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# Corporate Social Responsibility and the Millennials

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The incorporation of corporate social responsibility (CSR) into an organization's strategic plan may impact the company's ability to attract and keep members of the Millennial generation as employees. The authors examined the CSR attitudes of college students and the correlation of these attitudes with willingness to work for companies that emphasize CSR through employee volunteerism. The outcome from an event consisting of 9 high-level executives from for- and nonprofit companies explaining their CSR philosophy to these students is described. Results indicated that the event itself was responsible for changes in the students' attitudes and were not correlated with earlier attitudes or actions.

**Keywords:** business education, integrated ethics education, social responsibility, teaching ethics

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is defined in a variety of ways and with a variety of word choices including organizational citizenship or social outreach. The names may vary but not the intended outcomes. Typically, the theory is viewed through various stakeholders—society, firm, and employee. All three groups could have different views, needs, and expected outcomes.

One definition of this model is advanced by Holme and Watts (2000). They defined *corporate social responsibility* as the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce, their families, the local community, and society at large.

Traditionally, in the United States, CSR has been defined much more in terms of a philanthropic model. Companies make profits, unhindered except by fulfilling their duty to pay taxes. Then they donate a certain share of the profits to charitable causes. It is seen as tainting the act for the company to receive any benefit from the giving (Baker, 2008).

In contrast, the European model is much more focused on operating the core business in a socially responsible way, complemented by investment in communities for solid busi-

ness reasons (Baker, 2008). This latter model may present a more sustainable version of social responsibility because,

1. Social responsibility becomes an integral part of the wealth creation process, which if managed properly should enhance the competitiveness of business and maximize the value of wealth creation to society.
2. When times get hard, there is the incentive to practice CSR more and better. If it is a philanthropic exercise which is peripheral to the main business, it will always be the first thing to go when push comes to shove (Baker, 2008).

It is this latter model that was emphasized in the event used to generate the present study.

## Corporate Social Responsibility and the Millennials

There is no agreed-upon generational definition of the Millennials. They have been defined in various ways, including having been born between 1979 and 2001, from 1980 and 2000, or from 1982 to 2002, and so forth. One study of particular note is the 2006 Cone Millennial Cause Study (Cone, 2008b), the first in-depth study of its kind. The Cone study, a collaboration between Cone, Inc. and AMP Insights, included a probability sample of 1,800 Millennials and was conducted online in May 2006. The study focused on the

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role that causes play in a Millennial's life as an individual, employee, and as consumer. In the present study we defined Millennials as having been born between 1979 and 2001.

The Cone (2008b) study shows that 61% of Millennials feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world. Individuals of this civic-minded generation not only believe it is their responsibility to make the world a better place, a majority of them believe that companies have a responsibility to join them in this effort. The majority (79%) of Millennials want to work for a company that cares about how it contributes to society and 69% would refuse to work for a company that is not socially responsible.

Other studies indicate that Millennials are prepared to reward or punish a company based on its commitment to social causes (Cone, 2008a). They are also hard working, team-oriented, and place a high value on helping others and on addressing social problems (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007; Gloeckler, 2008). Millennials are volunteering in record numbers for various reasons. These include altruism, being influenced by family and friends, and wanting to pad resumes (Alsop, 2008). All these elements are causing for-profit and nonprofit organizations to rethink their employee culture, especially regarding younger employees' input into how the organization interacts with its external stakeholders (Fine, 2008).

Implicit assumptions embedded in CSR include the views that standard business practices are unfair and that ordinary firms that do not practice CSR intrinsically offer nothing of value to a community or society at large (Barrett, 2009). It can be concluded that this does not sit well with the Millennials, and that they expect the companies they work for to incorporate CSR into their strategic plan rather than as a philanthropic exercise when times are good. In addition, Millennials, as consumers, expect organizations to demonstrate congruence with external social values as part of the organization's contributions to the community (Maignan, Ferrell, & Ferrell, 2005). Organizations that study the culture of Millennials are aware that they are not very company-loyal. Millennials' commitment is more to self-knowledge, and they volunteer for causes to enhance themselves more so than trying to make the company look good (Alsop, 2008). Therefore, Millennials are expected to impact the organization on two fronts: as consumers and as employees whose self-identification may be strongly impacted by the organization's CSR initiatives (Marin, Salvador, & Rubio, 2009).

