

Millennials Go To College

By Neil Howe and William Strauss

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Executive Summary prepared by Steve Eubanks, (originally for distribution at Azusa Pacific University; revised for general release 8/06)

Abstract

Neil Howe and William Strauss introduce the Millennial generation, and discuss characteristics of this generational cohort as their first representatives enter their senior year at colleges across the nation in their book *Millennials Go To College*. The book summarizes some of the cultural dynamics that have preceded this generation, and several characteristics that seem to describe the generational cohort as a whole. The authors then identify seven core characteristics of the generation and their implications for recruiting, campus life, and the classroom. This Executive Summary provides a brief synopsis of the book.

Who Are They?

The Millennial Generation, born from 1982 through the present, represents a generational cohort, distinct from their parents of the Baby Boom generation, and their immediate predecessors, Generation X. Neil Howe, and William Strauss, researchers whose first book *Generations* set the standard for our modern understanding of generational cultures, have described the Millennial in the context of their entry into the halls of higher education in their recent book, *Millennials Go To College*.

Howe and Strauss introduce a generation that sent their first freshmen to college in the fall of 2000, and will graduate their first seniors this spring. Generally described as optimistic, team-oriented, high-achieving rule-followers, the Millennials have driven down teen suicide rates, teen pregnancy and abortion, violent crime and drug use among teens. Aptitude test scores for this group have risen across all grade levels, and the pressure to succeed has risen likewise.

The expected teen rebellion among Millennials has manifested itself as a break with the Boomer and Gen X cultures that preceded them. "Expect teamwork instead of free agents, political action instead of apathy, T-shirts with school colors instead of corporate swooshes, on-your-side teamwork instead of in-your-face sass." The Millennials are correcting for "what teens see as the excesses of today's middle aged Boomers: narcissism, impatience, iconoclasm, and a constant focus on talk (usually argument) over action."

The generation that Millennials are most likely to emulate is actually the G.I. Generation, which Tom Brokaw called America's "Greatest Generation". "No other adult peer group possesses anything close to their upbeat, high-achieving, team-playing, and civic-minded reputation."

Unlike Generation X's traumatic, latchkey childhood, the Millennials grew up in an era that placed high value on children – reflected in everything from the products on the shelves (Cabbage Patch Dolls, "Baby On Board" stickers) to the media (pro-kid movies like *Baby Boom* and *Three Men and A Baby*, a sharp rise in kids magazines and TV shows). Even the TV show, "Barney and Friends" (featuring teamwork and commonalities) stole the limelight from "Sesame Street" (which featured individualism and uniqueness). Part of this trend is the emergence of "helicopter parents" – always hovering, ultra-protective, unwilling to let go, and enlisting . . . 'the team' (parent, physician, lawyer, other counselors) to assert a variety of special needs and interests."

Primarily the children of Boomers, a "boomlet" among the Millennials was expected. However, higher fertility rates led to a new boom that has pushed the Millennial cohort over 80 million already, and it could reach as many as 100 million; over a third larger than the Baby Boom cohort.

The Millennials "are the most racially and ethnically diverse . . . generation in US History. As of 2002, non-whites and Latinos accounted for 37% of the 20-or-under population in 2002". 1 in 5 has an immigrant parent and 1 in 10 has non-citizen parent. These demographics have resulted in a truly global generation in which race issues are no longer black and white, or even black, white and latino. "In fact, non-white youths are often bigger contributors to this generations' emerging persona than white youths."

The economy has taken a great interest in this generation. They are a more highly targeted market segment than past generations, and carry significant purchasing power, though of a different nature than that of previous generations of teens. The types of kid-income that have risen the most over the past 15 years have been those that parents most closely manage (gifts, joint-purchases and paid household work). Allowances and paid employment have risen the least. "The fastest

growing source of teen cash has been the direct ad-hoc payment from parent to child for a specific purchase on which parent and child confer” (the copurchase).

Paid employment is falling among Millennials as compared to Gen Xers. This trend appears to be driven by parents’ and kids’ concerns about time spent working instead of studying. Any work that Millennial teens do now “should be a planned and preparatory investment for the permanent kind of life they wish to lead tomorrow.”

