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The Impact of Millennials on Community College Instruction

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As a leader in serving diverse postsecondary student populations, the community college is renowned as a bastion for effective teaching and learning. Absorbing a growing number of traditional age college students, community colleges have witnessed a change in student characteristics. Such change is mainly characterized by the recent appearance of Millennial students. The Millennials' increasing presence poses some instructional questions for college administrators and instructors. Should instructional techniques be altered to better meet the expectations of this new generation of postsecondary students? If so, what impact might those changes have on the nontraditional students? To answer these questions, perhaps the best way would be to examine the changing characteristics of today's community college students and consider the potential implications for instruction.

Changing Student Body

Currently, almost half of all undergraduate students in the United States enroll in community colleges, with enrollments of over 11 million students in 2007 (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts). These institutions not only play the collegiate role of preparing students to transfer to four year institutions but also prepare students for professional careers beside their developmental and community roles (Cohen & Brawer, 2002). Not surprisingly, community colleges credential 60 percent of the United States registered nurses and close to 85 percent of law enforcement officers, firefighters and emergency medical technicians (Community College Facts, n. d., p. 1). Faculty members in community colleges have always shown dedication to teaching considering the portion of their time allocated to classroom.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), enrollment at Ohio's 23 community colleges totaled over 200,000 students during 2004 (Digest of Education Statistics 2005, Table 197). Full-time faculty members at these Ohio institutions spend on average 71 percent of their work time in direct interaction with students (Community College Facts, n. d., p. 2). Such dedication to teaching requires updated knowledge of student needs and the continually changing factors influencing the student body in community colleges.

While the community college provides postsecondary opportunities for nontraditional students, it is also "serving an increasing number of traditional

age and high school students who take specific courses to get ahead in their studies" (American Association of Community Colleges Fast Facts). Howe and Strauss (2000) identify millennial students as those born between 1982 and 2002. There are many different names that have been used to describe this generation including Generation Y, Generation Next, Echo Boom, Boomer Babies, and Generation.com (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Half of this generation has Boomer parents while the other half is being raised by Xers (Strauss, 2005). The Millennial experience is based on a world filled with technology as part of their everyday life. Based on the characteristics previously discussed, Millennials might be considered both traditional and nontraditional.

In the last few years, Millennials marched into campuses of higher education institutions changing the collective characteristics of the student body. According to Coomes and DeBard (2004), "in 2002, approximately 6.9 million Millennials were enrolled in the nation's colleges and universities, representing 44.2 percent of all students. By 2012, the number of Millennials is estimated to reach 75 percent of all students" (p. 12). Gradually the Millennials are becoming the majority among other student categories in the community college which is currently "polarized by the traditional college students and the non-traditional community college student" (Miller, Pope & Steinmann, 2005, p. 596). According to NCES, the percentage of Millennials attending community colleges in 2005 exceeded fifty seven percent (NCES, Digest of Education Statistics 2006, Table 179). This growing number of Millennials is especially significant for community college instructors, who must strive to

meet the expectations of the traditional Millennials while being mindful of the needs of the non-traditional adult learners.

Student Profiles

Typically, students in postsecondary institutions have been identified as traditional, non-traditional, and adult learner, often with the label being somewhat imprecise. Historically, these categories were almost equally represented in community colleges, differing from four year institutions where the majority of student body falls into the category of traditional students. The onset of increased diversity, not only in age and gender but in ethnicity and goals, coupled with the transformations in the composition of the general community college student population, has further blurred the distinction between traditional and non-traditional postsecondary students. For example, young students may have a child (or children) before the age of 18, while older adults may still be financially dependant upon parents.

The NCES defines a non-traditional student as one “...with any of the following characteristics: has delayed enrollment, attends part time, works full time while enrolled, is considered financially independent for purposes of determining financial aid, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma” (Glossary). Age has most often been used to distinguish these students; however, using age as a determining factor negates other attributes and features including family situation, financial dependency, and level of employment. Adult learners are autonomous, self-directed, goal oriented, possess life experiences, require relevancy, and are practical (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). They tend to be pragmatic learners and usually let their schoolwork take a back seat to other responsibilities, such as jobs and family (NSCC, Best Practices; the adult learner). These unique characteristics influence the expectations non-traditional students and adult learners bring to the community college classroom.

Characterizing traditional postsecondary students usually considers the two factors of age and financial dependence. According to the Center for Institutional Effectiveness (2004), a traditional postsecondary student usually “enrolls in college immediately after graduation from high school, pursues college studies on a continuous full time basis at least during the fall and spring semesters, and completes a bachelors degree

program in four or five years at the young age of 22 or 23” (p. 2). Further, traditional postsecondary students do not usually have financial independence with a focus on their college degrees as potential goals. Typically, they are “financially dependent on others, do not have children, consider their college career to be their primary responsibility, and are employed only on a part-time basis if at all during the academic year” (Center for Institutional Effectiveness, 2004, p. 2). Traditionally, the enrollment of traditional students in the community college was exceptional; however, this is changing as the percentage of students born after 1982 exceeded fifty per cent in 2005 (NCES, Digest of Education Statistics 2006, Table 179).

