



Navigating Generational Shifts: Understanding Today's Student Demographics, Preferences and Expectations

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Thank you for downloading this joint research report by UPCEA and Blackboard. Our collective mission is to continuously share insights and new ideas with the education community. This report on generational differences represents a cornerstone project around a topic that we are passionate about exploring.

As society evolves, our fascination with generational differences never seems to cease. Driven by the worldly events of the time, each generation embodies a generalized collection of cultural differences which tells us a fair amount about their beliefs, influencers, and preferences. While our fascination is oftentimes tied to pop-culture details such as fashion, music, and food trends, generational differences have a big impact on a global and economic scale. Higher education is no exception.

In early 2017, UPCEA and Blackboard began collaboration on research aimed at showcasing the education experience across multiple generations. Our hypothesis was that different generations likely have different expectations for their education experience. We were interested in just how different those expectations were, particularly for the generations furthest apart in age. Realizing that the largest majority of students today are adult, “non-traditional” learners, we set out to learn how each of the generations who make up the “new adult learner” category view their educational journey.

Ultimately, these expectations should inform our strategic approach to enrollment growth and student success. The primary objective of this research is to better understand the needs and preferences of the new adult learner, asking questions such as:

- › Are we still communicating with the right tools and messages?
- › Have we made the right investments in technology and outreach?
- › Are our systems set up to support these generations?
- › Do we have the best services in place to care for students?
- › Are our processes and approach in need of a full makeover?

This comprehensive white paper shares the results and findings of our research. Feedback and reactions are welcome, and can be sent to mnelson@upcea.edu.

Warmest Regards,

Jim Fong, UPCEA
Christina Fleming, Blackboard



Methodology

UPCEA and Blackboard jointly conducted a national survey of 18- to 35-year-olds. ResearchNow, a leading Internet research company, provided the list of 1,080 individuals who were surveyed and had an error margin of plus or minus 3% at 95% confidence. The survey was conducted in January 2017. The survey took an average of 5 minutes to complete.

Survey Demographics

From the survey results, categories of defined generations were formed. Generation Z was defined as those ages 18 to 20, comprising 100 respondents, or 10% of the total. The majority of respondents were Millennials, those defined as ages 21 to 35, at 748 respondents or 69%. Generation Xers, defined as 36- to 40-year-olds (Gen X participants over 40 were excluded from the survey), totaled 232 individuals, or 21%.

Figure 1 : Generational Differences

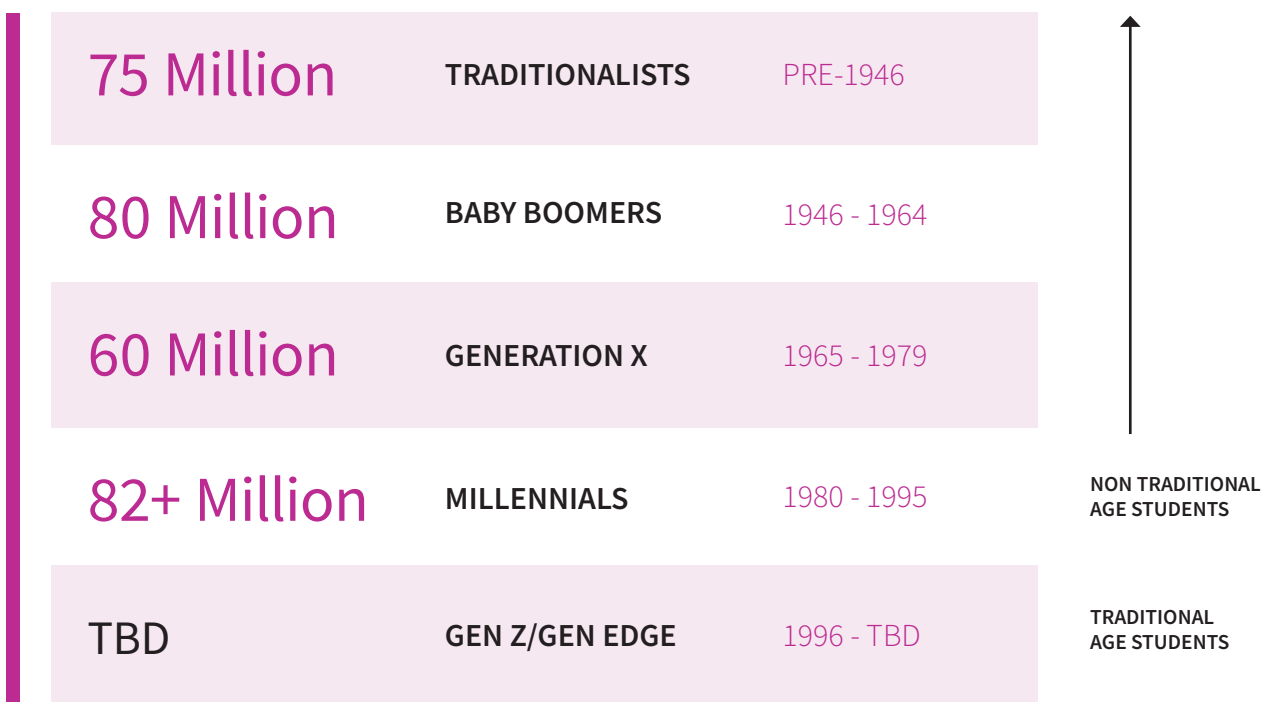


Figure 3 shows respondents' living situations, with half renting a home or apartment, and approximately one-third (31%) owning or paying a mortgage. Figure 4 identifies the marital status of respondents, with two-thirds being single and one-third married.

