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Welcoming a New Generation to College: The Millennial Students

Introduction

High on any required reading list for college-level student affairs officers and high school counselors is *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* by Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000). Experts on generational change in the United States, the authors contend that the current generation of college-age and pre-college-age students possesses many unique qualities that will both delight and challenge professionals working at various stages of the educational continuum.

Most scholars define a generation by a specific time period (e.g., 1943–1960) and shared experiences (e.g., World War II). Possessing a common history, members of a generation are influenced by people, places or events that become enduring social referents. As a result, members of a generation often develop shared values and behaviors (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Curiously, generations do not evolve linearly as extensions of preceding cohorts, but rather develop in a cyclical fashion—both complementing the dominant generation and filling the cultural vacuum left by their predecessors (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Further, as they develop, youthful members of a generation will explore the values of their elders—accepting some ideas, tweaking others and rejecting those with which they cannot identify (Coomes and DeBard, 2004).

According to Howe and Strauss (2000), members of five generations comprise the vast majority of the current U.S. population (with birth dates listed): the G.I. generation (1901–1924), the Silent generation (1925–1942), the Boom generation (1943–1960), Generation X (1961–1981), and the Millennial generation (1982–2002). This newest generational cohort, the Millennials, builds upon the values instilled by the Baby Boomers while also filling the cultural void left by the departing G.I. generation.

Most students enrolled in colleges and universities are members of the Generation X and Millennial groups—with the latter being the most recent enrollees. Using interviews, opinion surveys and focus groups of students and their student affairs officers, faculty and employers, social demographers have identified factors that influence and define members of these generations (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). In addition, they have postulated a set of common beliefs and behaviors that distinguish Millennial students.

The Millennial Generation

As youths, Millennial students were influenced by a unique set of forces. They watched the unfolding of Desert Storm in Iraq—and the continual, "real time" media coverage it generated. From school shootings at Columbine High School (CO) and other locations, they experienced school lock-downs and increased security. Growing up, they heard presidential sound bites to "tear down this wall" and "read my lips," and have witnessed the initiation of impeachment proceedings against a sitting President. Through all of this, they felt the steady support of protective parents concerned about their safety, their schooling and their academic and extracurricular success (Coomes and DeBard, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Murray, 1997; Woodard, Love, and Komives, 2000).

Growing up in this cultural environment has instilled in Millennial students a number of positive qualities. They are hard-working and have been socialized by supportive parents to be successful in life. They have engaged in numerous academic, ex-

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tracurricular and service pursuits; in helping others and addressing social problems, they are thought to be both generous and practical (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Woodard, Love and Komives, 2000) Their hectic lives have accustomed them to structuring time, working from schedules and following rules (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Along with this structured lifestyle is the expectation that, as students, they will be required to complete some form of standardized testing to demonstrate appropriate educational achievement. As a result, they are used to being assessed, receiving focused feedback, and being goal-directed (Coomes and DeBard, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2000). Having participated in group-projects at school, they are team-oriented, socially networked, and able to organize and mobilize (Coomes and DeBard, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002) Lastly, given their access to and use of computers, pagers and cell phones, they have keenly mastered the ability to multitask (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002).

Despite these positive qualities, Millennial students also present challenges to teachers, counselors and administrators at both the high school and collegiate levels. They are often exceedingly close to their parents, who assume participatory roles in their children's educational pursuits (Coomes and DeBard, 2004; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Murray, 1997). In this capacity, parents may serve as advisors and active advocates for their children—initiating interactions with educational faculty, staff and administrators. Perhaps because about one in five Millennial students has at least one parent who recently immigrated to the U.S., there are concerns that students of this generation may dismiss issues related to diversity, such as racism and discrimination, as less of a problem than in previous generations (Howe and Strauss, 2000; O'Reilly and Vella-Zarb, 2000).

Some researchers also fear that Millennial students, being over-reliant on communications technology, will have stunted interpersonal (face-to-face) skills. Others have expressed similar concerns that the ease with which Millennial students routinely engage in multitasking behaviors, enabled in part through the use of technology, has shortened their collective attention span. Finally, having completed primary and secondary curricula that may unintentionally encourage rote learning, these students may lack the skills necessary to be critical thinkers or demonstrate introspection and self-reflection (Murray, 1997).

Millennial Parents

Parents of college-bound students from previous generations have recognized that formal education marked the transition from youth to adolescence and on to adulthood. Aware of their aspirations for a higher education, many parents of college-going students from earlier generations sought to provide some form of support, be it emotional and/or financial in nature. Later, as their children graduated from high school, went "away to college" and earned degrees in their fields of study, parents took pride in the ascension of their progeny into the adult workforce.

