

Orientation to the Student Role: What Do You Expect from Millennials?

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This article explores and challenges the idea that today's college students (Millennials) are substantially different and more difficult to work with than past generations of students. To investigate students' college preparation and performance, researchers examined data collected by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) and by the National Department for Educational Statistics. Researchers compared this data to college professionals' attitudes of current students using a survey developed from the HERI data. The comparison revealed misperceptions of both student academic attitudes and performance which highlight the need for skepticism regarding generational differences in Millennials. This study examines misconceptions about college students, explores how these misconceptions are detrimental to student development, and offers ways to move beyond these misconceptions.

"I have recently discovered that you live dissolutely and slothfully, preferring license to restraint and play to work and strumming a guitar while others are at their studies..." (Father's letter to a student, written in medieval France, published in 1923) (Haskins, 1923/2002, p. 107).

"...many believe millennial students are not simply incrementally different from generations that preceded them but are qualitatively different. Many educators feel frustrated that millennials are especially difficult to reach and motivate." (McGlynn, 2008, p. 19)

"There seems to be a type of mind which is always glad to believe that the world is going to the dogs, with the young people leading the way." President of the University of Arkansas, John. C. Futrall, 1922 (Olson, 1996, p. 36).

The viewpoints above highlight complaints about college students that go back as far as medieval times. The consistent theme is that "students these days" are more challenging and difficult to work with than the cohorts that preceded them.

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As Futrall emphasized (Olson, 1996), this is not a new concern. Charles Homer Haskins, the great higher education historian of the early 20th century, noted that the “students these days” arguments assume a “golden age” of education when students paid attention, worked diligently, and had long attention spans (Haskins, 1923/2002, p. 107). Yet to date, no evidence of such a time exists (Haskins, 1923/2002).

In fact, today, as college and university staff members grapple with the challenges of Millennial students, they may need to confront their own cohort. Howe (2009), author of *Millennials Rising*, reported that our students are currently being led by “the dumbest generation” (p. A9). Students who graduated from high school in the 1980s, compared with every other birth cohort since the 1940s, performed the worst on standardized tests, were least attracted to professional careers, and have acquired the fewest educational degrees (Howe, 2009). Still, all evidence to the contrary, this current generation of staff and faculty discuss “students these days” (i.e., Millennials—that cohort of students born between 1982 and 2002) (McGlynn, 2008) as if they are less capable than earlier generations. If it were that such attitudes did not impact student outcomes, such a paradox would be interesting, but irrelevant. Considerable research, however, has documented that expectations from educators about students do influence outcomes (Rosenthal & Rubin, 1978; Rosenthal, 2002), and therefore should matter to orientation professionals. A college student’s transition to a new role may be negatively impacted by a focus on student deficits, so any report of student deficiencies needs to be carefully vetted. Much of the “students these days” attitudes are unsubstantiated by research data, potentially creating a negative and unwarranted outcome on today’s college students.

The Problem

One’s personal experience with this current generation may suggest that Millennial students are deficient in skills and motivation. Students may act in ways that seem irresponsible, disrespectful, and dependent. But is it the students who are changing? Or are the educators changing? The first author of this article offers this example:

I remember teaching my first college class. I used an essay prompt from my favorite undergraduate class in the 1980s. When I received the essays, the students’ poor writing shocked me. My immediate assessment: the students were less prepared for college than I had been. This thought bolstered my belief in my *alma mater* and in myself, until I looked back at my own essay from my sophomore year in college. I realized my “thoughtful” essay was no better than the ones my students had produced. A significant change in my writing and thinking had occurred, but I had not noticed it. I was disturbed by how quickly I was willing to blame the students. I think this misattribution of blame may be common as we age; we cannot help but compare ourselves to our students, but we may selectively remember ourselves as more responsible, respectful, and thoughtful than we actually were.

To investigate this misperception, the researchers first looked for evidence of student performance trends from the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI). HERI has been collecting data on first-year college students for over 40 years as part of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP), the largest and longest running survey of American college students.

