

# THE CHRONICLE

of Higher Education

## Commentary

[Home](#) [Opinion & Ideas](#) [Commentary](#)

October 11, 2009

### **More Than 'Millennials': Colleges Must Look Beyond Generational Stereotypes**

*By Mano Singham*

Until the 1990s, generations were thought by most people to span about 20 years, and labeling a generation with a catchy name usually meant that the cohort represented some major demographic trend. The births of the baby boomers, for example, had serious implications for social policy because of the need to project future needs in education, social services, and retirement. Giving that cohort an easily identifiable label made sense.

Now, however, it seems that a new generation is named every decade or less, driven by sweeping generalizations from the mass media and supported by little more than alleged changes in character traits as described by pop sociologists. One could dismiss all the generational splitting as the harmless fun of people in the news business, who need filler for their arts-and-style and pop-culture sections —except for the fact that it has seeped into academic conversations and may actually be influencing how we interact with college students, and not in a good way.

The first of the new breed of compressed generations was the so-called Generation X, consisting of those born after 1965, who are supposedly characterized by qualities of independence, resilience, and adaptability.

Tragically, before that generation could even reach its teenage years, it was killed off and replaced by Generation Y, consisting of those born after 1977. But it seems that Generation Y was unhappy with the label, and one can understand why. The letter X carries with it an aura of mystery, while Y is merely the letter after X, always playing second fiddle. Even in graphs, X is the independent variable, adventurously staking out new ground, while Y is the plodding dependent variable, following along in X's wake. Who wants to be part of that crowd? So Generation Y was rechristened as the Millennials, a catchy title for those coming of age at the turn of the century, and it has stuck.

And what do we know about these Millennials? A lot, it seems. Here's one description, from "Generation X and the Millennials: What You Need to Know About Mentoring the New Generations," by Diane Thielholdt and Devon Scheef:

*The 75 million members of this generation are being raised at the most child-centric time in our history. Perhaps it's because of the showers of attention and high expectations from parents that they display a great deal of self-confidence. ... Millennials are typically team-oriented, banding together to date and socialize. ... They work well in groups, preferring this to individual endeavors. They're good multitaskers, having juggled sports, school, and social interests as children, so expect them to work hard. Millennials seem to expect structure in the workplace. They acknowledge and respect positions and titles, and want a relationship with their boss. ... They are definitely in need of mentoring ... and they'll respond well to the personal attention. Because they appreciate structure and stability, mentoring Millennials should be more formal, with set meetings and a more authoritative attitude on the mentor's part.*

Really? We seem to have those 75 million people pegged, don't we?

The Millennial label was so successful that we were loath to let it go, so that generation was allowed to grow into adulthood until 1998, when the news media decided that it was time for a new one. Generation Z was thus born, comprising those born from the mid-to late-1990s through the 2000s. Their arrival is now indelibly linked with the events of September 11, 2001, and Generation's Z's worldview is supposedly shaped by that one event.

But that's not all. With the source of generation labels shifting from demographics to character traits and the influence of significant contemporaneous events, we have now gone back in time and cut earlier generations into more finely grained slices that encompass smaller age cohorts. Generation Next consists of people born between 1982 and 1989 who, according to the Pew Research Center, "have grown up with personal computers, cellphones, and the Internet and are now taking their place in a world where the only constant is rapid change." The MTV Generation consists of those who occupy the space between Generation X and Generation Y. Even the venerable baby boomers have succumbed to this generational Balkanization, with those born between 1954 and 1965 being peeled off and given their own enigmatic label of Generation

Jones. Why? Because late boomers are presumed to have been too young to be deeply affected by the Vietnam War and Woodstock—supposedly the cultural touchstones that shaped the worldview of early boomers.

I suspect that student-life and admissions administrators are the first to be influenced by such generational bandwagons. They have to deal with parents and with students' nonacademic lives, and thus must keep their antennae tuned to what is going in popular culture. From them these terms diffuse into general university conversation.

