

MINNPOST

College students: high in self-confidence but low in basic work skills

By [Stacy Teicher Khadaroo](#) | 08:00 am

Today's college students have been hit hard by the recession, but they exhibit a remarkable self-confidence that may outpace their skills for coping with the road that lies ahead.

This generation has its strengths, but independence and a clear sense of what's expected in the working world are lacking, according to the new book "Generation on a Tightrope: A Portrait of Today's College Students," which draws on national surveys and visits to more than 30 campuses around the United States.

"They're trying to precariously balance between their dreams and hopes for the future and the reality of diminished prospects," says Arthur Levine, president of the [Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation](#) and co-author with Diane Dean, an education professor at [Illinois State University](#).



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They may have trouble coping in a competitive economy because they "lack the ability to deal with adversity, or even imagine adversity," Mr. Levine says. "Whenever they've gotten into trouble, their parents have been there to bail them out."

The book offers guidance on how colleges, employers, and parents can do better in their supporting roles.

Sixty-seven percent of undergraduates now say the main benefit of a college education is increased earning power, compared with just 44 percent who said that in 1976.

That's perhaps not surprising, given how hard the recession has hit: Six of 10 college students say it affected where they chose to enroll. And nearly half of colleges and universities report increases in students living at home or dropping out temporarily for financial reasons.

Many students are majoring in fields that aren't their top interest, because they think it will lead to better jobs. For instance, 23 percent planned business majors but only 7 percent said that was the career most of interest. Medicine had a similar gap. Only 6 percent planned to work in the arts, on the other hand, though 11 percent said they'd like to.

"People are becoming more practically minded in very directly attaching education goals to career and financial outcomes," says Dennis Craig, vice president for enrollment management at [Purchase College](#), part of the State University of New York.

Despite the tough economy, 89 percent of college students are optimistic about their personal futures.

This confidence may be fueled in part by grade inflation, with 41 percent of undergraduates having average grades of A- or higher, compared with just 7 percent in 1969.

Yet employers say recent graduates often lack basic workplace know-how. Mr. Levine has heard from employers about new hires who e-mail the boss to announce they are working from home because the weather is nice, or who ask for a raise after just a week.

"Employers need to do extended orientations, make rules explicit ... and give frequent, candid feedback," he says.

Students, on the other hand, need to learn how to be more independent and innovative, Levine says. And that means parents need to let them start taking appropriate risks earlier in life.

The book shows that so-called "helicopter parenting" is pronounced. Twenty-seven percent of undergraduates say they've asked their parents to intervene in problems with professors or employers. Seventy-six percent of colleges and universities report increases in parent involvement and intervention.

One director of residence life told of a discipline conference with a student in which she whipped out her cellphone, called her mother, and then passed the phone to the director, asking him to talk with the mother. One facilities manager got a call from a parent whose child was stuck in an elevator — and had called the parent instead of the number posted directly in the elevator. Parents have called on behalf of students for everything from demanding an explanation for grades to finding out how to replace a lost campus ID.

The frequent communication with parents — 41 percent of students text, e-mail, call, or visit

daily — can be positive, with students trusting their parents' advice, says Mr. Craig. "The downside is that too often students are not thinking for themselves," he says. "If they're not becoming adult in college, when will they?"

Colleges, for their part, are not keeping pace with the digital technology that these students have grown up with, Levine notes: 78 percent of undergraduates say education would be improved if classes made greater use of technology.

But it won't just be a technical endeavor. With 44 percent of campuses saying technology-based infractions have increased, students need better digital literacy and values that inform how they use the tools at their fingertips, Levine says.

The ubiquity of social media has left students sometimes lacking face-to-face communication skills. Roommates sit in the same room but express their disagreement through text messages; kids "hook up" with each other sexually and are so afraid of emotional confrontation that they break off a relationship in a text.

On the positive side, students often arrive on campus already connected with their classmates, through a **Facebook** page, for instance. Orientations that used to be silent now erupt with chatter as if they were reunions, Craig says. For success in college, "having that support network of friends is important," he said.

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