# The New Generation of College Students: Is Higher Education Ready?

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Millennials: if they come, will higher education institutions be ready? For college educators and administrators, this is a critical question. Certainly this question has been asked about other generations, however, Millennials are different and warrant special attention. Higher education constantly reaches for the latest information on generational groupings, from interests, to trends, to new needs and wants, to cultural awareness, to study habits, and so on. Thus it is not a surprise the next generation of college students is a population worth studying and as such, much is being written about them (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Howe & Strauss 1998, Howe & Strauss, 1992; Tapscott, 1998; Zoba, 1999). As others have noted, they are tech-savvy (Tapscott, 1998). They are coming from a media-rich environment telling them nothing matters (Zoba, 1999). And, they are the biggest generation on record in North America, even bigger than the baby boomers (Howe & Strauss, 2000). This generation was awakened on September 11, 2001 to a new reality that further illustrated the harsher side of being part of a global community that will undoubtedly forever imprint their lives.

The new millennium provides sizable challenges and obstacles to higher education, as students, higher education institutions, and the world constantly are undergoing complex and dynamic transitions. One pronounced influence on higher education is the shift in numbers of underrepresented students which further fuels campus tensions (Altbach, Lomotey, & Kyle, 1999). Technology has and will continue to impact educational institutions at an unrelenting pace (Duderstadt, 1999), and socio-political events, on a global scale, increasingly have influence (Friedman, 1999). Overarching all factors is the ever-present cry for accountability and evidence of a value added college experience. This educational stage has changed dramatically within the past decade, and might even be more profound than realized when taken into account with Levine's recent vision.

> The biggest danger is that higher education may be the next railroad industry, which built bigger and better railroads decade after decade because that's the business it thought it was in. The reality was that it was in the transportation industry, and it was nearly put out of business by airplanes. Colleges and universities are not in the campus business, but the education business.
> (Levine, 2000)

Higher education in America, arguably the best educational system in the world, might

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be focusing more on bricks and mortar and less on student outcomes and learning at a time when attention to the customer base and delivery of learning opportunities should be top priorities.

### Who are These New Customers?

The next great generation is big and wants to be called Millennials, a term coined by an ABC poll surveying current teenagers (Howe & Strauss, 2000). The Millennials, young adults born between 1982 and 2000, are on pace to be the first 100 million person generation in US history (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Carnevale (2000) presented an eye-opening example to illustrate how big this generation of students is (and how big of a problem they will be) in the state of Washington, by contrasting 1999 and 2010 postsecondary enrollments, where 203,293 students attended public higher education institutions in 1999 with a project 52,500 by 2010 (Carnevale, 2000). The question for the state of Washington, as well as the rest of America, is will there be sufficient seats for the burgeoning postsecondary population? These projections do not include the non-traditional students nor new Americans, many of the latter have a fierce desire to pursue higher education and do so successfully in the United States.

The next great generation has grown up in a heavily commercialized society like no generation before it. "Millennials have never known pro sports arenas that were not named for companies or happy meals that did not have movie toys or schools that did not have soft drink logos and candy ads" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 281). The overwhelming number of billboard ads, Internet ads, college football bowls named after companies and so on has been a constant in their upbringing. Zoba (1999) pointed out the radical onslaught of the media-rich society children growing up today has had an overwhelming theme behind it; nothing matters. "Millennials are well on the path to setting a global standard for a politics and economics that takes aggressive consumerism and unfettered commercialism as its starting point, and which seeks new community uses for technology" (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 300).

The Next Great Generation is different from past generations in many ways. Millennials witnessed their first true recession, as the post-September 11, 2001 economy began to unfold. They are an ethnically diverse generation and intent on achieving a race-blind society. They are doing much more homework and have the most educated parents of any generation of students on record. Also, they are active politically, but not like the activism of past generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials host web sites on hunger, bulletin boards for human injustice, and send messages along listservs to thousands in an effort to facilitate change in areas they consider disturbing. The Internet has become the primary tool students use to release and/or vent with their peers about the state of affairs within a certain field or area. This illustration of Millennials in action for justice illustrates a remarkable difference about them: they can access important information and they have the tools to do something with that information. This ability should challenge administrators in higher education to become more active, as the student base is markedly different from just a mere five years ago. The Millennials, by and large, know what they want and seek it aggressively. If a postsecondary institution

is non-responsive, Millennials might be prone to cross institutional boundaries and secure their academic needs elsewhere. While not the norm, it is not uncommon for students to create hybrid programs among several institutions and earn their academic credentials from the one most accommodating. Institutional loyalty is being superceded by individual practicality. Further, these students are more demanding of what they want and how it will be delivered.

