

Coping with Millennials on Campus

The majority of today's college students are from the Millennial Generation, which has distinct traits that define its strengths and weaknesses. To successfully teach these students, business schools must understand what Millennials expect and how they learn.



BY STEVE WILLIAMS, JIM BEARD AND MARGARET TANNER

The five 19-year-old sophomores seemed dejected, yet defiant, as they waited for their business professor's critique. "Your work on the case study project was good, and your team presentation was solid," the professor began. "But I'm concerned about your post-project team member evaluations. You were instructed to complete the evaluations individually. I stressed the importance of confidentiality and absolute candor in assessing each team member's individual contributions. Otherwise, the evaluation process loses validity and reliability. Yet, each of you ended up with a 95 percent evaluation from all the others. Doesn't that seem like an incredible coincidence to you?"

One of the students answered without reservation. “It’s not a coincidence. We met together and worked out the distribution of scores. Seemed like the only fair way to do it.”

“But my instructions were clear, right? You just decided to ignore them.”

Another student chimed in. “Your instructions weren’t consistent with everything else you’ve taught us about teamwork, like the value of collaboration. Suddenly, at the end of the semester, we’re supposed to secretly rat each other out. It’s like you want us to pick a weak link to get a lower individual grade.”

Exasperated, the professor responded, “Collaboration occurs when you work together to solve problems and make decisions by combining your skills and perspectives. It’s a primary value of teamwork, yes. Collusion is when you get together to fix an outcome that benefits each of the colluders. That’s often illegal. You can tell the difference between collaboration and collusion, right?”

The young students looked at each other, puzzled. Then, with total wide-eyed innocence, they replied in unison, “No.”

Something is different about this generation, the professor thought. These are the same young people who worked so hard and so brilliantly on the case study project...in business ethics!

Children born since 1982 are collectively known as the Millennial Generation, and they’ve been descending on college campuses for the past ten years. Raised by protective Baby Boomer and Generation X parents, these Millennials have

common identifiable characteristics that can make them challenging to educate. But faculty and administrators who understand the generational profile of these students can create campus and classroom environments that will appeal to them, nurture them—and prepare them for the real world.

Neil Howe and William Strauss identified seven core personality traits of this generation in two books published in 2000 and 2007, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* and *Millennials Go to College: Strategies for A New Generation on Campus*. At the College of Business at the University of Arkansas–Fort Smith, we have used this framework to help us develop initiatives that suit students with these profiles and make it easier for them to learn.

The Seven (Deadly) Traits

According to Howe and Strauss, Millennial students are *special*, *sheltered*, *confident*, *team-oriented*, *achieving*, *pressured*, and *conventional*. Each trait affects how they see themselves—and how they behave in the classroom.

Special. Overprotective Boomer and Generation X parents have become known as Helicopter Parents, who hover anxiously over their children, assuring them that they are all winners. As a result, many of these young adults want to be recognized just for showing up and trying, and they’re indignant or upset when that’s not good enough at the university level.

Sheltered. Coddled since birth by their parents, who constantly fear for their safety, Millennials have been distanced from the “school of hard knocks.” As a result, many are unprepared for the realities of



Dean Steve Williams serves hot dogs to business students at the 2010 annual Dogs with the Dean student appreciation event.

the college classroom. Many do not hesitate to challenge their professors when they do receive constructive criticism or don’t receive A grades.

Confident. Having been told by their parents that they can be whatever they want to be, Millennials possess high levels of trust and optimism. Faculty sometimes interpret their self-assurance as arrogance, a sense of entitlement, and an unrealistic belief that they can accomplish too much too soon.

Team-oriented. Millennials have strong team instincts and tight peer bonds; they rely on e-mail, texting, and social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to stay in constant touch with friends and family. They expect a business classroom to offer team-based opportunities and address ways to serve the public good.

Achieving. Millennials are on track to become the best-educated and best-behaved adults in history. But since many of them have never worked outside the home, they frequently lack business etiquette and social skills. Business schools can expect an influx of students who

need help developing professional and career capabilities.

