Dispelling the Millennial Myth

By RICHARD A. HESEL and SUSAN BASALLA MAY

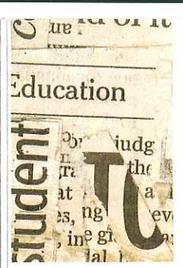
Millennials. We've been hearing about them for nearly six years. Institution presidents, trustees, enrollment officers, and student life staffers seem never to tire of expounding on the differences between the Millennial generation and the students who passed through the doors of their institutions 10 or 20 years ago. On campuses everywhere, marketing task forces are frantically developing and deploying new strategies in hopes of attracting and retaining the elusive Millennial student.

Such efforts have largely been fueled by the popular 2000 book, *Millennials Rising*, by Neil Howe and William Strauss. The authors predict that children born in or after 1982—who graduated from high school in 2000 or later—will be the next "Great Generation." Raised by Baby Boomer parents who are "protective and perfectionist," Howe and Strauss say these children "will rebel by behaving better, not worse, than the previous generation." The authors base this conclusion in part on their generational theory of history, which states that each generation reacts against the previous one, creating a repetitive cycle. Millennials, they argue, represent the return of the Hero generation, "the kind of generation that does great deeds, constructs nations and empires, and is afterward honored in memory and storied in myth."

The authors admit in the introduction to *Millennials Rising* that some youth trends run counter to their idea of Millennials, but claim that "it is a generation's direction that best reveals its collective self-image and destiny." As researchers and strategic planners who have extensively studied high school and college students, we were immediately curious about the origin of this commonly accepted

Marketing to this generation isn't as cut and dried as Howe and Strauss would have you think

ILLUSTRATION by GERARD DUBOIS for CASE



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Millennial theory and the research that informed it. We had found Howe and Strauss' conclusions regarding generational differences to be inconsistent with our own observations in some areas and were eager to compare their conclusions to those suggested by available research on the subject. Although Howe and Strauss drew upon a wide range of sources for their work, we wanted to see if our examination of the best available longitudinal studies (annual surveys conducted over several decades) would lead us to advise higher education marketing and communications professionals differently.

Our other motivation for examining the question of generational change among college students is a concern for the institutions that have invested significant resources in marketing to and programming for the Millennial student as defined by Howe and Strauss. Can the same set of messages really be effective for all colleges and universities? What if some of those efforts are misdirected? It would be an incredible waste of time and resources.

EXAMINING THE METHODOLOGY

To better understand how Howe and Strauss reached their conclusions about Millennials and their implications for higher education, we first examined their methodology. The authors drew from a wide variety of sources—ranging from government agencies to Internet user groups—to create their portrait of the Millennial generation. Perhaps because many of these sources were anecdotal, they also conducted a survey of high school students and teachers in 1999. (The design and results of this study are available at *www.lifecourse.com/news/millennialsurvey.php*.) A quick review of their methods raises questions about possible biases inherent in the study design.

Our first concern is that the surveys were conducted entirely within a suburb of Washington, DC. According to the authors' Web site, the student survey sample consisted of "655 students in randomly selected 11th grade classes at four public high schools in Fairfax County, Virginia." The authors acknowledge that Fairfax County is an affluent area but suggest that its ethnic diversity provides an adequate counterbalance. We compared key demographic measures for Fairfax County to the national average as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau and found that students in Fairfax come from households with incomes nearly twice the national average and that the ethnic diversity the authors cite comes primarily from Asian Americans, rather than African-American or Hispanic families (Fairfax has three times more Asian Americans and one-third fewer African Americans than the rest of the United States). Thus, the traits Howe and Strauss attribute to Millennials are, in the case of their own study, the characteristics of a small set of teens who are, in our opinion, likely to be profoundly different from most high school students.

Our second concern is how the participants were surveyed. According to the authors' Web site, the survey was "administered by classroom teachers." Asking students to answer questions about academics, morals, sex, drugs, and violence while being supervised by a teacher is likely to introduce a bias. Students are less likely to answer honestly if they fear their teachers might read what they wrote. To reduce possible bias, an alternative approach would be to gather students in a neutral setting outside the school and have professional researchers administer the surveys and evaluate the data.

In addition, according to the authors' Web site, "Results are presented as percentages of all responses other than 'don't know' or 'not sure.'" This approach raises several questions about the presentation of the results. For example, if 25 percent of students answered "yes" to a given question, 35 percent said "no," and 45 percent of students responded "don't know" or "not sure," then that in itself is a finding: Students didn't have or weren't willing to report their opinions about that particular topic. Applying the authors' method, we would be forced to disregard the 45 percent of "don't know/not sure" answers and present the remainder of the results as a portion of 100 percent, inflating the response rates for "yes" to 45 percent and "no" to 55 percent. It then appears that a majority of students surveyed said "no" when in fact, only 35 percent did so, and the largest single response was "don't know/not sure."

