



# Volunteering In The “Real World”: How Millennials Are Connected

Mitzi Downing, IEI Faculty Fellow and Extension Assistant Professor, N.C. State University

November 2015

Ok, let’s admit this upfront – most of us don’t need a team of researchers to tell us that the typical 16-year old, 30-year old and 76-year old are different from one another. Everyone knows that. Generations are different, and although in some ways that’s easy to understand, in others ways it’s hard to completely describe those differences, much less grasp the reality of how those differences create a divide between generations.

The Millennial generation (also known as Gen Y, or Generation Me, born from 1980 to 2000) is made up of mostly teens and 20-somethings. At over 80 million strong, they are the largest age group in American history. And, while there are several notable micro-generations within the millennial group, launching as often as new iPhones and certainly faster than some of us can take and post a selfie, no one can debate that this cohort is on course to become the most educated generation in American history. Millennial are also the most racially and ethnically diverse generation, and the most technologically savvy yet.

*Millennials make up 25% of the U.S. population*

So, with all that going for Millennials, why is there such a debate brewing over their sense of individualism and perceived disengagement? And, does this ongoing debate relate to the findings of the [2015 North Carolina Civic Health Index](#) report (CHI)?

With those issues in mind, I decided to take a closer look at the CHI survey’s findings regarding North Carolina youth and young adults. According to the CHI survey, young Tar Heels lag behind older adults on several key indicators, like volunteerism, by over 25%. Well, that just didn’t seem to fit the image or the descriptions most of us have of our state’s Millennials. I would also venture to say that is not the image our state’s Millennials have of themselves.

## WHAT GETS MEASURED MATTERS... A LOT

Now, many of you are probably wondering, “What type of questions did the CHI survey ask our Millennials?” We’ve all been there, right? Think about a time you got it “all wrong” because you failed to ask the “right” questions. In my review I’ve found a few important distinctions that probably (almost certainly) made a difference in how Millennials answered the survey and some that might interfere with Millennials’ abilities to accurately describe the type(s) of volunteer efforts they participate in yearly.

For example, in the “Volunteering” section of the CHI survey, Millennials were asked if they have participated “in any volunteer activities through or for an organization.” Well, I don’t know about you, but that “question” itself seems a bit old school to me (and I’m a Gen X). “Have you participated in any volunteer activities through or for an organization?”



The “question” seems to imply that an individual must have formal relationship with an “organization” to volunteer - and let’s be honest, most Millennials who volunteer (even those who do so on a semi-regular basis) don’t always have a formal affiliation with the “organization” they volunteer with and/or even know who the “organization” is that is often benefiting from their service and/or donation.

Now, take a look at the “Volunteer” options the CHI survey provided us (if, that is, we got past the question): Provide Professional or Management Assistance; Collect, Prepare and/or Distribute Food; Engage in General Labor; Coach and or Referee; Mentor Youth; Tutor and/or Teach; and Provide General Office Services. Come on, survey designers, get real! This looks like a list of volunteer options that we would have seen on a survey from the 1970s, not 2015.

In 2012, DoSomething.org, the largest U.S. organization for teens and social change, released “The DoSomething.org Index on Young People & Volunteering.” Researchers collected data from more than 4,300 internet-using 13- to 22-year-olds and found that more than half of young people (54.2 percent) volunteered, compared to the 22.5% seen in the federal data.

Perhaps changing how we define “volunteering” is more important than ever before. The survey by DoSomething.org used a definition of volunteering that “encompasses work done for no pay for any group or organization, with friends, or by oneself,” and they broadened their volunteer options to include things like fundraising and modern day causes like animal rights and environmental stewardship.

So, we have two reports telling us very different things. One report, the CHI, uses historical verbiage and an “old school” listing of volunteer opportunities. The other report speaks the language of our Millennials. Perhaps the CHI survey is not accurately depicting our Millennials’ engagement? This means that youth and young adults are volunteering in unconventional ways that aren’t being captured by traditional volunteer research surveys like CHI.

## NEW AND UNIQUE WAYS OF VOLUNTEERING

As older adults, when we see Millennials listening to iPods, texting friends, or watching TV, we may regard them as self-absorbed or disconnected, but the reality is that young people are giving back in more ways than we could have imagined or that even existed ten years ago. Young adults and youth alike are choosing the causes they identify with and supporting them. And, if there is not a formal cause organized, they are organizing the cause. They are joining causes on Facebook, sharing ideas for service and social change on sites like Doing Good Together, and posting selfie’s on Snapchat while volunteering not to be vain but instead to encourage their peers to volunteer too. They are embracing the traditional ideals of volunteerism and service, but they are finding new and unique ways of doing so.

