

# Examining the Helicopter Professor Label

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By Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Here's a



comment that's got me thinking.

Kristie McAllum writes in *Communication Education*, "We have created a system that simply replaces helicopter parents with helicopter professors. . . . Through our constant availability to clarify criteria, explain instructions, provide micro-level feedback, and offer words of encouragement, we nourish millennials' craving for continuous external affirmations of success and reduce their resilience in the face of challenges or failure."

There's no question that teachers can do too much for students. We can take already dependent learners and make them more so. And there's also no question that teachers can fail to do enough for students. We can withhold the guidance and support that makes learning experiences positive and constructive. The more interesting question is how we know whether we are doing too much or not enough. It's a question that applies to individual courses, the programs to which they belong, and within our institutions.



Unfortunately, we can't be sure about the accuracy of student feedback when they tell us what they need. If they tend to be dependent learners, as many of our students are, they will happily encourage us to make all the decisions about learning, thereby excusing them from making any decisions. And if we aren't providing enough guidance, they probably won't divulge that half the time spent working on an assignment was devoted to trying to figure out what we wanted.

Are there other benchmarks we could use to determine if we're doing too much or too little? Could we look at individual policies and practices? Does extra credit coddle students? What about dropping the lowest score? What if teacher feedback is only provided on the final version of the term paper? Should we call on students who very

obviously don't want to participate? Or, must individual policies and practices be considered in light of course content and who's enrolled in the course? Do students need more support when the content is especially challenging or requires sophisticated skills they have yet to develop? Does it matter whether the course is one taken by beginning students, majors, students fulfilling a general education requirement, first-generation students, or seniors in a capstone? Are there good reasons to do more for beginning students and less for seniors?

And what about individual differences? Our tendency to broadly categorize students by generation (Generation X, millennials) makes me nervous. This tendency allows for convenient groupings, but it also makes stereotyping an easy next step. Not all students fit in any group and to assume that all millennials act entitled and only want praise can result in approaches to teaching that don't work for some or even most of the students in any given class.

Most of the characteristics attributed to millennial students are not positive, perhaps deservedly, although it's hard to believe they don't have at least a couple commendable features. But whatever we believe about them—they need support and praise, or they need rules and accountability—ends up influencing how we approach them, the policies we adopt, and the strategies we use. We need to be clear in our thinking about who belongs in that group and what best serves the learning of those who do and don't display the group's typical characteristics.

I don't think there's much chance of reaching consensus in a conversation about how closely teachers, programs, and institutions should hover around students. It's easy to see the error of the extremes, but where's the middle? We need a place between the two and a balance of both, but where that place is or how that balance is determined—now that's what we need to be talking about, even if we end up disagreeing.

Currently, being labeled a helicopter parent or professor is not an accolade. But as we consider our relationships with students and their learning needs, we need to remember that hovering is what makes helicopters unique and useful. They just need to do it at a safe distance and that's the distance we need to discover.

Reference: Kristie McAllum, (2016) Managing imposter syndrome among the "Trophy Kids": Creating teaching practices that develop independence in millennial students. *Communication Education*, 65 (3), 363-365.



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