Figure 3: Living Situation

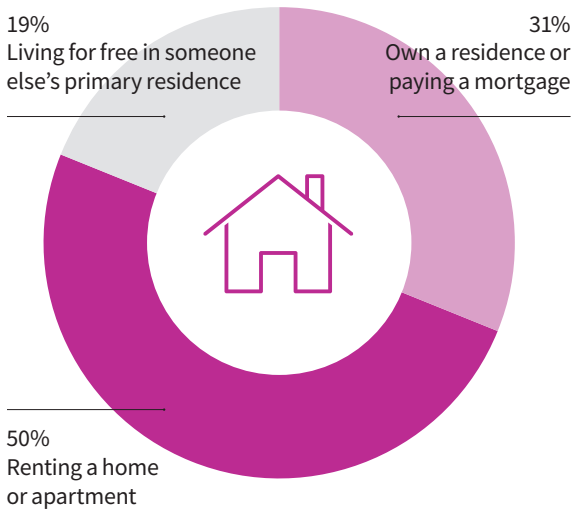


Figure 4: Marital Status

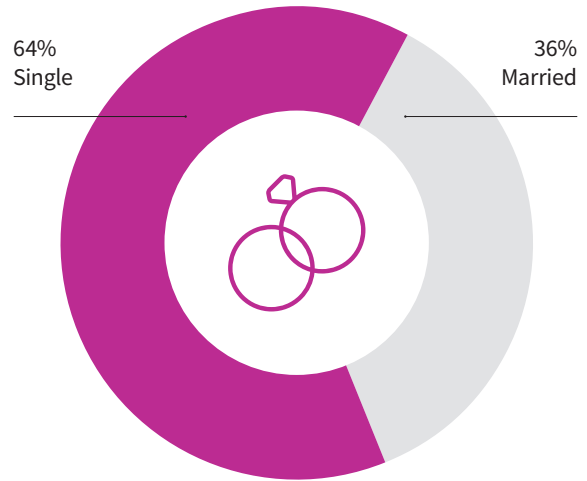


Figure 5 gives a gender breakdown, indicating a slight majority of female respondents. Almost half of respondents (47%) described their community as suburban, with another third (35%) selecting metropolitan or city as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 5: Gender Breakdown

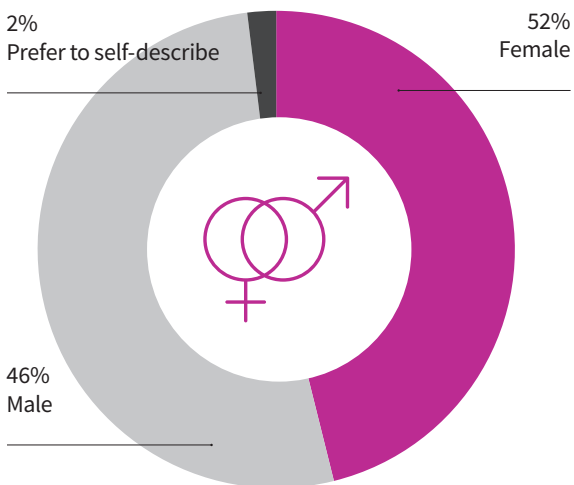
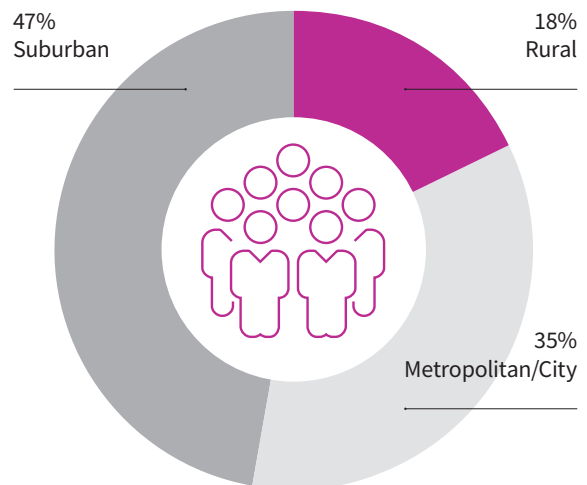


Figure 6: Community Description

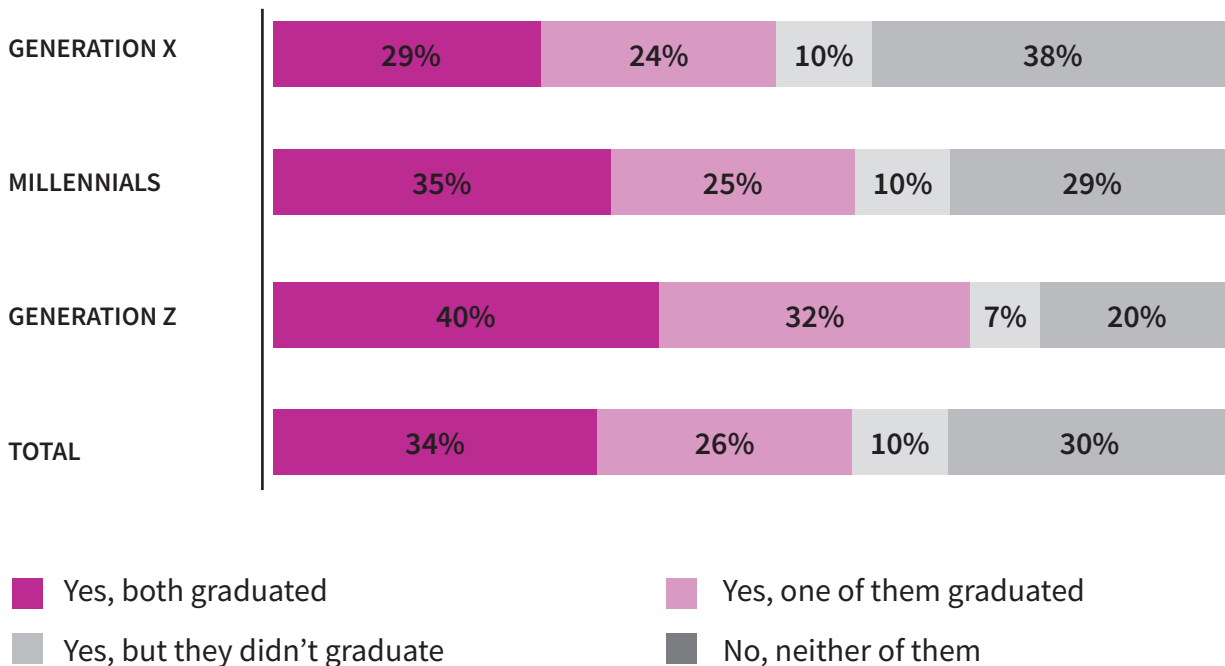




Survey Results

Figure 7 shows a generational shift that fits with one of the theories posed before conducting the survey—that the number of individuals with parents who have graduated from college increases with younger generations. While this shift is expected and fairly predictable, it indicates that the survey parameters are in fact defined correctly, and that respondents are in line with national averages.

