

Values are key to enticing Generation Z students

Attracting a new generation means learning and revamping your approach



Generation Z demands more from organizations than any previous generation. Is your institution prepared to deliver?

Strategies that worked for your school in the past may not be as successful with the latest group of college and university students. You may want to retool your approach and stand out with programs, recruitment and communication that align with Gen Z needs and values.

Understanding Gen Z students is critical to enticing them to choose your institution — and to keeping them happy once they're enrolled. These curated insights will help you create a better campus experience by explaining who Gen Zers are and how they think differently about higher education, technology, consumer behavior and more.

Who are Gen Zers?

People categorized as Gen Z were born between about 1996 and 2011. The Great Recession, school shootings, a growing climate crisis and the pandemic shaped this age group during members' most formative years.

Generation Z is the most globally diverse generation in history. With new immigrants arriving in the U.S. and joining the Gen Z population, Gen Z is likely to become majority nonwhite by 2026 — the first generation to reach this milestone in the U.S.¹

Immigration among Hispanics is driving this change. In fact, Gen Z Hispanics are more likely to be second generation rather than immigrants themselves. As such, they're more likely to stick with high school and more likely to attend college.²

You can build your brand in the eyes of Gen Z by publishing data regularly about the makeup of your faculty and student populations by race, gender, ethnicity and more.

At the same time, Gen Z's diversity reaches far beyond race and ethnicity. This generation thinks differently about many topics, such as individuality, politics, religion, gender, communities, social groups ... and education.

WHAT'S INSIDE:

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¹ *The New Generation of Students: How colleges can recruit, teach, and serve Gen Z*, The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2018. http://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/NextGenStudents_ExecutiveSummary_v5%20_2019.pdf

² Gutierrez, Sam. *Momentive study: consumer purchasing decisions*, Survey Monkey, retrieved July 26, 2022. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/momentive-study-consumer-purchasing-decisions/>

Gen Zers are reevaluating their education priorities

Generation Z is facing unprecedented financial challenges, with rising inflation plus student debt and housing prices at all-time highs. This uncertainty hits a nerve — after all, this is the generation that watched its parents cope with the Great Recession. Add the pandemic wildcard and increasing economic and environmental stress, and Gen Zers are scrambling to reevaluate the typical approach to college.

Although Gen Zers are more likely to pursue higher education than previous generations, a traditional four-year college education is not the foregone conclusion it has been in decades past. In a survey of 3,000 Gen Z teenagers, just 25% said that they believed the only way to get a good job was the four-year-college model.³

This generation doesn't see college as an opportunity for mere enrichment, and on-campus housing and amenities don't motivate them. Instead, Gen Zers want academic programs, support, gathering spaces and resources that will give them an education they can apply immediately, with skills that will make them marketable over the long term.⁴

What's more, student debt has grown by around \$600 billion since 2013 — and Gen Z knows it.⁵

It's not all bad news for higher education though. Gen Zers are still likely to go to college — even more so than previous generations. In many cases, that's because their parents did.

In 2019, 44% of U.S. kids were being raised in a household led by a college graduate.⁷ Those parental figures have a heavy influence in the plans of their Gen Z teenagers: Around that same time, 57% of recent high school graduates were enrolled in two- or four-year colleges.⁸

Their parents probably held down part-time jobs back when they were in high school, but fewer 15- to 17-year-olds are employed now than past generations were at that age.⁹

Instead, they're strengthening their college applications with schoolwork, extracurricular activities and sports. Every day, most Gen Z students are balancing more than their parents' generation did. That's largely because technology makes it possible for Gen Z to be “always on.”

Weighing the cost-benefit ratio of continuing their education, Gen Z students are choosing more affordable options that enable them to put their knowledge to work quickly, such as:



White-collar vocational competence
Prospective employees are opting to build skills by training in industries like technology, banking and insurance, where companies offer apprenticeship programs that can lead to lucrative jobs.⁶

Apprenticeships
The number of people in apprenticeships nearly doubled between 2012 and 2019 to more than 700,000.

Community colleges and credentials
Registration in short-term, credential-related classes increased by 70% during the pandemic, while freshman enrollment at four-year universities was down 16%.

³ Burt, Chris. “Gen Z leery of 4-year degree paths, surveys show,” University Business. February 24, 2021. <https://universitybusiness.com/gen-z-leery-of-4-year-degree-paths-surveys-show/>

⁴ The New Generation of Students: How colleges can recruit, teach, and serve Gen Z, The Chronicle of Higher Education. 2018. http://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/NextGenStudents_ExecutiveSummary_v5%20_2019.pdf

⁵ Millennials and Gen Z Are Rethinking the Value of a College Education, Wall Street Journal. November 18, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/millennials-and-gen-z-are-rethinking-the-value-of-a-college-education-11605734014>

⁶ Millennials and Gen Z Are Rethinking the Value of a College Education, Wall Street Journal. November 18, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/millennials-and-gen-z-are-rethinking-the-value-of-a-college-education-11605734014>

