

# Millennials in College: How Do We Motivate Them?

By **Angela Provitera McGlynn**

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**I**N academia, there is much discussion about “millennial” students—those born between 1982 and 2002. Although there is a mix of students in our college classes, particularly at community colleges, the influx of millennials is notable in terms of their sheer numbers. And more of them will be starting college in the near future. This year will see the largest high school graduation class ever—even bigger than the baby boomer high school graduates of the 1960s.

The discussions among college educators involve questions about who these students are and how they learn. There are many who

think millennial students are not simply incrementally different from generations that preceded them but are qualitatively different. Many educators feel frustrated that millennials are especially difficult to reach and to motivate.

I am reminded of an old joke. A man claims that he can train his mule to count. A skeptical witness asks to watch the training session. The man starts out by picking up a two-by-four piece of wood and smacking the mule with it. The horrified witness says, “What does that have to do with the training?” The man replies, “First, I have to get the mule’s attention.” ▶

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I am in no way comparing today's college students to mules. What I do want to emphasize is that before we can begin to motivate our students to take their studies seriously and to persist through their college programs to earn a degree, we must engage them actively in the learning process.

### **Reach Out to Students**

Student-engagement data from the National Survey of Student Engagement for four-year institutions and the Community College Survey of Student Engagement for the community college sector, makes it abundantly clear that student engagement is the key to academic motivation, persistence, and degree completion.

The challenges we educators face can seem daunting. How do we get our students' attention and get them actively engaged with the course material, with us as their teachers, and with their peers? We are competing for their attention with their jobs, their family obligations, and with time spent in activities with which students from previous generations had little or no access.

These students spend hours surfing Web sites, instant-messaging, interacting on MySpace and Facebook, talking on their cell phones, text-messaging, playing video games, and so forth. As Ian Crone, assistant dean of students and director of the Frick Center, and Kathy MacKay, dean of stu-

dents, both of Elmhurst College in the Midwest, point out in *Motivating Today's College Students* (2007), many students give up a deeper engagement in academic research for all the above-mentioned activities as well as to earn minimum wage at a local retail store.

Many millennial students seem to have a "consumerism" attitude towards education. To paraphrase Crone and MacKay, many students see their educations as another acquisition to purchase rather than as a learning process. These authors say that many millennials try to organize their schedules so they can keep in all the "fun" activities and do what is minimally possible to pass their courses.

According to Crone and MacKay, we can take a more active role in getting students to recognize how they use their time and suggest ways for them to manage their time more effectively. We need to become more proactive in reaching out to students to help them set realistic goals and provide the guidance that will help them reach those goals. Crone and MacKay talk about using "persistent inquiry" as a tool to engage students in the classroom. They ask students questions to help them reflect on their goals and to help them check the assumptions they make.

Not only are millennials shaped by this attitude of consumerism; they are also accustomed to 24-7 conveniences. They can get instant

answers on the Web; shop online day or night; and get responses from their friends instantaneously. This expectation of convenience carries over into academia. Many students expect instant gratification from their professors in terms of getting their papers back graded and getting instant responses to their e-mails, voice mails, etc.

Reaching these millennial students in order to engage, motivate, and inspire them needs to be addressed so that there can be an intersection between how they learn and how we teach.

### **Build on Students' Strengths**

What we educators need to do is to capitalize on the strengths they bring to the classroom. If we recognize their strengths, we can create a classroom dynamic and use strategies that will effectively engage them. For example, this generation is the most socially connected of all generations.

When they are not e-mailing, they are instant-messaging. And then there are cell phones. They use their cell phones to talk—constantly—and when not talking, many of them are text-messaging.

How can we tap into their need for social connection in the classroom? We have to make it happen with real live people—their classmates. There needs to be a cell phone policy so that students turn their cell phones off and put them away during class time. This is the

first step in getting their attention without using a two-by-four piece of wood.

I have a colleague who tells his students, "When you step into this classroom, you put aside your other life, you turn off your cell phones, and together we discover new ways to think and to learn."

This generation seems to like group activity. Educators need to maximize this generation's preferences for working and playing in groups in order to engage them with course material. Millennials want to learn information that is relevant to their lives and that can make a difference in the world. Experiential learning and service-learning programs seem to work especially well with these students.

Probably the first step towards engaging today's students is for teachers to create a learner-centered classroom. This involves a shift from seeing the classroom as teacher-driven and content-centered to seeing the classroom as student-centered and process-driven.

Obviously, we have to cover the content of our disciplines. However, teaching students to write and speak clearly, to think critically, and to develop an appreciation for diversity and for lifelong learning are equally important goals. If our students leave college without the ability to think critically and analytically, we have failed them. Students must be able to question the assumptions underlying what they

read and hear. They must be able to analyze data from multiple perspectives and see issues from a variety of viewpoints. They must be able to separate fact from fiction and be able to assess the credibility of data. Without those skills, our students will not be truly educated, and, as a result, they will be less-responsible citizens.

Given the shelf life of the information we teach, it is perhaps more important to teach students the skills to be able to find information (do research) and to be able to discern and evaluate the validity of that information. The Internet has opened up a world library for researchers. Where we had to spend what seemed like our lifetimes doing research in a particular library, our students can sit at their desks with their computers, or have their laptops with them anywhere, and tap into libraries from around the world. With this new magic comes the responsibility for us to teach them how to do informational searches and how to assess the information they find.

We need to educate ourselves on collaborative-learning techniques in order to involve our students in group-learning projects. We need to use more visualizations, simulations, games, and role-playing, and we must create a rapid pace. The traditional one-way, noninteractive lecture doesn't work well with these students.


We need to provide students

with Internet video clips and Web sites, particularly interactive Web sites that will help them learn the course material. We need to master the same technologies our students know in order to use the technologies they are comfortable with.

We need to get their work back to them quickly, and we need to give them praise. This is the generation that heard "Good job!" from their parents for much of what they did. Although we can offer realistic constructive criticism, we must be sensitive to the fact that they thrive on praise.

### **Engage Parents**

Millennials seem more connected to their parents than were previous generations. Given these ties, many colleges are offering parents orientation to college experiences in which the college explains the kind of commitment their children must make to their studies.

With less-educated parents whose children might live at home and commute to college, it is imperative that they understand the time their children need to devote to their studies so that they relieve them of some family responsibilities. Attending college part time and living at home are known "at-risk" factors for degree completion. For these students in particular, it is important to involve the parents in encouraging and motivating their children to devote the time and energy needed to do well in college. 

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