I attended a conference on college teaching recently and was amazed at how often generational stereotypes were brought up and used as a valid basis for dealing with students. All it took was one person dropping the word "Millennial" into the discussion, and the anecdotes started pouring out: The students who demand instant gratification, those who send repeated e-mail messages to their professors in the middle of the night and are annoyed when they don't get an immediate reply, those who expect professors to give them a wake-up call on field trips because that is what their parents did, those whose parents cling to them and intercede on their behalf, those who cling to their parents, those who confide intimate details about their lives that professors need not (and would rather not) know, those who demand to be told exactly what they need to do on assignments, and so on. Such stories seem to spring from an inexhaustible well. And the picture of the Millennials that emerges is that of a whiny, needy, instant-gratification-seeking, grade-oriented bunch of students.

It should be borne in mind that those stories were not told by bitter, curmudgeonly, "you kids get off my lawn!"-type professors who hate being in the company of students and think that universities would be much better places if no pesky undergraduates were around to interrupt the day. The puzzle is that the people who attend such teaching conferences and make such comments are often some of the best and most caring teachers—the ones who are constantly trying to find ways to improve their teaching and reach more students.

The willingness of such professors to accept generational stereotypes stands in stark contrast to their sensitivity when it comes to gender and ethnic stereotypes. During one session on identifying and dealing with classroom incivilities, a couple of professors ventured the suggestion that what students considered

incivil may depend on their culture: that Korean students may unwittingly commit plagiarism because they believe that citing sources is an insult to their professor; that Saudi Arabian students like to negotiate grades with their professors because they come from a bargaining culture; that Latin American students think that something is cheating only if you get caught. There was immediate pushback from other professors that such generalizations are not valid—and are in fact harmful, because they prevent us from seeing the individuality in students. Generalizations about the Millennials, however, went unchallenged.

Why are we in academe so accepting of media-driven constructs like the ever-multiplying generation labels? Paradoxically, it may be because we want to help students. Thoughtful academics are problem solvers, and when dealing with disengaged students, giving the problem a label gives one the sense that one understands it and can set about dealing with it.

But generational stereotypes are of no value for professors—and not because they are entirely false. After all, stereotypes are usually based on some reality. But even if different populations exhibit, on average, their own distinct traits, large populations like nations and generations include so many deviations from the norm that stereotypes are of little use in predicting the traits that any given person is likely to display.

It would be silly to argue that student behavior hasn't changed over time. But what we are observing may not be a result of new traits emerging, but rather old traits manifesting themselves in novel forms because of changes in external conditions. Maybe parents have not become more clingy or students more psychologically dependent on them. Perhaps the truth is simply that college has become vastly more complicated and difficult to navigate, with its explosion of majors, minors, and other programs—not to mention the byzantine rules for financial aid—so perhaps some parents have felt obliged to step in more than they might have in earlier generations to act on their children's behalf.

Similarly, we have always had students who were uninhibited, socially awkward, or needed instant gratification. But now e-mail and Facebook enable them to display those qualities in ways they couldn't before—such as by expecting immediate responses to midnight queries or revealing personal information online they should keep to themselves.

Students are diverse and have always been diverse. I've taught for over three decades and have my own cache of funny or poignant stories about needy, annoying, or self-absorbed students. We teachers love stories about students, and treasure and accumulate them like anglers or golfers do about their pastimes. While my own stories can fit those spread around about the Millennials, many of them are about students from long ago, before it became fashionable to label students according to their birth years.

Bertrand Russell said that "no man can be a good teacher unless he has feelings of warm affection toward his pupils and a genuine desire to impart to them what he himself believes to be of value." The trouble with generational stereotyping is that it sucks the individuality out of our students, the very thing that generates those feelings of warm affection. It makes them into generic types, whose personalities and motivations we think we can discern without having to go to all the bother of actually getting to know them.

*Mano Singham is director of the University Center for Innovation in Teaching and Education and an adjunct associate professor of physics at Case Western Reserve University. His latest book, God vs. Darwin: The War Between Evolution and Creationism in the Classroom, has just been published by Rowman & Littlefield Education.*

Copyright 2010. All rights reserved.

The Chronicle of Higher Education 1255 Twenty-Third St, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037