In Their Own Words: Best Practices for Advising Millennial Students about Majors

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Utilizing generational theory, we explored the relationship between Millennial characteristics and students' major selection and academic advising experiences. We conducted focus groups of students with senior standing at a private, midwestern university, and we utilized a closed coding technique to analyze the qualitative data. Consistent with documented Millennial traits, participants expressed a sense of specialness as well as conventional motivation, optimism, and a need to feel protected. The findings suggest that academic advisors should acknowledge and at times accommodate these Millennial characteristics when working with students. More specifically, we suggest a split-model advising system as a way to optimize the advising experiences of Millennial students.

KEY WORDS: administrative organizational systems, decision making, generations of students, praxis advising, student characteristics, student perceptions of advising

A college major not only provides individuals with the opportunity to become knowledgeable about a specific field of study, but it may also inform and direct one's career path after graduation. However, despite the importance of the choice of college major, relatively few sources explain the ways students decide on or commit to it. Neither does literature abound on the resources (especially those available from an academic advisor) students need to make a long-term decision. Highlighting the need to address the major choice and commitment process, several reports indicate that between 40 and 85% of students change their major before they graduate (Broadbridge, 1996; Kramer, Higley, & Olsen, 1994; Malgwi, Howe, & Burnaby, 2005), and as many as 10% change their majors at least four times (Kramer et al., 1994). These numbers should raise some concerns for academic institutions because undecided students exhibit lower academic performance and persistence rates than those with declared majors (Leppel, 2001). Furthermore, major persistence, or continued effort toward one major despite obstacles, relates to satisfaction with the academic environment and commitment to the college (Allen & Robbins, 2008). As "the success of the institution and the success of its students are inseparable" (Levitz, Noel, & Richter, 1999, p. 31), and reduction of student attrition rates can save a university hundreds of thousands— even millions—of dollars each year, policy makers may focus on student commitment to a major as a way to improve retention rates.

Academic advising provides an avenue by which colleges and universities may improve student satisfaction and retention as well as assist students in selecting and committing to a major. It both directly influences students' persistence and affects students' grades, intentions, and satisfaction with their own role, factors that lead indirectly to student retention (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to Yarbrough (2002), "The brief exchanges between advisor and advisee may have the greatest impact on the student's sense of self-efficacy in completing his or her degree requirements" (p. 63), and therefore, by adapting practices to match the needs of current students, advisors may help them decide on and commit to a major.

We focus on the needs of the current students based on their Millennial traits. Although few scholars have sought to understand how the characteristics of the Millennial generation impact students' major selection and commitment, others have pointed out that advisors who appreciate Millennial characteristics help establish best advising practices (Keeling, 2003; Kranzow, 2005; Kuebli, Kusto, & Campo, 2007). In fact, using a generational approach has worked well for other aspects of higher education; for example, faculty members designing course work acknowledged the technological savvy of Millennials and saw improved student engagement and motivation (Ciocco & Holtzman, 2008).

Literature Review

Academic Advising Practices

Extant literature identifies three primary forms of advising: prescriptive, developmental, and praxis (see Smith, 2002). In the traditional prescriptive advising approach, knowledgeable advisors primarily provide information about courses, explain registration procedures, and ensure students enroll in appropriate courses (Fielstein, 1994). This approach leaves most of the control in the hands of advisors, which allows them to remain uninvolved in the relationship, viewing it as mostly an administrative function primarily concerned with short-term goals (e.g., class registration) (Broadbridge, 1996). In contrast, the developmental approach encourages the advisor and student to engage in a two-way relationship (Broadbridge, 1996; Crookston, 1972/1994/2009; Fielstein, 1994), in which both parties work toward the student's developmental goals, such as course selection and career planning (Frost, 1993), but the students ultimately make their own decisions (Smith, 2002). Most recently, a third form of advising has emerged: Praxis is a hybrid of prescriptive and developmental advising (Smith, 2002) through which advisors give students expert advice on course selection, but also engage them in discussions about their declared major (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Smith, 2002).

