

A photograph of three students sitting on a set of blue brick stairs. The student on the left is wearing light blue jeans and dark blue sneakers with red accents. The student in the middle is wearing dark blue jeans and tan suede boots. The student on the right is wearing khaki pants and dark sneakers with white laces. They are all holding books or papers. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

# The Future of Gen Z

**How Covid-19 Will Shape Students and  
Higher Education for the Next Decade**



# 4 Introduction

## 8 **Section 1** A Focus on the Student Experience

As campuses reopen and the virus subsides, Gen Z students and their parents will expect more from campuses, both inside and outside the classroom.

**15 Sidebar:** About Our Focus Groups

## 16 **Section 2** What's New After the Pandemic

As the nation emerges from the pandemic, three simultaneous forces are driving demand for an improved student experience for post-Covid Gen Zers.

**19 Sidebar:** Well-being for Post-Covid Gen Z

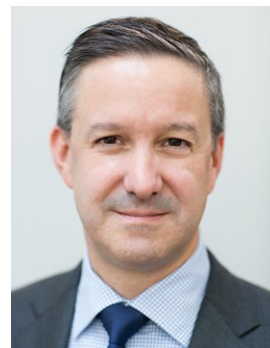
**22 Sidebar:** Teaching and Technology After the Pandemic

**25 Sidebar:** Marketing to Post-Covid Gen Z

# 28 Recommendations

# 30 A Final Word

## About the Author



**Jeffrey J. Selingo** has written about higher education for more than two decades and is a *New York Times* bestselling author of three books. His latest book, *Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions*, was published in September 2020 and was named among the 100 Notable Books of the year by *The New York Times*. A former editor of *The Chronicle*, Jeff is a regular contributor to *The Atlantic* and *The Washington Post*, and is a special adviser for innovation and professor of practice at Arizona State University.

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## INTRODUCTION







By **JEFFREY J. SELINGO**

**M**ention the “demographic cliff” in higher education, and it seems everyone knows what you’re talking about. In 2026, when the children born during the Great Recession reach college-going age, the number of high-school graduates in the United States will begin a rapid and steady decline.

What’s much less discussed is how students in middle and high school right now as well as those making their way through college and in their early 20s — the cohort collectively known as Generation Z — were on track to be the most well-educated generation ever. Born starting around 1995, the members of Gen Z were enrolling in college at a significantly higher rate than their predecessors, the millennials, did at a comparable age, according to the Pew Research Center.

That meant that a greater proportion of high-school graduates going to college might have partly made up for the drop in their overall numbers — at least until the global coronavirus pandemic hit in the winter of 2020 and cut deeply into college enrollment. Never before had colleges experienced a one-year decline in enrollment as steep as the one they witnessed between the high-school graduating classes of 2019 and 2020. In that one-year period, the number of students enrolling directly in college from high school dropped by some 700,000 students, or **nearly 7 percent**.

Higher education has experienced demographic droughts and global calamities before, including wars, recessions, and terrorist attacks. But rarely have both occurred at the same time. Moreover, new sources of students often eased the demographic downturns — rising immigration,

## There's no doubt that, at least in the near term, the pandemic is prompting a great reassessment about higher education among students and their families.

international students, and of course, higher college-going rates among domestic teenagers like those we were beginning to see with Gen Z at the [end of the last decade](#).

The question now is whether the disruption caused by the pandemic is a one-time blip for enrollment or whether that and the broader changes ushered in during the coronavirus outbreak — stress and depression, the coinciding racial-justice movement, online education — portend a new normal for the latter half of Gen Z, those graduating from high school over the next decade.

There's no doubt that, at least in the near term, the pandemic is prompting a great reassessment about higher education among students and their families. It's happening on several different levels. At the most basic level, as we heard in focus groups of high-school students convened for this report, they are worried about their safety and well-being, and hesitant about paying for a residential experience that's even partly virtual.

There is also growing evidence — both anecdotal and in surveys — that the pandemic has had a dramatic psychological effect among Gen Zers on the path to college. They fell behind academically during remote learning. The lack of social connections in school and in extracurricular activities affected their mental health. And a year of protests sparked by the killing of George Floyd has only intensified the expectations of a generation already highly

attuned to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion about how they want colleges to live up to those ideals.

Defining a generation by a significant event or painting a picture of developing adolescents with broad strokes is an exercise sometimes fraught with misinterpretations. All generations are shaped by outside events. Three years after millennials started college, for instance, the September 11 terrorist attacks occurred; later that decade came the Great Recession. While significant, those events didn't have the direct impact on teenagers in the way the pandemic quickly shifted high schools into online education and canceled athletics and extracurricular activities for more than a year.

"One of the main storylines of the pandemic was not only health-related but it was about school and the disruption to the lives of students," says Jean M. Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University and the author of *iGen*, a name she conceived for Gen Z, given its members' proclivity for digital devices from an early age. Twenge found in her research that smartphones radically changed every aspect of how Gen Zers live, making them more likely to stay home and less likely to socialize in person.

The pandemic "only accelerated the trends we were seeing with iGen," Twenge says. "It didn't stop them." Colleges and universities, she advises, will need to

## This report looks at how the demographic challenges already facing higher education pre-pandemic only deepened during the crisis.

employ new approaches to engaging students inside the classroom and assimilating them into campus life since a year of their adolescence — a key stage in their development — was essentially lost to the coronavirus. “We’re all going to need to exercise our social skills again,” Twenge says, “since so many of us haven’t interacted with people for a year — and that’s especially true for iGen.”

Because of Covid-19, we may come to view Gen Z over time as two distinct segments. The first is the one that entered college starting around 2013, and by the time the pandemic hit in 2020, had already graduated or were partway through their undergraduate career. That’s pre-Covid Gen Z. The second segment were college freshmen in 2020 and students still in middle and high school. It’s a group

— post-Covid Gen Z — that spans 11 years and is a larger group than the leading edge of the generation.

In 2018, I wrote a report about Gen Z for *The Chronicle* titled “The New Generation of Students.” This brief expands on that report by helping campus leaders understand how Covid-19 is likely to shape the preferences of college students in the decade ahead and how institutions will need to respond to the expectations and needs of the post-Covid Gen Z. It looks at how the demographic challenges already facing higher education pre-pandemic only deepened during the crisis. It examines learning loss and mental-health challenges amid school closures and economic hardships and explores key areas in which colleges will need to make changes to improve the Gen Z student experience.



