

## Research Dispels Millennial Theories

### Millennials appear more like than different from their parents' generation

#### Publishers' note

Generational change has always been a notion with enormous popular appeal.

The current fascination with the characteristics of “Millennials,” the generation that entered college at the turn of the century, is the legacy to generations X, Y, and Boomers, the generational labels given cohorts that came of age between the 1960s and the turn of the century.

The Millennial generation has been a particular source of curiosity among college and university presidents, trustees, enrollment officers, and student life staff. But aside from a few popular books on Millennials, whose assumptions are supported largely by anecdote or a few focus groups with students, there is scant empirical evidence to support the speculation about the values and behavior of the turn-of-the-century generation, particularly as they relate to college consideration and choice.

To help fill this empirical void, we decided to devote this issue of *Student Poll* to the evidence about Millennials and how they differ from previous generations of college students, drawing both on *Student Poll*'s own research and longitudinal data from the Cooperative Institute Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey.

Last fall, *Student Poll* administered an online survey to a national sample of college-bound rising high school seniors. This survey focused on how Millennials perceive themselves to be different from their parents on a variety of factors relating to college choice. Such a survey, of course, is about self-perceived differences, and measures values and attitudes at only one point in time. It is helpful, but not definitive.

To understand true generational change, consistent measures have to be taken over a long period of time, at least one generation or more, about 40 years. There is only one such source of longitudinal data on the attitudes of college students: surveys conducted by CIRP, part of the Higher Education Research Institute based at the University of California, Los Angeles. CIRP researchers have conducted an annual survey — the Freshman Survey — of incoming college freshmen every year since 1966. The survey is administered during orientation by more than 700 colleges and universities nationwide, with 272,000 students participating in the fall 2007 survey.

This issue of *Student Poll*, a collaboration of the College Board, Art & Science Group, and CIRP, synthesizes data from the recent *Student Poll* survey on Millennials as well as key findings from CIRP's 2007 report, and its 2006 report, *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends*. The findings from these surveys puncture large holes in much of the conventional wisdom about Millennials, but also provide solid evidence for other conclusions about this generation. In many respects, the data show that Millennials are more like their parents than different.

More than anything, the findings confirm that generational change is gradual and transitional, with few abrupt shifts, and that gross generalizations about an entire generation do not capture important subtleties and differences. The findings also sound a warning first raised in 1949 by the psychologist Benjamin Forer. He posited the idea — now known as the Forer Effect — that people are highly disposed to accept vague, generalized, positive personality descriptions about themselves or about people like themselves, and to gravitate toward answers that simplify and order a complex world.

In an era when the socioeconomic and racial diversity and complexity of the college-bound population is greater than it has ever been, nothing could be more dangerous. So we offer this issue of *Student Poll* in the spirit of encouraging more thoughtful and nuanced consideration of the student populations entering our college campuses today.

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## **Factors in College Choice**

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**1 Academic quality and several cost-related factors top the list of factors very important to both students and their parents in college choice. CIRP data also provide evidence of the increasing importance of social activities in students' college choice.**

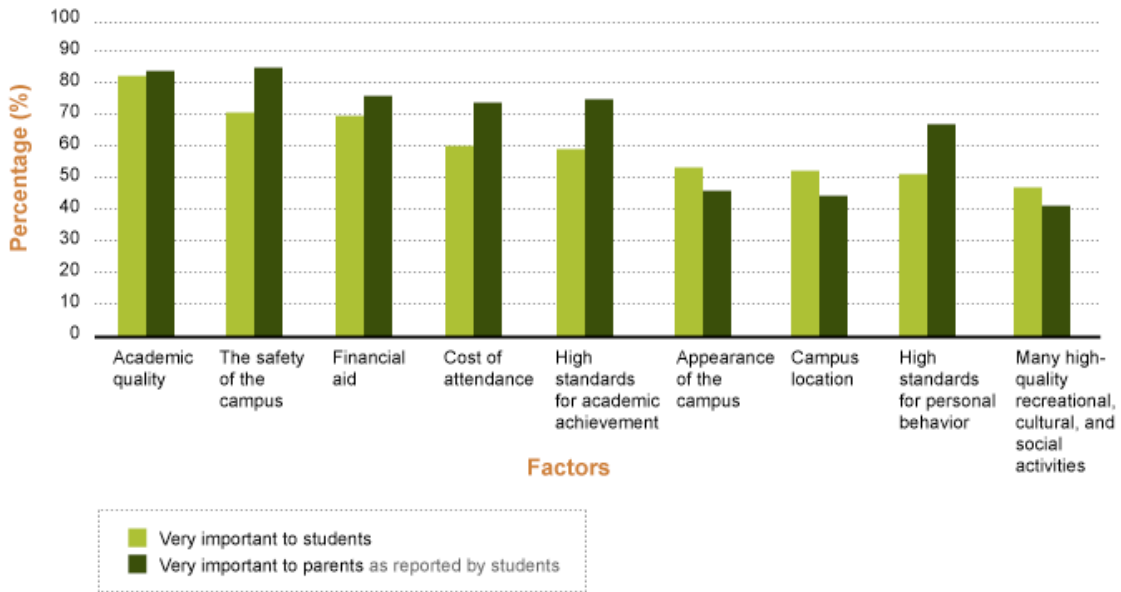
To understand the factors most important in college application and enrollment decisions, *Student Poll* asked respondents to rate how important 23 different factors were to them in their college decisions. We then asked students to tell us how important these same factors were to their parents.

