# Chapter 99

# Adult Millennials:
## Conceptualizing a Student Subpopulation With Implications for Online Teaching and Learning

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## ABSTRACT

*Discussions about students in post-secondary education are often based on divisions of distinct subpopulations, which are in turn often based on demographics or generational status. In the context of adult learners who are also members of the Millennial generation, there exist no discussions of the overlaps between the two groups. In this chapter, the author provides an overview of the characteristics of both adult learners and members of the Millennial generation. Following a comparison of the characteristics of the two groups, the author offers a perspective of a distinct subpopulation: Adult Millennials. After offering strategies for working with Adult Millennials, with attention to online learning environments, the chapter concludes with suggestions for further research addressing Adult Millennials.*

## INTRODUCTION

Discussions about students in post-secondary education are often based on divisions of students into distinct subpopulations, which are generally based on demographics or generational status. One of the challenges in discussing any subpopulation lies in moving beyond stereotypes (Gohn & Albin, 2006). It is important to keep in mind that much of what is covered in this chapter is based on broad generalizations, and are not meant to be applicable to all members of the subpopulations addressed. The most dominant subpopulations engaged in post-secondary education (in terms of sheer numbers) fall under two distinct labels: adult learners and members of the Millennial Generation.

Sometimes described as non-traditional students, adult learners are seen to represent a broad spectrum of students engaged in post-secondary education (Renn & Reason, 2013). A wrinkle in discussing adult learners, especially as they compare of other groups of students, is that there are multiple definitions of

the term adult learner, with little agreement between those definitions (Renn & Reason). A 2008 (Institute for Education Sciences) report from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that nearly sixty million adults were engaged in some form of formal post-secondary education.

A great deal of scholarly attention has been placed on the experiences and expectations of members of the Millennial Generation (hereafter referred to as Millennials) in post-secondary education (Bourke & Mechler, 2010; Mechler & Bourke, 2011). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, there were roughly 21 million people between the ages of 20 and 24, and roughly 21 million people between the ages of 25 and 29 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). Other estimates put the total number of Millennials at over 60 million (Twenge & Campbell, 2012). Millennials, so called due to their coming of age and entering college in the year 2000, have been heralded as the Next Great Generation (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Since arriving on college campuses, Millennials have had a tremendous impact on higher education (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Mastrodicasa & Junco, 2006; Reesor & Schlabach, 2006). Much of the research addressing the post-secondary experiences and outcomes of Millennials has painted this generation in a somewhat negative light (see Bourke & Mechler; Mechler & Bourke; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a perspective on Adult Millennials, and the implication of this intersection on student engagement in online learning environments. Millennials have become the most heavily researched group of college students of all time (Cone, Inc. & AMP Agency, 2006). However, the bulk of the Millennial-focused research approaches them as 18-22 year olds without acknowledging that there are now Millennials who fit into the categorization of adult learners. As noted by Strange (2004), "Millennials, as currently understood, promise to reinvent some of the more commonly accepted constructions of growth and development during the college years" (p. 56). By offering a perspective on the intersection of the characteristics of both adult learners and Millennials, the aim of this chapter is to provide the reader with insights into what it means to work with a previously unexplored group of learners, Adult Millennials.

Engagement with technology in education by both Millennials and adult learners has been area of increasing interest throughout higher education. One aspect of technology that has garnered a great deal of fanfare has been online learning (see Allen & Seaman, 2011). As more and more opportunities for learning outside of traditional classroom settings emerge, it is increasingly important to consider the characteristics and needs of students engaging in learning in online spaces.

The chapter is organized with an overview of the characteristics of adult learners, followed by an overview of the characteristics of Millennials. What follows is the author's perspective of direct comparisons between the individual characteristics of each subpopulation. Following a discussion of implications for these categorizations to the context of online learning and the Adult Millennial learner in online learning environments, the chapter concludes with suggestions for further research on Adult Millennials.

## ADULT LEARNERS: CHARACTERISTICS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Assumptions about adult learners often become intertwined with categorizations of non-traditional students (Cercone, 2008). The characteristic that most often comes to mind for many people is that non-traditional students are over the age of 25 (Dickerson & Stiefer, 2006). If 25 has become the marker of difference between traditional college students and adult learners, then it is safe to say that there certainly members of the Millennial Generation who fall into the category of adult learner. As noted in the

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