

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Study Shows Increase in Student Optimism

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Despite fears of student loans, the environment, and a competitive job market, today's students are turning an optimistic eye toward the future.

According to Teacher's College President Arthur Levine, who has studied college students' attitudes for the past 23 years, there has been a dramatic shift in student views on politics, education, and other major issues.

To better gauge this attitude adjustment, Levine designed a new survey in 1992 which was administered to 10,000 college students nationwide over the following five years.

Students at 28 public and private colleges also participated in day-long interviews with Levine.

Levine recently published his findings in a book entitled *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Students*.

The *Spectator* talked with Levine about his book and the attitudes of the '90s college student.

Spectator: Why did you call your book When Hope and Fear Collide?

Arthur Levine: Two things that emerged from this study were that students had an enormous amount of optimism. A high proportion of students thought that one person can make a difference in the world. Two-thirds of students were involved in service activities. A majority of the students had heroes. But I don't think we held one conversation in which their fears weren't a dominant theme. They're worried about getting jobs and paying off their student loans. They're worried about poverty and the environment. A majority said they'd never seen a successful adult relationship. I don't think I've seen a generation more eager for the American dream to be true and, at the same time, more aware of the risks of the

time, scared stiff that the promise of the American dream will be denied for their generation.

Spectator: How are today's college students different from college students 20 years ago?

A.L.: Today's students have been affected by different social events. In the first survey they said they were affected by Watergate, Vietnam, and the civil rights movement. And what they said [they were affected by] now was the Challenger explosion, the Iraq War, the fall of the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall, the Exxon Valdez and other environmental catastrophes, and AIDS. For both generations, the events were predominantly negative. Politics are changing. The political center is disappearing. Students tend to define themselves as left of center or right of center. Of those students who put themselves right of center, a majority favor choice [a woman's right to have an abortion]. Of those who classify themselves as left of center, a majority favor capital punishment.

The left and right of center students say they want change. Eighty percent of students disapprove of politics, politicians, and government.

They're very active. Sixty-four percent of the students surveyed were involved in service activities.

Spectator: Do college students have a different view of the role of a college education than they did in the past?

A.L.: Students have always been pretty pragmatic. They always wanted a job. Given that, [today's college students] are more consumer-oriented than previous generations. The universal cry is 'I'm spending \$25,000-\$30,000 a year, why can't I have....' Sixty-five percent of high school graduates go to college. It's more of a birthright than a gift. Students have the same orientation to college as they do to the bank, the supermarket, or the phone company. There is also a growing gap



TC Presidents are

between teaching and learning. Knowledge can be concrete or abstract. College professors teach in an abstract or passive way, while students prefer concrete, active learning. As a result, on the first day of school, professors ask the dean, 'Where did you get these students? They are worse than last year's.' The students say to each other, 'Did you have a clue as to what's going on [in class]?'

Spectator: How have students' attitudes about drugs and alcohol changed?

A.L.: Marijuana is still very present on campus [and so are] cocaine and designer drugs. They are no longer the center of activities, though. Alcohol has become the drug of choice on college campuses. Alcohol is cheaper, available, and less dangerous to some extent.

Spectator: How have students' dating patterns and sexual activity changed in the past 20 years?

A.L.: The notion of couples dating has disappeared. Dating is more frequently group dating. When you're with a group it's hardly dating.

It's less intimate [and there is] less pressure, students say. The idea of carrying some partner around forever is unappealing to them. The new terms for sex are devoid of emotional content. They use words like 'scamming,' 'scrumping,' 'shacking,' 'mashing,' and 'hooking.' They are more mechanical terms. AIDS really hasn't affected college students. They

are engaging in unsafe sex. They think they are immortal. The number of sexual partners hasn't changed nor the frequency [of sexual intercourse]. Alcohol is a major factor.

Spectator: In your book you say that students are reluctant to talk about race. Have race relations improved on college campuses?

A.L.: Race relations on campus is the topic that no one wants to discuss. The new four letter words are six letter words: racist, sexist and homophobic, which is even longer.

Students are more ready to talk about sex [than race relations]. In segregated groups, we got them to talk. They told terrible stories. Students of color said they feel like unwelcome guests. One girl said that people would always ask her about life in the ghetto, and she was from Scarsdale. White students said, 'I don't understand. I thought [racial tension] was over.' Others had a *Dances With Wolves* response and wanted to join the other culture. All students are confused and unhappy. Tension is so high in residence halls and dining rooms.

