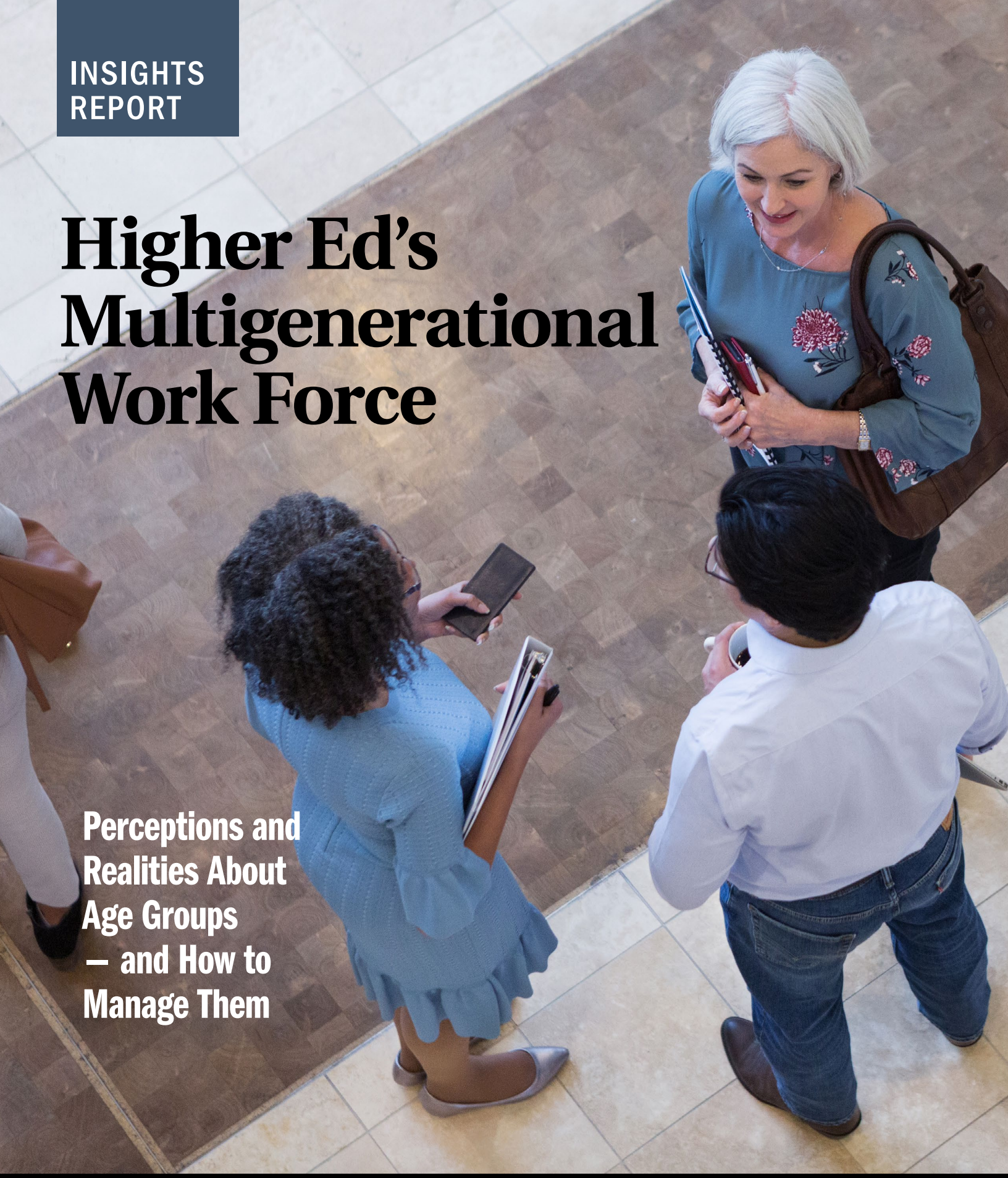
INSIGHTS REPORT

Higher Ed's Multigenerational Work Force

Perceptions and Realities About Age Groups — and How to Manage Them



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INTRODUCTION

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A higher-education work force today can easily encompass four, or even five, generations — from those born before World War II to those who could first vote only four years ago.