Academic quality came in at the top of the list with 84 percent reporting that it was “very important” to them in deciding where to attend college. High proportions of students also rated affordability factors as very important (71 percent rated financial aid and 61 percent cost of attendance as very important), suggesting that cost concerns are very much on the mind of students.

Academic quality was also believed by students to be very important to their parents (85 percent) with campus safety an equally high factor (86 percent). Not surprisingly, financial aid and cost of attendance were believed by students to be even more important to their parents (77 percent and 75 percent respectively).

CHART 1

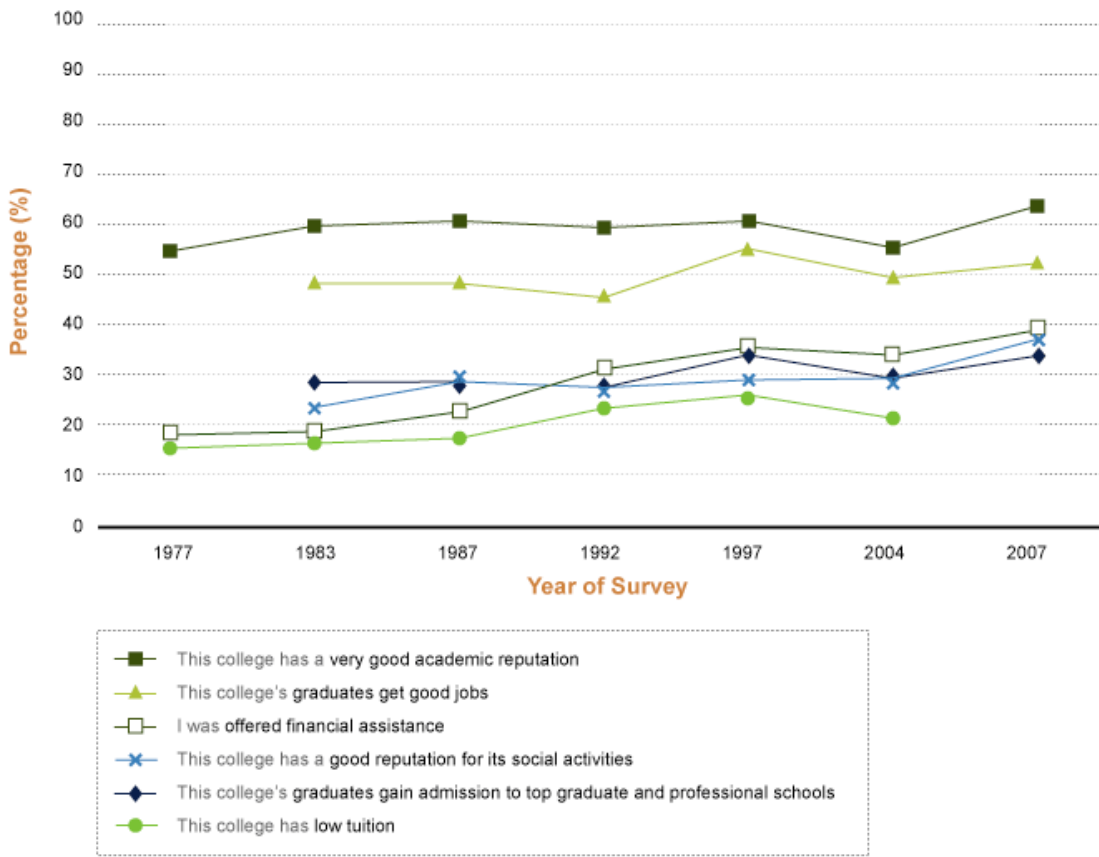
## Factors in College Consideration and Choice



Similar patterns are reflected in the CIRP longitudinal data. The academic reputation of the institution continues to be — as it has been for decades — the factor considered most important by the largest percentages of students in college choice. This is true for Millennials as well as their parents' Boomer generation. In 1977 (a year when many Boomer-generation students were entering college) 55 percent of students indicated that the college's good academic reputation was a "very important" reason they chose a particular college. Interestingly enough, CIRP's 2007 *American Freshman — National Norms* reported that this figure had risen to 63 percent — "the highest it has been in 35 years."

CHART 2

### Reasons Cited as Very Important to Student's Decision to Attend a Particular College



Source: The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends, CIRP

The affordability concerns reflected in the *Student Poll* findings are even more pronounced in CIRP's trend data. In fact, college affordability concerns have risen dramatically from the time Boomers entered college to today. For example, the CIRP data show, in 1977, 18 percent of students entering college reported that financial assistance was "very important" in their college decision. Over the last three decades that figure has risen steadily in importance, reaching nearly 40 percent in 2007, the highest this figure has been in 35 years. It is evident that Millennials have much greater concern about the cost of financing college than their parents did 30 years ago.

