



The New Professional Working Adult Learner – The Next Generational Cohort

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Abstract

With greatest respect and reference to Bob Dylan’s 1964 song “...the times [students] they are a changin...”, there has been a transitioning of professional working adult learners from one generational cohort to another, and now, to yet the youngest of generational cohorts... the Millennials.

Correlations exist between the number of webpage “hits” and the subsequent fall enrollments. While this information is important, it reflects a lagging indicator; that is, it does not tell us why there may have been more or less webpage hits. In contrast, a leading indicator will provide information as to why something has come to be.

From this perspective, this paper will examine the leading indicators to the new professional working adult learner; these individuals being the target cohort for fee-based professional education providers offering Master of Science or Master of Arts degrees.

Drawing from sixteen years of student data, this report will focus on who these cohort learners are and how they compare to previous cohort groups of comparable age. The information presented will focus on generational cohort differences that impact, or have the potential to impact the offering of Master of Science degrees and other fee-based continuing educational opportunities.

Specifically, this paper will focus on:

- Who are the new students
- The implications of ever increasing college costs
- The impact of increasing debt loads
- Moving back home after graduation and its implications
 - Postponing marriage
 - Postponing the buying of homes, cars and other material possessions
- Educational and income implications of having children later in life
- How do we make program/cost changes to our offerings to remain competitive

Who Are the Students?

To better understand how best and who is best to teach today’s college student, the personality and essence of the student needs to be better understood.

In a recent book by Levin and Dean titled *Generation on a Tightrope*¹, the authors present a snapshot of undergraduate students enrolled between 2009 and 2014. The authors begin by laying the foundation:

Today's college students are struggling to maintain their balance as they attempt to cross the gulf between their dreams and the diminished realities of the world in which they live. They are seeking security but live in an age of profound and unceasing change. (p. ix)...

They desperately want the economic opportunity their parents enjoyed but are coming of age during a deep recession with reduced career prospects. They want to believe in the America Dream and are optimistic about their personal futures but they are pessimistic about the future of the country. They want to be autonomous grown-ups but seem more dependent on their parents and the adults around them than any modern generation. They want intimacy—a partner and a family—but they are isolated, weak in face-to-face communication skills and live in a hook-up culture. They want to play by the rules but they don't know the rules and the rules are in flux because of the dramatic changes in our economy, the rise of new technologies, the condition of our public and private institutions, and a world growing flatter. They want to live in an n Internet world, a digitally connected globe but the adults and social institutions around them are analog or digital immigrants, including their blackboard universities.

From the onset, although not much of an issue, an understanding of their many names help, such that all may uniformly address these individuals as a cohort; that being born in a similar time period and having experienced similar major milestone events in their lives. Levin and Dean summarize the historical and current names being applied.

Current undergraduates have been called millennials (Howe & Strauss, 1992) and generation 2K (Zoba, 1999) because they are a part of the first college generation of the twenty-first century. They have also been called generation Y (Tulgan, 2009) and generation iY (Elmore & Cathy, 2010), which is logical because they followed generation X and are partial to the Internet. There is generation Z (Hopkins, 2005) because they are the children of generation X. Building on that Internet theme are the meat and potatoes Internet generation (Milner, 2010), the too-easy-to-confuse-with-basketball net generation (Tapscott, 2008), the insightful digital natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010) and the less committal digital generation (Jukes, 2010). There must be an iGeneration somewhere but we haven't found it. Taking an entirely different tack are the names me-first generation (Lipkin, 2009), meaning they are a tad self-involved, and echo-boom generation (Alch, 2000), referring to the fact that these are the

children of the baby boomers, not booming like their parents, just echoing, and so it goes.

As of this writing millennials leads the pack in popularity with generation Y following second but seeming to have faded because it may or may not refer to a somewhat older group of young people. (p. 5)...

Two of the many characteristics of this study and reported findings are the digital nature of this most recent cohort and the climate of continual change in which they live.

Colleges must educate this generation of undergraduates to thrive in an era of continuing change, to live productive and successful lives. A majority of undergraduates said their courses would be improved if they made greater use of technology, if their professors knew more about how to use technology, and if more of their classes made use of blended instruction, combining online and in-person classes (p. 165). The parallel to this statement resides in the truth of how many know a grandparent, or for that matter perhaps even a parent, that doesn't know how to use Facebook or how to tweet, or even for that matter how to text on a smartphone?