Howe and Strauss (2000), DeBard (2004) and Lowrey (2004) identified seven prominent characteristics of the Millennial Generation: special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team oriented, pressured and achieving. Since birth, these individuals have been the focus of attention and regarded as special. Millennials feel sheltered as Gen-X parents flutter around them, even at the college level, providing protection and demanding accountability from those in charge responsible for whatever happens to their kids. Being treated as special has provided this generation with an air of confidence. They are confident of their competencies to match expectations as long as beneficial outcomes are on the horizon. Recognizing the value of playing by the rules, Millennials abide by convention and are not rebellious. They develop strong team orientations and tight bonds with peers and group members. They think of group work not only as a demonstration of their cooperativeness, but also as a guarantee against the risk of individual failure. They do not mind pressure as long as they are sure that their efforts are going to prove rewarding. High expectations are the hallmark of this generation. Being both pressured and expectant, their level of achievement is high. (Howe & Strauss, 2000; DeBard, 2004; Lowrey, 2004 & Howe, 2005) They are tech-savvy, multi-taskers, displaying an alarmingly short attention span and expect to “take control of their learning” (Carlson, 2005, p. A34).

Impact on the Community College Landscape for Learners

Enrolling in large numbers, Millennials bring different characteristics to the community college landscape. Wilson (2004) uses Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* as it pertains to teaching

effectiveness with undergraduate Millennials; however, it does not account for the mix of nontraditional, adult learners often found in a community college classroom. Wilson's (2004) strategies such as student-faculty contact, reciprocity and cooperation, active learning, feedback, time on task, high expectations, and ways of knowing are appropriate for traditional college age Millennials. Therefore, an evaluation of similarities and differences among community college student body might be helpful to pick and choose the best instructional techniques to address the current needs.

Whatever the generation or group, community college learners share common attributes. Although the adult learners are diverse, they prefer team work and group activities which provide them with a sense of support and draw upon sharing experiences and resources, an aspect that is abundant in their lives. The team oriented Millennials (DeBard, 2004) fit well with the nontraditional, adult learner favoring group work.

Despite adult learners giving priority to their career and social life over their academic life and the Millennials having unrealistic expectations about what is needed to achieve academic success in college (Sax, 2003), all learners focus on success, with traditional, adult learners being goal-oriented and Millennials focused on achieving success. Both groups value their education as a helpful tool for better life (NSCC, 2006 and DeBard, 2004).

Perhaps the most obvious difference among nontraditional, adult learners and Millennials is their view of learning. Millennials arrive as confident students, well prepared to face the challenges of a postsecondary curriculum. Nontraditional, adult learners often approach their community college coursework with uncertainty. The postsecondary experience is outside of their world of work and exceeds the bounds of their comfort zone. These nontraditional students and adult learners do not grant their college learning experience priority over their other life responsibilities (NSCC, Best Practices, Adult Learner, 2006). Contributing to their differing perspectives is the expectation of technology. While Millennials have experienced a world where technology is ever-present, many nontraditional, adult learners still exhibit trepidation when facing technology in a learning environment. Millennials have surpassed the expectation of basic educational technology and expect multimedia to be part of their learning experience.

Perhaps the greatest distinction between nontraditional, adult learners and Millennials is that of being sheltered. The sheltered Millennial has parents who are involved in their learning experience as well as their lives. Nontraditional, adult learners are autonomous and self-directed. Their self-reliance is a stark contrast to the Millennials' needy nature. The combination of "special" and "sheltered" has caused some postsecondary administrators to discern a negative trend in undergraduate students. Lowrey (2004) notes that with disturbing frequency "student affairs professionals complain about Millennials and their parents who immediately call the vice president's office or the president's office to seek resolution of the smallest complaints – often without ever attempting to resolve the issue through appropriate institutional structures" (p. 90). This new phenomenon brings two vital questions to the community college classroom: 1) What are the appropriate techniques that instructors should utilize to build student autonomy and self reliance? and 2) What instructional techniques best serve the Millennials as a fast growing portion of community college student population?

Considering Instructional Techniques

The basic framework for determining effective instructional techniques at the postsecondary level requires considering the teacher, the learner, the content, and the situation resources (Morrison & Kemp, 2005). When reviewing the most common postsecondary instructional techniques (lecture, discussion and questioning, peer and group work, simulation/demonstration/role playing, case studies), there are some techniques that may be appropriate for all learners occupying the community college classroom while others may not be as comprehensive.

McKeachie (2002) states, "The lecture is probably the oldest teaching method and still the method most widely used in universities throughout the world" (p. 52). Lecture, providing one-way communication by a highly trained individual, is popular in community college classrooms because it is time efficient and provides an opportunity to present the latest information in an organized way. It is an excellent technique to transmit factual, foundational information. However, the "instructor as the expert" is not preferred by Millennials who crave group learning and interaction and are much less likely to tolerate an entire-period lecture. The lecture, with learners having

a passive role, is difficult for them to endure. Their limited attention span makes them impatient with a standard lecture especially with their expectations of a change of venue periodically.