Based on the analysis of student group discussions, Broadbridge (1996) suggested that students seem to prefer an advisor who is willing to do more than conduct maintenance activities (e.g., registration approval) and include more guidance regarding courses and career opportunities. Initially, students may be unsure of their own role in the advising relationship, but once their responsibilities are clarified and the advisor-advisee relationship established, students' participation in the advising process may be strengthened (Broadbridge, 1996). Thus, students generally feel that control of the relationship should rest with the advisor for the first year, but should switch to more of a shared relationship in subsequent terms.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) created standards for academic advising, drawing from research and theory in the social sciences, education, and humanities (CAS, 2005): a) helping students understand themselves (values, goals, interests); b) helping students clarify and make decisions about educational and career goals; c) monitoring students' academic progress; d) assisting students in monitoring their own progress toward established goals; e) helping students understand university policies and procedures; and f) offering referrals to people and departments who might be able to assist students. Generally, these standards align with a developmental advising approach, as the advisor walks alongside the student throughout his or her academic journey. To understand the concerns important to college students, however, academic advisors could also reference current issues unique to the Millennials (Keeling, 2003).

More Than Best Practices

Generational theory (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Strauss & Howe, 1991) states that groups of people generally born within 20-year spans have experienced similar life events (e.g., the death of John F. Kennedy) and develop similar patterns of beliefs and behaviors that inform the personality of their generation. For example, Baby Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960) are characterized as being politically active and enjoying freedom of expression (Coomes & DeBard, 2004). Generation Xers (born between 1960 and 1982) express a high concern for safety due to increases in diseases (e.g., HIV) and crime that they witnessed during their formative years. The current college generation, comprised of Millennials, includes individuals born after 1982, and like their predecessors, they possess a unique set of characteristics.

Broadly speaking, seven traits characterize Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2000, pp. 43-44). They

- see themselves as special, and they need individual attention, which they received throughout their childhood;
- feel external pressure to perform well, sometimes despite a lack of intrinsic desire;
- are achievement oriented, particularly with regard to education, but may also respond negatively to failure;
- have seen a number of technological and medical advancements as well as economic prosperity, leading to a generally optimistic mentality;
- prefer team-oriented activities, having often taken part in team sports as children;
- show conventional preferences for schedules and structure;
- are protected, which means they are comfortable with others watching out for their safety and often rely on others for support.

Noting these unique traits, advisors may be best able to address the needs of current students. For instance, because Millennials learned modern tech-

nology (e.g., computers, Internet) at a young age (Morris, 2006), some researchers (e.g., Ciocco & Holtzman, 2008) recommend incorporating technology into higher education practices, including advising. Additionally, unlike those of previous generations, Millennial students exhibit dissatisfaction with poor personalization of university practices including "class size, quality of academic advising and availability of professors for advice and guidance" (Atkinson, 2004, p. 155), making individualization an issue advisors will want to consider.

Through focus group methodology, we explored students' experiences in deciding upon a major. This qualitative approach provided the unique chance to hear students' perspectives. Our primary goal involved identifying the ways Millennial generation characteristics relate to students' major selection and advising experiences. Per the literature review, we expected participating students to portray a number of the Millennial characteristics described by Howe and Strauss (2000). Additionally, we anticipated that these students would describe or suggest positive advising practices that align with their Millennial traits and needs. The following research question guided our study: Do Millennial traits portrayed in college students today influence their preferences in advising regarding major selection?

Method

To inform the research, we formed eight focus groups to examine the university's role in the process of major selection. We chose a qualitative method for this study because we wanted to give students the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions. More specifically, we designed the focus groups to foster interaction between participants so that we could get a sense of the consensus between students within the group (as per Flick, 2007). The university institutional review board approved all study procedures prior to data collection. In this paper, we report a reanalysis of the data collected originally for internal use.