A review of the most recent data demonstrates more similarities than differences between past and present students. Based on the research findings, claims of large generational differences are difficult to substantiate. Students are probably not “qualitatively different” as mentioned in the McGlynn observation that opens this paper, but they may be slightly different on factors measured by HERI. In fact, Millennial students seem to outscore previous generations on a number of factors, such as having more years of college preparatory classes and reporting lower needs for remedial education (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, & Korn, 2007). It is important to note that these trends are occurring at a time when a greater proportion of graduating high school students are attending college.

Logically, this increase in the overall proportion of students going to college should result in lower averages on a number of achievement factors. An increase in the proportion of students now applying to college most likely includes a larger proportion of average or below average students. The expected results then should be lower mean scores on a number of academic factors, such as an increase in students who report a higher degree of academic needs. In general, however, the percentage of students self-reporting a need for remediation at college entry has declined since 1971, particularly in foreign languages, science, and mathematics (Pryor et al., 2007, p. 11).

This self-report data may not be indicative of achievement. For instance, students today could be less aware of how much remediation they truly need, or those who need remediation may be getting such needs met from online sources not previously available. But it is important to note that the data do not demonstrate lower achievement. Pryor et al. (2007) state, “While overall the data indicate that today’s freshmen, compared with cohorts 35 years ago, report less of a need for remedial English, and math preparation, it is important to note these figures have changed very little in the last ten years” (p. 13).

One theory, reported by Twenge (2006), is that the number of self-esteem programs instituted in public schools through the 1990’s led to increases in student narcissism. This theory could explain the results of the Pryor et al. (2007) study, where students self-reported lessening needs for remediation—students perceived their needs as decreasing when, in reality, they were increasing. A recent study by Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robbins (2008) contradicts this theory. No differences were found between generational cohorts based upon narcissism or self-enhancement. Trzesniewski et al. (2008) reported that “contrary to previous research and media reports, this study yielded no evidence that levels of narcissism have increased.” The study stated further, “Likewise, we found no evidence that self-enhancement, defined as inflated perceptions of intelligence, has increased over the past 30 years. Thus, today’s youth seem to be no more narcissistic or self-aggrandizing than previous generations” (p. 184).

The National Center for Educational Statistics collects data for the U.S. Department of Education. Results from a study of 26,000 high school transcripts (constituting a nationally representative sample) found that “students these days” are earning about three credits more than the 1990 cohort and scoring a third of a letter grade higher (Grigg, Lauko, & Brockway, 2006). Although some believe this is a result of grade inflation, the report also indicates that students are taking more classes with increased rigor, such as physics and calculus. In general, the student cohorts may be different, but if so, only slightly. The evidence demonstrating the uniqueness of these students is not staggering. If anything, the evidence supports the view that students today are similar to, not different from, previous cohorts.

Despite evidence that today’s students are not significantly different from past generations, professional conferences for educators of higher education offer numerous workshops about the unique issues of “Millennial students.” These workshops may have the unintended effect of labeling Millennial students as problematic due to noted generational differences. This view is supported by several books and articles which define and then solve the Millennial student problem. A recent report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported, “Ever since the term (Millennials) went prime time a decade ago, a zillion words have been written about who Millennials are, how they think, and why they always (fill in the blank). In short, Millennials talk is contagious” (Hoover, 2009). The researchers of this paper believe that the usefulness in defining current students as different from previous generations is not substantiated in the existing research and may have negative consequences.

Method

To investigate the accuracy of perceptions of the current cohort of college students, a survey was created based on the outcomes of the 40-year trends study by Pryor et al. (2007). Using an Internet survey developed at www.psychdata.com in February 2009, college staff, faculty, and students were invited to participate in a study by e-mail through higher education listservs frequented by college professionals (i.e., National Orientation Directors Association, National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition). Members of these lists were also encouraged to forward the survey link to students on their campus.

