

## **Are we ready for the nomads?**

Melvin J. Dubnick

University of New Hampshire

Remarks prepared for panel presentation at  
National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration

Thursday, October 19, 2006

Hyatt Regency Hotel, Minneapolis, MN

We are all increasingly aware that our programs are facing major changes in the demographics that impact our work as public affairs educators. To use a popular metaphor, we seem to be facing a "perfect storm" of challenges to our basic notions and assumptions about *who we teach*, *what we teach*, and *how we teach*. In response, many of us seem to be actively pursuing solutions to each of these challenges as if they are distinct problems.

Some of us are focused on issues related to marketing our programs to match the demands of our shifting customer base. Reaching out through the development of new programs, executive programs, new concentrations, new specialties, off-campus and distance learning, etc. is a growing obsession for many programs -- much of it driven by the need to sustain and grow our units in institutions where the competition for resources is commonplace.

Others among us are focused on curriculum issues and questions related to the relevance of what we teach. Times change and so do the challenges facing the public sector and nonprofit sectors -- a truism that hardly needs to be stated, except for the fact that the scope, range and depth of those changes and challenges are greatly magnified by the real and anticipated impact of new technologies. This morning's panel on the impact of innovations in chemical, bio- and nano-technologies represents as much a call to action to MPA program directors as to researchers in the field. But one does not have to turn to the technology pages of the New York Times to know that the demands on public service education are escalating. Just look at the daily news stories related to homeland security, disaster response and emergency management, the ethical conduct of the war, the emerging crises in social policy arenas and education. Those stories and others scream out for attention in our courses and curriculum.

As educators in today's universities, we are also engaged in an IT revolution that is transforming how we teach. For some of us this is an individual effort involving integration of web-based technologies in the classroom -- or even as the classroom. For others, it is driven by the institutional adoption of Blackboard, D2L and other course management platforms.

I suspect no one in this room would argue this analysis so far, and it is likely that we and our colleagues at home are all aware of these challenges and have made efforts to adapt our marketing, our curricula and our teaching accordingly.

However, I would argue that few of us have gone far enough in our responses, and that the future of MPA programs on all three points -- who we teach, what we teach and how we teach -- depends on our understanding not only demographic, technological or political trends, but also the social psychological trend involving the changing "mindset" of the generation that is now making its way into our market.

There are a number of labels that can and will be applied to this group, the most descriptive being "net-geners", reflecting their common experience of being "raised" on the Internet. Yes, there are many of us older folks who dove into the Internet world and are very comfortable with this technology -- but we were not literally immersed into this new context for communicating and learning at an early age, and often the process of reorienting ourselves to this new environment is difficult and time consuming if not torturous.

But these so-called net-geners are different in very basic ways in terms of their interests, their priorities, their "feel" for the social and political world -- and especially the way they "learn". For them, learning is not merely the processing of concepts and facts fed to them through textbooks, classic readings, cases, lectures, and seminars. Rather, it is increasingly the process of seeking and gathering information, of immersing themselves in instant messaging relationships and virtual worlds such as Second Life. They are not seeking AN identity, but rather exploring multiple identities. They tolerate formal education such as that provided them in the classroom (even the online classroom), but they truly engage in the learning environments constructed around their virtual existence.

All this may sound like new age claptrap, and it might turn out to be just that. But those of us who plodded through Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* four decades ago will sense something quite familiar. At the end of that now classic work, McLuhan speaks to the future in terms of the emergence of individuals who, nurtured and educated on the new electronic media, will become "nomadic gatherers of knowledge" -- people who, when they enter the economic mainstream, will engage in "learning a living" rather than earning a living.

Don't get me wrong -- I am not one who sees McLuhan as prophet, and in many respects he got the timing and even the media wrong. But his insights in the closing paragraphs of *Understanding Media* are worth paying attention to, because I do think he gets the personality of the net-geners right. They are nomadic gatherers of knowledge and they are our future. What they require -- what they demand -- of learning environments is that they be just that -- environments in which they learn through a process of immersion. If they are the answer to "who we teach," then we need to take their mindsets and their virtual cultures into account as we consider the content of what we teach and certainly how we teach.

We can "muddle through" in the short term as this group matures.

But the nomads are already at the gate.

The question for us as program directors and deans and for our colleagues back home is, are we ready for them?