Pressured. Since their supportive parents have pushed them to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of every opportunity, Millennials feel pressured to excel. They actively seek reactions and are lost without constant feedback, and the drive to succeed can cause them to cheat, plagiarize, and whine in the classroom.

Conventional. More comfortable with their parents' values than any previous generation, Millennials have a high level of respect for teachers and institutions. However, this respect comes with an equally high level of expectation. If business schools fail to live up to Millennial expectations, students can lose faith and walk away. At the same time, that conventionality leads Millennials to be less creative and take fewer risks in the classroom.

These seven characteristics can make Millennials challenging to teach, unless faculty learn to cope with the traits instead of trying to overcome them. At the UA Fort

Smith College of Business, our professors are working on ways to do just that.

Making Them Feel Special

Business schools can capitalize on the Millennials' need to feel special by establishing new traditions, promoting high standards, involving Helicopter Parents in campus activities, and supplying the great service students and parents demand.

Establishing new traditions. At the College of Business, we've developed events like "Dogs with the Dean," a student-recognition activity held every fall semester. During these gatherings, faculty and administrators serve hot dogs, chips, cookies, and drinks to business students at lunch on one day and at dinner the following day. Members of the Student Leadership Council also serve freshly baked cookies to grateful students multiple times throughout every semester on Student Appreciation Days. Both of these inexpensive traditions are widely anticipated and well-attended by business students and faculty alike.

Promoting high standards. The College of Business has the highest grade point average admission requirement of any program at the university, so students need higher academic credentials to matriculate into the school. We make sure potential business students know this, so they realize they have achieved something difficult if they're admitted.

Involving parents. The College of Business is following the lead of other academic institutions, such as Slippery Rock University, to develop and share best practices. These include providing copies of policies and resources to parents; posting appropriate information on the business school Web site; and disseminating information about curriculum requirements, grading policies, financial aid opportunities, and safety and security services. Additionally, we educate parents about the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations, which restrict the information we can lawfully share without student consent. As much as we can, we solicit parents to be champions who work on resolving concerns, rather than obstacles we must overcome.

Providing great service. We have created the staff position of Student Services Coordinator, whose job is to advise and retain business school students. Millennials expect service people to be available 24/7 and answer all queries immediately. Our coordinator doesn't meet those requirements, but is available during regular hours of operation to answer student questions and concerns. The coordinator also is supported by trained student peer advisors. And to provide students with some form of round-the-clock service, the College of Business has



The Student Leadership Council serves cookies to Millennials on Student Appreciation Days. These events also give students a chance to provide feedback and suggestions to the school.

reformatted its Web site to contain links with the answers to students' frequently asked questions.

As part of being "special," Millennials harbor the belief that they can request extraordinary service. This means they expect deans and faculty to be accessible to them at all times. At the College of Business, we make it abundantly clear when we will and will not be available. We also delineate the acceptable boundaries for prompt and consistent feedback, so they know when they can expect e-mail responses and when faculty will be available to personally respond to student queries. We want them to feel special—but we don't want them to control the school.

Providing Shelter

Security is a top priority for Millennials, and business schools need to address it. Small schools can use their size as a selling point by emphasizing how a small campus offers a safer and more personal experience. Larger schools might

"Millennials respond better when they're told about great things that will happen when they make appropriate decisions, rather than the terrible things that could result from incorrect choices."

point to their campus security force or integrated alarm systems. The point is to minimize any sense of risk for students and their parents.

In the b-school classroom, Millennials who have been sheltered from real-world expectations often will complain about what they perceive as unfair grades. These students, who have been raised to play it safe, also frequently display

a lack of creativity, possess few analytical decision-making skills, and are averse to taking risks.

At our school, to make them feel safe from surprises in the classroom, we've started to present complete course information in all syllabi at the beginning of each semester. Policies related to faculty expectations, grading practices, and classroom conduct are spelled out in detail and covered in class to ensure business students are aware of the rules and requirements.

Because many overprotected Millennials have never held jobs, they lack professional and social skills, so we think it's important to nurture student internship relations. Thus, we've created a faculty position for an Internship Coordinator, who works with the university's career services department and the Dean's Leadership Council of the business school. Since we implemented this program, business student internships have hit record numbers.