### Will They Come?

The Millennials are beyond comfortable with technology. Indeed, it is a staple in this next generation's lifestyle. Broadband Internet, cable TV, personal digital assistants (PDAs), and connectivity are as common to Millennials as MTV was to Generation Xers. Millennial students will expect more from a college and will pay for that difference; a reality colleges and universities are just beginning to understand. Miller wrote, "Colleges across the country have spent hundreds of millions of dollars in recent years wiring dormitories for high-speed Internet access….Indeed, today's students scoff at the ordinary Internet access most Americans know" (Miller, 2001, p. 1). Miller also noted "They crave speed to such an extent that they base their housing decisions on it, restructure their meager student budgets to afford it, and refuse to attend any college that doesn't offer it" (Miller, 2001, p. 1). These students are or will get accustomed to renting Blockbuster movies from home at the click of a mouse. Already, today's teenagers do not have to leave the couch to punch up a movie on pay per view channels on their DirectTV system. Some might suggest that this hunger does not exist, but members of Case Western Reserve University might beg to differ. The university recently made a statement to the rest of the higher education community through an investment in its Internet backbone. The Gigabit Ethernet solution for Case Western is roughly ten to fifteen times the speed network users at other institutions enjoy. These types of speeds over a local area network provide for full motion video, complex graphics, medical imaging, gaming, and inter-connectivity between users allowing for TV-like audio and video--all live, real-time.

*The market is changing, there are new competitors, and to be competitive an institution must continue to evolve the quality of instruction from the customer's perspective.* The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) recently released it's National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers, in direct response to the changing educational market. The Standards sound a clear call for educators in the collegiate setting to awaken from their slumber. Three of the six standards proposed by ISTE revolved around developing a more robust learning environment for the customer (ISTE, 2000). Administrators must provide adequate resources and time to retrain, refocus, and renew the quality of instruction offered by today's faculty in light of the techno-movement. Instructors need to be more than comfortable and competent with technology just to keep pace with Millennials. Disciplined competence is being challenged by technological competence.

Quality instruction goes beyond good customer service and care for an individual, in must be defined as creative, collaborative and constant. Envision, "…electron

microscopes remotely accessible, to extend the reach of digital video libraries, and to enable atmospheric scientists to collaborate over a distance will again revolutionize the way we all communicate" (Van Houweling, 2000, p. 40). This example illustrates what new postsecondary students will come to expect: a type of highly entertaining and highly technological, quality education the likes of which has rarely been seen on the collegiate campus. These types of educational environments will become less innovative and more the status quo with this coming generation.

Institutions that continue to place an emphasis on the student, on the person and their experience, will thrive if they are tech savvy campuses with quality instruction. The good news is that if an institution is good with personal care, takes time to teach students individually or has students believing they are part of a larger campus community, it will be well positioned. The bad news is that students will never know about the "personal interaction" or "community feeling" if institutions do not get them to matriculate into their respective schools or programs. The most important retention tool a school can offer, personal relationships with a student, might not be a part of the selling mix in the future. Instead, the infrastructure might become critical. Institutional efforts at personal relationships might need to wait until a student has been won over by tech-savvy residence halls or multimedia-rich educational programs.

Bennett and Benton (2001) reported, "…students attributed greater success to a college with modern architecture than they did to a college with traditional architecture (p. 174)." If surface appearances are so important to student perceptions, the argument for state-of-the-art technology and a faculty equal to the task of using the equipment and software needs to be advanced. If surface appearances are deemed important, it becomes necessary to ensure the initial impressions survive the critical reviews. The more substantive and deeper structures (advising, program strength, networking, etc.) might never see the light of day if an initial impression is not favorable.

The contract with students served has changed. "In short, policy makers, as well as students, parents, and the private sector, are demanding changes in the social contract between higher education and its constituencies" (Zusman, 1999, p. 142). Graves (1999) further provided evidence the higher education social contract was up for review. "New online learning resources, online communication tools, and the ability to deliver student services online are at the heart of the new social expectation" (p. 115). Technology, quality instruction and the personal attention points to the fact higher education needs to listen carefully to it's customer base. Levine may have stated it best when he recounted a discussion held with some students (customers).

> I asked some students in this new breed what relationship they wanted with their colleges. They told me that it should be like the relationship with a utility company, supermarket or bank--their emphasis was on convenience, service, quality and affordability (Levine, 2000).

### Are Institutions Ready?

**Warning #1: Students will want tech-savvy campuses AND learning environments.** Tomorrow's students are used to technology-rich environments whether at home, in

school, or at play. They have grown up in a digital world (Tapscott, 1998) and they will have these assumptions about technology as they look for colleges to attend. Fast broadband access, computers with flat screen monitors in residence hall rooms, wireless connectivity and communications, and specialized student portals are just the beginning of the enhancements students (and parents) will be shopping for in the coming years. This technology-savvy gap, operationally defined here as the divide between a student's tech experience up to that point in their young lives and what a college is ready (or able) to provide, is becoming a factor for students in selecting a school. Boettcher (2001) wrote "A clear sign of laptop programs moving into the mainstream from the edge is the appearance of laptops and ubiquitous computing at high schools and even grade schools, where the expectations of potential college students are being set" (p. 11). Evidence of this widening "tech-savvy gap" exists with the Sophomore class of 2003 at Duchesne Academy in Omaha, Nebraska, an all female, Catholic high school. Beginning this Fall, sophomore through senior year students will be required to use a laptop in their daily routine as a high school student. The challenge to the higher education institution, then, becomes, one of not just providing technology for use by new students, but doing so in such a way that it both builds upon previous knowledge and experience, and is used in a way that expands critical thinking skills.