## SECTION 1





# A Focus on the Student Experience

A

S THE PRICE of college has skyrocketed over the last 40 years, so too have the demands of consumers — students and parents. Every generation searches for the right fit on a campus, with an eye toward meeting their preferences. Meanwhile, college officials are constantly on the lookout for ways to differentiate their campuses in a competitive market by better fulfilling the shifting needs of students.

At the beginning of this century, colleges were awash in prospective undergraduates. The children of baby boomers — the millennials — had arrived on campus expecting a vast array of amenities, from suite-style residence halls to swanky rec centers.

Between 2004 and 2006, colleges and universities collectively built some 90 million square feet of space, one-third of it focused on residential life and student activities, according to Sightlines, a higher-education-construction consulting firm. To put that number in perspective: That's the floor space in about 33 Empire State Buildings combined. The building boom began to ebb as millennials started to give way to the arrival of Gen Z on campuses around 2012. In 2016, colleges built just a third of the square footage they constructed 10 years earlier.



**My belief is that whatever gets me on a campus in person, I'm going to do."**

— Male, junior, Colorado

If the first decade of this century was about student amenities, then the second decade was about student services — academic, career, and mental health. The pressure was on for colleges to raise graduation rates, improve retention, and deepen engagement with students.

As a result, institutions centralized academic advising by shifting duties from faculty to professional advisers, hired student-success specialists, and added technology for so-called intrusive advising that alerted officials when students were struggling. Campuses also scaled up their mental-health services to accommodate a 30-percent increase in the number of visitors to their counseling centers in the first half of the decade, according to the Center for Collegiate Mental Health. And they prioritized career support for students. Among other things, they elevated the titles of career-service leaders, the National Association of Colleges and Employers has reported. Some one in five institutions moved the function from student affairs to the provost, making it more central to the academic mission of the institution.

Now, as we enter the third decade of this millennium, colleges must focus on combining the amenities of the first decade and the services of the second into a seamless student experience.

That's particularly the case after the pandemic. Overall, Gen Z found their college experience during the crisis

largely inadequate and lacking the community they were promised in those glossy brochures and slick websites when they were prospective students. With Gen Zers learning

from their childhood bedrooms and tuition-paying parents witnessing the remote experience in real time, families questioned the value of paying in-person prices for what was often described as "glorified Skype."

"I hated online learning so much," one student noted in *The Chronicle's* focus group. "I struggled through it, so I'm looking for a smaller college because I don't want to go to an institution that is primarily online."

In a survey of more than 3,000 students in the United States and Canada by Top Hat, an education-technology company, nearly 80 percent of respondents said their online courses lacked the engagement of in-person classes. Even tuition discounts extended by some institutions didn't satisfy families. In most cases, the tuition reductions of 5 or 10 percent put an even bigger focus on the quality of the remote-classroom experience. Small price cuts signaled that colleges believed that



**I wasn't as motivated during online school, and now it's a little stressful trying to differentiate yourself in admissions."**

— Female, sophomore, Oregon

STUDENT VOICES SOURCE: Two focus groups totaling 13 junior and senior high-school students conducted in May 2021.



the bulk of their value is tied up in classroom instruction — and not in the residential experience that so many advertise.

As campuses reopen and the virus subsides, Gen Z students and their parents will expect more from campuses, both inside and outside the classroom, akin to the experience they have in every other part of their lives. In an age of instantaneous communication and feedback, surrounded by Amazon 1-Click, Netflix preferences, Instagram likes, and Google answers, college campuses remain stuck with an amalgamation of processes, paper, and people sitting in various departments. Think about the student who visits the bursar's office, the registrar, and the financial-aid office to clear up a single billing issue or the undergraduate who sees a professor, an academic adviser, and career services to receive credit for their summer internship.

Outside of higher education, this customer experience encompasses every aspect of a company's offering — from packaging to ease of use to reliability. Historically, those things were often thought of as separate

**“I’m considering a gap year, possibly to give an extra year buffer to figure out what I want. Also, who knows what the Covid situation will be.”**

— Female, junior, Connecticut

functions within companies. It's only in recent years that corporations brought them under a senior executive charged with the “customer experience.” Now, consumer expectations are spilling over to higher education. According to a survey of more than half a million current college students done in 2020 by the consulting firm Ruffalo Noel Levitz, only about half of those at four-year colleges say they're satisfied with the overall experience.

Gen Z “students and parents want campuses with fewer redundancies and less friction in every interaction,” says Tom Ellett, Quinnipiac University's “chief experience officer.”

The chief experience officer at Quinnipiac, perhaps one of the first of their kind in higher education, oversees all “student-facing functions” that are traditionally split between vice presidents and offices such as enrollment management, student affairs, the registrar, the bursar, and career services. Rethinking the student experience, Ellett advises, “is a deliberate process that identifies the silos that get in the way of students thriving” — and ultimately provides the return on investment that post-Covid Gen Zers are seeking.

**“I just met with my guidance counselor today, and I feel like they're kind of just as confused as we are about the state of college admissions.”**

— Female, junior, Connecticut

## STUDENT VOICES

### PLANS FOR COLLEGE



Something that has changed for me since Covid is I'd like to live somewhere other than the U.S., because I think that Covid showed me that you can work collaboratively with people from anywhere."

— Female, senior, Oregon



For me, my plan has always been to go to college. My dream was to go to New York City, but Covid might put the price of that out of reach."

— Male, junior, North Carolina

### MENTAL-HEALTH SUPPORT



The stress level definitely has gone up, because you keep reading about how all these schools got record numbers of applications, now that so many are test-optional. At least for me, that put more pressure on test scores because since such a large number of people aren't choosing to submit scores, you need to have good scores to really help."

— Female, junior, Texas

SOURCE: Two focus groups totaling 13 junior and senior high-school students conducted in May 2021.





Covid definitely has brought a lot of political issues to light. If there's a school you're looking at and they're doing some questionable things, whether it's something that you would align yourself with or not, it changes your opinion on the school and the type of people that run it."

