

The Double-Edged Sword of Preparing Millennial Students For Co-ops and Internships

Scott Weighart
Charlie Bognanni

Northeastern University

Third Draft
May 2006

Changing Times at Northeastern University

The last decade has been an era of significant change at Northeastern University. We have undergone a conversion from quarters to semesters, and co-op coordinators have been relocated from a central location to the buildings that house their respective academic counterparts. We have continued our transition from what was primarily a commuter school to an institution that draws almost two-thirds of its student from out of state.

Most significantly, in an ongoing quest to become a *US News and World Report* Top 100 university, our administrators have placed a great emphasis on attracting students with better high school grades and higher SAT scores. In 1995, the average combined SAT score for incoming freshman at Northeastern was 951. By the year 2000, it was 1128; in 2004, it was 1211.

In light of these developments, we were not surprised to see gradual but significant changes in the characteristics of the students we counseled in our roles on the cooperative education faculty. Working with undergraduate business students to prepare them for job experiences, we began to notice some developments that ranged from exciting to unsettling. University administrators were a bit giddy over our eyebrow-raising jumps in high school GPAs and SATs. Our College of Business Administration (CBA) dean at the time predicted that these students were at a whole different level and effectively would “place themselves.”

The reality has been much more complicated than he or any of us imagined. Indeed, we now have students who sometimes amaze us with their ambitiousness and self-confidence, their ambitious goals and ability to reach them. Yet we also have seen some unpleasantly surprising trends:

- more students with highly unrealistic expectations for co-op
- an increased level of fickleness when it comes to jobs and job offers
- more high-maintenance parents—some of whom intervene inappropriately
- students who are more demanding of our time and responsiveness

Most interestingly, we have found that a large majority of these students don’t “place themselves” by any means. In fact, they are generally more labor-intensive than their predecessors. They challenge us, and that has proved to be a mixed blessing. Our students today are fun, fascinating, interesting as well as sometimes frustrating and needy.

Yet our biggest mistake was to attribute these changes in our students as primarily caused by our evolving priorities as an institution. Although we now may be attracting students who have greater academic potential, we believe that the changes that we’re seeing have less to do with Northeastern and more to do with generational changes that are drawing increased attention in the media. In short, we came to believe that our students reflected the transition in college-age students from representing Generation X to the so-called Millennial Generation. Looking to confirm this, we devised a survey for our CBA undergraduates to learn whether their values were consistent with this national trend... or whether students opting for a co-op program would diverge at all from this phenomenon. Before we get to that, though, let’s consider the existing research on millennials.

Defining And Understanding The Millennial Generation

Although the book is rather outdated at this point and is limited in its commentary on millennials as employees, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (2000) by Neil Howe and William Strauss is a useful and entertaining book when it comes to understanding the forces behind generational changes.

The last Baby Boomers were born in 1964. Accordingly, only the most experienced co-op professionals worked with these individuals. In terms of admittedly sweeping generalizations, Baby Boomers have quite an array of characteristics: inner vision, creativity, ambitious, selfish, and judgmental are several mentioned by Howe and Strauss. Coming of age, boomers were more likely to be career-minded workaholics who demanded much of themselves and others.

With Baby Boomers as parents, Generation X reacted against many of these characteristics. With children devalued by parents who often were preoccupied with their careers, Xers emerged as more skeptical and sarcastic. Where did all that hard work get their parents? These children saw their parents get divorced at a higher rate in the late 1970s than at any other time in our history. These kids may have seen mom and/or dad work tons of overtime, only to get laid off during the recession in the early 1980s. As a result, the generation X mentality is more one of trusting yourself rather than organizations or authority figures. According to Howe and Strauss, they grew up “tough and self-reliant.”

This trend changed dramatically in the 1980s. Following a decade which Howe and Strauss note was characterized by numerous “evil child” movies (i.e., *The Exorcist*, *Rosemary’s Baby*), 1980s films—including *She’s Having A Baby*, *Three Men and a Baby*, and *Look Who’s Talking*—reflected a culture that had come to celebrate children. More people started valuing work-life balance. More families began questioning whether both spouses could be engaged in highly intense jobs without having a negative impact on their children. Individual achievement began to seem less important.

Companies started increasing products, services—and marketing—geared toward children. We began seeing “Baby on Board” signs and hearing about soccer moms, and kids started getting prizes for just participating in sports and activities as opposed to being the best at them. Increasingly, parents stopped leaving their children to fend for themselves or “go out and play” and began scheduling their weeks with ballet, music lessons, gymnastics, swimming, and any number of other activities.

