years ago, according to the Higher Education Research Institute survey, expect to graduate with honors.

After graduation, forty percent plan to go on to earn master’s degrees, and fifteen percent, to earn PhDs. Seventy-four percent expect their college preparation will earn them good jobs and salaries. One Harper student, recognizing that he will be graduating during an economic recession, observed, “In my field, they may not be giving bonuses to new employees, the way they were a few years ago. But I’ll get offers. The jobs are there.” “Said one Harper faculty member, “It’s not unusual for students to tell me they expect to make \$40-60,000 a year right out of college or within the first few years. Can you believe that?”

The Reality

The reality, as reported by these students, by the colleges they attend, and by their professors, conflicts with these bright self-assessments and prospects. Harper faculty state that while today's students are "eager," "nice," "comfortable," and "obliging," they are also "immature," "undisciplined," and "unrealistic." According to the Higher Education Research Institute survey, thirty-six percent of today's students claim to be bored in class, compared with twenty-nine percent ten years ago. Thirty-five percent report oversleeping, missing class, and neglecting appointments with teachers, compared with thirty percent in 1987.

Regarding homework, only thirty-three percent of today's students claim to study six or more hours per week, compared with forty-four percent a decade ago. This last is surprising, because Harper's Director of Admissions reports that over ten percent of today's students come to college needing remedial work in English, more than twenty-five percent needing extra classes in math. One Harper English teacher observed, "Many of my students, even the bright ones, are unprepared for the critical thinking, sound research, and polished writing required for success in college and, later, for success on the job."

Conclusions

If these facts and impressions are accurate, students of the new millennium are in for a rough awakening in their college classes and broken dreams when they go out looking for new jobs after graduation. Their self-assessments reveal lots of self-esteem but an equal amount of unrealistic thinking. Their teachers, too, may be in for difficult days in the classroom as they attempt to improve these students' skills and abilities. My parents no doubt painted a too-rosy picture of themselves and a too-serious picture of college life back in the 1970s, but it does appear that their generation was at least a little better prepared for college and a little more realistic about themselves and their careers than today's students.

Copyright © 2002 Larry Barnett. Reprinted by permission.