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In Practice

Generation Z: Educating and Engaging the Next Generation of Students

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We love feedback. Send letters to executive editor Frank Shushok Jr. (aboutcampus@vt.edu), and please copy him on notes to authors.

Corey Seemiller and Meghan Grace share some insights from their book, *Generation Z Goes to College*, about how our current cohort of traditional-aged students like to learn, engage, and serve.

In 1995, the Internet was born. So, too, was Generation Z. With so many books, articles, and research studies focused on Millennials, this younger, lesser-known generation grew up right before our eyes without much fanfare. The oldest of this post-Millennial generation arrived to college in 2013, and more than four years later, Generation Z students fill our classrooms, campus programs, and residence halls.

In order to recruit, educate, and graduate this new generational cohort effectively, educators must understand the overarching characteristics, perspectives, and styles of these students. Although not everyone born in a generational period shares the same values or experiences, they do share a common context that shapes their worldview. Thus, generational research can provide institutions with valuable information to design effective policies, programs, and practices.

Generation Z piqued our interest in 2013, when the first cohort of students was arriving to college. At that point, little research was available about Generation Z and higher education. In 2014, we decided to conduct a study of more than 750 Generation Z students from 15 institutions of varying sizes and types across the country. Our study provided insights on this generation's perspectives, styles, preferences, concerns, and beliefs as they related to politics, spirituality, motivation, communication, social issues, community engagement, relationships, leadership, and learning. We supplemented our findings with emerging generational research, market research, social and behavioral science studies, and national polling data. We present our study's findings, as well as results from several large studies that include more than 150,000 students, in our 2016 book, *Generation Z Goes to College*. This research shows that while Generation Z shares some characteristics with Millennials, it is a vastly different generational cohort. Current campus environments have been designed for previous generations, which do not and cannot fully meet the needs, interests, and learning preferences of Generation Z students.

Understanding Generation Z

Born from 1995 through 2010, Generation Z has been profoundly shaped by the advancement of technology, issues of violence, a volatile economy, and social justice movements. While these issues also have affected those in other generations, the historical context of these individuals is much deeper than those in Generation Z, who may have never known anything different.

Through smartphones, broadband Internet access at home, or an online connection at school, Generation Z students have had access to more information than any other generation at their age. Anything they want to know is only a click away. Yet they also recognize threats online, such as identity theft, cyber-bullying, and phishing. Because of these issues, they have learned to embrace privacy in their use of technology. One student in our study shared, "There is considerable comfort behind a computer screen ... as long as I am being very careful of the information I divulge." Their digitally infused social DNA plays a role in what makes Generation Z unique, but do not be mistaken in thinking that being digitally savvy is all that defines them.

Generation Z students also grew up post-9/11, having witnessed a crumbling economy, widespread public shootings, and ongoing violence and terrorism abroad and in the United States. The Internet and social media offer intimate details of these types of events, instilling fear and worry in many students. One student in our study said, "At any time of any day, I know that anyone could commit any act of violence to me or others around me, and that I am never safe."

Despite this uncertainty and fear, Generation Z students believe that they have the power to change the world. Social justice issues prominent in their lifetime, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as policy debates on immigration, religious freedom, transgender rights, and women's rights, have fueled the fire for many Generation Z students to strive for equal human rights. One student captures the sentiment of many in saying, "I feel like in the 21st century everyone should have the same rights no matter what color, race, ethnic group, [or] sexual orientation." These issues have likely contributed to what we discovered in our research as their "we"-centered mentality, one in which the majority of their concerns center around the well-being of everyone rather than solely themselves.

Understanding Generation Z's characteristics and context can provide insight into what has influenced the perspectives of this new generation of college students. So, what exactly are their perspectives when it comes to learning, engaging in their communities, and fulfilling their career aspirations?

Learning Preferences

No different from generations before them, Generation Z's focus when coming to college is to learn and acquire the skills necessary for their future careers. Learning for them, however, is markedly different from that of previous generations. Findings from Northeastern University's *Innovation Survey* highlight that Generation Z students prefer to engage in hands-on learning opportunities in which they can immediately apply what they learn to real life. One Generation Z student from our study described the ideal learning environment as “need[ing] to be actively doing the learning to obtain the most information.”