The Millennials, live in an anytime and anyplace world, operating twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week unbounded by physical location. "This causes a divergence between higher education and digital natives on the goals of education. Universities focus on teaching, the process of education, exposing students to instruction for specific lengths of time, whereas digital natives are more concerned with the outcomes of education, learning, and the mastery of content in the manner of games (p. 166)".

Higher education and digital natives slant toward different methods of instruction.

This is reflected in a difference between professors and students who approach knowledge in very different ways. Faculty members may be described as hunters who search for and generate knowledge to answer their questions. Digital natives by contrast are gatherers, who wade through a sea of data available to them in the disciplines, focusing on breadth versus depth of knowledge.

Digital natives are oriented more toward group learning and social networking, characterized by collaboration and sharing of content. This causes an ethical challenge for universities, which under certain circumstances view collaboration as cheating and uncited content sharing as plagiarism (p. 167).

Higher education as a provider of services is predominantly driven in belief and practice. "That is, the university through its faculty determines the curriculum, the content, the instructional methods, the study materials, and the class schedule. Digital natives tend to be consumer driven, preferring to choose if not the curriculum and content they wish to study, then the instructional

method by which they learn best, the materials they use to learn and the schedule by which they choose to study (p. 167).”

In the December 2012 report titled *Knocking at the College Door* (WICHE 2012) by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education³, the authors discuss the declining enrollment in institutions of higher education and the changing face of the college student from a racial and cultural perspective:

The landscape of American higher education has changed rapidly in recent years and will continue to do so into the future. Simple demographics suggest that some states and regions will continue to see increases in the number of high school graduates, while others will see declines. In addition, the composition of our graduating class will continue to change, with increasing number and shares of the population coming from communities of color... our nation's leadership position is in peril: the U.S. has slipped to 16th in the share of its young adult population with a college education...

The number of high school graduates overall having peaked during the 2010-2011 academic year, all four regions will see short-term declines in their numbers...

Why are College Costs so High?

As a nation, we are standing at the precipice of seismic shifts in national and international higher education and public institutions of higher education in particular. “The U.S. economy is stuck in neutral since the last recession, tuition prices are skyrocketing, student loan debt has surpassed \$1 trillion, parents, who have leveraged their homes through equity loans and first loans - for the second time, are losing faith in the value of education, state funding is dwindling, federal grants are shrinking, and donor dollars are smaller⁵”. These are the times in which we live. Change is inevitable. We can continue to do what we do, until such time when we can't, then, we must do something else. This is the prevalence of the literature today.

There is a growing trend toward college and university mergers. Marcus⁶ states “...it's a kind of private sector-style consolidation that is becoming increasingly common, not only for public institutions, but also for nonprofit, independent ones that can pool their resources and cut their costs in a time of falling budgets and demand for efficiencies in higher education...” Marcus goes on to state “...there have been few mergers of colleges and universities in the past... but the pace of such consolidations is picking up...” What is happening is a very natural next phase in the business life-cycle; costs are rising, the number of new freshman entering into college is flat, and college and universities are experiencing the financial implications of reduced revenue and increased costs (p. 2). In the end, we cannot protect something that does not have an economic

right to exist. Market forces will prevail as they always do; free money through taxpayer's indebtedness and rising tuition does not last forever.

Moody's, in their January Industry Outlook report of 2013, was negative about the financial prospects of higher education. They highlighted the consolidation trend as one of the "bolder actions by university leaders" that can "foster operating efficiencies and reduce overhead costs amid declining state support..." by centralizing such services as marketing, fundraising, purchasing, and information technology.

In the report *The Next Generation University*⁷, the nonpartisan New America Foundation stated higher education must adopt business practices to improve efficiency. Writing, the authors of the report state "...in the business world, the prevailing philosophy has long been that efficiencies and savings can be achieved by getting bigger and building economies of scale... which is why companies grow or merge with competitors..."

