

## Three “Central” Questions Worth Asking

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### Abstract

Today’s students are not alike. Some can primarily be classified as Millennial, others as Post Modern NeXter, and still others as Missionary. However, regardless of their primary predisposition, traditional undergraduate students grow and develop during college responding to three different questions: How do I know? Who am I? and How do I relate to others? Their journey in college hopefully results in more complex perspectives to each of these questions. This paper is adapted from a talk given at the Honors Convocation at Central College on April 19, 2007.

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I am greatly honored to share with you this celebration of achievement. I am a very proud graduate of Central College, right here in the middle of Iowa. When I was at Central, the student body was a rather homogenous lot, to be sure. Today you are much more diverse. Society is more pluralistic whether by race, cultural background, or faith traditions. I refer to this generation’s college students as the 3M mix—Millennial, Postmodern NeXter, and Missionary. Each can be viewed as a cluster, and you will undoubtedly find yourself as a “member” to some extent of each of portrayals.

**Millennial** students are conventional, cooperative team players, optimistic about the future, interested in math and science, prefer secure and regulated environments, accept responsibility, respectful of social norms, engage in community projects, and are concerned about their future. They are affluent, civic-minded, busy, optimistic, sheltered, confident, consumer oriented, and over-programmed. They focus on grades and performance, rely on peer approval, and prefer to not be involved in reflective and critical thinking. Finally they are close to parents.

**Postmodern NeXter** students are consumer oriented, entertainment oriented, like instant gratification, have a short event horizon, seek excellence-without effort, skeptical about life, intellectually disengaged, adaptable and pragmatic, entitlement focused, and are often stressed about their life. Finally they are close to parents. (Jean Twenge [2006] refers to the current group of young persons as “Generation Me.”)

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**Missionary** students are evangelical in their worldview, believe in external authority of truth and wisdom, hold traditional views of family and social interactions, are serious in their studies and work, view life and work as a calling and vocation, and are politically and socially conservative. Many, however, can be called “countercultural conservatives” given their support of equal rights, gun control, and social justice. They generally reject the “spiritual, but not religious” perspective of their faith, and are not as interested in church and organizational issues as they are in their personal faith journey. Moreover, many students today are very committed to social and secular causes, and have that missionary zeal, even though they do not depend on any religious tradition for their purpose and meaning in life. And finally they all are close to parents.

### **From “*In Loco Parentis*” to “*Parents on Location*”**

I hope you noticed that I mentioned “close to parents” all three times. One of the most distinguishing characteristics of this generation of college students is their relationship with parents. Parents are involving themselves more and more with their child’s college education—thus the term *helicopter parent*. Parental involvement has been described as a result of parents’ meaning well for their son or daughter, but from the perspective of the college administrators and faculty, parents often seem over involved, have an entitled predisposition, are immediate results oriented, see themselves as “co-purchasers” of their child’s education, and regard all the services, rules, regulations, and costs as negotiable. I like the image of the snow plow—or bulldozer—parents. Not only do they hover over their students with a cell phone ready to become involved at any moment, but they now come down to campus to run interference so their child can devote more time to studying—and perhaps partying. They pave the way for their son or daughter. When I was in college, the principle of *in loco parentis* was still healthy—the administration and faculty took on the responsibility of caring for us, acting in some ways as substitute parents. But that posture soon disappeared in American higher education. Ironically today we have an interesting situation--*in loco parentis* is gone, but now we have “parents on location.”

But having wonderful parents and being in college will not prevent you from challenges and difficult times. Unplanned events in our journey of life occur, and to me they require faith, family and friend support, and having a calling and purpose to make sense out of this world which at times seems quite senseless. Peter Gomes, author of *The Good Life*, has a useful definition of faith. “Faith is not some abstract theological construct . . . it is the way by which people make sense of a world that alone, on its own terms, makes no sense” (2003, p. 256). In short you need to make meaning of your journey.

Thus to prepare you for your journey of life while in college, I want to offer three “Central” questions for you to consider. But first I will make some generalization about how students grow and develop during college, realizing of course that each of you has your own unique pathway.

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### Student Development as a Journey

Think of your development as a journey. In your life-long journey, you are stopping off at a place—called college—for 2, 4 or even more years. During these years, you and other students will most likely change considerably since these are powerful formative years of your lives—especially if you are in the traditional age (18-24 years) cohort. Your thinking and expectations proceed from the simple to the complex. When you entered college, you most likely expressed values and beliefs that reflect your parents’ perspectives and home background, although you may not have had your views well developed or integrated into your own sense of identity. During college you begin to regard knowing what is true with greater complexity. You no longer see external authorities as providing paths to the absolute truth. You may be moving from thinking in terms of absolute certainty to relativism to making commitments within the context of uncertainty. But this journey often is not an easy one nor straightforward. Along the way, you and your fellow students often think that “anything goes,” since if there are no absolutes, why bother?