The online survey contained 10 questions asking if students today, compared with earlier cohorts, were more, the same, or less prepared among a number of academic factors previously measured by the Higher Education Research Institute (Pryor et al., 2007). The answers were expected to demonstrate a “gist” of the current student cohort. “Gist” is a term used by Reyna (2004) that encompasses beliefs and schema about a worldview developed from social norms and personal experience.

Results were scored and compared to actual data from Pryor et al. (2007). Answers that corresponded with the data and showed that students were improving equaled three (3) points, answers that students were neutral or had no change equaled two (2) points, and answers that contradicted the Pryor et al.

(2007) data equaled one (1) point. Based on this scoring system, a score of 30 would indicate an accurate gist congruent with the research, a score of 20 would indicate a gist that students were not different, and a score of 10 would indicate that a person's gist is inaccurate with the HERI data.

Results

Using a convenience sample (including readily available cases rather than cases randomly sampled from a specific population), 350 surveys were obtained and screened for missing data. Fifty-two incomplete surveys were removed, resulting in 298 surveys. The researchers tested internal validity using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .76$). Nunnally (1978) reported that an alpha $> .70$ is typically acceptable. The overall mean scores ($M = 18.1$) ranged from 12 to 26. Data were analyzed by demographic groups (i.e., staff & faculty, college students, staff involved with orientation programs) using an analysis of variance (ANOVA). Researchers were interested in finding significant group differences ($p < .05$).

The findings indicated that staff members of colleges and universities, as opposed to students, scored below the mean ($t(296) = 3.49, M = 17.53$), and that there were significant differences between the traditional college age group of 18 to 22 and those 23 and older ($t(196) = 3.44, M = 19.00, M = 17.57$, respectively). Pearson correlations were computed between age and gist scores showing a significant relationship ($r(297) = -.28, p < .001$ [two-tailed]), indicating a tendency for older people to report college students as less capable.

The overall score distribution was negatively skewed below the mean, indicating the most common gist was that "students these days" were slightly less prepared compared to earlier cohorts. In addition to the 10-factor gist-based test, participants were also asked to give their overall attitudes toward the academic preparedness of today's first-year students. The results show that 51.3% of participants believed that "students these days" were less or much less prepared for college academically compared to cohorts over the last 40 years; 23.2% believed that there was no change; and 25.8% believed that students were more prepared. The results from this question reconfirm the results of the gist-based test; "students these days" were more likely to be viewed as less prepared, although a significant group (26%) believed students were generally more prepared. Of interest was the result that no participant or demographic group rated the students accurately, compared to the data from the Pryor et al. (2007) study used to develop the survey.

Discussion

Our investigation explored a possible explanation to why Millennials may be considered less prepared by over 50% of the respondents and possible repercussions to this assumption. Only by considering such an analysis can orientation professionals gain an important perspective on the issues surrounding the incoming student's acquisition of the role of "college student."

Given the unique nature of orientation professionals in managing the transition of students into college, these theoretical considerations are important in serving incoming students.

Role Theory

When students arrive on campus during orientation and welcome week, they are in the process of figuring out their new roles as college students. These roles are influenced by both their pre-conceived beliefs and their interactions with staff and faculty. Roles offer behavioral models and norms to guide students in their interactions. These roles are especially helpful to students who may be nervous and unsure in a new environment.

Role theory is often illustrated by the metaphor of stage acting (Ashforth, 2001). When an actor takes the stage, there is a transition from the individual's identity off-stage to the role that he/she is stepping into. For some, this may mean adopting different personalities and values, which in turn affects how a person acts, speaks, and behaves. Role theorists consider the various roles and how they influence behavioral changes, such as transitions (sometimes daily) between roles of parent, spouse, son/daughter, professor, student, and employee. Role theory identifies these positions by defining the behavioral expectations and characteristics associated with a specific or implied role in a social framework (Ashforth, 2001). Roles serve as a resource for individuals to pursue their goals through interactions with others (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

According to role theory, as students fulfill their role they will develop a sense of identity within that role (Ashforth, 2001). Role identity is defined as "the goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles, and time horizons that are typically associated with a role" (Ashforth, 2001, p. 6). According to Ashforth, how first-years identify as students could then impact future choices. In one study of 77 first-year psychology students, researchers found that role identity predicted behavioral intention, which in turn was correlated with student attendance at study sessions (White, Thomas, Johnston, & Hyde, 2008). College orientation is likely an important time in this development since it coincides with the formation of the "college student" role identity.

