



## Chapter 13

# “The Next Generation” Is Here: The Impact on Millennials on Campus

By Mary Gerardy, PhD

**W**hen I read *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* by William Strauss and Neil Howe in 1997, I was captivated by their description of American generations and “turnings.” As a proud “Baby Boomer,” I had been perplexed by what I viewed as the strange behavior of “Gen X’ers.” Now, Strauss and Howe introduced a new cohort of Americans—“The Millennial Generation” or “Millennials.” I read their predictions about Millennial characteristics, attitudes and behaviors, and began to pay closer attention to media stories about teenagers and children.

Eight years later, Millennials fully occupy our colleges and universities. Without question, they have had a major impact on our programs, marketing and campus climate. When I did my first Internet search for additional materials on The Millennial Generation in 1998, I found very few resources. Today, a Google search for The Millennial Generation nets more than 150,000 results. Groups as diverse as national Greek letter organizations, churches and the military are using this information to recruit new members by appealing to their interests. Student affairs professionals must understand

this generation in order to provide the best service and mentoring to today’s students. Activities programmers have an increasingly important role to play in making the college experience purposeful and engaging.

Of course, most of us can find exceptions to the characterizations of Millennials. Characterizations about any generation take place on a macro-level. Our exceptions involve individuals, or perhaps students who attend a particular institution with a certain mission and purpose. We also need to remember that certain attitudes and behaviors are developmental more than generational. For example, I am not sure that Millennials will ultimately have different attitudes and behaviors related to high-risk drinking than preceding generations. Inappropriate and excessive drinking is more a rite of passage than a generational behavior. In fact, while Millennials strongly believe in following the rules and making sure their peers do the same, many do not see high-risk drinking as a problem.

Perhaps the best way to begin looking at the ways in which Millennials are changing the programming scene is to consider what Strauss and

Howe call their seven Core Traits. These Core Traits are identified as: Special, Sheltered, Confident, Team-Oriented, Conventional, Pressured and Achieving (Strauss and Howe, 2003, p.31).

## ● Special

“*Special*” Millennials have been brought up to believe that they are “collectively, vital to the nation and to their parents’ sense of purpose.” (Strauss and Howe, 2003, p.31). This Core Trait leads to several observations related to programming.

First, Millennials want big, signature events as a part of their college experience. For some schools, this will be easier than for others. Schools with smaller activities budgets may need to find new ways to pool funds and other resources in order to have one or more signature events each year. Students use big concerts and lectures, among other activities, for “bragging rights” with their friends. Schools with very small activities budgets

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may need to consider partnering with other schools or buying blocks of tickets to major off-campus events. Millennials have grown up with many service and entertainment venues available 24/7, or at least until very late at night. So what a shock it is when college and university services are open from 9 am to 5 pm!

Many schools have experimented during the last five years or so with late-night programming. At Wake Forest (NC), one of our most successful new “traditions” is aWAKE All Night. Once a semester, the University Center is open and full of different activities from 10 pm to 2 am. Some schools have late-night activities as often as every weekend; still others have opted to expand dining hours or to develop coffeehouse facilities where students can hang out late at night.

Parents are very interested in their student’s campus life, which can be a mixed blessing. My colleagues and I describe some as “helicopter parents,” hovering around their students and always ready to intervene should problems arise. Many parents enjoy the culture of the institution and look forward

to being part of their student’s experience there. Strauss and Howe suggest that institutions may want to communicate with parents via newsletters, parent Web pages or targeted e-mails (2003, p.44). Special programs such as Family Weekend, Sibling Weekend and Orientation may take on new importance. One challenge for programmers is to find entertainment for such events that will appeal to both students and their parents.

## ● Sheltered

Millennials have also been *sheltered* all of their lives. They have been subjected to many forms of protection—or overprotection—since they were born. Recently, I read that the public school district in Pennsylvania where I grew up has banned volleyball on the playground because the game is “too violent.”

Students and their parents expect colleges and universities to be security conscious. This will have a number of important implications for student activities and special events. For example, activities that could be deemed as unsafe now require carefully crafted waivers of liability. Student activities directors should review the safety and security plans for large events such as concerts and communicate them broadly.

Because of concerns about terrorism and safety abroad, international service or sightseeing trips may not be received as well as in the past; locations closer to home may be considered. The bombings in London in the summer of 2005 were a reminder of the need for caution. Safety concerns may also cause more students to go to school closer to home. This means that some schools will experience a larger commuter population. In such cases, schools may need to move from nighttime to daytime programming, as students may not want to return to campus after dark. Crackdowns on rowdy behavior at sports events such as football games may provide new opportunities for wholesome activities planning.

Millennial students are also very concerned about health matters. Recreation centers and recreational programming may need to be expanded along with intramural activities. Lectures, short courses and other programs related to health will increase in popularity.

## ● Confident

Millennials are *confident*. They are happy and believe that they will be successful in their lives. Strauss and Howe note that Millennials possess high levels of trust and optimism; further, they like

adults. This is great for those of us who work closely with students on a daily basis. “The ‘rah-rah’ spirit of campus life recalled by today’s senior citizens is on track to return” (Strauss and Howe, 2003, p. 54).

Forgotten traditions are returning as students clamor for “old fashioned” homecomings, pep rallies and even proms or campus-wide dances. At Wake Forest, last year’s surprise event was our Shag on the Mag, a semi-formal outdoor dance under a large tent featuring The Embers—a band that Baby Boomers would remember best.