— Male, junior, Colorado



I think it's really hard to know what you want, because you can't go visit and really get the feel of a school. "

— Female, junior, Texas



I feel like the grades that we got when we were all remote were a big lie. Some teachers were really strict with grading, while others were lenient, especially in taking late work. Now what's going to happen at these colleges when they look at these grades in admissions?"

— Female, junior, Connecticut

## STUDENT VOICES

### SAFETY



**I've never really been into party schools in general. But especially after everything happened with the pandemic, I want to look particularly at smaller colleges, because I think that would be safer."**

— Female, junior, South Carolina



**My parents have been pushing me to look for safe locations."**

— Female, junior, Connecticut



**I definitely think that how schools handled Covid – they made you wear a mask or they strongly recommended that you get the vaccine – that shows like they're actually concerned about the safety of their students. I would consider a school that did that versus a school that said, 'Oh, you don't have to wear a mask. Covid is fake.'"**

— Female, junior, Texas

SOURCE: Two focus groups totaling 13 junior and senior high-school students conducted in May 2021.



## ABOUT OUR FOCUS GROUPS

In May 2021, *The Chronicle* conducted two synchronous, virtual focus groups, each with six or seven high-school students, all juniors or seniors. The purpose was to collect data on how Covid-19 had affected high-school students' attitudes about college.

The literature on online focus groups recommends that they remain relatively small, so our ideal was five to seven students per group. While a focus group is not a statistically significant sample like a survey, the responses show how some students are thinking and talking about college.

We conducted an open call for students through college counselors in a diverse set of high schools. John Pryor, a former managing director of the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, and a former senior research scientist with Gallup, led the design of the questions and protocols for the focus groups and facilitated the conversations.

Quotes from the focus-group sessions appear throughout this report. Key takeaways:

### ▶ PLANS FOR COLLEGE HAVE CHANGED.

Everyone in the focus groups had planned to attend a four-year college before the coronavirus outbreak disrupted their high-school education. Now a few students were considering community college. Others were seriously thinking about taking a gap year, to give the coronavirus time to "calm down," or because alternate plans are now considered more mainstream. In general, a broader range of possibilities are now being examined by post-Covid Gen Zers.

### ▶ PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH HAVE BEEN AFFECTED.

Almost every student talked about being stressed during the past year. Emotional health and well-being were frequent topics. When looking at colleges, the students sought information about how each institution supported the emotional health of students during the pandemic; not doing so was seen as a reason to look elsewhere. Physical health was also a concern. If colleges didn't take the health concerns of their students seriously, such as appropriate quarantine measures or vaccination requirements, the teenagers scratched those colleges from their college list.

### ▶ ADMISSIONS IS MORE CONFUSING THAN EVER.

On top of the usual stress over getting into college, post-Covid Gen Zers feel they are getting mixed messages from institutions about ever-changing admissions policies. For one, they don't know whether colleges that have made the SAT/ACT optional in admissions *really* mean the colleges don't want test scores submitted with applications. The students are less sure than their predecessors about where they want to go to college since they have not been able to visit campuses. They like virtual tours, but they reported that such tours' quality and availability are spotty from college to college.

## SECTION 2



# What's New After the Pandemic

B

Y THE TIME the coronavirus emerged in early 2020, some seven years of Gen Zers had cycled through college campuses, giving officials a good sense of the trends and attitudinal shifts that were already defining this generation. There are several changes driven by Gen Z outlined in *The Chronicle's* 2018 report that will remain true even after the pandemic:

- **They see technology as an extension of themselves.**

Although Gen Zers don't believe technology has unlimited potential in the academic setting, this generation still expects a high-tech educational and campus experience. That's one reason why they gave such bad marks to professors inexperienced with teaching with technology when they made the quick pivot to remote education early in the pandemic. Given that Gen Zers were already experienced with shopping online, liking photos on Instagram, and navigating Reddit, when the college search moved online, they moved with it. Indeed, 55 percent of high-school juniors in 2020-21 said they preferred the online college search, [according to a survey](#) by the website Niche, which rates schools and colleges.



- **They mainly go to college for one thing: a job.** Gen Z puts great stock in the job after graduation — a departure from past generations. A long-running national survey of freshmen by the University of California at Los Angeles has found that since 2008 the No. 1 reason students attended college was to get a better job. As a result, Gen Z favors educational experiences that blend online and face-to-face instruction with liberal arts and professional-skills training — all with immersive elements and an experiential bent. And if students don't think a college will do enough for them to get hired after graduation, they will look elsewhere.
- **They focus on value over frills.** Family incomes among Gen Zers' parents have stagnated even as the price of higher education has shot up. In roughly half the states, more than 50 percent of K-12 students come from families making less than \$40,000 annually, which typically makes them eligible for the federal Pell Grant, according to the Southern Education Foundation. Gen Z is wary of taking on debt and is interested in practical subjects with clear paths to degrees as well as transparent pricing and tuition discounts. The Niche survey of high-school juniors during the pandemic found students automatically eliminating colleges from their search based solely on sticker price: Almost a third of students said that \$30,000 would be too much to consider.

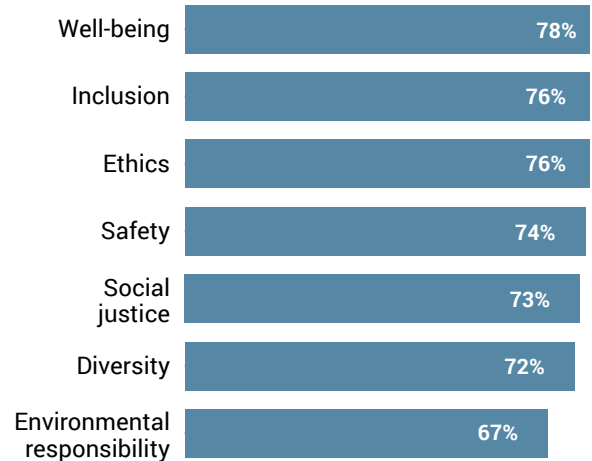
Now, as the nation emerges from the pandemic, what's driving demand for an improved student experience for post-Covid Gen Zers are three simultaneous forces. These pressures were either brought on by the virus's disruption to students' lives or already existed before the crisis, which only further exposed their risks for higher education.

