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"Don't Call Us Millennials!"

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"Don't Call Us Millennials!" We are the Emerging Adults

By Nicholas R. Santilli

Last year I agreed to deliver a presentation to a group of college juniors as part of their participation in a mentoring program for first year students. The new coordinator of the program, whom I had just met, surprised me with the blunt: "You're not going to talk about millennials, are you? I think the term has become somewhat demeaning and really doesn't describe us very well." I assured her that I am not a fan of the term either and my presentation would focus more on the literature in developmental psychology, specifically the new field of emerging adulthood.

I have labored in the field of developmental psychology for over 25 years and I've observed an endless stream of clichés describing human development. While I was in graduate school, the "superbabies" phenomenon was popular, soon followed by the Me Generation, tweens, queen bees, gamers, skaters, and now millennials. Here is the rub with these notions. These terms caricature children and adolescents in ways that are less than flattering and homogenize cohorts of individuals as selfish, bossy, conforming, or anti-social. My young colleague's concern that she was going to hear yet another presentation on the millennial generation, revealing their flaws and virtues, exposed my present discomfort with the term. While terms serve as a convenient shorthand, these characterizations also reduce a diverse group of individuals into an oversimplified whole.

In the remaining sections of this essay I hope to make a case for expanding our understanding of our traditional aged students by resisting the temptation to accept these clichéd characterizations and instead look to the discipline of developmental psychology, specifically the life-stage of emerging adulthood. I will focus almost exclusively on the traditional aged student. I do not mean to slight the large numbers of adult students educated by our institutions. Adult students enrolled in our undergraduate, graduate and professional programs certainly enrich our institutions and present us with a host of challenges in meeting their needs. However, in keeping with the theme of this issue of *Conversations*, I will limit my comments to students between the ages of 18 and 25.

From Millennials to Emerging Adults

The millennials. In 2000, William Strauss and Neil Howe introduced us to this term in their work titled; *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* followed in 2003 with; *Millennials Go to College.* The millennial generation captures the cohort of individuals born after 1981, with the first of its members coming of age in the year 2000. Strauss and Howe's research, drawn largely from national surveys on this cohort suggests that this generation may be characterized as special, confident, sheltered, team-oriented, achieving, pressured, and conventional. These personality and social characteristics are the result of rapid changes in communication and technology, terrorism, two Gulf wars, and diversity.

While important, these cultural phenomena remain a backdrop to the more powerful influence of parents and peers. The parents of millennials are some of the most educated and affluent of any generation. This cohort's parents, dubbed "helicopter parents," have created a bubble of protection around their children, are hyper-concerned about their children's physical and emotional well-being, and feel no inhibitions concerning their right to intervene in the lives of their children if they feel their young charges have been mistreated or slighted in any fashion. For example, my colleague Dr. John Ropar who directs our counseling center relayed a

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story to me about a parent who called our dining services because we did not carry her daughter's favorite jelly. Relative to peers, millennials find themselves living very structured lives with an ethnically diverse peer group, find comfort in group settings and spend quite a bit of time in constant contact with peers via texting, cell phone and social networking platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

The appeal of the characterization of this cohort has created a massive literature on millennials. To satisfy my curiosity, I plugged the term "millennial generation" into my Google search engine and received over 183,000 links. A few of the topics in these listings included: teaching millennials, millennials at work, millennials in the military, libraries and millennials, college recruiting and millennials, and governing millennials. My brief review of a few of these materials shows how some enterprising and creative minds have capitalized on describing how the seven primary traits of millennials need to be considered when governing, teaching, employing, enrolling, and designing living and learning spaces for the millennial generation.

