Ready, Set, Engage: Teaching (and Reaching) Millennials

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The Millennial Generation refers to the generational cohort born between 1982 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennial students are on track to be the most educated generational cohort (Pew Research, 2014) and represent the majority of the traditional undergraduate students currently enrolled. These students are distinguished from previous generational cohorts (e.g., Generation X, Baby Boomers) by seven unique traits identified by Howe and Strauss (2003). The Millennial student is special, sheltered, confident, team-oriented, achieving, pressured, and conventional. These characteristics pose significant challenges for faculty (Eckleberry-Hunt & Tucciarone, 2011; Mangold, 2007), and there is a need for faculty to adapt teaching in order to be effective (Goldman & Martin, 2016; Krauss & Sears, 2008).

As faculty endeavor to adapt to current students’ needs, several researchers have suggested a reimagining of the role of faculty. The dominant model in higher education has historically been based on students as passive recipients of information delivered by a professor through lecture. However, Wilson (2004) suggests that faculty should not deliver instruction, but rather, they should be “designers of learning methods and environments” (p. 59). The extent to which faculty can design these environments with the needs of Millennial students in mind will ultimately determine both the perceived and real learning that takes place.

Chickering and Gamson (1987) were among the first to suggest that students’ performance is optimized when they have the opportunity to engage with, relate to, and apply course material, rather than relying on memorization and repetition. This is particularly relevant for Millennials, as they are digital natives who are adept at finding and accessing information (Prensky, 2001). As a result, they have decreased tolerance for lectures and respond negatively to class time used to deliver information (Prensky, 2001). Active learning, which is defined as any instructional method that “engages students in the learning process…[and] requires students to do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing” (Prince, 2004, p. 223), represents a transformative approach to the way that instructional contact hours are used.

A common approach to implementing active learning is the inverted or flipped classroom. A flipped classroom is one in which the instructor delivers course content through media (e.g., taped lectures, classroom-aided instruction) that can be accessed by students outside of class. Then, the actual contact hours provide students with the opportunity to apply content through various instructional methods (e.g., case studies, project-based learning, simulation, role-playing) (Zayapragasarazan & Kumar, 2012). Active learning is not limited to the classroom, as both service learning projects, internships, and study abroad experiences can be included.

Active learning requires students to engage in analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, which is appealing to Millennial students who seek variety and change (Prensky, 2010). Further, Millennial students often have difficulty engaging in critical thinking or tackling abstract assignments (Hosek & Titsworth, 2016), and are less likely than their Generation X peers to appreciate theoretical concepts (Yahr & Schimmel, 2013). Active learning can address these shortcomings. The methods used for active learning may take the form of individual or group projects, which affords the instructor flexibility. Still, group work may be especially appealing to Millennial students, as they have grown up playing sports teams and working in groups (Howe & Strauss, 2003). A potential drawback to allowing group work is that Millennials may be drawn to collaborative projects because they have difficulty thinking independently (Wilson, 2004). This problem can be mitigated through the incorporation of peer evaluation into the assessment process (Kuh, 2003).
Active learning can help students master course content, but Millennial students commonly assign the greatest value to projects, courses, and activities that will help them find a job. They believe that they are entitled to not only good grades but high-paying, meaningful careers when they graduate (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Thus, a complementary focus of faculty should be professional preparation. Millennial students are increasingly unlikely to work while they are enrolled in high school or college (United States Council of Economic Advisors, 2014), so a focus on professionalism in and through college courses is especially important. Professional preparation may include a range of activities, such as internships, partnering with industry for class projects, and requiring professional conduct in the classroom.

This presentation will include discussion of panelists’ experience incorporating active learning in various sport management courses, how these efforts have been received by students, and the impact on learning outcomes. Specific highlights include: (1) how various platforms such as Twitter can be used to allow students to contribute/co-produce content and provide them with an alternative to 'voice' their input; (2) how in-class role playing activities can be used to foster a competitive environment in the classroom, thereby appealing to Millennials’ achievement orientation; and (3) how client-sponsored projects can be used to encourage critical thinking and provide students with immediate feedback from industry professionals. This presentation includes faculty members who currently hold teaching, administrative, and professional positions at their respective institutions. As a result, they bring a variety of perspectives to issues of student engagement, instructional innovation, professional preparation, and assessment. The panel format will allow for robust discussion of practical strategies and insights intended to aid faculty in responding to the needs of Millennial students.