What's on Our Students' Minds

Division of Student Affairs at the University of Michigan

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What is Emerging in Research about Millennials?

For the past two decades, writers have speculated about how the Millennial Generation would emerge into adulthood. In 2005, almost all University of Michigan undergraduates, and many Michigan graduate and professional students, are part of this generation, which generally includes individuals born between 1980 and 2000.

What we can learn from research, theory and demographic trends may shape how we educate these undergraduate and graduate students. This generation will most certainly shape universities nationwide. This is particularly true of highly selective institutions such as the University of Michigan, since the education at these universities is driven highly by the leadership and academic qualities of our students.

What's a Millennial?

Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000), long time writers about generational theory, provide a lens through which to view recent classes of Michigan undergraduates, and increasingly graduate and professional students. They depict this generation as being raised on organized activities; rather than play in the neighborhood, this group has participated in organized sports activities. Rather than read at home, this group has exploited interests in educational enrichment activities. These characteristics are different than those described by these authors for “Generation X” (the students who were in higher education through the 1980s and 1990s). Generation X was described as a group abandoned by authority in childhood, and who as a group have to date displayed cynicism toward the traditional structures of adult life (such as dress codes or traditional paths of career promotion), emphasizing balance in life as they progress through professional careers. The ways in which Millennial students’ childhoods have shifted may have implications for the offerings that the institution needs to provide to both develop underused abilities and further advance this generation’s strengths.

Predictions for this generation (largely the children of Boomers and the oldest of Generation X) started even before any Millennials were born. Many predictions seemed to be hopefully based on what most considered the failures of Generation X: Students would be better behaved, smarter, more focused on right and wrong, and better supervised. Early predictions also emphasized both more conservative sexual behavior in teens and more difference in dress and general behavior by gender, gravitating to previous masculine and feminine divisions. As years passed, predictions and projections continued to focus on more supervision of Millennials, more rules, more peer pressure to be upbeat in style and behavior. The general picture is of a happier, more compliant, less individualistic generation.

Both the Monitoring the Future studies of high school students and Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) studies of entering college undergraduates seem to bear out this message, particularly in describing student substance use. Monitoring the Future, a federally-funded study of secondary school student substance use housed at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, has noted declines in use of cigarettes, alcohol, and most other drugs over the past decade, down from peak levels in the mid 1990s. Likewise, the CIRP study of entering undergraduates, conducted nationally with the University of California at Los Angeles, and conducted at the University of Michigan by Student Affairs Research, has shown decreases in cigarette use over the same time frame.
At the University of Michigan today, Millennials make up nearly all of the undergraduate population. However, it is easy to forget that this population (aged 25 and under in 2005) comprises a large share of medical and law students, a substantial portion of masters students, and a small but rising proportion of Ph.D. students. As a result, the implications for educating Millennials go beyond the undergraduate realm, affecting students in the early socialization for a variety of professional and academic careers, and influencing the education of undergraduates from both the student and teacher perspective, as more Graduate Student Instructors come from the Millennial Generation.

In search of an “authentic” experience
Some writers disagree with the glowing description of regained innocence in the Millennial Generation. Hara Estroff Marano (2004) recently described this innocence as a “fragility factor” that has a collision course with undergraduate life, and particularly residential undergraduate life. While some writers praise a return of a protected childhood, Marano sees this protection as robbing students of opportunities to develop their leadership skills and independent living abilities at a time in life when risks are relatively small.

While for previous generations, children played at recess or with neighbor children after school, Millennials have had a different reality. From 1981 to 1987, discretionary time for children declined by 12 percent, according to Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) of the University of Michigan Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life, while school time, and time in supervised play and organized sports has increased.

Recess time has been reduced in school, while after school organized sports leagues have risen sharply. This shifts the ownership of play from children to the adults organizing the sports, registering the children for teams, and supervising play. The lessons children previously learned through negotiating rules with each other, dealing with small injuries, and navigating conflict are largely unavailable in the organized sports climate, in which adults intervene in conflicts.

The net result of removing these small tests and struggles for children is that children and young adults may crave, in Marano’s words, an “authentic experience,” a rite of passage in some form in which tangible success or failure is the result of their own actions. At the same time, they may lack internal resiliency and limit setting behavior that is derived from resolving one’s own conflicts. Marano (2004) and Arnett (2004) are among those who suggest that this creates a situation that encourages binge behavior (ranging from substance use to eating and dieting patterns) when these young people enter college. As we see surveys, for example, showing lower substance use among teens, but higher binge drinking rates among college students, this contrast may be part of this dilemma.

“Emerging adults?”
A picture of Millennials emerges from both predictions and recent surveys as a group that experiments less with substances and achieves more tangible rewards in academics (such as high test scores) in their teen years. However, the experimentation and struggle that many associate with childhood and adolescence has not gone away. Instead, it appears to be taking place later in life.