The work by Strauss and Howe provide an adequate description of the global personal and social characteristics of a particular generational cohort. While helpful, their description provides only a simple overview of the personal qualities of an entire generation. What is needed is a richer description of the changes happing in the life course of human experience. Instead of creating "generational snap-shots" it may be necessary to insert a stage exclusively for 18 to 25-year olds that not only captures the developmental challenges facing the millennial generation, but the challenges of generations to come. I am not alone in my concern regarding the term "millennials." A recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* carried a lengthy discussion on the topic, with several commentaries raising criticisms of the appropriateness of the term in describing college students. To enrich our understanding of not only today's college students, but the college students of future generations, I suggest we turn to a relatively new concept from developmental psychology: "emerging adulthood."

From millennials to emerging adulthood. In his article in the American Psychologist (2000) and later in his book titled; *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (2004), Jeffrey Arnett proposed the term "emerging adulthood" to capture a new life stage to include the 18- to 25-year old. According to Arnett, delay in age of first marriage and parenthood, prolonged time for education and assumption of adult work responsibilities, and financial independence, have introduced a new stage in the life course that stands between adolescence and young

adulthood. Emerging adulthood, then, characterizes a period of development that arises from the conditions growing to maturity in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries and is not merely tied to the experiences of one generation. Before moving to the qualities of emerging adulthood, a note of caution is necessary.

Emerging adulthood describes the experiences of 18- to 25-year olds living mostly in the industrialized world. I've chosen to introduce this notion of emerging adulthood because it captures the life experiences of the majority of the undergraduate students populating our institutions and I believe it provides a richer heuristic for understanding this and future generations of college students.

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Emerging adulthood defined. Five essential qualities distinguish emerging adulthood: identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feelings of transition, and openness to possibilities. The primary differences between these five dimensions of emerging adulthood and the millennial traits: emerging adulthood describes developmental challenges faced by this age cohort; are not tied to a specific generation; and are the product of larger, substantial changes in the organization of society affecting the lives of 18 to 25 year-olds in the "postindustrial" West and select Asian countries like Japan and South Korea.

The first quality, **identity exploration**, extends the traditional Eriksonian notion of identity development beyond the teenage years and into emerging adulthood. Exploration ends in the formation of a moral compass, the capacity to form lasting relationships with peers and a life partner, a vocational path, and a commitment to civic responsibilities. In short emerging adulthood affords the opportunity to explore possible selves across the major functions of adult life, especially in the areas of love, work and the civic commitments of adulthood.

The nature of identity exploration creates **instability**, the second quality, in the lives of emerging adults. Naturally we see instability in the commitments of emerging adults as they wind their way through various college majors and romances. Those among us who have advised undergraduate students know we can expect a proportion of them to change majors and dating partners at least once during their college experience. Instability extends to other areas of their lives as well, most notably changing residences during emerging adulthood. I look at the living arrangements of my son, at the upper end of the stage of emerging adulthood. He has lived at home, spent three years of college in the residence hall, followed by two years in three different houses near campus and now shares an apartment with one other student while pursuing graduate studies. The important lesson here is that his change of residence is typical of the experiences of emerging adults.

The third quality, **self-focus**, represents a normal and transitory centering on the knowledge, skills, and self-understanding necessary for a healthy adulthood. This aspect of emerging adulthood has the greatest potential to be misunderstood. Self-focus here does not mean self-absorbed or self-centered. While there are certainly selfish emerging adults, just as there are selfish teenagers and middle-aged adults, self-focus instead refers to the need to spend serious time in reflection on the lessons learned through exploring interpersonal relationships, vocational choices and civic commitments. The time and space to reflect on these life-lessons is not typical of the experiences of adolescents and less common in the world of full-blown adulthood.

These first three dimensions, exploration, instability, and self-focus contribute to the fourth quality; **feelings of in-between**. Emerging adults are caught between adolescence and adulthood. Arnett's interviews of emerging adults (reported in his 2004 book) and my own experience discussing this life-stage with my own students shows two things; the criteria for the attainment of adult status has changed, and 18 to 25-year olds feel in some ways adult and in other ways not. As recently as 30 years ago, it was more common for people between 18 and 21 to move on to full-time employment, family and parenthood, and a permanent residence outside of their parents' home than it is today. These three accomplishments, employment, family and residential status, were the criteria for adulthood then, but not now. Today's emerging adults do not measure adult status by these criteria, and instead mark adulthood by the ability to accept responsibility for their actions, the capacity to make independent decisions, to become financially independent, and the ability to create and sustain loving, caring relationships with others. These standards supported by data on marriage, career and residential status, show emerging adults slowly gain adult status and report feeling caught in-between adolescence and adulthood.

