

## 26 [Engaging Gen Zers Through Academic Advising](#)

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*Rich Robbins, Bucknell University*



In 2019, several NACADA regional conferences as well as the annual conference included sessions on working with Millennial students. However, the time has come to shift academic advising practices from a Millennial framework to a Generation Z (Gen Z) approach. Millennials have moved on from higher education and Gen Zers, described by The Pew Research Center as those born between 1995 and 2015 (Dimock, 2019) are today's traditional-aged college students. There are nearly 74 million Gen Zers in the U.S., with the average 18-year-old first-year student born in 2001.

This is not another article about advising digital natives. Millennials are, and every generation thereafter will be, digital natives. This article presumes such and focuses on specific characteristics of Gen Zers as a completely separate and distinct generation from Millennials. As Seemiller and Grace (2016) point out, "research shows that while Generation Z shares some characteristics with Millennials, it is a vastly different generational cohort."

The bulk of the Gen Z literature focuses on how to market to Gen Zers (cf., Kleinschmit, 2019). Extrapolating from that information, combined with the few articles on Gen Zers and education, observations and suggestions regarding promising strategies to engage these students through academic advising are offered here. It is important to remember that, as McDowell (2016, para. 10) stated, "Gen Z members face the same life challenges as previous generations, but in a super-connected and rapid-moving technological age."

### **Gen Zers and Technology**

Gen Zers have never known a world without the internet or smartphones (McDowell, 2016). As a result, they have quick access to more information than any other generation at their age (Seemiller & Grace, 2016) with little separation of work, study, and leisure or public versus private. This is especially true for teenagers who are reportedly connected to social media or the internet nearly every waking hour (McDowell, 2016).

Due to this fondness for and reliance on technology, Gen Zers tend to perceive information visually, have short attention spans (Robertson, 2018 suggests an average of eight seconds), and are less focused than previous

generations—including Millennials! Multitasking is a primary trait, and they have the abilities to process and absorb lots of information within seconds (Robertson, 2018).

### **Personality Characteristics**

Gen Zers are very individualistic and are accustomed to having things personalized for them (Fisher, 2016). They are independent and confident and do not rely on their parents to the degree that preceding generations did. Gen Zers have different cultural experiences of family compared to past generations, such as same-sex households, three-parent families, and couples choosing not to have children (McDowell, 2016). They have grown up in ethnically and racially diverse environments (McDowell, 2016) and are the last generation whose majority members will be white. With social justice issues being prominent in their lifetimes, they are very environmentally and socially aware (Robertson, 2018) and firmly feel they have the power to change the world (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). They prefer community engagement opportunities that make a lasting impact on an underlying societal problem over short-term volunteer experiences that only address the symptoms or effects of an issue (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

### **Higher Education Considerations**

A 2018 study by Barnes & Noble College showed that today's Gen Z college students expect to be fully engaged in the classroom. Lectures are no longer the accepted norm as they thrive within a collaborative learning environment in which theories and concepts have broad applications beyond classroom exercises and for which they can be hands-on and directly involved in the learning process (Kozinsky, 2017). These students prefer practical learning opportunities that can immediately apply to their lives (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

Robertson's (2018) research showed that 44% of teens use computers to do their homework, with 48% viewing videos related to their academics. Gen Zers prefer being connected with their teachers and peers on social media sites when studying, with 50% to 76% reporting that they use social media and/or listen to music and send text messages or watch TV while doing their homework. The majority (55%) conveyed that such multitasking while completing homework did not negatively affect their productivity; many reported that it actually improved their productivity. Due to the individualized nature of technology, Gen Zers are very comfortable with independent learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2016) such that they regard instructors and peers as resources, preferring to work with others on their own terms. They expect on-demand services with low barriers to access and are more career-focused earlier in their college careers than past generations (Kozinsky, 2017).

Today's campuses are the most ethnically, racially, economically, politically, religiously, and sexually diverse ever. This diversity enriches Gen Z students' experiences while simultaneously creating new challenges (Mintz, 2019). These students are more likely to know someone from a different socioeconomic background as well as others who use gender-neutral pronouns, and there are more students than ever before with uneven degrees of academic preparation. Such diversity inevitably leads to today's students experiencing differences in attitudes, behaviors, and self-presentation styles (Mintz, 2019).

