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The Times They Are A-Changin'

Dail Mullins

University of Alabama - Birmingham

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DAIL MULLINS

The Times They Are A-Changin’

DAIL MULLINS

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM

Shortly before his death in 2002, the British author and dramatist Douglas Adams—author of *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*—composed his “Three Rules” for describing how people react to change (*The Salmon of Doubt*, p. 95): “(1) anything that is in the world when you are born is normal and ordinary and is just a natural part of the way the world works; (2) anything that is invented between the ages of 15 and 35 is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career out of it; (3) anything invented after age 35 is against the natural order of things.” While primarily concerned with technological innovation, Adams’ “Rules” might just as easily apply to cultural change generally, including any of a variety of generational cultural markers such as music, dress, leisure activities, foods, and even the latest jargon. Dude, is there a generation alive whose musical tastes or slang expressions haven’t offended the sensibilities of its parents?

In thinking about an honors culture—whether there is such a thing and, if so, what its characteristics might be, who or what determines them, and if they have changed over time—I find myself sensitive to Adams’ three rules and whether there might be an “old fogey” factor to consider in all this. An interesting characteristic of the academic life is that, since incoming freshmen are always about the same age, faculty members have a kind of window on generational changes that may not be readily apparent to the students themselves. As Adams suggested, a steadily aging faculty, presumably set in its ways, may find itself increasingly critical or disapproving of these changes.

For example, early on in my tenure as an honors teacher and administrator at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), most students coming into the program from high school had never used a computer, either in class or at home, and we on the faculty were still fumbling around with green-screen Apple IIs and desk drawers full of floppy discs. Email still required horrendously long addresses, and the dawning of Google was over a decade away. By the time I retired nearly twenty years later, personal laptops were *de rigueur* in most high schools, and students were grumbling about Wi-Fi dead spaces on campus. While I pride myself on having managed to keep up fairly well with computers and the extraordinary changes they have brought to all our lives, there were other student-imported technological innovations that I often found more annoying or ominous than

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

helpful. Cell phones in the classroom come to mind, as does cut-and-paste plagiarism on exams and term papers.

The honors program I left for retirement in 2004 was in many ways quite different from the one I had joined nearly twenty years earlier. Some of the changes I witnessed—the replacement of our IBM Selectric typewriters with desktop computers and word processing programs, for example, or the university’s conversion to a semester system from a quarterly calendar—were welcome in time, even if they took some getting used to. Others, such as the total renovation of the Honors House and the growing popularity of fraternities and sororities among even honors students, were to my mind the kinds of changes for which the expression “mixed emotions” was invented. For example, because it contributed in a major way to a change in the ambiance of the program—its furnishings and physical layout, its daily rhythms and flow, its traffic patterns, and even its sounds and smell—the renovation of the Honors House was not necessarily viewed by everyone as an improvement. Many alumni, students in attendance both before and after the alterations, and faculty members missed the “old house” with its Goodwill décor, graffiti wall, art deco collage bathrooms, and penknife-engraved wooden desks in the main classroom. Everything now seemed almost too new, too clean and sterile, to accommodate the kind of “lounge and learn” atmosphere that we had grown accustomed to. It was shiny and beautiful and techno-chic, but it didn’t quite feel like home anymore.

Even before the physical renovation of its building, however, the climate of the Honors Program at UAB had begun to change. With the rise of the Lawyer Era, helicopter parents, and what Herman Kahn referred to as the age of “excessive risk avoidance,” alcohol and ashtrays in the Honors House went the way of our typewriters, and we had to begin paying a bit closer attention to the verbiage on the graffiti wall. The faculty’s annual “roasting” of the students at the end of our fall interdisciplinary courses took a hit when one of our invited lecturers expressed concern about the legal liabilities of such frank and risqué witherings. (Alas, I consider some of my own contributions to these roasts to be among my finest literary accomplishments!) Likewise, it became increasingly uncommon for groups of students to gather together in the house after exams or on a Saturday night for an old-fashioned collegiate *Bacchanalia*, never mind that faculty had long before had to forego joining in such revelries.