Figure 7: Parents Attending College



Respondents from Generation X included a large number of individuals who had finished high school (44%), as well as individuals who had started college but hadn't yet finished (39%) (Figure 8). For this survey, Generation Z was defined as 18-20 year olds, therefore, some may be still in college. This could explain the high "haven't yet finished" number as well as the low percentage of "earned bachelor's degrees." Millennials had the highest percentage with a bachelor's degree (38%), and another 20% who had started college but didn't finish. Gen X was a little more evenly distributed, with one-third (33%) with a bachelor's degree, and another 18% with an even higher degree (master's, doctorate, or professional).

Figure 8: Highest Educational Level Received

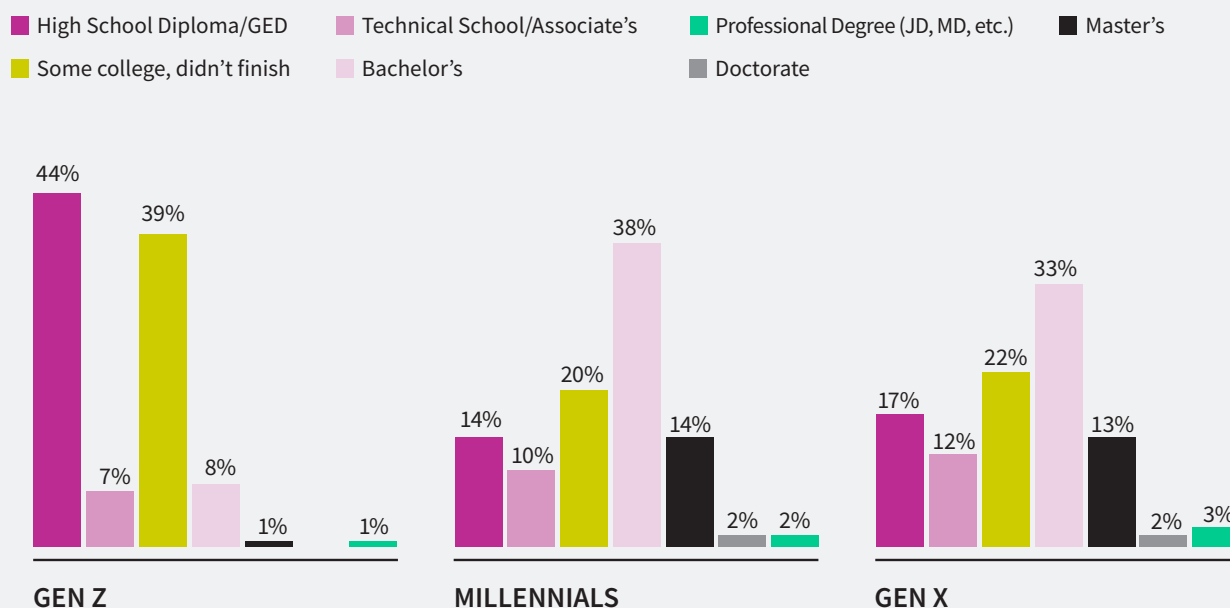


Figure 9 shows employment status, with over half (58%) of respondents employed full time, and another 18% employed part time.

Figure 9: Employment Status

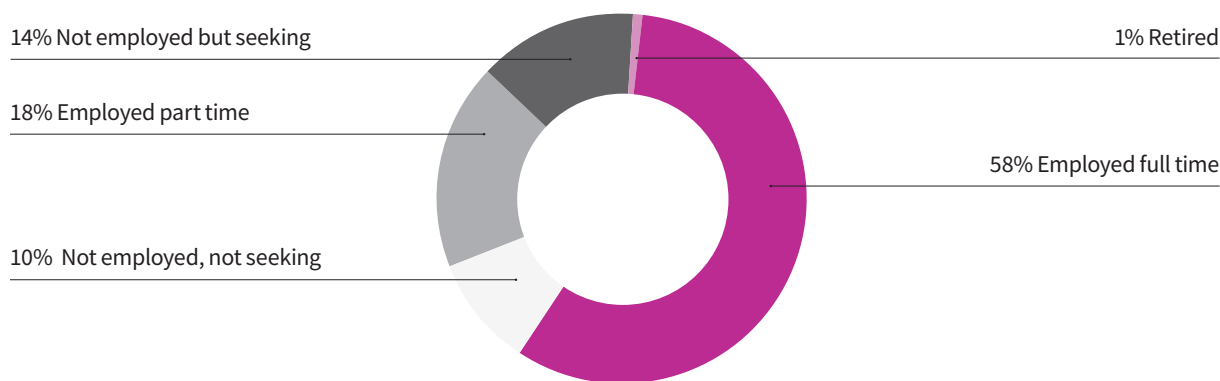
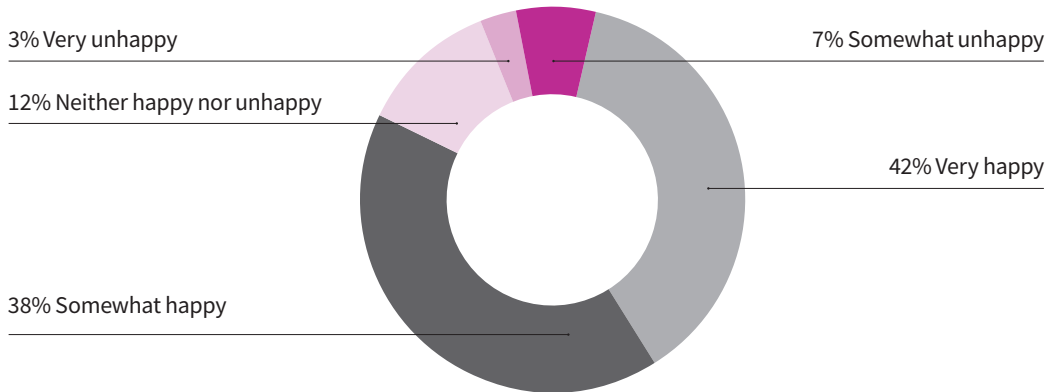


Figure 10 shows current job satisfaction, with a large majority (80%) of respondents very or somewhat happy.

