

“It’s All About ME!”

Mary Beth Heeder

I wrote this two years ago, but was hesitant to publish it because my premise about the millennials varied a bit from what many of the experts had written. Since I wrote this article, I have begun to see a little more written about the entitlement factor that plays a role in the millennial generation. For years, when talking to faculty, academic advisers, housing and residence life staff, employers, elementary and middle school teachers, and others, the conversation often did not end without mention of entitlement—how young people believed they were entitled to whatever it was they were doing.

Of course, not all millennials think it’s “all about them.” There are many hard workers among this generation. What I’m suggesting in this article is that there are some things about the millennial generation that are challenging—some things that could affect whether or not the millennial generation is “the next great generation” and why we’ve gotten to the point where new students and their parents believe “it’s all about ME!”

As you may have noticed, if we abbreviate “millennium” and “entitlement,” we come up with the word ME! Today, “it’s all about ME” as we interact with many students and their parents. Having worked as an orientation director for over 20 years, I can state with confidence that things have changed for those of us working in higher education. I venture to say that others in administrative leadership positions have experienced the same or something similar.

The “It’s all about ME” concept is not new, especially to the customers we serve. It’s been all about them for years. Parents, since their students were in preschool, have told school teachers and administrators what is right for their children. Parents have been behind the firing of teachers, principals, superintendents. These parents are used to getting what they want.

Students also are used to getting what they want. You’ve heard the expression, “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.” When students behave disrespectfully in class, some parents defend them. “It must have been a bad day.” “It was the teacher’s fault.” When their students have not liked their teachers, some parents have had them moved to another class. A bad grade that would affect their entry into a prestigious institution of higher learning... this certainly was not the fault of their child. College applications... why worry about them? Mom and Dad have paid to have someone coach the student through the admissions process.

Perhaps no one actually has said to the students, “college will be a breeze,” but think about it. What have these students been learning besides A,B,C and 1,2,3 as they have

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gone through school? You've guessed it: "It's all about ME!" "Given that I'm entitled to what I want, why would things be different in college?" So off we go to college orientation. Several students leave these programs excited to return to their college. Some leave disillusioned. "Orientation wasn't fun enough." "It was too long." "It was too short." "It was a negative experience."

If the "negative" comment is made, I do some investigation to determine what is meant by "negative." Past sleuthing efforts have produced the following. The student attending orientation may have been told, "You'll have to study more than you did in high school." "The work will be much harder." "You may not get the grade point average that you were used to getting in high school." "At times it might seem that you don't have a life outside your academics." "Long distance relationships often do not last." "During the first few weeks, you may feel homesick and want to go home." All these statements about transitioning to college can be true. Are they "negative"? One could interpret them as being "negative." If a student receives this type of information with the mind-set that "I am entitled to things going my way," the above comments about the realities of college might not be well received. They may even be thought of as "negative."

For a parent who is used to making things right for their student, these remarks about college could be very unsettling. After all, how are parents going to continue to make things comfortable for their students when they are so far away? The response usually is to cling with greater gusto to the student and complain louder about what they might not like about the school.

I remember speaking to parents who complained about the degree requirements for a particular major. The fact that they vehemently opposed these requirements made their orientation experience "negative." Why should the parents respond otherwise? As stated earlier, most likely, they've been responding in a similar manner regarding their student's academic experience since the child was in preschool. They've gone from complaining about their child's classroom placement (i.e., "I don't like that teacher") to complaining about college degree requirements.

How can we as higher education professionals effectively respond to the "ME" phenomenon? We need to identify boundaries regarding where and when a parent should step in to make it "okay" for their child, and when they should not. These boundaries need to be clearly communicated and consistently enforced. At times we will have to say "no." "No, we cannot change degree requirements because you think they are ridiculous." "No, we cannot change your student's class schedule because you don't like it." "No, we cannot change your student's math class because you don't like the fact that he/she placed into a low math class." "No, you cannot sit with your student when he/she meets with the academic adviser and enrolls for classes." And the list could go on.

Hearing "no" does not often go over very well. We need to remember that both students and their parents are not used to hearing "no." It goes back to that entitlement thing. We're saying "no" to parents who pulled their students from one classroom and put them into another because they didn't like the teacher. We're saying "no" to students

who are used to getting what they want.

We also need to let parents know that by allowing their students to experience all aspects of college life, both the comfortable and the uncomfortable, they will be doing their student a service. The college experience includes out-of-class experiences such as dealing with situations that are not pleasant, including roommate conflicts, a poor grade on a test, not liking a professor, and not getting a position/job. Many life lessons are taught during the college experience. As students work through their own disappointments, problems, and challenges, they will learn that “it’s not all about ME.” What a valuable life lesson! Parents who tend to overprotect their students actually impede their growth and development. What they might perceive as helpful is actually detrimental.

It goes without saying that one of our goals as orientation professionals is to educate new students about the college experience. We want them to learn about college expectations as well as their role in this uncharted territory. We also need to educate parents about what their role should be. This is a challenging job. Many students think they know it all. They sit at orientation wondering why we are telling them that they will have to study more in college than in high school. After all, their system of studying (i.e., briefly glancing at notes prior to the test, or doing nothing at all) has worked well for them for years. They got accepted into college, didn’t they? Who are we to tell them that they might have to buckle down and really study, or better yet...learn how to study?

Parents are of the opinion that they can and should continue doing what they have been doing for years, which is to make everything easy and comfortable for their student. It breaks their heart to watch their student suffer. It is our responsibility to point out to parents the merits of taking a backseat and a more supportive role, a role that puts their student in the driver’s seat. Initiative! Who should take the initiative? Without a doubt, taking the initiative is the student’s role. And the parent’s role? It should be one of support and encouragement.

Over the years, I have learned that orientation is a process, not a program. As we interact with students of this millennium and their parents, we need to do what we can to change the “It’s all about ME” mindset. This is going to be a process that involves repetition. It requires us to let students know that they are going to have to work hard in order to achieve their goals. It requires us to be direct, clear, and consistent as we set boundaries and encourage parents to let their students learn from the ups and downs of the college experience. Doing this allows us to affect whether or not the millennial generation becomes “the next great generation.” An easy task? Absolutely not. A necessary task? Absolutely!

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