Even though the oldest and youngest are sparsely represented now, such a generational span — as people live and work longer — signifies an unusual time in the history of work. And while research on generational challenges in the higher-education workplace is scant, there is more information available on the impact on the workplace in general.

The exact years that divide each generation are hardly scientific, but generally, traditionalists are considered those born between the 1920s and1945, baby boomers (roughly 1946-60), Generation X (1961-80), millennials (1981-96) and Generation Z (1997 to present).

And each of those groups have their own instantly recognizable stereotypes, played out repeatedly across popular culture and social media.

But what research has found is that generational differences are far more often perceived than real; nonetheless if people think there are real distinctions, they will still make (often negative) assumptions that can hamper workplace relationships.

That doesn't mean generational disparities don't exist, particularly in the area of technology. Or that an age group that faced a major national or global event during its formative years – such as a war or financial crisis – isn't in some ways shaped by that trauma. But even those around the same age will experience the impact differently depending on race, gender, nationality, and ethnicity.

Stereotypes (the out-of touch older person of the "OK, boomer" meme, or the perception that all millennials are lazy) aren't going to go away, but as Lauren Bowen, provost of Juniata College, in Pennsylvania, puts it, "people at every age want to feel heard and respected, and age in either direction brings its own set of insecurities about that and how you'll be received in the workplace."

There are ways to address those insecurities — through more deliberate inclusion of multiple generations on committees, especially those related to technology, more openness in acknowledging how we perceive different age groups (similar to how colleges are trying to address race and gender), and through the use of nontraditional mentors, such as younger employees advising older ones.

> "People at every age want to feel heard and respected, and age in either direction brings its own set of insecurities about that."

The generation gap is shallower than most people believe, and through these kinds of efforts, facile stereotypes can be replaced with something more nuanced, realistic, and positive.

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What Research Tells Us

Those looking to affirm their beliefs about how annoying boomers, millennials, or Gen X or Z are won't find Eden King much help.

"The conclusion that has fairly wide consensus in our field of organizational psychology is that a lot of the ways people think about generations and generational differences is just a myth," says King, a professor of psychology at Rice University, who works on diversity and inclusion in organizations.

"There really aren't huge differences between generations in terms of their behavior and attitudes," she says. "But what is relevant to the discussion of generations is that people believe there are differences, and we treat people differently based on their generational group."

In fact, many researchers say they prefer to speak more in terms of age rather than generation, meaning they think people are more likely to reflect behaviors based on what period they are in their life (20s, 30s, etc.) than based on when they were born.

Nonetheless, King says, even if actual differences are much smaller than most people assume, if people *think* a certain group of people have specific characteristics, they tend to interpret behavior through that lens.

For example, millennials often get the bad rap of being entitled, and "if you think someone of a certain generation is entitled, you're going to treat them consistent with that belief," King adds. A 20-something may think she's being friendly calling a professor or administrator by their first name; the older person may simply see it as another example of that generation's disrespect.

> To the researchers' surprise, "all age groups thought other people stereotyped them more negatively than they actually do."

King's research asked people of specific age groups what stereotypes they had of others of different ages and what stereotypes they thought other generations had of them — something King called "meta-stereotypes."

To the researchers' surprise, "all age groups thought other people stereotyped them more negatively than they actually do."

For example, all age groups had largely positive views of older people, using words like "responsible" and "hard-working." Yet older workers themselves assumed that others saw them as "boring" and "grumpy."

Other research looks at actual versus perceived generational differences of values at work, such as preferred forms of communication, teamwork, security, recognition, autonomy, and fun.

"We had the subjects tell us what they personally valued, but then had them go through three different iterations — 'this is what I think a millennial would think, this is what I think a boomer would think, and this is what a Gen Yer would think," says Rhetta Standifer, an associate professor of management at North Central College, in Illinois, and co-author of an article discussing the findings.

"By far the generations are much more similar to each other than different," Standifer says. "They all had the same core values, but their perceptions of each other differed widely."

That was particularly true when looking at boomers and millennials, she says, who had many mistaken beliefs about each other.

