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## **On Campus Now: Generation Z** **by Colleen Waller**

Welcome to a new academic year!

You may have been noticing a shift in your student population over the last couple of years. According to marketing and generational researchers, a new generation, “Generation Z” (or “Gen Z”), is coming on to college campuses, supplanting the long dominant and much maligned Millennials (who are now shifting to influence campus climate as [professors and staff members](#)). [Pew Research Center \(2018\)](#) defines Gen Z as those born after 1997 and, although there is no definitive cut-off yet, researchers and journalists have identified end dates ranging from 2010 to 2015. Other names given to this group include “Post-Millennial,” “Homeland Generation,” “iGeneration,” or simply “iGen.”

As evidenced by the names given to this generation, by far the most talked about and perhaps most influential characteristic of this group is their status as the first true “digital natives.” Unlike Millennials, who embraced and adopted emerging technologies, this generation cannot remember a world without them. Gen Z takes available, fast, and constantly accessible connectedness for granted and “breathes through social media” ([Pappano, 2018](#)). Working from the suggested date of 1997, many Gen Z students were provided Chromebooks throughout their education and were only 10 when the iPhone was introduced and began to influence American culture. Having access to this technology from a young age influenced their preferred mode of communication, prioritizing texting over emails and phone calls ([Daulerio, 2017](#)).

In [\*iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood \(2017\)\*](#), Twenge connects Gen Z's overwhelming screen time to increased reports of loneliness, depression, and anxiety, warning that “iGen is on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades” (p. 94). Though no definitive causes are identified, the [2017 Annual Report of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health](#) has noted a marked increase in reports of anxiety and depression in college counseling centers.

Other cultural shifts, in addition to the pervasive effects of rapidly evolving technology, are worth considering when thinking about the increased anxiety and depression observed in this group. Gen Z were all born shortly before or after Columbine and have not known a world without regular school shootings and lockdown drills. Annual standardized tests have been ever present in their primary education as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act. Other defining cultural influences include the War on Terror, the election and presidency of Barack Obama, the Great Recession, and the 2016 presidential campaign and election. [Williams \(2015\)](#) compares Gen Z to the Silent Generation, noting the common childhood experiences of financial instability and a nation at war. Having parents predominantly from Generation X, who experienced a recession during Gen Z's formative years, this generation is fiscally conservative, pragmatic, and realistic about future employment and life goals

[\(Anatole 2013\)](#).

Being parented by Generation X has affected Gen Z in other ways too. As [Williams \(2015\)](#) points out, Gen X parents were the latchkey kids of the '70s and '80s and have prioritized safety with their own children. [Twenge \(2017\)](#) emphasizes that this parenting style may present, in Gen Z, as a tendency to be risk averse. They are physically safer than previous generations—wearing seatbelts as a matter of habit and being less likely to drive drunk ([Twenge, 2017](#)). Their tendency to be more cautious extends to their online habits, as well, where they are migrating from platforms like Facebook to spaces like Snapchat, which can seem more private and temporary.

Gen Z are also the most diverse and seemingly tolerant generation we have seen thus far. Using the years from 1995 to 2012, [Twenge \(2017\)](#) notes that a quarter of Gen Z is Hispanic and almost 5% multiracial. They are generally seen as more accepting and exposed to ethnic and sexual orientation diversity, having attended schools with diverse student populations and having come of age in a time of increasing acceptance, for instance, witnessing the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Knowing the common characteristics of Gen Z certainly does not necessitate a whole-scale overhaul of our classes or teaching methods. However, such an awareness can help us recognize generational differences that may be affecting our classrooms and the learning processes of our students. This can inform our efforts to provide the best educational experience possible.

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