

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Friday, January 4, 2008

Generation Gaps and Racial Disparities Draw Concern at Meeting of Law-School Officials

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New York

Today's law students, members of the "millennial generation," tend to be confident, pampered, accustomed to immediate feedback, and not afraid to demand changes. They also take stupid risks, exposing embarrassing personal information on social-networking sites and firing off cringe-worthy e-mail messages to their baby-boomer professors.

Those generalizations prompted plenty of lively discussion here, as did a new Web site that presents sobering statistics about diversity in law-school enrollment, on the opening day of the Association of American Law Schools' annual meeting.

A session called "Understanding the Millennial Law Student" offered law professors tips on how to connect with students who have unprecedented amounts of information at their fingertips and, in many cases, "helicopter parents" who have guided them through college and may still be hovering close by.

The theme of the conference, "Reassessing Our Roles as Scholars and Educators in Light of Change," is a call for what many see as a long-overdue reassessment of legal education.

The attitudes and expectations of today's law students may be changing, but their racial breakdown isn't—at least, not the way most people think it is, according to a recent compilation of law-school admissions data.

The statistics, from the Law School Admission Council, are highlighted on [a new Web site](#) created by Columbia Law School.

Worrisome Diversity Data

The data document how first-year enrollment of black and Mexican-American law students dropped from a total of 3,937 for both groups in 1992 to 3,595 in 2005. Even considering an upswing in black enrollment in 2006, the combined total was slightly less in 2006 than in 1992.

The decline occurred even though members of those groups have applied to law schools in relatively constant numbers during the period between 1992 and 2006, and standardized test scores and grade-point averages of those students have risen, said Conrad A. Johnson, clinical professor of law at Columbia.

"Most people who see this decline are as surprised as I was," he said.

The Web site was created by Columbia's Lawyering in the Digital Age clinic in collaboration with the Society of American Law Teachers, a group that advocates increased diversity in law schools.

Mr. Johnson, who serves on the society's Board of Governors, believes the decline may be due, in part, to law schools' focus on magazine rankings that rely heavily on Law School Admission Test scores. Although minority applicants' test scores have risen in recent years, they tend to be below those of white applicants.

Mr. Johnson believes the decline may also be due to "wishful thinking, based on anecdotal evidence, that the situation has improved, when it really hasn't."

Catching Up With the Millennials

Frustration over the slow pace of change at law schools that are steeped in a tradition more than a century old spilled over into several of the meeting's sessions.

"We got on the Generation X bandwagon about three minutes before it ended, but we have a great opportunity with this new generation to rethink legal education," Tracy Leigh McGaugh, an associate professor at Touro Law Center, said during the panel on millennial students.

Millennial-generation students, most of whom were born in the last two decades of the 20th century, are civic-minded and not afraid to shake things up, so they would be good allies in the effort to overhaul legal education, she said.

But they can be remarkably naïve in other areas, she added. She tells students horror stories about law students who lost out on jobs because of incriminating photos and narratives on social-networking sites like MySpace and Facebook.

"Those partners who are hiring you didn't just fall off the turnip truck. They know how to get on those pages, and if they don't, their nieces do," she said.

Some law students also need to be reminded to think twice before sending a professor an e-mail message "whose tone would be more appropriate if we were adversaries in divorce court."

When confronted, students are often surprised that their tone was off-putting. "Sometimes we just have to teach them how to treat us," Ms. McGaugh said.