Gen Z is not the end of the demographic drought for colleges. Higher education has faced enrollment downturns in the past,

## Brand and Enrollment

What do colleges need to emphasize to meet the socially conscious expectations of Gen Z?

"Moderately" or "very" important when deciding which college to attend



**82%** Safety, well-being, and inclusion are as important as academic rigor.

**72%** Colleges/universities need to be doing more for the well-being of their students.

**>40%** It is "somewhat to very hard" to find info about campus safety, wellbeing, and inclusion efforts.

Source: Everfi K-12 course data.

## WELL-BEING POST-COVID FOR GEN-Z

**T**he inability of Gen Zers to see friends, participate in sports, and go out during Covid-19 led to an increased sense of loneliness and isolation. While adults also experienced similar feelings, for those in Gen Z it was a much more significant loss since they are in a developmental period where friendships are key, socializing is essential to their identity, and milestones, such as proms and spring break, are important markers, says Nance Roy, chief clinical officer at the Jed Foundation, which promotes emotional health among college students.

As post-Covid Gen Zers arrive on campus in the decade ahead, Roy has this advice for how institutions can support them.

### ► MAKE RELATIONSHIPS CENTRAL TO THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE.

Relationships between students and mentorships between faculty members and students are often random. Post-pandemic, it will be more important than ever before, Roy says, for colleges to provide students with opportunities for meaningful connections. Colleges should carve out more space and time for students and faculty members to interact, professors should dedicate more time to class discussions for students to connect with each other, and more project-based learning should be introduced to allow students to work together.

### ► CREATE AND PROMOTE MORE SOCIAL EVENTS.

Gen Zers will be looking for opportunities to meet up face to face after the pandemic. Students will create their own social networks if colleges don't provide a more robust slate of formal events than before Covid-19 or encourage and provide space for organic gatherings.

### ► ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO STUDENTS.

While campuses are likely to see higher numbers of students seeking clinical services for mental health, others will benefit from increased support from faculty and staff members even if they don't engage in formal counseling. "A warm hand, outreach from a faculty member, coach, academic adviser, or dining-hall staff can go a long way to fostering a much-needed sense of belonging and cultivating a culture of caring and compassion on campus," Roy says. "The emotional well-being of students is a campuswide responsibility."

## Did You Know?

### MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Only 3 percent of college students said they are most likely to talk to a counselor if they were experiencing mental-health challenges, while 45 percent would most likely turn to a friend for help and support.

### SEXUAL AND RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

Eighty-eight percent of students said they would refrain from sexual activity if the other person was incapacitated, but only 42 percent felt their peers would do the same.

### DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

While 82 percent of students said a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion is important, only 51 percent have been provided with prior training on these topics.

### ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS

The number of incoming non-drinkers or abstainers has increased significantly over the past 15-plus years, yet the overall high-risk drinking rate among college students has remained unchanged.

Source: Everfi

most notably in the early 1980s and early 1990s. Those were the result of dips in Gen X, which was a relatively small generation of students sandwiched between two huge ones, the baby boomers and millennials.

What was well-known to higher-education leaders before the pandemic was that the number of high-school graduates in the United States was projected to peak at 3.93 million in 2025. Still, there was cause for some optimism. For one, the high-school dropout rate for the leading edge of Gen Z was significantly lower than that of the

first of the millennials in the early 2000s. Second, among Gen Zers who were no longer in high school in 2017, 59 percent were enrolled in college — higher than the enrollment rate for millennials in 2002 (53 percent) and Gen Xers in 1986 (44 percent), the Pew Research Center found.

The pandemic not only stopped those gains, it reversed them. That was particularly the case for the largest segments of Gen Z students — those who were low-income and students of color (see graph *Percent Change in Fall Enrollments by High-School Characteristics* on page 23). But college enrollment also fell among affluent, well-prepared high-school graduates whose parents attended college. Instead of going to college virtually, some decided to defer admission and take a gap year — an option likely to become more popular as students and families reassess what they want to do and how they want to go to college in the future. A Gallup survey commissioned by the Carnegie Corporation of New York during the pandemic found that nearly half of parents said they would prefer not to send their children to a four-year college after high school, even if there were no obstacles, financial or otherwise.

“College has always been my plan, but during Covid I kind of turned into a hermit,” said one focus-group participant, a junior from Colorado. “I like to spend a lot of time in nature, so that kind of kind of made me want to take a gap year to work on farms.”

In past demographic downturns, colleges always could look further into the future for signs of growth. When the last of the Gen Zers leave high school around 2030, marking the end of the decline in graduates, the numbers simply remain stable for a few years before falling again.

As the United States emerges from Covid-19, the reality is that the nation is on the brink of what labor-market analytics company Emsi calls a “sansdemic” — a lack of people. The U.S. government reported that the number of births nationwide in 2020 — 3.6 million — was the lowest since 1979. The birth rate has fallen by 19 percent since



## Post-Covid Gen Z will need time to acclimate – both academically and socially – when they arrive on campus.

its recent peak in 2007 — putting colleges in a demographic trough through at least the late 2030s.

The pandemic set back Gen Z — academically, emotionally, and financially. Under growing pressure to improve graduation rates and show the value of a degree, colleges have elevated their student-success efforts over the last two decades, deploying a variety of tactics to improve retention and move the needle on stubbornly low graduation rates. That work took on a greater sense of urgency before the pandemic as colleges welcomed larger numbers of underrepresented students — first-generation, low-income, and students of color — all of whom had historically not been well-served by higher education.

Covid-19 is likely to put a dent in those efforts given the disruption to in-person learning in K-12 schools. Almost a third of seniors in the class of 2020 surveyed by McKinsey & Company, for instance, shared concerns about their academic preparedness for school. As colleges return to normal operations, many are beefing up their tutoring services and professors are tweaking their courses to build in more time to review material that normally would have been covered in high school.

How long colleges might need to make up for any learning loss is unclear. Most of the national research that showed students regressed academically because of lost classroom time — especially in math — focused on elementary and middle schools. Those younger students could catch up by the time they graduate from high school — or not.