"It's not an easy thing politically," said Richard Novak, senior vice president for programs and research at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, "...you certainly have academic departments that have on the surface the most to lose, and will be the most vocal critics. And faculty, who have tenure and job security, are the most likely to be outspoken about it⁶ (p. 2)." Marcus goes on to state "everybody is realizing that we're not going back to the way things used to be... change is coming – and you can either get on board or be left by the side of the road (p. 3)."

States have been increasingly rolling back their financial support for higher education, leaving their public universities, which already educate eight in ten Americans, scrambling for cash at a time when students are trying to get in. This leads to the finger pointing of inefficiencies. And, when the finger pointing of inefficiencies begin, it almost always points at the oft quoted "bloated administration" and "overbuilding" across any given campus. Remedies to increasing efficiency and reducing costs suggest⁷ (p. xiii):

- ❑ Limiting the number of majors and tying those remaining to the needs of the local economy
- ❑ Offering classes year around
- ❑ Offering distance hybrid courses

Other suggestions are generally aligned to standard business practices of⁸:

- ❑ Simplifying organizational structures by decreasing layers of management
- ❑ Increasing the number of direct reports for any given supervisor
- ❑ Eliminating redundancies in service organizations such as information technology (IT), human resources (HR), finance or marketing through centralization, and, consolidating purchasing

There is no shortage of ideas on how to fix the growing and currently perceived financial debacle of higher education. Over twenty years of literature reveals hundreds of potential solutions. While these are specific recommendations for colleges and universities to follow, most are really nothing more than basic practices in any business/industry looking to increase efficiencies and reduce costs.

Moving Back Home and Its Implications

Increasingly students, those who graduated and those who did not, are moving back home. While there is no single authoritative source for actual percentages, a proliferation of studies reflect 34% of graduating students moved back home in 2011 and a more recent survey reflected 60 – 85% of graduating students intended to move back home after graduation¹¹ (p. 1). All of this seems to be due to the slowly recovering economy from the last official recession; December 2007 through June 2009, and a difficult job market.

CNNMoney¹² (p. 1) reported in 2011 that as many 85% of graduating college seniors intended to move back home for at least a short while; this up from 67% in 2006. PEW Research Center reported in December 2011 that 53% had intended to move back home, at least, again, for a short while.

Whatever data is used for reporting, clearly there is a trend that implies college graduates are in fact expecting to move back home, if not for only a short while after graduation.