Participants

Participants for this study were from a mid-sized, private (Jesuit), midwestern university made up of several schools (e.g., Business, Arts & Sciences). Students were centrally advised as incoming freshmen, but after they selected a major, they were advised by a faculty member in the appropriate department and discipline; students are required to select a major by the end their freshman year.

We used a university database to identify students with senior-class standing who had changed their majors at the university at least once over the course of their college career. We chose seniors because they can reflect on both beneficial and undesirable advising practices experienced throughout their time in college. Also, the selection represented the demographics of the population; inclusion of freshmen, sophomores, and juniors who had not yet changed their major would have frustrated this important aspect of the study. Students received e-mails, flyers in their mailboxes, and announcements at the Student Government Association inviting them to participate in the study. Of the 814 students who received an invitation to take part, 80 (10%) agreed to participate and 49 attended the focus group (7%). Although the response rate was low, a sample of 49 was sufficient to thoroughly explore the research questions asked through the focus group. All participants were graduating seniors (some were traditional 4th-year students and others were in their 5th or 6th year) and came from a variety of majors such as business, education, psychology, and biology.

Instruments

The semi-structured focus group questions incorporated items on the process of major selection, including the college's role. Sample questions include: "How did you explore different majors? What experiences/who influenced you, either positively or negatively, in this process of exploring and selecting a major? What has [your school] done well to help you in exploring and selecting a major?"

Procedure

Students who agreed to participate were asked to sign up for one of eight focus groups held over 3 days. Six different facilitators, each trained in focus group methodology in a group setting prior to facilitation, received a standardized discussion guide to use in the eight focus groups. The semi-structured interviewing technique contributes to internal consistency and also allows the facilitator to probe for participant elaborations on their ideas (Berg, 2007).

Data Analysis

Focus group discussions were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Three of us independently analyzed the data using a closed coding technique, which we selected because we wanted to extend existing, rather than develop new, theory (Hsieh &

Shannon, 2005). The specific codes aligned with the seven traits of Millennial students: special, pressured, achievement oriented, optimistic, team oriented, conventional motivation, and protected. Each student comment was rated on a dichotomous scale (i.e., 1-0) for each of the seven codes, and the coders independently decided whether to assign each code. Raters were randomly assigned one third of the transcripts with 10% overlap. Based on the 10% overlapped segments, inter-rater agreement between all three coders was 76%, and two of the three coders agreed on 85% of the codes. To ameliorate concerns over low inter-rater agreement, we present a number of direct quotes from the focus group transcripts in the Results section.

Results

All of the students who participated in a focus group expressed at least one of the Millennial traits, consistent with expectations. We present the results for each trait in order of the frequency with which participants exhibited it. Comments from at least one person in each of the eight focus groups, with the exception of achievement orientation (in one of the eight groups, no one expressed verbiage related to achievement orientation), indicated characteristics of the trait described.

Specialness and Need for Personalization

According to the three coders, each of 49 respondents made comments, for a total of 159, that indicated a *specialness* trait. Specialness was defined as wanting a) constant feedback, b) individualized classes, and c) a personal relationship with an advisor/mentor.

According to the focus group responses, Millennial students who prefer constant feedback and an individualized relationship with their advisors may feel that advisors do not care about them, especially if advisors do not seem to understand their need for individualized attention. For example, Jonathon described: "I never felt like my advisors were interested in what I was doing, what kind of path I wanted to take, or what I was into." He added, "I feel that would have been really helpful to me and maybe would have made me commit more to my major." Ellen described a similar situation with choosing her major: "[My advisors] never really said, 'Well is this the right thing for you?'" She expressed a more positive attitude when her advisor gave her the individualized attention she sought: "I'm in [another] school now and they're like, 'What are you into? What do you like? What don't you like? You didn't do so well in this class, so let's think about other classes you can take.' It's much more accommodating." Finding an advisor to help her think through options when choosing a major helped her commit to her current major. Rebecca similarly mentioned looking for a more personalized advising experience, one that would foster trust so she would know that her advisor had her best interest in mind.