### ● Team-Oriented

Millennials are *team-oriented*; many grew up playing soccer and other sports that emphasized teamwork. They place a high value on friendship and maintain networks of friends near and far. During the last few years, I have heard many of my student life colleagues and students talk about “building community” on campus. What will this mean for your school and your students? How do we make sure that “community” includes all students? How do we maintain community while discouraging conformity?

Technology has helped today’s students maintain their tight bonds with friends and family. The importance of technology in staying connected opens new avenues for publicity and marketing. Does your program board have a Web site that is up-to-date and exciting? Is it interactive? Do you have a Web portal? I encourage you to check out [student.wfu.edu](http://student.wfu.edu). This Web portal was created and is maintained entirely by Wake Forest students.

Technology has led to other significant changes in activities programming. One example is the role of films in the overall activities schedule. Two-dollar movie theatres, HBO in residence halls and off-campus apartments, inexpensive rentals—even in the bookstore or library—and computer downloads mean students can view movies at their convenience. Film series have been the mainstay of many activities programs for years; however, attendance has been dropping at many institutions. Film programs must now offer something special if they are included in the activities calendar (“theme” movies, outdoor movies, international festivals, etc.). Interactive activities such as video game tournaments and DDR (Dance Dance Revolution, a music video game series) are also popular with many student groups.

The Millennials are a girl-led generation; conversely, the Baby Boomers were a male-led generation. A cursory look at today’s pop culture reveals the leadership of girls in films such as *Mean Girls*, *How to Deal*, *13 Going On 30*, and *The Princess Diaries*, among others. Ten years ago, I led a women’s team at Wake Forest to ensure that female students were given equal opportunities for leadership and success. Today, as I survey the university landscape, the one group that seems to need the most attention is freshman men. Returning men eagerly greet freshman women; freshman men are often ignored. What kinds of special programs might be created for men that they would want to attend? Are all-male residence halls a place where these programs might happen? What about intramurals?

### ● Conventional

Millennials are *conventional* in attitudes and behaviors. Strauss and Howe comment that they take pride in their improving behavior (2003, p.31). Their musical taste is less extreme than that of previous generations; their style of dress is more modest.

In fact, Millennials and their parents increasingly share musical tastes. This may account for the stunning popularity of *American Idol*, which is watched in many homes by parents and their children. My daughter, a college senior, called me last season to compare picks after each episode.

For those who note that today’s movies are still excessively violent and sexually graphic, it is important to remember that current films are being made by Gen X’ers and Baby Boomers for the Millennial Generation. When Millennials are in position to make critical decisions regarding pop culture and the media, they will more accurately reflect their values. The key takeaway point is this—we need to be careful about the types of entertainment we are providing. Risqué programs that were acceptable in the past may not be as popular with Millennial students.

### ● Pressured

In 1997, Deborah Jones, a Canadian journalist, dubbed Millennials “The Sunshine Generation,” due to their happy, optimistic nature. However, as Jung once remarked, “The brighter the sun, the darker

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the shadow,” and the Millennials do have a shadow side. It is most apparent when considering the *pressure* they feel to get ahead, to be successful, to take advantage of opportunities and to avoid taking risks.

In a recent American College Health Association study, 29.3% of students noted that stress was an impediment to their academic success (Kadison and DiGeronimo, 2004, p.38). My colleagues and I have noticed recently that students seem less resilient than in the past. Pressure and a corresponding inability to handle it create a difficult situation. What can we do to help pressured students “chill out?” Some campuses have tried “stress-free zones,” especially during midterms and finals. Other schools have developed more “hang-out spaces” such as coffeehouses where students can relax until very late, even 24/7. Recreation centers and student union buildings may also need to remain open longer to provide relaxation and study areas. Classes or short courses that teach relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation may also be popular on campus. Activities directors may want to consider shortening the length of some programs so that even busy students can attend.

### ● Achieving

Millennials are *high achievers*. I am constantly amazed when I read the résumés of current students and discover that many of their accomplishments occurred while they were still in high school! For many students, summer break is no longer a vacation; rather, it is a chance to add to their

résumés via internships, service or other experiences. I knew of a rising sophomore, for example, who spent six weeks in India during the summer of 2005 teaching dance (as a form of therapy) to young children who were adversely affected by the December 2004 tsunami.

As college students, Millennials are very intent on fulfilling their life plans, which they have detailed for at least the next five to 10 years. Students are attending meetings sponsored by the Office of Career Services earlier in their college experience. Student activities planners can take advantage of this by collaborating on business-oriented lectures and activities.

High achieving Millennials will also want to get actively involved in campus life during their freshmen and sophomore years. They will not be content to wait until junior and senior years for leadership positions in campus organizations. How could the structure of the activities board be modified to allow younger students to assume leadership roles for specific programs or events?

“Nobody expects twenty-year-olds to have life figured out. But the Achievatron rarely forces students to step back and contemplate the long term. It rarely forces students to think about how a complete life should be lived” (Brooks, 2004, p. 184). Do activities programmers have a role in helping students to understand their mission and purpose? What are some ways in which we might achieve that goal?

### Core Traits of Millennials

- Special
- Sheltered
- Confident
- Team-Oriented
- Conventional
- Pressured
- Achieving



## Ensuring the “Next Great Generation”

We have not always been prepared for generational sea changes on campus. But the Millennials have clearly arrived and are changing our campuses in many ways. Challenges, certainly! Opportunities, definitely! By reading, watching and listening, the traits and characteristics of the Millennial Generation will become clearer to each of us. What individual schools do to appeal to Millennial students may be different, but it will all be important. More than ever, the roles of the student activities director, union director and activities board are crucial in helping to create the campus climate that appeals the most to this generation and that helps Millennials to achieve their full potential as the “next great generation.”

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