

The New Generation of College Women: *Challenges Facing Sororities*

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The Changing College Landscape

Colleges and universities have experienced drastic changes in the past ten years. Within the past five years alone, tragedies such as Columbine, September 11, 2001, and most recently, the war against Iraq, have all had a dramatic impact on college students and campuses across the country.

Worldwide events are only one of many factors influencing college life. Campus administrators and faculty are challenged to increase services for students with decreasing funds. The student population is growing increasingly diverse, including more Latino/Hispanic students and first generation college students. The non-traditional (over age 25) and part-time student populations are growing exponentially. Colleges must deal with a higher incidence of mental health disorders and increasing concerns related to mental health of students. Parental involvement is on the rise. Students' and parents' expectations demand a customer-service atmosphere, sometimes at the expense of a student-centered approach.

As university administrators and faculty tackle these issues and the ever-changing campus landscape, it is imperative that we, as women's fraternities and sororities, do the same. We must ask ourselves: *How can we effectively adapt to the changing campus environment? How can we best meet the needs of today's college women? Most importantly, how can we enhance the college and sorority experience for today's generation of college women and beyond?*

Today's College Students

As we ask these questions, we first need to understand the new generation, the "Millennials," that is populating America's campuses. "These students are part of the largest population group since the baby boom of the 1950s and '60s. More than 81 million Millennials were born in the United States from 1982 through 2002, compared with 87.2 million baby boomers born before 1961. And more are coming. The Census Bureau predicts that the biggest segment of the new generation will reach its peak between 2005 and 2011" (O'Brien, 2003).

The Millennials, born in or after 1982, are "the most numerous, affluent, and ethnically diverse generation in American history" (Howe and Strauss, 2000). The oldest of the Millennials graduated from high school in 2000, and many are now in college. The Millennials are planners and goal setters who have highly detailed five- and ten-year plans

for their futures; they feel they are special; and they believe they are the corrective generation that can reverse the trends of prior generations. Neil Howe and William Strauss, authors of the books *Millennials Rising* (2000) and *Millennials Go to College* (2003), characterize the Millennials as:

- Close with their parents, often sharing the same values,
- Focused on grades and performance,
- Busy with extracurricular activities,
- Eager to take part in community activities,
- Savvy in technology,
- Interested in mathematics and science and less interested in humanities,
- Demanding of a secure, regulated environment, and
- Respectful of social conventions and institutions.

Millennials are often compared to the generation prior to them, known as "Generation X." Millennials are more ethnically diverse and discard race as a criterion for judging people and behavior. As a collective whole, they focus on community and civic renewal. Presumably, the ideals that organizations such as sororities and fraternities foster will be more attractive to the joiner Millennials than the individualistic Gen Xers.

How Can Sororities Effectively Respond to Today's College Women?

As colleges and universities prepare for the new wave of Millennials, so too must the sorority community. The question remains: What are some of the ways that we can effectively respond to the needs of today's college women and enhance their college and sorority experience? Millennials will heavily consider the cost-benefit analysis of lifetime membership in an organization. It is imperative that our organizations are thoughtful, not only in recruitment, but in the overall collegiate experience and beyond, to ensure that we provide a meaningful experience for our incoming membership.

Recruitment. Millennials expect that what they are told is what they will experience. Therefore, it is vital that sororities deliver on whatever we "sell" to potential new members during recruitment. If we tell them that we do community service, help with their academics, have movie nights, and provide a safe environment, then we must do our absolute best to provide that type of experience. And we must be mindful that we are not only selling this experience to the student, but to her parents as well.

New Member and Membership Education. New Member and Membership Education programs need to be much more interactive, including use of teams, technology, and more involvement by chapter members and advisors. It is not enough to just “talk at” today’s students. As faculty members know from their teaching, we must present information in various ways, to address various learning styles, and we must present multiple opportunities for students to be involved.

The Importance of Big Sisters as Mentors. The role of big sisters as mentors is paramount. Research on student development (such as studies by Chickering, Pascarella and Terenzini, Astin - all theorists who have researched student development and student involvement) have indicated that mentoring, whether it is by faculty, administrators, staff or upperclass students, positively impacts a student’s satisfaction with her college experience and her ability to be successful both academically and socially. Big sisters were not established to buy a plethora of gifts. The value of the big sister role and relationship should be one centered around spending time with the new member, who, in some cases, may be older in her academic career but new to the sorority. No

bought gift can replace the time spent with a sister to help her understand and develop her sense of self.

High Standards and Expectations. The Millennials have high expectations of themselves and their organizations. In the fraternal world, we too often focus on setting and meeting “minimum standards.” This new generation sets high standards for themselves and those all around them. They will not be motivated by minimum standards. We need to create programs and incentives to challenge and support them, while remembering that they are most likely involved in many different activities across campus and in the community.

Scholarship and Career Goals. This generation is focused on scholarship and career goals, and we need to help them meet those goals. In addition to supporting our younger members, we must also focus on the needs of our upperclass members, many of whom we are not retaining. Once a student outgrows the “party mode” in college and focuses on her future, we must offer the types of activities, programs and support to meet her academic and career goals and her changing needs and development.

Additional Questions to Consider in Working with the Millennials

The questions below are provided for your own thought, or for discussion within your chapter or alumnae association.

Why are we losing our seniors? Is it because their commitment to the sorority is falling low on their priority list as they get closer to graduation? Is it because we have not inculcated a life-long commitment to our organizations? What can we do to keep them involved? What type of programming and support should we be providing for them?

Why have we seen an increase in sophomores serving as chapter presidents? Some of these women are only 19 years old, and some become president only a semester or two after their initiation. Why are these younger sisters the only ones “eligible?” Where are our third and fourth year members?

What is our process of assigning a big sister to a newer member? Is that role one of being a mentor and helping her little sister through the college years? If so, why are we allowing second semester freshman (many of whom are still 18 years old) or first semester sophomores to serve in big sister roles? Is it because they are the only ones who can afford to be or want to spend the time that it takes to be a big sister?

What happened to juniors and seniors truly mentoring younger members and teaching them what they need to know to have a positive sorority and college experience? Is it that our older members do not feel valued or needed? Have they lost the desire to help the younger members?

Will our advisors know how to work with the Millennials? All of our $\Theta\Phi\Lambda$ advisors are volunteers, and many have very different generational expectations.

How can we support and help our advisors in working with this new generation?

As sororities, are we seen as partners and collaborators to administrations and faculty? All national sororities and fraternities are being asked this question. Each sorority must do its part to be seen as a valuable partner on our campuses and within our communities.

Are we demonstrating to external audiences that sororities positively impact college women? We need to communicate with campus administrators about the ways that we contribute positively to college women’s learning and development, and not just wait to do so when something goes wrong and we have to prove our value.

A few additional questions to consider: Since the Millennial women are planned and focused, how will some of our unorganized chapters attract and

retain these students? Will the new generation of students continue to rely so much on their parents for guidance to the point that they will mature less rapidly? Will their respect for authority cause challenges as it relates to hazing and other behaviors?

The questions are many and the answers are complex. Considerations such as these are intended to prompt all of us who work with students to evaluate and revise our practices. We must plan for the future of our sororities, and an important part of that future is the Millennials. If we listen to and learn from the new generation of college women, live our mission and creed, and set our goals high, I believe we can provide a true living-learning experience for this new generation, and consequently, they will take our organizations to new heights!