You also become more self aware of your own sense of self, viewing your development in terms of your self-identity. You are more intentional in creating for yourself a sense of self-direction and purpose in your life. You connect your mind and heart in new forms and with greater complexity. As the speed of globalization increases, so does the need to reestablish, redefine, and refine one’s identity. And in general if you were religious at entry into college, you do not necessarily become less religious or spiritual. Patterns of religious and spiritual development are much more complex than that (Braskamp, 2007).

Finally, you view others differently with an ability to see each person’s uniqueness beginning to emerge. You relate to others in more complex ways, often moving from dependency to independence to interdependence. You begin to view yourself as a unique contributing member of communities. Social interactions with others become more complicated, and you feel more comfortable with persons unlike you. You are becoming more global in your perspective. In our pluralistic society you can no longer live in a world in which we cannot escape learning, meeting, and living with others with very different cultural backgrounds, habits, perspectives, customs, religious beliefs, and aspirations. You now live in a global world, in which multiple perspectives on knowing, sense of identity, and relationships with others are distinct and serve as powerful influences in our society (Braskamp, Braskamp, and Merrill, 2007). In short, each of you and your friends develop each in your own way, but do so holistically, by integrating your thinking, feeling and relating to others.

### The “Central” Questions in the Journey

In this journey you have been asking—perhaps unconsciously—several important questions. I call them three “Central” questions.

- How do I know?
  - Who am I?
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- How do I relate to others?

*How do I know?*

Whom do you trust for the truth? What source do you use to find what is true and valid? Is it your parents, faculty, textbooks, Bible, Qu'an, yourself, etc? Do you see gray in truth claims or is it still a matter of seeing it as right or wrong? How you come to what you consider to be the truth?

Today colleges and universities are not always very intentional in helping you discover what is truthful and good in your life. Sharon Parks, in her book, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, provides this interpretation of the role of colleges in the search for truth.

Since the nineteenth century, and particularly with the development of the research university, higher education has been increasingly dominated by a particular interpretation of academic objectivity that over time has appeared to preclude a self-conscious search for value and meaning. As a result, commitment to the true has been divorced from the question of the good" (p. 159). Knowledge has been limited to "objective reality" ignoring "ultimate reality," ... "thus diminishing the significance of emotion, intuition, the personal, the moral, and full engagement ... of lived experience. (Parks, p. 160)

As a result universities have become increasingly irrelevant in our American culture. They fail to "connect with the human beings' deepest interests and most pressing concerns" argues John Sommerville (2006), author of *The Decline of the Secular University*. A college is most effective when it is a place with a mission that is complex, multidimensional, intellectually enriching, and above all contested. Any college that takes the search for truth seriously will be a hotly contested place, since no one on this good earth has been given the truth—we all need to search for it. So ask yourself if you are engaging in activities that stretch your mind and provide meaning to you in your journey.

One way to think about knowing is to regard it as a socially active journey, not one of just receiving facts and objective knowledge from the outside, such as from parents or faculty. Learn to become a critical thinker. But being a critical thinker, what Andrew Delbanco (2007) states is today's "reigning banality" in higher education, is insufficient. The problem with this focus as your end goal of education is that critical thinking often ends up being critical and not much thinking. It is far easier to criticize than it is to be constructive and creative in your thinking and doing. I am impressed that Howard Gardner (2006), the cognitive psychologist from Harvard, in his latest book, *The Five Minds for the Future*, includes two human factors—respectful and ethical—with three cognitive factors—disciplined, synthesizing, and creating in his recommendations about how one can be best prepared to become a contributing member of our society. I also like what Karen Armstrong (2007) stated recently, "Until we all learn to approach one another with generosity and respect, we cannot hope for peace." In sum, use your mind, but constructively and creatively. And do not see your thinking as isolated from your feeling and relating with others. As the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2006) argues, a college education is not only concerned with developing the

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mind, but also fostering a “strong sense of self and responsibility to self and others” (p. 8). Having a sense of self leads us into the next “Central” question.

*Who am I?*

I have had the opportunity to watch hundreds of students walk across the stage to receive their diploma. In their own way they take that walk with joy and pride. When they do so, I am asking myself these questions: what really is this person like, who is she, what does she care about, what is her faith in something beyond herself, what type of parent, citizen, friend will she be throughout her life? Will she live a life that is worth living? I do not think about her test scores on some test she took as a freshman. And then I ask myself, and I am sure that every faculty member and administrator everywhere is doing the same self-reflection: have we sufficiently prepared her for life as well as a career? These questions are about matters of the heart.