### Purpose of the Study

If the Cone 2006 Millennial Cause Study (2008b) and subsequent studies are correct and Millennials actually do intend to reward or punish a company based on its commitment to social causes, then the public perception of the firm is critical. A related concern is how to adequately meet the business educational needs of students who increasingly value CSR. Studies by Cornelius, Wallace, and Tassabehji (2007) and

Nicholson and DeMoss (2009) indicate that our colleges' business curricula may not be adequate to meet the needs of our graduates and the organizations that employ them. Millennials may have to be engaged with more nontraditional, external to the classroom, structured activities. The traditional classroom lecture on ethics and social responsibility, for example, may not be effective by itself. Millennials want to be involved in real issues with real situations (Tucker, 2006). The problem is how to structure, pay for, and get involvement in an external event.

In the present study, the authors describe the output and outcome of a large ethics and CSR event held on our campus in the fall of 2008. This event was formed in response to the research on Millennials previously discussed that indicate that ethics and CSR need to be reinforced external to the classroom. We examine the attitudes of undergraduate business students concerning their personal social responsibility activities and the correlation of these attitudes with their willingness to work for a company that incorporates social responsibility into its strategic plan.

## METHOD

### Procedure

In 2008, during the fall semester, the authors participated in an Ethics Awareness Week (EAW), with the theme "Social Responsibility: Why Bother?" This biennial event was the fourth hosted by the College of Business and Technology in a large Midwestern public university. Each EAW has presented various activities designed to highlight issues of ethics and social responsibility.

The 2008 EAW theme was selected by the EAW Committee in order to provide an opportunity for the faculty, students, administration, and the community to examine how social responsibility is integrated into a firm's strategic plan. The focus of the entire week of activities was on the rationale behind the firm's decision to integrate social responsibility into its strategic plan rather than focus upon the specific projects in which a firm is involved.

There were six EAW activities scheduled during one week, all designed for specific targeted stakeholders. The present study focused on one of these activities—the Ethics Challenge Course (ECC). The ECC was designed to provide an opportunity for the students to expand their knowledge of ethics and social responsibility issues.

Nine firms were invited to participate in the ECC. Each firm was chosen specifically based on its involvement in corporate social responsibility. The nine firms were divided into three categories: three were nonprofit entities, three were profit-seeking with a local focus, and three were profit-seeking with a national focus. All the nonprofits were service providers, the profit-locals included two service providers and a manufacturer, and the profit-nationals included a

manufacturer, a retailer, and a service provider. Each firm provided a representative to discuss the firm's rationale as to why the organization integrates corporate social responsibility into its strategic plan. It is interesting to note that almost all of the firm's representatives were CEOs or high-ranking executives. Anecdotally, the support from the firms was tremendous—providing not only the speaker, but also providing significant financial support for this endeavor. This addressed a previously discussed problem with this type of student event.

### Data Gathering

The ECC was a 1-day, 4-hr event. University students preregistered to attend 1-hr session blocks. Upon arrival at their designated time, the students were randomly assigned to Group A, B, or C. In each of these groups, there was one speaker from a nonprofit entity, one from a profit corporation with a local focus, and one from a profit corporation with a national focus. The focus of each speaker varied, but each speaker covered elements of the financial, legal, marketing, communication, and societal ramifications of the organization's decision to incorporate social responsibility into its strategic plan. Each speaker repeated the same presentation for each student group. Thus, a speaker gave the same presentation three times per hour for 4 hr. This was an attempt to control for consistency of message for all of the attendees.

*Presurvey.* Upon arrival at the ECC registration table and the random assignment to Group A, B, or C, the students were handed a packet of information that included information on each organization the student was going to hear about in the next 55 min and the presurveys on each organization. The presurvey contained questions about the student's knowledge of the company's involvement in CSR and if he or she would consider working for the company.

*Postsurvey.* After the presentation, each student completed a postsurvey that asked about the postpresentation opinion of the organization and also if the student would now consider working for the company. A student could not receive recognition for attending the ECC unless these forms were completed and turned into the hall monitor.