When students had personal experiences with their advisors, they seemed to express positive outcomes and greater commitment to their decisions. Becky stated, "[My advisor] knows me to a 'T,' and he knows what I want to do with the rest of my life, and that has been awesome because he knows what classes I should take and what classes I shouldn't." Likewise, Sarah talked about her positive experience with her advisor:

> I love [when] they can actually give you real-life experience about your major and what you can do and just even telling you how to live life and other random things. I think sometimes advisors need to be more sympathetic to things that we're going through and shouldn't just be, "this is what you need to take, bye."

Conventionally Motivated

In total, 39 out of the 49 respondents made 80 comments that indicated the trait of conventional motivation. This trait is defined as a) being rule oriented, b) having high respect for institutions, c) looking to administrators for guidance and support, and d) seeking structure (e.g., straightforward grading policies).

Millennial students often spoke about wanting clear structure regarding course requirements for their majors. Some suggested that set schedules within majors would be helpful. For instance, Ben recommended, "Schedules that are premade … break it down for you by hours per semester and tell you how many elective hours you have left and how many classes in each subject you have to take." Ellen also proposed that "within a major they could kind of map out different concentrations or different paths." Colleen recalled, "My advisor was very helpful … she broke it down, 'you will have to take one [major] class every semester for your college career and then you will be done.' … She made it very easy for me."

In addition, students choosing a major showed a desire for an advisor with a breadth of knowledge. This person would likely know, or have the ability to easily access information, regarding major requirements and course offerings. As Natalie

recommended:

> It would be nice if [advisors] knew the requirements for my specific major … even if it were just a reference paper that [advisors] can pull out when I come in the office. Just so that I don't have to go talk to five different people to figure out what class I need to take. And I understand that it gets updated all the time and stuff like that, but it would just be really nice if the advisors had some knowledge of the majors.

Optimistic

Of the 49 respondents, 38 (at least one from every focus group) made 104 comments that displayed optimism, which is identified by a) highly positive wording, b) hopefulness about the future, and c) a desire to make a difference and impact the world. The students were asked to discuss how the Jesuit mission affected their major choice. Because of this explicit question probing the trait, we only include the unsolicited comments in which students expressed the optimism trait.

A number of optimistic Millennial students plan to pursue a career in which they can make a difference in society. These students mentioned that their experiences in college helped them solidify or find their calling. As Rebecca recalled, "I actually had the opportunity to spend the summer in Haiti … helping developing countries and reaching out in their community through medicine, that really solidified it for me because I knew that was what I wanted to do." Rebecca chose her major because "it's a field where you can really make a difference."

Students saw their major as important, but not a definition of themselves. This optimism, expressed as belief in endless future opportunities or lack of pressure to decide on a career, may have led Millennial students to defer a commitment to a major or a career path. Amy stated, "College is the time of exploring for yourself and discovering who you are." Similarly, Megan said, "I picked something that I would be interested in learning about for 4 years. I haven't really thought of it as an end in itself. I always figured I could do whatever career I want. I just have to major in something." Selecting a major is not the same as choosing a career to the optimistic Millennial student. We see this in the suggestion Joe gave to incoming freshmen: "Figure out what makes you happy. What's something that ultimately makes you happy and not monetary compensation? . . . Use your happiness as a gauge for a starting point for what sort of major you want to pick."

Protected

A majority of participants (33) made 60 comments indicating that they felt protected or sheltered, as expressed by a) showing concern for safety, b) relying on parents, and c) expecting that their emotional needs will be nurtured. Students in this sample expressed a dependence on their parents, often mentioning them as sounding boards and as comprising the students' primary support systems.