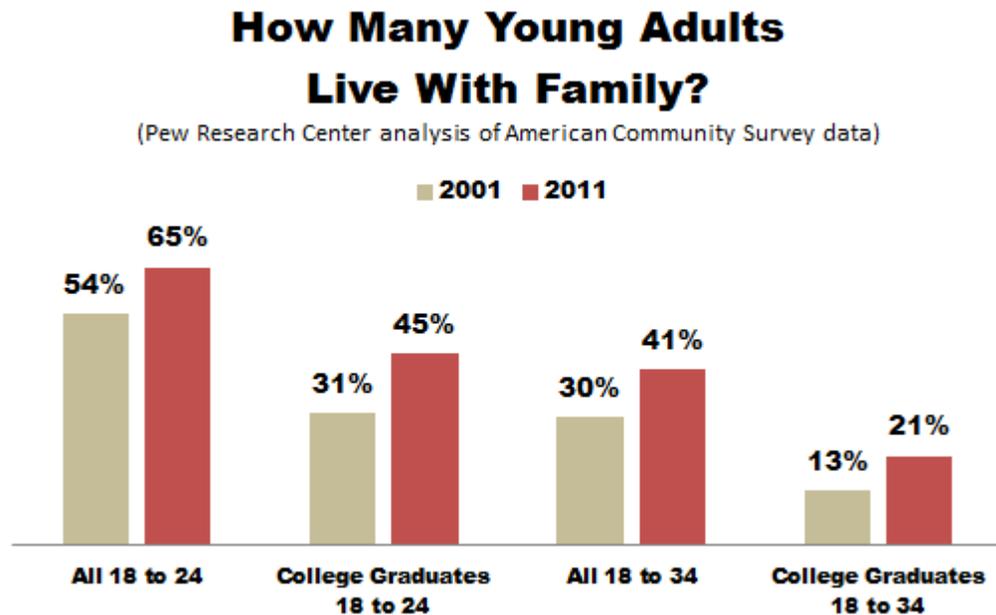


Figure 1.0 – Increase in College Graduates Moving Back Home

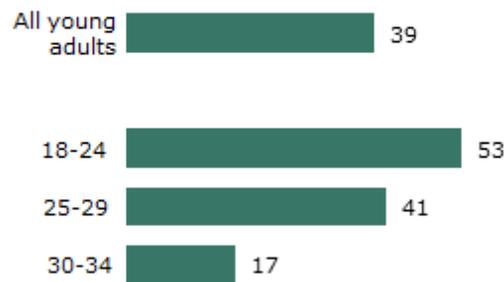
Vivian Giang, reporting for Business Insider in 2012 states: "...It's becoming the norm for young people to move back in with their parents. In fact, 53 percent of 18-to-24 year olds are living

with their parents, and 85 percent of college seniors plan on moving back home after graduation (Gang, p. 1).”

In March, 2012, PEW Research Center reported more generally “...This generation of young adults has sometimes been labeled the “boomerang generation” for its proclivity to move out of the family home for a time and then boomerang right back. The Great Recession seems to have accelerated this tendency. The Pew Research survey found that among all adults ages 18 to 34, 24% moved back in with their parents in recent years after living on their own because of economic conditions.” Tracking the number of young people in a given household is more easily measured than relying on voluntary data from those nearing college completion. Although, job prospecting in a nearing college graduate’s vision is a very strong indicator of intent; meaning, if a college graduate is not finding gainful employment than their reporting they intend to move back home is likely a positive correlation to reality upon graduation.

Youngest Adults Staying Close to Home

% saying they live with parents now or moved back in with parents temporarily because of economy



Note: Based on adults ages 18-34, n=808.

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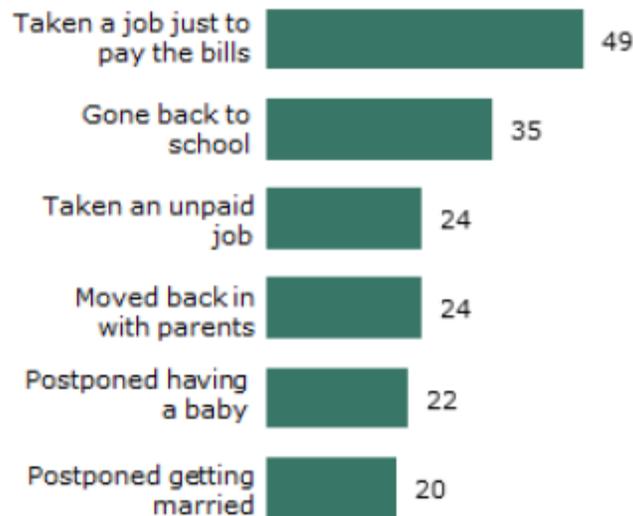
Figure 2.0 – Moving Back Home Because of Economy, by Age Demographic

February 9, 2012, PEW¹³ reported “...More affluent adults and those with higher levels of education are among the most likely to say that young people are struggling in today’s economy. Nearly half (48%) of college graduates say young adults are having the hardest time these days. This compares with 37% of those whose educational attainment is a high school diploma or less. Similarly, adults with annual household incomes of \$75,000 or higher are much more likely than those making less than that to say young people have been hit harder than their older counterparts (52% vs. 37%, respectively).”

The PEW Research Center graphic below (PEW, Feb. 9, 2012, p. 3) leads directly to subsequent discussion on the implications of the slowly recovering economy and difficult job market on the postponement of marriage, having children and purchasing of material possessions typical of age-specific cohorts.

How Economic Conditions Have Affected Young Adults' Lives

% of 18- to 34-year-olds saying they have done each in recent years because of economic conditions



Note: Based on adults ages 18-34, n=808.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER Q29

Figure 3.0 – Impact of Economic Conditions on Employment Selection

Postponing Marriage and Children

While the data on how many college graduates is subject to many studies, data on the average and median age at first marriage is readily available from U.S. Government census data and reporting.

Subsequent to moving back home after graduation is the continuing, and next logical postponement of adulthood, namely, getting married. Again, as with moving back home there is significant literature on the seemingly ever increasing increase in age at first marriage.