Finally, because Howe and Strauss conducted this survey for the first time in 1999, there is no way to gauge whether students would have responded differently to these questions in 1980 or 1990. To fill this gap, Howe and Strauss ask students to compare themselves to their parents and ask teachers to compare today's students to those they taught 10 to 15 years ago. The bias inherent in this approach, however, makes it less desirable.

ALTERNATIVE RESOURCES

If the goal is to understand generational differences and patterns, research should have two fundamental characteristics. First, it should be longitudinal, based on an annual survey conducted over several decades on a national sample large enough to be segmented by region, income, parental education, type of institution, and other factors. Second, it should be based on rigorous scholarship conducted by social and behavioral scientists.

The Cooperative Institutional Research Program based at the University of California, Los Angeles' Higher Education Research Institute (*www.gseis.ucla.edu/heri/cirp.html*) conducts just such longitudinal studies. CIRP researchers have been conducting an annual survey of incoming college freshmen since

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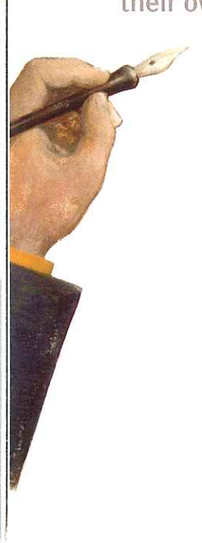

1966, administered during orientation by more than 700 colleges, universities, and community colleges nationwide. More than 400,000 students participate in CIRP surveys each year. CIRP covers many of the same issues Howe and Strauss addressed, such as social and political views, alcohol and drug use, academic workload, career aspirations, and motivations for attending college. Best of all, CIRP data are widely available to campus administrators.

Another excellent resource is the Research Network on Transitions to Adulthood (*www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/index.htm*), a collaboration of psychologists, economists, sociologists, and other researchers who have been examining the changing nature of early adulthood, and who are funded by the MacArthur Foundation. In particular, Tom W. Smith's article on generational change from the 1970s to the 1990s in the RNTA book, *On the Frontier of Adulthood: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*, is based on data from another large-scale longitudinal study, the General Social Surveys.

POINT/COUNTERPOINT

Comparing the claims in *Millennials Go to College* to the data and analyses from CIRP and RNTA reveals, in our opinion, some inconsistencies in Howe and Strauss's conclusions. The authors don't misrepresent their findings, but readers of their books may find that some of their generalizations do not correspond entirely with their own data. Consider the following:

Howe and Strauss on the next "Great Generation": "History has tapped [the Millennials] to be the inheritors of the mantle of the upbeat, team-playing, World War II-winning GIs. … They will be a generation capable of rebuilding powerful political and economic institutions and reenergizing a sense of community and public purpose." (authors' Web site)

In the above quote, Howe and Strauss present the Millennials as an optimistic generation, eager to change political and economic institutions for the better. However, in response to a Howe and Strauss survey question about what will happen "when their generation is raising kids, running corporations, and occupying high political office," high school students were pessimistic. The students in their survey were most likely to say that religion, family life, and crime will be *the same or worse* when they are in charge than it is today rather than better.

In addition, the RNTA research shows that the current generation is actually more disconnected from society than previous generations. They are less likely to read a newspaper, attend church, belong to a religion, vote for president, or identify with a political party. And they are more cynical and negative about other people. All of these findings are at odds with the concept of an upbeat, world-changing generation.

Howe and Strauss on sex and violence: "Today's movies and TV shows are the handiwork of Boomers and Gen Xers—not Millennials, who are the first youth generation in living memory to be less violent, vulgar, and sexually charged than the youth culture adults have created for them. Two-thirds of today's teens are either extremely, very, or moderately offended by the sexuality of the media." (*Millennials Rising*)

Despite their implication that Millennials are clean-cut and wholesome, Howe and Strauss' survey of Fairfax County high school teachers paints a different picture. The teachers reported that, compared to 10 to 15 years ago, today's students "reveal more severe problems" with profanity (86 percent), gangs (85 percent), sex (81 percent), disruptive clothing (70 percent), sexual taunting (67 percent), and fighting (48 percent).

Howe and Strauss on optimism: "The old youth angst, cynicism, and alienation are all giving way to a new confidence about the future and a new trust in parents and authorities. … Today's teens are more upbeat about the world they're growing up in." (authors' Web site)

Measuring abstractions such as teen angst or optimism isn't easy, but Howe and Strauss' own research findings lean toward pessimism. When Fairfax teachers were asked to compare the attitudes of current students to those of students 10 to 15 years ago, they said that students today show less trust in public institutions (77 percent), less positive feelings about America (59 percent), less faith in the national future (57 percent), and less faith in their personal future (42 percent). And the majority (47 percent) of students surveyed said that their views of "the long-term future of the United States" are no more pessimistic or optimistic than "the views of most American adults."

