

**I** This chapter establishes the conceptual framework for understanding the Millennial generation by presenting a theoretical model of generational succession that demonstrates the value of studying how the values of one generation interact with and are influenced by others.

## A Generational Approach to Understanding Students

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Faculty and staff working within institutions of higher education place confidence in the future through the development of college students because they have such a vested interest in their growth and development. This sense of optimism is particularly important to student affairs practitioners since the intentional outcomes of this profession have less to do with objective performance than with the more amorphous development of valued behaviors (Astin, 1995). These valued behaviors are determined through a combination of internal drive and external pressure that makes up the motivation of college students. Creating the perception that growth is positively affected by what happens in college is necessary for students and those who would sponsor their attendance. Obviously, this perception must become a demonstrated reality if intentional outcomes are to be achieved during the collegiate experience and this positive perspective is to be maintained for the future (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991).

This chapter presents a discussion of the efficacy of a generational model for understanding students (and those who work with them). A framework for understanding generations is reviewed in order to establish a template within which the Millennial generation can be placed. Finally, this introductory chapter concludes with basic demographic information about the various generations currently to be found on college campuses.

### **Understanding Individuals and Groups**

On any given day, student affairs practitioners, regardless of level of responsibility, may find themselves counseling individual students, advising student groups, teaching in the classroom, or giving a speech before a student

assembly. All of these activities require the practitioner to understand how each student is unique, how students function as groups, and how students in the aggregate respond to and shape the campus environment. The knowledge base of the profession has given student affairs educators numerous theories to assist them in working with both individuals and groups of students.

Our work with individual students has been directed by a range of psychosocial, cognitive, and typology theories (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Through the work of Chickering and Reisser (1993), we have come to understand the developmental tasks in which our students are engaged. Theorists such as Josselson (1987), Cross (1971), Helms (1993), and D'Augelli (1994) help practitioners understand how gender, race, and sexual orientation shape identity. The cognitive processes students use to make sense of the world are explored by Baxter Magolda (1992), King and Kitchener (1994), and Perry (1968). Finally, a number of theorists (for example, Myers, 1980) posit that personality type plays an important role in human development. (Chapter Four examines many of these theories in greater detail and explores how these theoretical perspectives may need to be revised to consider the unique characteristics of Millennial students.)

These theories all focus on different aspects of development but share a common emphasis on the individual. Other theorists have offered us group perspectives for understanding students. Theories and models for understanding groups of students can be categorized under the headings of student peer group typologies, human aggregate perspectives, and cohort models.

Sanford's seminal *The American College* (1962) contains a chapter by Newcomb outlining the importance of student peer group influence. That work was extended by Clark and Trow (1966) through their development of a peer group typology that included student subcultures: academic, vocational, nonconformist, and collegiate. Using historical analysis, Horowitz (1987) finds similar student groups: college men and women, outsiders, and rebels. More recently, Kuh, Hu, and Vesper (2000) use data from the College Student Experiences Questionnaire and factor analytic techniques to develop a typology based on the activities in which students participate. They categorize students in these groups: disengaged, recreator, socializer, collegiate (similar to Clark and Trow's collegiate and Horowitz's college men and women), scientist, individualist, artist, grind, intellectual, and conventional. Readers are encouraged to examine the Kuh, Hu, and Vesper article as it features an excellent chart outlining a number of peer group typology models.

In addition to peer group typologies, a number of theories and models have been developed that more appropriately can be classified as human aggregate models (Strange and Banning, 2001). In addition to describing individuals, the Myers-Briggs model (Myers, 1980) can be used to explore how groups can be established on the basis of how the individuals in those

groups gather information, make decisions about that information, and interact with the external world. John Holland's model (1973) of vocational choice can be used to describe individuals and also provides us with such useful aggregate concepts as congruence, consistency, and differentiation. At the heart of the human aggregate perspective is the idea that students are attracted to, stable in, and more satisfied with environments where other members of the environment share their personality characteristics or vocational preferences. This "birds of a feather flock together" approach has been used by student affairs and academic educators to direct a range of educational practices, from roommate matching (Rogers, 1990) to academic advising (Creamer and Scott, 2000).

