

# The Changing Faces of Higher Education

From Boomers to Millennials

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**Series in Education**



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# Foreword.

## Bridging Generational Gaps in Higher Education: Perspectives from an “Old Millennial”

Alexandra “Xan” C. H. Nowakowski

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I find this volume deeply resonant, cathartic, and energizing. The unique generational context of my own upbringing also situates me especially well to appreciate its nuanced contributions. This much I anticipated; what I could not have foreseen was how perfectly the invitation to pen an introduction would enable me to understand the content on a deeper level.

I am an “Old Millennial” in perhaps the truest sense. I was born just before the end of 1983, and am now writing this reflection in advance of my 38<sup>th</sup> birthday. This places me squarely within the Millennial generation socially. Whether it makes me “old” in a more general sense depends on perspective. I live with a genetic disease called cystic fibrosis (CF) that makes mucus extremely sticky. People with this disease generally face a lifetime of health challenges related to breathing, nutrition, and infections. We also historically lived very short lives. During my birth year, average life expectancy for CF in the United States hovered around 18; it has since increased to nearly 50. Many of my Millennial peers in the CF community have survived things that many of today’s young patients will never endure—and many have not.

Understandably, my parents and their fellow Boomers who had children with CF feared this diagnosis deeply. My parents experienced additional terror because they recognized the disease clearly but could not get me conclusively diagnosed in early childhood. How old I am is thus a deeply contextual question to which the answer really depends on context. Chronologically, I am 37. Experientially, I am older—and hopefully a little wiser as a result. This hard-won wisdom makes me especially grateful for the efforts and insights of each author in this volume.

Years before Internet bloggers dubbed my specific birth cohort of Millennials the “Oregon Trail Generation”, I vented my frustrations about the

physical ravages of CF through various “you have died of dysentery” memes. Getting an education is not entirely unlike traveling the arduous Oregon Trail in search of a better life. Some days you try to ford the river and your oxen die. Other times, you make it across to face the next challenge. You probably also spend a lot of time, especially lately, reflecting on how the very metaphors you have used all your life to understand your journey were built on the erasure of oppressed peoples.

CF never did manage to derail my own education, though not for lack of trying. I attribute this partly to embracing a certain stereotypically Boomerish stubbornness in persisting through situations where I should have rested. For example, I completed my PhD in just over two years while working full-time as a research project manager and living with intractable pneumonia that antibiotics would not resolve. Part of me looks back on what I expected of myself and feels impressed. Another part feels horrified, and a third sees how I continue struggling to change my own behaviors in the present. Like many Millennials raised by Boomer parents, I feel a complex array of gratitude and despair in attempting to untangle the constructive lessons I internalized from the toxic ones. After reading this volume, I feel better prepared to draw those distinctions, and to respond effectively.

I also survived into adulthood—both educationally and otherwise—because I was raised at a medical school. My Boomer parents, who remain highly active professionally, ran a developmental neuroscience lab at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School for nearly 25 years before joining the faculty at Florida State. I suppose you could say I joined the family business. While receiving ample mentorship from them myself—and of course interacting with a lot of brain specimens while helping out in their lab—I also observed them teaching multiple cohorts of Gen X medical students. This unique upbringing helped me to understand generational contexts and communication styles in ways I might not have otherwise. As an early member of the Millennial generation who was socialized almost exclusively around adults outside of school, I have lived largely at the intersection of the analog and the digital. Consequently I have often served as a bridge between these two frameworks in education and life.

I also spent many years being “the only one” on multiple fronts in my workplaces within higher education. In my early years at FSU College of Medicine, I was often the first faculty member students encountered who openly reflected their own lived experiences of certain types of marginalization. I openly disclose my own lived experiences of bisexuality, nonbinary gender, chronic illness, disability, abuse, multiethnicity, and neurodivergence so that I can share their impact on my understanding of quality health care. Over time, I have developed a surprisingly simple rule on

personal disclosure: I never ask my students to show vulnerability in learning that I do not first model myself in teaching.

