

***Reevaluating the Relationship between Millennial Students, their Parents, and Professors When Teaching a Study-Abroad Course: Searching for More Success***

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**Abstract**

When the new millennium approached, educators looked toward the 21st century with either excitement or concern. As a perfect time for of self-reflection, many universities and colleges began to pay attention to a new generation of students that began arriving on campuses in 2000. Since then, much of the research has focused on identifying their distinctiveness, how they develop, and their overall impact on campus life. Yet, what do the curiosities of this generation of students mean for foreign language learners; and in particular, for students who plan to study abroad? As campuses across the country continue to globalize their curriculum, how can professors help these students learn and make the most of international educational opportunities? Known for being naturally global in their thinking, this generation exhibits various attributes that are ideally suited for study abroad. Therefore, this paper focuses on how we turn perceived challenges of the millennial student population into benefits in the context of international educational experiences, specifically looking at how family plays an important component in the encounter. It is often said that parents of this generation are an obstacle to professors and campus personnel in their academic endeavors. But upon reflection, I believe this may not be true; and as such, I will examine how faculty can best utilize this perceived difficulty to reveal how, in fact, parents can serve as a real asset and viability to the success of a study abroad program.

Keywords: *Millennial students, study abroad, Family-Educator relationships*

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## Introduction

As the magical year 2000 approached, many university educators anticipated the new century with either excitement or trepidation. In this environment of self-reflection, universities and colleges across the nation began to pay attention to the new generation<sup>1</sup> of students that began arriving on campuses in 2000. Reasoning for much of this interest stems from census data indicating that this generation will be the largest (U.S. Census Bureau, Jan. 2000). Even though the generation is going on fourteen years, much of the research still focuses on identifying their distinctiveness, how they develop, and their impact on campus life. It is only recently that researchers have started to examine the relationship between these students and how they learn. Yet, what does this generation of students mean for foreign language learners, and in particular, for students who study abroad? As campuses across the country continue to *globalize* their curriculum in new and different ways, how can we best help these students learn and make the most of international educational opportunities for universities and colleges? Inherently global and multicultural in their thinking, this generation exhibits various attributes that are ideally suited for study abroad, and as a result of this; faculty and administrators examine these questions of implications for type of study. Therefore, the focus here is on how faculty can turn the challenges of the millennial student population into benefits in the context of international educational experiences, specifically looking at the role family plays in the overall success of the student in the program. Often, the parents of this generation have been characterized as an obstacle to professors and campus personnel in their academic endeavors. As such, this paper examines how faculty can best utilize this perceived difficulty to reveal how, in fact, parents can serve as a real asset and viability to the success of a study abroad program.

## Who are they? Characteristics of the Millennial Generation

One of the primary challenges for educators is to understand the unique characteristics of these students. Often referred to as the “Y Generation” or “Generation Next”, the identifying name that has come to dominate these students is the *Millennial Generation* or *Millennial students*. Neil Howe and William Strauss in their pioneering studies that began in the 1990’s sought to categorize the special qualities that these incoming college students possess when they reached college campuses as we entered into the new millennium. In their research they discovered seven distinct traits that distinguish them from previous generations. First, they are described as *special*. As a group, their parents and society have instilled in them that they are vitally important both personally and to the nation. This specialness also had led these students to have high expectations of themselves and those around them, which in some cases has been perceived as entitlement. They have constant need for feedback, reinforcement, and structure. Even so, these students feel that they have a sense of purpose because of the increased amount of attention that has been given to them. Secondly, they are *sheltered*. As a nation, the United States began in the 1980’s to implement a series of new laws intended to protect children, creating the most wide-ranging safety movement in America’s history and fashioning an environment

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of focus, I will not be discussing the concept of “generation.” For a concise understanding of the notion of generations and how it relates to the Americas, please consult: Howe, Timothy and William Strauss. *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1997.

