
**Gen Z - Know them, reach them, recruit them,
and the consequences should we fail**

Kelly O'Brien
Bowling Green State University

Michelle Brodke
Bowling Green State University

The first-generation members of Gen Z, once on track to become the most educated cohort in history, have veered off course, with many now pursuing alternative paths. This alarming shift in trajectory necessitates our immediate attention. In this paper, we aim to introduce scholars and practitioners to Gen Z, illuminate potential causes for this shift, propose recruiting methods aligned with generational preferences, and outline the potential consequences if this trend persists. The implications for the U.S. economy and Gen Z members without a college degree could be severe. However, there is still a window of opportunity, as nearly half of this cohort is still in grade/high school. The authors present alternative career paths and strategies to engage Gen Z.

Introduction

As Baby Boomers and Generation X age out and exit the workplace, many institutions and industries have done little to prepare for the coming shift in the workforce. Generation Y, or Millennials, have become the largest part of the workforce and moved into leadership roles. Generation Z, or Gen Z, is just starting to make career choices and move into the workplace with very different expectations. Considering institutions and industries will rise and fall with this incoming cohort, it is essential to understand what sets them apart from previous generations.

The disruptive nature of the COVID-19 pandemic forced colleges and universities to transform to meet the needs of their students quickly; however, the bureaucracy of higher education generally prevents academic institutions from having the agility required to match industries' workforce needs, take advantage of federal funding opportunities, and meet Gen Z's need for real-world skills directly tied to a career path. Agile colleges and universities adapt and respond not only quickly but proactively by adopting

policies and procedures that allow them to take advantage of resources as they become available, and modify existing programs, or add programs that prepare students through workforce development opportunities and understanding employment needs (McCully, & McDaniel, 2007; Baim, 2019; Qtairi & Alshoraty, 2022; Hoyt & Jones, 2023).

Although the dates for identifying Gen Z vary from study to study, Fry and Parker (2018) offer that Gen Z includes people born from 1995 to 2015. They further note that this is a racially diverse, large generation (52% non-Hispanic white and 20% of the population); additionally, Della Volpe (2022) found Gen Z has strong feelings about social, environmental, and political issues. However, many Gen Z are opting out of post-secondary education and struggling to find a career path. A generation without education is disastrous to the U.S. economy and potentially to each cohort member. Fortunately, a significant portion of this cohort is still in middle and high school, so there is still time to act.

Post-Secondary Educational Expectations and Gen Zs' Concerns

Gen Z sees the purpose of education as to prepare them, in very practical ways, for life after high school – and yet, overwhelmingly, they feel like their K-12 education did not prepare them adequately to enter today's world (Della Volpe, 2022). This cohort appreciates a more practical try-it-and-see approach to learning, unlike the sit, listen, and trust authority mentality of generations past (Gelford & Kahl, 2014; Bhandarker & Kumar, 2017; Ortiz & Redmon, 2020; Mahesh et al., 2021).

Gen Z is the first generation to grow up with smartphones and have always known the internet. Therefore, access to technology has changed their outlook on the value and cost of education (Stancampiano, 2022). A recent two-year Question the Quo survey (2022) of 5,317 Gen Z high schoolers (ages 14–18) found that Gen Z wants shorter, more affordable, career-connected education pathways in high-demand industries. The survey, which measured pre- and post-Covid Gen Z mindsets, found that the number of students considering a four-year college education dropped nearly 20 percentage points from February 2020 to January 2022. This study found that 62% of those surveyed wished their high schools had provided more information on post-secondary career paths. In addition, there was almost a 10-point drop in those who believed any post-secondary education was necessary. The study found that the top criteria for choosing a path after high school included only considerations about cost and whether

college would provide skills to help them earn a higher wage. Unfortunately, higher education lacks the agility to pivot and offer programs that utilize federal funding, match workforce needs, and meet Gen Z's need for real-world skills directly tied to a career path.

Higher Education's Concerns about Gen Z and Beyond

Looming large in higher education's not-too-distant future is the great 'demographic cliff' of 2026. In 2026, the number of high school graduates in the United States will peak and then steadily and rapidly decline, leading to a drop in college enrollment (Selingo, 2021). Pre-Covid Gen Z college enrollment rates were significantly higher than previous generations; however, enrollment dropped with 2019 and 2020 graduating classes by almost seven percent (Selingo, 2021). Additionally, the number of international students may slow due to immigration laws (Selingo, 2021). Therefore, it is imperative that colleges recruit and retain Gen Z. To recruit them, we must understand their formative experiences and values.