Figure 10: Current Job Satisfaction

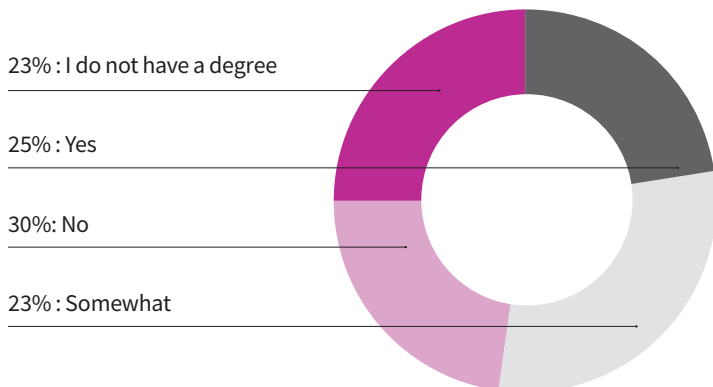
How happy would you say you are with your current job?



Although Figure 10 shows very high job satisfaction, only one in four respondents (25%) answered ‘yes’ when asked if they were using their degree in their current job (Figure 11). Millennials were more likely to say they are not using their degree. While job satisfaction is strong, colleges and universities still need to tailor degree offerings and preferences to meet generational needs. Over half (53%) of respondents were either partially or not using their degree at all which equates to 68% of those with a degree. Because of the cost of receiving a degree, universities need to better highlight career outcomes and the path to a strong return on investment (ROI).

Figure 11: Degree Usage in Current Job

Would you say you are using your degree in your current job?



Because of the cost of receiving a degree, universities need to better highlight career outcomes and the path to a strong return on investment (ROI).

Respondents exhibited a high degree of interest in educational, professional, or skill-based certificates or badges, as seen in Figure 12. Of particular interest, younger adult learners including Gen Z and Young Millennials (ages 21 to 25) demonstrated a high degree of affinity for these specialized options. Universities should continue to diversify their offerings beyond those solely dependent on one credential. Micro-credentialing, non-credit certificates, seminars, elite credentials, and other shorter-term opportunities are becoming very popular. Combined with partnerships with employers, these opportunities offer new tuition revenue streams, a mechanism for stacking credits and degrees, and growing overall brand affinity.

Universities should continue to diversify their offerings beyond those solely dependent on one credential.

Figure 12: Interest in Specialized Education Options

How interested are you in earning an educational, professional, or skill-based certificate or badge in the future?

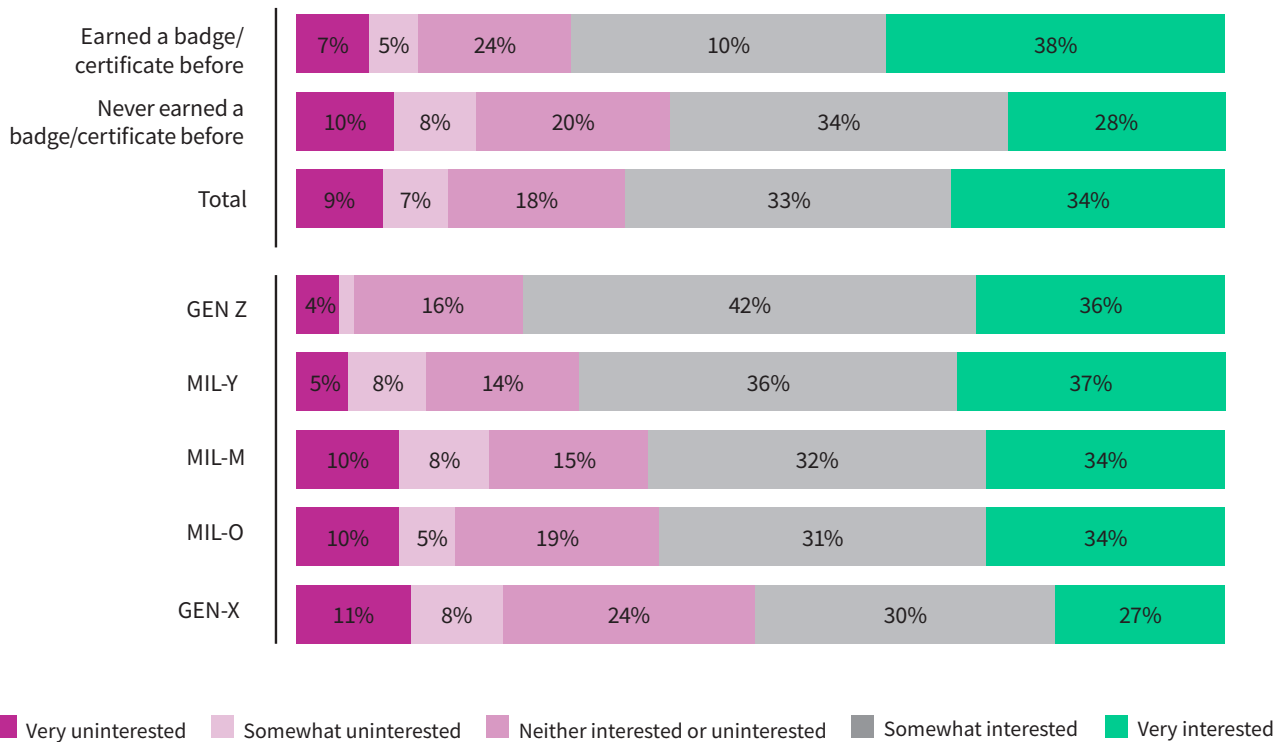


Figure 12.1 shows that respondents who started college but didn't finish listed the primary reason for discontinuing their program as due to more important responsibilities, followed by high costs and lack of financial aid. In addition, Figure 12.2 shows that one in four participants who selected the "other" option most frequently cited that it "wasn't worth it." Figure 11 charts the percentage of employees who are using their degrees, and this response seems to correlate with the 30% who are not. Millennials were broken down into young (21 to 25), middle (26 to 30), and old (31 to 35) cohorts.

