COMMENTARY

The "Burnout Generation"

and the Role of Higher Education

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In a January Buzzfeed article, Anne Helen Peterson dubbed millennials the "burnout" generation, garnering national response. Peterson explained that while America as a whole is currently facing challenging economic times and political instability, millennials and the rising Generation Z are combatting "burnout" because they have had these effects magnified by phenomena like the omnipresence of social media and larger-than-ever burden of debt.

This should matter to higher education. Between traditional 18-24 year old undergraduates, less-traditional online and "adult" students, and graduate students, institutions of higher education are full of millennials and "cuspers." And they are struggling.

Only about 58% of college students graduate in 6 years. Student debt has skyrocketed, with an average bachelor's recipient graduating with nearly $30K in debt, and total student debt in the US surpassing total credit card debt. Mental health concerns are worsening, with 1 in 3 students reporting mental health issues, and 1 in 5 contemplating suicide. Students are clearly consumed by worries about financial insecurity, societal unrest, personal safety, and the onslaught of 24/7 "news."

Are millennial students suffering from "burnout" as Peterson posits? Perhaps. But the real issue is that they are facing an exhaustion of "mental bandwidth," the extremely limited amount of conscious cognitive resources available to accomplish tasks at hand. Students need bandwidth to complete assignments, study for exams, apply for jobs, and even pick something for lunch. There is simply not enough to go around. Having a positive mindset or trying harder or pushing through it is not going to help. There is only so much bandwidth available. When it's gone, it's gone.

The question becomes, how are students using their bandwidth, and what influence do institutions have?

While bandwidth refers to the cognitive resources that are potentially within conscious control, not every use of bandwidth is a conscious choice. To the contrary, much bandwidth is used up by forces beyond individual control. Cognitive interference—persistent unwanted thoughts—is a notorious waster of bandwidth. Test anxiety is a classic example of how unwanted thoughts take up cognitive resources and prevent one from being successful. There are numerous other sources of cognitive interference for students in higher education, like worries about finances, fear of failure, or concern about others' judgments.

In addition, higher education is increasingly home to greater numbers of low-income and first generation students, students of color, and other socially-marginalized students, all of whom face extensive bandwidth drains from unrelenting societal discrimination. These students have dealt with chronic depletion of bandwidth for much of their lives, and the "new" burdens of bandwidth demands that Peterson describes are layered on top of this and magnified by higher education environments that impose additional bandwidth drains unique to these students, like stereotype threat, and microaggressions.

Further, many students of this generation have already optimized their usage of bandwidth to a startling degree. Because so many of them have been guided by "helicopter parents" to be as efficient as possible in each thing they do, their bandwidth usage is often *over*-optimized. The "work smarter, not harder" mentality familiar to earlier generations as a way to free up time has been twisted into "work smarter AND harder," leading to greater productivity, but sacrificing meaningful living.

Yet unfavorable judgements of these students are rampant throughout higher education. These students are entitled and lazy. They can't complete the simplest assignments, whine about everything, and only

want to do something if it's going to be on the test. Their super-optimization and overextension of bandwidth is not only going unrecognized, but is being turned against them, resulting in shame, resentment, and anxiety (all of which, by the way, use up even MORE bandwidth.) Further, the system of rewards in higher education (i.e. good grades at all costs) intensifies the "work smarter AND harder" mentality and not only exhausts bandwidth, but also increases chronic stress and deteriorates physical and mental health.

Peterson describes the particular challenge millennials face when trying to garner motivation for high-demand, low-reward tasks that only benefit themselves. How many of these tasks are demanded of college students? It is not uncommon for a college students to be expected to handle five courses a semester (with A's, of course), while mastering research, internships, volunteering, student leadership, ePortfolios, and networks with peers and faculty—not to mention paying their bills, helping their families, and working outside jobs.

And although it would make sense for graduation requirements to include the components that are *most* likely to lead to student success, many of the high impact experiences that lead to the greatest success are "optional" (i.e. extra-bandwidth-requiring) activities. At a great many institutions, students would likely be better off investing their bandwidth resources in the popular "co-curriculum" rather than the curriculum itself.

To stop contributing to bandwidth exhaustion for students, institutions need to understand their role in draining bandwidth and how they can help students preserve these resources. As described in Dr. Cia Verschelden's recent book, *Bandwidth Recovery*, there are cost-effective, bandwidth-preserving interventions that can be implemented in the classroom and across campuses. Beyond this, implementing systemic changes that reduce bandwidth drain for all students would have the greatest impact.

To do this, institutions need to re-envision student success and rethink traditional criteria used to measure student success. Grade point average (GPA) is a key culprit. It is used excessively to determine access to opportunities, but it is highly influenced by many non-academic, bandwidth-draining factors like poor physical and mental health, job and family demands, and housing and food insecurity. Given this reality, it is problematic that GPA is used as the primary (and sometimes only) measure of learning, performance, potential, and ability.

Institutions of higher education also need to acknowledge and address how their systems, policies, and practices may reflect and intensify the classism, racism, and other forms of discrimination that steal students' bandwidth and create environments that hold back their learning and success. While the hard-won diversity- and equity-promoting initiatives at many institutions are encouraging, they are seldom able to address the root injustices that exist. Again, the role of GPA is critical to note. Cumulative GPA often reflects the quality of a student's K-12 education, whether a student has a reliable support network, or if they are able to adapt quickly to new social environment, rather than their academic potential or ability. And a low starting GPA is not only hard to overcome, it is also used to determine a student's access to the very opportunities that would help them engage in and succeed with their education. Thus, by using GPA so consistently, higher education stops acting as a "great equalizer," and instead perpetuates and even exacerbates the inequities experienced in society.

Higher education institutions need to recognize the critical role they play in building—or undermining—the foundation that students will carry forward into the rest of their lives. They need to take responsibility for providing students with what they truly need to be successful, in a way that enables them to use their bandwidth and other resources to build they life of meaning and value they seek. ■