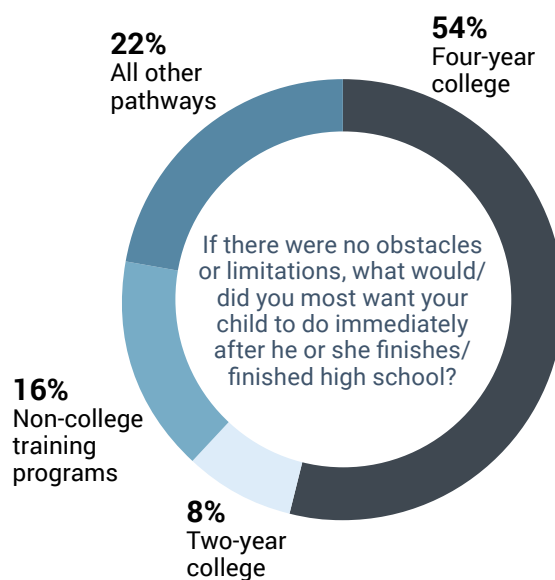
Beyond academics, colleges also need to prepare for students whose social development was curtailed during the pandemic. This generation was already coming to college less seasoned than previous generations even before Covid-19 locked them at home with their parents and forced them to communicate with friends from a distance.

Half of the students surveyed by McKinsey said Covid-19 had affected their emotional and mental preparedness to enroll in college. The McKinsey study echoes other surveys. A poll of more than 7,000 students in the class of 2022 by Niche found only half felt confident that they would be socially and emotionally prepared for college, a decline of a third from the class of 2020.

Post-Covid Gen Z will need time to acclimate socially when they arrive on campus. Campus leaders should consider

### Parental Preference

Percentage among all parents



Note: "Non-college training programs" and "all other pathways" are composite groups.  
Source: Gallup, Carnegie Corporation of New York

## TEACHING AND TECHNOLOGY AFTER THE PANDEMIC

**A**lthough Gen Zers largely gave low marks to remote learning during the pandemic and eagerly awaited their return to campuses for in-person learning, they don't want to entirely dispense with the flexibility that accompanied online education. The reality is that the post-Covid campus is likely to be a mix of virtual and face-to-face courses. Here's what colleges should plan for when it comes to teaching post-Covid Gen Z, according to Don Carter, director of academic and research technology services at Northern Arizona University.

### ► EXPECTATIONS WILL BE HIGHER AFTER THE PANDEMIC.

Students gave a pass to faculty members who were unfamiliar with using technology at the beginning of the pandemic. When it became clear that the fall of 2020 would also be online at many institutions, colleges spent the summer training the faculty to improve their remote courses. "Faculty training was successful for those who attended," Carter says, "but most opted for just-in-time training and support." If colleges expect to continue offering online courses to residential students, they need to essentially start over and redesign classes and train the faculty for the long run.

### ► PROVIDE EQUAL TECHNOLOGY FOR MULTIPLE DELIVERY CHANNELS.

If students are allowed to mix and match in-person and online learning on campuses, colleges need to provide technology that gives students the same opportunities to participate in classroom activities no matter how they consume the course. The problem, Carter says, is that online students generally have more digital tools available during class time. Institutions that are serious about hybrid learning need to invest in upgrading classroom technology or else the "in-person students will ask, 'Why not just be remote?'" Carter says.

### ► DON'T THINK OF ONLINE AS JUST COURSES.

Encourage faculty members to consider the lessons they learned about teaching during the pandemic, and not only what happened in their classroom. Take virtual office hours, for example. Most professors reported students attended office hours in greater numbers during the pandemic because they found online meetings more convenient. The convenience factor doesn't disappear with the pandemic for students who live off campus or work. Virtual office hours are also often more effective with students who are intimidated by visiting their professors, a group that includes many first-generation students.

transforming the first semester of college into a transitional term both academically and socially.

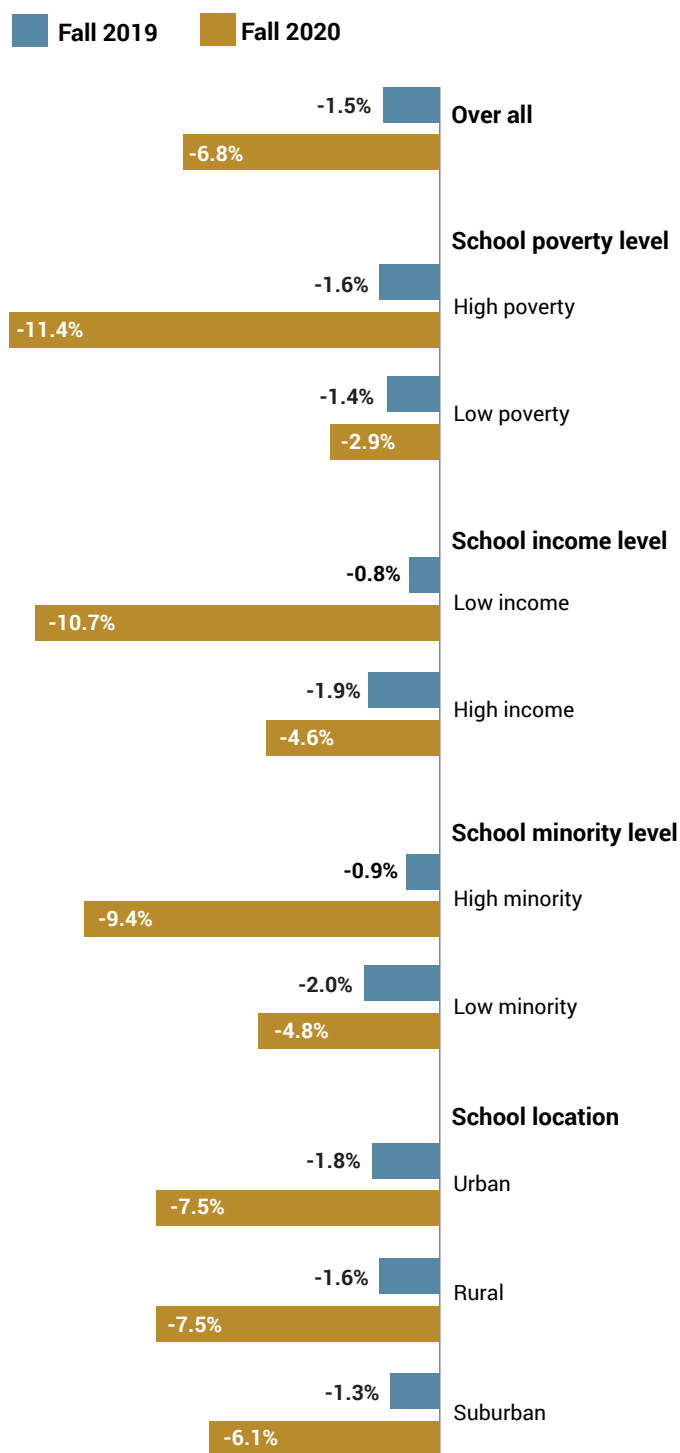
No matter what, Covid-19 is likely to worsen the mental-health crisis among Gen Zers. More than a quarter of students on 14 campuses surveyed by the American College Health Association and the Healthy Minds Network during the pandemic said anxiety or mental distress had disrupted their studies and affected their academic performance.