From 1960 to 2010, the median age at first marriage went up nearly six years, from 22.8 years of age to 28.7 for males, and from 20.3 to 26.5 years of age for females¹⁷ (p. 3).



Figure 4.0 – Increase in Median Age of First Marriage

In piecing together the puzzle, established is that college graduates are moving back home after graduation, and, are postponing marriage in record numbers. Aligned to the postponement of marriage are discussions on total fertility rate, education and fertility, income and fertility, and the biological implications of postponing having children.

The total fertility rate is premised on the number of babies the average woman would bear over the course of her life if she were to survive until the end of her reproductive years and age-specific birth rate were to remain constant¹⁴.

“...Demographers measure fertility in different ways. They start with the simplest observation: the number of births each year plotted against the numbers and ages of the rest of the population. From there they calculate the “crude birth rate,” which is the number of children born per 1,000 people in that particular year. The crude birth rate isn’t particularly useful, but for sake of context, the U.S. population was about 312 million in 2011 and about 4 million babies were

born, so the U.S. crude birth rate was around 13. By combining the crude birth rate with other census data, you can determine “completed fertility,” which is the number of babies actually born to each woman in American by the time she’s 50.. And finally, there’s the “total fertility rate.” The TFR is closely related to completed fertility: It’s the number of babies the average woman would bear over the course of her life if she were to survive until the end of her reproductive years and age-specific birth rate were to remain constant¹⁴ (p. 5).”

A few quick facts on total fertility rate and its implications on the world population¹⁴ (p. 11).

- ❑ The American fertility rate currently sits at 1.93
- ❑ In order for a country to maintain a steady population, it needs a fertility rate of 2.1
- ❑ Which means that the Japanese and Italians (with fertility rates of about 1.4) are on the verge of downsizing their countries. Their cities are dwindling; some small towns are on the cusp of simply closing
- ❑ 1979 world’s fertility rate was 6.0, today it’s 2.52

Relative to education and fertility, the more educated a woman becomes, the less children, on average, she has (p. 12).

- ❑ U.S. average 1.93
- ❑ College graduate = 1.78
- ❑ Women with a graduate degree = 1.61

<i>Education level</i>	<i>Total Fertility Rate</i>
Not a high school graduate	2.447
High school, 4 years	1.947
College, 1 or more year	1.719
Associate’s degree	1.820
Bachelor’s degree	1.632
Graduate degree	1.596
Source: Jane Lawler Dye, U.S. Census Bureau, “Fertility of American Women: 2006,” August 2008.	

Figure 5.0 – Educational Impact on Fertility

Education, then, is directly correlated with delayed family formation. The drop in fertility among women with college and advanced degrees, then, is in large part a function of delayed family formation.

Specifically, it’s not just the length of education that diminishes fertility, or the careers the education makes possible, but the debt load the education incurs. Since 1987, when the Nellie

Mae Corporation began keeping statistical track of student loans, the average student- loan burden on college graduates has almost quadrupled, from \$7,500 to \$29,400.

In looking at income and fertility rates, there is again a direct correlation between increasingly higher levels of income and decreasing fertility rates¹⁴. As the below chart depicts, household income level under \$20,000.00 represents the highest fertility rate at 2.038. As household income rises up through the range of roughly \$75,000 to \$100,000 per year, fertility rates decline and stabilize around 1.75%. Household incomes over \$100,000 show a slight uptick from the 1.75% to 1.83%, but far less than the highest fertility rate of 2.038.

<i>Household Income Level</i>	<i>Total Fertility Rate</i>
Under \$20,000	2.038
\$20,000 to \$29,000	1.988
\$35,000 to \$49,999	2.052
\$50,000 to 74,999	1.734
\$75,000 to \$99,000	1.752
\$100,000 and over	1.832
Source: Jane Lawler Dye, U.S. Census Bureau, "Fertility of American Women: 2006," August 2008.	

Figure 6.0 – Impact of Income on Fertility

Given young adult college graduates are assuming increasingly greater levels of school loan debt, are forced into moving back home for a period of time, delay marriage, opting to find gainful employment and establish their careers all prior to having children; when, then, do these young individuals have their first born child and how does that compare to previous generations?