So I deeply appreciate how the diverse chapters in this volume illuminate fundamental differences between Boomers and Millennials about appropriate roles and functions for vulnerability in higher education. As someone who spends as much time managing health challenges myself as I do teaching others about medical care, I see vulnerability as essential for effective clinical education. And I now find endless joy in seeing my own school evolve to mirror many of the experiences and dialogues from this volume that have proven so transformational for my own students as colleagues of all ages have found their own courage to share more openly.

I have heard from some of my Boomer colleagues that seeing younger faculty model vulnerability in the face of comparatively greater risks to our careers and reputations has inspired them, and helped them to realize their own inner strength. This perspective has proven invaluable to me in my own work with colleagues from my parents' generation—because it has helped me to understand that reluctance to change often stems from deeply seated fears of inadequacy. And my training in sociology constantly reminds me of the contextual origins of these fears for members of different generations.

Indeed, the chapters in this volume illustrate both important dynamics of intergenerational struggle and more systemic processes of oppression underlying these conflicts. Achieving justice in higher education is not a question of Boomers vs. Millennials, but rather one of “all of us vs. capitalism” as I once noted to a GenX colleague. This book offers realistic, actionable recommendations for working together towards educational equity. Each author balances empathy for Millennials and Boomers individually with action on broader justice needs in educational settings.

I also highly recommend the concluding reflections section, which can help readers expand from our own individual contexts to a broader picture of how we can make needed change happen. None of us can travel an entire trail in the space of a day, whether to Oregon or somewhere more intangible. We also likely fare much better making that journey together than alone. Moving forwards with a collaborative spirit—*especially* when this teamwork exposes us to discomfort personally and makes us question our internalized values—will be vital. We honor our students best by remaining conscious of our own roles as true “lifelong learners” per the educational model embraced by many Boomers in recent decades. Just as we are never too old to learn new tricks, we are never too young to shine in teaching them.



# Preface.

## When Baby Boomers Ruled the World...

I (Mitchell Mackinem) am a Baby Boomer and for many years my cohort and I ruled the world. Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. This is a fairly long period of time and often Baby Boomers are broken up into two edges. The “leading edge” Baby Boomers were born from 1946 to 1956 and the “trailing edge” Baby Boomers were born from 1956 to 1964. I am a trailing edge Boomer. Baby Boomers are often associated with Woodstock and the Vietnam War and that certainly is true for leading-edge Baby Boomers. We, the trailing edge Baby Boomers, would’ve been young children during Woodstock and we would never serve in Vietnam. I would’ve been 11 years old trying to hitchhike up to New York State to go to Woodstock. Whether front edge or trailing edge Baby Boomers, we grew up in a time of economic prosperity, deep racial divisions, deep gender divisions and ultimately a period of rapid social change. We fought against the “greatest generation” and as they died off, we took over as the chairs, deans, CFOs and college presidents. As with past rulers, we too are fading, but we still largely rule the academic world.

Current realities are often created in our formative years. We Boomers saw Dr. King assassinated, John and Bobby Kennedy gunned down. In our brief time, we went from television aerials to cable television; slide rules to calculators; human computers to electronic computers; landline phones to cell phones; and from newspapers to the internet. The birth control pill was developed and widely used during our youth. The sexual revolution ensued which was unfortunately followed closely by the AIDS epidemic. We Boomers have seen so much change. Change in the land of the ivory tower has also been sharp and fast.

In the 1980s, prospects were strong for a graduate student. If one were successfully trained and socialized at a Division I university, one could reasonably expect to secure a job. If not in a Division I University, new PhDs could at least work at a strong academic university. Occasionally, one might hear about someone not really making it and ending up at a small liberal arts college. At least in a small liberal arts college there wasn’t a publish and perish imperative like there was at the larger universities. Once our burgeoning scholar secured the sought-after university position one could expect to teach maybe six courses a year, do a little committee work, and secure the big prize of tenure. These were not unreasonable expectations and many a graduate during the era of Baby Boomer academia was able to achieve these lofty goals.

