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Making the Move from Shouting to Listening to Public Action: A Student Perspective on Millennials and Dialogue

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of what one senior student at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley, Colorado, found while researching the power of conversation to foster civic engagement among her peers. The essay is divided into three sections. First, research on the Millennials is summarized to provide an overview of this generation's characteristics. Second, the methodology and findings of the applied portions of the student's senior thesis, referred to as Conversations for Change, are outlined. The third portion, the essay's conclusion, calls for the increased presence of the student voice in our colleges and universities so as to empower the Millennials' potential to participate in democracy.

Keywords

Millennials, Higher Education, Conversation, Dialogue, Deliberation, Deliberative Democracy

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As a college freshman, I threw myself wholeheartedly into the new academic experience and campus activities at the University of Northern Colorado. I found my time there to be both fulfilling and educational. However, it was not until I began work on my University Honors Program thesis during my senior year—a combination of research and peer dialogue circles on the student experience—that I realized what I and my peers were lacking in our education. Despite the best efforts of our university, students said they were not getting the opportunity to experience and practice the kind of citizenship America's democracy was intended to foster, a citizenship that was meant to be a conversation, not a lecture. Students felt as though they were being shouted at, both by those closest to them and those they had never even met, and this plethora of voices was forcing them to choose a side in the political world or exhaust themselves for a success they had not even defined. In this essay, I present an overview of what researchers have said regarding my generation, followed by a summary of findings from my thesis. I conclude that by simply giving students a voice, a chance to engage in dialogue and discussion on everything from politics to their own education, we can renew the Millennials' faith in democratic participation and truly empower them to use their professions to both earn a living and make a life for others at the same time.

The Next Generation

They call us a great many things—the Millennials, Gen Y, the Dot Nets, Generation WE, and the Trophy Kids—and in recent years, we have become prominent research subjects. Those of us considered to be a part of the Millennial Generation were born between 1978 and 2000, and we number 95 million, making us the "biggest age cohort in the history of the nation" (Greenberg and Weber, 2008, 13). As America's largest generation, we are over 21 percent bigger than the Baby Boomer generation—those born between 1946 and 1964. Within our generation, simply because of its size, lies a great deal of power and potential to change the world we live in; however, it remains unclear and will for years to come whether or not we, the Millennial Generation, will capitalize on our ability to make change a reality.

Robert F. Kennedy once said, "Each generation must win its own struggle to be free," and, for all generations, Kennedy's words could have served as their mantra. This sort of mindset seems considerably more absent in the Millennials than in those who came before. It has been said that perhaps what makes our generation so unique is that we do not think we are doing something new (Brooks, 2001). Unlike those who rebelled against the standards imposed on them by

society and their parents during the middle of the twentieth century, we do not define ourselves in relation to a previous generation; the Millennials see the need for collaboration with instead of opposition to those who are older than us (Greenberg and Weber, 2008). This is a relatively new concept for a generation when you consider the Baby Boomers and Generation X, both of which took pride in being unlike their parents.

The Millennials are working to bridge the generation gap with those who are older than us, and we also see the need for more connections to our counterparts across the globe. Our generation believes that we not only have a lot in common with our peers in America but with those around the world (Greenberg and Weber, 2008, 21). The Millennials have grown up more integrated in global society and, thanks to technology, more able to access information about and make connections to the world than those generations before us. We are also increasingly tech savvy, and our constant use of social networking sites and MP3 players is a fact which has drawn both praise and a criticism from scholars (Alsop, 2008, 22).

Both positive and negative evaluations of this generation are abundant in the research done on the Millennials, and there is no doubt that we make fascinating subjects. Ron Alsop and Alexandra Robbins, both former journalists turned researchers, have taken an interest in the Millennials and written extensively about them. Robbins' work, *The Overachievers: The Secret Lives of Driven Kids*, not only chronicles the personal stories of several Gen Y students but speaks at great length about our characteristics—our altruism, our desires to further our education, and, primarily, our extreme will to succeed. It could be said that Robbins' book is primarily a criticism, not of the Millennials themselves, but of the environments and people who have pushed us to a point that is detrimental to our well-being. Robbins is concerned with the pressure that has been put on our generation to reach the constantly heightened bar of success. In addition to our achievement obsession and extreme fear of imperfection, Robbins records how Millennials have also developed physiological responses to the stress such as thinning hair and suppressed immune systems (Robbins, 2006).