Today, parents are still supportive forces in their children's education. However, there are some indications that level of parental involvement may be changing—from the proud, supportive parent who provides passive encouragement to the aggressively protective parent who assumes an active role in their child's educational experience (Brownstein, 2000; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Murray, 1997; O'Reilly and Vella-Zarb, 2000; Zemke, 2001). Reasons for this aggression stem from patterns in the parental generation. For example, parents of Millennial generation students generally waited until their late 20s to have children, when they were financially secure (Murray, 1997). They took their child-rearing responsibilities seriously, and assumed an active role in exposing their children to myriad social and cultural events. Once their children were of school age, they continued to be actively involved, critically appraising schools, teachers, coaches and curricula.

Throughout this supervision, parents of Millennial students were acutely aware of their children's progress through primary school and their associated learning activities. As children grew older, parents encouraged them to pursue extramural interests and activities. In fact, many parents became chauffeurs, transporting their children from one organized activity after another. Indeed, Murray (1997) contends that virtually all aspects of the Millennial child's life were planned and executed to achieve success, as parents worked to find activities at which each child could excel.

As children progressed to secondary school, emphasis on academic achievement continued with book reports, science projects and term papers becoming collaborative efforts as parents dealt with their own perfection complexes (Murray, 1997; O'Reilly and Vella-Zarb, 2000). Viewed as overprotective

advocates of their children's success, these "helicopter parents" hovered over their children even as they prepared for college, carefully studying college guides, and exercising an influential presence (Shields, 1995).

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Communicating with Parents of Millennials: Admission Strategies and Beyond

College admission officers have long understood the importance of parents in the college-choice process (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Playing to the increasing interests of parents of Millennial students in college selection decisions, many colleges and universities have parent-oriented links on their campus Web sites to provide information and resources to commonly-asked questions about the institution. Other colleges and universities have published recruitment materials geared to parental issues and concerns, and still others have designed activities for parents when prospective students come for on-campus visits. Information geared specifically toward parents includes personal and virtual campus tours, seminars on financial aid, and specially-designed Web sites addressing campus academics, athletics, housing, cultural opportunities, and student wellness programs, as well as opportunities for them to contribute to development campaigns directed to parents.

Once students matriculate at a particular college or university, parental involvement does not wane. In fact, some institutions have opened Offices of Parental Relations to handle the avalanche of emails and telephone calls from parents to the college administration (Brownstein, 2000). At other institutions, parents are reported to be involved in discussions regarding their child's financial aid, housing arrangements, and even disputed grades—leading some college administrators to elicit parental concerns regarding campus alcohol policies, disciplinary actions, etc. proactively (Turrisi, Jaccard, Taki, Dunnam, and Grimes, 2001). Indeed, in an effort to accommodate increasing parental involvement, one university has implemented several initiatives, including: 1) Parents' Weekends in both fall and spring semesters; 2) newsletters for parents; and 3) a Parents' Advisory Council that meets regularly with the vice chancellor of student affairs to discuss campus events and issues. In short, parents of today's college students want, and expect, to be involved in the admission process—and many expect that involvement to continue, in some form, throughout their child's undergraduate education.

The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records, gives parents certain rights with respect to their children's education records. Yet those rights transfer to the student when he or she reaches the age of 18 or attends a school beyond the high school level. In communicating with parents of Millennial students, counselors must obtain written permission from the student to discuss or release information from his/her record with parents. In so doing, the higher education counselor not only follows the federal law, but also recognizes and reinforces that the student is an adult learner and independent from the parental unit, a valuable message to student and parent alike.

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Working with Millennial Students

Authors Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000) contend that key defining attitudes and behaviors distinguish the Millennial generation of students now entering college. Specifically, it is argued that Millennial students are: 1) conventionally motivated and respectful; 2) structured rule followers; 3) protected and sheltered; 4) cooperative and team-oriented; 5) talented achievers; and 6) confident and optimistic about their futures—all of which have implications for educators at all levels (Strange, 2004).

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First, being conventionally motivated and respectful, Millennials promise to be responsible and conscientious students with whom to work. Growing up, they have been directed and nurtured by both their parents and teachers. Some predict that, as a result, members of this generation may be obedient of university faculty and administrators, looking to them for their knowledgeable guidance and support (Murray, 1997). Toward this end, Murray (1997) suggests that university administrators be prepared to display authoritative expertise, reinforce motivation, invest in outcome, and celebrate victories. Providing data that support authoritative decisions is important when communicating with the Millennial generation and their parents because it adds to the faith this generation has in authoritative expertise. When administrators are transparent about their decisions, sharing data and reasoning behind them, Millennial students tend to believe in the capability of the institution and those who lead it.