Millennial students talk to and seek support from their parents regarding the decisions they make in college, especially changing or choosing a major. Matt, for instance, recalled, "I approached my parents about [changing my major] and their initial reaction to it was literally, 'We are surprised it took you this long.' …As soon as I told them, they totally supported me one hundred percent." Sarah had a similar experience:

> I'm really close to my mom. So, freshman and the beginning of sophomore year, I would call her and I'd be crying on the phone because I didn't know what I wanted to do. . . . She reassured me that it was okay that I wasn't one hundred percent sure of what I wanted to major in and what I wanted to do in the end.

Team Oriented

Team orientation was displayed by 29 respondents as shown by 54 comments. The respondents expressed a) relationship dependence, b) a willingness to help peers, c) a high level of involvement in social clubs, and d) a desire to solve problems with others instead of alone.

The student stories featured feelings of a sense of community or belonging within a certain major or school. In talking about her department, Anne explained, "I really liked that sort of sense of community that I got within the department. And so, even if I didn't like the subject as much as I liked [others], I still felt like it helped me stick through some of the tougher course work and stuff." As can be seen from Anne's comment, Millennial students may be drawn to a specific major because of the social or contextual factors related to the major rather than the content of the program. Connecting with other students within a major may be one way in which Millennial students foster a commitment to a major. As Sarah said,

> Once I got into [my major], we ended up doing

> a lot of group work and I met three other girls who were really, who were a lot more committed to the major than I was. And the four of us working together had so much fun and we were actually learning something. But it didn't really feel like learning because we were enjoying ourselves. So I think that that sort of made me realize that I liked what I was doing and that I had made the right decision.

Pressured

Of the 49 participants, 26 expressed the pressured trait as represented in 58 comments. *Pressured* means a) lacking a balance between work and play, b) desiring to always be busy, and c) experiencing external motivation to perform (e.g., felt pressured to graduate in 4 years or pursue a certain major).

Many students spoke of the pressures they felt from their parents to choose a certain major, career, or graduation time frame. While a source of emotional support for Millennial students, parents also seem to be sources of pressure, suggesting that they can both help and hinder a student's college decision-making processes. In one focus group, Amy talked about the direct pressure she received from her parents: "My dad chose pre-med for me. They said they would only pay for college if I did what they wanted me to do." Colleen had a similar experience: "My dad is a lawyer and he was really pushing me to go to law school and was like, you know, even if you do business you can still go to law school."

Several students expressed a desire to major in multiple fields. The pressure to graduate, however, tempered these desires, and some students perceived their major as the one they just "settled on." Isabelle recalled, "There are a lot of other majors that interest me, but in order to finish in the 4 years that you're expected to finish in, you really have to almost have something set out by your sophomore year." Similarly, Morgan stated,

> One of the things that made it really hard to move away from certain majors was the fear of not being able to graduate. And those credits, because I was like "if I take this class then I'm behind and I need to graduate," and then you have the whole tuition cost if I stay an extra semester, and so you really do feel that pressure to declare right away and stick with it.

Achievement Oriented

Achievement orientation was present in 34 comments by 19 respondents. It was defined as a) expecting to earn good grades, b) setting high standards, c) expecting to be above average, and d) expressing a negative reaction to failure. The topic of major selection and commitment did not lend itself to exposing this trait, which may account for the lower occurrence seen in student expression of it.

Most instances of exhibited achievement orientation involved students giving up on a major that was too challenging and switching to one they perceived to be easier. While this may be an issue of fit between the student and a major, the respondents also specifically mentioned poor grades as the reason for switching, suggesting an achievement orientation. Amy explained, "I switched to [my second major] because I thought [my first major] was too hard. Then I switched out of [my second major] because then I thought that was too hard." Ellen recalled,

> [In my first major] I got by the first one or two semesters. I didn't do well though and the advisors never said, "Hey, why don't you look at a different major?" They only suggested taking less credit hours. They never really said, "Well, is this the right thing for you?"