The final group perspective is the cohort approach to understanding students. The Cooperative Institutional Research Program has been tracking the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of first-year students since 1966. By presenting normative data on entering college students since that time, researchers are able to discern changes in patterns of belief and behavior across time. Adelman (1994) engaged in similar longitudinal analysis using the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972 to draw *Lessons of a Generation*. Levine (1981) and Levine and Cureton (1998) used cross-sectional data to paint portraits of college students in the late 1970s and 1990s. Levine and Cureton note that, "There is a preoccupation in this country with searching out the distinctive characteristics in every new generation of young people, the ways in which the current generation seems different from the last. We then apply an appropriate sobriquet that somehow captures the salient features of the age" (1998, p. 2).

Capturing the distinctive characteristics of a generation has been used by Jones (1980) to examine the impact of the Baby Boom generation on national politics, the economy, and culture. It has also been employed by Hirsh (1998) to explain the experiences of suburban youth in the mid-1990s and by Kitwana (2002) to examine the crisis facing young blacks in America.

The most extensive articulation of a generational model is that of William Strauss and Neil Howe. Their model has been the basis for examinations of generations of college students (Komives, 1993; Howe and Strauss, 2003) and forms the conceptual framework for much of this sourcebook. As such, the Strauss and Howe model warrants further discussion.

## **A Framework for Understanding Generations**

By studying what Strauss and Howe (1991) describe as the "peer personality" of an emerging generation such as the Millennials (students born after 1980), student affairs practitioners can better identify their students' needs and reconcile the potential intergenerational conflicts that can emerge when values are not aligned. The relationships between Boomer generation or Generation X faculty and staff and the Millennial students now beginning

to attend higher education can be better understood within the framework of generational analysis.

According to Strauss and Howe, each generation has its own biography, a biography that tells the story of how the personality of the generation is shaped and how that personality subsequently shapes other generations. In their model, generations are defined as “a cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality” (p. 60). By length, they assert that a “phase of life” involves central social roles that span a twenty-two-year period of an individual’s life. Strauss and Howe build what they admit is a “simple lifecycle framework of four life phases of equal twenty-two-year lengths. Accordingly, we define ‘youth’ as lasting from ages 0 to 21; ‘rising adulthood’ from ages 22 to 43; ‘midlife’ from ages 44 to 65; and ‘elderhood’ from ages 66 to 87” (p. 56). Echoing the work of such life-span developmentalists as Erikson (1964), Levinson and Associates (1978), and Chickering and Havighurst (1981), Strauss and Howe suggest that the life roles at each life stage are distinctly different. For youth, the central role is one of dependence and includes growing, learning, accepting protection and nurturance, avoiding harm, and acquiring values. For the rising, activities include working, starting families and livelihoods, serving institutions, and testing values. For those in the midlife stage, leadership, parenting, teaching, directing institutions, and using values become important life tasks. Finally, elderhood entails stewardship, including supervising, mentoring, channeling endowments, and passing on values.

A generation also has a peer personality, which Strauss and Howe (1991) define as a “generational persona recognized and determined by (1) common age location; (2) common beliefs and behavior; and (3) perceived membership in a common generation” (p. 64). Each of these is important, but it may be the third one that is most important. To be a generation, its members must recognize it as distinct from other generations. What leads to this recognition is the interaction the members of a new generation have with members of other generations and how they experience “social moments,” which Strauss and Howe define as “an era, typically lasting about a decade, when people perceive that historic events are radically altering their social environment” (p. 71).

This two-part interplay of one generation with another and with important social moments results in what Strauss and Howe term the “generational diagonal.” The generational diagonal acknowledges that generations are not static; they move through time influencing and being influenced by important historical events (events Strauss and Howe see as inner-oriented “spiritual awakenings” and out-oriented “secular crises”) and other generations.