Inevitably, this kind of upbringing has been producing a very different kind of person:

“You might expect this new group of kids to be a bunch of techno-brats—as wowed by the Internet as Boomers are, as obsessed with making dot-com fortunes as the Gen Xers are, and generally spoiled and self-centered from a lifetime of pampering by parents made rich in the roaring ‘90’s. You would be wrong. The Millennial teenager appears warm, confident, and upbeat, with little of the moral superiority that characterized the antiestablishment types of the 1960’s” (Fortune, 2000). According to Howe and Strauss (2000) among others, Millennials are team-oriented, optimistic, practical, and trusting of authority and traditional institutions (Rollin, 1999; Collins, 2000; Howe & Strauss, 2000). Literature Review: Factors Affecting the Development of Generation X and Millennials, Denham & Gadbow)

Borrowing liberally from Howe and Strauss as well as numerous other authors on the topic, here are traits that we prefer to use in characterizing millennials:

- **High Expectations:** This term captures what various researchers hint at it when talking about today's college students being "pressured," "achieving," and "confident." Basically, today's generation has very high expectations because they have been told all along that they are special and capable of great things.
- **Preference for Structure:** In the research, you find references to today's college students being "sheltered," "scheduled," and "connected." Between parents planning out much of their activities and technology enabling them to connect readily in a variety of ways, this generation is largely accustomed to high degrees of structure and may be at a loss in situations which lack that structure. In fact, the healthcare industry has already begun looking at steps that healthcare employers will need to take to accommodate the preference for structure in this new generation of workers. Some of them include defining career ladders, establishing thorough orientation programs, and providing mentors to new employees (Tulgan).
- **Highly Technological:** The millennial-era student has grown up with computers, often learning basic computing skills as preschoolers. Today's college student's facility with technology often extends to a strong comfort level with software applications, communication with cellphones, e-mail, instant messaging, and Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs). iPods? On a *60 Minutes* segment on October 3, 2004, one millennial half-joked that they were now "required by law." Many researchers cite data indicating that millennials strongly prefer the computer to the television or telephone. Zemke et al. (2000) state that "there aren't just three R's anymore—as in, reading writing and 'rithmetic—there's a fourth: the Internet. And it's as natural as breathing for Generation Next (i.e., Millennials)."
- **Highly Attached To Parents:** Other terms that one sees in reference to this characteristic include "special" and "sheltered." The term "helicopter parent" apparently was coined in the early 1990s; it first appeared in a *Newsweek* article on September 9, 1991. This refers to parents who hover over their children—sometimes to the point of offering unwanted assistance to educators. For better and worse, parents are much more engaged in the education of their children—including their adult children who are at college. One might argue that this has already created a closer affinity to family, in general, for these Millennials. At Rumson-Fair Haven, Stephen says "My only financial goal is to put my kids through college. I worry how much I'll have to make." Adam from Washington and Lee says, "I would work at a boring job if I could come home to something satisfying" (Fortune 2000).
- **Team-oriented and multicultural:** The research all points to a generation that is more comfortable with "we" than with "I." According to Pickett (2004), Rocky Mountain College Vice President for Student Services Brad Nason points to the fact that today's college students have been playing structured team sports as early as age 6. The 2004 movie *Meet The Fockers* has a scene in which a character has numerous ribbons on his bedroom wall. "I didn't know that they made ninth-place ribbons," another character states. This generation often was rewarded for simply participating in team events as opposed to excelling at them. Jane Buckingham, marketing consultant and head of Youth Intelligence in New York, says

“Belonging to a group is so important that I caution anyone advertising to this generation against putting a lone individual in an ad” (Fortune 2000).

With respect to competencies, research shows that Millennials:

- Work collaboratively, gathering information quickly and sharing it readily (Howe & Strauss, 2000; Tapscott, 1998; Zemke et al., 2000)
- Respect diversity, value multiculturalism, and are resilient (Zemke et al., 2000); and
- Converse comfortably and freely on an intellectual plane with adults, and have found that their expressed thoughts are valued much more highly online, where their age cannot be determined (Tapscott, 1998)
- Are brighter than previous generations, scoring 15 points higher in terms of raw intelligence, than kids 50 years ago (Greenfield, 1998)
- Have superior written communication skills (Greenfield, 1998; Tapscott, 1998)

Howe and Strauss actually have written another book—the *Recruiting Millennials Handbook*—which teaches employers and military personnel how to capitalize on this new “we” focus in recruiting.