Students may be willing to sacrifice their initial interest in a major to do well in their classes. The focus group discussion revealed that they may not be afraid of the work required of their courses, but they may fear the consequences of poor grades on their future, especially if they are intending to apply to graduate school.

Discussion

In summary, Millennial students a) need individual attention from their advisor, b) prefer clear guidance with regard to fulfilling major requirements (e.g., course requirements), c) may have overly optimistic visions of their future career options, d) rely on their parents for support but also feel pressured by them, e) prefer majors or careers in which they can feel like they are a part of a community, and f) may have negative reactions to failure. What does this mean for advising Millennial students? We give a number of recommendations for advising practices based on the present study and consistent with the research of others.

Previous research suggests Millennial students' experiences, ways of thinking, and outward behavior differ from those of previous generations and should be considered by college personnel (Keeling, 2003; Kuebli et al., 2007). Similar to the way

individual instructors accommodate Millennials in the classroom (Ciocco & Holtzman, 2008), those in college recruitment, academic advising, alumni relations, and other academic services would seemingly benefit from an awareness of Millennial traits and implement new strategies, if necessary, based on them. Rather than making judgments, either positive or negative, of specific Millennial traits, we focus on how both large scale and small modifications to current advising practices may benefit Millennial students' advising experiences and major commitment.

As one option for adapting an advising system to the needs of Millennial students, we recommend a dual or split model of advising (Habley, 2004) in which students see both a staff advisor and a faculty mentor. The results of the present study also provide support for Smith's (2002) endorsement of praxis advising, which is a hybrid of prescriptive and developmental approaches. Millennials may prefer prescriptive advising due to their conventional characteristics, but developmental advising best suits their needs for individualized attention. A model in which students are assigned both a general staff advisor and a faculty mentor within their major allows students to receive praxis advising, taking advantage of prescriptive and developmental approaches at the most appropriate times. This model could be effectively implemented in many university settings as long as the lines of communication are open among the three parties and all parties are aware of their roles.

Recommended Role of a Staff Advisor

Smith (2002) suggested that the advising process should be adaptive. After finding that freshmen preferred a more prescriptive style of advising, Smith indicated that the form of advising should change throughout the tenure of the student, with a more developmental approach instituted for students after their first year. Our research and recommendations align with Smith's findings. General staff advisors may serve a primary role as students adapt to college, engaging in prescriptive practices such as guiding students through course registration procedures and giving students information about majors (Keeling, 2003).

According to the focus group results, students need an advisor who can give quick, straightforward advice about majors, course offerings, and requirements. With a breadth of knowledge, general advisors can meet this need for information while also guiding students toward other general resources on campus. In a dual model, general advisors could focus on giving clear straightforward guidance, consistent with the CAS (2005) goal of clarifying aspects of educational and career choices, and as recommended by the students in the focus groups, providing summary sheets or links on the university web site of information for major requirements.

According to comments made in the focus group, general advisors may have the opportunity to help stressed Millennial students cope with the abundance of major options available by providing resources that help them make decisions. Advisors knowledgeable about many different majors and a variety of career paths may help alleviate some of the pressures on Millennials.

McKenzie offered a specific solution for helping undecided undergraduates: Advisors could encourage students to take one-credit courses within a field or major to get a broad understanding of the subject area, as well as positively affect GPA, and students who maintained interest in the area could sign up for additional courses. "That's just such a great way to do that versus taking three credits and a whole course and maybe not doing very well in that course [and] having that affect your grades."

Recommended Role of a Major Mentor

While the general advisor handles issues of undecidedness, we envision the major mentor as primarily engaged in developmental advising practices, giving individualized attention to students, guiding them through career options, and connecting them to resources relevant for their major. We recommend that these mentors get to know their students and try to see their perspectives on decisions and the future. Such mentors can gain understanding of their students by familiarizing themselves with Millennial traits.