There are very few campuses without voluntary segregation in the dining rooms, playing fields, social situations, and Greek life. Any conversation could potentially be a conversation about race. Students say that when they are asked to turn their music down, it is usually by a person of a different race. Current students define themselves by their differences and not their commonalities.

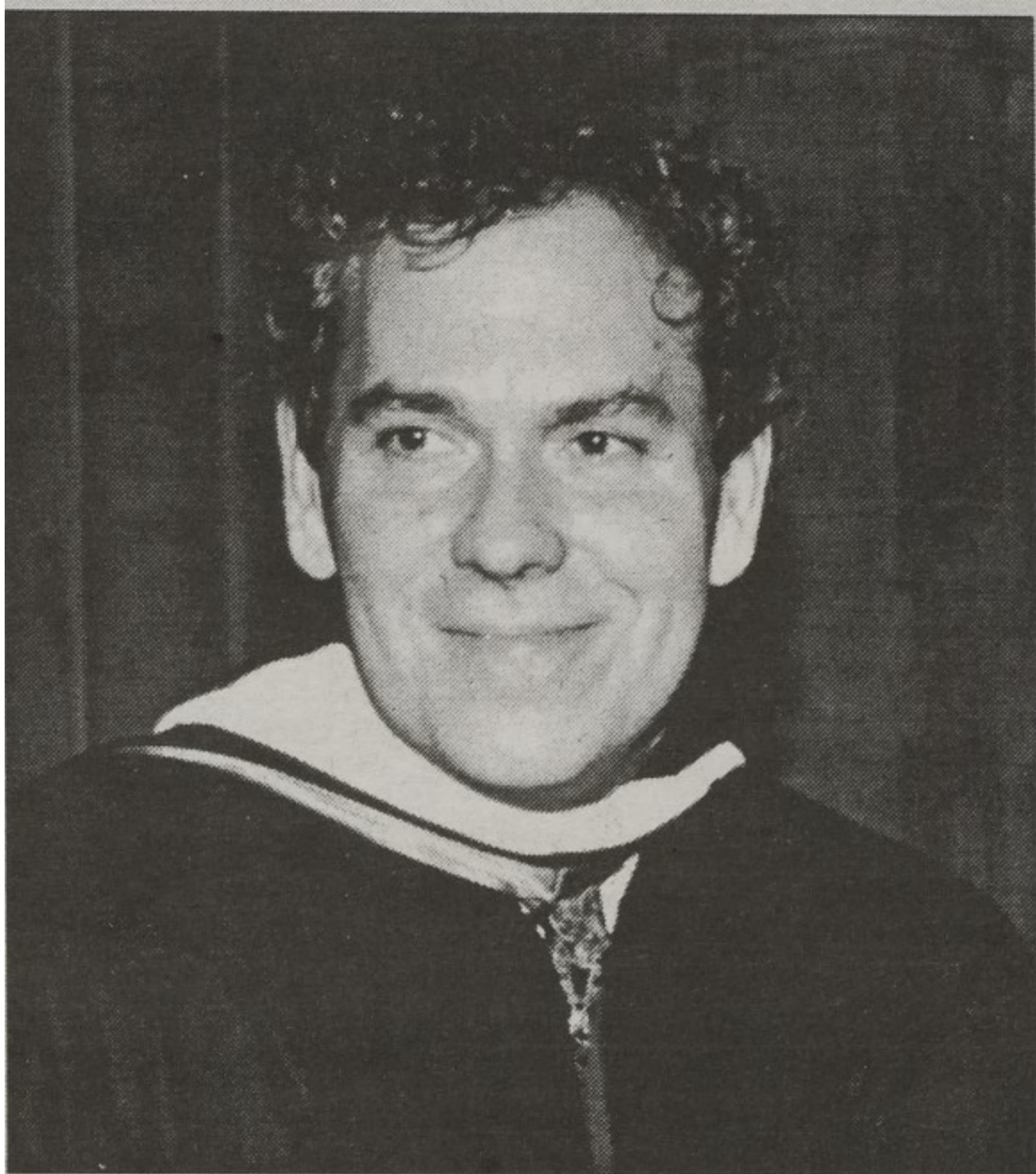


PHOTO COURTESY ARTHUR LEVINE

TC President Arthur Levine says today's students are "eager for the American dream."