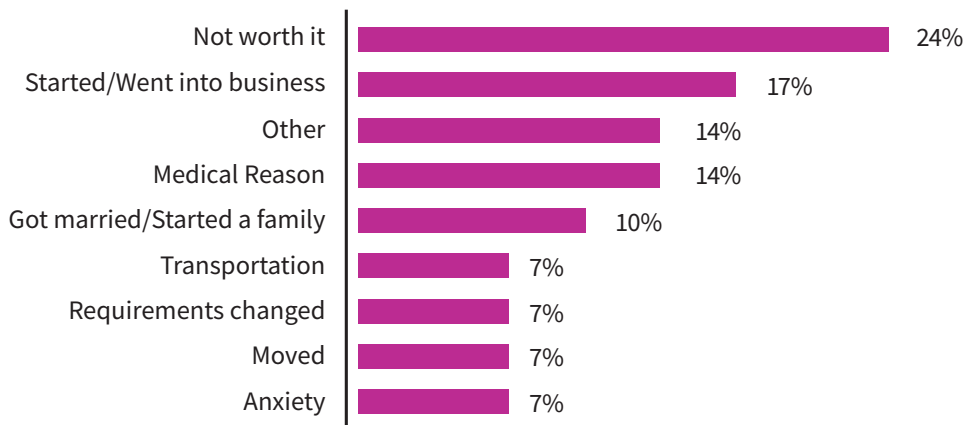
Figure 12.1: Discontinue Program Reasons

Why did you discontinue your program? (Some college, but did not finish - multiple responses allowed)

	Gen Z (18 to 20)	Millennials-Y (21 to 25)	Millennials-M (26-30)	Millennials-O (31-35)	Millennials-X (36-40)
Cost was too high	33%	44%	46%	19%	30%
Lack of financial aid	33%	27%	46%	17%	18%
Already had a job	0%	8%	0%	23%	23%
Didn't know major	50%	19%	14%	21%	8%
Didn't fit in	17%	12%	7%	6%	15%
Difficulty with courses/material	0%	23%	21%	15%	3%
Parents didn't go	17%	4%	4%	0%	5%
More important responsibilities	33%	46%	18%	40%	33%
Not convenient	17%	8%	11%	11%	8%
Other	50%	23%	14%	17%	20%

Figure 12.2: Discontinue Program Reasons (Other)

Why did you discontinue your program? (Other)

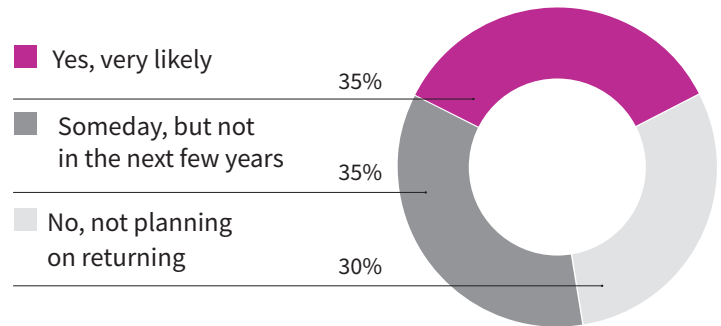


When those who had started but hadn't finished college were asked if they were planning on returning in the next two to four years, 35% indicated they were likely to do so. Slightly less than one-third said they would probably return at some later date, while the rest said they weren't planning on returning at all (Figure 13).

In thinking about job outcomes, the way to tackle affordability is through consistent, front-and-center messaging about the ROI.

Figure 13: Return to College Plans

Are you planning on returning to college in the next 2 to 4 years?

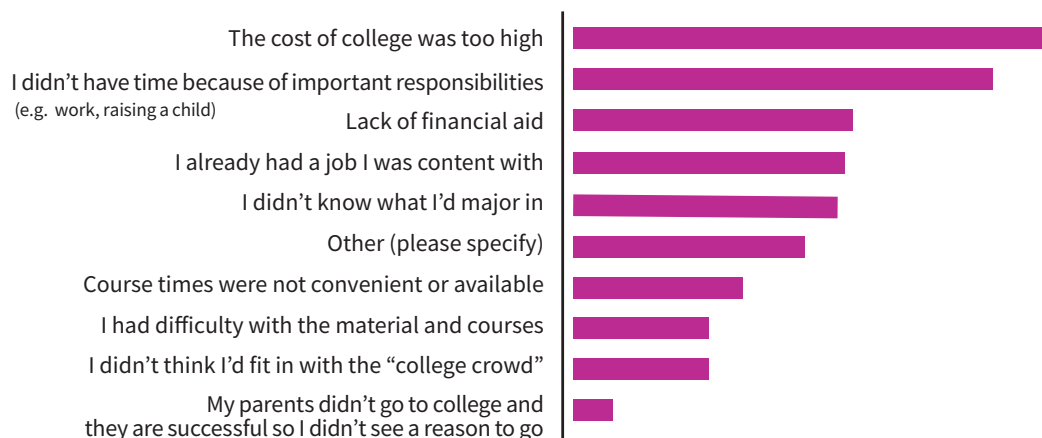


Affordability, as expected, also played a big role in determining if a person decided to go to college at all (Figure 14).

