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Millennial adjustment: Colleges devise new ways to attract, launch a new generation

By Chad Halcom



Photo by Walsh College MBA students at Walsh College work the online component of their blended online/in-class instruction model.

No, not all millennials are tech-addicted, Snapchatting layabouts. Recent studies show they value mentorship, experiential learning, socially responsible missions in the workplace and a customizable education that is more intense than what colleges and universities have offered to past generations, local experts say.

Southeast Michigan business colleges are adapting to that educational demand with half-semester courses that condense classroom time or undergraduate and MBA-level instruction combined into a five-year graduate degree program. Also trending in higher education is the offering of new or expanded mentorship programs, entrepreneurial assistance, community service projects and more elective coursework to give MBA students more specialization.

More than half of millennials, generally born between the early 1980s and 2000, are interested in entrepreneurship and about 27 percent are or have been self-employed, according to a 2011 survey by the **Young Entrepreneurs Council** and **Buzz Marketing Group**.

Research suggests they organize into groups and collaborate on projects faster than employees of other organizations, local university program directors said.

But millennials also tend to assume what scholars call "low power distance" — i.e., they don't distinguish between emailing helpful suggestions to the company CEO versus a peer in the adjacent cubicle (a strategy that plays well at a tech startup or artisanal bakery, but less so at a tier-one auto supplier).

Still, they value input from non-millennials (75 percent want a mentor, and 90 percent want to share ideas with senior company employees, according to a 2012 **MTV** study), and do not mind more demanding study and work schedules if it means meeting a goal sooner.

At the **University of Detroit Mercy**, about 20 to 25 of the average 125 new MBA students per year enroll in the accelerated five-year BSBA/MBA program the university began offering in 2009. Joe Eisenhauer, dean of the College of Business Administration, said graduates of that program overwhelmingly place into professional positions just five years after high school, and students increasingly seek an MBA earlier in life.

"Part of that trend is because employer reimbursement for graduate school training programs has diminished somewhat," Eisenhauer said. "Twenty years ago, MBA programs were largely staffed by corporate employees getting reimbursed for the additional training, after maybe five to seven years in the workplace, and that's not as common anymore. More often people want that degree earlier, in their careers, and we're going to give that opportunity."

Toni Somers, associate dean of the Mike Ilitch School of Business at **Wayne State University**, said students are more interested in attending class more days of the week or on weekends to complete their education sooner.

The school saw MBA program enrollment plummet from nearly 2,000 to less than 500 in 2012, but it has since recovered to more than 850.

Among the more popular program changes, besides offering accelerated 11-week semester courses and a four-week training module as an alternative to traditional 15-week courses, is a corporate mentorship program that launched last fall. About 50 students and 50 corporate mentors have participated, she said.

"We find they enjoy teamwork, and they enjoy it when they're paired with seasoned professionals, and people who bring a wealth of experience," Somers said. "They're interested in learning from non-millennials — there's always been a little of that in other generations, but it's changing."

Terri Washburn, professor of business information technology at **Walsh College**, said the business school began offering a revised MBA program in fall 2014 based in part on research into the habits of millennials. The new model includes two hours of reading and online preparation before two hours of class time, with little repetition or overlap between the two.

"Millennials are very confident and share what is known as 'low power distance,' meaning that they are comfortable approaching authority figures such as professors," Washburn said. "(So) professors keep office hours (and) some professors offer web-ex style discussions synchronously with their online students."

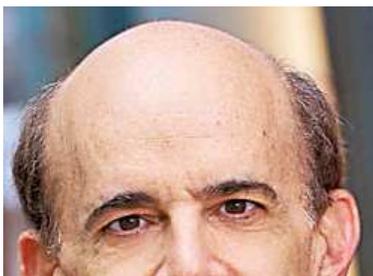
Erik Gordon, clinical professor in the MBA and undergraduate business programs at the **University of Michigan**, said incoming MBA students join a yearlong team challenge starting at orientation, managed by the Sanger Leadership Center at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business.

The Ross Impact Challenge tasks students with creating a profitable venture with a social mission in Detroit. Social mission and making enriching tasks are an increasing priority for millennial MBA students, Gordon said.

"We don't get a lot of robber-baron students. We do get students interested in making a lot of money, but that usually is coupled with either a very strong sense of social responsibility or a desire to monetize an activity that's also personally rewarding," Gordon said.



Terri Washburn



"At Ross, we have a big focus on participative management, and that includes this initiative. This is not a tool for people to come to Detroit and think up some big answers, it's a path to listening and learning to do something important together."

Glenn Omura, associate dean for MBA and professional masters programs at the Eli Broad College of Business at **Michigan State University**, said half-semester course modules are a popular new option introduced in the past four years.



Erik Gordon

Also new to the MBA program is Extreme Green, a co-curricular creativity training course that instructs graduate students in creativity, challenges with product development and new technology, and innovative entrepreneurship.

More than 200 students have taken part in the program since it launched three years ago, though the name is a new addition last year, Omura said. Students have taken part in marketing and product development exercises with executives at **Whirlpool Corp.**, Jiffy Mix of the **Chelsea Milling Co.** and New Jersey-based **Mars Chocolate**.

"The value of experiential learning, which the (millennial) generation seems to favor, is that it sticks longer and deeper, and that learning can be accessed more easily when it's time to apply it," Omura said.

"These are the kind of experiential things that we have our students doing, and we're doing many more in a variety of courses. It leads to a cementing of concepts in the classroom, and translates into an improved quality of graduates we put into the markets."

Gordon said UM has also focused more on interactive learning experiences and made multidisciplinary action projects that place MBA students within various local employers a standard feature of the full-time MBA program.

In addition to being more experiential, millennials are also more diverse. Only 60 percent are white versus more than 70 percent of those over 30, according to the **Pew Research Center**, and 11 percent are born to at least one immigrant parent. So they have an affinity for learning new languages and respecting other cultures.

"We have always lived in a world where diversity was an aspiration. They live in a world where diversity is a reality," Gordon said. "Not only of cultures but locations and of professional backgrounds. Their world is one where you must be able to work together, and ... in the MBA program you get to learn, and get comfortable with, that experience."



Glenn Omura

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