

Who Are Our Generation Z Students? **by Betsy Cohn for SOC Pedagogy Workshop, November 20, 2019, V3.0**

Our current undergrads are part of [Gen Z](#) or iGen (born 1995-2012), and they differ from the Millennials who were born 1981-1995. While not everyone in an age group shares the same characteristics, some generalizations can be made.

Gen Z students are digital natives: their physical and digital lives overlap and they're always plugged in to technology. Plugged into screens, they are [used to multi-tasking](#), while some [psychologists](#) argue that we can only switch tasks, not effectively perform multiple tasks at the same time. They are resourceful [DIY learners](#) and consult YouTube or google before another human being. Since they are often using technology with endless amounts of information and entertainment, they are [quickly bored](#) by slower-paced engagement. So, we have [eight seconds](#) to catch their attention.

Many of their families struggled through the 2008-2009 recession, so they will work hard and want to be winners rather than losers. It also means they are pragmatic – their priority in college is to learn skills that will help them [find a job](#) and once graduated, achieve financial stability.

Financial insecurity and living on-line, as well as the physical insecurity of our times (mass school shootings, for example), have contributed to greater levels of anxiety and depression among this generation, as Sylvia Mathews Burwell noted in [Foreign Affairs](#). Burwell wrote: “[A]ccording to the 2016–17 Healthy Minds Study, an annual survey of mental health on American college campuses, while 44 percent of students said that they were flourishing, 39 percent reported experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety....”

Yet, Gen Z students are not self-absorbed and they feel less entitlement than Millennials; they are [industrious and want to help the world](#). They are used to [working on their own](#), not in groups, and they are more competitive and [realistic](#) than Millennials. They are also more used to diversity than previous generations and they value equality.

Growing up they've been told they are wonderful; they are confident, but not necessarily as competent as their perception of themselves. They are also constantly comparing themselves to others on-line so have fear of missing out (FOMO) and seek to create a perfect self on social media. Given the need for perfection, negative feedback may be hard for them to receive as they may not have the emotional tools to deal with it.

They want skills in multiple areas as they don't expect to stay in one job or career throughout their lives. Some 35% expect to own their own business, but this attraction to entrepreneurship may result from resistance to relying on anyone rather than a new business model – as well as the fact that they are growing up in the gig economy and a political world in which institutional foundations are being challenged. They will change the world and they are expecting us to equip them with the tools to do so.

Given these characteristics of Gen Z students:

1. *How can we build on their strengths and help them learn the skills and literacies they need?*
2. *What practices in our teaching, advising, or mentoring should we keep or change?*
3. *For faculty: What kinds of assignments and classroom sessions will help them learn?*
For staff: What kinds of practices or systems will help them succeed?