As much as it grieves us to say, those days are over and gone. While not a definitive list there has been some tremendous changes in higher education in the last 10 to 15 years. Colleges and universities have become very expensive, and the cost of higher education has far outstripped the inflation rate. As a result of this and many other forces, colleges and universities became driven by a business model. This model demands a strong focus on financial responsibility, ever-increasing enrollments, ever-increasing fundraising, and watching nickels and dimes in expenditures. Academics are now not only supposed to teach classes, they are also expected to secure outside funding from the federal government, bureaucracies, and foundations so all-too-valuable indirect expenditures can be pocketed by universities.

The composition of the academic workforce dramatically changed in large part because of increasing pressures on expenditures. Adjunct professors quickly became a way to replace, at much lower cost, tenured professors. Adjunct professors could be paid a relatively cost-effective amount and produce the same revenue as a full-time faculty member without all the healthcare costs, pension costs, and other indirect expenditures. A cheap way to balance the budget was just to get a few adjuncts and not hire a full-time faculty. When adjuncts weren't enough, an institution could hire a visiting professor. Visiting professors have changed. They used to be both uncommon and temporary. Visiting professorships were a great way to gain a little bit of experience and expand your vita. Now visiting professors can be paid at lower rates with no guarantee of employment. Today, institutions often hire visiting faculty on the cheap and fire them at will.

What about the all-important tenure? Tenure was supposed to secure academics from the vicissitudes of public opinion allowing academics to voice unpopular views based upon science and research. Earning tenure was a sign that one had arrived as an academic. Tenure was a public marker that the scholar was worthy of accolades and security. The academic had proven to his or her peers that their respective research, publications, and teaching had met the highest standards. Anyone surveying the current academic landscape would recognize that today's tenure is becoming increasingly rare and far more fragile. It is still difficult but not impossible to fire an individual tenured faculty member. It is also now far easier to eliminate a department or major and eliminate many tenured faculty. In states with higher education unions, tenure seems to be solid, but the number of states with higher education unions is quite small. For most faculty in most institutions, tenure is nice but not the security it once was.

Online classes? That term would have been totally meaningless to any Baby Boomer faculty during much of their early education and career. Card catalogs and a well-endowed library were the bedrock of any academic discipline.

Mainframe computers, if they existed, with their finicky computer cards could do statistics quickly and with marked accuracy. The early mainframe computers could do some word processing. My first mainframe computer usage showed me that they had a spell check program that could check over 600 words for proper spelling. This is almost laughable now. Mainframe computers gave away to household computers and the rapid rise and dissemination of the Internet. Today, during the pandemic online teaching has been the lifeline for many institutions to provide education in a safe and somewhat effective way. Sure, many Baby Boomer professors had trouble adapting to online learning platforms, Zoom, Windows Meetings and other kinds of technology applications; but there were young faculty on campus to show them the way.

The academic world in which we Baby Boomers grew up is gone. As with so many professions, we have had to learn to adapt to new times and new technology. Yet, the early formations of our academic foundations came from a time when colleges and universities were relatively cheap, jobs at major institutions were achievable, academics could publish, state, regional, or national conferences were readily available and a great way to meet your old colleagues, tenure was available, and Baby Boomers ruled the world.

The academic world that we were trained in is gone, but we are not. Second wave Baby Boomers are the managers, presidents, provosts, and leaders of many academic institutions. Following edge Baby Boomers are not retired but are looking forward to retiring soon. In the meantime, we are the bosses. If not the actual chair, we can be the old curmudgeon in the academic office suite that talks about how they're not going to change. As one of my colleagues told me, "I've been using these notes for 20 years and I see no reason to change."