Additionally, this generation is unprecedented in their exposure to diversity. As a result, they often have a relatively high comfort level when confronted with individuals of different race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Interest in millennials has been increasing dramatically, both on campuses and in the media at large. We thought it would be interesting to devise a survey to assess just how “millennial” our business students at Northeastern really are.

Surveying Business Students

We surveyed students on the first day of our COPU101 course, “Professional Development For Co-op.” This course is a mandatory, one-credit, pass/fail course for all Northeastern students as a prerequisite for co-op. Typically, the course focuses on self-assessment, resume writing, strategic interviewing, and on-the-job performance issues. Business students at NU are required to do co-op, and they typically take COPU101 one semester before they start their first co-op experience.

The survey included 11 “millennial questions” as well as eight questions designed to assess their confidence level in the various subjects taught in the course as well as their expectations about the co-op job search. A total of 197 business students were surveyed. Our primary goal was to better understand who we were really teaching and how to instruct them most effectively. We believed that finding out how “millennial” they were would assist us in adjusting our teaching style accordingly to be most effective with the greatest number of students, recognizing that there will always be individual differences in any group.

The survey results can be seen in the attached document. With one major exception, we found that our co-op students generally did reflect this national trend of exhibiting values consistent with those ascribed to the millennial generation. Here are some highlights of our findings:

- A strong majority (83%) either strongly agreed or somewhat agreed with the notion that their mother or father is their “most important role model.”
- There were a broad range of responses regarding students’ expectations about their parents calling the school in the event of problems, but 17% of respondents strongly agreed with the statement “I expect my parents to contact the university if I need any support or assistance.” Adding in those who somewhat agreed with that statement, we see that almost half of our respondents see this development as possible.
- As expected, students do have a high comfort level with computers and technology. However, we were surprised by the extent to which our students chose computers over TV. Eighty-five percent favored the computer, while only 6% preferred TV.
- Reflecting high expectations, a very strong majority (81%) either somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they should be able to get a great job in the area of their choice for their first co-op.
- Four out of five students either somewhat or strongly agreed with the notion that they have had significant exposure to diversity.
- One key exception that turned up: A solid majority of our respondents indicated that they didn’t mind doing low-level work if necessary on the job. About 68% somewhat or strongly agreed with that statement, countering some research that indicates that millennials in the workplace are reluctant to “pay their dues” by doing low-level work.

We believe that this disparity might reflect a difference in millennials who self-select a program in which full-time cooperative work experience is mandatory as opposed to those who opt against a program in which job experience will be required.

- Roughly 86% of our students somewhat or strongly agreed that they enjoy working in teams.
- About 75% of our students had favorable attitudes toward doing volunteer work or working for organizations that make the world a better place, which seems consistent with the “civic minded” trait of this generation, valuing collective success more than selfish motives.
- Perhaps most remarkably, 89% of our respondents **STRONGLY** agreed with the statement that “it’s important for me to achieve great things in my career and in my life.” Although one of our colleagues questioned who would disagree with such a positive statement, we remained struck by just how strong the response was. It might be interesting to refine this question to confirm the strength of this value.

On the whole, we were surprised by the extent to which our survey appeared to confirm the presence of millennial values in our student population.

The Double-Edged Sword of Millennial Characteristics

These millennial characteristics are a mixed blessing for educators who are working with co-ops and interns. Every single one of them has definite benefits and drawbacks. In addition to identifying those here, we offer our recommendations for dealing with millennials most effectively.

Positives of the “High Expectations” Characteristic

In responding to an aspiring fiction writer, author F. Scott Fitzgerald noted that a prospective reader wanted characters that were strong. “After all,” Fitzgerald wrote, “you wouldn’t be interested in a soldier who is just a *little* brave.”

The same is true when considering the benefits of having high expectations. These students don’t want to be just a little successful: They are often very ambitious and goal-oriented. We work with intelligent students who expect to succeed. It’s challenging but fun to work with students who have big dreams... and who have the confidence, work ethic, and drive to realize those dreams.

I have one student right now who e-mailed me during his first job search. Although he knew that the process was to see me to discuss the jobs that interested him, he e-mailed me to indicate that he had a really busy schedule that week. Acknowledging that I probably would not generally be willing to do business this way, he also created a spreadsheet ranking the jobs and including his rationale for each selection. I wrote back and told him that I would make an exception to my usual policy, given how much effort and thought he had put in to his way of approaching the problem at hand. This was one of the best examples of a student having high expectations and being willing to go the extra mile to make sure he was doing everything he could to accommodate all the demands on his time.