The National Educational Technology Standards for Teachers (ISTE, 2000) noted that faculty must first and foremost be trained and skilled at delivering this robust and complex education tomorrow's students will crave. As Tapscott wrote, "New Media tools offer great promise for a new model of learning—one based on discovery and participation" (1998, p. 127). He further pointed out, "This combination of a new generation and digital tools will cause a rethinking of the nature of education—in both content and delivery" (p. 127).

Wireless and mobile technology, for instance, are already beginning to impact how the educational experience can happen.

> Untethered from wires and cables, our learning environments are free to be anywhere and everywhere. We will soon be able to return to the days of Plato and engage in customized dialogue on logs under trees using innovative products to support customized learning: personalized computers, customizable software, and software that adapts to your way of working. (Boettcher, 2001, p. 11)

Hence, institutions that bring technological resources and training to their faculty will have a commanding lead, if not a critical advantage, that could affect a particular institution's livelihood for this next century.

**Warning #2: Educators must ready themselves to work even more with a new stakeholder: Parents.**

There is a cliché that parents give educational institutions their most prized possessions in the world and colleges had better take very good care of them. Past generations had different reactions to parents and parental involvement, whether it was a generation of

students needing freedom from home or needing a sense of community that was lost due to shifts in the nuclear family unit. Howe and Strauss (2000) mentioned that the impact parents have on the Millennial generation has been substantial, including parental involvement in coaching, in parent-teacher associations, and in academic decisions. Higher education leaders need to have their institutions ready for this type of change in thinking, as this type of parental involvement changes past equations of how to involve, or specifically how not to involve, parents in college choice, retention, major selection, and so on.

The emphasis on quality education in the face of budgetary constraints make colleges and universities vulnerable to probing questions from prospective students and their parents. They want to know how the touted learning opportunities will be presented and be of benefit. They want to know why designated learning opportunities are required. They want to know when specialized learning opportunities will be made available. And they want to know where the learning experiences will be made available. They, students and parents, have always been an important consumer, but based on the relationship Millennials have with their parents, this team dynamic of student and parent must be recognized and catered to differently. And this question looms even larger for those in the ranks of student transitioning and orientation. How do institutions help parents with this transition? Many programs offer parental sessions on the changes their student might go through or the obstacles they may face, and an equal number offer time to help parents with the changes they face as their sons and daughters leave home and engage in college. The process is not as clear as it was at one time, and heightened parental involvement needs to be reflected in programming. This might involve providing resource information on career options for different majors, strategies academic success, and how to provide parental support that is helpful to the college student, but not invasive.

**Warning #3: Educators must renew their obligation to one on one interaction with students.**

Zoba's (1999) assertion that the current society presents a message of "nothing matters" to youth is of great concern. However, since September 11th Zoba's assertion seems spurious. The Millennials sit on the cusp of a wave of new postsecondary students. The real question to probe is whether prevailing attitudes and behaviors are valid indices of the Millennials: will they carry forward the caring attitude evidenced by America? The events of September 11th, and its sequelae have permeated the American society. Patriotism and chauvinism are strong attractions. Ethical and moral issues have assumed attention when previously they had been neglected. The admonition to higher education is to weave such attitudes and beliefs into a meaningful, attractive, and productive curriculum. A curriculum that engages students while inculcating them with values and knowledge that can serve as a springboard to the global society of tomorrow.

Meanwhile, faculty members are under increasing pressures from all angles. Tenure, research, grant writing, teaching loads, and declining budgets directly or indirectly compromise faculty and student interaction. The discussion to improve faculty-student interaction must continue on campuses, especially in light of a student's

world of grab and go meals, 24-hour coffee shops, and instant messaging. Students want attention from adults, specifically teachers, but it is doubtful the routine of scheduled office hours will work. Instead, students need what society has come to expect, good and better customer service. Whether it is an academic advising center open during night time hours, a faculty member on-line in a chat room ready to answer registration questions, or a toll-free number for students to receive counseling or support about personal issues, the landscape of postsecondary care and personal attention is changing. The Millennials are different from other postsecondary cohorts; they want and need the support, the mentoring, and advice faculty and staff provide can provide, perhaps more so than any group of students since the 1940s.

## Conclusion

Institutions with tech-savvy learning environments, tech-savvy instruction, and a heavy focus on connecting with the student-customers are well-poised for the future. An interpretation of the essence of higher education, even on the campus of the future, includes a focus on personal interaction between students and data, peers, and guides. Data, including the technical aspect of living on campus and ranging to course content, must be much more thorough accessible (24 hrs a day, 7 days a week), and presented in a far more entertaining fashion than at any time before in the history of higher education. The peers and the guides are human aspects that must not only be provided during recruitment, previews, or orientations, but it is an aspect higher education should continue to develop and improve in order to serve this new generation of students. Higher education cannot allow itself to lose sight of the human connection while implementing a tech heavy strategic plan to prepare themselves for these students and their learning. These challenges are great and campuses must answer them to be ready to serve these students.

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