The answer, as might be expected, is the median age of first time parents has been skewed to the right; meaning, the median age of first time parents has gone up. Data reflects the median age for first time parents has increased as much as 5% for mothers 30 - 35 years and older; this while 20 to 30 year old first time mothers decreased in age by 3%.

In looking at the second figure below, the Center for Disease Control depicts declining birth rates for three age categories, 15-19, 20-24 and 24-29; while depicting increasing birth rates for age groups 30-34, 35-39 and 40-44.

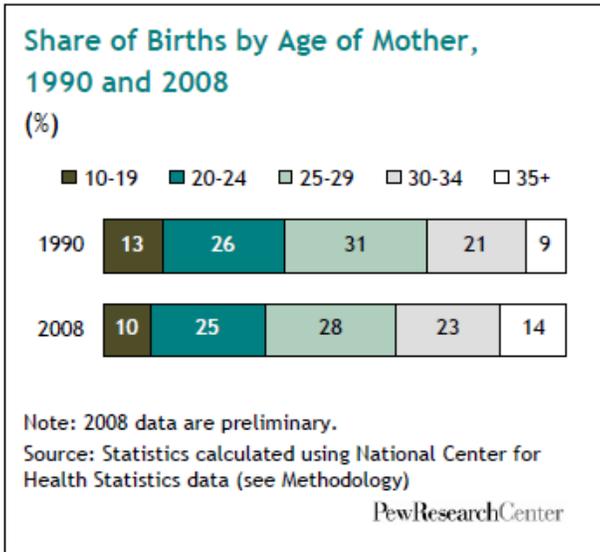


Figure 7.0 – Increase in Age of First Births

Recasting Motherhood, 1990 to 2008
 (% of births by characteristics of mother)

	1990	2008	Percentage Point Change
Mother's Age			
< 20	13	10	-3
20-34	78	75	-3
35+	9	14	+5
Mother's Race			
White	65	53	-12
Black	16	15	-1
Hispanic	14	24	+10
Asian	3	6	+3
Mother's Marital Status			
Married	72	59	-13
Unmarried	28	41	+13

Note: 2008 data are preliminary. Percentages may not total to 100% due to missing data or rounding.
 Source: Statistics calculated using National Center for Health Statistics data (see Methodology)

PewResearchCenter

Crossover

Figure 8.0 – Increase in Births of Unmarried Mothers

From another perspective, the skewing of median age of first marriage and children, has its limits. From a biological perspective, between the ages of 24 and 34, a woman's chance of becoming infertile increases from 3 percent to 8 percent. By 35, half of all women trying to get pregnant over the course of 8 months will not succeed. After 35 it gets even more difficult. By age 39, a woman has a 15 percent chance of being unable to conceive at all. And, by a woman's 43 birthday, her chances of getting pregnant are nearly zero. All of which is why today, 1 out of every 100 babies born in the United States is created via in vitro fertilization¹⁴ (p. 51).

Postponing the Purchasing of Material Possessions

As we chronologically age, we have very predictable patterns of spending. These patterns of spending are directly linked to what have been coined gerontological life phases. When we refer to gerontological phases we are referring to the scientific study of human development. The

scientific study of human development is the science that seeks to understand how and why people change, and how and why they remain the same, as they grow older¹⁵ (p. 4).

To help individuals to better understand the developmental changes we experience as we grow older, there have been established three domains of human development: biosocial, cognitive, and psychosocial.

Biosocial development includes all of the growth and changes that occur in a person's body, and the genetic, nutritional, and health factors that affect those developments, as well as motor skills, everything from grasping a rattle to driving a car. Cognitive development includes all the mental processes that are used to obtain knowledge or to become aware of the environment.

Psychosocial development includes development of emotions, temperament, and social skills. (p. 5).

Gail Sheehy was one of the first to authoritatively document the basic consumption patterns of ageing individuals or cohorts of individuals based on age. Harry Dent¹⁶, more recently aligned these patterns to actual accumulated data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey. Dent's findings can be summarized in the below. The consumer life cycle presented below, uses U.S. Census Bureau data to reflect the median age by which most Americans participate in a given event; for example, our first starter homes are purchased generally around the age of 31.