In thinking about job outcomes, the way to tackle affordability is through consistent, front-and-center messaging about the ROI. What will the student get out of having the degree or credential? What are the job placement rates, stories about advancement, testimonials about fulfillment in a new career? These are the messages that matter to the adult learner, particularly the young adult learner.

Figure 14: Why Respondents Didn't Attend College

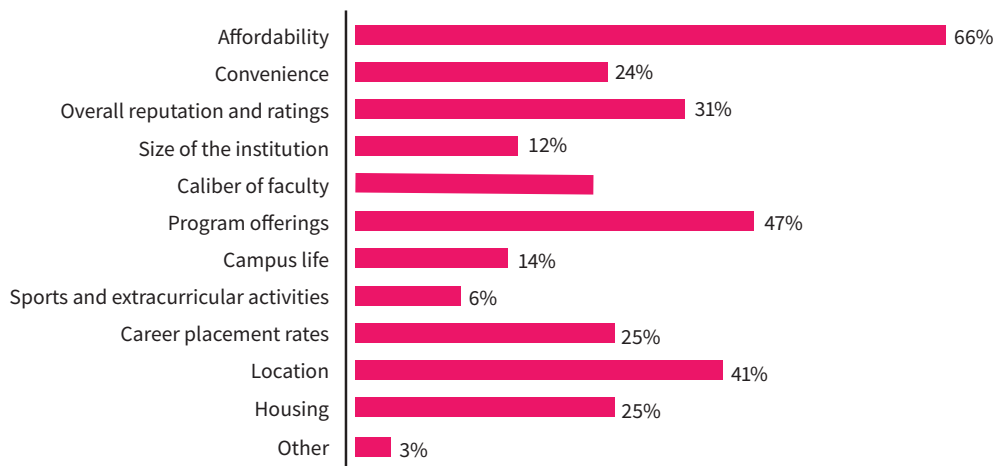
Why did you decide not to go to college? (select up to 3)



Likewise, affordability was the most important factor considered by students when deciding on a college or university as seen in Figure 15. While we expect these results in today's economy, this data represents a shift from 10 or 15 years ago. Costs have clearly become a much larger consideration in recent times.

Figure 15: Most Important Factors When Deciding

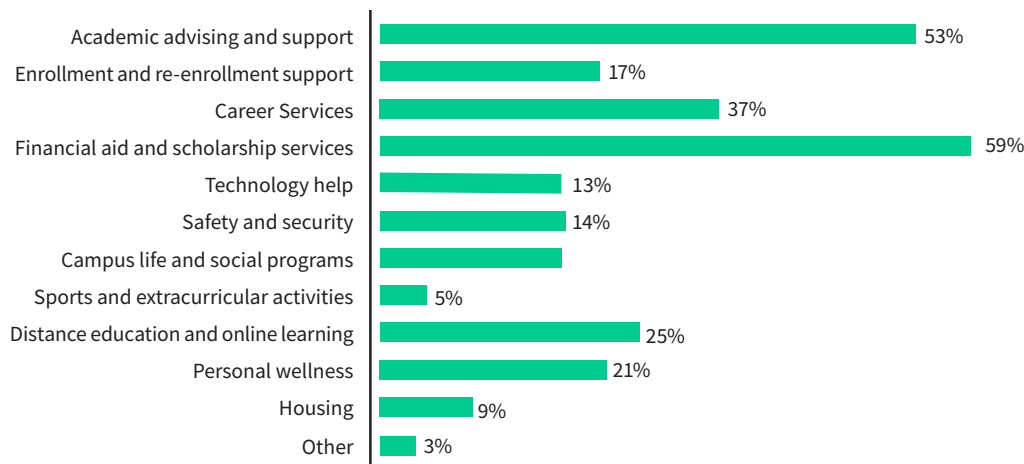
What are the most important factors or attributes that you will consider when deciding on a college or university?



Related to affordability, students named financial aid and scholarships as the leading factors most important to their educational success, followed by academic advising and support (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Most Important Factors in Educational Success

Of the student activities listed below, which do you believe will be the most important to your educational success and the completion of a degree?



Of concern, however, is the indication that among the various services and initiatives available to students, financial aid and scholarship services earned the lowest scores in terms of satisfaction. (Figure 17)

Figure 17: Most Negative Experience

Which of the following represents the most negative experience at your college or institution?

	Gen Z (18 to 20)	Mil-Y (21 to 25)	Mil-M (26-30)	Mil-O (31-35)	Gen-X (36-40)
Classes/faculty	17%	13%	9%	8%	11%
Academic advising and support	8%	21%	22%	19%	19%
Enrollment and re-enrollment	8%	16%	11%	8%	8%
Career services	10%	19%	25%	19%	19%
Financial aid and scholarship assistance	29%	32%	37%	23%	29%
Technology help	23%	12%	9%	6%	9%
Safety and security	7%	11%	10%	6%	5%
Campus life/social programs	17%	5%	10%	12%	12%
Sports/extracurricular activities	13%	8%	6%	4%	6%
Distance education/online learning	18%	13%	12%	6%	8%
Personal wellness	12%	10%	12%	6%	9%
Housing	28%	22%	19%	12%	14%
Other	8%	11%	10%	6%	14%