⁷ Statistics Snapshot: Generation Z and Education, Annie E. Casey Foundation. October 2020. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-education>

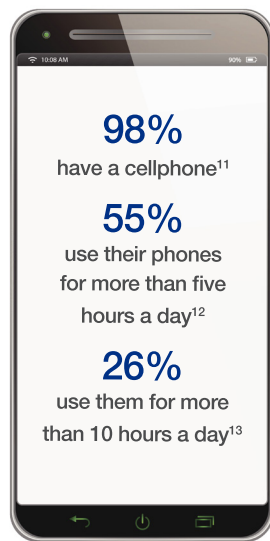
⁸ Statistics Snapshot: Generation Z and Education, Annie E. Casey Foundation. October 2020. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-education>

⁹ Statistics Snapshot: Generation Z and Education, Annie E. Casey Foundation. October 2020. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-education>



Technology makes Gen Z communication and learning possible

The first generation to have been born in the internet age, Gen Zers rely heavily on everything from computers and mobile devices to games and learning management systems. Cellphones lead the way, with the average Gen Zer checking theirs more than 80 times a day.¹⁰



Gen Zers routinely use multiple devices at once. For example, almost all of them (95%) use another device while streaming/watching TV.¹⁴

Those statistics prove that these digital natives make quick decisions about whether or how long to engage with content.

If you want Gen Zers to stay interested, keep it short. Whether it's in video, online or print content, get to the point fast before you lose your Gen Z reader's attention.

Such reliance on technology served Gen Z students particularly well in the pandemic when institutions moved from in-person to online learning — a format that propelled a shift from print to digital course materials, which Gen Z students prefer because of their instant access, convenience and affordability.¹⁵

Spending less on course materials may ease the financial burden that makes Gen Z students so dependent on loans, and that could increase program-completion or graduation rates. For a generation rethinking whether college is even an option, digital course materials — which are as much as 90% cheaper than new printed books — could be the difference between pursuing college or not.¹⁶

Institutions and publishers recognize that embracing digital course materials is one effective way to entice Gen Zers, especially since the pandemic accelerated digital adoption. Courses that offered only printed materials declined by 35% between fall 2019 and spring 2022 for example. At the same time, digital-only courses tripled — a sign that Gen Z's technology prowess is transforming higher education.¹⁷

¹⁰ Parker, Kim. Igielnik, Ruth. *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far*, Pew Research Center. May 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>

¹¹ Parker, Kim. Igielnik, Ruth. *On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Gen Z So Far*, Pew Research Center. May 2020. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/14/on-the-cusp-of-adulthood-and-facing-an-uncertain-future-what-we-know-about-gen-z-so-far-2/>

¹² LeDuc, Daniel. Who is Generation Z, The Pew Charitable Trusts. May 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2019/who-is-generation-z>

¹³ LeDuc, Daniel. Who is Generation Z, The Pew Charitable Trusts. May 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2019/who-is-generation-z>

¹⁴ LeDuc, Daniel. Who is Generation Z, The Pew Charitable Trusts. May 2019. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2019/who-is-generation-z>

¹⁵ Student survey by Follett Higher Education, winter 2021. Survey participants included students that ranged from freshman to senior+, graduate, and non-degree students with the majority indicating a full-time student status.

¹⁶ Follett internal data, January 2022.

¹⁷ Follett internal data, March 2022.

Social media both reaches and connects Gen Zers

That enthusiasm for technology enables Gen Z's preoccupation with social media. Scrolling multiple platforms is more than an everyday activity: The average Gen Zer spends about three hours a day on social media.¹⁸

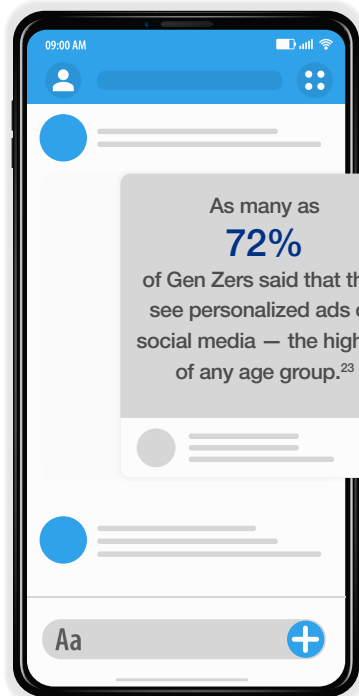
Gen Zers see that social media has a downside, with 18% of students reporting they've had unhealthy social media habits in the past month.¹⁹ As many as 44% said that social media has made their mental health worse.²⁰

On the other hand, Gen Z finds consumer support on social media. They're becoming the most important consumer bracket in the U.S.²¹ They research companies, products and services to inform their buying decisions — and 72% depend on social media as a source of pre-purchase information and product research.²²

Gen Z's constant social media use is good for organizations too. Targeted marketing efforts are likely to reach the Gen Z audience because companies and institutions have unprecedented access to them. The proof:

Social media is an enormous opportunity for universities. Gen Z wants to see your school's personality and flair, and platforms like TikTok and Instagram are ideal places for you to show them. Rather than focusing on expensive, polished videos and glossy brochures, consider posting short-form video content created by administrators, faculty and students.