Although students of all ages might prefer applied learning, two specific aspects stand out for Generation Z students. First, we found that Generation Z students are *observers*. They like to watch others complete tasks before applying the learning themselves. One student said, “To learn something, I prefer watching someone do it correctly, then make an attempt to do just the same.” This approach is reflected in Generation Z students' affinity for seeking information through video. As one student described: “If I don't understand something or if I need to watch something to help me ... I'll look it up on YouTube.” You might see a Generation Z student watching someone make lasagna in a video rather than reading a recipe posted online. A student in our study illustrates their desire to learn through video content, saying, “I am exposed to many videos that allow me to learn a variety of things ... from strength training to how to make food and so on.”

Generation Z students also want to know that the concepts they are learning have *broader applicability* to more than just a practice example. One student discussed the importance of being “able to apply [learning] in a variety of everyday life settings,” and another shared about “grasping concepts and applying them to other problems.”

In addition to their desire for applied learning, Generation Z students have a preference for intrapersonal learning. The individual nature of technology has helped Generation Z become comfortable and accustomed to learning independently. Whether reading an article or an eBook, completing an online module, or watching an instructional video, students can typically engage in many educational practices in an individual setting. The market research firm, Sparks and Honey, in *Meet Gen Z: Forget Everything You Learned about Millennials*, reported that 85% of those in Generation Z have engaged in research online to complete an assignment, likely without the need for interpersonal interaction. Not only are they accustomed to engaging in individual learning, our study found that these students prefer it because they can focus, set their own pace, and make meaning of their learning before having to share that meaning with others. One said, “I prefer to learn independently, involving others only when I must.”

Generation Z's intrapersonal approach to learning differs drastically from the teamwork-oriented and collaborative nature of Millennials, as Carina Paine Schofield and Sue Honore describe in *Generation Y and Learning*. However, just because they prefer intrapersonal learning does not mean abandoning collaborative group work with these students. We should be mindful of their reasons for preferring intrapersonal learning when we design group experiences. For example, Generation Z students view peers and instructors as valuable resources and like to have the option to work with others on their own terms, often after they have had a chance to think through a concept, problem, or project on their own.

Community Engagement

Generation Z students' perspectives on community engagement also seems to be different from those of previous generations. Findings from the Higher Education Research Institute's 2014 *CIRP Freshman Survey*, by Kevin Eagan, Ellen Bara Stolzenberg, Joseph J. Ramirez, Melissa C. Aragon, Maria Ramirez Suchard, and Sylvia Hurtado, report that fewer than 34% of Generation Z students in their first few weeks of college indicated that there was a very good chance they would engage in volunteer work in college despite the fact that nearly 60% of them participated in some required form of community service during high school. Their interest in volunteerism appears low as they are not seeking out traditional community service opportunities like their

Millennial counterparts. Instead, we found that community engagement opportunities that make a lasting impact on an underlying societal problem appeal more to Generation Z students than do short-term volunteer experiences that address the symptoms of that problem. For example, instead of volunteering five hours a week at the food bank, Generation Z students would rather engage in a social change initiative aimed at eradicating hunger. This is evidenced in our most recent qualitative study of more than 1300 Generation Z students from 50 institutions, the *Generation Z Stories Project*, students shared examples of how their generation plans to change the world by solving complex problems. One student shared, "Our generation is extremely innovative and will be able to create solutions to many different problems that have been addressed in ways that have previously not worked."

The social change mentality of Generation Z students can serve as a motivator to get them involved in other forms of community engagement if given the opportunity. In *The 2013 Gallup-Hope Index*, researchers found that nearly 40% of Generation Z students want to change the world by inventing something, and Sparks and Honey reported in *Meet Gen Z: Forget Everything You Learned about Millennials* that nearly half want to work for themselves in their lifetimes. This interest in innovation and entrepreneurship opens up opportunities for higher education to offer a wider variety of community engagement experiences. For example, opportunities for students to create social change through developing technology, drafting a business plan, or accessing start-up funding may align with how Generation Z students see themselves engaging in and affecting their communities.