RNTA research confirms that today's students have a less-than-rosy outlook. For example, they are less likely than previous generations to believe that people are trustworthy, helpful, and fair, and that humans are naturally good. And they have a greater expectation that there will be another world war.

Howe and Strauss on academic pressure: "Polls show that today's kids' biggest worries are grades and college admissions. Most kids say they fear homework and grades far more than they do school violence. … Over the last decade, time spent on homework and housework is up." (*Millennials Rising*)

Academic pressure may be a major problem for the students Howe and Strauss surveyed, but CIRP data show that students spend less time studying than ever. In 2002, the percentage of students who said they devote six or more hours per week to studying or homework declined to an all-time low of 33 percent since this question was first asked in 1987, when 47 percent reported completing six or more hours of homework per week.

IMPLICATIONS

When we share our perspective on Howe and Strauss' Millennial profile, some campus leaders argue that, questions about methodology aside, many students on their campuses fit the Millennial mold. They've seen these Millennials with their own eyes, they say. We admit that anecdotal experiences, particularly on campuses serving the most affluent, high-achieving teens may well fit the theory.

Campus leaders should be suspicious of sweeping generalizations that purport to describe the behavior of an entire generation.

But before an institution commits its marketing dollars to the Millennial theory, we advise asking whether the Forer Effect is at work. In 1949, psychologist Bertram R. Forer discovered that people are highly disposed to accept vague, generalized, positive personality descriptions as uniquely applicable to themselves (or, in this case, their children). This concept has been validated over the decades by numerous successive studies. In the face of complexity, Forer and subsequent researchers argue, it is human nature to gravitate toward answers that simplify and order our world. Finding relevant advice in one's horoscope, for instance, is a common example of the Forer effect in action.

On the other hand, we've also heard from campus officials who are unsurprised by our arguments. After presenting these findings at a recent State University of New York conference of staff and administrators, a member of the audience pulled us aside and said, "I read that Millennials book, and I thought, 'Our kids are nothing like that,' and now I know why."

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Institution presidents and enrollment and admissions officers should be cautious about making broad conclusions about student behavior on the basis of anecdotal evidence or even their own instincts. They should also scrutinize all research on the topic. No research findings, including our

own, should be accepted as truth without first examining the methods behind them.

Equally important, campus leaders should be suspicious of sweeping generalizations that purport to describe the behavior of an entire generation. Such pop sociology has a certain appeal, but it often does not withstand careful scrutiny.

So what should communications and marketing professionals do? Based on our experience working with many institutions as well as our own examination of generational data, we suggest getting to know your students through surveys, informal meetings, and planned interactions. But remember that once a student sets foot on campus, his or her statements about why he or she chose your institution is forever biased. Better to ask about their current experience on campus than about how they felt during the admissions process.

The whole idea of marketing to a generation runs counter to the best contemporary practices, which emphasize tailoring messages and content to the needs and interests of the person.

We also suggest examining the CIRP data in relation to your institution's students and RNTA's ongoing research. The CIRP studies present an intergenerational profile of the students who have attended your institution, all the way back to 1966. Together, these sources can provide a valuable point of comparison to Howe and Strauss.

If there is one universal truth that we have learned in our work, it's that the market for every institution is unique. Setting marketing, admissions, or pricing strategies based on peer or aspirant institutions can be a fatal mistake. For example, the prospect pool for College A might include students worried about campus safety, but University B's prospects might actively seek out a gritty, urban environment. Sweeping generalizations about "what students want" are almost universally inaccurate. The only way to know for sure what's true for your institution's prospects is to conduct your own rigorous research study.

On a more tactical level, we offer the following advice based on our examination of CIRP and RNTA research and our own studies:

- Avoid hyperbole and clichés. Taglines and brand hype will play to cynicism about promotion.
- Don't dwell on history. There's limited patience for it.
- Appeal to honor and integrity. Standards do matter.
- Build a basis for trust in your institution; given the untrustworthy behavior of so many government and corporate leaders, trust is increasingly rare and valued.
- Demonstrate a sense of humor. If anything, young people like to have fun.
- Build connectedness and create bonding experiences—forge powerful personal relationships with students.
- Express progressive views on gender, racial equality, and civil liberties—the evidence is clear that this generation is open-minded.
- Provide strong social and emotional support. The evidence is overwhelming that students today are more emotionally needy.

But even these generalizations need to be viewed with a skeptic's eye. In the end, the whole idea of marketing to a generation runs counter to the best contemporary practices, which emphasize tailoring messages and content to the needs and interests of the person. Students will be best served if their individual talents, passions, convictions, and commitments are touched personally. A one-size-fits-all generational theory works against that goal.

Richard A. Hesel is principal and Susan Basalla May is managing associate of the Art & Science Group, a strategic marketing firm serving higher education.