

Chapter 16

Leveraging Generational Strengths in Online Graduate Education: Facilitating Cross-Generational Communication

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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of online graduate schools has resulted in greater numbers of students with greater diversity than ever before. Generational diversity affects the ability of online faculty to communicate effectively with graduate students. Faculty-student communication is improved by applying generational theory. Four main cohort groups actively participate in online education, each with their own set of preferences and tendencies, including: Veterans (born 1925-1942); Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960); Generation X (born 1961-1980); and Millennials (born 1981-2001). Differentiating online faculty communication methods based on generational tendencies is a potent and efficient method of empowering educators and motivating graduate students. Improved faculty-student communication enhances student engagement, creating greater satisfaction that leads to higher retention and improved academic performance. As faculty understand generational identity, communication is enriched by emphasizing each generation's strengths and avoiding misunderstandings.

INTRODUCTION

The demographics of higher education have been changing with greater numbers of graduate students enrolling in an increasing amount of distance education options (National Center for Education Statistics, November 2015). Distance graduate student demographics by their very nature show an increase in generational diversity with a higher percentage of older adults (aged 30 and older) choosing to participate in some or all of their graduate education via distance courses when compared to younger graduate

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students. Statistics from the 2007-2008 school year showed the same pattern of higher percentages of older graduate students enrolling in distance education courses and programs. In 2014, over 30 percent of graduate students in the United States chose to pursue their education either partially or completely via distance options (National Center for Education Statistics, November 2016). While overall higher education enrollment has had a slight decrease, distance education enrollment has continuously risen (National Center for Education Statistics, May 2016a). With the growth of distance education, faculty of distance education institutions have also naturally increased. Statistics on faculty age are not as readily available as student age demographics. Statistics for distance education faculty age compared with traditional faculty age demographics do not appear to be available. However, it is known that the total number of faculty members in degree-granting postsecondary institutions has steadily increased over the last two decades, with a much sharper rise in part-time faculty than full-time faculty (National Center for Education Statistics, May 2016b). It is unclear whether this phenomenon was mirrored in solely distance education institutions. One result of the increased need for faculty might be that institutions hired from a more diverse group to fill the required positions, which would include increased age diversity, and thereby, generational diversity.

With the differences found in each generation, improving intergenerational communication between graduate students and faculty has the potential to help retain and graduate more students of all generations. In order to create lasting change in graduate education, with academic benefits being enjoyed by more individuals than ever before, online post-secondary educational institutions must be adaptable to graduate student needs, including embracing the various strengths of each generation. Working with these strengths will improve the potential for ever greater numbers of graduate school graduates in our country's workforce. Not only does this increase the economic power of the United States, but it affects each individual student's future career and earning potential. As online graduate schools improve communication with their non-traditional students, lives are improved and change is effected. Faculty members are likely to be familiar with the concept of generations, and are likely to even be familiar with the generations currently in the online student body, knowing them by name. However, knowing that Baby Boomers exist, for example, does not necessarily mean that faculty members understand the significance of communicating with Baby Boomers in an online graduate school setting. Nor does it mean that faculty members would know how to personalize working with any one particular student based on his or her generation. Presenting documented generational traits and trends from the literature highlights the characteristics of each generation, thereby allowing faculty members to better understand students of each generation as well as the faculty members' own generational background.

As graduate education increasingly grows in online settings, concerns arise that online instructors typically receive no extra training to cope with the different demographic of students that exists in online education (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016). Online faculty often have not participated in distance education as students, which may make it difficult for them to identify with non-traditional students, or to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of the online model. Faculty members who have no distance education experience may also encounter fear and other negative emotions about working with online graduate students (Betts & Heaston, 2014). For these, and other reasons, online faculty require and desire professional development surrounding online pedagogy, specifically in smaller, focused trainings (Schmidt, Tschida, & Hodge, 2016). Quite a bit of literature has been written about adapting traditional curricula for online settings, as well as the various modes and technology for doing so, but far less research has been published on the non-traditional student, particularly the online graduate student, and how to best teach the varied demographics found in this form of distance education. With the differences found in each

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