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Serving the Millennial Generation

M. D. Coomes and R. DeBard

A Review Essay by Todd S. Voss, Ph.D.

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We have been waiting. Those of us in Student Development who have intently immersed ourselves in the Millennial Generation research (and warnings) of Schneider and Stevenson (1999), Martin (2001), Lancaster (2002), Sax (2003) and Howe and Strauss (1991, 2000, 2003) over the past several years have experienced the void between research and thoughtful analysis, between explanation and application. We have been waiting with others, who for the purposes of practicality have been holding out for a “three hour tour” of this generation now entering the gates of higher education. But now the waiting may be over. Thanks to the contributions of a variety of authors, “New Directions for Student Services” (2004) has come to the rescue presenting seven brief but substantive chapters that offer more than the previous “analysis” approach to serving this exciting generation.

Before declaring this the Holy Grail however, three points of caution are suggested at the outset: While the editors of this series, Michael Coomes and Robert DeBard, effectively weave together several practical components of serving this new generation, it should be noted that six of the seven chapter authors hail from the same Midwest public institution. Consequently, the reader needs to realize a lack of diversity in authorship context will limit to some extent the depth of the ideas expressed. Secondly, since there is admittedly a dearth of research regarding Millennials, Howe and Strauss are referenced ad nauseum throughout this series. Finally, it is important to note that the entire work is only ninety-nine pages, hence the reader looking for richer insight into specific topics and characteristics will need to either look elsewhere or be patient as the writings catch up with actual successful practice. With those three cautions in mind, the review below represents a window seat tour of this helpful and insightful book.

The first chapter succinctly outlines the viability of using a generational model approach in understanding students, and then effectively discusses the current generations co-existing on today's college campuses. This chapter is highly recommended for those who need a refresher in generational research, and a reminder of the caution needed when stretching generalizations too far. The second chapter builds on the first by discussing the importance of the historical context of every generation. This brief history lesson concludes with an excellent conversation about Pop Culture and the fundamental impact it has on driving history. The third chapter is a salient and effective dialog regarding the overriding themes of this Millennial generation. Generational concepts ranging from being special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team focused and achievement oriented are comfortably outlined and supported. The reader can quickly begin to connect these character traits with the trends being witnessed on campus.

The fourth chapter seamlessly moves the reader into a conversation about the current models of Student Development and the intriguing implications of the Millennial generation on these models. The author suggests several challenges this new generation may provide on commonly accepted assumptions regarding how students develop and mature and outlines their new requirement for connectedness and the ubiquitous parental influence perhaps impeding their growth. Chapter five drills deeper into the classroom learning experience as the author uses the *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education* (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) as a foundation for enhancing student learning. Each of the seven principles are clearly discussed and then several applications regarding Millennials in the classroom are provided including dealing with high expectations for success (it is suggested that Millennials who have achieved academic success have done so with very little effort), parental involvement, technology, and disabilities (possibly the largest generation with identified learning issues). Chapter six initially discusses the changing demographics of Millennials including racial and ethnic diversity especially in the Asian and Hispanic student populations and the expected increase within the category of students struggling with sexual identity issues. The author of this chapter then carefully outlines the changes most campuses are already experiencing regarding student attitudes toward diversity and social issues such as the mixed messages of racism, gender and sexism, sexual orientation, political polarization and social justice choices. Implications for college administrators are then discussed to help institutions build on the strengths and challenges of this generation. Obviously, for those of us employed in Christian colleges, the implications and responses associated with diversity issues including sexual orientation will need additional campus culture research, alignment and development that goes beyond the scope of this book.

John Lowery connects the concepts together in the final chapter of “Serving the Millennial Generation” by employing the seven key characteristics previously suggested by Howe and Strauss (2000) to organize a brief discussion of fresh student affairs delivery systems. Helpful insights regarding parental involvement, gearing up for greater counseling center support, educating students and parents regarding appropriate avenues for resolving conflict, using the welcomed and expected advantages of technology and utilizing team approaches are a few of the best. One final observation from this author deserves additional attention. A side comment on page eighty-nine may provide significant hope for Christian colleges in particular. The author suggests a renewed interest in the concept of “in loco parentis” among the very parents who helped usher in its demise, and their students who are much more accepting of institutional involvement and direction. What this suggests is a greater increase in interest for Christian colleges among the Millennial generation and their parents who are seeking a stronger institutional mission and a more appropriately balanced campus.

The potential for positive transformation within colleges and universities in the next decade is truly amazing. Strauss suggests that if “done right, we could see a new golden age of campuses.” (in Lowery, 2001, p.11) But with that possibility, comes a great obligation: to deliver higher education in a way that not only meets the demands of this new generation of students, but one that understands how the resources, delivery methods, mission and spiritual development need to come together in new ways. The role of Christian colleges in this task has never been more acute. More than ever, we are training our replacements, and setting the course for the future of higher education.

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