The most interesting part of this theory is the idea that a generation is shaped by its interactions with other extant generations. In their newest book on Millennial students, Howe and Strauss (2003) posit a number of

rules for understanding how generations move through the generational diagonal and interact with other generations:

- First, each rising generation breaks with the young-adult generation, whose style no longer functions well in a new era.  
 Second, it corrects for what it perceives as the excesses of the current midlife generation—their parents and leaders—sometimes as a protest. . . .  
 Third, it fills the social role being vacated by the departing elder generation (p. 21).

As one views the current generations on college campuses, the dynamics of the interactions among these generations appear to give some credibility to these rules. Relative to the first rule, many members of the Millennial generation see themselves as a counterpoint to the generation that immediately preceded it (Generation X, or “Thirteeners”) and not an extension of it. For instance, Millennial students prefer to work in teams rather than function as free agents, as do members of Generation X. The Millennials seem to have traded the apathy and aloofness of the Xers for a desire to become involved and tend to value authority rather than to be alienated from it (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002).

At the same time, Millennials are also attempting to correct some of the excesses of Baby Boom parents and grandparents. The narcissism and iconoclasm that marked the college years of the Boomers are in the process of being replaced by the conventionality and expectation of structure on the part of members of the Millennial generation (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

Most importantly to Strauss and Howe’s theory of “generational cycles” (1991) is the relationship between the emerging Millennial students and the elderly GI generation. Howe and Strauss (2003) contend that “the most important link this ‘G.I. Generation’ has to today’s teens is the void they leave behind: No other adult peer group possesses anything close to their upbeat, high-achieving, team-playing, and civic-minded reputation” (p. 22). Perhaps because of this perceived void, adults are encouraging Millennials to adopt the values of the GI generation. For their part, Millennials, in surveys, have responded that they have the highest regard for members of the GI generation and the lowest for members of Generation X (Howe and Strauss, 2000).

To fully understand this model, it is necessary to grasp the idea of dominant and recessive generations. Strauss and Howe indicate that certain generations become “dominant” because their members need to respond to crises as they move into rising adulthood and elderhood, whereas others are recessive because of the absence of such social moments. For instance, the dominance of the GI was the result of responding to both the Great Depression and World War II. The subsequent generation, whom Strauss and Howe label “Silents,” are a recessive generation as a result of coming of age during a period of postwar peace and prosperity.

The final part of the Howe and Strauss generational theory is the manner in which the dynamics of diagonal movement result in a cycle of generational types that are recurrent in nature. In this regard, a dominant idealist generation, such as the Baby Boom generation, “grows up as increasingly indulged youths after a secular crisis” (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 74), as was faced by their parents, who were members of the GI generation. They are followed by a Reactive generation (Generation X) that “grows up as underprotected and criticized youths during a spiritual awakening, matures into risk-taking, alienated youths, mellows into pragmatic midlife leaders during a secular crisis and maintains respect (but less influence) as reclusive elders” (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 74). In the Strauss and Howe theory, this recessive generation would be followed by a dominant Civic generation, like the current Millennial generation. Members of such a generation “grow up as increasingly protected youth [who] will come of age during a secular crisis [for example, the War on Terrorism], will unite into a heroic and achieving cadre of rising adults, will build institutions as powerful midlifers and emerge as busy elders attacked by the next spiritual awakening” (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 74). Finally, there is a generation Howe and Strauss refer to as “Adaptive.” Their example is the Silent generation, which they describe as recessive in nature. The Silents grew up as “overprotected and suffocated youth during a secular crisis, matured into risk-averse, conformist adults, and provided indecisive midlife leaders during a spiritual awakening before moving to less respected, but sensitive elderhood” (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 74).

These peer personalities move along a diagonal line of life stages that are buffeted by the influences of other generation peer personalities and social moments. What is important for this sourcebook is the proposition that, if knowledge of the values and motivations of student service providers as well as those to be served is understood, some guidance can be extended to make the provision of and reaction to these services most effective.

