



Trend Three – The Face of Change

As I traverse the country working with independent schools, colleges, universities, and the occasional non-profit outside of the education industry, I get an unusual chance to be in contact with young people in all regions of the nation. Currently, our firm is working with independent schools or colleges in Hartford, Asheville, New Orleans, Memphis, Houston, Salt Lake City, Bozeman, Spokane, Seattle, and Portland. We don't just have every time zone covered, but we also have nearly every region of the country covered in our work with these institutions. And, as I talk to students all over the country, I am convinced of a growing trend that is important to acknowledge:

Young people today might be the first generation since the Vietnam era that really believe they can change the world.

For a variety of reasons, I am convinced that tweens, teens, and young adults are not just more politically active than their previous generations, but also more socially and culturally aware of the challenges that theirs and future generations will encounter. Some of these reasons include:

A Lack of Apathy

As I talk to young people in schools across the nation, there is a lack of cynicism and apathy about power structures and social challenges that dominated the thinking of previous generations during the last two decades.

A Cultural Awareness

Young people today are more “dialed in” to the issues that face America. They have grown up with high speed internet, 500 channels on TV, and their own cell phone. They saw the 9-11 terrorist attacks and understand that not only are our lives, but our lifestyles and values, under attack by terrorist organizations. They tend to favor socially conscious products, like the Bono-led Product Red, that offer individuality and yet make a difference in the greater world.

A Renewed Optimism

For whatever reason, I sense a sea change with young people that is connected to a renewed sense of optimism, energy, and urgency. They are not motivated by merely money, power, or prestige, but by seeing that their world of tomorrow is markedly different than the world of today. And, they each seem to believe that they are

instrumental in that task, no matter how small or large it may be.

The face of change is young people today - a sea change in the attitudes and orientation of the students we are educating. This is our topic for Trend Three in our series of Ten Trends.

The Big Idea

There are three main points we want to make about these difference makers in our world today. They are going green, going global, and just simply going.

Going Green

Young people today are very concerned about the environment. Whether it is climate change, global warming, sustainable building, recycling, or smaller, hybrid cars, students today are not just making choices, but educating their faculty and parents on what it means to be green. To me, they seem less wasteful and more intentional about their purchasing and lifestyle choices.

Now, before you accuse me of giving youth too much credit and consider me being out of touch with reality, I confess that I have a 12 year old and a 9 year old at home. Sure, they are wasteful times, but when I look at them as a cohort, together with their friends, they are more aware of the issue of sustainability than I would have ever considered myself at their age.

Young people today know what it means to be green, to reduce their carbon footprint, to make sustainable choices. This is one aspect of the face of change.

Going Global

Young people today are not just in touch with their community or school, but with the larger world. Previous generations saw the world through the prism of nationalism - this generation sees the world through the lens of globalism. Technology, international travel, and the growing diversity of American culture have been conduits for young people today to see the world as one space, one place.

When I first read Friedman's "The World is Flat" about two years ago, I believed that we were on the emerging edge of a new trend. Today, that trend is alive and well - it is not new, it is the here and now - the norm. My daughter takes Mandarin Chinese as a 6th grader. She will have international travel as part of her educational experience every year between 6th grade and her senior year. And, she is not atypical, especially among independent school students. At the college level, students are increasingly seeing international and global experiences as an integral and expected part of their learning experience. And, colleges and universities are expanding their curriculum into the far reaches of the world, via technology, and reorienting the curriculum as a result.

The truth is, we live in a global world. Students know it - and they practice it. They don't

have the same national boundaries that I grew up with. And, this new globalism expands their potential universe as change agents.

Just Get Going

Finally, students in this new era seem to have a remarkable sense of practicality to their endeavors. They seem more mobilized, more willing, and more urgent than their previous two or three generations.

As I talk to students across the nation, I see more students desiring to go on service trips or join in humanitarian efforts. I have met many students in the past two years that have put college on hold for a year to go on a humanitarian mission overseas. (My generation graduating high school in the early 1980's would have put college on hold for a year to travel abroad and do some sight-seeing as part of the "me" generation.) Students today seem less encumbered by systems, structures, and societal expectations for their living and success in life. They are striving for purpose in life and seek experiences that allow them to find it. And, they just seem to be mobilized. It is more than talk - it is action.

So What?

So what do you do with this information? First, consider this information anecdotal - it is the collection of my experiences as I travel and serve our clients. It is not statistical or empirical data, though my guess is that there will be many studies in the coming decade that will track the attitudes and impacts of our young people and affirm my observations.

This information could play an important role in understanding the mindset of young people today. As educational institutions, we need to understand our students if we are to educate them. It is important that we know what attitudes and beliefs our students bring to campus with them.

Perhaps more importantly, we might want to think about how we can mobilize and encourage young people today. These difference makers will be our leaders of tomorrow. How can we develop programs for them and relationships with them that guide, nurture, and help develop their abilities to make positive change in the world?