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The Voices of Generation Z: Barriers and Supports to Success in Community College

Alison Airhart and Jennifer A. Spielvogel

Introduction

Higher education institutions recently began to enroll a new generation of students known as *Generation Z*, or digital natives. Born between 1995 and 2010, this was the first generation to be born into an internet-connected world where technology is the center of all they do. This generation depends largely on technology and social media for their interactions with the outside world, often choosing to text or message with friends, even when those friends are physically present in a space with them (Cilliers, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Selingo, 2018). Generation Z uses technology to brand themselves on social media platforms, express their opinions on social, political and economic issues, and acquire information (Johnson & Sveen, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Selingo, 2018; Trevino, 2018).

Technology is embedded in this generation's core values so much that it has become an extension of themselves. Thus, Generation Z expects technology to be incorporated into learning (Hope, 2016; Loveland, 2017; Selingo, 2018; Trevino, 2018). Generation Z students reported that learning became enjoyable to them when some mode of technology is merged into their course materials. Further, the impact of internet resources such as YouTube and Khan Academy has changed the way Generation Z prefers to learn; that is, to take charge of their own learning (Seemiller & Grace, 2017, 2018; Selingo, 2018; Twenge & Donnelly, 2016).

Not only does Generation Z value technology, but their expectations for personalization are high. They gravitate to personalization in building not only their identities, but also expect personalized college experiences (Selingo, 2018). With even higher expectation than previous generations, the Generation Z cohort wants to develop the skills to not simply prepare themselves for the future workforce, but also to create jobs in the future workforce (Johnson & Sveen, 2020; Selingo, 2018). Generation Z wants personalized and customized learning as well as a push to create learning environments that maximize Generation Z's capacity to learn (Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Selingo, 2018). Hope (2016) reported that this new generation of students attending college has distinct learning preferences (i.e., they do not react positively to informational dumping, group work only, and projects that were not solutions-oriented). They choose classroom interactions over lectures, prefer to be closely connected to faculty, and want to acquire knowledge with the independence of what and how they learn. This generation strives to optimize their time through constructive learning, community involvement, and a connection to technology in both their educational and future career paths (Seemiller & Grace, 2018).

Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study to answer the research question, "How can community colleges help Generation Z students progress toward their educational goals?" Data were

collected in semi-structured focus group interviews. The study was limited to students currently enrolled at a Hispanic-serving community college located in a diverse region of Southern California who met the following criteria: currently enrolled in at least one credit unit, identified their race or ethnicity as Hispanic on the college application, and were born in or after 1995. Any student under the age of 18 was excluded from the study.

Participants and Data Collection

The focus group interviews contained open-ended questions regarding the characteristics of Generation Z students, barriers the students have experienced in reaching their educational goals, and the services students believe supported them in college. The focus group format allowed the students to use the chat feature in Zoom to answer interview questions at any time.

Students' responses from the focus groups were segmented into three sets. Students who indicated completion of 0–12 course credit units were identified as *Newcomers*, those who completed 13–24 course credit units were identified as *Midpathers*, and students who completed 25 or more course credit units were labeled *Seasoned*. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the 12 focus group participants to use when they were quoted.

Findings

To corroborate the literature, students were asked to describe the characteristics of Generation Z. *Connection to technology* and *open-mindedness* were two themes that were discussed frequently by all students. *Determined* and *challenged by mental health issues* were two minor themes that arose with the *Newcomers*. Other themes students described were barriers to success and supports to meeting educational goals.

Connection to Technology. As the first generation to grow up with the internet and a high degree of online connectivity, the students reported “being good at everything.” They know how to get answers quickly from the internet and find that social media platforms help build stronger communities and are helpful in many situations. However, due to the lack of filtered content on the internet, this generation reported being confused by what is true or not true. *Seasoned Jose* described how the internet is confusing for his generation:

The internet gives us everything. It will give us both sides. It will show us the good and the bad. That is one thing that makes me think that we are both one of the good generations but also one of the bad generations as well. There is so much false information out there. The second we read it, we want to believe it.

Open-Minded and Accepting. One student expressed that due to the exposure to the internet, this generation is more open-minded than preceding generations. They reported being exposed to more diversity and accepting of various ideologies and individuals.

Seasoned Jose explained how exposure to differences leads to more acceptability:

Platforms such as Facebook or Instagram have so many people that are posting and others are following, that I believe it's now making it easier for us to accept new things and people for what they are and not judge them for what they like or what

they do in their free time. That's something I believe that makes Generation Z a bit unique than most others.