Standifer acknowledged that the study was somewhat limited by broad categories. That was deliberate, as researchers wanted participants to interpret the values their own ways, but then it failed to capture the nuances of how the generations might differ in their interpretation of a value such as "security" or "autonomy." For example, everyone said they valued social media, but there were differences in how often they wanted to use it. But even in the case of technology and forms of communication, the perceived differences were stronger than the actual ones, she says.

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One surprise was the answer to the question, "to what extent do you prefer to work with people your own age?"

"We went into it thinking that the older workers would be the ones who might have that preference," Standifer says. "What we actually found was that it's by far the younger workers who tend to have that preference — and the younger the workers are the more likely they are to have that preference."

For Megan Gerhardt, a professor of management and leadership at Miami University, in Ohio, the trick is neither ignoring nor exaggerating generational differences.

"Generations aren't everything," she says. "But they're not nothing."

Higher-Education Generations

So how do these perceptions and stereotypes of generations play out among staff, administration, and faculty members at universities and colleges?

While there are a lot of similarities to other organizations, there are some differences. Since professors might work well into their 70s and there is a constant influx of students in their late teens and early 20s, there is perhaps greater generational interaction than other workplaces.

Another distinctive feature: On the faculty side, most employees start eight to 10 years later than other fields because of the need to complete a Ph.D., says Barbara Altmann, president of Franklin & Marshall College.

"If you were to look at the demographics in a college like ours, we have more senior people than other sectors," she says.

And while this can also be true of corporations, universities especially are "full of oral traditions and unwritten rules, and if you start out so eager to shake things up and don't learn those, you're at risk of making some serious mistakes," says Tania Tetlow, president of Loyola University New Orleans.

She sees those coming out of college today as "distrustful but really eager to fix systems." They have a willingness to question assumptions and make change; attitudes that can be perceived by those older as pushy and ignorant of the history and values of the institution.

"If you were to look at the demographics in a college like ours, we have more senior people than other sectors."

For Tetlow, who is 48, that questioning in the workplace can sometimes "lead to an uncomfortable self-righteousness. The trick is how to push back on the fact of complexity without sounding like you're making excuses."

But, she adds, "if you are too busy reacting to lack of experience, you will miss out

on the vitality they bring, and how they can be unfiltered and blunt, but also tell the truth." On the other side, if "you're too busy seeing older people as being resistant to change, you miss their experience."

Alexandra Voorhees, who was recently hired as an academic adviser for engineering students at the University of Colorado at Boulder, knows the experience from the other side.

"We want to get things done, and we often don't understand why there are barriers at universities," says Voorhees, who is 25. "It requires so much effort and work to bring about change, which in turn incites young professionals to feel like they have to be more outspoken and more firm with their ideas. That's not always greeted with excitement."

Over her time working in higher education, she says her passion and advocacy have remained as strong as ever, but now "I realize that going in guns blazing usually doesn't get the job done. I'm much more attuned now to reading a room."

Bowen, 58, of Juniata, understands that older employers can interpret that eagerness as entitlement, but she sees it differently.

"It's agency, it's a confidence, and it's a desire to have a meaningful career," she says. "They want to advocate for themselves because they think it's better for the organization."

Another difference among younger versus older staff, Bowen notes, is how much deference to give seniority. "They have a perspective, they have a voice — they exercise it and are never disrespectful, but I can observe and watch people who have been here 20 or 30 years who are expecting, well, greater deference."

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Such informality isn't always appreciated; Tetlow admits that she sometimes gets frustrated at the relaxed nature of email and texts and worries that the mode of communication sometimes overshadows the message.

But she also notes that as a young lawyer, she wore a pantsuit to work, which was considered shocking by some people, while "I was oblivious. What my grandparents were scandalized by is very different than what I'm scandalized by. There are still things younger people do that I don't understand at all. But if you get hung up on the rules you had when you were growing up, you will miss people's intentions."

Altmann, of Franklin & Marshall, says she sees generational differences ranging from substantive issues to the more frivolous — yet all need to be dealt with to ensure staff and faculty members feel heard and understood.

"When we look at our benefits package, there are diverse opinions on where we ought to invest our money," she says. "The younger faculty tends to be less interested in the retirement benefit and much more interested in keeping up with market wages, while, not surprisingly, perhaps, the senior faculty are very interested in preparing for their retirement." This, of course, makes sense given the life stages of those age groups.

