
Peer-Reviewed Article

Case Example of Cultural Trends Coming Out of Utah to Reroute the Future of Higher Education Distance Learning for Millennials

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Abstract: In 2019, the Millennial population will overtake the Boomer population by 1 million. Due to this generational shift, new adaptations in higher education distance learning will need to happen since Millennials have distinctive learning preferences. This paper presents the state of Utah as a case example of multilateral cultural trends set by Millennials that educators and leaders in other states and countries may use to reroute the future of higher education distance learning for a predominating Millennial generation.

Keywords: Millennials, higher education, distance learning.

Introduction

In 2016, the US Census Bureau projected that by 2019, the population of Millennials will overtake Baby Boomers; Millennials number 73 million, while Baby Boomers have declined to 72 million (Fry, 2018; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). With this statistic on the horizon, the race to reroute the future of distance learning for an increasing population of Millennials is on the minds of many educators and leaders in higher education. There are already a flurry of thoughts and ideas that have led to important changes in accommodating the needs of the Millennial generation. However, the individualistic and the fast-paced nature of this generation requires

constant re-assessment and re-evaluation of its values, in order to efficaciously adapt to its educational needs. This paper focuses on four facets of Millennial values and briefly examines them directly around Utah's youth, allowing a profile to emerge on the future of distance learning in the age of Millennial predominance. The question asked is the following: what cultural trends coming out of Utah can serve as examples to reroute the future of higher education distance learning for the Millennial generation?

Research

What Sets Utah Apart

Utah was selected as the case example for this paper because 2016 data from the US Census Bureau revealed that it is the youngest state in the nation (Johnson, 2017). Utahans' median age is 30.7, almost 8 years younger than the 37.9 median age of the rest of the country.

Earlier in 2012, a study by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that Utah has the sixth highest percentage in the nation of students enrolled exclusively in distance learning at Title IV institutions: 22%. At the graduate level, Utah ranks fifth place with 40.2% of all its graduate students enrolled exclusively in distance learning at Title IV institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014, Table 2).

The purpose of these statistics is not to suggest a causation implying that younger generations tend to be more educated. Rather it is mainly intended to showcase a state with a dominating Millennial population that also has a high drive towards higher education distance learning.

Millennials' Learning Preferences

Generally, Millennials are characterized as informal learners with short attention spans and a preference for bite-sized information available 24/7 through online search engines, social networks, and technology (Sharma, 2016). Moreover, they are distinguished as multitaskers and collaborators who appreciate the social aspects of learning (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil, 2004). Most importantly, they are independent-minded and outspoken people who think for themselves and challenge the status quo (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Millennial Utahans share similar characteristics and learning preferences with Millennials in the rest of the country. However, the lifestyle, religious beliefs, political affiliations, and social ideals in Utah set up a case of cultural trends that are pertinent to the future of higher education distance learning for all Millennials. Each of these four facets provides examples that are in alignment with values held by Millennials and their learning preferences.

Lifestyle

With a four-season climate, drastically diverse landscapes throughout the state, countless national parks, and easy access to nature, the majority of Utahans are outdoor enthusiasts. They enjoy skiing, snowboarding, hiking, mountain biking, camping, climbing, boating, just to name a few of the most popular activities around the state (Utah Office of Tourism, 2018). Some Millennial Utahans actively pursue more than one of these activities, making the outdoor lifestyle part of their identities (Hargrave, 2017). Time spent in the mountains or the desert, for a couple of hours or a full week, alone or with friends becomes a priority for them, as long as any picture taking technological device can also make the trip.

The outdoor lifestyle coupled with the Millennial mindset allows them to embrace the idea that living productively should not be restricted to four walls, and technology should

connect a person to the rest of the world from anywhere. When living productively and connecting with the world are equated to obtaining a higher degree and doing distance learning, it becomes apparent that many Millennial Utahans are conditioned to pursue online degree programs.

The cultural trend of feeling free to be anywhere and have access to an online learning platform fits the characteristics and learning preferences of the Millennial generation. Going forward, the leaders in higher education should prioritize the innovation of gadgets and software that will further simplify distance learning.