Keeling (2003) suggested that advisors "work closely with students to ensure that they are on the path that will lead them to the desired career" (p. 33). Keeling's recommendation aligns with the results from our focus group in which participants expressed a desire to receive individual attention. The influence of an advisor can sway a student's choice of major as indicated by several of our respondents who mentioned changing their major or school because they were drawn to the individualized attention received by the faculty and staff they met in the discipline they finally chose. This finding agrees with that of Atkinson (2004), which showed that students are unhappy with the unavailability of faculty members to provide guidance related to their major and future career.

In summary, as illustrated by previous research and our focus groups, Millennial students are likely to choose or commit to a major when they feel a personal connection with someone in that field. Assigning advisors from the student's declared major may be one way to foster a personal connection for the student, but these advisors must be incentivized to dedicate quality time to building individual relationships with students.

Mentors working within departments also need to recognize the Millennial students' needs for working in teams and feeling like part of a community. Mentors may benefit from offering opportunities for collaboration. Mentors should encourage involvement in social opportunities already offered by established groups and department activities. Many students do not necessarily recognize the benefit of these events until after they have attended them, and failure to appreciate and take advantage of these social events means that some students, especially those who are shy, live off campus, or do not feel committed to a specific major, may need extra encouragement to get engaged.

One focus group student suggested another idea for forming collaborative groups with a shared interest (e.g., major): "I also think it would be cool if there was more senior and freshmen interaction." Setting up these interactions between upper division and first-year students may generate a sense of community for the newcomer. Addition of a peer mentor to the team may also relieve some of the burden carried by the mentor.

Finally, both mentors and advisors need to be aware that Millennials still depend heavily upon their parents. Keeling (2003) pointed out that students often come into college undecided or with parents who pressure or push (whether directly or indirectly) them into a major. Advising meetings may include discussions of parental expectations or beliefs related to the student's major and future career. We believe that advisors should acknowledge these concerns as they play a role in the decisions students will ultimately make. However, acknowledging the students' dependence on parents does not mean advisors should fail to promote autonomy for their advisees. In fact, when advisors field parental inquiries at advising meetings or through e-mail, they can encourage student autonomy and decision making. By appreciating students' current dependency while also mentoring them toward greater autonomy, advisors assist in clarifying educational and career goals (CAS, 2005).

Limitations

This research is not without limitations. A commonly mentioned drawback of the generational approach to understanding human behavior is that many people born in a certain generation do not display the typical traits associated with the generalizations made about it. We understand this concern and do not recommend that advisors assume all students epitomize the traits found in the literature or our research. Rather we recommend that advisors—especially those from Generation X or the Baby Boom era—seek understanding of Millennial traits at a broad level so that they can better appreciate the ways the lives of current advisees may differ from their own college experiences.

Also, we used focus group methodology, which may limit the generalizations one can make from these results. We worked a limited sample ($N = 49$) based on a low response rate (7%). Those students who participated may be significantly different from those students who chose not to participate. Future quantitative studies could potentially validate these qualitative findings, in part, because it would allow researchers to expand the sample size.

Additionally, our focus groups were comprised of students attending a mid-sized, private, midwestern university. Future research utilizing students attending other types of higher education institutions in different geographical locations may yield results that further inform discussions on advising Millennials. The students participating in our study were graduating seniors asked to remember the processes they underwent as they selected and committed to a major. Studies that included freshmen or sophomores currently undergoing the major selection process might better capture students in the moment.

Conclusion

We set out to examine Millennial traits expressed by current students in higher education. Results show that students possess the traits of the Millennial generation, and advisors may need to adapt their practices slightly to accommodate their advisees' needs. As a specific outcome of our research, we suggest a split-model advising system to addresses the needs of Millennials at multiple levels. Millennials can receive personalized and supportive attention from a faculty mentor within their declared major, but can also get straightforward and prescriptive advice from a general staff advisor regarding course work, major selection, and degree requirements.

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