As an individual develops a new role identity, aspects may begin to affect that individual's general identity. According to Hoelter (1983), the importance of a role identity to an individual's general identity is increased as a person becomes more committed to that role. This happens internally through evaluation of self-in-role (Hoelter, 1983; Kleine, 2002) and externally through social validation and assessment (Ashforth, 2001; Kleine, 2002). Social validation (i.e., via faculty, staff, peers) exerts great power over the formation of an individual's role identity. In some cases, the social expectations of a role may project onto the individual developing into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Ashforth, 2001). For example, an individual may adopt aspects of either the "capable student" or "incapable student" role that others project onto them.

The self-fulfilling prophecy in education is well documented, stemming from

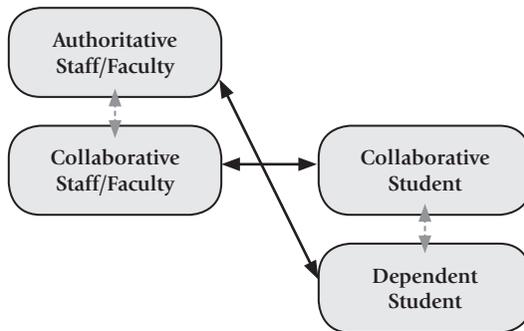
Rosenthal's expectancy theory (2002). Rosenthal and Jacobson (1966) found that students who were randomly labeled as "blooming students" subsequently improved academically and were rated as pleasant and engaged students by their teachers. Studying the effect of negative expectations on students, Harris, Milich, Corbitt, Hoover, and Brady (1992) conducted research on the expectancy effects of being labeled with a stigmatized behavioral disorder. They found that "negative expectancies are associated with more negative affect and reduced effort or involvement on the part of the perceivers" (p. 48). This study also found the labeled students had increased negative effects. As new students engage in the student orientation process, the early projections of the professionals surrounding them may have implications on their role identity development, interactions, sense of achievement, and campus relationships.

One popularized model of interpersonal interactions was developed by Berne (1973). As part of his theory of transactional analysis, Berne discussed three common ego states: the child, the adult, and the parent. These ego states may influence behavior similar to roles. Berne believed communication was impaired by conflicts between these ego states. Berne asserted that communication takes place along two pathways: adult/adult roles and parent/child roles. For instance, if a student engages in conversation from the position of the child role, it is easiest to respond back to the student in language and expectations from the parent role.

Inspired by this theory, we propose a theoretical model to explain how the language used to describe Millennials reinforces what we call an authoritative-dependent role. Our central idea is that students or staff members who operate from these role positions influence the role positions of students. Ideally, we hope for students and faculty to engage in collaborative roles, since these roles are more likely to result in valued student outcomes (i.e., autonomy).

Figure 1 represents a simplistic model of the social expectations and interactions that define roles in the collegiate environment. This model demonstrates the relationship between the expectations of students and staff, which in turn influences two types of mutually reinforcing role positions. We assert that only two of these combinations can result in role balance. In other words, the role expectations of a student work best when aligned with the expectations of the staff or faculty (and vice versa).

Figure 1. Student/staff role positions.



