

Thank the Millennials for pushing us to change

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Recently, an article appeared in the Chronicle of Higher Education titled “The Millennial Muddle.” The author, Eric Hoover, questioned are we accurately interpreting the most popularly-sited data on the Millennials and how much change should we make to our practices to match the Millennials expectations. As practitioners examine the traits and characteristics of this generation, it has lead to change based on the assumptions that this is what the Millennials want or expect as a part of their experience. Yet, the idea that the Millennials, or more so their parents, are the reasons for the change may be placing blame wrongly on them when instead we should be thanking them. Imagine a college campus without risk-management procedures, campus security, study-abroad experiences, residential communities, educational technology applications to support learning, or support services. Imagine a campus not guided by rule, policy, or procedure designed to protect student’s rights. Then add in the thousands of graduate students who have produced millions of pages of research findings to demonstrate how changes in our practices will improve the educational outcome of our students. Think of how much better our campuses are today because practitioners have examined our current practices and made improvements.

The Millennials are a by-product of years of work and efforts to improve the academic experience. In our research-minded culture, we seek solutions to problems through researching a problem statement and then providing multiple solutions. Each research method has limitations. When research is reviewed though a meta-analysis, it presents themes that are hard to dispute. Most of the research on the Millennials supports a positive change to our current practice. At the 2009 Stetson Higher Education Law and Policy Conference, author Jean Twengy provided an examination of the Millennial generation and reminded us that, while we may think there are some dramatic shifts between generations, “Change is linear and happens over time.” These changes are the results of many societal responses created by the generations before to ensure we have a safer student experience that fosters student success. Despite the outliers whom take up much of practitioners’ time and provide great water-cooler conversation, the academy has made numerous positive changes to education, and for that, the academy should be thankful to the Millennials (and their parents) for pushing us along.

In the 2009 Freshmen Attitudes Survey, 90 percent of students reported that they were deeply committed to their educational goals, and “I’m fully prepared to make the effort and sacrifices that will be needed to attain them.” From an academics perspective, many would laugh to read how many students report the willingness to make this type of a sacrifice, but how often does the academy provide a rigorous and engaging experience that brings great relevance to a future world that will maximize the use of technology. Students want to know why they need to know a skill. Seems like a fairly good question. Why do they need to know how to be an effective communicator or critical thinker? The answer may be obvious to us, but as Millennials grew up in a time of rapid technological and information change, we may have lost the rationale behind our activities to better engage the learner. Asking a question isn’t wrong, in many ways it is the foundation of our academic practice to inquire and seek understanding, yet because this generation asks why and most practitioners didn’t it builds into a pattern of defending the

questions rather than presenting findings based on facts. The very essence of our work is grounded in research, finding new solutions to problems; identify strategies to enhance the quality of life, learning, cures to our diseases, or solutions to our societal problems. Perhaps we should stand up and cheer thanking them for pushing us to reexamine our practices and apply new strategies based off of our own research.

Technology has changed everything. It has sped up our production of, well everything. Technology is a tool to make connection and provide services, a medium for communication, and opportunity to increase engagement. Students should have access to grades online, accurate bills, easier systems to navigate to gain information. From an educational perspective, one strongly supported by Millennials, the notion that we have not fully integrated technology into all of our practices is ludicrous. Our world is transitioning to a new medium that will alter our and, even more so, the Millennials' future. The Millennial knows this and wants to be as fully prepared as possible for the future. Seems like a reasonable request.

Colleges and universities have spent hundreds (maybe even thousands) of hours reviewing their mission, vision, values, and core principle statements. Institutions now need to live them. As campuses recruit and orient students to their organization, embedded within those activities needs to be a keen awareness of and examples which demonstrate how an institution lives their values. Campus actions should foster the values and vision of an institutional mission. Institutions need to take time to set realistic and reasonable expectations with Millennials that are grounded within those values. Technology can be an essential tool in building community. Through technological mediums, we can connect with people on a variety of fronts. This medium does not need to replace completely in-person phone calls or face to face interactions, but should be used as a tool to enhance the connection and reinforces values.

Students are not customers. They are accepted into a community of learners. All students have a shared responsibility in their role with their academic experience. Colleges need to frame this responsibility in a Millennial perspective and present it in their world view to gain buy-in and understanding. Core values and principles need to be embedded in our actions. Students expect quality. With increased cost it seems fair that students expect quality and receive it. Thanks to multi-vehicle ways to have "15 minutes of fame," it appears as if more students want to be in the spotlight. Campuses can respond to this by highlighting awards and recognition programs that foster the spirit, attitude, and values of the institution. Campuses can create sites for YouTube video submissions and unedited blogs for students to express their opinion. This generation is asking us to become more authentic. Bravo! What makes America unique is our collective melting pot, let us rejoice and highlight our differences rather than seek to become the same and let's give the Millennials the venues to express themselves. Much of their self-expression is about celebrating difference – great. How can campuses embrace this embedded within their values, mission, vision, and core principles?

Much of the research about Millennials includes a need for role models and structure. For the past 30-plus years, research has supported a need for time on-task, the value in structure, and the rewards from strong mentoring programs. Recent research helps us better understand distinctive sub-populations which may benefit even greater from this type of structure to achieve success. Colleges and universities are a perfect place to provide this type of support and should be a part of our philosophical core. As we accept a more diverse student population, our research tells us the support they need; now let us put that research to practice.

In conclusion, the practices within the academy should focus on the majority and not the few. Practitioners should have policies and procedures for how to deal with irate parents or students. Staff and faculty should be supported by a mission and values-centered paradigm that fosters student success framed in a contemporary context. We need to stop blaming and rather start embracing change. There appears to be no evidence that supports going against building critical thinking skills, strong communication skills, effective use and understanding of basic math, science, language, and culture. Practitioners need to bring relevance and facts to support why this is needed. As technology enhances, it brings resources to those who never had the opportunity to explore or learn. Our role is to transition through this revolution of change providing an engaging and dynamic experience preparing our graduates for this century.

Now, go hug a Millennial and thank them for pushing us to be better teachers, educators, administrators, and leaders.