Robert Kegan (1994), one of the most prominent developmental psychologists of our time, and author of the book, *In Over Our Heads*, gives this perspective of our journey in life that is centered around the search for self-authorship. As we continue in our own journeys—a journey of development—we need to bring our big hearts to our big minds, to hold them with each other. Development is thus the unfolding of the mind and the heart. “We know a person by what he cares about,” says Robert Kegan.

Alexander and Helen Astin of UCLA (2005), who have been studying the spirituality of students, argue that we cannot understand and help others if we do not fully understand our inner lives. Students know that their lives are holistic, and they do not like to have their residence life and the life in the classroom separated. In a recent UCLA survey of juniors “nearly two-thirds...[of the students] say professors never encourage discussion of spiritual or religious matters” (p. 1). Barbara Walvoord (2007) concluded from her survey of professors teaching introductory courses in religion that a “great divide” exists between the desires of the students and those of the faculty—students want their courses in religions to affect their affect—heart—while faculty desire to stick to issues of the head. Teaching holistically is admittedly very difficult to do, and I can speak from personal experience.

I like to think of the matters of the heart in terms of vocation and calling, linked to purpose and meaning:

An authentic vocation is not just about “me” and my personal fulfillment, but about “us” and the common good. . . . Socially responsible discernment seeks a proper balance between inward listening and outward, socially-engaged listening, between listening to our hearts and listening with our hearts to the realities of the world we live in—especially to the ways the needs and pains of the world and its people are calling us. (John P. Neafsey, 2004)

So vocation is more than “unharnessed passion”—view it as passion with a cause to contribute, to make a difference. Living the “good life” is one that matters; it is being of consequence to those around us, argue Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass (2005).

I end this section with a quote of the Provost from Villanova because it puts into balance the two questions of “How do I know” and “How am I?” He told us, “We

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encourage students to let their intellectual life be guided by their hearts. Students are learning and developing in college for a purpose: that is, to be of service to the world.” (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward, 2006, p. 191). Living the “good life” is not limited to being a good critical thinker—it is much more demanding and rewarding. The good life is not only a self-reflective life, nor even just a committed life, but one of sharing love toward others (Buchanan, 2006). This is a nice segue into the third “Central” question.

*How do I relate to others?*

In our journey of life, we are not alone. We should aim not to be dependent, nor stubbornly independent, but to be interdependent in our relationships, a paradox to be sure. In forming closer more intimate relationships, we need to overcome the romanticizing phase of relationships with others. When we go deeper, differences will undoubtedly show up. Ironically being in community is what makes us unique as individuals and fosters our own self-development. We should aim to feel comfortable and accepting of people not just like us, but rather to be engaged with those very different in their cultural and social backgrounds.

In your journey during college, I hope that you had and will have expectations that are “in over your heads.” You also need to have idealism, hope, lofty dreams, and a sense of awe. Creating dissonance between what is and what should be is a very powerful way to learn and develop. But do not think that you have to do it all on your own, but find community to provide you with the necessary social and emotional support. In this journey we have learned that you will optimally develop in a culture of challenge AND support on a college campus—this condition turned out to be a pivotal and central theme of our findings in our study of effectiveness of ten colleges in fostering holistic student development (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward, 2006).

One of the first questions I ask students, staff, and faculty when I come on campus is, “Do you feel safe here?” When I specifically ask them about their psychological safety, many students tell us that they find the classroom as the safest place, a tribute to faculty who can create in their class this openness for searching, inquiry, debate, and doubt. It takes a skillful teacher to create this safety, one that goes beyond mere tolerance of differences. Just being indifferent because I can’t be bothered is not acceptable. In my conversations with faculty, Presidents and Boards of Trustees, the challenge we all face with a sense of urgency is—how can we all get beyond a mere tolerance of differences into engagement, finding a common purpose, making a commitment to work actively together for common goals or the common good? In our research, we found examples of a “mentoring community”—faculty and staff feeling the need and calling to be mentors and models, not molds of students (Parks, 2000). I like what a professor at Whitworth College said, “The beauty of this place is that there are as many models as there are faculty.” As students tell me, “We are watching—and learning from others.” They want to learn from adults as well as their peers, and they care about how and what the faculty think and do. So watch, observe, and above all listen. And remember you are also a model and mentor to others.

As you enter this school year, keep asking these “Central” questions:

- How do I know?
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- Who am I?
- How do I relate to others?

They will indeed last you a life-time. Enjoy the “good life.”

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