### **Mental Health Issues**

Anxiety and depression are the main concerns reported by many members of Gen Z (Mintz, 2019). According to Schrobsdorff (2016), approximately three million adolescents aged 12–17 years and across all demographics have experienced a major depressive episode in the past year. Anderssen (2016) reported that over two-thirds of Gen Zers feel overwhelmed by all they have to do every week, and a growing proportion of

this generation's students experience economic stress (Mintz, 2019). Gen Zers grew up post 9/11, witnessing and sometimes even experiencing economic collapse, public shootings, and violence and terrorism both domestic and abroad. Their use of technology offers intimate details of these types of events, promoting anxiety in many students (Seemiller & Grace, 2016).

It remains unclear whether there is an increase of mental health and emotional problems among Gen Zers, as it may be that this generation is more secure with the language of mental health and more willing to acknowledge such experiences and request help. What this does mean is that higher education faculty and staff are more likely to encounter students willing to admit to and discuss such matters.

### **Academic Advising to Engage Gen Z Students**

Seemiller and Grace (2016) identified four ways that campuses can engage Gen Z students. These include (1) the increased use of technology (especially video-based learning) in-and-out of the classroom, (2) the incorporation of intrapersonal learning into class work and group work, (3) the inclusion of community engagement opportunities in the curriculum, and (4) connecting students to practical learning experiences starting earlier in a student's college career. The first way includes suggestions for any digital native students and is therefore not exclusive to Gen Z students. These include, for example, social networks, learning management systems, and online modules as part of academic advising to provide information to students. Group texts, Facebook groups, even Instagram accounts are options as well. Such applied learning techniques incorporated into the academic advising interaction can foster student learning resulting from advising.

The second suggestion of incorporating intrapersonal learning into academic advising relates specifically to Gen Zers. Due to their experiences with increased diversity, social awareness and social justice issues, environmental concerns, and civic engagement, advisors must be prepared for highly controversial topics to emerge in the advising interactions. Appropriate academic advisor training and development is necessary to ensure that advisors are prepared and able to manage such situations. The emphasis on college as a means to obtain a desired career, combined with the related issue of students and their families concerned about the cost of college and resulting student debt (Mintz, 2019), further means that academic advisors must be able to provide meaningful connections across multiple courses and disciplines regarding students' academic and career goals (Egan, 2015).

To meet the third and fourth recommendations by Seemiller and Grace (2016), beyond knowledge of available support services, academic advisors need to know the applied learning and community engagement opportunities for students both in individual courses and across the institution. This includes opportunities for the incoming first-year student to the graduating senior. As Robbins (2014) suggested, it has never been more imperative for academic advisors to discuss and promote the benefits of integrative liberal learning to their students.

Finally, given the mental health issues reported by many members of Gen Z students and the fact that academic advisors are often the first persons on campus to whom a student may express such an issue (Robbins, 2012), academic advisors must know when to refer to mental health experts. For example, the Achieving the Dream (2018) program's processes include comprehensive academic advising as just one component of holistic student support. An integration of intentional supports is necessary, and while developmental advising skills of empathy, listening, and caring are good, Kuhn et al. (2006) discussed when it is appropriate for advisors to refer students to counseling services.

### **Conclusion**

Several points discussed here are not new recommendations, as others have previously suggested increased technology for academic advising (e.g., Esposito et al., 2011; Leonard 2008; Pasquini, 2011; Steele, 2014), and there are numerous articles regarding academic advising and student mental health issues (e.g., Kuhn et al., 2006; Robbins, 2012). What is new is the recognition of today's Gen Z students being technologically connected most of their waking hours, having short attention spans, and possessing expertise at multitasking. They come from very diverse backgrounds, hold strong social justice attitudes, and report high levels of anxiety and depression. Their characteristics, behaviors, experiences, expectations, and learning preferences are different from the Millennial generation, and academic advising processes need to adapt to their optimal learning conditions while addressing the issues meaningful to them beyond the academic curriculum.

### **Rich Robbins**

Associate Dean  
College of Arts and Sciences  
Bucknell University  
[rich.robbins@bucknell.edu](mailto:rich.robbins@bucknell.edu)

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