Mental-health problems were exacerbated by financial worries during the pandemic, as students' parents lost their jobs when unemployment surged. More than one in five Americans faced economic difficulties resulting from the pandemic, the Pew Research Center found. Nearly a third of students in the McKinsey survey said Covid-19 had a strong or extremely strong impact on their ability to afford college.

While campuses have added to their ranks of counselors in recent years, they continue to struggle to keep up with demand. College presidents are feeling the pressure to do more: Student mental health is their top concern going into the fall of 2021, [according to an American Council on Education survey](#).

Beyond providing assistance to their current students, making mental health a priority also helps with future enrollment. In their college decision-making process, safety and well-being are increasingly as important for Gen Z as academic rigor. Eight in 10 students said well-being is a "moderately" or "very important" consideration

## Percent Change in Fall Enrollments by High-School Characteristics



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center



when deciding which college to attend, according to research from Everfi, a company that provides students with online training in how to deal with alcohol, misconduct, and mental-health issues.

“I’m looking for a place that’s going to accommodate my mental stress,” according to a focus-group member from the high-school class of 2022.

The result is that colleges need not only a comprehensive approach to safety and well-being, but they also need to better communicate that commitment to would-be students in admissions materials.

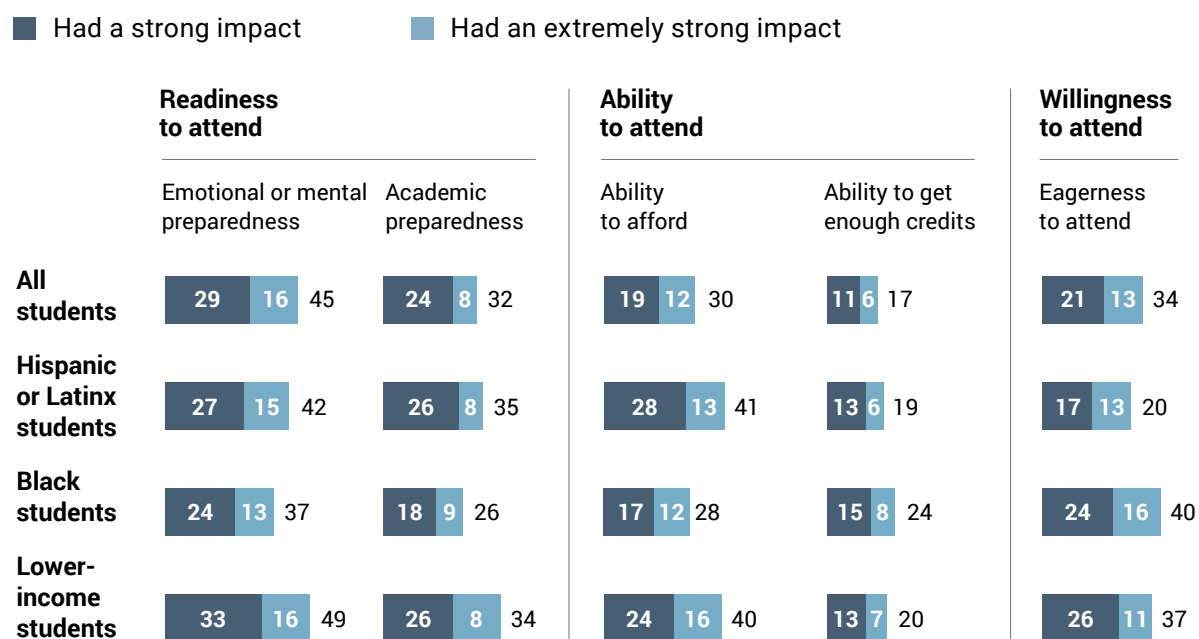
Gen Zers are even more focused on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the wake of Covid-19. The protests that erupted in the wake of high-profile police

killings in 2020 were muted on college campuses because they were mostly closed or locked down to students during the pandemic. While colleges quickly released statements condemning racism, campus leaders likely missed the full effect of Gen Z’s frustrations with colleges that make bold pronouncements but then fail to take actions demanded by students, such as cutting ties with local police departments, requiring classes on racism, and hiring more faculty and staff of color.

“This is a generational shift in the belief that these values are really important and foundational to their experiences,” Alvin Tillery Jr., director of the Center for the Study of Diversity and Democracy at Northwestern University, told

## Students at Risk

Level of reported impact of pandemic on college-preparedness factors, percent of respondents



Notes: Figures may not sum because of rounding; the level of reported impact on college preparedness factors relates to the question: “What, if anything, has been the impact of Covid-19 on the following aspects of your preparedness for college?” Lower-income students includes those with an annual family income of less than \$50,000.

Source: McKinsey Covid-19 Higher Education Enrollment Survey: wave I, conducted April 21-28, 2020

## MARKETING TO POST-COVID GEN Z

**D**uring the pandemic, more than 600 colleges and universities dropped their admissions requirements for ACT and SAT scores. At some colleges, including the University of California system, those test-optional policies have become permanent.

