A T WHAT POINT does a paradigm become so prevalent that it loses its utility? Probably when attempts to simplify complex concepts become oversimplification. A case in point may be the use of the term *millennials*. The designations *millennials* and *millennial generation* are frequently used, allegedly to paint a nuanced portrait of today’s college-going population. It seems that wherever one turns—newspapers, journals, or professional meetings—there are opportunities to read or hear about the best ways to teach or reach millennial students.

Numerous authors, such as Michael Coomes and Robert DeBard in *Serving the Millennial Generation*, have postulated that thinking of this generation of students as a discrete cultural unit imbued with particular characteristics that differentiate it from the college-going populations of previous eras enhances the ability of educators to connect with their students and improve the teaching and learning process. But does it? In *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, Neil Howe and William Strauss tell us that millennials are wired, multi-taskers, strivers, sheltered, confident, team-oriented (they prefer group activities), conventional (they identify with the views of their parents), pressured, and achieving. We have been encouraged to think of today’s students in this way, presumably so that we can understand them better and help them make their courses, programs, and services more engaging and meaningful.

All of this talk of millennials has obscured a basic fact about college and university students today: close to half of them—those whom we describe as non-traditional students—clearly fall outside of the chronological parameters of the so-called millennial generation. Moreover, within the traditional-age student group, we find growing numbers of international students and racially and ethnically diverse students, as well as students of immigrant parents. Painting all of these students with the same broad brush does little to help our understanding of them and their needs. Surely, many of these students possess attributes that diverge from the norms that have been assigned to the millennial generation.

When first introduced, the idea of the millennial generation of students struck a chord with many educators, probably due to its novelty and accessibility. It seems, however, that as the concept has gotten greater and greater exposure in educational circles, it has...
become less and less useful as a framework for developing strategies that lead to effective learning. Thinking of the college students of this era solely as millennials oversimplifies who our students are and how we should best work with them. This kind of thinking perpetuates stereotypes about who attends college and who does not. Although contextualizing the characteristics and experiences of students may be a helpful way to think about them as a group, the more broadly these generalizations are applied, the less accurate they tend to be. This is why I think that the term *millennials* has only limited usefulness in the educational arena.

Theories have a finite shelf life. In a previous era, nearly all of the research on college student development was based on the experiences of traditional-age, male, white college students. The diversity of the college-going public was not what it is today and was not a factor in the establishment of the theories of student development that were first espoused as a means of understanding what happens to students in college. In *The Handbook of Student Affairs Administration*, Kelly Carter and George McClellan describe how Arthur Chickering’s original theoretical model of identity development was based on his research on traditional college-age men. They go on to show that another widely disseminated and discussed theory, William Perry’s theory of cognitive development, was also based primarily on his research with white, male subjects. While these theories have in some ways provided the foundation for new avenues of thinking about college student development, it has become widely understood that the value of this research had to be reassessed as collegiate populations changed. This flaw was initially addressed in the 1980s, when research methods were broadened to ensure inclusiveness in the populations studied. Carter and McClellan point out that the path-breaking work of Carol Gilligan, for example, offered educators the opportunity to think critically about the limitations of previous attempts to explain moral development and redress those shortcomings. I fear that overuse of the term *millennials* in the context of higher education may sometimes obscure the reality of who goes to college and what students experience there.

The fact that so many of us have been so eager to buy into the idea of millennial students has fueled the idea that adopting new information technologies is a key to reaching this wired group. Being wired is one characteristic that is ascribed to millennials, but it is not their only quality. I worry that many educators have overemphasized the benefits of innovative information technologies as pedagogical and communication tools for this group, absent enough evidence that the current uses of such technologies are educationally effective. As technology continues to be inserted into the classroom and as student affairs administrators explore how to use blogs and social Web sites like Facebook and MySpace to connect with students, perhaps there is a need to step back from the information technology “arms race” and continue to determine whether all of these devices and the ways in which they are being employed actually help students learn.