## Current Generations on Campus

Four generations currently predominate on the nation’s college campuses. In order, from the oldest to the youngest, they are Silents, Boomers, Thirteeners, and Millennials. This section presents a brief introduction to the demographics of each group as a way of setting the stage for the subsequent chapters in this sourcebook.

**Silents (Birth Years 1925 to 1942).** A recessive generation, Silents represent a rapidly declining proportion of the student, faculty, and administrative populations. Cutting-edge Silents are in their midseventies, while those born at the tail end of the generation are nearing retirement age. Strauss and Howe (1991) designate members of this generation “Silent” to recognize their position between two dominant generations: the GI generation of the Depression, World War II, and the postwar recovery; and the Baby Boomers of campus unrest, the Age of Aquarius, and the introspective

1970s and 1980s. Members of the Silent generation, who attended college as traditional-aged students, would have started their collegiate careers between 1943 and 1960. They attended college during a period Horowitz (1987) describes as one when “wealth and conservatism returned to campus. Upon the nation settled a sober mood that some students interpreted as a license to return the campus to college life” (p. 168).

Silents would have assumed positions as college faculty and administrators during the 1950s and 1960s and would have advanced in their professions during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1998 (the most current data available) members of the Silent generation constituted 25.8 percent of the full-time and part-time faculty in the nation’s colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). No similar data are available for staff and administrators on campus, but one is safe in assuming that a similar proportion of Silents would be found in those positions. Furthermore, in the five years since those data were collected, the number of Silents on campus has undoubtedly decreased, so the 25.8 percent certainly overrepresents members of that population. Silents are now turning over the reins of collegiate leadership to subsequent generations.

**Boomers (Birth Years 1943 to 1960).** This generation, described as a “very large mouse in a very small snake” (Hodgkinson, 1985, p. 1), has reached middle age and assumed the mantle of leadership from its Silent predecessors. Traditional-aged Boomers would have attended college between 1961 and 1982. Their college careers coincided with the civil rights and women’s movements, the Vietnam War, and a period of significant collegiate unrest. Many of these students attended college during a period when “the social order seemed to be disintegrating” (Horowitz, 1987, p. 221). Many also extended their collegiate and postcollege educational careers into the 1980s and 1990; it was members of this group, as returning adult learners, who were responsible for significant enrollment growth on many college campuses in those decades.

In 1998, 50.6 percent of full-time and part-time faculty members were Boomers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Once again, it is safe to assume that a similar proportion applies to administrators and staff members within college settings.

**Thirteeners (Birth Years 1961 to 1981).** Popularly referred to as Generation X (Strauss and Howe prefer the term *Thirteeners* to mark its place as the thirteenth generation since the Puritan generation that founded the nation), cutting-edge Thirteeners are now entering middle adulthood, while those at the tail end of the generation are wrapping up their college years and tackling the early adult tasks of partnering, developing a career and lifestyle structure, and assuming civic responsibility (Chickering and Havighurst, 1981).

A significant number of Thirteeners still remain in college; in 2002, more than 5.8 million Thirteeners were enrolled. That number represents,



at a minimum, 37 percent of all the students enrolled in 2002 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). (Establishing the actual number of Thirteeners enrolled in 2002 is a difficult task. The upper age group divisions used by the NCES to report college enrollment breaks at thirty-five and includes all members born in 1967 or before. Therefore, this final NCES age grouping contains a significant number of Thirteeners as well as members of other generations.)

As already noted, Thirteeners are actively involved in the life task of building a career. Members of this generation account for 18 percent of all full-time and part-time faculty employed in 1998 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). It is conventional wisdom that the student affairs profession is a “young person’s” profession. With that contention in mind, it is safe to assume that a significant number of student affairs administrators are members of this generation. The number of Thirteeners will only continue to increase in the years ahead, as the generation moves through the employment pipeline.