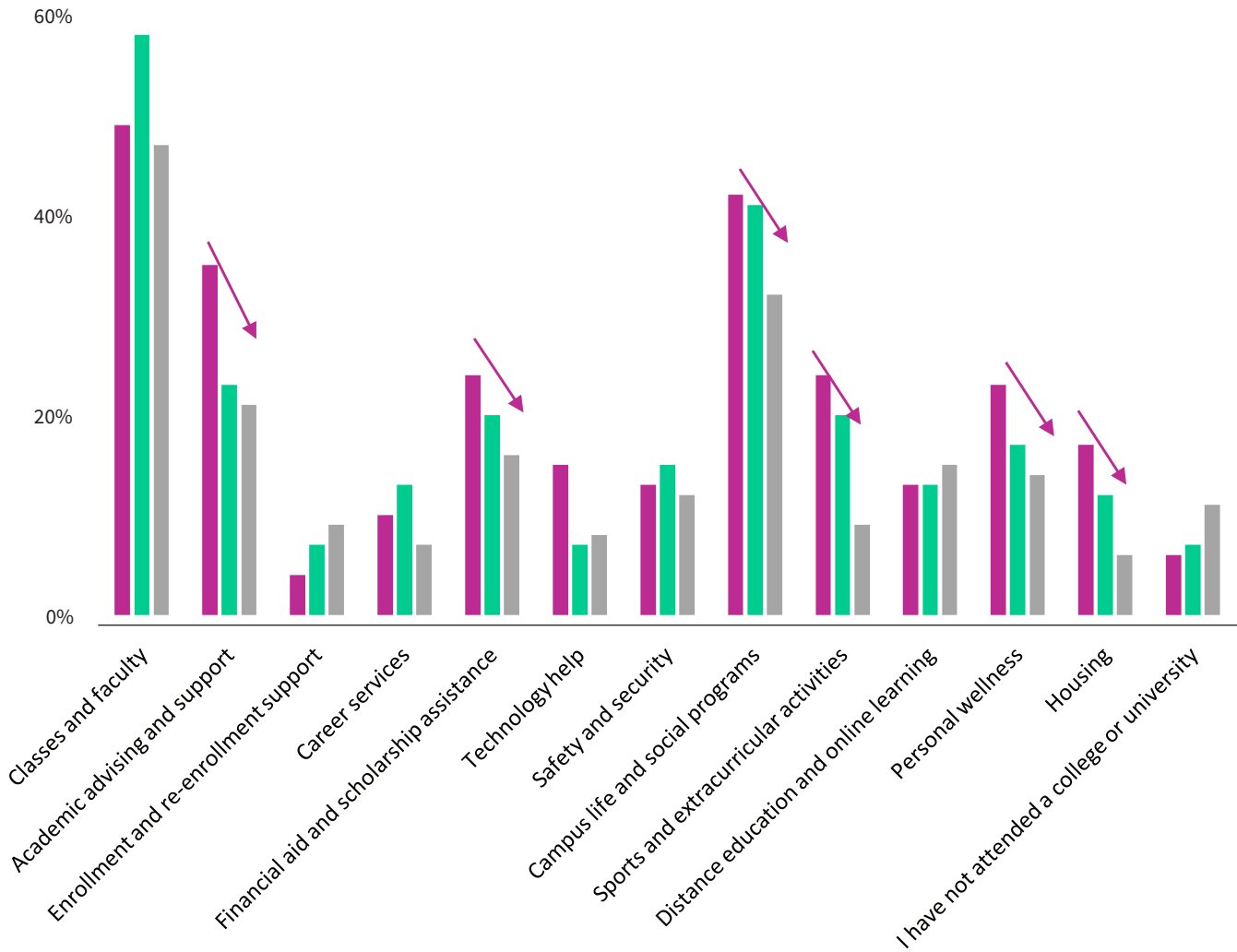
As seen in Figure 18, the most positive college experience for all generations has been classes and faculty.

There were several interesting trends to note, including the fact that academic advising and support, and financial aid and scholarship assistance had a higher positive impact on the younger generations. In addition, similar trends were seen in campus life and social programs, sports and extracurricular activities, personal wellness, and housing.

This suggests that universities may have begun to focus more on extracurricular activities, well-being, and housing in an attempt to improve the overall student experience, and/or students are beginning to notice and value these components in a university more than before.

Figure 18: Most Positive Experiences

Which of the following represents the most positive experience at your college or institution?



When it came to search preferences in researching future education options, **the youngest Millennials were more likely to search for online ratings and reviews and talk with a family member, friend, or co-worker than all of their counterparts** (Figure 19).

Figure 19: Future Education Search Preferences

If you were to seek out a college or university for future education, how likely would you be to... (% saying very or somewhat likely)