*Classroom surveys.* In addition, within the first week of the fall semester, students who were in courses in which the faculty were requiring or recommending EAW participation were surveyed regarding their commitment to issues of social responsibility and the level of importance of the subject to them. This survey was given early so the subsequent classroom CSR and ethics coverage would not have a chance to impact the students' answers. Questions asked included type of participation in volunteer projects, reasons for participation, and the importance to them of this participation. Various classification variables were also measured,

including age, gender, and major, which allowed correlations between younger Millennials, older Millennials, and non-Millennials. In addition, the importance to them of working for a company that incorporates social responsibility via employee volunteerism was measured.

*Database.* The database that emerged contained data from three main surveys (that were all generated using non-probability sampling): the classroom survey given at the beginning of the semester and the pre- and postsurveys given the day of the event during EAW. Students were required to identify themselves on each survey, which allowed tracking of attitude change specific analysis on correlations of measures. The final, usable data resulted in a total of 649 students who completed the classroom survey and 259 students who completed all three surveys.

## RESULTS

The data from the three surveys were analyzed to examine a total of eight research questions. For the purposes of this study, younger Millennials were defined as 18–21 years of age, older Millennials were defined as 22–25, and non-Millennials were defined as 26 and older. Volunteerism was defined on each survey as the act of giving of time, energies, talents, monies or materials, on a regular or sporadic basis, to any individual or group for which the individual was not paid. This definition was partially based on the definition of volunteerism discussed by Clary et al. (1998). Research Questions 1–6 pertain to the classroom survey executed early in the semester and Research Questions 7 and 8 pertain to the ECC event surveys.

*Research Question 1:* Are there significant differences among age groups, or other classification variables, regarding reported volunteer participation?

*Research Question 2:* Are there significant differences among age groups, or other classification variables, reporting that working for an organization that incorporates volunteerism as part of its strategic plan is important?

*Research Question 3:* Will the Millennials who have volunteered for organizations be more likely to have given their time rather than only donated money or possessions?

*Research Question 4:* Will the Millennials who have volunteered be more likely to report that they volunteered for an altruistic reason instead of a classroom, social or religious organization, or other requirement?

*Research Question 5:* Will those students reporting that working for a company that incorporates volunteerism in its strategic plan is important report more volunteerism than other students, and if so, are there significant differences among age groups or other classification variables?

TABLE 1  
Item Description and Percentage Reported  
Frequencies of the Classroom Survey (Sample 1)

|                                 |                      |    |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|----|
| Type of volunteer organizations | Religious            | 54 |
|                                 | Social services      | 56 |
|                                 | Environmental causes | 21 |
|                                 | Medical              | 32 |
|                                 | Athletic             | 35 |
|                                 | Youth development    | 26 |
|                                 | Other                | 22 |
| Type of involvement             | Manual labor         | 83 |
|                                 | Fundraising          | 62 |
|                                 | Board member         | 12 |
|                                 | Donated money        | 45 |
|                                 | Other donations      | 60 |

*Research Question 6:* Will those students reporting that working for a company that incorporates volunteerism in its strategic plan is important report being more likely to have volunteered for altruistic reasons rather than resume building or other requirements?

*Research Question 7:* Will those students who participated in the ECC event and that originally reported that working for a company that incorporates volunteerism is more important be more likely to change their opinion of any of the nine companies in the ECC event, and if so, are there significant differences among age groups?

*Research Question 8:* Will the students' opinions about any of the nine companies in the ECC event change significantly as the result of the presentation on incorporating CSR in their strategic plan, and if so, are there significant differences among age groups?

Frequency counts were prepared on all questions, as well as appropriate measures of correlation and independent samples *t* tests on the metric data. A description and frequency percentages of the nonclassification question items appear in Tables 1 and 2 for the classroom sample (Sample 1). Table 3 summarizes the frequencies for the classification questions for the classroom (Sample 1) and the ECC event surveys (Sample 2). The importance questions were measured using a 5-point, interval level, itemized rating scale. It is also important to note that the percentage description of Sample 1 reporting importance of working for an organization that incorporates volunteerism (shown in Table 2) almost exactly

