

The Coronavirus Effect: How to Engage Generation Z for Greater Student Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Due to disruptive changes such as COVID-19, universities can achieve better student outcomes with a shift to a learner-centered strategy. During the Spring semester, faculty abruptly changed their teaching method of face-to-face format to mostly online education. With the ongoing impacts of disruptive changes, colleges and universities must make significant changes in order to recruit and retain this generation of students. This article examines the traits of today's generation of students to provide recommendations on how administrators and faculty can better engage Generation Z for greater student outcomes. The result of this discussion is significant because the results can better assist administrators, faculty, and practitioners on how to inject innovative thinking in order to produce sustainability education for current and future students.

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, Coronavirus, Generation Z, Student Outcomes, Disruptive Change.

1. INTRODUCTION

Times were difficult after the lockdown. Jobs were scarce. At the University, most students didn't pay attention to the job market. Evelyn did. She was ranked right in the middle of her senior class in her business major. In fact, the business dean and faculty showcased other students with higher GPAs to visiting corporate recruiters. Yet, she was the most determined, having participated in five internships in four years. At the end of the semester, most of the business students including the honor students did not have any job offer. Contrarily, Evelyn found herself stressing over five job offers. The business dean was puzzled by the attractiveness of Evelyn to potential employers. Feedback from employers was positive about Evelyn's character, work experience, and varying skill sets. The dean was shocked that she had business skills that were not taught at the university. Evelyn attributed her success to Dr. Armstrong, her advisor. Evelyn stated that Dr. Evelyn connected to her and her classmates with individualized coaching. While other Professors were good lecturers, Dr. Armstrong was supporting self-learning and challenging students with more relevant teaching. Dr. Armstrong knows how to connect with our generation. The dean did not understand this point.

With COVID-19 sweeping across the globe, academic institutions have been forced to rethink their strategies and processes. What worked in the past will not work in this current disruptive environment. With that said, universities cannot maintain the status quo of teaching students with the same methods. Forward-leaning institutions are making the transition from subject-centered teaching to student-centered teaching. However, this approach cannot be seriously undertaken without understanding this generation of students.

Enter Generation Z (GEN Z). Many Professors make the mistake of calling them 'Millennials' or 'Generation Y.' This error can no longer be ignored. Each individual brings their generational differences. I understand generational matters. In conducting extensive research on generational issues. When writing *Impending Danger: Rethinking Federal Leadership for the 21st Century*, I researched generational issues as they are related to Baby Boomers retiring in the near future and leading a huge brain drain on the public sector. In doing so, I evaluated how the federal system must make changes in the leadership development of future employees, primarily Millennials, which are also called Generation Y. Today's universities must understand the specific characteristics, perspectives, and styles of GEN Z students in order to recruit and retain them (Seemiller and Grace, 2017).

As we look at disruption in today's higher education, universities and colleges need to better prepare current students for the challenges that lie ahead. This article examines the traits of today's generation of students to provide recommendations on how administrators and faculty can better engage Generation Z for greater student outcomes.

2. THE URGENCY

Many administrators and managers were challenged by the pandemic and had to modify existing strategies for their organizations to remain viable. The pandemic's long-term effects on institutions are difficult to estimate, as most were forced to change their business and teaching models. The high levels of uncertainty and reduced revenues made businesses and institutions operate differently and display resilience to remain open (Verma and Gustafsson, 2020). The unpredictable circumstances and future made choosing a strategy to address a turbulent external environment and prepare a path forward a monumental one. Green *et al.* (2020) maintained that market disruption has been a significant catalyst for forcing traditional institutions to make organizational changes.

Institutions transformed operations from face-to-face courses to virtual and hybrid in as little time as a few days or weeks, in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Institutions have proven to make transformational changes, as they switched from traditional classroom teaching to virtual and hybrid teaching. They discovered that their students and faculty are adaptive, creative, and resilient in making learning and teaching changes. In addition to moving their academic programs to a virtual environment, they are providing services, such as advising, tutoring, counseling, and other student services virtually or in hybrid arrangements, along with managing the business of the universities in virtual and distance ways.

Institutions must now come out of the pandemic in a way that they become more environmentally aware and better global citizens. Institutions must be able to listen and learn as global citizens that must actively engage with the world versus taking a passive approach to managing their environments. Scoblic (2020) found that scenario planning is widespread among governments and businesses for predicting the future and determining ways to think about the future. Scenario planning and preparing for a future event may take a heightened role in institutional planning. Ramírez *et al.* (2017) offered that predicting the future may not be the best approach to scenario planning but developing competencies to deal with uncertainty may be the best way to approach the future.