In addition, we've implemented

changes to our required business communications class. We also have developed required and voluntary modules that feature sessions on résumé building and review, business and dining etiquette, social networking, job training, and career management. Other modules offer students assistance in developing an "elevator speech" and opportunities to con-



Students work on business etiquette and social networking skills as they meet with Fort Smith business leaders.

duct mock interviews with corporate volunteers.

Finally, we are looking into proposals that will help develop our students' leadership and civic engagement skills. We believe community engagement opportunities will build our students' professional and social interaction skills while simultaneously capitalizing on their desire to be involved in not-for-profit and community-based activities.

Playing to Their Confidence

Millennials are used to having their self-confidence praised and shored up, so they tend to be receptive to comments and concepts that are relayed in positive tones. They respond better when they're told about the great things that will happen when they make appropriate decisions, rather than the terrible things that could result from incorrect choices. In

the classroom, their self-confidence frequently leads them to rationalize poor results and decide against seeking much-needed help from their business professors.

Therefore, when our College of Business professors discuss poor performance with students, they intertwine criticism with compliments. They also establish early in the semester that hard work by

itself won't guarantee high grades, and they indicate the type of student effort that's likely to lead to desired rewards. Also, where possible, professors demonstrate preferred outcomes by providing concrete examples of successful papers, exams, and assignments.

Capitalizing on Team Spirit

With teamwork emphasized from daycare throughout their secondary education, Millennials are accustomed to identifying themselves within networks of tight peer groups. They were weaned on organized activities and communications technology. Indeed, for this generation, connectivity is a self-defining value.

Because of their team orientation, Millennials expect that in the business school classroom, they will work in—and be graded as—teams. Thus, our faculty provide options for group work both in and out of the classroom. We've noted that these students prefer to work in teams of five or fewer, and they work best when professors provide a clear structure for team management, including a fair mechanism for ejecting slackers.

At the curricular level, we have redesigned our sophomore Business Communications course to reflect this team bias. Rather than using it to stress individual skills, such as writing procedural memoranda, we focus on four specific learning outcomes of effective team communication: setting meeting agendas, holding effective meetings, writing and distributing minutes of team proceedings, and performing effective team roles to make collaborative decisions.

We also accommodate those team-style preferences through-

out the curriculum by embracing collaborative and active learning pedagogies instead of lectures. For example, our business professors are experimenting with using free online polling software like Poll Everywhere (www.poll everywhere.com). This service allows students to send texts from their cell phones to provide instant graphical responses to material covered in class. It also taps into Millennial preferences for technology and desire for social interaction.

Helping Them Achieve

Ever since kindergarten, Millennials have expected to work hard, earn good grades, and pursue extracurricular activities. Rising standardized test scores confirm that they are the smartest generation in recent memory, and indications are that the majority of Millennials intend to earn a college degree. These high achievers assume schools will offer them a complete spectrum of extracurricular activities and access

to cutting-edge technology. They also come to the classroom expecting high academic standards, small classes, fair and transparent grading practices, and traditional values similar to the ones their parents espouse.

However, Millennials have grown up constantly multitasking, which means they have difficulty focusing on priorities. As a result, they're more likely to do several things simultaneously and poorly than do a single thing well.

To teach this group of easily distracted high achievers, some of our College of Business faculty have successfully mimicked the structure of video games, in which actions are followed by consequences and there is a clear relationship between effort and reward. These professors provide students with multiple paths and opportunities to maintain and improve course grades. They also offer students incremental rewards and frequent feedback—through quizzes, exercises, reports, papers,



The College of Business at UA Fort Smith has converted unused entryway areas into spaces where students can relax or study.

and group activities—which seems to work better for Millennials than the traditional grading structure of a midterm and final.

Alleviating Their Pressure

Driven by their pushy Helicopter Parents and their own high expectations, today's Millennial students experience unrelenting pressure to position themselves for long-term success. This pressure causes them to feel increased stress, engage in less physical activity, and give in to the temptation to cheat in the classroom. It also means they often want help developing the skills and habits that will enable them to transition into college life and then the working world. Business schools must address all of these situations.