Religious beliefs

Utah is home to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), where more than 65% of its members live (Omondi, 2018). As a common practice, LDS mothers of school-age children tend to be stay-at-home parents (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1995). Also, traditionally, many of them become mothers by their mid-twenties. In order to fulfil their personal enrichment goals, many of them continue their education in their free time, when the children are in school. They heavily contribute to the niche of Millennials who choose distance learning as a convenient option.

Aslanian Market Research reported in the spring of 2015 that 70% of online students at the undergraduate level were women and 72% at the graduate level were also women (Haynie, 2015). Since more women than men are enrolled in online degree programs, the claim that Utah Millennial stay-at-home moms more often resort to distance learning is grounded in reasonable assumptions. Furthermore, surveys from 2012 showed that the majority of homeschooled children belong to households of two parents, one in the labor force, which resembles the LDS family dynamics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). It is likely that a portion of

these same Millennial stay-at-home moms are homeschooling their children, which perpetuates a distance learning culture within the state.

The reality is that Millennials are brought up in the age of options, where one mold does not fit all. Having the option to earn their degrees online, while keeping up with their personal lives and values, is nothing less than what this generation wants. Since it is inevitable that the Millennial population will soon overtake the Baby Boomer generation, the future of higher education distance learning should consider this cultural trend of convenient options and increase flexibility in the online degree options.

Millennials in other states also share preferences for independent learning. Most institutions already have their online class syllabi set up for independent learners: assigned chapters to read, PowerPoint slides and videos to watch, and discussion boards to comment on. However, with the Millennial independent learning culture in mind, instructors, and leaders in higher education distance learning should continue to design curriculum with diverse and unbiased sources.

Political Affiliations

Utah is a red state, made of 54% Republicans, 39% Democrats, and 16% in the middle (Pew Research Center, 2014). The state has not voted for a Democratic president since Lyndon Johnson in 1964. However, during the 2016 presidential election race, as candidate Bernie Sanders connected with Millennials across the country, his very progressive values also resonated with many Millennials in Utah, so much that he won the Democratic caucus nomination in this conservative state (The New York Times, 2016). Ultimately, Sanders dropped out of the race and the Republican candidate, Donald Trump, won the national election. However, more than 20% of the votes in Utah went to Evan McMullin, an Independent

newcomer, whom Utah Democrats felt was a more honest candidate than the qualified and experienced Hillary Clinton (National Public Radio, 2016). What the 2016 election turnout revealed about Millennials in Utah is their independent mindset.

Even as a red state, only 19% of younger Millennials and 15% of older Millennials in Utah are registered Republicans (Pew Research Center, 2018). It is a generation determined to make up its own mind and choose its own values, rather than accepting the legacy of older generations as their own. Millennials hold themselves accountable to independently interpret information and explore new knowledge.

Social Ideals

There are a number of nonprofit organizations dealing with wilderness, public land, and refugee issues in the state, so Utahans do not lack the opportunity to serve. “Utah has the highest volunteer rate, the highest percentage of population that donates time, and is tied for first place for giving away the most money and having the largest portion of its population that make donations” (Strauss, 2017, para 5). The state’s philanthropic culture is also strong due to the large LDS youth population engaged in community service and missionary work. However, most Millennials in Utah in general care about social responsibility, regardless of religious affiliation (Utah Foundation, 2015).

As a generation, Millennials everywhere are outspoken about social justice and are proactive about leading social movements or bringing awareness to certain issues. Through social media, it has become easier for them to engage in causes nationally, as well as internationally (Dookhoo, 2015). It is a generation with a community culture, who wants to belong and welcome others.

Going forward, the last trend for the future of institutions in higher education distance learning should be to cultivate the culture of online communities. In addition to discussion boards, Millennials students need online platforms to relate to each other and exchange ideas.

Conclusion

In summary, Utah does not have an advantage over other states for having a large population of the young residents and whose citizens demonstrate the most common characteristics of those who typically enroll in online degree programs nationwide. Based on the four facets of the Millennial values examined—lifestyle, religious beliefs, political affiliations, and social ideals—studying Utah provides a case example of an unrestricted, convenient, independent, and socially conscious culture for higher education distance learning. Examining this multilateral culture can help us identify and reroute future trends and adapt to the learning preferences of a predominating Millennial generation.

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