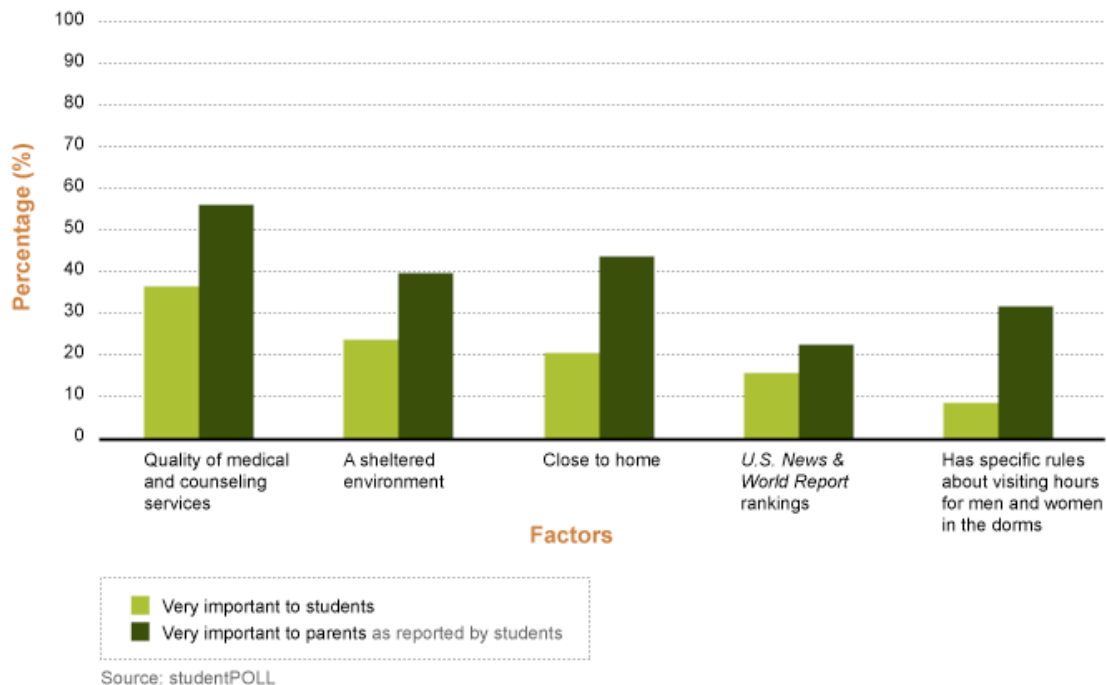
CIRP's longitudinal data also chronicle the increasing importance in college choice of a college's social activities. In 1983, the tail end of the Boomer generation entering college, 24 percent of students reported that the college's reputation for good social activities was very influential in their decision to attend a particular college. In 2007, this had climbed to 37 percent.

## 2 Millennial students are much less cautious than their parents about "sheltering" factors in college choice.

Contrary to conventional Millennial-generation wisdom, today's students are much less inclined than they think their parents are to value protective or sheltering factors in college choice (go to college close to home, have parietal hours and good medical and counseling services).

CHART 3

### College Choice Factors Seen Differently by Students and Parents



The greatest differences between students' own views and their perceptions of their parents' views were found in several factors:

- A college close to home (21 percent of students cited this as very important compared to 44 percent who believed their parents viewed this as very important)
- Has specific rules about visiting hours for men and women in the dorms (9 percent of students compared to a perceived 32 percent of parents)
- Quality of medical and counseling services (37 percent of students compared to a perceived 56 percent of parents)

By gender, a larger proportion of female students compared to their male counterparts were more likely to report these factors very important to them in deciding what colleges and universities to consider or attend:

- The safety of the campus (78 percent women versus 66 percent men)
- Campus location (57 percent versus 47 percent)
- Quality of medical and counseling services (41 percent versus 33 percent)
- High standards for personal behavior (56 percent compared to 48 percent)

