



Education to Secure a Safe Future

Generation Z has earned a reputation for focusing on the pragmatic aspects of education. After all, this generation grew up on the heels of the Great Recession, which in many cases impacted older siblings who graduated from college in debt and without hope of employment. They may have had parents lose jobs or become resigned to underemployment. Today, they are listening to discussions about the next “bubble”—the student loan crisis. As a result, Gen Z has become highly risk-adverse when it comes to finances. Not only have they seen the fragility of one financial reality, but they are also keenly aware that graduating from college can leave a student unemployed and thousands of dollars in debt.

The intensely competitive environment for job-seekers has had an impact on this generation. In focus groups with young people, Gen Z shows they understand that when they step into the workforce they are competing with others, locally and internationally, who can do what they do better, and maybe for less. Due to their connected nature, they are acutely aware of the gig economy and societal issues around income inequality. This has created an intensely competitive environment for these students. It has also put young people under a great deal of pressure. Teachers often say that students today do not even have a childhood. From a young age, there is an intense focus on academic excellence, sports accolades, resumes, positioning to get in the best college possible, and so on.

Having watched the drama of the recession unfold, and being focused on competing from early on, members of Gen Z tend to look at college more strategically, selecting practical majors that will translate into a career, rather than following their intellectual passion. It has also made Gen Z more aware of the opportunities they may have lost due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**An
increasingly
competitive
environment**

The economic backdrop of Gen Z's educational and early professional life is poised to be one of crippling inequalities. Growing up with this type of environment is likely to push this generation's inherently competitive nature further.

It has also pressured Gen Z to rethink their majors. According to a September 2020 study from the UMass Dartmouth Center for Marketing Research, pandemic-induced stress encouraged 15% of surveyed Gen Z college students to change directions in their