As veteran honors faculty well know, success in any college or university program invariably catches the eyes of administrators, who then begin making noises about growth and expansion, both in numbers of students and reams of paperwork. Increased numbers of incoming students, however, can dampen the group intimacy of such a program through a kind of balkanization phenomenon, with the result that there is often a decline in the variety of

friends and acquaintances that individual students may develop and so learn from. To make matters worse, students today claim not to require a specific locale—an honors house, or even a campus—in which to engage with friends; they can do so online. Ask a student today how many friends he or she has and the answer is likely to be in the hundreds; never mind that these friends will be scattered across the planet in front of keyboards and webcams and never actually encountered in the flesh. Too often, I suspect, such digital Facebook acquaintances trade opinions and photos but not life histories, accomplishments and plans but not late-night fearful musings. Texting does not lend itself well to the exchange of nuanced intimacies.

Again mindful of over-sentimentalizing the past and the old-fogey trap, I still find myself more attuned to the sensibilities and demeanor of our honors students a quarter-century ago than those I encountered during the waning years of my career. Students in the UAB Honors Program in the mid- and late-1980s seemed to me to be more casual, both in dress and in habits; more conversational and group-minded, sometimes to the point of boisterousness; seemingly more argumentative about ideas or opinions expressed in class, and yet nearly always good humored and primed for a joke or laugh; often less intensely focused on their futures, and so generally more inclined to explore options of many kinds. Cheating on exams and term papers was a less conspicuous problem than it was in later years, though this may be related to matters of temptation, feasibility and ease in the pre- and post-Internet eras. Interestingly enough—and as most faculty well know—the same Internet search capabilities that facilitate plagiarism by students also make possible its quick uncovering.

By contrast, today's honors students seem earnest to a fault about almost everything, and especially their careers. One surmises that changing academic fields would represent a major life crisis of sorts; better to double or triple major. Students today are nothing if not goal-oriented. Oddly, however, what faculty might view as frivolous distractions from a goal students see as necessary accoutrements to its full mastery. They seem strangely isolated from classmates, preferring instead their iPods or electronic friends; the cell phone, derisively termed the world's longest umbilical cord by critics of hovering parents, has replaced the conversational cigarette during class breaks. Doodling in the margins of notepads in class has evolved into multiple screens on laptops: one window for note taking, another for surfing the Internet, yet a third for email. It is perhaps not surprising, as pointed out by Mark Edmundson in a recent issue of *The Chronicle Review* (p. B7), that the most recent drugs to enter the pharmaceutical larder of college students are those designed to mitigate the symptoms of attention-deficit disorder (Adderall, Ritalin, Concerta, and Daytrana), the better to help them focus on

THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’

preparing their post-baccalaureate national scholarship applications, the administration of which has become a kind of cottage industry within academia (probably by now necessitating at least a vice-presidential slot).

One can speculate about the reasons for these dramatic changes in students, but I suspect such matters will always be more complex than speculation will reveal. Certainly a keen awareness of the near-absolute socioeconomic necessity of an education well beyond high school is a major factor. The heavy financial investment in this necessity, together with the parental desire to oversee and properly manage the investment, has been cited as a major reason for the rise of so-called helicopter parents. Another is the necessity of coping with the rapidly changing world our students now experience: technological change, to be sure, but also political, social, economic, and environmental change. They cannot afford simply to browse the elements of change; they must devour them. Honors students in particular may be especially cognizant of this need.

I am of an age and station in life, however, that can still afford to browse innovation, picking and choosing from among what seems interesting, discarding the rest into a pile of unnecessary nonsense and clutter. This does not make me an old fogey. Being someone who still prefers the Allman Brothers Band to Snoop Dogg or Nine Inch Nails makes me an old fogey.

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The author may be contacted at
drdoom@uab.edu.