where the defense of children is commonplace. From “baby on board” window decals and “child-proof” caps on over-the-counter medications to amber alerts, the amount of regulatory legislation has created an environment of protection for the nation’s children. Moreover, these students are *confident*. Having solid relationships with their parents and high levels of optimism and trust, this generation often equates good news about themselves with their country. They are aware of their place in the nation and their perceived power and potential within it. Even so, they take fewer intellectual risks because a fear of failure. Also, they are *team-oriented*. As a result of team sports (soccer, football, volleyball, etc.) and a focus on group learning in schools, this generation has developed strong team instincts and bonds closely with their peers. As politics determined and attempted to reform educational policies throughout their lives, these students have become *achievers*. They have defined goals and believe that their potential has no limits. As a whole, they are anticipated to be the most-educated and well-mannered generation in the history of the United States. As a result of their desire to be the “best of the best,” these students are *pressured*. They endeavor to take full advantage of the opportunities that adults have provided for them, and therefore, they are pushed to study hard and avoid personal risk. They feel an undercurrent of pressure to excel in all that they do, and they want to do it all. This push is evident in the number of students that faculty and staff advise who have two or three majors, with a list of minors, extra-curricular activities, and sports. Lastly, this generation is *conventional*. This is conventional not conservative. These students take pride in their improved behavior and are more at ease with their parents’ values than any previous generation. They support convention or the notion that social rules can and will help the greater whole (Howe and Strauss, 1997, 2007). All told, these students possess qualities that at the onset may appear to be overwhelming or “high maintenance.” Yet, these traits also reveal a determined and purposeful group of individuals, who, at the core, have attributes that are desirable to many members of the faculty.

### **Millennials and their Professors**

Now, fourteen years into having the millennial generation on campuses, their characteristics are established and well defined. While the millennial students began arriving on campus in 2000, the majority of the university and college professors teaching in campuses across the nation belong to another generation, and as such, they possess different qualities that can come into conflict with these new students. The greater part of these professors belongs to the Boomers or Gen Xers (Debard, 39). Therefore, the priorities and how the professors view areas such as education, careers, or parent-child involvement vary noticeably from that of their students. Whereas the Boomers desire to have freedom of expression in education, want to build a stellar career, and demonstrate a receding relationship with children; the Gen Xers have a pragmatic view of education, aspire for portability in their careers, and have a somewhat distant relationship with parents. It is against this background that the Boomers and Gen Xers meet the Millennials, who need structure of accountability in education, wish to build parallel careers, and have ever-present parents (Debard, 40). As we can see, the views are at times opposing and conflictive. Consequently, educators need to be able to step out of the comfort of their generational perspectives and be very cognizant of these students’ characteristics and views when planning for and developing programs for non-traditional learning opportunities. Recognizing

these differences is a key point when thinking or rethinking about how one can develop diverse areas for learning while on or off campus.

### **Universities and the Millennials**

As previously mentioned, when this generation of student began arriving on campus, faculty, individuals in charge of student life, resident life, and within the educational administration earnestly took note. Faculty had to start addressing these students in a different way and offer them with a new notion of what the university or college experience could be. The idea of “one-stop shopping” became a call to universities as they moved at recruiting this generation of students and their parents. This concept provided a framework by which everyone involved with students could seek out new patterns of thinking about the college experience. No longer do we only talk about our outstanding curriculum and faculty. It is necessary to accentuate the positive in all aspects of university life: from Residence living in community to broad technological advances available and from internships to intermural sports, academic clubs, and international educational opportunities.

Even though this new attention to the university experience appears to draw away from the fundamental educational underpinning by which we have built our institutions, the reality is that if we approach it from a new perspective, we are able to see how they can add to it. Now, study abroad experience can take on a new significance and appeal to the students and their parents as another opportunity to learn. Both are not merely satisfied now with just a stellar education. Students need to have a variety of “experiences” during their time at university or college, which can translate into “marketable skills.” This notion of marketable skills, borrowing beneficially or not from the business world opens the door for faculty and staff to rethink the different manners that we can maximize education, which is the ultimate goal for all students. Moreover, this idea of garnering multiple benefits from a singular task appeals to both parents and students alike. Due to the continually rising costs of attending university or college, the investment in higher education is real and respected. Therefore, parents and students alike are trying to acquire more out of the university experience, and they have pushed universities to start offering more opportunities, if they want the tuition dollars or enrollments to continue. For this reason, when one thinks about teaching millennials, there is another set of parameters to take into account when looking at study abroad, especially if they are faculty directed or lead.