3. GENERATION Z CHARACTERISTICS

Given the enormous demographic changes within the 21st century, the American workforce is experiencing organizational growth pains. For the first time in history, five generations are co-existing together in the workplace. See Table #1. Each generation has distinct attributes, such as belief systems, expectations, and behaviors (Green and Roberts, 2011). Harding (2000) further suggested the emergence of a new generation of workers in the workforce that would produce significant human resource problems for traditional organizations. He called this new generation the Emergent Workforce, which crosses age groups, gender, race, and geography. These workers are driven by a new set of values and job expectations. Thus, administrators and faculty must understand how to address these generational differences in order to enhance better learner outcomes.

Furthermore, these generations that now co-exist are different than Generation Z. Hamill (2005) suggested that individuals communicate based on their generational background. Erlain and Bromfield (2014) further argued that these generational divisions have created a variety of negative consequences including confusion, conflict, leadership gaps, and overall tension in organizations.

If educators do not understand generational issues in academia, they will continue to make poor decisions about how to better engage students. In fact, bad advice along with generational lines can damage an organization for several years (Green and Roberts, 2011).

Who is GEN Z? Generation Z, is the most global, diverse, technological, and entrepreneurial generation ever. They have never known a digital world without smartphones and social media (Green, 2018). They have also been called Digital Natives, Post-Millennials, Nextars, and iGenerations. Contrary to popular beliefs, Millennials (Generation Y) and GEN Z students are not the same. See Table #2. In analyzing more than 750 GEN Z students from 15 institutions, the study showed that Generation Z has distinct characteristics from Generation Y although they also share similar traits (Seemiller and Grace, 2017).

In general, GEN Z was born in 1995 and after. This generation makes up about 26% of the U.S. population. Each generation is shaped by parenting and its social environment. Generation X, with his independent thinking and realistic outlooks, are the primary parents of GEN Z students. This current generation has been shaped by many social changes, including 9/11, Global Warming/Climate Change, Boston Marathon Bombing, Great Recessions (2000, 2008), Sandy Hook Shooting, Social Media, Same-Sex Marriage, Hurricane Katrina, and the election of Barack Obama (the 1st Black President). In one study, GEN Z described themselves to be loyal, thoughtful, compassionate, open-minded, and responsible (Mohr and Mohr, 2017). Yet,

GEN Z is realistic and concerned about their safety and the world. Some would call them anxious. According to one study, 58% of Gen Z's are either somewhat or very worried about the future (Green, 2018).

Table 1: Comparison of Generation Y and Z.

Generation Name	Traits	Size
The Great Generation (Born Before 1946)	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservative • Loyal To Employers • Practical • Frugal • Dedicated <u>Leadership Style</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Directive • Command-And-Control 	25 M
Baby Boomer (Born 1946-1964)	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ambitious • Strong Work Ethic • Loyal To Careers And Employers • Optimistic • Personal Gratification <u>Leadership Style</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensual • Collegial 	80 M
Gen X (Born 1965-1976)	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Realists • Results-Oriented • Informal • Intolerant Of Bureaucracy <u>Leadership Style</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Entrepreneurial 	45 M
Gen Y / Millenials (Born 1977-1995)	<u>Core Values</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Socially Conscious • Digital Native • Open-Minded • Technology Dependent • Work-Life Balance Focused <u>Leadership Style</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participative • Social 	79 M

Table 2: Comparison of Generation Y and Z.

Generation Y	Generation Z
Self-Interested	Thoughtful
Entitled	Entrepreneurial
Parent-Supported	Responsible
Tolerant	Critical of Peers and Open-Minded
Over-Confident	Not Competitive

Source: Understanding Generation Z students by Mohr and Mohr.



Dr. Green worked with his students on collaborative research that led to academic publication. This practical experience allows GEN Z students to transition from young adults to business professionals.

4. GEN Z LEARNING STYLE

Generation Z possesses unique learning styles. According to the Barna Group Organization (2017), Gen Z is represented by people born between 1999 and 2015; part of this generation is 18 this year. Many of this generation are in their teens and childhood years. Gen Z is the second-largest generation alive today with 69 million of them in the US, compared to 66 million Millennials, 55 million Gen Xers, and 76 million Boomers. This generation is the most ethnically diverse alive today and has grown up immersed in technology. Iftode (2019) found that Generation Z is identified as creative, flexible, independent, and has increased concern for the environment. Communication is another important trait of the Z generation. They feel the need to be connected constantly through any communication technology possible. They use Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, and others to “go out” with friends and meet. Communication is the most important activity in the lives of Generation Z. They may be masters in using technology and spending most of their time online, they tend to prefer face-to-face meetings and classes, as a preferred channel of learning or socialization.