This entire book deals with the friction between us, the Baby Boomers, and the newer generations of faculty. Sometimes the friction is productive, sometimes the friction is destructive. Sometimes we resist the change, stifle the voices of others, and fight for returning to traditional educational values. Sometimes we promote change. Sometimes the voice of wisdom and experience that the Baby Boomers bring is valued and productive. Sometimes we just want to be left alone and hang in there till retirement. We Baby Boomers may have ruled the world, but our time is coming to an end.

*The Changing Faces of Higher Education: From Boomers to Millennials* seeks to hear the voice of Millennials, new perspectives, and new accounts of what the world of academia is today. New generations of scholars with new voices, new perspectives, and a new ethos have emerged and are busily shaping the future of higher education. This book is not an elegy for Baby Boomers but the realization that generations of new scholars, new leaders, and young academics have emerged and will continue to make their presence felt for many years to come.

## Organization of the Book

This book is organized into three major sections. These sections organically emerged out of the submissions of the many contributing scholars that have worked on this project. We suggested 15 potential topic areas, including Navigating Non-Traditional Academic Employment, Pedagogy and Understanding the Gen-Z Student, Technology in the Classroom, Teaching from the Margins, Researching the Youth – Gen-Z Students as the Research Subjects, Inclusivity of New Voices – Women and Minorities and more. Ultimately, we asked that prospective authors write on topics they thought central to understanding the newer generations of scholars. From the many submissions, the editors coalesced the submissions into three broad areas: **Career Pathways; Teaching and Research;** and the **Voice of Others.**

What's it like to work for Baby Boomers might be the subheading for Career Pathways. Each of the three chapters in the section on Career Pathways highlights differing aspects of what it's like to work for and with Baby Boomers. In some chapters, the Baby Boomers are the official leaders of the academic unit and in other chapters, the Baby Boomer is more of a mentor and the focus is on how their mentorship may either enhance or inhibit the career development of the other generational faculty members.

The section on teaching and research is the largest of the three sections presented in this book. Each of the contributing authors in their own way look to identify and explain some of the challenges that teaching in today's current academic environment brings to the forefront. Without question, the issue of technology in the classroom continues to dominate much of the teaching discussion. As the "sage on the stage" approach fades, there is an increasing focus on activities, technological involvement, and an ever-growing array of applications & programs.

The third section is, in many ways, the most important and challenging of all the sections in the book. If there is one sterling quality of the newer generations it is their increased humanity, tolerance, and acceptance of people that are nontraditional. Equity and inclusivity are mantras for today's emerging zeitgeist. In this section, we hear from nontraditional academics on what their experience is in the academic setting. Minority status, sexual orientation, and self-presentation, to name but three, may vary. Yet, these new and emerging voices are openly challenging traditional academic perspectives, research, and values. The Boomers' responses to these new voices can often be troubling for us; the generation that had previously protested the Vietnam war, marched for civil rights and championed equal rights.

# Part 1. Career Pathways

As was suggested in the preface, there have been changes to employment options in higher education. There is a rise in non-tenure employment, as well as increased use of adjuncts and visiting professorships. The first few years of post-degree work might include a mix of adjunct and visiting work while still striving for a secure full-time position. Online adjunct opportunities such as those listed on *adjunctworld.com* have created a new class of professors who virtually teach at a diverse set of geographically scattered locations. One can make a full-time salary from adjunct teaching jobs in Arizona, Germany, New York, and occasionally in Colorado while living in Florida. Such possibilities are far beyond the wildest speculation of leading-edge baby boomers as they started their careers.

Even when one secures a full-time position, new challenges emerge. Mentorship, a traditional way of successful employment, becomes increasingly complex when cross-generational personnel are involved. Even such mundane issues such as tattoos can bring forth deep generational differences. In the next three chapters, we hear from different scholars on their experiences securing and working within academic careers.