Career Aspirations

Generation Z students are coming of age in an era that is known as the gig economy, which the *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, in an article by Elka Torpey and Andrew Hogan, defines as an economy comprised of workers who engage in freelance work rather than holding long-term contracts with one employer. According to findings from the *Freelancing in America: 2016* study by the independent contractor site, Upwork and the Freelancers Union, 55 million people engaged in freelancing in 2016. This context might help explain why many Generation Z students want to work for themselves after college. However, these students know that they have a lot to learn about entrepreneurship as nearly two-thirds think that colleges and universities should teach students skills they can use to run a business, according to findings from Northeastern University's *Innovation Survey*. Their desire for self-employment as a career might affect their major and course selection along with their use of the career center for job preparation.

It is not just where and how they will work that is important to Generation Z students. In our *Generation Z Stories Project*, students shared stories of the importance of having happiness and enjoyment in their careers, even at the expense of earning money. One student noted that what is most important in a future career is to have "a true passion and love for it—the money just needs to be enough to live off of," and another said, "I'm not necessarily worried about money or 'measured success,' because if I feel good about the work I'm doing and get that sense of fulfillment, everything else will come." This sentiment is a bit different from that of Millennials who were willing to go into a career field that they were not as interested in if it meant getting a job and being in a growth industry, as shared by Arthur Levine in Tamar Lewin's report, *Digital Natives and their Customs*. Instead of helping students explore only their interests and viable career options, educators may also need to help students engage in self-exploration of their values and passions as they search for their greater meaning in life.

And whether they plan to work for an organization or as entrepreneurs after college, Generation Z students value hands-on opportunities that prepare them for career success. A total of 79% believe that practical experiences like internships are essential in a college education, according to Northeastern University's *Innovation Survey*. Thus, many will likely seek out multiple internships during their college years as a means to gain connections, experience, and skills that they can leverage in any future occupation.

Four Things Campuses Can Do to Effectively Engage With Generation Z

1. Utilize video-based learning: Capitalize on Generation Z's interest in learning through observation by using videos and other visuals to help explain a theory or concept or to demonstrate a challenging process. Videos of effective speakers, such as TED Talks, can also bring content to life and help students ponder difficult questions. In addition, apps like Jing and Camtasia, which allow users to make voice-over instructional videos, can be useful for prerecording videos to help students understand a process, such as filling out student organization paperwork or completing a class project successfully.
2. Incorporate intrapersonal learning into class and group work: Consider breaking a project into multiple "checkpoints" along the way that provide opportunities for individual learning and reflection before having students complete group "checkpoints" later in the process. In addition, have students engage in what Frank Lyman calls *Think-Pair-Share* in which students reflect on information before discussing it with a partner and ultimately sharing it with the larger group. Finally, intrapersonal learning fits nicely with a flipped learning approach. Rather than assigning homework, which often is done after the learning occurs, have students prereflect on content to prepare them for the upcoming session.
3. Offer community engagement opportunities for students to address underlying societal needs: For example, offer case competitions in which students compete in developing business plans designed to solve a local issue, set up hack-a-thons and ask students to develop technology to address a social issue, or provide seed money to start businesses with a social mission.
4. Connect Generation Z students to internship opportunities: Because Generation Z students want their educational experience to incorporate practical learning opportunities from the beginning, they may not want to wait until their later college years to acquire an internship. Thus, it may be beneficial for institutions to offer on- and off-campus internship opportunities that are developmentally appropriate for younger or less-experienced students.

Reflections

The most important lesson we have learned, both from our research and from our experiences with Generation Z students, is that this generation is a unique cohort whose needs, expectations, perspectives, and aspirations are different from those who entered college before them. One student in our *Generation Z Stories Project* sums up this generation when saying, "This attitude of 'if we don't do it, nobody will, and I want to be the one to' ... seems to drive many of the people in my generation to make a difference in the world and accomplish individual greatness. I believe coming from this place of enthusiasm for greater perception, variation, and progression will allow my generation to improve the world in all ways it needs to be improved better than any generation has before." Higher education can either adopt philosophies and practices that educate, mobilize, empower, and prepare Generation Z to solve our world's problems or miss the opportunity to influence significantly the great minds of our next great generation.

Biographies

COREY SEEMILLER is a faculty member in the Department of Leadership Studies in Education and Organizations at Wright State University. She is the author of *The Student Leadership*

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NOTES

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