TABLE 2  
Percentage Description of Samples: Number of  
Volunteer Projects

| Total     | Sample 1 | Sample 2 |
|-----------|----------|----------|
| 0         | 18       | 15       |
| 1-2       | 26       | 27       |
| 3-4       | 23       | 21       |
| 5 or more | 33       | 37       |

TABLE 3  
Percentage Description of Samples

| Variable                     | Sample 1 | Sample 2 |
|------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Age                          |          |          |
| 18-21 years                  | 43       | 55       |
| 22-25 years                  | 41       | 35       |
| 26 years and older           | 16       | 10       |
| Gender                       |          |          |
| Male                         | 63       | 57       |
| Female                       | 37       | 43       |
| Major                        |          |          |
| Undergraduate business       | 67       | 74       |
| Undergraduate, nonbusiness   | 26       | 24       |
| Graduate                     | 7        | 2        |
| Number of volunteer projects |          |          |
| 0                            | 18       | 15       |
| 1-2                          | 26       | 27       |
| 3-4                          | 23       | 21       |
| 5 or more                    | 33       | 37       |

matched the Sample 2 reported percentages on each of the response categories of the 5-point scale.

The results are given subsequently for the eight research questions. Kendall's tau was used to determine significance on the ordinal level data, chi square on the nominal data, and Pearson's *r* and independent samples *t* tests on the interval data. Inadequate cell sizes for the age variable required recoding it to a categorical variable. All tests used an alpha level of .05 to test for significance.

For Research Question 1, no significant differences were noted between reported numbers of past participatory volunteer projects and sex or major. However, younger and older Millennials reported slightly more volunteerism than the non-Millennials (Kendall's  $\tau C = -.075, p < .008$ ).

This supports the Cone (2008b) study findings, which found that Millennials volunteer in significantly higher numbers than non-Millennials.

For Research Question 2, there were no significant differences between age group, gender, or major and the importance of being able to work for a company that incorporates CSR in its strategic plan (*p* range:  $< .183$  to  $< .643$ ). Note that 52% of the sample rated this as important or very important. This did not support the previously cited Cone (2008a, b) and other studies. Based on those studies, we expected the Millennials to place significantly higher importance in working for a company that incorporates volunteerism. However, only 7% of the classroom sample (Sample 1) indicated that working for an organization that incorporates volunteerism was not important.

For Research Question 3, Millennials who have volunteered were not more likely than non-Millennials to have given their time rather than money or possessions (*p* range:  $< .258$  to  $< .634$ ).

For Research Question 4, younger and older Millennials were slightly more likely to place higher importance on

TABLE 4  
Average Percentage Changes: Pre- to Postevent

| Type of organization    | Pre-event opinion |             |           | Postevent opinion |             |           | Willing to work for company: Pre-event |      | Willing to work for company: Postevent |      |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|-------------|-----------|--|------|--|------|
|                         | None              | Unfavorable | Favorable | None              | Unfavorable | Favorable | Yes                                    | No   | Yes                                    | No   |
| Nonprofit               | 54.6              | 3.7         | 41.7      | 1.7               | 2.3         | 96        | 53                                     | 47   | 71.6                                   | 28.4 |
| Profit-seeking local    | 77                | 4           | 19        | 6                 | 4.7         | 89.3      | 54.3                                   | 45.7 | 68.7                                   | 31.3 |
| Profit-seeking national | 29                | 9           | 62        | 1                 | 4.7         | 94.2      | 48                                     | 52   | 74.7                                   | 25.3 |

social organization volunteerism requirements (Kendall's  $\tau C = -.103, p < .002$ ), extra-credit opportunities (Kendall's  $\tau C = -.196, p < .004$ ), and resume-building opportunities as being important reasons for volunteerism (Kendall's  $\tau C = -.077, p < .024$ ). Younger and older Millennials were also slightly more likely to rate family influence as more important reasons for volunteerism (Kendall's  $\tau C = -.183, p < .014$ ). No other altruistic reasons were significantly different among age groups. This supports Alsop's (2008), and Elam et al.'s (2007) findings that many Millennials volunteer for self-enhancement reasons, including resume-building opportunities, and the value being part of a team. This would explain the Millennials in this study placing higher importance in fulfilling organizations' requirements. There was no significant difference between Millennials and non-Millennials reporting the importance of volunteering regarding the items of "feeling good about myself" and "it was my civic duty," and "it is the moral thing to do." This also reports the findings of those cited studies.