- ❑ Single (ages 18 – 22)
- ❑ Young Married (ages 22 – 30)
 - Average age of first apartment – 26
- ❑ Young Family (ages 31 – 42)
 - Average age of 1st starter homes – 31
 - Average age of trade-up homes - 41
- ❑ Family, College Kids (ages 46 – 50)
 - Average age, largest consumption of furniture - 46
- ❑ Empty Nesters (ages 50+)
 - Average age for college tuition peak – 51
 - Average age for purchases of autos – 53
- ❑ Retired (60+)
 - Average age for hospital visits – 60
 - Average age vacation and retirement homes – 65
 - Average age for cruises – 70
 - Average age for predominance of prescription drugs – 77
 - Average age for nursing homes - 84

As we chronologically age, our life demands for shelter, transportation, food and clothing all change. These many changes are a reflection in large part to our changing family makeup at distinct periods in time. From above, it can be construed our U.S. populace generally get married in their 20's. The 30's are typically a time for the collection of material possessions (cars, homes, furniture, appliances, etc.) Our late-40's reflect an empty nester's phase, where our children become, theoretically, independent and move out onto their own; whether this be college or simply moving away from home to begin working. During our 50's, we begin to notice the changes of primary ageing; that is, those changes related to biological changes in hearing, eye sight, and other physical changes that are frequently the underlying premise for sayings such as “..ageing is not for the faint of heart..”

It becomes considerably more apparent when looking through the above lens to see the overall impact delaying adulthood can have on our national economy. Skewing our purchases to the right, places pressure on the entire economic infrastructure designed around historically predictable patterns of purchasing. In summary, delaying entry into adulthood, meaning moving away from home, being married, having children and all of the implications of this shift to the right, has a negative impact on the whole of the U.S.

In 1950, the median age in the U.S. was 30 years of age. In 200, the median age had increased to 35 years of age. By 2050, the median age in the U.S. will be 40. As people age, they consume less in terms of material possessions. Those chronologically aged also reduce their earnings and subsequently their taxes, therefore reducing the overall U.S. tax base.

Complimenting this line of thinking, is the required number of working adults 16-64 who pay into Social Security in support of those who draw down from this Government sponsored social support program. The below table reflects the severity of this ratio from 1940 (the first year social security checks were issued) to more recent 2010.

“The Social Security Administration predicts that by 2034, the ratio of workers-to-retirees will fall to just 2.1 workers for every retiree as a result of (1) roughly 809 million Baby Boomers retiring and (2) the declining fertility rates having failed to produce a proportionate number of new workers (p. 108).”

Ration of Workers Paying FICA Taxes to Retirees Collecting Social Security Benefits			
<i>Year</i>	<i>Workers (in millions)</i>	<i>Beneficiaries (in millions)</i>	<i>Ratio (number of workers supporting each retiree)</i>
1940	35.390	0.222	159.4
1950	48.2850	2.930	16.5
1960	72.530	14.262	5.1
1970	93.090	25.186	3.7
1980	113.656	35.118	3.2
1990	133.672	39.470	3.4
2000	155.295	45.166	3.4
2010	156.725	53.398	2.9

Source: Social Security administration (<http://www.ssa.gov/history/ratios.html>).

Figure 9.0 – Number of Workers Supporting Each Retiree

Conclusions

On the whole, we have a slowly recovering economy, difficult job market, high student debt, graduates moving back home after graduation, delays in marriage, having children and the purchasing of material possessions. All of this demands action for the betterment of our society and the world populous as a whole.

Although one could argue vehemently the root cause of any one of the above triggers of delayed adulthood, the perspective of this paper suggests the precipice of change has to error on the side of continuing to educate our populous at a fair and reasonable costs.

There are multiple areas for future research. Below reflects a few of these areas.

- ❑ A mapping of what we now know about this next generational cohort to the many programs offered to professional working adult learners. Specifically, with the above presented information on economic variables and their impact on life phases, how will organizations offering opportunities for continuing education be better equipped to align program costs to participating students and program applicability to needed employment skills?
- ❑ Given the many demands on the new cohort of program participants, what impact might be expected to time to graduation?
- ❑ Will the average age of the professional learner go up with the above presented life-phase shift?
- ❑ Will there be greater need for career and financial services in support of the many competing economic considerations?

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