To alleviate stress and encourage physical activity, schools need to provide on-campus opportunities for extracurricular activities, such as intramural sports. In addition, schools need to set up student lounges where students can relax, step back, and socialize with their peers. At the College of Business, we have transformed unused areas into student lounges that have wireless access, electrical hookups for laptops and cell phones, and comfortable furniture where students can study or network.

To discourage cheating, professors make sure that, early in the semester, they offer clear and concise discussions of what constitutes cheating, how to avoid it, and how it will be punished. Because plagiarism has become rampant, business faculty also have increased the amount of time they spend in class discussing what plagiarism is and how it will be monitored; almost all faculty are using copy-detecting software like

Recap: Nine Things to Know

The University of Arkansas–Fort Smith suggests these approaches for teaching the Millennials who form such a big part of this generation of college students.

1. Develop campus traditions to build a sense of team spirit.
2. Take opportunities early and often to explain issues such as academic integrity, intellectual ownership, and cheating.
3. Provide clear expectations, detailed instructions, and explicit syllabi.
4. Offer spaces for students to recover and rejuvenate.
5. Help students develop skills in studying, time management, and professional development.
6. Plan occasions for parental involvement and actually utilize input from parents.
7. Offer career planning that stresses professionalism and long-term success.
8. Provide internship opportunities and other forms of extracurricular engagement.
9. Provide cutting-edge technology, interactive Web services, and social media access.

turnitin.com to screen assignments. In fact, we are working on creating a unified approach to what many faculty believe is a plagiarism pandemic.

One reason Millennials cheat is because they feel overworked, which also leads them to complain about course workload and grading practices. Our business professors address this problem by explaining to students the purpose of various assignments and what they need to do to achieve the grades they desire. Some business professors also are breaking assignments into more manageable modules and sub-

modules, offering study guides that include exam questions, and developing more flexible deadlines—for example, reduced grades for late submissions rather than a “no late papers” policy.

Finally, to help students learn coping techniques and transition into college life, faculty have developed a one-credit freshman course, Planning for Success, that teaches time- and stress-management skills. The course also helps prepare them for their subsequent business programs.

Understanding Their Conventional Values

Unlike previous generations, today's Millennials are conventional; they believe social rules can help. They arrive on campus with a high level of respect for institutions, but they expect an equally high level of performance. When schools and faculty don't meet expectations, they will see the trust of the Millennials erode.

Millennials are accepting of the rules, but the rules need to be unmistakably defined, and the link between violations and consequences needs to be made clear. Business instructors have found that Millennial students tend to follow rules they understand, and they prefer structure in the classroom. With Millennials, we have learned to err on the side of providing “TMI” (too much information) about what is required in their role as students.

For example, the College of Business Code of Ethics appears on every syllabus. Faculty members follow up by holding classroom discussions about what the code means in terms of everyday conduct: not cutting class, arriving on time, muting smartphones, not texting during class, and demonstrating respect in

other ways for the instructor and their fellow students.

At the same time, conventional Millennials are not risk takers. Professors find that it's difficult to get them to demonstrate independence, creativity, and critical thinking. To address these concerns, more of our faculty members are experimenting with holding open classroom dialogues with students, rather than teaching through the traditional lecture format.


The Millennials Go Forth

Every generation develops its own personality and instantly identifiable markers. At institutions of

higher learning, we must understand and adapt to the needs of each new set of students if we are to successfully prepare them for the working world.

It's true that some of their group traits make Millennials seem unimaginative, whiney, unfocused, and self-centered. Much material has been written about the shocks that await them as they enter the corporate world and learn that they won't be lauded simply for showing up and doing a standard level of work.

But other books and articles have described how the corporate office will have to adjust

to accommodate the Millennials—and why they will be such a strong addition to the workforce. This generation is loyal, hard-working, deeply concerned about social issues, and committed to making business a force for good. With the right kind of education, these students really can go out and change the world. 

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