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Special Feature: Undergraduates
 Jim Austin
 United States
 11 April 2008

It's true, as we've pointed out before, that "young" scientists are getting older. The average age of a person receiving his or her first faculty appointment has increased rapidly, to about 36 today in the United States, in the biomedical sciences. The average age of a first-time National Institutes of Health (NIH) grantee is well into the 40s. By the time these scientists are fully vetted and enfranchised, they've started to go gray.

"There's a lot going on in the minds and lives of 20 year olds that matters profoundly to the future of science and the world we live in."

their futures as scientists.

There's a lot going on in the minds and lives of 20 year olds that matters profoundly to the future of science and the world we live in. So we'd all do well to educate ourselves about what makes these people tick and do what we can to help them make decisions that are sound and well informed. That's why we wrote this feature.

So what are they like, these 20-somethings, also known as "Generation Y" or "millennials"? If you trust the clichés, they're the generation of entitlement, seeking instant gratification. Millennials, the stereotypes say, expect to be coddled, have short attention spans, and want the corner office--now. Which raises the question: What do you do if a whole generation of the scientific workforce decides to drop out?

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With U.S. grad-school enrollment rates dropping among American white males, that's a prospect that has policymakers quaking in their shoes. But it's not a very likely prospect. Although this generation, on

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average, has its peculiarities--like every previous generation--it also has virtues that rarely register in the popular accounts. Those virtues are easy to see in undergraduate research labs. And those virtues, some experts say, may well make the latest generation of scientists the greatest generation ever to hit the bench. So what exactly is the truth about Gen Y? [Elisabeth Pain](#), our Barcelona-based contributing editor, reports.

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Generation Y has been raised in times of prosperity, but also, in America, of increasing economic inequality. Those less affluent students--and minority groups underrepresented in the scientific workforce--increasingly are served by local, 2-year community colleges. That makes those institutions, potentially, an important source of scientific talent, a place where, it is hoped, new scientific careers currently gestate. Policymakers and funding agencies have taken notice, starting new programs that aim to draw community college students into science.

The potential of community colleges to enrich the supply of potential scientists is obvious. It's less obvious that 2-year colleges can get the job done. Average student attainment is lower. Per-student funding is lower than at most traditional 4-year schools. Research opportunities at community colleges are increasing, but they're still quite rare.

Can a 2-year college provide its students with access to a research career? The answer, writes contributor [Siri Carpenter](#), is a qualified "yes."

The millennial generation, experts says, is less interested in money than previous ones. Millennials are more likely to seek a career that promises to provide personal fulfillment. Nevertheless, money matters. So we asked ourselves, does a Ph.D. pay off in purely financial terms? And then we asked contributor [Sarah Webb](#) to investigate.

Jim Austin is the editor of <i>Science Careers</i> .	Comments, suggestions? Please send your feedback to our editor .
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