According to this model, conflict is caused by role imbalance (Ashforth, 2001), and people will work to resolve this conflict by shifting role positions. For example, if a staff member is expecting a student to take the role of collaborative partner, but the student expects the staff to fill an authoritative role, role conflict occurs. In this situation, either the staff member needs to assume the authoritative role, or the student needs to assume the collaborative role in order to achieve role balance. Expectancy effects may be developed unintentionally when students and staff try to reduce role conflict. In these situations, one of the two role positions adapts to the expectations of the other. We speculate that the greater an individual's expectancy of others, the greater the amount of role changing influence they communicate to the other individual.

Authoritative-Dependent Role Position

The authoritative-dependent pathway is characterized by unequal power dynamics. Staff and faculty are considered the experts and givers of knowledge. Students are viewed as being less capable; as a result, staff and faculty expect less from them. These roles may be comfortable and reinforced by students since they may benefit from lower expectations (i.e., less work, less critical thinking). While the information exchange is predictable, it restricts constructivist models of developing knowledge in the classroom, such as in an inquiry-based learning program. Students' role position does not reinforce creative construction of knowledge. Instead, the creation of knowledge is largely controlled and conceived by staff and faculty. This knowledge is then communicated to students as finished products. One unfortunate outcome from the authoritative-dependent interaction is a separation between students and faculty that can exacerbate beliefs that generational differences exist, preventing the formation of collaborative academic relationships.

Collaborative Role Position

Students and staff in the collaborative role positions interact as partners. While obvious differences in experience may exist, the student is treated as capable of providing insight into course material. The faculty member's role is more humble and shifts from an expert separated from the students to a resource, sharing with the students in the construction of knowledge. The hope is to evoke what Duckworth (1996) calls the "having of wonderful ideas," impelling students into a creative process of education.

The largest benefit from the collaborative pathway may be a deepening level of student engagement in academics. Research demonstrates that peer and faculty discussions about class material have a significant (non-chance) impact upon student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The collaborative model promotes relationship dynamics more likely to result in such discussions. The collaborative model not only asks students to be responsible, but to engage in material at the

level of the staff and faculty. Although we use the example of interactions with faculty, collaborative relationships could be formed in a number of areas within an institution (i.e., orientation staff, residential life staff).

Conclusion

“Students these days” are not drastically different from students in the past. When staff and faculty identify students as troubled or problematic, students may find it easy to fulfill these roles. The problem is that role expectancies can undermine some of the goals of higher education (i.e., students developing autonomy, academic gains). Just as roles can exist that may hinder transition to college, the inverse is true. Students and staff can organize roles around the greatest hopes they have for students, expecting high levels of maturity, respect, and engagement in the college community. We encourage people working in orientation to consider the role expectations and student role in the development of a student culture. The most important suggestion we propose is that college staff challenge the conventional wisdom that implicates students as a problematic group based upon generational differences. These beliefs need to be carefully considered and should be based upon solid research rather than casual observation. We demonstrate that little research is available to make claims that students these days are uniquely different from past generations.

Specific actions that orientation and student development staff could take are to:

1. Strategically identify the role expectations that are the most favorable to student development.
2. Attempt to align all communication to students that reinforces collaborative expectations of student behavior.
3. Demonstrate collaborative models to the institution, such as how peer leaders, resident assistants, and campus activity boards meet high expectations. Also, when working with faculty, good collaborative roles can be enhanced with the development of undergraduate research programs and student involvement in faculty projects.

Roles exist to help students negotiate the transition into the university and fulfill expectations. Fortunately these roles are socially negotiated, and with a proper understanding of roles, staff can make changes that may improve the college environment.

Orientation directors are often the tone-setters for a student cohort, facilitating a student’s first interactions with an institution. A student’s first interactions with a college culture are important and worthy of serious consideration. Fortunately, orientation can set the tone for collaborative student roles. Unfortunately, if new students are treated as “problems” in our communities, our greatest educational aspirations are undermined by an inaccurate assessment of students. Stereotyping students in the “Millennial” role invites separateness between students and faculty/staff that decreases expectations. Certainly, by expecting little from our students, we do them no favors.

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