The Pandemic

The most significant event affecting Gen Z would be the Covid-19 global pandemic. As a result, post-pandemic Gen Z is sometimes referred to as "Generation Resilient," particularly those 18 to 28, who comprise emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adulthood is "a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of one's life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469). Both professionally and personally, this is when young people lay the foundation for adult life. However, there is a real sense of urgency to make up for lost time because many Gen Z feel cheated out of two years of their lives, having missed experiences, friendships, and milestones (Paz, 2021). Unfortunately, the pandemic significantly reduced the opportunities available to high school and college graduates, forcing many to settle for lower-paying jobs to pay their bills (Paz, 2021). Many Gen Z's are finding creative ways to make extra money (like reselling clothes, DIY crafts, and innovative freelance services) to compensate for the income gap (Merriman et al., 2022).

A Nation Divided

The Harvard Public Opinion Project (HPOP) has been surveying 18 to 29-year-olds since 2000 to gain insight into young people's attitudes toward politics and public service. Gen Z will soon be the country's largest cohort of eligible voters – and they do plan to vote – giving them tremendous power (40.8 million eligible voting members) to remake institutions in ways that support their vision for the future (Deckman et al., 2020; Della Volpe, 2022; Medina & Suzuki, 2023). The results of the 2022 survey found that young people are turning out to vote. In addition, being raised in a tumultuous America has given Gen Z a distinctive sense of personal and public purpose (Della Volpe, 2022). Negative partisanship helped Gen Z to form opinions based on the actions of a party they disliked; our culture and our society evolve when the passion of young people melds with the power of those leading our institutions (Della Volpe, 2022). They are the most educated and least prejudiced cohort; Gen Z voted in historic numbers in 2022 to address the climate crisis, gun violence, personal rights and freedoms, and student debt relief (Deckman et al., 2020; Della Volpe, 2022).

Interestingly, the Pew Research Center (2024) found a correlation between higher education and political affiliation. The study reports that 52 % of registered voters with a high school diploma or less favored the Republican party; however, registered voters with a college degree (51%) and postgraduate degree (61%) identify as Democratic (Doherty et al., 2024). Additionally, Hohagen and Bitar (2024) propose young American males are shifting to the right, citing dissatisfaction with the economy (inflation), climate policies, and a failure to resolve ongoing global conflicts for the shift. These authors also suggest some Gen Z voters are considering third-party candidates due to frustration with the two-party system (Hohagen & Bitar, 2024).

The Gender Gap

In 2024, of the total number of bachelor's degrees awarded, 58.4 % were conferred to women compared to 41.5% to men, and females are 32% more likely to finish their degree at the institution of their choice than men (Hanson, 2024). Gen Z women voted for Democrats, although the percentages (49% white, 85% black, and 65% Latino) varied greatly depending on race (Medina et al., 2025). According to Munroe (2024), one of the reasons Gen Z male voters are conservatively leaning is masculinity and the need to take back our country. Further, a Pew Research Study

(2024) found that 1 in 5 men feel the gains women have made over the last decade have been at the expense of men (Horowitz & Parker, 2024). Many young men think nostalgically about the days when men were perceived to be more valuable (Munroe, 2024). The "Make America Great Again" slogan spoke to many Gen Z males who admired Donald Trump's strength, viewing him as a hero who would take down the ruling Democrats and restore pride to masculinity (Munroe, 2024).

Social Justice

According to the 2022 HPOP (The Harvard Opinion Pole, 2022) survey, only 33% of Gen Z trust the Supreme Court. This is a 10%-point drop in five years as it was 44% in 2018. An anti-establishment narrative began to develop with the oldest Gen Z in September 2011 when the Occupy Wall Street movement started to protest economic inequality (Della Volpe, 2022). Occupy Wall Street was one of several social justice events to shape how Gen Z sees its role in improving the future (Della Volpe, 2022). Donald Trump's presidency, George Floyd's murder, the Parkland School shooting, and Greta Thunberg's School Strike for Climate are the other events that are interwoven to shape Gen Z's attitudes, opinions, and beliefs on social justice (Della Volpe, 2022). Deckman et al. (2021) suggest the Women's March of 2017 and the # MeToo Movement also shaped Gen Z's political views. Through social media, Gen Z has been exposed to and feels connected with the climate and their peers around the globe. Unlike Boomers and Gen X, whose world was their neighborhood, for Gen Z, thanks to the internet, the world is limitless, which brings empathy and understanding (Deckman et al., 2021; Della Volpe, 2022). However, the downside of having access to the infinite world of the internet is viewing the world's woes at a young age and lacking the maturity to mentally comprehend all materials being considered.