Second, as structured rule followers, it is also believed that Millennial college students will be less distrustful of policies, procedures and processes than the earlier Generation X or Baby Boom cohorts (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Murray, 1997). However, to retain that trust materials that spell out rules, policies and procedures may need to be carefully prepared and regularly reexamined (Brownstein, 2000). Demonstrating that college policies and procedures are reviewed routinely, communicated periodically and displayed in multiple formats (i.e., in written booklets, on the Web) adds to the trust that Millennial students have in a higher education institution. Similarly, those rules students are expected (and expect of themselves) to follow must be fairly enforced. Breeches of rules must be acted upon accordingly when dealing with issues related to student rights or to disciplinary code violations.

Third, and related to the aforementioned point, it should also be anticipated that Millennial students, having been protected and sheltered, may ask questions concerning their safety and well-being when acclimating to the university setting. They likely will hold university officials accountable for providing a safe and secure campus environment as they travel across campus, and reside in campus housing.

Fourth, throughout their primary and secondary education, Millennial students have worked together in teams on group projects, often receiving group grades. Encouraged to be cooperative and collaborative, they have developed skills that not only ensure mutual-inclusiveness, but also the expectation that all team members do their part. Given their collaborative nature, Millennial students should be predisposed to judging plans and projects according to their merit and providing constructive suggestions to group approaches to solving problems (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Desiring to work cooperatively on projects that have meaning and will make a difference (Zemke, 2001), Lancaster and Stillman (2002) believe that Millennials will feel empowered to take positive action when things go wrong. Counselors and admission officers have an opportunity to tap into this talent of the Millennial student and promote service learning, community projects and peer-to-peer programming for present and future students.

Fifth, long pressured to excel, Millennial students will have high expectations for their own success as undergraduates. As such, they may also have clearly defined objectives, and will actively seek help in accomplishing their goals. Failing to do so may render the university and its faculty as accountable to both the student and their parents (Howe and Strauss, 2000). This is particularly relevant to admission counselors toward whom students, and their parents, may be quick to claim unfairness in selection decisions (Brownstein, 2000). Since non-acceptance to a particular college or university is an obvious reality, anticipating responses to students' and parents' high expectations is important for both high school counselors (who may provide letters of recommendation and evaluation) and college recruiters. Having a list of FAQs about acceptance and non-acceptance to college or university available for students

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and their parents is one strategy that can assist counselors and admission officers alike.

Finally, Millennial students are described as confident and optimistic about their futures. While this generation of students is thought to present current and future challenges to educators, they are also felt to possess great positive potential for society, leading Howe and Strauss (2000) to label them the next "greatest generation." While in college, faculty and administration can work to provide these students with the education and experience necessary to pursue their generational interests in social welfare and social institutions (Brownstein, 2000). As counselors, advisors, educators, and administrators, we can nurture their "can-do" attitudes, civic-minded proclivities and empathic concerns in hopes they may ultimately lead to large-scale societal improvements. Linking students to local, as well as national and even international initiatives, allows students to define their role within a community, society and the world.

Regrettably, as a collective, discussion of Millennial generation students should not imply that all individual members of this cohort have been afforded equal levels of financial, personal and social support. While many Millennials have been reared in middle- and upper-class environments offering ample opportunities, others may not have enjoyed these same advantages. Thus, high school counselors and college admission officers will continue to be challenged with social inequalities segregating the "haves" from the "have-nots" (Brownstein, 2000). For example, first-generation college students may be less familiar with technology (e.g., computers, cell phones, etc.), or less likely to have reaped the benefits of tutors, travel and/or support services of more educationally-advantaged students. As a result, university faculty and administration may need to continually rethink strategies to recruit students from disadvantaged backgrounds, assist them in defraying educational costs and provide opportunities to remediate deficits in key areas. This work must be done early through student programming, summer enrichment and career exploration; collaboratively with the aid of teachers in public and private schools, and grant-writers and researchers in higher education; and collectively through national and professional organizations and private foundations.

More research in the secondary and postsecondary settings is needed to empirically validate Howe and Strauss' contention that college-age students are indeed changing in the ways hypothesized. Still, as a dynamic entity, it is prudent to consider appropriate responses in educating this next generation (Woodard, Love and Komives, 2000). To accomplish this requires a constant reexamination of our assumptions and policies related to the goals and aspirations of this generation and how we can effectively assist in successfully achieving them.

As the defining behaviors of this generation of students gradually influence teaching, learning and career guidance at the high school and collegiate levels, high school counselors and college admission officers may wish to review and evaluate their efforts to build and sustain relationships with Millennial students and their parents. To share in the widespread optimism that this generous, practical and achieving generation of students may have the requisite skills, knowledge and temperament to address societal ills is an exciting prospect (Brownstein, 2000; Howe and Strauss, 2000; O'Reilly and Vella-Zarb, 2000). Yet, it is incumbent upon those of us in the counseling and advising fields to ensure that this educational path toward self-fulfillment is as direct and accessible as possible.

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