New Kids on the Block:
Observations on the Newest Generation of MIT Students

Marilee Jones

One of the great pleasures of working in Admissions is that I'm afforded a bird's eye view of American teenage culture. While the freshman application has changed little over time and 17-year-olds are always the same in some fundamental ways, the attitudes, values, and activities of our applicants do change quite dramatically each decade or so, heralding the arrival of a new generation. This shift has occurred again and the leading edge of this newest generation now fills all four undergraduate classes at MIT. These students are as different from us as we were from our parents' generation. Their characteristics bode well for society as a whole, but not necessarily for MIT as it is today. Their presence will provoke a reevaluation of our purpose and mission and they will challenge all of us adults to lead them in ways we are not expecting. They will change MIT as surely as MIT will change them. And I'm not sure we're ready for them.

The Generations

First, by way of background, let's consider the different generations represented at MIT today. A quick comparison of generational characteristics captures the obvious differences among them. I refer here to **Rocking the Ages: The Yankelovich Report on Generational Marketing**, Walker Smith and Anne Chirman, '97, which describes four twentieth-century generations: Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. (N.B.: These generalizations are meant to capture the overall characteristics of the given population, not necessarily all individuals within it.)

The first group, labeled *Matures*, includes the World War II generation as well as the following Silent Generation.

Matures, made up of 61.8 million members born between 1909 and 1945, were affected most by the key markers of the Great Depression, the New Deal, World War II, the GI Bill. As a result, the key characteristics of this group are team work, commitment, sacrifice, discipline, financial and social conservatism. (They are also known to the following generation as "The Establishment.") Most of the senior administration at MIT is made up of Matures.

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are the largest single generation in US history at 77 million members. They were affected by Vietnam, TV, Woodstock, Watergate, and, of course, sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Boomers are characterized by idealism, individualism, self-improvement, high expectations and an intense self-centeredness. Most current faculty members are Boomers, as well as a little over half of all student services administrators, including the Dean of Admissions.

Generation X, born between 1965 and 1978, is the smallest population of the four at 52.4 million members. They were at the epicenter of the cultural meltdown brought about by the Baby Boomers in their effort to separate from the Matures. As a result, members of this cohort are characterized by pragmatism, diversity, entrepreneurial spirit, desire for a high quality of life, savvyness. They were most affected by AIDS, MTV, PCs, divorce, the Internet. This resourceful and resilient generation created the dot com phenomenon. Nearly half of student services administrators are Gen Xers.

Millennials, the newest generation, are the subject of this article. Born after 1979, they will nearly eclipse the Baby Boomers in size at just under 77 million

members (and growing). The Yankelovich Report describes their markers as OJ, Monica Lewinsky and multi-culturalism. I would add the Columbine shootings to that list. Key characteristics of this group are neotraditionalism, ritual, optimism, technological adeptness, volunteerism, busyness.

We can see the presence and the impact of these different generations at MIT over time in Table #1. As you know, all varsity teams and activities at MIT have been started by students. The 60% increase in varsity team offerings between 1970 and 1990 was the direct result of Title 9 which mandated gender equity in athletic offerings in public schools. The doubling of MIT clubs between 1980 and 1990 came about as a result of Gen X students who, used to finding community through common interests, created a plethora of ECAs (extra curricular activities), quite a different model of community building from their Boomer predecessors who connected through larger social movements. The doubling again of clubs and activities between 1990 and 2000 indicates the recent presence of the Millennials. Though there is no way to actually know, I would posit that the number of ECAs carried per MIT student now is higher than in years past. Millennials, as we shall see, are extremely busy people.

While I agree with the Yankelovich summary of Millennials, I'd like to share my own observations of this new generation as seen through the MIT application process, through the changing trends in the essays, activities, letters of recommendations, interview reports. I preface this with the clear

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Table 1

Varsity Teams and Clubs

Entrance Year	Varsity Teams	Clubs/ Activities
'60	21	60
'70	23	71
'80	31	80
'90	37	150
'00	41	356

understanding that I am discussing MIT applicants from the US (a specialized group to be sure). I am also generalizing like crazy, since we are now seeing just the leading edge of this amazing group, the peak number of which has just entered middle school.

• **They are idealistically pragmatic**. Combining the idealism of their Boomer parents and the pragmatism of the Gen Xers, these students really want to make the world a better place and, most importantly, they have a plan.

• **They are group centered.** As the population with the highest percentage of members in day care from an early age, they have learned good group skills, how to lead and follow as circumstances demand. They spend more time in groups and group activities than their predecessors.

• **They have no problem with authority**. These students have been raised in relative affluence in peacetime by Boomer parents. Most of their free time is spent in adult-supervised activities. They have little urge to push back against adults. In fact, they actually like adults. This is shocking to both Boomers and Gen Xers who still regard authority figures with suspicion, but Matures find a certain resonance with them.

