



What Do Millennial Students Expect in the Classroom?

Colleen M. Aird and Autumn N. McKeel
Faculty Sponsor: Craig A. Wendorf

Department of Psychology
University of Wisconsin - Stevens Point

ABSTRACT

The Millennial generation is described as individuals who were born between 1982 and 2000. Using seven characteristics described by Strauss and Howe (2003), we administered a 50-item survey with additional open-ended questions to see how accurate these stereotypes actually are. Similar to research by Brown and Fritz (2001) on Generation X, these students expect to have a variety of teaching styles in the classroom, including PowerPoint. We found similar results for millennial students. Interestingly, we also found that students did not always believe that other students their age held similar views. For example, they were significantly more likely to indicate that classroom interaction was more helpful for them than it appeared to be for others. There are many implications of these findings for college teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Recent analyses of the popular media and literature have suggested that the newest generation of students may be unique. But do students of this generation really possess these implied characteristics, tendencies, and preferences?

Background

- The millennial generation has been classified as those individuals born between 1982 and 2000. There has been much speculation about the characteristics of this generation.
- Strauss and Howe (2003) have identified seven traits that they believe best summarize Millennials:
 1. **Special:** Millennials have faced many structured, planned, and supervised environments and therefore expect feedback and structure in any environment.
 2. **Sheltered:** As children of Baby Boomers, Millennials have a strong need for safety coupled with close relationships (especially with parents).
 3. **Team-Oriented:** Millennials focus on the development of strong team instincts and expect community involvement, group work, and tight peer bonds.
 4. **Pressured:** Millennials have faced strong social and academic pressure and therefore work to "get things right."
 5. **Conventional:** Originality may be less important for Millennials than making sense of a chaotic world and helping to simplify information.
 6. **Achieving:** Millennials expect to meet high standards and succeed, especially in the areas of technology and science.
 7. **Confident:** Millennials are upbeat and excited about their futures, but also risk-averse, as they focus on long-range personal plans.

METHOD

Participants

- We surveyed 178 students at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. The students who participated in our survey ranged from 18 to 23 years of age ($M = 19.1$). The majority of the students were freshman (69.4%). The mean total credits earned was 22.79.
- Among the student participants, 55.3% were female and 42.9% were male. Also, 76.5% of the students indicated they were pursuing a B.S. degree. An overwhelming percentage of the participants were Caucasian (96.5%).

Procedure

- Participants filled out a 50-item survey that assessed attitudes toward seven broad "traits" of the Millennial generation (e.g., Sheltered, Confident, Team-Oriented, etc.) identified by Howe and Strauss (2000).
- In Fall 2005, Participants were asked to answer 8 open ended questions. In Spring 2006, we administered the 50-item survey and asked participants to answer 6 additional open-ended questions.
- For each item, students were asked whether the statement is true of them (on a 5-point Likert-type scale) and whether they believe it is true for others their age. For example, students were asked whether they preferred a "Team-Oriented" classroom environment with discussion and interaction.

RESULTS: ITEM RATINGS

Likert-Type Ratings Analyses

- Two representative items were chosen for each category of the Millennial characteristics described earlier (see Table 1 for these items).
- For each of these items, students' responses to their self-rating and their rating of others their age were compared using a Dependent Samples t tests.

Table 1: Comparing Mean Ratings on Sample Questionnaire Items

Category	Sample Item	Self-Rating	Other-Rating	t-Test for Difference
Special	How often do students want feedback from professors?	4.12 (.88)	3.74 (.81)	6.18**
	How frequently should professors use email or technology to communicate?	4.08 (.88)	4.04 (.81)	.69
Sheltered	How often do parents acknowledge an interest in college classes?	4.02 (1.01)	3.50 (.83)	6.93**
	When choosing a college, how frequently did you consider leaving the state?	2.24 (1.27)	2.96 (.90)	-6.54**
Team-Oriented	How often do you wish to work with groups instead of independently?	3.10 (1.11)	3.68 (.81)	-6.90**
	How often do you expect to study in groups outside of the classroom?	2.31 (.97)	2.84 (.74)	-7.32**
Pressured	How often are you involved in extracurricular activities?	2.66 (1.16)	2.65 (.76)	.13
	How often do you feel that lack of sleep has an effect on your performance?	3.42 (1.24)	3.51 (.91)	-.99
Conventional	How often is the instructor responsible for teaching all the needed material?	3.51 (.97)	3.74 (.97)	-4.10**
	How often do students expect to learn general ideas instead of memorization?	3.42 (.88)	3.10 (.80)	4.90**
Achieving	How likely are you to feel stressed if college is not completed?	3.55 (1.19)	3.41 (.88)	1.94
	How frequently do students worry about the grades they will receive?	4.459 (1.73)	3.91 (.80)	3.98**
Confident	How frequently do you worry about your future occupation?	4.30 (.89)	3.68 (.80)	8.58**
	How often do students choose a career path related to math and science?	3.15 (1.02)	3.27 (.70)	-1.42