Eric Greenberg and Karl Weber, authors of the book *Generation WE: How Millennial Youth are Taking over America and Changing Our World Forever*, have synthesized large amounts of research on Millennials, referred to as "Generation WE" throughout their text. They produced and elaborated upon a laundry list of characteristics of our generation. Their focus is on the capacity of the Millennials instead of their deficiencies. For the Millennials, there is a lot at stake. If many of the issues currently confronting the United States and the rest of the globe remain unsolved, there may not be a future for us, and we are set on creating better lives for ourselves than our parents or grandparents had (Greenberg and Weber, 2008).

Generation WE is deeply concerned about the common good and truly wants to make a real difference in the lives of our fellow citizens (Greenberg and Weber, 2008). In fact, in 2006, 66.7 percent of surveyed college freshmen believed in the importance of helping others, and becoming a community leader was also ranked by a large percentage of students as "essential" or "very important" (Higher Education Research Institute, 2008). It is, therefore, not surprising that volunteerism is unusually high among Millennials, and there are many theories as to why we are spending so much time giving back. In addition to the explanation that the Millennials are innately inclined to do so, the increasing numbers of government-run or funded service programs, service-learning opportunities available in elementary and high school, and high school graduation requirements are also catalysts (Sax, 2000).

Experts also think there may another factor at work: the Millennials might be volunteering rather than voting. Turnout of the Millennials at the polls may be up in recent elections, but the percentage of our generation casting ballots is still far behind that of older generations (Greenberg and Weber, 2008). Political attention and activity also lags behind (Friedland and Morimoto, 2005). Robert D. Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* notes several observations along these same lines. The average college graduate, according to Putnam, knows little more today about public affairs and current events than a high school graduate did in the 1940s (Putnam, 2000). In an age where information is abundant and readily available at our fingertips, Generation WE does not seem to utilize it to further our political understanding and engagement.

With all of America in a state of civic decline, it is not hard to imagine why the Millennials would be in the same state. However, we do know that the Millennials are also fed up with "slash-and-burn" politics, and a perceived lack of political efficacy could be the reason that some of us have boycotted traditional political engagement and replaced it with community service (Boyte, 2008, 3). We still want to be citizens who are contributing to the greater good, but many of us do not see political participation defined by extreme polarization and partisanship as the most effective means of doing so (Kiesa, 2007).

When we compare today's young adults with young adults from the past, we find that the Millennials have "diminished civic attachment" (Boyte, 2004, 77). It seems that we, as a result of our overscheduled and overstressed lives, the priorities of our educational institutions, and our frustration with today's politics, have lost a sense of public life. According to some, there are not enough hours in the day for the Millennials to read a newspaper and remain up to date on current events even if we wanted to, and nights spent discussing politics with our peers are a lost cause when even conversations with friends have to be scheduled. We are constantly being pushed to succeed in our fields without any training as to

how we can use it to enrich the lives of our fellow citizens, and volunteering, according to some, is something we do to build our resumes or shun partisan politics. It is not to be said that Millennials do not long for more, because quite the opposite is true. One student interviewed by well-known civic life scholar Harry C. Boyte articulated the incompleteness felt by our generation exceptionally well—"There is an essential piece missing…a piece of our souls that has been stolen away by a steadfast commitment to rules and order and success" (Boyte, 2006: 36). Programs like the one I am about to describe can be powerful antidotes to these concerns because they restore Millennials' sense of civic duty and empower them to create change.

Conversations for Change

The research on Millennials—our merits, our flaws, and this "missing piece"— and my faith in higher education's ability to create "agents and architects of democracy" are what prompted my research on the power of intentional conversation and peer dialogue (Boyte, 2009, 15). In the spring semester of 2010, I adapted the November 5th Coalition's[1] Conversations for Change model to the University of Northern Colorado and hosted a series of three discussion circles with Millennials on campus (South, 2010).[2] Participants for the three sessions of Conversations for Change were drawn from two sections of *MIND 289: Coming of Age in the Twentieth Century*. MIND classes, those course designations that make up a portion of the University Honors Program curriculum, are interdisciplinary classes that focus on expanding students' worldviews and engaging them in their learning. Two instructors based out of the Center for Honors, Scholars and Leadership at the University of Northern Colorado agreed to incorporate these dialogue sessions into their sections of MIND 289 as a part of their discussions on community and citizenship. Each section had approximately 20-25 students enrolled, but the sections were combined for the conversations. Most of the students enrolled in the class were

[1] The November 5th Coalition was an initiative taken by the National Coalition for Deliberation and Dialogue and Harry C. Boyte to capitalize on the 2008 election and use the opportunity to foster deliberation and dialogue and empower ordinary citizens to become the force behind our government and the livelihood of our communities. As part of this initiative, the coalition has produced a guide to what they are calling Conversations for Change. These conversations, which happen over three different sessions, can be utilized to determine what participants believe about democracy and citizenship, and how they can be involved as agents of change. They allow participants to see what is possible when people start to talk to each other and become the co-creators and co-producers of goods, which includes practical solutions to common problems, that benefit the public as a whole For more information about the November 5th Coalition, visit http://www.thataway.org/?page_id=904.