Winning them over isn't easy. Be mindful of sharing memes and other content that has a limited shelf life. If you're not right on time, your efforts at being catchy will backfire. Gen Z commits only to institutions and brands that prove that they're worth Gen Zers' valuable time, energy and money.



As many as **72%** of Gen Zers said that they see personalized ads on social media — the highest of any age group.²³

72% of Gen Zers said that they'd more readily make a purchase from brands they follow on social media.²⁴

47% of Gen Zers who follow brands on Instagram have purchased something directly through the platform.²⁵

75% of Gen Zers said that they engage with brands on Instagram.²⁶



¹⁸ *Population Projections Datasets*, United States Census Bureau. October 2021. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popproj/data/datasets.html>

¹⁹ Student survey by Follett Higher Education, winter 2021. Survey participants included students that ranged from freshman to senior+, graduate, and non-degree students with the majority indicating a full-time student status.

²⁰ *Statistics Snapshot: Generation Z and Education*, Annie E. Casey Foundation. October 2020. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-education>

²¹ Student survey by Follett Higher Education, spring 2022.

²² Gutierrez, Sam. *Momentive study: consumer purchasing decisions*, Survey Monkey, retrieved July 26, 2022. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/momentive-study-consumer-purchasing-decisions/>

²³ *Statistics Snapshot: Generation Z and Education*, Annie E. Casey Foundation. October 2020. <https://www.aecf.org/blog/generation-z-and-education>

²⁴ Cullen, Katherine. How brands can use social to connect with Gen Z, National Retail Federation. July 23, 2021. <https://nrf.com/blog/how-brands-can-use-social-connect-gen-z>

²⁵ Cullen, Katherine. How brands can use social to connect with Gen Z, National Retail Federation. July 23, 2021. <https://nrf.com/blog/how-brands-can-use-social-connect-gen-z>

²⁶ Cullen, Katherine. How brands can use social to connect with Gen Z, National Retail Federation. July 23, 2021. <https://nrf.com/blog/how-brands-can-use-social-connect-gen-z>

Passion affects their consumer behavior

A highly motivated generation, Gen Z pays more attention than ever to causes and authenticity. They think critically about mission, ethics and impact, all of which shape their behavior as consumers.

When Gen Zers support a brand, that brand is a reflection of their own values. Similarly, this generation chooses universities that align with their values. Gen Z expects you to communicate your values clearly and demonstrate commitment.

When you're communicating with Gen Zers, accountability is key. For example, if your school experienced a negative event or bad publicity, own it. If they're going to trust your institution, Gen Z needs to see how you take responsibility.

Expect Gen Z to demand transparency and action from organizations. Climate change is Gen Z's top concern, with 44% saying it's number one on their list of worries.²⁷ Sustainability must be woven through a brand, company or institution rather than a buzzword on a website.

For example, in a 2022 survey of more than 14,000 students, *The Princeton Review* found that 74% of college applicants said a college's environmental commitment would affect their choice of schools.²⁸

Gen Zers are confident they can reduce climate change, and they back up their concern with their money. Before purchasing or committing to a brand, Gen Zers want to understand a company's mission, where its products and services come from, its environmental impact and how it treats its workers — and 65% said that they try to learn these details about the products they buy.

61%
of Gen Zers are willing to pay more for ethically and sustainably produced products²⁹

78%
said that they purchase products from companies they consider ethical³⁰

In addition to climate change, Gen Zers strongly support causes like human rights, antiracism, gender identity, LGBTQ+ issues and feminism. They'll pay a premium for brands that demonstrate they're also committed to these causes.

Gen Zers watch for public evidence of support for their causes from all kinds of organizations, including higher education. Consider holding campus events and community conversations or engaging in partnerships and branded products. These are all opportunities to showcase how your organization rises to the standards of Gen Z students.

Summary

For decades, colleges and universities have aimed to improve their offerings as new generations emerge. With Generation Z, you'll need to adapt more than you ever have — but your investment and effort will pay off.

Show that you understand Gen Zers' priorities by revamping your strategies in recruitment, programs, activities and even course format. Your institution can attract Gen Zers today by highlighting how you understand them, meet their needs and expectations, and align with their values.

²⁷ Dennington M.D., Alan. Gen Ztressed: A New Generation of College Students, timelyMD. May 2021. <https://timely.md/blog/generation-z-college-students/>

²⁸ 2022 College Hopes & Worries Survey Report, The Princeton Review. March 2022. <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/college-hopes-worries>

²⁹ Trndstrs Media Agency. <https://www.trndstrs.com/>

³⁰ Francis, Tracy & Hoefel, Fernanda. 'True Gen': Generation Z and its implications for companies, McKinsey & Company. November 2018. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies>



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