Newcomer Sofia described her generation's open-mindedness. "I feel like we are not bonded by those ideas that have been created about others, and we are more open-minded about getting to know people. We don't put people in boxes that society puts them in." Other students described Generation Z as being more open-minded when it comes to career paths.

Midpather Mariana said that she has a lot of friends who decided not to go to college after high school, but instead opened small businesses. "It's not like before. I feel like before all you have to do is go to college. Now . . . there's also other options. We are more accepting if you go or if you don't go to college." Careers such as real estate agents, YouTube influencers, social media workers, and business owners were mentioned as non-conventional career paths this generation explores. One student described the difference between his mother's generation and Generation Z as related to career paths:

Our parents told us that without college, you can't be happy, or you can't have a good life. But that was all just a lie. You can be happy. You can have a good life. . . . Now, they're getting paid millions just for posting one video up and having people follow.

In addition to pursuing unconventional career paths, this generation also reported not following the traditional American gender roles. One *Seasoned* student described that in the past, women went to college, got a job, and then started a family. Unlike past generations, Generation Z men and women no longer follow this path.

Determined. Most *Newcomers* began attending community college when the colleges re-opened in the 2020-21 academic school year, following their closure in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These students described their generation as being determined. *Newcomer Elena* explained why she characterized Generation Z as being resolute:

I would say that we are determined. I think very determined when it comes to tough situations like the pandemic. Even though we didn't get to go to school, because I was graduating from high school when the pandemic hit, and we didn't know what was going on, this is a situation of how we handled it [well]. . . . going to college, staying safe. . . . It was really tough for us. I think just how we handle things is with determination.

Another student described this generation as being determined or even "stubborn" because they make decisions for themselves and without much concern for what family or friends think.

Mental Health Challenges. A less dominant theme that emerged amongst *Newcomers* is the mental health challenges their generation experiences. These students characterized themselves as struggling with self-motivation and procrastination related to learning remotely during the pandemic. One student stated how she struggled with being isolated at home during the pandemic. Another student reported online learning during COVID-19 was draining because of the number of hours required to be in front of a computer. One student summed up how she worked through her mental health challenges. "Having the need to push yourself can be hard, but it's worth it. You have to talk yourself out of those negative thoughts." Not only does this

generation characterize itself as being challenged by mental health issues, one student stated she perceived that mental health issues overall were on a rise with this generation.

Barriers to Success. When asked what barriers they have experienced in making progress to their education goals, one participant mentioned that he had no barriers at community college, and all had been “smooth sailing” for him. For the others, three main themes emerged related to the challenges or barriers Generation Z students experienced. These themes included lack of personal or institutional support, college processes such as course offerings and scheduling, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generation Z students not only reported their struggle to pay college tuition and fees, but also the auxiliary costs of attending college, such as buying textbooks and materials. Having to become financially literate presented a problem for *Midpather Ximena*. “I think the [biggest] challenge right now would probably be financial, because I have to be aware of how to use my money wisely.”

Students reported that professors often required expensive book purchases. *Midpather Mariana* explained her situation with buying a textbook. “My most expensive book . . . was \$150. I did not have my financial aid. . . I had to pay out of my own pocket. . . I wish there were a cheaper option.”

When students could not afford to buy their own textbook(s), they stated that the college library allowed them to use course textbooks, but the textbooks could only be used at the library. Because there were often not enough textbook copies available at the library to meet the student demand, it is common to have long wait times to use certain textbooks needed to complete homework. *Seasoned Jose* explained this challenge. “I had to wait a long time for a book because someone else was using the book. You get to spend two hours [using the book], but then, what happens if you don’t have those two hours to spend there?”

College Processes. Generation Z students frequently expressed that they struggled with understanding the college processes and procedures. One frustration was the lack of consistent information from their college. Students reported long wait times or no replies to their emails, difficulties making appointments with counselors, and not receiving any information on special programs. Students also reported how scheduling, course offerings, and programs created a barrier. While the college offered courses at a main campus, as well as at four off-site campuses, students expressed difficulties taking classes close to home because only a limited number of classes were offered at the off-site campuses, or the classes were offered at inconvenient times.

COVID-19 Pandemic. While having described themselves as technologically adept, Generation Z students nevertheless struggled with having all their classes online after the school closure when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred. Students expressed being distracted by activities in their household and having difficulties with dependable internet access while sharing Wi-Fi with family members.