Negatives of the “High Expectations” Characteristic

While these students can be challenging and fun, they also challenge us because of their relative labor-intensiveness. Having grown up with highly engaged parents—and with technology that encourages immediate feedback ‘round the clock—these students expect us to respond immediately and to be available beyond regular hours.

Additionally, some students who have high expectations don’t necessarily have *realistic* expectations. DiGilio & Nelson (Information Outlook, 2004) also caution that many Millennials seem to expect instant gratification for their efforts. In the absence of stimulation and rewards, job performance could very well suffer. Despite the fact that a given student may be a sophomore with no corporate work experience and average grades, that student may operate under the assumption that he or she should have, say, a position making important marketing decisions for an organization. Likewise, we have students who expect a challenging position with great pay but who are reluctant to look beyond jobs within reach of public transportation in downtown Boston. We spend a great deal of time trying to convince students to consider relocation or at least getting a car to open up options.

Students are more fickle now than they were here ten years ago. In the mid-1990s, a sophomore in accounting would be inclined to accept a job at Deloitte and Touche almost without even asking what the duties would be. Today, we have many students who want to

decline their first offer—often a very good offer, as well—simply because “It’s my first offer, and I really wanted to get some more offers before deciding.”

We also see a degree of what we call “pressure paralysis.” While some first-time co-op students are knocking on our door months in advance of their first co-op, several others struggle to make time to see us—despite numerous reminders in the prep class. Ironically, our sense is that some students feel that so much is at stake that they become paralyzed when it comes to taking steps toward actually obtaining a job. Similarly, they can become incredibly indecisive when it comes to choosing between multiple offers.

We also worry that having high expectations may lead to making questionable decisions ethically. If living up to their own expectations—not to mention those of their parents—is such a Herculean task, won’t some students be tempted to cut corners to get ahead?

Recommendations Regarding the “High Expectations” Characteristic

How can we capitalize on these positives while contending with the drawbacks? We have a few concrete suggestions:

- *Push the expectation button:* In teaching COPU101—especially in light of the fact that the class is a pass/fail course which students expect to be fairly easy—we find it best to push and challenge students. Sometimes we referred back to the survey itself: “Almost everyone here said that it was important for them to accomplish great things in the career. So our goal is not have an “acceptable” resume—you need to know how to write a *great* resume, and we’re going to make sure you know how to do that for the rest of your career.”

Recognizing students in class—both for their achievements and, yes, even for just being there—is important; these students have been used to being “special” for most of their lives. One of us took the extra step last fall of bringing a digital camera to class on the first day, taking photos of each student holding up their name card. The next step was to have students fill out 4 x 6 cards with information such as hometown, concentration, career goals, and hobbies. By the second class, the instructor had just about memorized everyone’s name and could reel off a few facts about each student. Although this was admittedly labor-intensive, it sent the message that the instructor knew his students and was going to push himself as much as he would push them.

- *Use more advanced materials:* In a similar way, we have found it wise to raise the bar when working with students. Instead of simply going over interviewing basics, for example, we developed new classroom assignments in which students would have to master relatively advanced concepts. One exercise required that students learn how to respond to a behavioral-based interview. They had to write three to five specific, true stories and then brainstorm to determine which soft skills (i.e., multitasking, customer-service skills) these stories could be used to prove. Stories that were not specific and vivid had to be revised and resubmitted until they did the job. Behavioral-based interviewing—something we never used to consider teaching to “beginners”—turned out to be the most popular aspect of that course.

We also found it was critical to use advanced materials when teaching diversity in class. Students approached the topic with considerable confidence and expressed dissatisfaction in

many sections about the handling of diversity: They believed they already knew it all. But one of our colleagues came up with a more advanced exercise that gently showed her class that they did NOT nearly know all that they could know on this topic, and her class rated that subject more highly in their course evaluations.

- *Provide reality checks:* As the last example indicates, many students today are not necessarily grounded in reality when it comes to perceptions and expectations. We need to be constructively critical when talking to them about their hopes and dreams as well as their abilities. We require all students to do a practice interview—even those who insist that they already know how to interview because they’ve had many jobs before. These interviews usually turn out to be humbling experiences—good ways to remind students that there is always more to know about any topic.

Likewise, we have provided reality checks to students when it comes to explaining why they aren’t qualified to interview for some jobs. With a student who has been adamantly arguing why he deserves to be on the Microsoft interview schedule, for example, we have been known to pull out a resume of a student who *is* on the schedule so they can see the disparity between their qualifications and those of the bona fide candidate. Additionally, we might pull out a previous employer evaluation to remind the student that they have some key workplace competencies that need improving before a highly desirable job can be pursued.