The final quality, **openness to possibilities**, reflects the opportunity emerging adults have to create a life. Many significant life choices have yet to be made, and those that have are subject to revision. For instance, a young woman goes to college to major in accounting and a year later majors in philosophy with a concentration in East Asian Studies. For some, the high school sweetheart is replaced by someone new by Thanksgiving vacation, a phenomenon my colleague John Ropar calls the "turkey drop." The range of possible futures available for emerging adults provides grist for the mill of identity exploration, instability, self-focus and the sense of being in-between. This age of possibil-

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ities opens a world to emerging adults, a world that affirms the paths already chosen or offers alternate routes before unimagined or feared due to the risks involved in taking a chance with the future.

I would like to close with a few thoughts, admittedly in formation, concerning the match between Jesuit education and emerging adulthood. Recently, I've taken an interest in the literature on Ignatian pedagogy and applying it to the notion of emerging adulthood. Briefly, Ignatian pedagogy advances five dimensions: the *context* of teaching and learning and their intersection with the lives of our students; the educational *experiences* we create for our students like service learning, living-learning communities, undergraduate research and the like; opportunities for *reflection* that afford students the chance to attach personal meaning to their learning experiences; the chance to attach *action* to their learning experiences; and *evaluation*, self-analysis of progress in personal formation coupled with the guidance of thoughtful and caring faculty motivated by the Jesuit notion of *cura personalis* (see Sharon Korth's *"Precis of Ignatian Pedagogy: A Practical Approach* in George W. Traub, S.J.'s *A Jesuit Education Reader, 2008*).
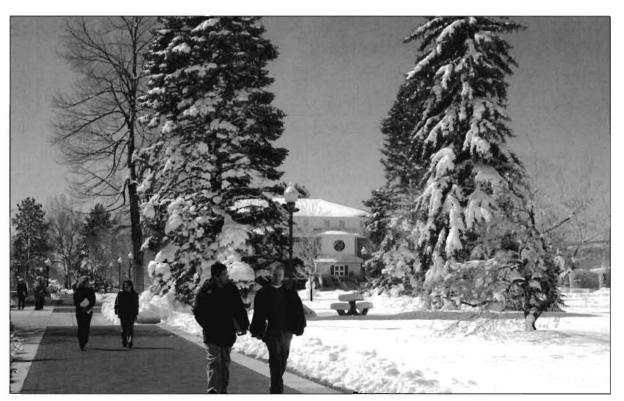
Is this educational paradigm a good fit with Arnett's emerging adult? In my opinion our Jesuit institutions, populated with talented faculty and staff, are well-positioned to serve the educational and personal needs of emerging adults. Emerging adults seek an educational experience that supports their exploration for meaning and purpose in vocation, personal relationships and civic responsibilities. Jesuit education, with its tradition and history of academic excellence and ethical formation rooted in the liberal arts, provides the intellectual and social community necessary for the type of self-reflection that leads to the formation of personal, vocational, and civic commitments needed for adulthood. Our faculty and staff serve as stewards of this educational mission; demanding rigor and excellence from our students while offering support in equal measure nourishing their discernment through the array of life-choices they face. In the end, Jesuit education and pedagogy brings a structure and methodology that meets emerging adults at a crucial moment in their development, when past experience is consolidated in anticipation of an exciting yet unknown future. ∎

For some the high school sweetheart is replaced by someone new by Thanksgiving vacation

A beautiful winter scene on the campus of Regis University.