### **Millennials and Learning**

Not only do millennial students exhibit unique characteristics in their lives, how they learn prompts faculty to reflect more on their approach to teaching in general and study abroad in particular. Robert Debard points out that “millennials are likely to invest themselves to meet high and clear expectations” (65). Linda Sax furthers this sentiment by stating that these “students, who have achieved academic success with relatively little effort [early on in their education], may have unrealistic expectations about what is necessary to be academically successful in college” (16). These two sides of expectations – rising to meet them and unrealistic in nature – require careful consideration by educators to create and foster new learning skills by a student population that already believes itself to be in an elite, unique group. This notion is

especially important when these students are confronted with an unfamiliar environment or country, such as in the case of study abroad. The harsh reality of not knowing “everything” hits hard and produces wide-ranging new challenges for this generation of students.

Therefore, in order to address these high expectations, as educators we have to rethink how we can engage students and their families in new ways which will allow the opportunity to gain a sense of accomplishment and purpose through study abroad. Whether it is about learning a different language or becoming absorbed into the new cultural encounters, their expectations about study abroad differ greatly. As such, they come individually and collectively to these new experiences with distinct, personal objectives. Their goals may be geared toward language fluency or cultural competency; and as a result of this variety, these students offer opportunities and challenges for the learning environment. Studying in a “foreign” location produces a new set of learning parameters, which can play into or against the high expectations of the millennials. The focus of the educator is to underscore the benefits that overshadow the problems. One way to accentuate these advantages of these students is in how we incorporate their families into the mix. By creating new ways of connecting with the curriculum to the student and their families, professors can now allow students to address some of the insecurities that their learning styles present, and we are now able to tackle their previous perceptions or misconceptions in a beneficial manner. Taking advantage of being in a new locale where students have not been previously, their academic framework for learning can be adapted to link them with the new material. Moreover, students can have equal baseline for learning.

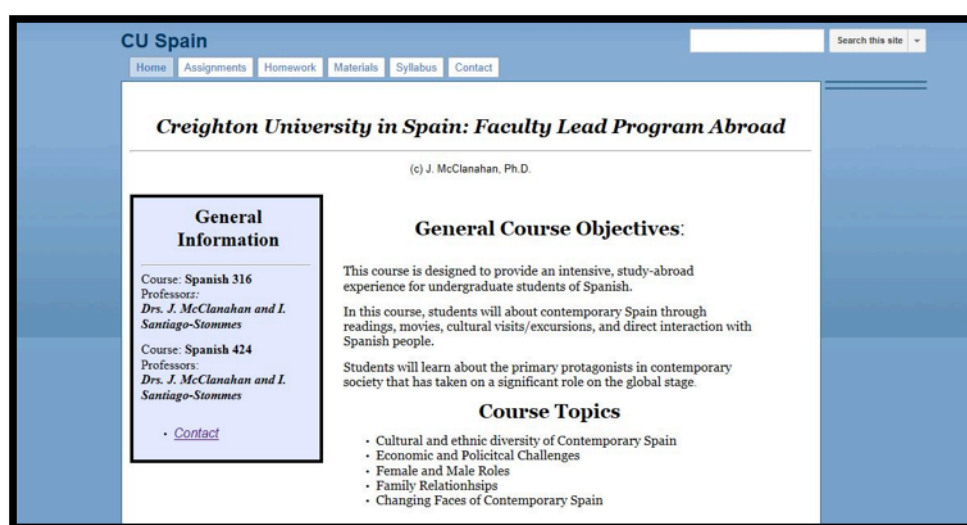
### **Parents and Millennials**

While there are many aspects of this generation of students that deserve attention, the role that parents and families play in the study abroad experience is crucial. More specifically, how faculty can take the perceived difficulties of parent’s involvement and turn them into benefits becomes even more necessary. The direction that professors take to involve the parents of a millennial student needs to be more comprehensive. From the onset of recruiting, through the pre-departure preparations, and during the actual study abroad experience and the return home, all represent areas where faculty needs to reticent of their role and how to include parents.