Emotional Health and Well-being

Gen Z is reporting higher levels of anxiety, depression, and distress post-Covid than any other generation (Coe et al., 2022). According to the World Health Organization, social determinants of health (SDoF) are the non-medical factors influencing health outcomes; they are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age. A Kaiser Family Foundation survey (Drake & Rudowitz, 2022) found that 69.9% of Gen Z survey respondents perceived they had unmet social needs. Therefore, as Gen Z develops their resilience, they may expect holistic wellness programs

that include physical health, behavioral health, and social needs as potential students, employees, and customers (Coe et al., 2022).

Social Media

Gen Z are avid social media users; they use it to guide social change, challenge political institutions and governments, and hold the corporate world accountable (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Savvy corporations have tapped into the Gen Z market with a strategy known as 'corporate social advocacy' or 'corporate activism,' which suggests a higher pursuit beyond economic gains (Reinikainen et al., 2020). Coe et al. (2023) found that one-third of Gen Z survey respondents (n=16,824) spent more than two hours on social media daily. Among Gen Z social media users, the preferred platforms are in descending order: YouTube (88%), Instagram (76%), TikTok (68%), and Snapchat (67%). Perhaps the best example of this strategy is Nike's 'Dream Crazy' advertising campaign in 2019, in collaboration with Colin Kaepernick. This NFL player took a stand against police brutality and racial injustice (Reinikainen et al., 2020). This kind of 'mobilizing talk' raises societal awareness and invites consumer discussion and action, thereby blurring the line between emotional issues and corporate brands (Olkkonen & Jaaskelainen, 2019). Further, Gen Z are avid social media users who want to obtain skills and education in their areas of interest, according to YouTube's *Culture & Trends Report 2022* (Roberts, 2023).

What Success Looks Like to Gen Z

Over the last ten years, Gen Z has seen divisive politics, economic instability, mounting social injustice, a global pandemic, and the exponential melting of the polar ice caps (Merriman, 2022). Still, instead of passively watching the world crumble, they want to take control of their future with their choices around education, work, and society (Merriman et al., 2022). Although previous generations measured success extrinsically (high-profile careers, money, fame), Gen Z values meaningful work, financial stability, and a life full of meaningful experiences (Morris & Hedges, 2024; Merriman et al., 2022). Boomers, Gen X, and Y focused on building traditional careers and wealth; Gen Z focused on earning enough to secure financial stability and not something that gave meaning and purpose to their lives (Mahesh et al., 2021; Merriman et al., 2022). Many Gen Z actively try to limit spending (63% are saving money) by assessing short-term saving practices and putting off buying homes and starting families (Morris & Hedges, 2024;

Merriman et al., 2022). They prefer to spend money on experiences like travel or dining with friends that create memories and connections as an essential piece of success rather than buying things (Merriman et al., 2022). Spohn (2017) found that Gen Z has a fear of missing out on anything, more so than previous generations, which may contribute to their desire to travel and create memories.

Reaching Gen Z

Social media marketing provides universities, colleges, and employers opportunities to access, engage, and build relationships with prospective candidates (Clark et al., 2017; Mwenda et al., 2019; Pham et al., 2020; Levesque, 2022). Bergamo et al. (2012) stress that "relationship marketing is critical to create and maintain a relationship between institutions, students or employees; such relationships are being developed towards customer/employee retention and loyalty" (p.26). Unlike traditional means of communication, television and print media, social media provides flexible, low-cost, two-way communication (Pham et al., 2020). HTML-embedded coding allows video sharing on multiple media platforms (Pham et al., 2020). So, although YouTube may be the current social media preference, Threads, TikTok, or X may be the Gen Z platform choice for tomorrow. In addition, organizations on social media receive feedback on messaging and content on a like or dislike basis and gather data by enabling and monitoring the comment section.

Levesque (2022) found that Gen Z uses the internet as their primary tool for researching potential universities, community colleges, and employers. Therefore, institutional websites should be user-friendly, easy to navigate, and provide the information candidates seek, like tuition, financial aid options, accurate program and job descriptions, graduation and acceptance rates, job placement, and information about campus tours (Levesque, 2022). Visually appealing homepages that focus on the student experience in a particular major and discuss internships, job opportunities, and social engagements may pull students into higher education enrollment or employment (Levesque, 2022).