### Personal Values

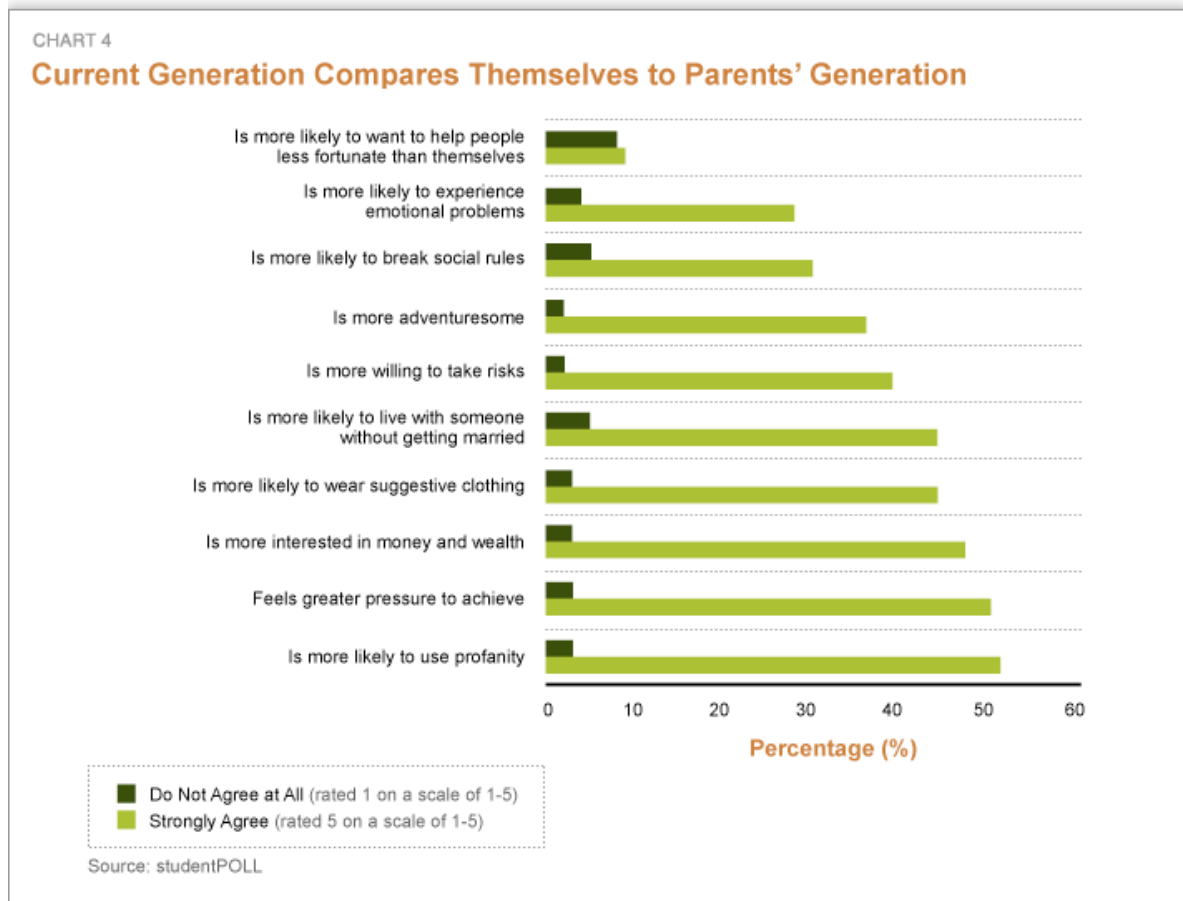
**3** A sizable segment of Millennial students strongly agree that they are more interested in money and wealth and less likely to want to help others in need than their parents' generation.

*Student Poll* specifically asked students to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement (on a scale of 1–5 with 5 being “strongly agree” and 1 being “strongly disagree”) with a series of statements about their generation versus their parents' generation. For example, we asked students whether their generation “is more interested in money and wealth” or “more likely to want to help people less fortunate than themselves” than their parents' generation.

Conventional Millennial theory suggests that this generation of students is less interested in “having a lot of money” and more interested in “making a contribution to society.” *Student Poll’s* and CIRP’s findings lead to very different conclusions.

Over the last 30 years, the CIRP Freshman Survey data shows that “being well off financially” has remained a top personal goal for nearly three in four college freshmen, with no changes among Millennials. In fact, CIRP notes that “much of the growth in the percentage of students who rate highly the importance of being well off financially occurred from 1966 to 1987 (from 42.2 percent to 74.1 percent) and has remained fairly stable since then.”

Similarly, *Student Poll’s* Millennial findings revealed that 47 percent of students strongly agreed (giving a rating of 5 on a scale of 1–5) that their generation is “more interested in money and wealth” than their parents’ generation. Only 3 percent of students indicated that they did not agree at all with this statement.



While only 9 percent of students strongly agreed that their generation is more likely than their parents’ generation to want to help people less fortunate than themselves, CIRP data provide a more complete picture. While 67 percent of students in 1977 reported that “helping others who are in difficulty” was “essential” or “very important” to them, this figure hovered in the mid-60s for many years and then climbed to 70 percent in 2007 — the highest it has been in the last 20 years, suggesting as CIRP explains in its *Forty Year Trend* report that there appears to be a “resurgent interest in altruistic values” among college freshmen. In other words, Millennial levels of social altruism have become more similar to those of their parents’ generation.

**4 Raising a family tops the list of life objectives that are “essential” or “very important” to Millennials — even more so than their parents’ generation.**

Family values, it seems, still matter as much to Millennials as they did to their parents' generation. In 2007, 77 percent of the 272,000 students surveyed by CIRP nationwide indicated that "raising a family" was an "essential" or "very important" life objective to them. In 1977, by comparison, 59 percent of students gave the same level of importance to raising a family, although this figure has remained relatively constant since the early 1990s.

Millennials and previous generations show the greatest difference in the personal or professional objectives they deem "essential" or "important" with regard to:

- Becoming an authority in my field (77 percent in 1977 compared to 59 percent of students in 2007)
- Influencing social values (32 percent in 1977 compared to 44 percent in 2007), which seems to reflect the growing importance to students of community service (26.8 percent of students in 2006 indicated there was a "very good chance" they would participate in such activities in college compared to 16.9 percent of college freshmen when CIRP first asked the question in 1990).

Given the "green" revolution and growing interest in sustainability on college campuses, it is not surprising that "becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment" is "very important" or "essential" to an increasing percentage of students — up 7 percent among students over the last decade. However, CIRP data show Millennials' growing interest in the environment appears to be on a par with their parents' interest a generation ago when the world energy crisis, the beginning of Earth Day, the creation of the EPA, and other events strongly influenced their opinions.