[2] Complete copies of the adapted model used at the University of Northern Colorado are available from author upon request.

freshmen and sophomores, although the class was open to all years. The students were diverse in their backgrounds, fields of study, and campus experiences.

The students in both sections of MIND 289 attended a one-day course retreat where the first two sessions would be held. Each of the three conversations is themed and involves asking the participants to explore their conceptions of community and citizenship and then put the paradigms and ideas that emerge from them into action. The first session was concerned with community. The second session was centered on citizenship. The 40 students who attended the retreat were broken down into eight smaller groups, and the groups worked to discuss the session topic and answer session questions before we reunited to identify key ideas or concepts. These first two sessions lasted an hour and a half and an hour respectively. The third session took place in a regularly scheduled class session which combined both sections. In *Session #3: Action*, participants were asked to look back and reflect on their discussions of community and citizenship and evaluate how they can practically incorporate their ideas into higher education. The third session lasted an hour.

In the first session, students were asked to define the word *community,* and each group, as a part of their definition, said that being part of a community involved working towards a common good and creating something bigger than each of the individual members. When students were asked which communities they were a part of, they identified everything from university clubs and residence halls to the ethnic groups they claim. Each group also identified responsibilities of the individuals within the communities and said that the relationship between the individual and their community should be reciprocal—both the individual and the community should benefit.

During the last part of the session, students were asked whether they considered UNC to be a community, and if not, why. Every individual who was deeply involved in at least one campus organization said that UNC was a community. They felt as though they belonged to a community because they had a personal stake in the university. The students who were not involved in anything on campus said that they did not feel as though the campus was their community. Some of these students saw their college experience as a means to an end and were more connected to their co-workers or high school friends than anyone else. When asked why they did not feel connected to UNC, they said they just did not want to be; they were there to get in and get out with a degree as cheaply and as quickly as possible. Other students said they were uninformed about ways to get involved, especially those who lived off campus. Students who were heavily involved on campus said they advertise using all possible outlets and thought that those who were not drawn in were apathetic because they did not understand how anyone could not see their flyers or hear about their organization. What these students began to realize though is that many of their peers were not apathetic but

simply did not know how to get involved. Other students within the groups said they came into college wanting to be involved and found many campus organizations to be very exclusionary, especially those tied to an academic discipline. One student said he belonged to one of the university choirs, but it had been and continued to be a difficult experience. Many of the students involved in choir were performing and visuals arts majors, and he is not. Although he is passionate about singing and music, he felt that the group looked down on him as a non-major who lacked commitment.

After a short break following the first session, students regrouped and during the second session they worked to define the word *citizen* and identify who could be a citizen and what their responsibilities were. Students defined a citizen as not only a member of a community but as an active participant within a community. Each group agreed that citizenship could not be passive. The responsibilities of citizens included those things that we regularly equate with being a citizen—voting, paying taxes, and obeying the law. However, the participants said that although many of us primarily associate our citizenship with these minimal duties, citizens should be more active in the political process, more aware of cultures and current events, devote more of their time to serving their communities through philanthropic and volunteer efforts, and speak up more frequently. When students were asked if they believed they had the capacity to influence government, the general consensus was no, unless they had a lot of money. Students within the group made several comments that money was now synonymous with influence and power, and that everyday Americans had lost their ability to participate in democracy. A couple of students said that the only way we could truly participate these days was to exercise our consumer power by buying or not buying things or services from certain companies. Other students said they could have a greater impact by not participating in the political process, but rather they could be citizens by spending their time volunteering, an activity in which they felt they could actually do something to improve society.