• **They are attracted to large social movements**, very much like their Boomer parents, but look for ways to make their contributions on a local level, more like the Gen Xers. They are expected (even required) to volunteer in their communities, working side by side with adults who teach them competence and effectiveness. Consequently, they know how to work the system and they always have a Plan B. Many of our students have already made significant contributions to their communities while still in high school.

• **They are not as likely to study subjects for the pure pleasure of it**, not as likely to focus on one thing, because they are the busiest students in US history. The majority of my audiences this age seem to carry upwards from eight ECAs in high school, in addition to a stiff course load. (I wonder when these teens actually sleep.) They have essentially been trained to be generalists. Consider the tension created when MIT Mature, Boomer and Gen X faculty, who are living their passion, teach Millennials, who want to learn the material just well enough to get a good grade so they can move on to the other 17 activities they have to master that day. This has the makings of a classic generation gap.

• **They desire instant gratification**. A member of the Financial Services staff remarked recently that these kids "have never heard a busy signal." They are used to surfing the Web and they prefer Instant Messaging to the phone for the sake of efficiency. (Why have a conversation with just one friend when you can speak with 8 simultaneously?) With Boomer parents who demand top service and strive to meet their childrens' every need, these kids expect what they want when they want it from all of the adults in their lives.

• **They may not see or accept the consequences of their behavior**. Adults are always saving these kids. I see that top high school students who fail exams or miss deadlines due to outside commitments are regularly protected by their teachers and school personnel. Excuses are made, adults blame themselves rather than allow the student to accept the painful consequences that previous generations knew all too well. Parents do most of the negotiating with admissions offices now, regularly weighing in on every piece of the process on behalf of their busy children, taking on an almost eerie quality of parent-as-applicant. No surprise that students cheat more often, drop activities if they can't win, cut corners. Their time is all carved up, given away to multiple and competing demands that please adults while the adults in their lives race to protect them from failure.

Is MIT a good match for this generation?

In many ways, we are a good match for them. These kids are hard workers, carrying up to a third more courses in high school than we did at their age, so the MIT workload isn't as big an issue to them. They can balance competing demands. MIT is the firehose. They are diverse and require diversity. You can't find a more diverse private university in the US than MIT. They can lead or follow as required, and there are plenty of opportunities to do both here. They desire relevant work. We're all about relevance, eschewing ivory tower. They are intensely busy. Busy is our middle name.

But in many more ways I worry about the match. First, while these Millennials are busy, they are "diverse" busy, spreading their energies over many

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activities, not the "focused" busy of the classic Techie, who eats, sleeps, and dreams their passion. They desire structure when we are all about choice. They don't consider "choice" to be a value as the Boomers and Gen Xers do. These kids were raised on the World Wide Web and 90 channels of cable. They do not need 30+ choices of living groups – they are busy…they just want a room. You can see the evidence for this attitude in Table #2 , the chart listing the top reasons why admitted MIT applicants chose to enroll elsewhere. Last year, for the first time, housing and the quality of the campus, was the #3 reason why the students we worked so hard to admit went to other schools. This year, the quality of student life, which includes housing and campus issues, was #2 on that list. This generation is voting with its feet. The current housing system with its myriad choices and arcane rules, an artefact of the Boomer era, is no longer relevant to the students of today. MIT housing is changing just in time.

Most disturbing to me, though, is that the MIT Millennials, who have been raised on praise and positive re-enforcement, are in for real culture shock. They have been groomed to high achievement, feted by their schools and communities, have starred in *USA Today* as well as in their local papers, have been cheered in their games by adults from both sides. They have nearly all earned at least state level distinction in something. Think about that for a second. What would it have taken to be the state's best something when you were their age? It is a big deal and they could not have gotten that far without positive support from the adults in their lives. As we all know, there is very little of this at MIT, for any of us. These students come to MIT, ready for us to lead them and

Table 2

Why Admitted Freshmen Choose Not to Enroll

1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
Academic concerns (lib arts)	Financial Aid	Academic concerns	Costs/ Academic concerns	Costs
Finances	Academic concerns (lib arts)	Location	Costs/ Academic concerns	Academic concerns
	Location	Costs	Diversity	Housing/

position them for the next logical progression of their lives and they quickly disengage from us because we do not recognize their specialness. These are not Boomers or Gen Xers who reacted to this phenomenon by angrily pushing MIT faculty and administrators away and creating their own islands of support. These students wonder why we glorify the Big Screw Award, why the only campus-wide community sentiment is IHTFP, why we tolerate the Tech Is Hell lifestyle. They wonder why they turned down Stanford to come here.