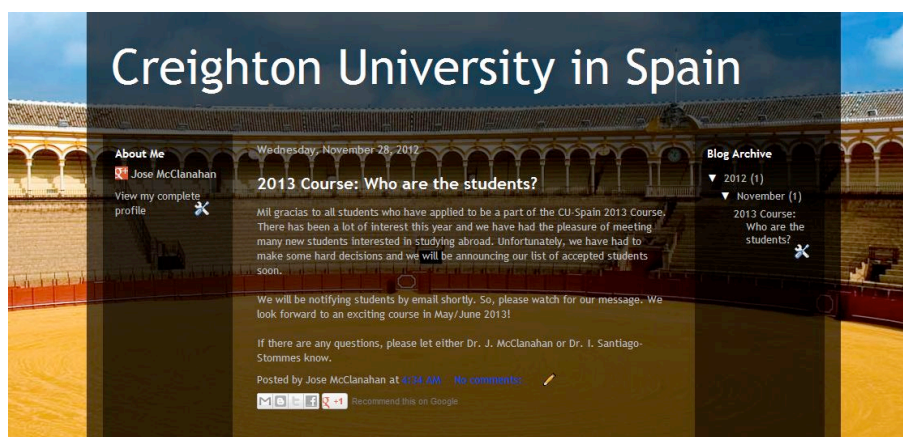
Along with a new generation of students, faculty and universities have to deal with a new generation of parents as well. They have been traditionally referred to as “helicopter parents”, a term coined by Cline and Foster in 1990. They are seen as hovering or over-parenting. These parents are involved at every stage of the educational process, including many of the decision-making steps. They are often considered as “micro-managers” and believe that because they “have done it before” they know better. Yet Roiphe points out that helicopter parenting is not the product of “bad or pathetic people with deranged values. [...] It is not necessarily a sign of parents who are ridiculous or unhappy or nastily controlling. It can be a product of good intentions gone awry, the play of culture on natural parental fears.” Remembering on how the government has played a role in this new role of parenting by instituting a series of new laws and regulations that has resulted in the society “over protecting” this new generation of students, it is not a far leap to see how partents, raised in that context, possess these characteristics.

As such, the need to get the parents “on-board” for a study abroad experience is paramount. Involving them from the onset provides opportunity for faculty to gain a strong support from one of the most important factors in the student’s life. Moreover, it is the parents who often pay for the education of the students, and as such, it is important that faculty include the parents from the beginning of the process. As with many “millennial parents”, it is necessary to underscore the value of this type of educational experience. The incarnations of that a study abroad experience can vary greatly depending on the university and the focus it has. Yet, each of them can provide new prospects for students (and their parents) who are looking to broaden their academics. Moreover, the variety of skills that a student can take away from an experience abroad reaches beyond the traditional academic realm. Therefore, faculty should maximize the value for both parents and students as they begin the recruitment process. Additionally, the application in the recruitment process has to include the parents. When recruiting or conducting interviews for a study-abroad course, two of the key questions in the application should be: “Have you talked with your parents about this educational experience?” and “Do you have the support of your parents for this program?” Moreover, it is important to continually remind students to share the information with their parent. By doing this, professors have the opportunity to involve the parents sooner, which will aid in the students having a positive outcome from it.

After completing the recruitment and acceptance phase, the pre-departure of the process begins. In this stage, we are preparing students prior to leaving the US for their study-abroad experience. Here, as in every other stage of the overall encounter, parents need to be a part. Like their children, many parents have engaged technology as a means of information and communication. As such, faculty must be willing to adapt. By incorporating many free, available technologies, faculty can create platforms to reach out to parents and inform them. Knowing that they will want to be involved in most aspects of their student’s lives, having access to information is comforting and indispensable at the same time. Currently, it is not required that faculty be computer programmers in order to create websites, blogs, or listserves. Whether through a Google account sponsored website or free online blog, we are now able to create new ways of communicating and keeping informed parents of these students.



