

Sifting Through the Stereotypes: Connecting with Gen Z Students
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How do you define academic rigor? Work that requires muscle, endurance, and may cause a degree of suffering to complete? Unyielding, inflexible, austerity? A condition that makes life difficult, challenging, or uncomfortable (e.g., the rigors of a New England winter)?

Narratives shape identity, give meaning to the events of our lives, and can become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Common narratives used to describe Gen Z¹ students, which can lead to unfortunate biases:

1. Privileged and protected → makes students “entitled”
2. Tethered → makes students “lazy,” expecting to be “entertained” in class

Can unconsciously seep into faculty evaluation of student work and cause us to notice deficits (what’s lacking) instead of assets (what’s there), as well as make judgments based on (sometimes false) assumptions about student effort.

Yet, such evaluation ignores into two other narratives that also constrain Gen Z students’ lives

3. Perfect is possible.
4. I am unsafe.

All 4 narratives undermine student resilience, the capacity to recover from setbacks.

- Just the right amount of adversity develops resilience: too little, nothing to “snap back” from; too much, folks crumble under the pressure.
- Resilience matters because it is highly correlated with student learning, persistence, and general well-being.
- 1.) Privileged and protected = too little adversity; 2.) Tethered = too little adversity (e.g., cat videos are so easy to watch) and too much (e.g., life has to be curated for social media scrutiny and judgment); 3.) Perfect is possible = too much adversity; 4.) I am unsafe = too much adversity.

Toxic consequence of Gen Z students having little (or no) resilience is epidemic levels² of:

- Disconnection/loneliness/isolation
- Adversarial relationships with time (never enough, life is a checklist)
- A sense of helplessness

¹ Students born between the mid-to-late 1990s though 2012. Also, referred to as Digital Natives.

² Data drawn from four large, nationally representative surveys of 11 million Americans since the 1960s... from Twenge’s 2018 book *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*

See also Camfield, E K. (2016). Mediated-efficacy: Hope for “helpless” writers. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 39(3), 2-11. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1130186.pdf>

- Depression and anxiety (50% increased rate of major depressive disorder in teens between 2011-2015; suicide rates have doubled)

Manifested in student attitudes about learning like these: *“I find it weird that I hate writing but I love to read... Every time I have an essay assignment for a class, I become very **anxious**. Before I even start writing down my outline, I **stress myself out** over **what will be good enough**. It takes me hours to even write my first sentence... No doubt, I have pressed the backspace button about a million times...I try my best in every assignment, but **the outcome never comes out positive**...The bad scores I would get **from my teachers** caused me to **doubt myself, lowered my confidence**, and caused me to **panic** every time I would write an essay.”*

How do we craft counter-narratives about Gen Z that foster resilience?

Reframe rigor as that which builds learning muscles: standards, curricula, and assessments that provide the right amount of adversity to support student growth.

- Cultivate **empathy and community**: build learning relationships that create a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2012); get to know your students
 - Assign autobiographical narratives about their past learning
 - Include student self-annotation of assignments to reveal their “invisible learning”
 - Use daily rituals for “checking in.”
 - Design collaborative learning activities
- Develop a “**growth mindset**” about students (Dweck, 2007); see them as interested in and capable of learning.
- Activate **student agency**: use pedagogy that empowers (Freire, 2018)
 - Dismantle hierarchies and teach transparently (see [TILT](#))
 - Build curriculum around student inquiry or themes (to avoid the tyranny of “content coverage” that can exacerbate time sickness)
 - Instead of reading quizzes, assign “one-pagers” or randomly select students to serve as “intellectual tour guides” (but do let them know ahead of time this will happen).
 - Honor (and reward) process as well as product
 - Give students *choices* over what they will study and what they will submit for evaluation.
- Become a “**warm demander**” (see Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Hammond, 2014)
- Help students develop **academic self-efficacy** (Bandura, 1987)
 - Mastery experiences; create some assignments as opportunities for students to succeed
 - Modeling (e.g., how to read a syllabus, how to create a semester workplan, how to read actively, how to write effectively); templates, graphic organizers, examples.

Eileen Kogl Camfield, CETL Faculty Associate, UC Merced, ecamfield@ucmerced.edu
 Leslie Bayers, CTL Associate Director, University of the Pacific, lbayers@pacific.edu
 Lott Hill, CTL Director, University of the Pacific, lhill@pacific.edu