A less consequential difference, she says, is that millennials and those younger have a different approach to social events.

"We decided to move to a more informal structure, more mixing over heavy hors d'oeuvres rather than dignified plated dinners," saying she heard from millennials that "the more informal style suited their social preferences much more strongly — that choosing a table and sitting with people they didn't know was more anxiety-producing, while more senior people preferred the plated dinners. That was a revelation."

But such generational distinctions appear not just in socializing and ways of communicating, but also in the essence of academe itself. Younger faculty, Bowen says, want to make teaching "more action-minded and relevant, and don't expect it to be inherently so."

For example, after the "Unite the Right" 2017 march and death of a protester in Charlottesville, Va., she recalls students and younger faculty members insisted that it was a time to act, not read.

"There are still things younger people do that I don't understand at all. But if you get hung up on the rules you had when you were growing up, you will miss people's intentions."

"For more senior generations on a college campus, reading and words are often understood as action," Bowen notes.

And she echoes the thoughts of others, who say they see a difference between younger faculty and staff members in terms of work-life balance — especially the millennials. "They're dedicated to the organization, but not quite willing to bleed themselves dry," she says. For example, during this summer when everyone was working intensely, it was usually the millennials who asked if they would get paid extra for their time.

"I don't begrudge them that, but I was pretty clear — not this summer," Bowen says.

Generation X is often overlooked, squashed as it is between the behemoth boomer and millennial generations. Lara Carver, now the administrative director of undergraduate nursing at Western Governors University, did her Ph.D. thesis in 2008

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looking at the relationship between generational differences and organizational commitment.

As a Gen Xer herself, she tired of the rap on her age group that they changed jobs frequently and weren't committed. She sent out 5,000 surveys to nursing faculty members nationwide; she received a 30 percent response rate, with an age range of 25 to 80 years old. She took millennials out of the equation because only two responded.

Carver found that there were little generational differences when the respondents were asked about their level of commitment and plans to stay at their organization.

"It validated what I already believed — we weren't a bunch of slackers," she says.

Altmann, 63, sees Gen X as the pivotal generation at universities.

"Like a middle child, it flies under the radar, but we can't afford not to pay attention to our mid-career people, whether on the staff or faculty side," she says. "It's very clear if they don't have access to continuous professional development, that that group begins to founder a little bit, and sometimes they become disaffected or start participating less in institutional culture."

Gen X is also key in both mentoring younger employees and keeping older ones abreast of development, she says. "It's well worth institutional investment and other resources to look out for that group — they pick up a great deal of the labor and need to be recognized. We need to not let those in mid-career slide along quietly."

Lee Skallerup Bessette, a learning-design specialist at the Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship at Georgetown University, sees the Gen X generation as the leading edge in changing the academy, especially in using social media to organize and question the underlying assumptions about working in higher education. At 43, she is at the tail end of that age group.

"Gen X scholars were the perfect age and looking for the perfect thing when Twitter really hit it big," she says. "We formed great communities on Twitter of adjuncts. Any work I could around adjunct advocacy was because of my network on Twitter. We were able to talk and form a community in a new way that other generations didn't understand."

Technology: The Great Divide?

When talking about generational disparities, technology — including use of social media — is front and center.

That's not surprising. Educators, psychologists, and parents bemoan the sight of young people glued to multiple screens at once, while older people painstakingly attempting to join a work Zoom call has been the stuff of comedy shows.

It is the most obvious and perhaps important difference among age groups, because, as Tania Tetlow of Loyola says, it's like learning a language at a young age — it's no surprise that millennials and Gen Z are fluent, while older generations generally find it less instinctual and more difficult to navigate.

But during the pandemic and switch to remote learning, Tetlow says, her faculty and staff members stepped up to the plate. She tells of a physics professor who, at 92, was excited last spring to fundamentally shift what he had been doing for 60 years and move online.

"When there's a clear emergency like we had, the faculty at every age showed a desire and willingness to change, as long as it wasn't just for change's sake," she says.

But there's sometimes a reverse side to comfort with technology — a discomfort with speaking out in real life. Last year Franklin & Marshall began allowing participants to text in a response or question at faculty meetings, in part, Barbara Altmann says, because the young instructors can feel uncomfortable speaking from the floor.