The key is to temper expectations without crushing them. In giving feedback, laying out steps that they can take in the short run to get to their “big goals” on a future co-op or after graduation can be very helpful.

Positives of the “Preference for Structure” Characteristic

On the positive side of the ledger, many millennial-era co-ops are very organized and good at dealing with a highly directive style of management. They are more trusting of authority and less likely to be rebellious. They like undergoing formal training and development, including skill-building courses such as our Professional Development for Co-op course.

If you like using written materials to explain any aspect of your co-op process, these students generally will be receptive to them. Many of our students enjoy the *Find Your First Professional Job* textbook and use it faithfully in preparing for interviews.

Negatives of the “Preference for Structure” Characteristic

Of course, the majority of organizations do not provide formalized training for co-ops and interns. The figure-it-out-for-yourself nature of many jobs can be more overwhelming and stressful for many of today’s students in comparison to their predecessors. After a lifetime of having adults frequently spell out and plan their activities step-by-step, the millennial student-employee sometimes can lack many valuable soft skills: creative thinking; initiative; and the ability to work independently and autonomously all can be lacking. In the world of work, Zemke, Raines, Filipczakk noted that Millennials’ liabilities include the need for supervision and structure, and inexperience, particularly with handling difficult people issues (p. 144, *Literature Review: Factors Affecting the Development of Generation X and Millennials*, Denham & Gladbow).

Obviously, these traits are more worrisome in some jobs, fields, and industries than in others. “Creative accounting” may be quite undesirable, for example. But almost any positions have moments that require “out of the box” thinking; millennials are more “stay between the lines” thinkers as a generalization.

Recommendations Regarding the “Preference for Structure” Characteristic

We recommend a balance between giving these individuals the structure that they crave while also fostering the ability to adapt to a lack of structure. For example, our co-op prep course is very clear in terms of course requirements and expectations as laid out in the syllabus, but we find that it’s also vital to give students some assignments that require unstructured analysis.

One typical homework assignment gives students many specific examples of behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) questions and answers, showing them how a strong BBI answer has to be vivid, detailed, and grounded in a finite time span. Next, they have to come up with their own true stories and brainstorm to identify how they use their stories to *prove* that they have specific soft skills sought by the interviewer. Although this turned out to be very difficult for some of our sophomores, they ultimately rated this exercise as the most valuable in one of our sections.

One good rule of thumb is to clearly lay out all of the steps and processes involved in the co-op or internship job search. We have found that it’s good to schedule a follow-up appointment before the student leaves the office and to summarize next steps as closure for each meeting. This seems to be more important to our students today than for those of yesteryear.

Lastly, we use the counseling technique of “modeling” to personalize career path uncertainty or to bring to life problem-solving skills. Hearing our own true stories about the unexpected twists in our careers helps them understand that you can only structure your career to some extent: Ironically, you get them to think of change as part of the way of structuring their careers! Spending more time to reassure them that dealing with unstructured situations is a muscle that they need to grow seems to be resonating well so far.

Positives of the “Highly Technological” Characteristic

In a workforce that is graying as Boomers approach retirement age, the workplace values technologically competent employees in a wide array of fields. Millennials’ facility with the Internet and numerous software applications is a definite asset in many jobs, as is their ability to master new technologies rapidly—especially given that technological change is a very common trait in the 21st century workplace.

Negatives of the “Highly Technological” Characteristic

Over the last decade, we have found it necessary to spend much more time cautioning students about the abuse of technology in the workplace. It’s not so much that the typical student is trying to “get away with” using Instant Message programs, personal e-mails, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), and cellphones at work. It’s more that technology has become completely ingrained into their lifestyle. Used to answering their cellphones or using IM while doing their homework, it seems perfectly natural to them that they should keep doing so in the workplace. When you’re “constantly connected,” it can be a struggle to cut

that connection. At a recent Red Sox game attended by someone we know, a fan was overheard saying, “Oh, shoot, I remembered my BlackBerry!” He then proceeded to check his e-mail and make numerous phone calls for the next several innings, basically ignoring the game. Obviously, the technology habit can be compellingly compulsive.

An additional issue is that the use of technology in the workplace can be a gray area for co-ops and interns. In some organizational environments, it may be okay to answer the occasional cellphone call, check personal e-mail, or surf the net at lunch or during downtime. In other places, the Internet is strictly off-limits at all time. Learning to figure out workplace norms regarding technology can be tricky.