In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Brock Read reported late in the fall of 2006 that “one of the first systematic efforts to figure out how students use their laptops” was conducted at Carnegie Mellon University. Researchers there “found no evidence that . . . computers improved students’ work” (p. A28). How the use of laptops is mediated by instructors is a key variable in these and other findings. Simply increasing the high-tech quotient of a student population isn’t enough.

Student health and welfare is also a principal concern on our campuses. Yet as Andrea Foster reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, only one campus in North America (Lakehead University in Ontario, Canada) has decided to limit wireless technology because “the electromagnetic energy that some systems emit could endanger students’ health” (p. A31). Apart from the Lakehead campus, the love affair between higher education and information technology sails along, seemingly unimpeded by concerns about student health and well-being.

Even if we dismiss health concerns related to the use of wireless technology as unproven, one might wonder whether we are so desperate to connect with students on their terms that we are unable to stand back and ask questions that beg to be asked about effective pedagogy and practice in relation to information technology.

It is possible that the rush to integrate laptops, wireless networks, and other information technologies into the learning process—even to the point where students are downloading lectures to their iPods, eliminating their need to attend classes—is not driven as much by concerns about educational effectiveness as it is by concerns about institutional image and enrollment management. Institutions want to be seen as innovative and up-to-date and as cogs in the global economy, and ubiquitous computing is viewed as a means of communicating that image to the

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We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Jean M. Henscheid (aboutcampus@uidaho.edu), and please copy her on notes to authors.
public. Sadly, Elizabeth Farrell recently reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that “many admissions deans are racing to prove to prospective students that they are hip to the latest trends . . . to connect with teens—and to keep up with competitors . . . [even though] there is scant evidence that a college gains any admissions edge with high-school students by reaching out to them through technology” (p. A36). And where does our attentiveness to student learning fit into this equation? I agree with Lawrence Musgrove, who wrote online that “this attempt to equate pedagogy with technology confuses ends with means.”

What to do? I offer four suggestions to help combat simplistic thinking about students and how to best enhance their learning.

✦ *Meet students’ needs by first getting to know them personally.* Examining lists of characteristics, reading articles and books, or attending workshops that describe how students think and what motivates them are poor substitutes for connecting with students as individuals. Even though it may not be feasible to enjoy a personal conversation with each and every student, it is essential that we take advantage of opportunities for one-on-one dialogue with students; proactively seek out chances to listen to, converse with, and get to know these individuals as the unique persons that they are; and move beyond arbitrarily assigned group identifiers.

✦ *Get to know all students by embracing student diversity.* Above all else, effective personal interactions with students are at the core of effective teaching and learning. Yet personal interactions can be limited in improving our understanding of the college student of today if we consistently interact only with the same groups of students. Perhaps we most often see students who are majoring in one discipline or who are involved in a small subset of student organizations. Maybe we are only spending time with students in one narrow age range. It is important not only to connect with individual students but also to interact with broad cross sections of students. Embracing the diversity of today’s students in all of its manifestations can help faculty and administrators connect with students in ways that lead to a better understanding of students at their institution and how to best reach them. Embracing student diversity without labeling groups of students places individual students, rather than convenience, at the center of our activities.

✦ *Keep the focus on education.* The use of generational labeling originated in the field of market research. Marketers rely on demographic research to make informed decisions about product development, packaging, and placement. In the 1980s, enrollment managers began to use geo-demographic data to effectively target potential applicants, and over the past two decades, the use of such data as a means to identify and target those most likely to enroll in higher education institutions has proliferated. I would argue that we should look to the world of human development, not business development, to enhance our understanding of students and their needs.

✦ *Practice critical thinking.* It may be convenient to think of college students as members of homogenous groups that can be appealed to and connected with in specific ways, yet labeling people for the sake of convenience can also lead to fallacies that obfuscate our thinking about students and their learning and development. Thinking critically about long-term educational goals rather than trying to expedite the processes of communication and learning is, in the end, the best way that institutions of higher learning can serve the public interest. That idea may not be as catchy as branding today’s students as millennials, but it may be the more thoughtful and effective course of action.

**NOTES**