CHART 5  
**Objectives Considered Essential or Very Important to Students**

	1977	1983	1989	1992	1997	2004	2007
Raising a family	59%	68%	70%	72%	75%	75%	77%
Being very well off financially	56%	69%	74%	71%	73%	74%	74%
Helping others who are in difficulty	67%	65%	61%	65%	64%	62%	70%
Becoming an authority in my field	77%	75%	68%	70%	65%	58%	59%
Obtaining recognition from my colleagues for contributions to my special field	50%	58%	57%	58%	55%	52%	56%
Developing a meaningful philosophy of life	63%	48%	44%	49%	45%	42%	49%
Influencing social values	32%	32%	43%	46%	39%	38%	44%
Becoming successful in a business of my own	46%	49%	50%	41%	39%	41%	42%
Having administrative responsibility for the work of others	34%	41%	46%	41%	39%	39%	42%
Keeping up to date with political affairs	45%	41%	44%	45%	30%	34%	37%
Becoming involved in programs to clean up the environment	30%	21%	27%	35%	20%	18%	27%

Source: *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends* and *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2007*, CIRP

**5 Millennials say they are more likely to use profanity, wear suggestive clothing, and take risks compared to their parents'**

## **generation.**

Our findings appear to contradict some of the hypotheses of Millennial-theory proponents, namely that the Millennial generation is less likely to wear suggestive clothing, use profanity, and take risks than their Boomer parents. A sizable segment of students surveyed indicated that they strongly agreed (giving a rating of 5 on a 1–5 point scale) that their generation, compared to their parents generation:

- Is more likely to use profanity (51 percent strongly agreed)
- Is more likely to wear suggestive clothing (44 percent strongly agreed)
- Is more likely to live with someone without getting married (44 percent strongly agreed)
- Is more likely to take risks (44 percent strongly agreed)

## **Purpose of a College Education**

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### **6 Millennials value college most for job and career preparation, with intellectual objectives close behind.**

We read students a series of statements about the value or purpose of a college education and asked them to indicate how strongly they preferred that particular value or objective. Almost universally students strongly or somewhat preferred the statement that a college education “prepares you for a career or profession,” with 83 percent indicating that they strongly preferred that statement.

Nearly three-quarters of students also strongly preferred a college education that enabled them to:

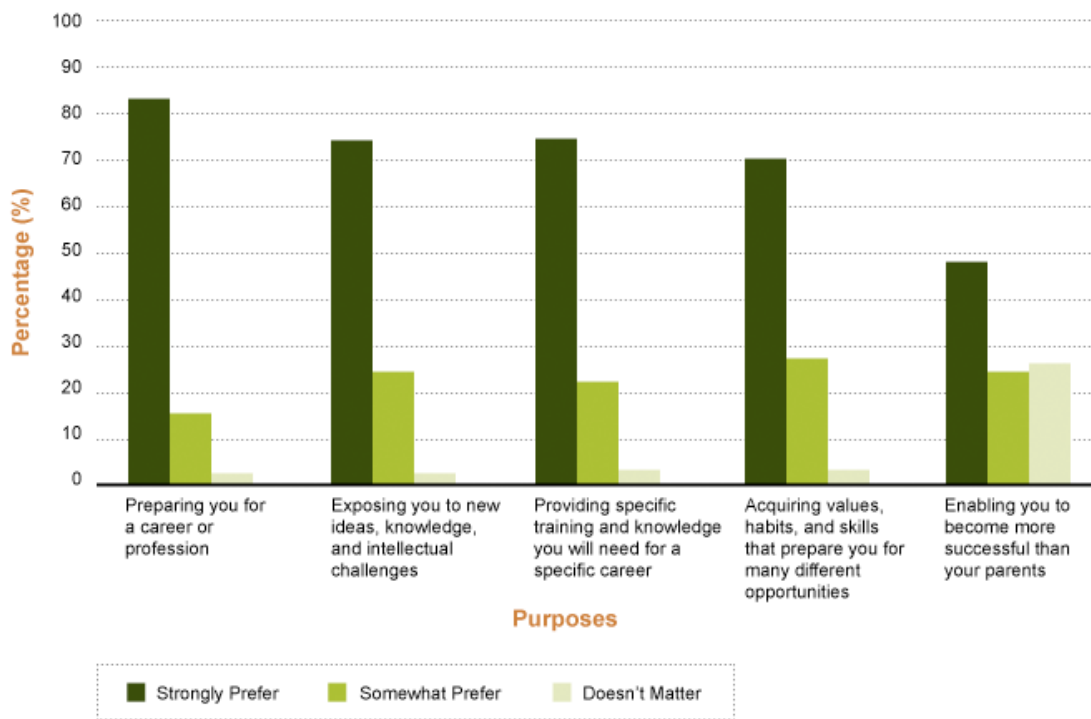
- Acquire values, habits, and skills that prepare you for many different opportunities (70 percent)
- Be exposed to new ideas, knowledge, and intellectual challenges (74 percent)
- Receive specific training and knowledge you’ll need for a specific career (74 percent)

Doing better than their parents, often a concern of social critics, was not nearly as important: Less than half of the students surveyed strongly preferred a college education that would “enable you to become more successful than your parents.”