Recommendations Regarding the “Highly Technological” Characteristic

Using mini-cases, anecdotes, and true horror stories written by our students, we find it useful to bring these dilemmas to life and to have dialogue about what might or might not be professionally acceptable in this area. One mini-case is written by a student who was fired from his job because he received a pornographic cartoon at his work account, and he simply forwarded it on to his school account. Students are sometimes shocked to hear that this sort of transgression could lead to termination. For that matter, some are stunned to learn that organizations have a perfectly legal right to “sniff” any e-mails in search of music files, pornography, or other material that is not work-related. Hearing true stories and debating some gray-area scenarios seems to make the issue more real; it puts it on their radar screen.

Likewise, once a first-time co-op accepts a job, we find it helpful to discuss success factors and potential pitfalls for co-ops, focusing on the transition from the student role to the role in which being an employee is primary. As a student—and a customer of the university—certain behaviors are acceptable that no longer remain appropriate once the student becomes an employee, a service provider to an organization. Getting students to think of themselves as employees first can be useful here. Lastly, we make sure that students read and re-read the fourth chapter of *Find Your First Professional Job*, which reviews at length what’s at stake when students work as co-ops and interns as well as many ways in which they can prevent problems from arising.

Positives of the “Highly Attached To Parents” Characteristic

Quite frequently, today’s students come to us with a strong sense of self-confidence, borne of years in which parents’ behaviors reminded them of how special they are. One of our Taiwanese students admitted that he was envious of his American peers because of their self-confidence. Growing up, he said that he always was told that he was not smart or capable, and he still has a hard time believing that he is really as good as his co-op coordinator thinks he is.

Our students have a strong support system in their parents, who are more inclined to do what it takes to ensure that they’re successful. We hear many stories of students receiving exceptional emotional and financial support from their parents in their quests to live up to the big dreams that they share with their parents. These students are more trusting of adults and authority figures as well.

Negatives of the “Highly Attached To Parents” Characteristic

This trait inevitably makes some of our students much more labor-intensive. Parents call co-op coordinators much more often than they did ten years ago, sometimes just wanting to understand but also wanting to intervene when a student has been struggling through a job search or in the job itself. We have even had some parents call employers directly because a problem at work. These “helicopter parents” aren’t always helpful in resolving conflicts; in fact, they become another constituency that must be handled carefully.

Because students value their relationships with parents highly, we have to deal indirectly with “parent experts.” A first-time co-op may say, “My dad really thinks I should have an Objective section on my resume...” or “My parents think it’s ridiculous that I have to do an entry-level job...” Although some parents can be useful resources, sometimes we have to counter the misperceptions and fallacies that they may have about co-op and careers.

The fact that our students have been “sheltered” and consider themselves “special” can cut both ways as well. Right now we have a student working in a terrific job with one of most attractive employers, and he’s blowing it by being late on a regular basis. Even worse, this student already had issues in his previous co-op, where he admittedly wasn’t a great match for the highly conservative environment but responded by surfing the net and showing no initiative. This student’s mother has been quick to defend his behavior and to attempt to pull strings when he’s been on thin ice, rather than helping us out by making it clear that his performance needs to be good regardless of whether everything is perfect in his job situation. Our sense is that the student is a nice enough guy but rather entitled.

In one of our classes last year, one of our students complained about a behavioral-based interviewer asking her to describe a specific time in which she had encountered and overcome adversity. “I’m 19 years old: I’ve never had to overcome adversity!” she said. While it’s true that a young adult may have had fewer opportunities to deal with adversity, we also believe that this is more common with the millennial generation. With parents who are highly involved—ready to step in and solve problems—and a society that is more likely to reward participation rather than critique it, our present-day students often have had fewer opportunities to contend with life’s obstacles on their own. As a result, struggling with the aforementioned behavioral-based interviewing question is the least of their problems! How does such a student deal with making a big mistake at work brought to their attention? How do they know how to handle a difficult co-worker or a problem with too much or too little work? We can’t assume that our students necessarily will have the initiative and creativity to be problem solvers, given that they may lack significant experience with that core competency.

Recommendations Regarding the “Highly Attached To Parents” Characteristic

For starters, we have to acknowledge that parental influence is important to many of our students and can be quite helpful. Yet at times we also need to remind students of the limits and biases of their parents’ perspectives. This requires diplomacy. We may say something like “It’s great that your parents are so interested in your career and that they want to help you out all they can. However, we also need to remember that your parents aren’t the ones with the expertise that can only be derived from helping hundreds of students find the best possible co-op job or internship. I have been down this road many times, and I have a good sense of what jobs are really plausible for you in the marketplace.”