Millennials are also a very busy group. From 1981 to 1997, there has been a 37% decrease in unstructured free time among kids 3 to 12. Where is this time going? The biggest increase is in time spent at school (early classes, after school programs, summer school), followed by time spent doing household chores, personal care, and travel and visiting, which includes visits to non-custodial parents.

Seven Core Traits of the Millennial Generation

Special

“As Millennials absorb the adult message that they dominate America’s agenda, they come to the conclusion that *their* problems are the *nation’s* problems, *their* future is the *nation’s* future, and that, by extension, the American people will be inclined to help them solve those problems.” They tend to trust large national institutions (including the government) to do the right thing. In addition to their faith in institutions to serve them well, this generation is also more willing than other generations to acknowledge the importance of their own personal choices and actions.

In recruiting, colleges can capitalize on this trait by stressing traditions and high standards, and involving the co-purchasing parents in recruiting activities. Administrators must prepare to deal with the impact of helicopter parents on campus life, and students’ high expectations for housing and other facilities. Feedback and structure are critical in the classroom for this group of students who has come up through the “no child left behind” approach to education.

Sheltered

“Everywhere Millennials go . . . they expect to be kept safe”. From school uniforms, to identity cards, to V-Chips, to fences and metal detectors at school, Millennials have grown up with a premium on security, and they support for harsh punishments for those who misbehave. The doctrine of *in loco parentis*, long denigrated by Boomers and Gen Xers is regaining support among both Millennial students and their parents.

In recruiting, quality campus security services can become a real selling point, as well as an emphasis on the smaller, safer feel of a “college” as opposed to the larger, more impersonal feel of a “university”. Safety on campus both from external threats, and from the misbehavior of students themselves will impact the nature of campus life. This will include addressing issues of health services and substance use and abuse. In the classroom, faculty can expect more complaints about “unfair grades”, biased values, and any perceived inappropriateness in faculty-student relationships.

Confident

More than four in five teens believe that they will be financially more successful than their parents – a percentage that rose sharply during the 90s. The Millennials’ view of success has become more rounded with the concept of balance becoming more important. Among freshman, the goal of “making a contribution to society” is on the rise while “having lots of money” is on the decline.

In recruiting, it will be more important to tell prospects about the great things that will happen when they make the right choice, rather than the terrible things that will happen if they make the wrong choice. School spirit is likely to return to campus life with all the attendant pep-rallies and award ceremonies. Confidence about their future may lead Millennials to see less benefit in attempts to be “creatively different from their peers”, focusing in the classroom more on following the rules than pushing the envelope.

Team-Oriented

In response to the perceived “lack of cohesion” of Gen X culture, Millennials are trying to make all the pieces fit together a bit better. Fewer teens report feeling lonely, and more reporting socializing in groups than socializing with only one or two friends. This group orientation, combined with advances in technology, has increased levels of interconnection among Millennials who are less interested in the anonymous freedom of the internet than its potential to maintain their peer networks. This connected generation of teens tends to view the major causes of America’s problems as the consequences of adult individualism, and issues of gender, race and ethnicity are losing importance, while issues related to income inequality are gaining.

Peer pressure among Millennials can become a powerful tool for recruiters as they capitalize on this groups' tendency to conformity. Also, while many schools openly recruit for subpopulations (including men), Millennials appear to be bothered more than previous generations by "preferential admissions quotas or formulas based on race". With regard to campus life, this team-orientation is likely to manifest itself in growing involvement in service and civic activities both on and off campus. In the classroom, faculty should prepare for students that expect team teaching, team assignments and team grading, and more emphasis on academic programs that serve the public interest rather than individual interests.

Conventional

The conventionality of the Millennials seems to stem from their general sense that rules and standards can make life easier. This generation feels loved by their parents, and perceives a diminished generation gap – their parents are in touch with their lives and it's easier for them to talk with their parents about sex, drugs and alcohol than it was for previous generations. More than ever before, teens and parents share tastes in clothes and music, as well as many values, although they tend to feel that values will be more important in their generation than they were for their parents.

