

# Educating RARE Students

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Education is considered to be one of the most important activities children, adolescents, and adults will ever engage in during one's lifetime. Not only does education, particularly higher education, prepare an individual for a professional career (which is seen as its main tenet in today's world), it is also designed for personal, civic, and cultural development.<sup>1</sup> Research has demonstrated the more education (and based on degree type) an individual acquires the greater potential he or she has for future professional and financial success and stability<sup>1-3</sup> while acquiring knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary for active participation within the community and home.<sup>1</sup> In fact, for males who obtain a college education (undergraduate degree), the difference in the lifetime payoff is \$367,000 (highest gross-earnings payoff among the nations studied), while the payoff for females is \$229,000.<sup>2</sup>

The educational process should actively promote scholarly inquiry, critical-thinking and practical application of knowledge and skills related to almost every aspect of human existence, including: (1) health professions, (2) agricultural business and production, (3) manufacturing, (4) engineering, and (5) computer and information sciences just to name a few. In higher education, the focus of education appears directed towards meeting this scholarly inquiry and application through the establishment of a qualified and technologically advanced workforce for the increasingly competitive and constantly changing local, state, national, and global economies.<sup>4,5</sup> This consequently has resulted in a paradigm shift as to the purpose of higher education. No longer are the days of a comprehensive liberal arts program<sup>6</sup> focused on developing the "well-rounded," holistic individual capable of expressing one's own thoughts and experiences through art, music, poetry, literature, and basic science. Included in this shift are the potential fundamental changes in pedagogy, technology utilization, organization, and administration of educational programming.<sup>5</sup>

Although many students are still required to engage in "general education" programming, many students attempt to find the path of least resistance through the required course work. Some, if not many, do this in order to complete an occupational-professional degree (eg, health professions) as quickly as possible, with as little effort and expenditure of energy in order to get into the workforce and start their careers.<sup>6</sup> Many higher education institutions expedite and encourage this process by offering accelerated and hybrid technology courses to meet the demands of the marketplace rather than developing well-rounded individuals capable of demonstrating workplace skills and social commitments. Certainly, there are times and places for accelerated and hybrid technology courses, but only when there is accountability for these programs.

Many higher education institutions now offer occupational-professional degree programs specifically designed to produce a sufficiently qualified pool of laborers for a given marketplace. This is done because the job market(s) (and the public they serve) demand properly educated and trained individuals in numerous fields (eg, business, education, engineering, health).<sup>6</sup> This in itself is not necessarily a terrible thing; however, the resultant paradigm shift has eroded away some of the fabric of education, causing an evolution leading many students to lose their way as to the purpose of higher education. Higher education is not a rite of passage, rather, higher education is a period of time in a student's life where one learns to evolve and mature, as well as appreciate his/her academic, professional, personal, and social responsibilities.

Higher education students and educators have forgotten that education is about not only learning to become a professional in a chosen degree or professional field, but also learning to become a lifelong learner as well as an able-bodied, well-rounded

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## Full Citation:

Berry D. Teaching and learning: Teaching RARE students. *Athl Train Educ J*. 2010;5(2):90-93

individual that contributes to the greater good of society. The competitiveness of higher education, professional preparation programs, and certain labor markets, while necessary to improve the quality of professionals and public safety, has also driven students to become obsessed with grades. Academic excellence (often reflected in grade point average [GPA]) is certainly a necessary contributor to professional and personal success and is without a doubt imperative for admission into any graduate professional program. Students, though, have come to expect that simply sitting through a whole semester's worth of lectures entitles them to an "A" in the course, regardless of their effort in the course. This sense of entitlement is potentially a generational issue with today's Millennial students.

Millennial generation students, think, behave, and engage in life much differently than Baby Boomers and Generation Xers.<sup>7</sup> Sometime referred to as the Trophy Generation<sup>8</sup> or Generation Y,<sup>7</sup> Millennial students have grown up sheltered and spared many of life's unpleasant experiences. As a group they are considered overly scheduled, spending more time working a job, participating in extra-curricular activities, and socializing than attending to classes and studying.<sup>7</sup> They are used to the "no one loses" or "everyone is a winner" philosophy which translates into earning something while not being accountable or responsible for anything.<sup>9</sup> This has come at a price because students often take on too many activities and then believe others (instructors and employers) should be flexible with them in negotiating scheduling conflicts so they can achieve and not be penalized for not getting things done in a timely fashion.

Millennial students have been pressured into achieving and being goal oriented by their Generation X parents who are known as "stealth parents."<sup>7</sup> However, Millennial students have a reticent commitment to homework and become shocked when they do not receive an A or B in their college courses.<sup>9</sup> They also believe the workplace should learn to conform to them, rather than adapting and respecting the needs of the workplace or the individuals whom they work for and alongside.

In higher education, this sense of entitlement and the need for educators (who are not Millennial students) to adapt to the students rather than the students adapting to the educator appears in conflict. Students need to understand the goals and expectations of an educator and the educator needs to understand the students' perspectives. Students must also understand that seat-time alone does not and should not translate into academic or even professional success.