More participatory than lecture, discussion is considered the prototype for active learning (McKeachie, 2002). It is more democratic and student participation allows the instructor to check learners for comprehension as they apply the subject matter. Instructors can intersperse questioning and utilize Socratic discussion to encourage participation and avoid student fear of disapproval. Adult learners value questioning as a supportive method of instruction. According to Kasworm (2005), discussion provides students with the opportunity to draw on their life experiences which they value. As questioning proved to be a valuable strategy for adult learners, it is also appropriate for the confident Millennials (DeBard, 2004), providing them with a chance to articulate their specialty. While sometimes viewed as unmanageable in large classes, discussion can be a successful technique for both Millennials as well as the historical community college population. Instructors in community colleges can utilize lecturing with discussion intervals to suit the Millennials.

A panel of experts, serving as a resource for learners by presenting a discussion of an issue, can provide insight into a complex issue or topic. Further, a panel can provide anecdotal information and present applications of theory to practice. Inviting experts into the community college classroom complements both adult learner desires and Millennials' expectations by providing real-world experience and information. In addition, the experts serve as examples of success and achievement beyond the classroom. Panel discussions suit the community college especially when introducing multifaceted or complex concepts.

Peer and group work are used often in adult education, providing synergy of group and permitting exchange of ideas and viewpoints for problem-solving. According to Wilson (2004), it is one of the best practices to consider dynamics within the class as a group. Fassinger (1995) argued that utilizing study groups and learning teams to facilitate learning and promote knowledge acquisition would positively improve the emotional climate in the college classroom. As an instructional technique, group work fits the Millennials, the successful team players who highly value working in groups as an insurance against failure (Lowrey, 2004). As students share experiences and

express opinions, the cooperative inclination of Millennials is supported. They tend to discuss alternatives and work out solutions through interaction among individual members or groups. As sheltered Millennials participate in group work, they can assure that they are moving in the right direction while at the same time enjoying the security and support of peers. The Millennials' confidence is likely to promote participation in such class activities. Moreover, utilizing such activities enhances the Millennials' self efficacy and individual autonomy as they promote student interactions away from the control of the instructor with a focus on interactive communication. This aspect is complementary to adult learners as well.

Role playing and simulations usually allow for self reflection and a large degree of independence. Such characteristics, apparently visible in the adult learners, are not common among Millennials who are not very self reflective and will expect instructors "to display authoritative expertise, model effective techniques" (Murray, 1997, p. 42) and present the rules for them. Instructors can combine demonstrations with role playing so as to optimize the exchange of skills among learners especially in courses within the allied health and technology disciplines.

Demonstrations, by their nature, are helpful to provide students with guidance to a skill or task. In addition to providing an overview of the target skills, they also help present a model for the student to imitate. This highly suits the conventionality of Millennials. Demonstrations offer the guidelines and rules to be followed. Case study may not be applicable to foundational content typically presented in the early years of college. It also takes considerable time to prepare and may take learners a long time to comprehend. However, case studies not only aid in developing students' analytical skills but they can help foster teamwork if done in groups (Rodriguez, 2003). Depending on the content and desired learning outcomes, utilizing case studies to foster student learning should be considered.

Technology and other media, although not an instructional technique, play a supportive role in college instruction. According to Twigg (2004), the use of technology in redesigning courses and programs has improved student learning. Millennials are very familiar with technology and expect the instructors to be proficient in using it. Wilson states, "Students are increasingly savvy when it comes to technology" (p. 66). According to Miller, Pope and Steinmann (2005)

community college students expect their instructors to develop a respect for incorporating technology into their teaching. The total population of adult learners in the community college might not highly welcome such extensive use of technology. Therefore, instructors should strive to find the safe path between relying extensively on technology and totally eliminating it. Grasha and Yangarber-Hicks (2000) suggested that instructors develop a conceptual rationale behind the use of technology in the classroom to fit their teaching philosophy as well as the students learning needs.

Conclusion

While postsecondary instructors are experienced in teaching both traditional and non-traditional adult learners, Millennials present a particular challenge in the community college classroom. They exhibit characteristics different from undergraduates in the past and have particular traits that impact teaching and learning. Their distinctive needs and the high expectations of faculty may create conflicting issues when looking at traditional instructional techniques utilized in the classroom. As Wilson (2004) argued, "Given how structured their lives have been, they may struggle in the transition to college as they face more ambiguity and a greater call for self-responsibility" (p. 65).

The effective utilizations of suitable instructional techniques together with clear instructions and articulated course expectations can be consistent with Millennial characteristics and effective instructional techniques. McGlynn (2005) argued that for maximizing their particular strengths, colleges should engage Millennials with cooperative learning exercises. The use of technology can maximize learning experiences of both Millennials and the nontraditional adult learners. Therefore, the common characteristics of being team and group oriented as well as striving for success share by the various student groups would ensure a promising future for the community college learning experience once well met with appropriately selected techniques of instructions.

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