*A Tenure-Track Destiny Deferred* authored by Blair Thomas uses his own career paths and experiences to fully illustrate the non-traditional paths that many Millennial scholars must endure in their path toward a secure position. Thomas, like his classmates, envisioned himself in a R1 faculty position. Unfortunately, the path toward full-time employment was far more erratic. Thomas had taken positions as a visiting professor in two different colleges. Both appeared to have the chance of full-time employment; neither did. He took a position as an adjunct hustling for teaching slots. This led to another visiting position which eventually translated into a full-time tenure track opportunity. From his many disappointments, successes and experience Blair offers some advice to others in his track. The advice includes staying close with your major professors, publish, visit professional colleagues, attend faculty meetings, (even if they are not required), and finally teach any course that needs filling. This advice will serve any recent graduate as they embark on their own path toward a full-time position.

*“So, When Do I Begin?”* by Lammert and Ash takes a narrative analysis about their own experiences with mentorship in high education. All can agree that mentorship is critical to career success. Yet, differences in work values, gender

and power makes the mentorship between often male boomers and upcoming academics a challenge. The authors share stories where work expectations when tied to power differentials created a work environment that all must be in their offices between 8 and 4; even if that meant watching Netflix during the allotted time. This chapter offers specific advice on improving the mentoring relationship between Millennials and boomers. The advice includes mentors and mentees should make deliberate choices in each other, establishing clear expectations for both parties, move away from power dominance paradigm, humanize each other and practice self-reflection. Any academic leader or faculty mentor can see the opportunities created by this reflection on the mentoring relationship.

Closing the section on career pathways we have an interesting chapter by Tondreau and Barnes. Entitled *Mentoring and Being Mentored in an Age of Social Media Connection and Instant Gratification*, the authors offer an interesting perspective of Millennials as sandwiched between the boomer and the upcoming Gen Z. The core idea is that mentorship is not incentivized by Baby Boomer leaders and yet is still expected. There is no real training on being a mentor and simply copying how one was mentored is not relevant with the fast-paced changes in social media and more. Boomers prefer face to face sessions focusing on specific achievement tasks. A good job talk and dressing for an interview is the mainstay of Boomer mentors. Millennials are more comfortable with alternative modes of communication such as Twitter and other apps. Compared to Gen Z however, Millennials are primitives in the land of expanding technology. Millennials must manage to meet Boomer expectations and catch up with changes to mentor and train Gen Z. Fortunately, Millennials' familiarity with online technology as an alternative and preferred source of communication helps prepare them for the challenge.

These chapters in Career Pathways each point to the dynamic nature and challenges for Millennials as they secure jobs and attempt to learn the skills and perspectives needed to help them be successful in jobs in higher education. Get a job, grab a mentor and tenure will soon follow no longer seems to be the model that can withstand the changing landscape. All academic leaders can benefit from understanding the complexity of these young scholar's challenges.

## Chapter 1

# **A Tenure-Track Destiny Deferred: How to Find Your Academic Home When Your Current Job Title Says “Visiting”**

M. Blair Thomas

*Florida State University*

**Abstract:** A tenure-track position. The prize at the end of a three to six-year struggle that doctoral students justify as the ends that will be truly worth gutting through the academic struggle. In many doctoral programs, specifically at top research universities (affectionately called “R1 programs” by individuals associated with academia), there is a universal formula to obtain the all-but-certain destiny for recent graduates: Do well on core classes, pass comprehensive exams, attend a relevant conference or two, publish a peer-reviewed article, defend your dissertation by April and voilà, your destiny awaits. For some however, destiny is deferred. This chapter explores what happens when ABDs and recent doctoral graduates want to pursue a tenure-track position but must take another route to achieve this dream. Considering narratives from professors that have taken an alternative path to tenure-track status including the author’s, this chapter explores feelings of uncertainty and lost confidence, navigating through the litany of short-term positions and provides recommendations on how to reach the tenure-track destiny, regardless of research-level status that is yours for the taking.

**Keywords:** adjunct professor, mentoring, networking, scholarship, visiting professor

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If you have pursued a doctorate degree at any top research university, there is little doubt that you were presented with the following pathway to a tenure-track position: Do well on the core classes, pass comprehensive exams, attend

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