Here, the very basic website provides information for parents so that they will be informed about what the student is learning and doing while abroad. And subsequently, they will be able to support their children and the faculty through the study abroad course. As these parents are continually connected to their children more than at any time previously, the mere act of including them into the communication circle allows what was once believed an intrusive parent into an active partner in education. By providing additional information through an electronic medium, faculty can assure parents (and students), given the “foreign” nature of this educational experience. A simple blog can further grant access to information, which can be viewed by participants and parents alike.



Like a website, the course or study-abroad blog offers the opportunity for faculty to communicate to both students and their parents. Moreover, it provides professors the chance to control information that is released and when. In turn, everyone is provided with the same information at the same time. As much as we would like students to give their parents up-to-date and complete information from pre-departure, informational meetings, or about what a student is learning while abroad, every faculty member understands that sometimes the best intentions are not always followed through. Therefore, a simple, informative blog can allow access to information and create a space for dialogue with parents (and students). This additional method of communication allows for a new collaboration with parents and students at the same time, and it can relieve a lot of the stresses found in a learning environment that can often is “flexible” and reducing the anxiety of the millennial’s desire for a structured learning space. Further still, the information is current and timely.

In order for a study-abroad program to continue to be successful, there needs to be reflection by the teaching faculty about the successes and the areas where improvements can be made. Here again, parents can help. By changing our perceptions about millennial parents and their role in the education of their children through study abroad offers faculty the chance to have a more positive, ongoing experience. While student evaluations have long been a standard for teaching, now, technology permits professors to extend to parents the chance to provide feedback as well. While it may not be traditional for faculty to reach out to parents in this way, I believe we are able to garner a lot of valuable information about how we best provide such an outstanding international experience to our students, especially when we think about the preparation we provide them. The questions can illicit information in

the areas where the parent is most present: access to information (before and during), understanding about the mission of the experience, and the value that study-abroad has in the lives of their children.

## **Conclusions**

As Higher Education becomes more competitive and resources are continually reduced or limited, professors and universities need to support and offer educational opportunities for the student population. Study-abroad has long been regarded a valuable gem in education. Yet, it is important to adapt and change how we conduct these international educational experiences. How we engage the new generation of students that have been arriving on our campus requires a new way of thinking about how we teach them and through what mediums, and even more important, the need to include the family of the student in the “extended” experiences.

Taking this into consideration, the role that parents play in study-abroad becomes incredibly important. Encourage students to engage their parents in the mix before leaving and updating them through their time abroad. Professors can aid in and make the sharing more appreciated if they can reach out through current technologies to extend their modes of communication. Remembering what role parents can play in the lives of this generation of students, it is necessary to take this into consideration when taking a group of students abroad. Also, we are able to take what appears to be intangible – education – and make it more tangible by demonstrating how this experience has a true academic value. Including the parents in the communication cycle can do this. Leaving them to hear about it tangentially through their children is really leaving it up to chance. We need to be purposeful and direct in underscoring the inherent worth of study abroad, especially if it is a faculty-lead program. Furthermore, we are able to highlight the practical applications and skills that students are continually acquiring through their time in a different learning environment. Again, we cannot leave to chance the opportunity to share this information. It is essential that faculty actively communicate to students and their family the significance of what the students are doing.

All told, the *millennials* as a generation provide the opportunity for revitalization and reexamination of study abroad. As professors, we can now take advantage of an inadvertent fortune. This new generation of students (and their parents) possesses the raw material by which we can continue to strengthen and build and enhance our programs of study. Their unique characteristics present challenges and opportunities, and as reflective educators, we are able to capitalize on this moment by mining these students’ inherent connectedness to the world in which they live, their desire to be part of a larger community, and a desire to learn. We understand that one of the overriding goals in higher education is fostering the growth of the whole student, and by tapping into their distinctive traits as a generation, educators who take students abroad are uniquely situated to benefit from these interests.



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