For Research Question 5, in the overall sample, students who rated working for a company that incorporates CSR as important did report significantly higher volunteerism ( $r = .306, p < .000$ ),  $t(647) = 5.51, p < .001$ . Examined by age, younger and older Millennials who rated CSR incorporation as more important reported significantly higher volunteerism ( $p < .000$  for younger;  $p < .001$  for older), but this was not significantly different for the non-Millennials ( $p < .213$ ). This supports the Cone (2008b) study and the other cited studies that found that Millennials are more willing to help the organizations they work for achieve their CSR goals.

For Research Question 6, students who rated CSR incorporation as important indicated that satisfying the volunteerism requirements of social organizations to which they belong were important ( $r = .198, p < .000$ ),  $t(647) = 4.419, p < .000$ , satisfying religious organizational requirements was slightly more important ( $r = .216, p < .000$ ),  $t(647) = 4.832, p < .000$ , and resume building was slightly more important ( $r = .131, p < .004$ ),  $t(647) = 2.889, p < .004$ . However, no other organizational or personal requirements were significant. Regarding altruistic reasons for volunteering, students who rated CSR incorporation as important showed no significant differences in reporting family or friend influences on volunteering. Significant differences were noted for

"making me feel good about myself" and being "my civic duty" for moral and religious reasons. There were moderate positive associations for all these ( $r_s = .214-.392, p_s = .000-.002$ ).

For Research Question 7, there was no significant association between any of the original sample student responses on any of the variables and the event questions regarding willingness to work for the companies both before and after the event. There was also no significant association between any of the originals and changed opinions of the companies in the event ( $p$  range:  $< .203$  to  $< .646$ ). It would appear that the students who participated in the ECC event, Millennials and non-Millennials, were equally likely to change their opinions of the ECC event organizations.

For Research Question 8, as indicated by the frequencies reported in Table 4, there were significant changes across all companies from "no opinion or knowledge of the company's involvement in CSR" to "favorable opinion based on knowledge of CSR." There were also significant changes from "unfavorable opinion" to "favorable opinion" for the nonprofits and the national for-profit companies. There were also significant changes in "willingness to work for," especially regarding the national profit-seeking companies (tests were all highly significant; specific numbers not reported here).

## DISCUSSION

Because we know of no other study that addressed the research issues presented in the present study, we had more questions than preconceived hypotheses about what we would find. We hoped that we would find significant differences between Millennials and non-Millennials on the issues, as that was the premise of our paper. For the most part, we were not disappointed. We found that Millennials reported more volunteerism than non-Millennials and that the reported reasons for this behavior were pressure from social organizations, seeking extra credit for courses, and wanting to pad resumes. We also found that Millennials reported that family influences were important in their volunteerism decisions. Millennials who rated working for a company that incorporates CSR as important reported more volunteerism

than non-Millennials who also considered this important. These findings support the Cone (2008b) study conclusions that Millennials have internalized the need to make the world a better place and support that attitude by volunteering more.

Limitations of the present study included lack of control of order bias in terms of when the students heard the respective presentations in the ECC event. We also could not control for the impact of classroom ethics and social responsibility content on students' answers. We attempted to control the potential impact of media content on student responses by choosing companies for the study that had little or no media attention regarding recent ethics violations. We would have preferred that all those students in the original sample had also participated in the ECC event, but this was not possible. We are happy to note that the event sample is almost identical to the original sample on the critical variables.

The present study is not generalizable due to the nonrandom sampling method used, but within the sample, the findings pertaining to the ECC event were especially noteworthy. The present study strongly suggests that hearing the speakers passionately discuss their companies' efforts at incorporating social responsibility significantly affected the students' opinions and willingness to work for the companies. The students' previously reported attitudes and reported volunteering did not correlate with these changes. If these results are replicated through future research results, it would strongly indicate that holding educational events, such as the one in our study, could have a major impact on our students' attitudes about their social responsibilities. This could impact the choice of the companies with whom they seek employment. It could also impact the willingness of companies to incorporate more CSR in their missions and the companies' methods of communicating with both target markets and target employees.

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