Recruiters need to respond to the fact that, more than the generations that preceded them, the Millennials believe in big brands, and will want to go where the group goes. Once on campus, these students have a high level of respect for the institution, but this respect comes with an equally high level of expectation, and an administrator or professor that "fails to live up to those expectations will lose a great deal of trust—and may find it very difficult to earn back." In the classroom, a new generation gap seems to be opening between professors who value questioning authority and Millennial students who are more inclined to trust that the authorities and their institutions are telling them the truth.

Pressured

As transcripts, test scores and even attendance records become more important in the marketplace, and in the minds of students, an assumption is emerging among today's youth that long term success demands near-term achievement, reviving the connection between effort and payoff. There is less of a sense among Millennials than among their Gen X predecessors that one can rebound from failure. This pressure to succeed has led to an emphasis on planning, and time management is becoming more important in order to fit in all the necessary activities. "Millennials are far more interested than Gen Xers in institutions, including colleges, that can enhance (the) job and life stability" that they have planned and prepared for so diligently.

Recruitment strategies should focus on conveying to prospective Millennial students that an institution is part of a life plan in a larger context, including helping them develop values, habits and skills that will help them become the kinds of adults they wish to be. On campus, provision for physical and other extra-curricular activities, as well as "chill-zones" where students can simply relax, are important parts of necessary stress management strategies for these students. In the classroom, the discussion of pressure quickly becomes a discussion of cheating, and while the conventional nature of this generation would seem to lead away from cheating, the difficulty seems to be in helping Millennials clearly define what cheating is.

Achieving

With their plans and their pressure, and confidence all in tow, Millennials have shown a great propensity to achieve. With achievement test scores at an all time high, and strong extra-curricular programs, today's teens not only are successful, they know they are successful. A majority of today's high school students say they have detailed five and ten year plans for their future. Most have given serious thought to college financing, degrees, salaries, employment trends, etc., and see preparation as important, although not necessarily fun. More students are reporting that they try their best in school, but fewer are reporting that they actually enjoy the process. Surveys show that Millennials are more interested in pursuing fields in math and the hard sciences where success can be objectively measured than the more subjective social sciences and arts.

While at first, the success of Millennial students appears to be a gold mine for recruiting, it is important to realize that most schools will now have an opportunity to recruit higher achieving students. Highlighting a balance of top notch academics as well as a strong and diverse community and solid "infrastructure for student activities" will be important. Campus life should offer a broad array of extracurricular activities, and the technology tools that these students will demand. In the classroom, "expect students, parents and public officials to demand higher academic standards, smaller classes, straight forward grading policies . . . (and a) mixture of traditional values with cutting edge technology."

Graduation and Beyond

Institutions can expect the characteristics of this generation to continue with them through graduation and beyond. The Helicopter Parents that looked over everyone's shoulders during four years of schooling will show up at the Career Counselor's table to find out how all of the work and investment is going to pay off in their student's first job. Career Counselors will serve students well by helping them define success realistically, and by paying close attention to employment

and labor market trends, as well as to the kinds of employers and organizations that appeal to this generation. Graduate and professional schools will need to prepare for students who will bring many of the same needs, preferences and expectations into those institutions as they brought to their undergraduate schools. And by all accounts, it seems likely that Millennial alumni will be “an active, loyal and giving generation.”

Implications for Higher Education

The most essential point of understanding the characteristics of the Millennial generation sometimes gets lost in the discussion of the more complex surrounding cultural and societal dynamics. That point is simply this; our students are not entirely like us. Whether we are faculty, staff or administration; academics, student life or auxiliary; Silent Generation; Baby Boomers or Generation X, it is critical that we remember that what is generally true for others our own age, is not necessarily true of the generation of students that now make up our undergraduate population. We must be prepared to adjust.

There are some significant shifts from the Gen X culture that we have been working with, and in some cases battling with, for the last two decades. The strategies that we have brought into the classrooms and campus life to engage Generation X will need to be reevaluated in light of the new generational personality that has moved on campus. Many of these shifts appear to be very positive, such as confidence, conventionality and team-orientation. However, each comes with its own “shadow side” that must be addressed as well. Confidence should be encouraged, but we must guard against that confidence becoming arrogance. The team-oriented, conventional student must still answer for him or her self, “Who am I?”, “Who do I believe God is?”, and “What does God want me to do?” As we adjust our practice to fit the needs of this new generation, we must be conscious of both sides of the Millennial coin.