CHART 6

### Student Preference on Purposes of College Education



Source: studentPOLL

CIRP data reveal similar and consistent patterns over the past three decades. CIRP reports that “the top two important reasons in 1976 (‘to learn things that interest me’ and ‘to get a better job’) are the top two important reasons [students decided to go to college] 30 years later in 2006.”

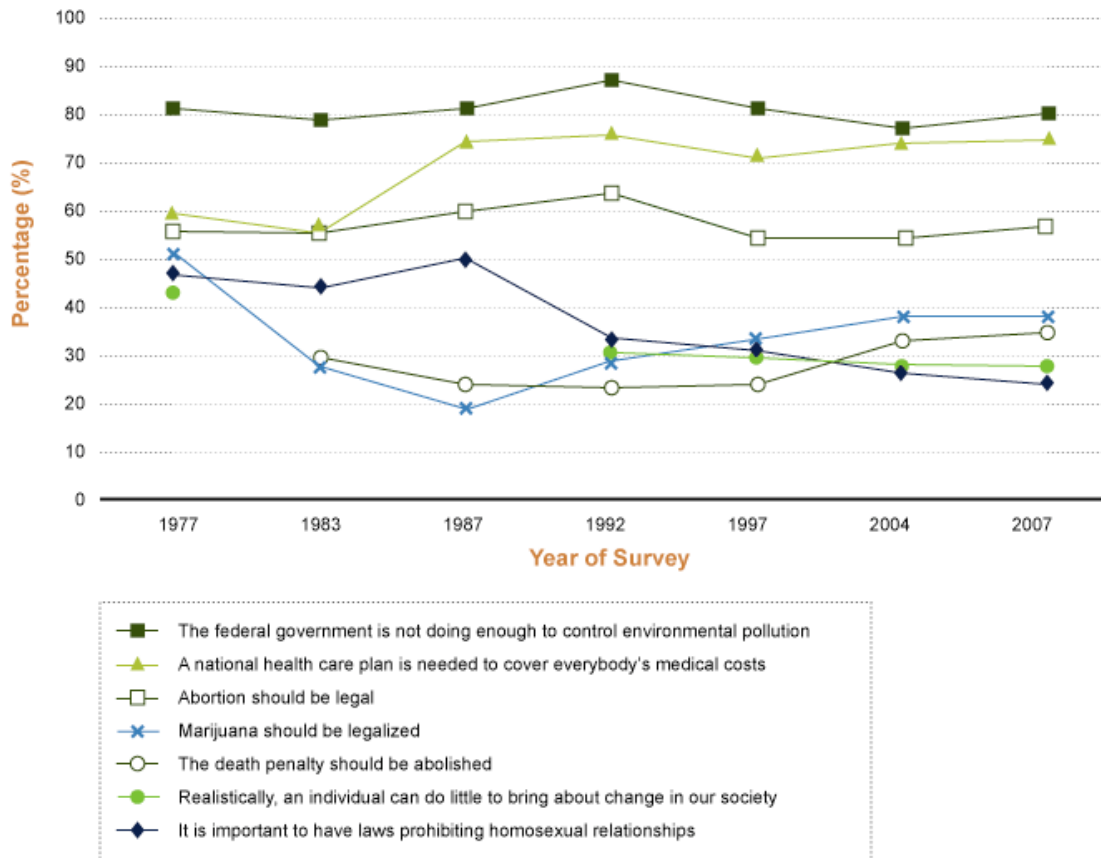
## Social, Political & Socioeconomic Questions

**7 Millennials’ strong support for abortion, the need for tougher federal environmental controls, and the abolishment of the death penalty seems very much in line with that of their parents when they were college freshmen.**

For decades, the CIRP Freshman Survey has asked students to indicate their level of agreement to a series of statements about relevant social, political, and socioeconomic questions of our times (and these, despite the passage of time, continue to be hotly debated on college campuses nationwide). On many of these questions, Millennials’ views reflect those of previous generations of students. For example, in 1977, 81 percent of students indicated that they “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that “the federal government is not doing enough to control environmental pollution.” Since 1974, this figure has remained relatively constant, reaching 83 percent in 1974 and remaining in the high 70s or low 80s over that time period.

CHART 7

### Ideas with Which Students Strongly or Somewhat Agree



Source: The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends and National Norms for Fall 2007, CIRP

Majorities of Millennials and their Boomer and Generation X counterparts strongly or somewhat agree on this timely and much-debated issue:

- Abortion should be legalized (this figure climbed in the late 1980s and early 1990s with more than 60 percent of students strongly or somewhat agreeing with this statement, but over time this figure has remained at around 55 percent of students).

Student agreement on other issues, in some respects, reflects changing societal values and trends. For example, in 1977, some 47 percent of students “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that “it is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships.” This figure has steadily declined, largely reflecting more tolerant views of homosexual lifestyles, with only 24 percent of students indicating that they “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed with this statement in 2007.

## Factors in the College Environment

**8** A range and variety of majors and programs, a faculty devoted to teaching, and internships and other career opportunities appeal strongly to students in the college or university they are likely to attend.