Other students struggled during the pandemic because they expressed a lack of quality instruction during the pandemic. *Seasoned Jose* explained that his professor did not know how to

use a computer or how to use Zoom. He shared, “[The lack of online experience for the instructor] slowed me down a bit to the point where one class I even just passed automatically because [the professor] didn’t know how you do Zoom.” *Midpather Mariana* expressed she wished “[class] was in-person and the teacher would help me.... Instead of trying to figure out a time where we could set up a Zoom.” Other students became frustrated due to a lack of response or direction from their professors or counselors during this remote learning period.

Finally, it was frequently mentioned that COVID-19 created a bottleneck of students needing help and questions answered when the college closed. There became an increase in students trying to get help related to the changes caused by the pandemic. This barrier was particularly unique to the *Newcomers* who entered the college in the middle of the pandemic and did not have the chance to attend their first semester on campus. However, enrolled students also had similar experiences. *Newcomer Sofia* described her frustrations when she tried to get help after the school closure. “One of the main challenges...is that I didn’t have someone that could help me. Being able to contact the counselors was a bit more challenging due to all the other students trying. . . It was just too much.”

Supports to Meeting Educational Goals. Generation Z students reported that the people around them, as well as the wide array of comprehensive programs and services offered to them by the college, helped support their retention, transition, and overall academic success. The students also offered suggestions for additional or enhanced supports.

Social Connections. The relationships that Generation Z students have with individuals in their lives influenced their academic success. This connection included family members, peers, and faculty. The *Newcomers* found support from family members helpful especially when family allowed them the time and space to complete homework and focus on their assignments. *Newcomer Elena* expressed that it was important for her family to be accepting of the decisions she made in college, even when her family had other desires for her career:

It doesn’t matter what other people say. It’s what you really want to do, no matter if it pays a lot, or if you don’t get enough money. Some people get into a career that they don’t really end up loving...what helped me a lot was to choose a career that I want instead of [my family] thinking this is a good career for you.

In addition to family, a connection to college peers was reported as supporting academic success. *Seasoned Jose* mentioned that the connection he had with the members of his college sports team allowed him to work in a team study group. The team members were easily accessible to help him with assignments when a faculty member was not available.

Faculty members and counselors are also key people who influence Generation Z students’ progress. This generation of students appreciated when faculty put the link to free textbooks and resources on Canvas, an online learning management system (LMS). They also reported that it was particularly helpful when both the professors and counselors informed them about the support programs available to them.

In addition, counselors were mentioned as being helpful when assisting students to choose a major and providing information needed about special programs. Dedicated counselors in special

programs, such as TRIO, support students along their educational path. *Midpath* Cory, who identified their gender as non-binary, described how their counselor maintained a close relationship and served as a safety net for them while at the college:

The counselors also made sure to check up on us and help us set up our classes. I think the first time we did it, I signed up for two semesters so they had an idea [of what classes I needed]. Then we could also schedule appointments with them, so we could make sure every semester we signed up for the classes that will go towards our major.

Comprehensive Programs and Services. One of the helpful support services mentioned in all three focus groups was the tutoring center. The students appreciated getting help in math, and having their writing critiqued by the tutors. *Newcomer Sofia* stated that she struggled with math and that the college tutoring services helped her to pass her math course. Generation Z students also emphasized that the tutoring center provided critical support needed to complete writing assignments across the curriculum.

To some Generation Z students, the use of the tutoring center was a new concept. *Seasoned Ana* shared that she appreciated it when her professor required all students to have their papers evaluated by a tutor at the tutoring center:

I had a professor who actually required us to go to [the tutoring center] to get our papers peer-reviewed. When we did that, we would get full credit. If you didn't do it, then you get half credit. So, you essentially did not get a good grade if you didn't get your paper peer-reviewed. Back then it was a little odd. But now, looking back, it helped me gain the courage to actually go to [the tutoring center] afterwards for different classes to use some of the services.

Similar to the tutoring center, many students expressed the help they received from the library was beneficial, especially the textbook loan program. While students mentioned the high price of course textbooks as being a barrier to academic success, it was very helpful when they could check out the course textbook for free or use a reference copy of the book at the library.

Other Support. Generation Z students frequently reported a need for additional support systems to help them meet their educational goals, from onboarding through completion. *Newcomers* reported they would like more onboarding FAFSA workshops and more information about programs and services offered.