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Victoria Rosario, district director of human resources and support programs, has long seen how generational differences affect adaptation of various forms of technology. She has been with the Los Rios Community College District, in California, since 2000 and was for 10 years the associate vice chancellor for student services at Los Rios, the second-largest community-college system in the state, serving about 70,000 students at four colleges. She also wrote a thesis in 2012 on generational differences in adopting technology at community colleges.

At 57, she calls herself a boomer with Gen X tendencies.

During her time working at Los Rios, she saw the transition of student-support services — such as registration, orientation, financial aid and education plans — from face to face to online.

"When I started, we were still taking counseling appointments on a clipboard," she says.

One of the major tensions she saw was that "the people holding the purse strings were mainly baby boomers, and they were completely happy with how we were conducting business." It was the Gen Xers who were most excited about moving many of these services online.

"Institutional memory is critical for the boomers — they don't want to lose everything we're building upon," says Rosario. "But then we have millennials saying, 'Yeah, that's how we did it back then, but that is not working now for our students.' Trying to navigate those complex perspectives and expectations is quite a challenge for organizations and not something we're necessarily trained to do."

The same is true with the use of social media. For example, Lauren Bowen of Juniata says, younger faculty members are more likely to retweet students on hot-button issues, such as advancing racial justice at the college, "while other more senior folks see it as 'what happens on campus, stays on campus' and would be more likely to send me an email letting me know that students appear upset about an issue."

But younger faculty members tell her that retweeting is a way to show solidarity with students and it's a way to get her attention.

"It's different styles of communication and very different understandings of the power and the role of social media and what it means to be part of an organization," she says. "It also complicates the boundaries of relationships with students. I do see a generational split in how to use social media to communicate and effect change."

CONCLUSION

Complaints about the generational divide are centuries old, yet somehow people of all ages have still managed to work together. And maybe it seems more pronounced today (if indeed, it is) "because we're in a moment of such tentativeness, uncertainty, and stress," Bowen says. "When people are tired and stressed and working so hard to bring their best selves to the party, you feel the generational differences more keenly."

But those who study the issue think that in the 21st century, there are ways to bridge the gap more intentionally.

One important point, as has been learned with other demographic differences, is to simply be aware of the issue. Victoria Rosario, of the Los Rios Community College District, says when she is gathering a team for any technological-implementation plan, she deliberately brings together those who are excited about the project — usually younger staff members — and those who are resistant – often older workers.

"It's critical to have objectors at the table," she says. "We won't get full adoption until they're heard. If you end up with a homogeneous group of thinkers, that's a huge red flag. If you're not getting the outliers at the table, adoption will be painful and excruciatingly slow."

It's also crucial to make sure people understand that you appreciate what they bring to the conversation.

"We can't make our boomers feel like they're left behind, because we need them and we're building upon the work they've done in the past," Rosario says. "We can't just move forward with fast-moving early adopters that have no connection to our history, culture, and institutional memory."

And there are times you just have to accept that some people will not embrace something new. Rosario remembers when Los Rios rolled out its new online education plan, some senior counselors simply refused to use it.

So she hired people by the hour to input the counselors' written information into the computer.

"Sometimes you have to figure out a workaround for those few," she says.

Using mentoring to challenge generational tropes is one possibility. Eden King, of Rice University, has conducted research about whether discussing age differences between a mentor and a mentee could minimize stereotypes of each other.

She and her colleagues didn't find strong evidence that such a conversation had a substantial impact, but "we might have tried to do it too formally, and informal discussions could be useful.

"We think that's a direction we should take going forward," she says, "what kind of dialogue would be helpful in mitigating the effect of these stereotypes and meta-stereotypes?"

Employees can benefit when mentoring goes both ways, Rhetta Standifer, of North Central College, says, not just the traditional older worker coaching a younger one. For example, a junior employee might mentor the senior employee on technology.

"It helps to begin a dialogue among the generations and helps them work with each other — to the extent that you can cross-pollinate across the generations, it's a good thing," she says.

And be very aware of generational shaming directed at any group, says Megan Gerhardt, who co-authored the book *Gentelligence: The Revolutionary Approach to Leading an Intergenerational Workforce,* which is due out next year.

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