Recruiting Gen Z

Persuasion requires transmitting a message consisting of arguments or simple cues, like music in messages that evoke specific responses in the receiver (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Mwenda et al. (2019) and Pham et al.

(2020) found that message and content style mattered when attempting to persuade potential Gen Z recruits. Mwenda et al. (2019) examined discipline-specific YouTube videos for recruiting Gen Z for STEM-related career choices. This study found the video content they analyzed to be homogenous and failed to differentiate one program from another and one university from the next. At the same time, the Pham et al. (2020) study focused on a review of educational institutions' video YouTube messaging and found that "in general, universities adopt a quasi-standardized 'recipe' in both information content and appeal messages" (p. 92). The Mwenda et al. (2019) and Pham et al. (2020) studies tell the story of missed opportunities to introduce recruits to the uniqueness of each program and institution. Furthermore, videos tended to focus on pulling potential recruits who had already decided to attend a four-year university to their institution rather than trying to push undecided candidates toward deciding to attend college.

Prospective candidates seek personal engagement with institutions but not necessarily in-person contact (Dejarnette, 2019). Organizations increasingly realize it is not enough to attend a college or job fair because they compete for a dwindling number of candidates (Dejarnette, 2019). Universities and employers must meet recruits with an authentic and credible message on a large scale via digital and social media (Dejarnette, 2019).

Certifications and Alternative Credentials

As Gen Z turns away from college degrees, they increasingly seek certifications and alternative credentialing, sometimes referred to as alt creds, to grow skills and offer 'proof' of knowledge (Westfall, 2023). With over a million forms of alt creds, including certifications awarded by U.S. organizations, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish good, bad, or fake alt creds (Westfall, 2023). Additionally, employers are moving toward no longer requiring job applicants to have a college degree due to a steep drop in candidates with a bachelor's or an associate degree (Kawamoto, 2023). Yet, for the moment, except for IT and customer service positions, recruiters still rank a college degree as the most valuable credential for most roles (Westfall, 2023).

Many community colleges and regional universities are jumping into the alt creds market. Often marketed as 'Alternative Pathways,' alt creds may entice those members of the Gen Z cohort still in high school to enroll

in alternative credentialing programs, in addition to capturing those disengaged Gen Z learners who may have started at a university but dropped out prior to completing a degree program. A recent study of disengaged learners conducted by Straighterline and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) found that those with some college, no credential (SCNC) are looking for institutions to provide credit for prior learning (Straighterline & UPCEA, 2023). Although this study found that the SCNC Gen Z population continues to grow and re-engagement rates are still declining, offering online self-paced programs and prior learning assessments to provide credits for demonstrated knowledge and skills may offer a path for degree/program completion (Straighterline & UPCEA, 2023).

The Negative Implications of a Generation without a Higher Education

The failure to reach and recruit Gen Z and push high school graduates toward higher education is already being felt in the private sector. Recently, a Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturer planning to start production at a U.S. facility was forced to postpone due to a shortage of skilled labor (King, 2023). The Chips and Science Act of 2022 set aside billions of dollars to boost the industry domestically, creating 460,000 new positions; however, based on current trends, 67,000 jobs will go unfilled unless something changes (King, 2023).

The U.S. manufacturing industry is on the verge of a comeback due to supply chain weaknesses and the over-dependence on overseas suppliers that were exposed during the pandemic (Fried, 2022). Furthermore, a recent Deloitte study of the U.S. manufacturing industry (2021) predicts that 2.1 million jobs will go unfilled due to a skilled workforce shortage by 2030 (Wellener et al., 2021). Primary drivers include Boomer retirements and a loss in interest in manufacturing jobs by Gen Z. Given the large population in the U.S., the country's extensive network of colleges and universities could ensure that many individuals receive a post-secondary education. However, the U.S. in 2021 ranked 13th in the population aged 25-34 with a post-secondary education, with only 51.17% of its population holding tertiary qualifications (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2022). This shortage of workers may represent a lost opportunity cost of 1 trillion dollars or about \$3,100 per person in the U.S. per year (Wellener et al., 2021).