With fewer institutions requiring the tests, fewer college-going teenagers might feel compelled to take them. Every year, colleges purchase the names of test-takers to begin their outreach to students. Without all those leads to fill the top of their recruitment funnel, colleges will need to look elsewhere for the names of prospective students at a time when Gen Z is already bypassing many of the traditional marketing channels colleges have long used, such as email.

In the aftermath of the pandemic and a national reckoning over race, skepticism is growing toward institutions of all kinds, including colleges, says Tamalyn Powell, senior vice president for education at BVK, a Milwaukee-based marketing and advertising firm. She has this advice for colleges in how they can tailor their marketing messages to the needs of post-Covid Gen Z.

### ► BE CANDID ABOUT WHAT TO EXPECT.

Gen Z is incredibly savvy, and technology has empowered them to find information on the fly. Colleges need to be forthright with information that matters most to students. Make tuition and fees clear and understandable. “Dig into efforts toward greater campus safety,” Powell says. And go beyond statements about antiracist values and show what actions you’ve taken.

### ► STAND FOR SOMETHING OUTSIDE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, TOO.

“Students in this generation see themselves as agents of change,” Powell says. “They aren’t merely advocating for change, they are making it happen, pushing their agenda, and being supported by their educators, parents, and in many cases, business leaders.” Any university could claim small classes, top-notch professors, and hands-on learning in their admissions materials. In order to differentiate their messages in a crowded marketplace, colleges and universities need to align with ideas that students crave and want to be part of — issues like racial justice, climate change, and social mobility.

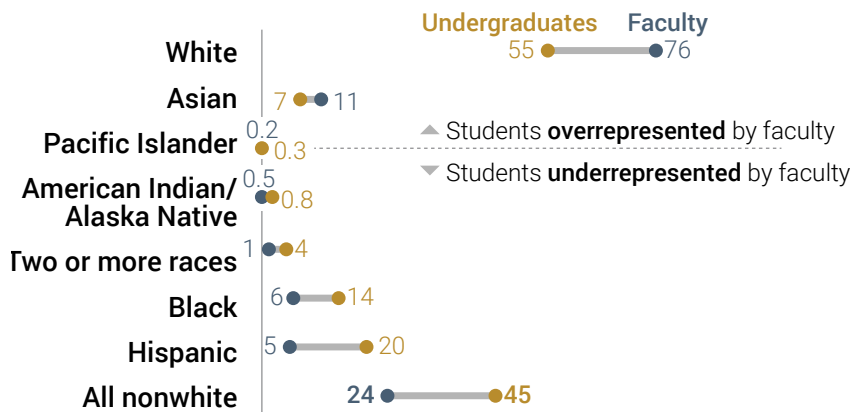
### ► MATCH THE MARKETING TO YOUR ACTIONS.

Too many times, how a university tells its story in marketing does not match what prospective students experience when engaging with the institution. This was especially true during the pandemic when some institutions said they cared about their students’ well-being, but were encouraging them to live on campus and attend in-person classes. Colleges need to develop a shared commitment to a brand and mission among faculty and staff members, understand where there are any disconnects, and eliminate those gaps.

## Diverging Demographics

U.S. college students are twice as likely as faculty members to be Black, and four times as likely to be Hispanic.

Percent of undergraduates and postsecondary faculty members by race and ethnicity in fall 2017



Note: "Nonwhite" includes those who are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska Native, and those of two or more races. Those categorized as "nonresident alien" and "race/ethnicity unknown" are not included in this analysis, so shares may not total to 100 percent.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, Pew Research Center

*The Washington Post*. "You can say there's no systemic racism, but they don't believe that."

For Gen Z, the pandemic exposed dramatic health and economic inequities that previous generations have ignored. In *The Chronicle's* focus groups, students said they closely followed the protests and national debate. For some, it inspired a change in career plans. All paid very close attention to how colleges reacted. They want campuses that take issues of inequity seriously, just as they are looking for institutions that took the pandemic seriously. Not only did prospective students look for official communications from colleges, they also sought out student videos on YouTube and followed current undergraduates on social media to see what they were thinking and get a better sense of campus culture.

Meanwhile, on campuses, the pivot to remote education uncovered the divide

between white and well-off students and everyone else. A study by the research and consulting organization Ithaka S+R found that Latino students reported the highest number of challenges during remote learning compared to every other racial and ethnic group; issues with technology were also more problematic for low-income students than their counterparts.

Yes, Zooming into homes of undergraduates helped faculty members better understand the competing pressures in their students' lives. But the reality is that given Gen Z's diversity, the racial, ethnic, and economic composition of the student body on most campuses is shifting much faster than the faculty and staff who turn over at a much slower rate.

Just among the faculty alone, about three-quarters of professors in the United States are white, compared with around



half of undergraduates, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. The fastest-growing group of students in higher education are Latinos. They now make up 20 percent of undergraduates, but only 5 percent of faculty members are Latino.

Over all, a larger share of younger, non-tenured professors are nonwhite compared with fully tenured professors, as reported by the Pew Research Center. But junior faculty still aren't diversifying as quickly as the student bodies at their institutions. Over the last decade, the share of nonwhite assistant professors grew by 10 percentage points, for instance, compared with 8 points for professors.

The demographic gap between college students and the faculty exists across academic disciplines. A study by researchers at the University of Missouri at Columbia found that faculty of color are especially underrepresented in fast-growing science, technology, engineering, and math disciplines at the nation's 40 biggest public universities.

This growing divide has critical consequences for student success. Research has found that students who have professors

of the same race or ethnicity are more likely to stay in college, perform well in class, and graduate. After the pandemic, not only will students be more attuned to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion

**For Gen Z, the pandemic exposed dramatic health and economic inequities that previous generations have ignored.**

but enrollment is also expected to diversify even more quickly over the next decade than the last one — compelling colleges to better ensure that the experiences of their students are reflected in classroom instruction as well as the makeup of the faculty and staff.