Jeffrey Arnett (2004) has captured the idea of a delayed adolescence as “emerging adulthood,” a time between 18 and 35 in which young people slowly take on the responsibilities and personal authority of independent adult life. These life tasks taken on more slowly include experimentation with identity, establishing an independent livelihood and residence from parents, committing to a career, and establishing long term relationships. As Millennials take longer to explore their identity, behaviors previously associated with teens or undergraduates may carry into their 20s and 30s.

The notion of adolescence itself took root in the early 1900s as high school attendance became more prevalent for U.S. teens, advocated for the first time in social science texts in 1905. It seems fitting, then, that as more than half of the population attends college (and more than 1 in four achieve bachelor’s degrees), that a new life stage of “emerging adulthood” would rise to match this time of exploration.
Demand for higher education

Early research and demographic work indicates that this Millennial Generation is not only larger than Generation X, but that a greater percentage of this generation will attend college than any preceding generation. As a result, many colleges and universities will see a substantial rise in applications, a rise already being felt by institutions such as the University of Michigan. This rise will make admission more competitive, boosting even further the test scores, grades, and prior accomplishments of entering undergraduate students.

At the same time, these students (and their parents) may be very focused on grades and career, and may need extra encouragement to further their learning in less tangible, although valuable, ways. In focus groups of students, faculty, and staff, conducted by the Division of Student Affairs in 2002, all of these groups indicated that students feel more pressure from families to “succeed” at Michigan and beyond, to the extent that parents had contacted some UM faculty to discuss grades and policies concerning their children. This competitive environment creates higher demand for a variety of services, creating implications for a variety of student affairs units.

Implications for student needs during college

Overall, students clamor for an authentic experience that tests their ideas and skills, a need that should be incorporated into the various ways we educate. We can create opportunities for productive “authentic experiences” that allow students to create and take greater responsibility for large pieces of their own educational experience, while understanding that many needed skills will be only newly developing in students. The impacts for the work of the Division of Student Affairs and the University are many. These impacts are especially evident in relation to the Division’s expressed long term goals for its work: student goals of Student Learning, Community, Life Skills, Wellness Skills, and a staff development goal of Diversity.

Student Learning: Students need experiential and cooperative learning opportunities – the chances in the university environment to take risks. Students need increasing opportunities to create their own learning experiences, with faculty and staff playing key roles as coaches and resources. In addition to creating the learning, students need the opportunity to reflect on these experiences, weaving together the parts of their education at the University of Michigan into a cohesive whole. Recent cohorts of entering University of Michigan undergraduates taking the CIRP survey have reported lower confidence in many academic and leadership skills than their predecessors. While it is easy to think of these issues as undergraduate issues, our graduate students will increasingly be Millennials, shifting the approach to education at these levels. As the variety of Student Affairs areas further develop educational initiatives, they are doing so with this need for authentic experience in mind. Students are still learning to be proactive in creating their educational careers.

Community: Students coming from more structured environments may have fewer experiences and skills with interacting with people different from themselves, but more eagerness to be part of a larger community. These students often have less exposure to students from other backgrounds than their predecessors. At the same time, students need to gain leadership skills that previous generations derived from unstructured play. Students often come with fewer conflict resolution skills, an important growth area for students no matter what their future holds. As the Division creates educational initiatives and physical environments, promoting student skills in community building is firmly in mind.

Life Skills: The Millennial Generation comes to college with higher test scores, but fewer experiences working (either in paid employment or in chores around the home). Many skills that come from pursuing jobs or holding family responsibilities will need to be developed. In the variety of interactions with students, from developing career goals to holding a first job in one of the Division’s units, teaching the skills to balance time, maintain financial stability, and move forward to larger personal and family goals is essential to students making the other areas of learning live to their fullest.

Wellness Behaviors: While students report less use of tobacco, alcohol, or other substances before college, some students are pursuing more binge behavior during college. Beyond helping students to develop healthy behavior patterns, educators will be challenged to help students take charge over their own health care. For students who have had greater parental involvement in their lives to date, this is quite a shift in responsibility. Promoting familiarity with both health issues and health resources is vital to helping students and their future families live healthy lives.
Diversity: As students change, faculty and staff will need to learn more about the new diversity that these students bring. The change in students will, in many ways, change our work with and approach to students. In addition to challenging faculty and staff assumptions about students, faculty and staff will be called increasingly to help students develop in many areas. Often for Millennials, this will include helping students recognize the existence of privilege, particularly as they meet students from different backgrounds for the first time.

Post graduation for Millennials
The Millennial Generation is one that is welcomed on the adult stage for numerous reasons. It has a bright promise, one we can enhance through our work with them during their college years. At the same time, Millennials are eager to make their own statement about who they are, having read so much about themselves during their entire childhoods. This could create a clash of expectations versus behavior for this group, as they seek to establish their own voice – to author their own futures. While this collision could require great energy of universities such as the University of Michigan, it can also be a great source of intellectual energy. Millennials' work to define themselves may in turn redefine and reenergize the institution. The Division of Student Affairs is eager to work with these students as they seek to create the next phase of their education.

Bibliography