Newcomer Elena stated how she would like counselors to reach out to students instead of students having to reach out to counselors. Similarly, *Midpath* and *Seasoned* students reported experiencing challenges associated with having a lack of counselors. *Midpath* David wanted support with regards to transfer counseling:

I would have a really big push on counseling towards students on helping them figure out what they're going to do after they leave college. I would try to bring counselors not only from the UCs, but also from other well-known universities to talk to our students. Basically, [I would help] students to establish connections to where it would be easier for the students to make the next step rather than having to figure it out on their own.

Seasoned Ana stated that she would like counselors to interact closer with students:

I think a lot of people get lost along the way, or they just don't really know what to do next. It is difficult, and I think having a plan or roadmap for them to follow over however many years they want to take classes is a good thing.

Discussion

Across the literature, researchers agree that Generation Z has a unique set of values related to technology, personalization, and outcomes (Parker & Igielink, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2017; Selingo, 2018). The results herein support previous findings in the literature related to the needs of Generation Z, such as students expect technology to be incorporated into learning (Hope, 2016; Loveland, 2017; Selingo, 2018; Trevino, 2018). In addition, the findings support research that suggests colleges may need to expand resources in financial aid counseling and create virtual access to these services (Selingo, 2018). This research also supports studies that found while colleges are improving at helping professors redesign courses to incorporate the latest new technology, there is still a dire need for professors to experiment more with technology to engage students and improve learning.

Results here support research that the college journey for Generation Z needs to be directly connected to their career on the horizon (Bailey et al., 2015; Parker & Ingielink, 2020; Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Selingo, 2018, Trevino, 2018). In their comments, students in this study supported the previous findings that college is no longer the only option available to them, and there is a need for institutions to help them move quickly on their educational paths. In addition, the students in this study expressed experiencing mental health challenges. This supports the findings that mental health concerns—such as anxiety—are growing in this population, and mental health support services need to be put into place to address this rising need in order to support successful education (Seemiller & Grace, 2018; Selingo, 2019).

Implications for Practice

Students and families are confused by the many layers of information, processes, and requirements that are necessary to enter and continue in community colleges. Many programs do exist to support students, but awareness, accessibility, and the design of the programs are still barriers. Students voiced a need for guidance in their transition to careers or 4-year universities after completing studies at their community college.

Supports could include college-led efforts that comprehensively support students in their first year with academic, financial, and social resources, as well as, coordinated efforts to leverage social media and new modalities of reaching this population of students with relevant information and skills that lead to academic success. Some interventions that could benefit students include identifying near-peers, cohorts, or readily available counselors who can ensure that students have consistent guidance throughout their educational journey; educating professors and staff about the resources and supports available to students so that they can serve as a bridge to these services; and, pacing and simplifying information so that students have just the right amount of information when they need it, delivered in a modality that students find accessible (e.g., short videos, TikTok, text messages, alerts in Canvas).

Colleges must shift from “preparing Generation Z students for college” to redesigning colleges to meet the needs of this generation. Many college leaders have learned that college systems and processes were not set up for flexibility, access, or the diversity of students’ needs. Students shared barriers to locating information on the college website, finding contradictory information, and accessing counselors or getting guidance during critical decision points. Adapting community colleges to center around the needs of Generation Z students will require adopting new media and technologies that are familiar to Generation Z students (e.g., YouTube, TikTok, Canvas pop-up alerts, text messages, instant messages, personalized emails); improving self-service options (e.g., navigating the website, registering for courses, finding resources, booking appointments with counselors, tutoring, scheduling office hours with instructors); and, training faculty to improve their instruction through the use of new and emerging technologies.

Recommendations for Future Research

An exploration into the changing image of a college education is needed as the role of higher education is shifting. For many decades, receiving a college education was seen as enough accomplishment—in and of itself—for success. Now, social media trends have altered the way education is valued in today’s gig economy, a term that refers to the increase in short-term contracts rather than permanent or stable jobs (Woodcock & Graham, 2020). Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube influencers are earning incomes that even college graduates do not receive. A study to explore the effects of the gig economy on higher education could help colleges rethink how programs are designed for the next generation of students.

Conclusion

Colleges and universities have traditionally faced difficulties in rapidly responding to both generational and cultural shifts of their students. To remain relevant in the coming decades, community colleges have an urgent responsibility to realign their practices with their vision of student success. Failing to meet the needs of Generation Z students has long-term implications. The choices that colleges make now will have an impact not only on this generation, but also on future ones. Generation Z students have rich experiences and ideas to share. By adopting their determination, we can reimagine an educational system most responsive to them.

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