*Student Poll* explored to what extent various aspects of a college’s environment appealed to students. In particular, we asked students to consider the appeal of a variety of academic majors and programs, research with faculty, a faculty devoted to teaching, student diversity, and other important choice factors in thinking about the college or university they would likely attend.

Chart 8

### Appeal of Different Experiences and Opportunities at the Student's College of Choice

	Much more appealing	Somewhat more appealing	Somewhat less appealing	Much less appealing	Don't Know/NA
A wide variety of programs, majors, and other academic opportunities	69%	28%	2%	0%	2%
A faculty devoted to teaching who give students lots of personal attention	67%	29%	3%	0%	2%
Many opportunities for internships and other career-related experiences	64%	30%	4%	0%	3%
Many opportunities for study abroad and other international experiences	49%	30%	9%	4%	8%
A world-class faculty renowned for research and scholarship	41%	47%	6%	1%	5%
Many opportunities to conduct research with faculty	37%	42%	12%	1%	2%
Students from a wide variety of social, economic, and racial backgrounds	36%	43%	11%	3%	8%
Nationally ranked teams in sports	23%	33%	11%	12%	21%
A large university	21%	40%	18%	9%	11%
A small college	17%	31%	27%	13%	12%
Students who are more interested in intellectual life than preparation for a career	13%	32%	34%	11%	11%

Source: *Student Poll*

When it comes to the college or university they are likely to attend, majorities of Millennials reported that they found the following academic, cocurricular, and career-related aspects of a college very appealing:

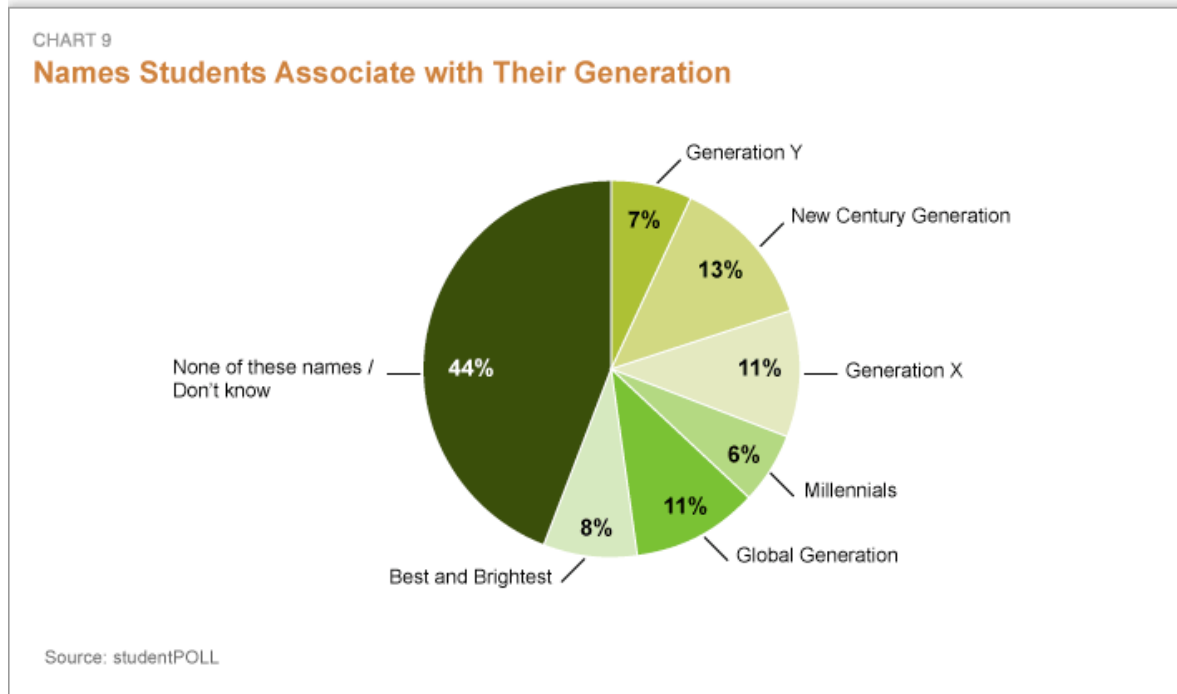
- A wide variety of programs, majors, and other academic opportunities (69 percent)
- A faculty devoted to teaching who give students lots of personal attention (67 percent)
- Many opportunities for internships and other career-related experiences (64 percent)
- Many opportunities for study abroad and other international experiences (49 percent)

### The Millennial Population

**Millennials are not aware of nor do they associate themselves with the name “Millennial Generation.”**

9

Given all the public and media hype about the “Millennial Generation,” we decided to ask students what name, if any, they thought was used to describe their generation. Only 6 percent of students associated their generation with the name “Millennials.” In fact, 43 percent reported that they didn’t know or that none of the six generational names tested was the name used to describe their own generation, and as many identified themselves as Generation X or Y.