*85% of Millennials  
(age 18 – 24) own a  
smartphone*

Our daily work and social lives are connected, so why then shouldn’t our volunteer lives be just as connected? Social interaction is paramount to today’s youth and young adults and their volunteer efforts reflect this notion. According to the DoSomething.org survey, a huge majority (75.9%) of youth whose friends volunteer on a regular basis also volunteer. Thus, the social nature of volunteering mixed with the national trend of episodic (short-term) volunteerism is a theme that interjects another interesting angle in our conversation.

Millennials volunteer and participate in many ways that are not always recognized as traditional volunteer efforts, and they often do so in groups (e.g., peer, family, clubs, etc.). “Anyone can volunteer...and you never think you’re going to bond with people who are much older or younger than you,” says Kate (age 23), “but it happens,” and that’s what makes volunteering so cool. Volunteering allows each of us the opportunity to leverage whatever signature strengths we have and to channel them in a way that matters most to us.

Today's Millennials take part in local pet walks to raise money for animal rights; clean up local rivers and greenways in support of environmental stewardship; host "Two Lunch Tuesdays" where a group pools what they spend on lunch and donates the money to a local food pantry, hunger relief organization, or other worthy cause; and run/walk in local races that support a variety of causes like "The Color Run" (the "happiest 5k on the planet") that combines a healthy fitness challenge with bright color chalk paint, music, lights, and – you guessed it – lots of socializing!

*"Anyone can volunteer... and you never think you're going to bond with people who are much older, or younger, than you, but it happens!"*  
(Matthew, age 23)

Millennials are also raising funds, and I mean big bucks too! According to the DoSomething.org research, the #1 way youth and young adults are volunteering today is through fundraising. Perhaps we need to thank the Millennials for the billions of dollars raised by local charities via on-line donations last year. In addition, Millennials actively seek out companies that "give back" when they make purchases (take TOMS for instance) and they are loyal to brands that stand for more than their bottom line.

## TIME FOR NEW MEASURES

Perhaps the debate over why our Millennials are so "disengaged" needs to be re-framed. The questions really need to surround "How do we define volunteerism today?" and "Why are we so stuck on measuring volunteerism in 'old school' ways?"

The concepts of volunteering, helping others, and service will never grow old, but how we go about doing those things has and will continue to change.

## RESOURCES, WEBSITES & OTHER INTERESTING READS

All Together Now: Collaboration and Innovation for Youth Engagement: The Report of the Commission on Youth Voting and Civic Knowledge. (2013). Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. Retrieved from: <http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/CIRCLE-youthvoting-individualPages.pdf>

Brookshire, D., Graham-Brown, A., Cronin, P., & Mosnier, J. (2015). North Carolina Civic Health Index. Institute for Emerging Issues. Retrieved from: <http://iei.ncsu.edu/emerging-issues/innovation-reconstructed/2015-forum-resources/2015-nc-civic-health-index/>

Connecting Youth and Strengthening Communities: The Data Behind Civic Engagement and Economic Opportunity. (2014). Opportunity Nation. Retrieved from: <http://opportunitynation.org/app/uploads/2014/09/Opportunity-Nation-Civic-Engagement-Report-2014.pdf>

Do Something Good Together. <http://www.doinggoodtogether.org>

Pew Research Center – Social and Demographic Trends. (2014). Millennials in Adulthood: Detached From Institutions, Networked with Friends. Retrieved from: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/Millennials-in-adulthood/>

Rainie, L & Wellman, B. (2012) Networked: The New Social Operating System. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

The DoSomething.org Index on Young People & Volunteering. (2012). Retrieved from: [https://www.dosomething.org/sites/default/files/blog/2012-Web-Singleview\\_0.pdf](https://www.dosomething.org/sites/default/files/blog/2012-Web-Singleview_0.pdf)

Twenge, J., Freeman, E., & Campbell, K. (2012). Generational Differences in Young Adults' Life Goals, Concern for Others, and Civic Orientation. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102 (5), 1045 – 1062.