It can be helpful to remind students that most workplaces are meritocracies: Those who work hard generally will be rewarded with more responsibility, better references, and a deeper set of skills. These things don't happen magically or unconditionally; they have to be earned: Employees don't get a trophy or a ribbon for just showing up at work.

Lastly, we find it useful to encourage our students to think of us as their supervisors rather than as their parents or professors. What does this mean? If they're going to be late or absent from a co-op class or appointment, we expect advance notice via e-mail or voice mail. We expect them to take the initiative in making sure they understand our expectations and are clear on all steps and processes, as opposed to structuring everything for them or holding their hand throughout a job search or a placement period. Basically, we do this to try to help them be more ready to display the autonomy and initiative that will become more important in the workplace.

Positives of the “Team-oriented” Characteristic

For a long time, our College of Business Administration has required students to work in teams in the classroom—groups that are selected by the professor. The rationale is that employees have to work in groups in organizations, and they usually don't get to pick their co-workers. Today's team-oriented millennial students are much more comfortable with this practice than the wary Generation X students, who had more of a “you can only trust yourself” attitude. So this comfort and competency as team members is a real positive for Millennials.

This generation's comfort level with diversity is also unprecedented in our nation's history. Our society has become more diverse, and diversity is discussed much more openly now, giving more visibility to and contact with individuals of different races, religions, and sexual orientations. As such, today's students seem to be readily accepting of the heterogeneous groups that typically comprise organizations.

Negatives of the “Team-oriented” Characteristic

The flipside of being comfortable in teams is that many Millennials have difficulty in terms of working independently and taking initiative as an individual. Likewise, even some of our excellent co-ops are surprisingly weak when it comes to self-awareness. In a society that increasingly rewards for participation rather than achievement, our students struggle to understand and articulate their own strengths and weaknesses in comparison to their peers.

Although our students are much more appreciative and accepting of diversity and teamwork, they also may be likely to overrate their understanding of how these issues affect workplaces. In short, they equate exposure to teams and diversity to mastery of the complex issues that may arise in organizations related to these topics.

Recommendations Regarding the “Team-oriented” Characteristic

First, we suggest using tools and techniques that will enhance self-awareness. Using inventories of skills and interests—whether customized or formalized in the form of the Myers-Briggs and Campbell-Strong inventories—can be helpful in understanding how they may differ from their peers. Likewise, classroom exercises in which we show students how

to customize their interviewing strategy for a specific job description—contrasting the strategies of different students—can be helpful in building this muscle.

Students also need constructive “truth medicine.” We have many students who are prone to either underrating or overrating themselves in the context of available jobs in their field. We meet with students individually to make sure that they aren’t either selling themselves short or setting themselves up for failure based on the jobs that wish to pursue. If a student expresses interest in a job that is too advanced, we won’t simply say “No;” we’ll point out an entry-level or intermediate job that has proven to be a useful prerequisite for the more advanced job. This also helps students understand the individualized nature of career paths.

Finally, we need to recognize that these students *are* capable of handling relatively advanced concepts when it comes to diversity. One of our colleagues simply developed a more challenging diversity exercise that assumed good fundamental knowledge. This exercise implicitly acknowledged their strength but also showed them that there was still much more to learn.

Further Implications for Co-op and Internship Professionals

We believe that our research and experiences indicate that there is a great realm of possibility for co-op and internship professionals who are concerned with maximizing effectiveness with a student population that is ever-changing in its composition. Therefore, we suggest consideration of the following factors as we move forward in understanding of generational differences in our student-employees.

Need for Additional Research on Co-op Populations

We would like to see our colleagues at other institutions perform additional research to see how widespread the millennial phenomenon really is. We would be interested in seeing how prevalent millennial attitudes are among co-ops nationally and internationally, given that the existing generational research that we have seen apparently does not pertain to individuals outside the United States. It would be interesting to learn more about whether these trends are true in Canada, given the size and scope of many excellent co-op and internship programs north of the border.

Need to Monitor Changing Values of Students Continually

The shifts that we have experienced at Northeastern remind us that we must be vigilant in assessing our changing student populations on an ongoing basis. Through continual surveys and ongoing dialogue with our colleagues here and elsewhere, we can understand whether generational differences are more or less prevalent in various majors or at different institutions.

In terms of monitoring the latest research and publications on the millennial generation, we would recommend the following website:

<http://www.lifecourse.com/media/clips.html>

This site is affiliated with Howe and Strauss and offers a frequently updated archive of articles on this topic.