Why should we care or try to change?

It is no surprise that I am writing this as Dean of Admissions. Many faculty who have worked with the Admissions staff and with CUAFA know well that we are in a tough period in college admissions. Our competition (Harvard, Stanford, Princeton, Yale) is actively recruiting our kind of students – Techies – at a time when these students' portfolios are now so balanced they are just as attractive to liberal arts schools as they are to us. And everywhere universities are buying top talent. In short, we now

have to work aggressively just to continue to hold our base. To make things worse, Millennials require a sense of the larger community that can readily be found at our competitor schools. MIT, with its focus on the individual, without a sense of campus-wide community, looks pale in comparison, like an outlier, to these kids. MIT will need to adapt in some ways if we are to continue to enroll the best students of our type in the world.

What they need from us

Millennials need MIT. Despite their good qualities, and there are many, these stunning young people need to learn to think analytically and to question more. They need a sense of context to help them sort through the dizzying mass of information they confuse for knowledge. And closer to this Boomer's heart, they need to realize that actions have consequences, so that in the future they will be less likely to hand over their privacy – and ours – for the sake of efficient consumer service. (They don't call these kids "the Abercrombie generation" for nothing.)

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Whether we acknowledge it or not, we adults at MIT do act "in loco parentis," playing a major role in the lives of our students. Just as we expect them to meet our needs regarding deadlines, class participation, attention to detail, etc., they need specific things from us in order to thrive here.

• **They need to understand the rules**. For example, we can't assume that they actually know what is considered cheating these days. It is possible that they do not realize that pulling something off of the Web and not citing the source is a bad thing. I understand that cheating cases of this sort have escalated in the past three years at MIT, so I encourage you to clearly define your rules at the beginning of each semester, describe the repercussions of violating your rules and then follow through if violation happens. Remember that most adults in their lives cave in to them easily, so they will push back hard. Stand firm through all of their excuses and whining. Eventually they will realize that you mean business and they'll comply because Millennials generally want to obey the rules.

• **They need to hear about MIT's history and relevance in the world and to be reminded why they are here**. This is a big one. These students know that they are special and they have a sense that MIT is, too. Yet, once they arrive on campus, they never again hear about why MIT is so famous. I believe that this is one of the reasons why generations of bright-eyed MIT students, the best in the world, have become disconnected, often cynical, by the end of their freshman year. It is not the workload alone, but a total lack of inspiration. This past spring I spoke at a leadership seminar on campus. One of the students told me, in passing, that he had not been doing well in an advanced course taken by many freshmen until the professor spent an entire class on the many ways that MIT specifically advanced that particular field, describing the history, the people, the same labs operational on campus today. The student was energized when he realized that he was part of that legacy. He saw the relevance of the material. He concluded the semester with an "A" and the confirmed desire to become a scientist. There is a great lesson here for everyone who teaches at this remarkable place. Our competition tells its students that one day they will inherit the world as it is. We need to tell our students that one day they will fix the world on behalf of the others who can't. This is not only the truth. It is the clarion call to this generation, the mother ship calling the baby ships home. I believe that if we remind our students on a regular basis that we fix this world, we do what others think is impossible, we "apply science for the benefit of humankind" as MIT was founded to do, and they are part of that effort, IHTFP will dissolve within five years. And the best of our kind of student will continue to come to MIT for another generation.

• **They need to be involved in decision making, but they need for us to make the final decisions.** We Boomers in particular have a tendency toward consensus even when consensus is inappropriate. They don't want us to be friends. They want us to lead.

• **They need praise and positive feedback.** At MIT, we put too much stock in perspiration and not enough in inspiration. Because we think analytically for a living, it is often hard to keep that skill, designed for the world of ideas, from spilling into our social discourse. We can inadvertently become critical of ourselves and of others. These students serve to remind us that we adults hold a special responsibility to encourage these future leaders of the world with words of kindness as we teach them the ropes.

• **They need to be allies with us.** MIT undergraduates have long existed in what I call a Lord of the Flies World in which, without adult intervention and engagement, they create their own rules and live with more danger than we might imagine. These new students will increasingly find this to be unacceptable because they are used to alliance with adults. Many of us will need to be more open to such alliance opportunities as Millennials enroll in force over the next decade.

From my point of view, the future looks bright. If we assume our natural role as the wise elders of this community during their tenure at MIT, and if we apprentice them well, the world will be in good hands with these Millennials. Not only will this huge population of very hard workers who care about community do good things in their lives, they will never let Social Security fail. And that should help us all sleep a lot better tonight.✤

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Table 3

MIT Faculty By Generation Type

Matures (1909-1944)	Boomers (1945-1964)	Generation X (1964-1979)
285	502	164