When the groups were asked if they felt that higher education was educating them to be citizens instead of mere consumers, students were no longer raising their hands to answer but were eagerly and fervently speaking up and talking with each other. Every student in the room said that our institutions were not doing enough to prepare them to be citizens—it was running like a business where the degree was marketed to customers with the hope of turning a profit as the primary goal. Certainly, students attend college so they can succeed in their careers, achieving both prominence in their field and financial success. They were also adamant that they wanted to learn and use their degree to give something back to society at the same time. However, they said that most people, including administrators, faculty, and even some of their peers, at the university did not see them like that. When asked what needed to happen in order to better educate them

to be citizens, students had a lot to say about their professors and about how they were being treated in their classrooms. Repeatedly, students told stories about the professor who uses lectures and PowerPoint as the only means to teach. They talked of the upper level professor who makes it clear that he feels demeaned by having to teach an introductory course. They spoke of advisors who will not give students time because they feel their efforts will be wasted on a freshman who is likely to switch their major. They were enraged at those instructors who would not explain why a concept came to be or was necessary but merely told them that they did not need to know why. Overall, students said they rarely felt attachment to their professors or to their peers because the classroom was not an engaging place that allowed dialogue and inquiry. This is not to say that all professors treat their students like this or run their classrooms in such a fashion; there were positive stories too.

In the week following the sessions, students told their instructors that they had enjoyed the dialogue, but they wanted to do more, to find solutions to address the problems they had identified. The first two sessions naturally generated a desire for a third session focused on action. The action they sought, however, was change on the part of their professors and action by the administration. They had to be prompted to think about their own responsibility, what they could do collectively or as individuals.

Slowly, students came to a sort of stunning realization and began posing solutions to their peers. They suggested that they speak to their professors and tell them what they had told me. They decided that if they wanted a more engaged classroom then showing up and actively participating in the class were the first steps to showing their instructors that they were capable of using discussion to learn. They proposed an event that would allow panels of students to address a faculty audience in order to help their professors better understand them and their needs. Despite the irony of this solution, simply another lecture, only this time it would be directed at professors, the students intended the panel to open lines of communication and start a conversation. They felt that many times, students have the opportunity to hear from their professors speaking to them as experts, but professors rarely get the opportunity to experience the students as experts. They proposed the event as a way for them to actively take control of their education and work with their professors to improve the experience of everyone at the university.

Conclusion

Throughout all three conversation sessions, I was amazed not only by the level of participation but the content of the discussions. While the discussions led to practical reforms and improvements, there are more important conclusions that can be drawn from the experience. First, considering what the members of this

generation that participated in sessions said, it seems that the research on Millennials is accurate. Both inside and outside the classroom, these students were eager to interact with their peers, whether they are traditional or non-traditional students of any race, religion, and economic status. Diversity is considered to be an asset by these students; despite the different backgrounds of the millennial participants, they found commonalities and worked together across all sorts of boundaries to shed new light on similar problems. Education is also important, which is why you will find these Millennials flocking to post-secondary institutions. They have been raised to achieve, and many of them are succeeding at doing just that. However, as many of these Millennials said during the conversations, they are looking for more out of college and university experiences than expertise in their field and a diploma, and, in many cases, they not finding it. My generation is desperate to be a part of something bigger. We want to become men and women who have a stake in our communities, a sense of responsibility to society, and a belief in the power of our voices to impact our world. However, without the education necessary to reach our potential, an education that is based not just on how to earn a living but also how to make a life for others, it is likely that we will become simply a generation of consumers who are "wired up but tuned out" to the world around us (Boyte, 2008, 49).

It is my belief that the Millennials stand at a critical juncture. My generation, just like those who came before us, will determine our level of ownership in democracy, and, in the process, we can either reverse America's civic decline or continue it. Many scholars believe that we will do the latter. However, it is clear to me that we can utilize these conversations, especially in our post-secondary institutions, to empower the potential of my generation to engage. Giving the Millennials opportunities to dialogue with each other and our professors will not only showcase our previously discussed characteristics, but it can actually change the values and habits of our generation. When our American colleges and universities stop shouting the merits of a degree and discipline-specific expert knowledge that often has no clear practical application to students' lives and start listening to the Millennials desire for less theory and more engagement, they will find that we generate interesting and productive conversation. I am convinced that the various ideas described in this special issue—programs that involve more than volunteering or simple political debate and that incorporate the powerful principles of deliberative democracy—will be welcomed by this generation of students and supply the piece that many of us are missing.

By strengthening the voices of students in our institutions, our colleges and universities can revolutionize our education and our democracy. When we interact with each other, we form attachments to our peers, our faculty, and our campuses that help us create and become a stronger part of the academic

community. When we exchange ideas, we learn the value of the collective and develop respect and tolerance for different ideas, which help us find solutions that benefit the common good. When we speak our minds, we remember the power we have to affect our circumstances and influence people, which gives us a stake in our future and the future of those around us. When we, both my generation and the institutions that educate us, move from shouting to listening and facilitate dialogue and public action by hosting these Conversations for Change, we make the choice to become the very thing that has always made America great—her citizens.

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