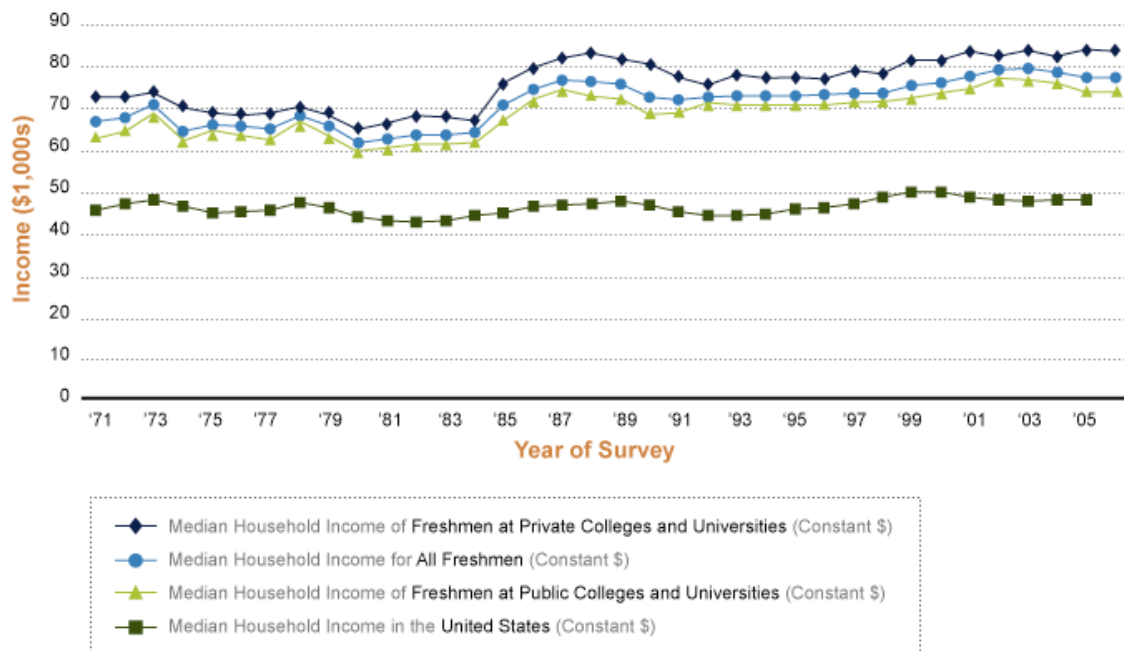
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**Millennials are more financially advantaged than previous generations of college students.**

In spite of the many initiatives over decades on our nation’s campuses and in the legislative and executive chambers of federal and state government to make higher education more accessible to the poor and economically disadvantaged, the opposite has occurred. As CIRP data convincingly demonstrate, today’s freshmen come from households with incomes much higher in comparison to the average American than those of a generation ago, and the gap is steadily widening. Parental income for the Millennial generation is outpacing the national income by more than a two-to-one margin. In the last 35 years, CIRP notes in its report *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trends*, “college student parental income rose from \$65,700 to \$76,400 (inflation-adjusted), representing a 16 percent increase, while national income rose from \$44,900 to \$47,800 (inflation-adjusted), representing a 6.5 percent increase.” In other words, efforts to make higher education more egalitarian have largely failed. While higher education has much greater racial diversity, economic diversity has narrowed, and the class divide widened. Sadly, Millennials represent a more privileged slice of the population than their parents’ generation.

CHART 10

### Changes in Median Household Income for College Freshmen and the Average American Family, 1971-2005



## Millennial Facts & Myths

### Millennial Fact: Campus safety is increasingly important to students and parents.


Our findings concur with the Millennial generation theory that students and their parents are more concerned about the safety of college campuses. In fact, 72 percent of students indicated that the safety of the campus was very important to them in college consideration and choice and 86 percent reported that it very important to their parents. It should be noted, however, that our research was fielded in the aftermath of major acts of violence on U.S. college campuses which may have distorted our findings.

### Millennial Myth: A college's history and "institutional heritage" matter to all students and should be played up in recruiting messages.

Contrary to conventional Millennial wisdom that encourages colleges to emphasize their school's history and traditions to prospective students and parents, *Student Poll* found that a small percentage of students surveyed considered a school's history and traditions as "very important" in their college decision-making process.

### Millennial Myth: Increasingly students want to attend college with their high school friends.

Only 11 percent of respondents surveyed indicated that it was very important to have their friends from high school attend the same college. Furthermore, only 11 percent of these students indicated this factor was very important to their parents in college choice. In sharp contrast to this Millennial-generation theory, nearly half of students indicated that it was **not important at all** for them to apply to or enroll at a college where many of their friends from high school would be.



Compared to students from lower- and middle-income families, students from high-income families were even less likely to say that attending college with their high school friends was very important to them (14% HI, 23% MI, and 34% LI).

***Millennial Myth: Student interest in “making a contribution to society” is on the rise while interest in “having lots of money” is declining.***

*Student Poll* and CIRP’s Freshman Survey data conclusively show that interest in “being financially well off” remains high and at levels comparable to previous generations.

***Millennial Myth: Students are more intellectually oriented and less career focused than previous generations.***

Again, *Student Poll*’s findings and CIRP’s data demonstrate that students are very much career focused, but equally interested in the academic aspects of college that challenge them intellectually.

***Millennial Myth: Students will increasingly be interested in small colleges.***

Students appear to be equally interested in small and larger colleges and universities. However, CIRP’s 2007 Freshman Survey data suggests that preference for size is more likely a factor of affordability and whether an institution — large or small or public and private — can offer them generous financial assistance or a lower tuition cost.

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