Behaviors such as dedication, commitment, responsibility, accountability, and respect must be the driving force behind the development of successful, confident, achieving, and goal-oriented Millennial students. In fact, it is my firm belief, based on my observation of higher education students for the past ten years that students who demonstrate appropriate levels of respect, accountability, and responsibility will, by virtue of engaging in these behaviors, demonstrate a level of excellence necessary to succeed academically, professionally, personally, and socially.

However, these behaviors, which should be part of students' normal development, that have escaped many Millennial students during their progress through secondary education. Students have forgotten the fundamentals that constitute academic excellence. Until students are taught how to engage in and demonstrate appropriate levels of respect, accountability, responsibility, and excellence, many educators may end up fighting an uphill battle; struggling to deal with students who believe they have a sense of entitlement and believe that their actions and/or lack of actions are not their fault, but the fault of the educator.

For this reason I propose using the RARE model to educate students (Figure 1). The RARE model focuses on four basic tenets: (1) Responsibility, (2) Accountability, (3) Respectfulness, and (4) Excellence.

As students learn to model these behaviors, they begin to understand that academic and personal success is not going to be thrust upon them, rather it must be earned. They learn that a commitment to learning and life results in a level of excellence commensurate with the acceptance and willingness to be responsible, accountable, and respectful to themselves, their peers, and their instructors.

Selling this philosophy is not easy and will most likely be met with opposition and laughter. (It was when I proposed it for the first time.) However, creating a culture of academic and professional success requires changing not only the students' habits and attitudes toward learning and life, but also changing ours (educators) as well. I believe it is possible to change the Millennial students' perspective on academic engagement, but it takes consistent modeling and reminding of what it takes to be successful in higher education and life.



**Figure 1.** RARE Model

When introducing the RARE model it is necessary to stress to students that this is a collaborative approach to education and that “you [student] and I, as a team, will need to demonstrate and accomplish the following in order to be successful in life.” The following outlines the concept of being a RARE student.

### **Responsibility:**

This is the ability of the student to demonstrate responsibility to self, peers, and the instructor by making moral decisions (concerned with correct conduct) while remaining reliable and dependable.

As a responsible student:

- ▶ Peers are able to trust and depend on you. That is, you are reliable and complete task and projects when they were supposed to be done.
- ▶ Make rational and appropriate decisions in your own best interest during the semester in order to allow YOU to excel professionally.
- ▶ Make rational and appropriate decisions in your best interest during the semester in order for YOU to excel personally.

### **Accountability**

This is the ability of the student to demonstrate to themselves, peers, and instructors the ability to be obliged to account for your own action(s) and/or lack of action(s). For example:

- ▶ Accepting the consequences when you are at fault, rather than blaming others for your inaction.
- ▶ Taking time to reflect on actions and inactions during academic and clinical education experiences.
- ▶ Accepting corrective feedback and criticism, with the understanding that when it is offered it is in your best interest.

### **Respectfulness**

This is the ability of the student to demonstrate to themselves, peers, and instructors a minimal level of courteousness, feeling of friendship, level of being respected, sense of worth and dignity, and concern for one’s academic, professional, and personal well-being.

### **Excellence**

By virtue of engaging in the first three behaviors, the RARE student will hopefully demonstrate a degree of excellence or the “State or Quality of Excelling.” This is ultimately why students are enrolled in higher education, to reach the highest level of achievement

possible in order to promote professional and personnel success. As academicians we should not solely measure excellence via grade point average (GPA), Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores, or Board of Certification (BOC) passing rates, but by the level of commitment to professional and civic engagement while demonstrating the highest levels of respect, accountability, and responsibility, which some may say are the qualities of leadership.

When our students demonstrate high levels of academic, professional or civic excellence, we have succeeded! This success leads to improved institutional reputation and recognition as well as professional fulfillment for us as educators.

Getting students to demonstrate achievement and excellence takes more than simply lecturing for 50 minutes every day on a topic. It requires educators to discuss and model what it takes to be successful inside and outside of the classroom and demonstrating to students that academics come first and that organizational and professional activities should enhance the learning experience and not detract from what is learned in the classroom.<sup>11</sup> Thus, when I introduce this model to my students I remind them that as their facilitator, mentor, muse, and/or guide (whatever term you decide to use) through their academic journey that I too must remember to live by these principles. If I fail to model these behaviors I am a hypocrite and am no better than next individual.

As educators, we constantly strive for excellence, regardless of whether we teach in a liberal arts program or an occupational-professional program. It is clear that a disconnect between how the Baby Boomers or Generation Xers view education and life exists. However, if we want our students to succeed, it may be necessary to teach them more than the cognitive and psychomotor skills necessary to be successful. I remind my students that it is important that we work together as a unit, rather than independently for “Together we can strive to achieve, alone we are destined to fail.”

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