Predictions for Mini-Millennials

There is already some research available as well as some prognostication on “mini-millennials”—children born since the year 2000 and who won’t even be coming our way until approximately 2018! According to Howe (2000), a new generation comes along about every 22 years. Parker (2005) notes that some of the millennial characteristics already appear to be shifting in intriguing if unsettling ways. For example, the aftermath of 9/11 has increased concern regarding the safety of children. In response, the Japanese city of Osaka and a school in Denmark are using microchips planted in children’s clothes or school bags in order to track students’ location at all time. Obviously, this is the intersection of our increasingly technological culture as well as the growing desire for parents to structure and control their children’s lives.

We predict that efforts such as these ultimately could lead to a backlash, and another generational shift should ensue. Fed up with overly controlling parents, governments, and technologies, the next generation may shift away from being more civic-minded and more adaptive—at least this would be consistent with what Howe and Strauss postulate when they discuss how generations run in cycles. If this does hold true, we would expect that the next generation would be characterized by cautiousness, a “compromising and accommodating” spirit, and a sense of work as a duty. It will be interesting to see how this plays out.

Need to Continually Adjust Teaching Tools and Counseling Style

Above all, we believe that co-op and internship professionals must not be wedded to using the same teaching tools and counseling style over long periods of time. Our students will continue to change; we also must continue to change our methods appropriately to make sure our students are getting what they need. Ten years ago, we had no co-op prep course, no co-op textbook, and we did relatively little with students to make sure that they understood professional behavior in the workplace.

To survive and succeed, we have made dramatic changes in all of these areas. All Northeastern students now must take a co-op prep course before going on co-op for the first time. Efficiently run in groups of 20 to 40 students, these students cover the fundamentals of co-op preparation, including resume-writing, strategic interviewing, and on-the-job performance. We bring in panels of upperclassmen and employers to tell their stories, ease the anxiety over transitioning into the workplace, and model appropriate behaviors for co-ops and interns. Likewise, our co-op textbook has been through about seven or eight iterations over as many years, always attempting to adjust to the ever-changing needs of our students and employers. The chapter that has grown and changed the most has been the on-the-job behavior chapter, as new technologies and complexities have needed to be reflected there.

Final Thoughts

At the first-ever Practice-Oriented Education conference—held at Northeastern University in April 2001—professor and noted researcher Stephen Brookfield delivered a speech that continues to haunt us.

Brookfield described how he used to handle teaching the first day of his favorite class. It all sounded great: He told his students how much they already knew about the subject and about how it was okay to make mistakes and how he himself has made many mistakes as a teacher. He told them that when something went wrong in the course, he didn’t want the

students to look to him for the answer: Instead, they would draw on the combined experience of the group to solve the problem.

It all sounded very democratic and empowering. However, Brookfield eventually surveyed the class and learned that his wonderful opening speech made his students extremely nervous: After all, their instructor had admitted his incompetence, leading them to question his credibility.

Now, Brookfield told his audience, he still very much wants to teach the class as he always had. However, when pondering this, he pretends that he is not about to teach his favorite class: Instead, he envisions himself taking a class on something very threatening or intimidating—in his case, white-water rafting. Brookfield imagines his white-water rafting instructor admitting that she doesn't know much about the sport and that she hopes to learn from her students. She talks about celebrating the mistakes that the students make in the rapids. Worst of all, she tells them that when they face something extremely difficult—such as an intense section of rapids—that they make look to her to solve the problem at hand, and she would not do that for them! Instead she would have them form small groups to figure out how to deal with this crisis in their lives to decide the best course of action.

When the laughter subsided, we were left to reflect on what Brookfield's story meant for us as educators. Don't we all fall in love to some degree with the ways in which we prefer to work with students? Haven't we all been guilty of convincing ourselves that one approach was best for our students, either without strong evidence or sometimes at odds with the feedback that we have received?

Although we have been working as co-op educators for a combined 25 years, we believe that we need to continually gauge our approach with students and make adjustments based on their changing needs. Sometimes we may need to overhaul our practices to contend with the evolving nature of our co-op students and interns. If we take the time to learn more about our students' learning styles, values, and attributes—whether further research proves them to be truly “millennial” or otherwise—we will do a better job of providing students with the most effective education possible. In turn, employers need to invest the same level of time learning about these new employees. Tulgan (year?) states, “The mission of companies should not be to tame the younger generation but to use them as a compass to move into the workplace of the future.” As a bonus, the process of continually tinkering with and adjusting our approach will keep our own jobs fresh and interesting over the changing years.