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.
**p < .01

RESULTS: OPEN-ENDED

Use of Open-Ended Questions and Responses

- These questions were generally aimed at discovering students' expectations about classroom behavior and were not designed to specifically represent the Strauss and Howe categories.
- We chose responses that were most representative of the Millennial generation as well as responses that contradicted the expected characteristics given by Strauss and Howe.

Table 2: Sample Open-Ended Questions and Responses

Category & Question	Sample Student Responses
Special: Do students of your generation expect to be able to make choices about activities in a class?	"I think most of my generation expects the choices to be predetermined. I believe this is because that is what we are used to." "It's expected that most classes will have a detailed syllabus. We're expected to complete the assignments on time and done according to the directions."
Sheltered: Why do students of your generation attend college?	"Parents want their kids to finish college. We as students want to finish college. We want ourselves and our parents to be happy and proud." "I know that if I want to get a good paying job it is in my best interest to attend college. I must admit, though, that it never crossed my mind not to go to college, it just seems like the next step."
Team-Oriented: Describe your generation's expectations regarding interactions with other students in the classroom.	"Interactive. We learn better that way." "It's fun to meet people but group work should be optional. Having a partner and having that work be factored into a grade isn't practical."
Pressured: Why do students of your generation attend college?	"Now a days you can't get much, salary wise, with just a HS diploma. A sense of self actualization and accomplishment. An opportunity for leadership and other important daily skills. We love STRESS." "Truthfully, I believe we attend college not because we necessarily want to, but more or less because we have to. For example, because of the pressures of competition and a slim job market."
Conventional: What teaching styles does your generation prefer?	"To gain knowledge thru [sic] lecture. To also gain knowledge that will help when a person goes out into the job field he or she chooses. To also learn as much as possible about a topic that is given in lecture." "People need to remain quiet and not interfere with my right to learn and the teacher's right to teach."
Achieving: Does your generation place more emphasis on learning or grades?	"I believe my generation has placed much more importance upon grades compared to learning experiences. I think this to be true because some people of my generation seem to base their self worth off of their grades." "GRADES! For me personally, even if I enjoy the class and learn a lot, but receive a C for one reason or another - I would get pretty depressed."
Confident: What goals and aspirations do you have during and after college?	"Many students attend college in order to prepare for a long-term career of choice. Although students do tend to change majors in the first year or two, most come in knowing they want to pursue a career in something they have a passion for. College helps them to confidently decide on a specific area that's right for them and take action to increase their knowledge and experience." "Maintain a higher GPA. Get into graduate school. Get a rewarding career."

DISCUSSION

"Those who pay no attention to generational transitions, or who think generations matter only to the producers and consumers of pop culture, leave themselves with precious little to assess where they, and America, stand in the sweep of history."
- Howe and Strauss (2000, p. 4)

Conclusions and Implications

- Previous research on Generation X has shown that, despite all the stereotypes, the values, goals, and expectations of Generation X are not significantly different from the mainstream (Eskilson, A. & Wiley, M. G., 1999). Similarly, the Millennial generation may not be radically different either.
- While the media portrayals may be too simplistic, there is probably some truth to the generalizations. Students' perceptions were not always dramatically different from media perceptions. There are remarkable *individual* differences in preferences.
- In the future, we would like to analyze the additional 6 open-ended questions as well as run more analyses on the 50-item survey.

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Comments, questions, or inquiries should be directed to:

Craig A. Wendorf, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Psychology
2001 4th Avenue
University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point
Stevens Point, WI, 54481
Email: cwendorf@uwsp.edu