## RECOMMENDATIONS



### PRIORITIZE BELONGING AND PURPOSE.

Institutions need to embrace a greater role in helping Gen Z students find a sense of belonging and purpose that is vital to improving the post-pandemic student experience. Feeling a sense of belonging is not about “fitting in” per se; it’s about having environments inside and outside classrooms where students are comfortable speaking up and learning from their mistakes. After the economic and social upheaval caused by the pandemic, post-Covid Gen Z will want colleges to do more than simply nurture human connections, however. The coronavirus outbreak had a dramatic psychological effect on people, and many students are reassessing what they want to do in life. Colleges will also need to help students understand the purpose of college by making better connections between what they’re learning in the moment and how they will use that learning after graduation.



### FOCUS ON EMERGING CAREERS TO CULTIVATE STUDENT DEMAND.

Even before the pandemic, Gen Z went to college to get a job. Covid-19 is already reshaping the future of work, with the rise of remote workplaces and increased automation in jobs. The moment is ripe for colleges to reverse the enrollment declines of the pandemic and cultivate greater demand by building new degree programs, offering different kinds of credentials, and establishing complementary advising services that can get students into careers. New programs can be built in fields emerging from the pandemic, such as logistics, which can help organizations get ready for the next crisis, whether it’s a public-health emergency or an environmental one. Colleges should look to where jobs are being created and investments being made, in health care, biotech, cybersecurity, and infrastructure, since that will spur demand for graduates with those skills.



### THINK ABOUT 30 YEARS, NOT JUST FOUR.

The pandemic revealed the need for upskilling and reskilling throughout life as jobs disappeared quickly and industries contracted while new ones emerged. Alumni no longer need to rely on their alma maters to help them maintain their networks, which can be done almost automatically online. Now, colleges must play a role in maintaining the lifelong education needs of their graduates, allowing them to more easily associate with the institution to take single courses to beef up specific skills and obtain micro-credentials. What’s more, employers are increasingly turning to educational benefits to lure new employees and retain existing ones. Building lifelong learning platforms with flexible course requirements and schedules allows more colleges to serve adult learners and break into the employer market.



### INVEST IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM.

The uniqueness of a residential campus in a specific geographic location was diminished by remote learning during the pandemic. It was difficult for institutions to differentiate their brand from another college's when everyone was at home learning online. Many students and their tuition-paying parents didn't think classes on their own were worth the price tag. For post-Covid Gen Z, colleges need to better integrate technology and academics and rethink how courses are taught. Gen Zers want more lectures prerecorded, so in-class time can be used for discussions or group work. Students and faculty members both realized during the pandemic that the ultimate value is in learning, not simply earning a grade. As a result, colleges should encourage faculty members to eliminate grades for class participation, give fewer high-stakes tests, and provide more flexibility with deadlines on assignments.



### HELP PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS FIND THEIR FIT.

College admissions follow a certain cadence in its annual recruitment calendar. But that system was upended by Covid-19 — perhaps forever. During the pandemic, unable to visit colleges or meet with admissions counselors in their high school, teenagers were forced to browse, click, and chat their way to an opinion of a campus. Without the usual markers of student interest, enrollment leaders found it difficult to determine who would apply and who might enroll. For post-Covid Gen Z, instead of colleges controlling when to interact with prospective students, institutions can join students in exploring the right fit by collecting data on who they are, based on their academic profile and their preferences for distance from home, for instance, or for small colleges or urban institutions.



### CONNECT STUDENT DATA ACROSS CAMPUS SERVICES.

Over the past few decades, campuses have upgraded their operations from analog systems to digital records, department by department. The problem, however, is that digitization has largely stayed siloed in campus divisions. Students want a seamless campus experience that doesn't require them to go to multiple offices for help and gives them more choices in how they obtain services. By connecting all the dots between functions, campus officials can identify student needs as they arise and make services more efficient.

In conversations with college presidents and enrollment managers over the past few years, I've heard great concern about the demographic cliff coming in the middle of this decade. Yet in the same breath many also dismissed talk that the sky was falling and the possibility that hundreds of struggling colleges might close. After all, their predecessors always seemed to find new cohorts of students during demographic downturns in the past — underrepresented students who were new in the college pipeline, teenagers in geographic territories far from campus, or undergraduates from overseas.

There was optimism for a similar result once again. Besides, demographic doomsday was still a few years away. There was time to plan and hope — or pray.

Then Covid-19 happened. Campuses shuttered, and classes quickly moved online. The images that admissions officers had sold prospective students of perfectly manicured campuses, inspiring professors, Saturday football games, and undergraduates sitting around a table in a dining hall no longer held true for an entire class of incoming freshmen. As a result, some said no thanks — they would delay college for a year or maybe longer. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show the share of new high-school graduates who enrolled in college in the fall of 2020 was the lowest in two decades, reaching only 62.7 percent.

Talk to college officials, and there is a widespread belief that 2020-21 was an anomaly in enrollment — and that once the pandemic subsides, students will return, and the numbers will snap right back. Maybe that's the case, but no matter what, the circumstances certainly will vary from campus to campus. A college's position in the market will play a large role, as we saw in spring 2021, when

applications to selective colleges and big, name-brand public institutions were up — way up in some cases — while everyone else was down.

But there are also indications that for Gen Z and their families, the pandemic altered how they think about higher education.

The first change in thinking is around value. Even before the pandemic, the student experience was often lacking on campuses. The pandemic only exacerbated the problem as students spent their time off campus learning or socially distant from their classmates and professors on campus. Now as students return to campus, their expectations for an improved experience inside and outside the classroom are only going to be heightened.

The second is around diversity. The pandemic coincided with a national reckoning over race. Rather than issues of inclusion and well-being being peripheral to what students are looking for in a college, they've become central for Gen Z. Colleges need to do more than issue declarations of support or tweak mission statements. Whether or not a campus meets students' expectations is increasingly about whether colleges care about their students' well-being and lived experiences.

Finally, given the shifting job market both before and after the pandemic, Gen Z places greater emphasis on outcomes. Colleges that fail to step up their academic and co-curricular programming risk even greater enrollment declines than from demographics alone.

For each successive generation since the Baby Boomers, a college campus has increasingly been the venue for the passage from adolescence to adulthood. That won't change for Gen Z. But where they go to college and how they go will be largely shaped by the ease and relevance of the student experience.



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