**Millennials (Birth Years 1982 to 2002).** Like their GI generation grandparents, members of the Millennial generation may have what Franklin D. Roosevelt called a “rendezvous with destiny.” The assumption that generational greatness is potentially on the horizon is one of the reasons why there is so much attention being paid to Millennial students (Howe and Strauss, 2000; Martin and Tulgan, 2001; Sax, 2003). This generation will be the largest cohort in the nation’s history, with census figures indicating some eighty million Americans born after 1981 (Yax, 2004). With an anticipated influx of immigrants potentially raising the number to more than ninety million, the Millennial generation would be 33 percent larger than the Baby Boom generation. It will also be the most diverse college-going generation ever. African American enrollment has more than doubled since 1980, and Hispanic enrollment is the fastest growing group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Millennials are certainly the most educationally ambitious generation ever, with more than three out of four college freshmen projecting they will earn a graduate degree (Sax, 2003).

As the largest generation in our nation’s history, the Millennial generation holds important implications for how colleges develop programs and policies during the initial decades of the twenty-first century. In 2002, approximately 6.9 million Millennials were enrolled in the nation’s colleges and university, representing 44.2 percent of all students. By 2012, the number of Millennials is estimated to increase to 13.3 million, or 75 percent of all students. The number of Millennial students enrolled in 2012 will have increased by 93.5 percent over the 2002 level, while the number of students from other generations will decrease by 50.2 percent during that same ten-year period (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

In addition to changes in student demographics, cutting-edge Millennials will have established themselves in entry-level administrative and faculty positions by 2012. The first college graduates of the generation



completed college in 2003. Those same students are now enrolling in student affairs preparation programs and are beginning to enter the administrative ranks in entry-level positions. Millennial generation faculty members should begin showing up on campuses by the end of this decade.

These demographics projections suggest the importance of understanding how this generation's values, beliefs, and behaviors are shaped and how to best educate and work with members of the Millennial generation. Subsequent chapters in this sourcebook lay out more detailed information on understanding, educating, and working with Millennials.

## **Conclusions and Caveats**

A generational perspective provides student affairs educators with one more tool for understanding students. By exploring the factors that shape a generation's peer personality and discerning identifying characteristics of that personality, educators can develop more effective policies and practices. Effective practitioners must have a firm grasp of theoretical and conceptual models that explain their work. Student affairs has developed multiple theories for understanding students as individuals and as members of groups. Understanding the theory of generations gives the practitioner a supplemental source of insight to round out conceptual frameworks he or she already holds and relies on.

However, like all models, a generational perspective should be employed with caution. Like many megatheories, it can lead to stereotyping and overgeneralization. Still, it has been advanced by human resource development experts that people tend to do in the future what has worked for them in the past (Drucker, 1974). As long as this perspective is attached to consideration of the past behavior of an individual in order to predict the future, the theory has validity (Erikson, 1964). However, to make assumptions about another individual's behavior on the basis of knowledge of the previous individual's behavior would be erroneous. The same can be said of generations. One should not assume that a current generation's values, attitudes, and behaviors are the same as those of its immediate predecessors. A fascinating aspect of generational analysis is to observe the emerging generation's movement away from the previous generation's thematic values (Howe and Strauss, 2000). One should not study generations in order to predict the transfer of normative behaviors from one generation to the next. Rather, once a generation's themes are established, predictions about what motivates action through appealing to the goals, engendering the hopes, and appreciating the fears of a particular generation can emerge.

Like measures of central tendency, a generational approach may illuminate the characteristics of the group, but it also obscures the idiographic characteristics of the individual. The information contained in this and subsequent chapters should prove useful in understanding the Millennial generation, but it may prove woefully inadequate for understanding any specific

Millennial student. Furthermore, one must always approach with caution the use of such models for understanding the dynamics of subcultures on college campuses. Strauss and Howe developed their theory by examining the big picture of historical and cultural events that shape generations. However, the big picture seldom contains images of marginalized groups. It is uncertain how effectively the generational perspective can be applied to students of color, LGBT students, and students of specific ethnic and cultural groups. These students must interact with larger cultural forces and are members of their generational cohort, so one would assume they share many of the same experiences and perspectives. However, the lesson learned from other social science perspectives—that the variance within groups is always greater than the variance between groups—undoubtedly applies to generations as well.

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