GEN Z students tend to focus on practical study methods that are connected to real life. They also have an affinity for flexibility and want to choose the courses that are of interest to them. They like to learn on their own and are auto-didactic based on their participation in online tutorials. They learn to play an instrument or cook even use certain software or devices through YouTubes or other online tutorials is what this generation does all around the world. This indicates that they are ambitious, independent, and focus on personal development (Iftode, 2019).

5. KEY STEPS TO ENGAGE GEN Z STEPS

Given the level of disruptive change in higher education including COVID-19, higher education should adapt itself so that academic institutions meet the need of current Generation Z students. Green and McCann (2020) noted that student learning outcomes can be significantly improved through increased teaching quality, curriculum design innovation, and optimization of resource equipment. Mohr and Mohr (2017) further argued that novice and veteran university instructors must consider the dispositions and needs of their students. In fact, effective instructors often invest significant effort to understand, teach, and support their students. Yet, all generations have their OWN set of biases based on parenting and their social environments growing up (Green and Roberts, 2011). Today's administrators and faculty are not the exceptions. Baby Boomers and Generation X are predominantly the university Professors that GEN Z students must interface with (Mohr and Mohr, 2017). GEN Z seeks to be change agents who can make a difference. Yet, Mohr and Mohr (2017) maintained that universities educators may need to assist this generation with navigating higher experiences. With that said, below are recommendations to assist GEN Z students to foster greater learner outcomes:

ALLOW THEM TO CREATE AND INNOVATE IN THEIR WORKING ENVIRONMENT. Iftode (2019) found that Generation Z students must be able to perceive their real skills, strengths, and priorities, before learning new ways of learning. Realistic perceptions of themselves will always increase self-confidence and well-directed efforts that lead to success. Generation Z students want to use practical study methods with direct implications or connections to real life. These students would be through career orientation programs that are specifically oriented to outcomes when deciding to enroll in a study program and choose the specialization. These students need to receive the support and motivation from Professors that will get them motivated to research more, to be more involved, and take initiatives for studying additional materials. Generation Z students want flexibility and courses that are interesting to them.

CREATE COURSE MATERIALS THAT ARE TAILORED TO THE NEEDS OF THEIR STUDENTS. Educators should meet the needs of their students based on their level (Green and McCann, 2020). In fact, Professors must pay close attention to the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that learners bring into the classroom (National Research Council, 1999).

ENGAGE STUDENTS DIGITALLY. Today's society operates on digital platforms like websites, blogs, and small smarts. Incredible technology changes are creating a new generation of techno-savvy students (Cilliers, 2017). GEN Z students are built for technology growing up in the Information age. Faculty can infuse engagement of these students with meaningful technology interaction. Some Professors might feel overwhelmed because they may feel that students know more about technology. While students may know how to consume a plethora of online content, GEN Z students still need guidance in how to sift, sort, and synthesize information so that they are not overwhelmed (Mohr and Mohr, 2017).

MAKE SURE THAT ANY LEARNING IS CONNECTED WITH RELEVANCY. More hands-on experiments can be a powerful source for students to understand the underlying conceptual understandings that aid generalization (Green and McCann, 2020). Utilizing business simulations and micro internships can provide practical experience which is beneficial to potential employers.

In fact, Generation Z's main concern is learning materials very quickly, effectively, and materials of interest to them. They do not prefer a particular learning style. Therefore, instruction must prepare students to use and handle different learning strategies and styles in preparation for lifelong learning. By mastering various learning strategies and styles Generation Z could receive more information more effectively in various ways. Z generation students stated that they are fans of clear and direct instructions revealing some fear of uncertainty. These students, like most, need to receive the support and motivation from Professors that will get them motivated to research, gather information, and study additional materials (Ifstode, 2019).

In summary, these tips should be implemented strategically to build better communications across organizations. By implementing these recommendations, GEN Z students are better prepared for future employment. Generation Z employees will be a great asset to organizations with their fresh ideas and technology intuitiveness.



Dr. Green utilizes business simulations to connect students to technology while providing relevant, practical work experiences to GEN Z students.

6. THE PATH FORWARD

In today's changing landscape including the impacts of COVID-19, colleges and universities must adapt to the needs of current and future students. With that said, Generation Z is at the center of this discussion. Therefore, faculty must be willing to adjust their teaching methods to accommodate this emerging generation. Given the unique generational traits of GEN Z, today's academic institutions will be faced with organizational challenges such as recruitment, team building, and motivation (Green and Roberts, 2011). This article demonstrated that the current GEN Z students possess distinct characteristics than other past generations. Additionally, this article provided recommendations on how administrators and educators can better connect with GEN Z in order to produce better student outcomes. This analysis is significant because the results can better assist administrators, faculty, and practitioners on how to inject innovative thinking in order to produce sustainable education for current and future students.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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