Beyond the potential effects on the U.S. economy, the lifelong impact on Gen Z could be devastating. Carnevale et al. (2023) found that individuals who opt out of a college education tend to make 75 percent less over a lifetime than cohort members with a bachelor's degree. The U.S. Bureau for Labor Statistics (2022) reported that the unemployment rate for individuals with only a high school diploma (4%) was double that of a college graduate with a bachelor's degree (2%). Additionally, a study by The Center for Divorce Education (2023) found that higher education levels are associated with lower divorce rates. Individuals with a high school diploma have a rate of 38.8%, whereas those with a bachelor's degree have a divorce rate of 25.9%. This study implies that the factors contributing to the correlation between divorce and education are economic stability, cognitive and social skills, the ability to communicate effectively, and informed decision-making, all of which are skills and abilities gained through post-secondary education.

Discussion

As of 2023, about half of Gen Z's U.S. population is still in high school, junior high, and elementary school, so as discussed earlier, there is still time to address this trend. Gen Z clearly stated they felt their K-12 education has not, and is not, preparing them for life after high school (Della Vollpe, 2022; Willcoxon & Marken, 2023). Further, Gen Z has clarified that they want an educational approach directly tied to a career, without college debt, and benefiting or, at least, not harming the environment. Nevertheless, thousands of STEM-related jobs go unfilled. Additionally, Gen Z has stated that they are concerned about social justice, specifically gun violence and police brutality. However, the International Association of Chief of Police reports that 65% of their members have too few candidates applying for vacancies (Columbia Southern University, 2022). Perhaps it is time for a candid conversation about realistic career paths with students at a younger age.

Regional, community, and technical colleges offer an alternative to a traditional bachelor's degree by providing a shorter, less expensive, direct career path in high-demand industries. Gen Z can find a variety of STEM programs, from Urban Forestry to Construction Management to Manufacturing Technology. They can enroll in programs focused on Criminal Justice and Emergency Services; the best way to address concerns about police brutality and gun violence is to be part of the solution. Regional,

community, and technical colleges also offer a variety of accredited certifications, skilled trades apprenticeships, and water/wastewater operator licensing programs. Apprenticeship and licensing classes can be paired with a workforce development program, permitting students to gain the necessary experience to pass required testing. Licensed candidates, especially those with an associate or bachelor's degree, often receive multiple job offers.

Many regional, community, and technical colleges have 2 + 2 or pathway programs that act as transfer portals, where Gen Z can earn course credits toward a four-year bachelor's degree at more affordable prices. Additionally, as Gen Z ages and decides success may be more than traveling and having dinner with friends, community colleges have classes in business management for Gen Z who may want to move into a leadership position and entrepreneurial technology courses designed for individuals who wish to start and own a business.

Finally, research tells us (Duffet, 2020; Armawan et al., 2023; Thomas, 2024) that Gen Z relies heavily on the internet for news and information, particularly on YouTube. A quick YouTube search reveals that many universities are not adopting Gen Z internet recruitment strategies. Gen Z tends to watch a short video and then deep dive if interested; however, the promotional videos offered by prominent universities and colleges tended to be two to ten years old and lacked information. Although short, they followed the same grand production formula: dramatic music, play-action shots of young people on campus, and a few scenes of lectures, ending with a narrator reading the university's tagline.

Blake and Weissman (2023) found that regional, community, and technical colleges were the only higher educational sectors to experience growth (increased enrollment) in 2023, and they attribute this growth to industry-specific programming and recruiting. Many smaller, more regional universities and community colleges' promotional videos focus on career paths and academic programs meant to push Gen Z toward education to career, rather than focusing on the 'you will have a successful career because you attended this prestigious university' philosophy.

Conclusion

Like many industries, higher education appears to have tripped, stumbled, and is falling post-pandemic, but there is still time to right itself. The pandemic hit every generation hard, but especially Gen Z. Many Gen Z

in the emerging adulthood phase, forced into remote learning, began to question the value of higher education. Therefore, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to know and understand what Gen Z values and grasp how to reach this pivotal cohort.

Regional campuses could significantly improve recruitment by increasing search engine-optimized recruiting on Gen Z's preferred platforms, with information on academic programs directly related to career paths, salary information, and employment prospects designed to push Gen Z toward a college education. Additionally, regional campuses of four-year institutions may benefit from establishing flexible programs with local technical and community colleges that allow Gen Z to begin their educational journey without crippling debt. Finally, a skilled labor shortage will have a devastating effect on the U.S. economy when manufacturing is making a comeback in the United States, as well as the potential loss of earned income Gen Z may face due to a lack of education. There is still time to reach Gen Z, but action is required now.

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