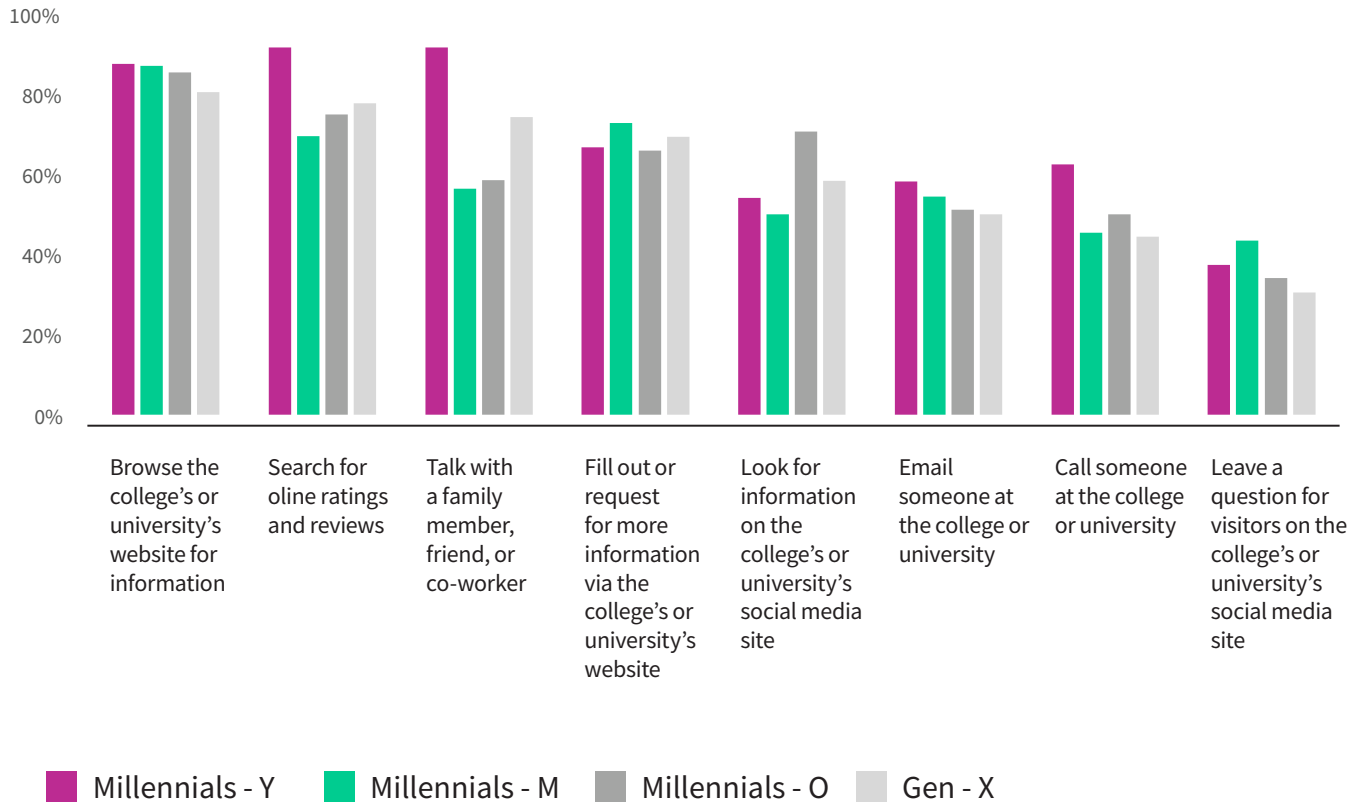
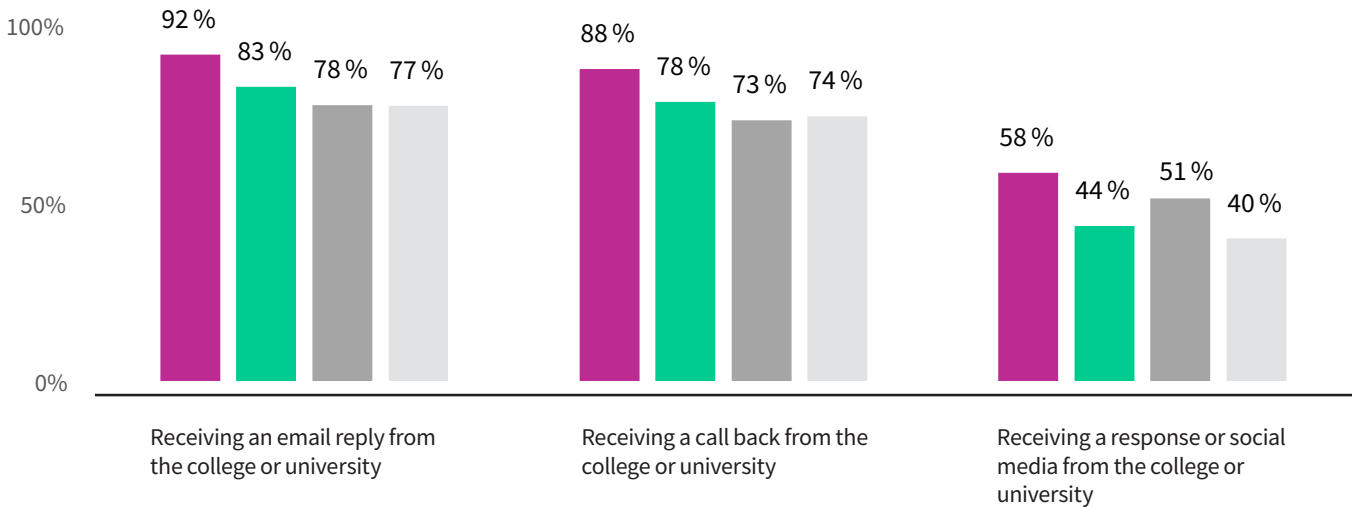


Figure 20 shows that the younger generations have a great interest in communications with the university. **The youngest group of Millennials ranked several different communication preferences with the university as more important than their older generation counterparts did.**

Figure 20: University Communication Preferences

If you were to seek out a college/university for future education, how important would the following be? (% saying very or somewhat)





Key Findings and Recommendations

- › While universities cannot do a great deal about students not completing college due to other more important responsibilities, they can alter the way that busy students are given the opportunity to learn. **Universities should include a variety of learning options such as non-credit and microcredit offerings, online classes, and asynchronous lectures allowing students to choose their own schedules, and provide flexibility.**
- › Respondents indicated that they didn't feel college was worth it, even though salary statistics indicate otherwise. Therefore, **universities need to work even harder to make students feel that their studies are tangible to their job field, and to actually tailor their programs to the fields, adequately delivering on a Return on Investment.**
- › Students concerned with affordability and seeking help with financial aid and scholarships require extensive help in navigating financing options. **Universities must make sure financial aid information is readily available to students through dedicated advisors who are equipped with the right tracking technology and consistent processes.**
- › For communication preferences, respondents cited emails, calls, and social media responses as key ways to stay in contact with universities. Students are also interested in more than just the classroom aspect that universities offer. Younger generations are interested in student life as a whole and want extracurricular activities, social wellness programs, and academic advising and support. **Colleges and universities need to broaden their appeal to an upcoming generation of students beyond just academics.**

About the Authors

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Jim Fong is the Director of UPCEA's Center for Research and Strategy. The Center primarily addresses the need for market research and benchmarking information among nearly 400 UPCEA member colleges and universities. Prior to UPCEA, he held leadership positions at Penn State Outreach and a number of consulting and analytics companies. He holds an M.S. in statistics, an M.B.A. with a concentration in marketing and business strategy, and a B.S. in mathematics from the University of Vermont.

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About UPCEA

For over 100 years, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA) has been enhancing the quality of higher education and has established itself as the leading association for professional, continuing, and online education. The association currently serves over 400 institutions through its Center for Research and Strategy, Center for Online Leadership, innovative conferences, and specialty seminars. The Center for Research and Strategy is the research and consulting arm of the association, formed to meet the research needs of its members.

About Blackboard

Blackboard is education's partner in change, helping learners, educators, institutions, and companies thrive in a complex and changing environment. Blackboard delivers innovative education technology and services that help schools, districts, institutions, and companies drive student success.



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