

Today's students expect more. Are you listening?



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For the last five years, infinite digital ink has been spilled over how Generation Z is reshaping commerce, the workforce and even politics. But in higher education, institutional leaders are in the thick of experiencing how Gen Z is transforming their colleges and universities.

Every coming-of-age cohort brings experiences that shape their expectations for education. Not every cohort, however, enters college following a global pandemic. Not every incoming class has dealt with long-term high school shutdowns and a healthcare crisis.

Today's students are navigating college life after years of remote learning and limited in-person socialization. They're also doing it against the backdrop of racial justice movements, the Ukraine war, conflict in the Middle East and a tense US election year.

On one hand, this has exacerbated the student mental health crisis—to a point where all institutional leaders must acknowledge the need for new and better resources, not just pay lip service to “wellness.” But it's also created a student body that is more vocal than its predecessors, more willing to take a stand and advocate for each other.

The biggest challenge leaders face today: Tapping into these voices in a way that's productive and transforms campus life for the better.



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Active, informed and yearning to be heard

One of the most telling signs that today's generation of college students expects more is their inclination to act.

Students are requesting meetings with campus leaders and reporting instances of misconduct at a higher clip—and a broader scope. Beyond flagging long-standing issues like hazing or bullying, they're calling out problematic behavior across the classroom and all corners of student life. Today's generation puts even greater stock in standing up for what they believe is right as a means of not just expression but taking care of each other.

As leaders from William Smith College recently pointed out, they've seen an undeniable uptick in application essays focusing on students' personal mental health and that of their peers. One 2024 survey indicates that more than 80% of college students are struggling emotionally to some extent. For young adults who spent a portion of their formative years in lockdown, it's no wonder they place so much value in protecting each other.

Today's students are also an incredibly informed population. Many have done their homework when it comes to understanding campus policies (particularly around freedom of expression), which shapes the conversations they're willing to have with faculty and staff. In some ways, this presents new obstacles. How can leaders effectively communicate and clarify policies to a student body that has grown up with access to information a click away? Especially during tense global or political moments, what are the best channels for creating productive campus dialogue and sharing information clearly?

Because students are so informed, it is even more imperative for administrators and staff to be prepared for these conversations. The days of "winging it" are in the past. The way we address these issues will shape student life for years to come.

Rethinking the scope of student support

Whether it's a health crisis, war or economic instability, there will always be larger forces at play that shape a student's college experience. Addressing each individual issue in isolation is not sustainable. Higher education leaders have to think bigger, and pursue more holistic changes, to support today's and tomorrow's students.

A few options worth considering:

- » **Audit your organizational structure:** Four years out from the start of the pandemic, it has become obvious that some facets of higher education will never simply go back to the way they were. As we move into this next chapter, institutional leaders must evaluate whether student-facing staff and resources are organized in a way that reflects this new reality. For example, in the spring of 2022, Texas Tech realigned its Office of the Provost, bringing the student services and student life functions together

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while integrating all academic-focused support teams. This alignment emphasizes function ultimately creating more dedicated resources for focusing on the daily student experience, in and out of the classroom. The more stewards we have for student success, the more we can support their physical, mental, and emotional wellness.

- » **Make your reporting mechanisms intuitive and actionable:** It's impossible to diagnose—let alone mitigate—issues on campus unless you know they're happening in the first place. Given the breadth of challenges today's students face, it's imperative to have easily accessible, anonymous methods for reporting concerns. Do your current reporting tools live in different places depending on the issue at hand? Look for ways to consolidate and remove the guesswork that prevents many students from sharing information.

It's equally important to ask whether you're setting up students, faculty and staff to submit complete reports. The quality of a report can make or break your ability to respond and investigate. Does your reporting mechanism guide whistleblowers through the specific information they need to provide? Gathering the right data upfront ensures the person reporting can remain anonymous while also protecting your university down the line. Very few members of our communities have been trained on how to write a good report.

- » **Invest in relationship-building:** Aligning your teams and shoring up your reporting processes are critical. But when it comes to supporting current and future generations of students, nothing is as potent as solid relationships. It is essential for student services administrators to identify and build bridges with student leaders across campus. Introduce yourself as early as possible to cultivate trust over the course of their college career. And don't hesitate to maintain and transition those relationships as new administrators and new student leaders come on board. Nurturing these connections proactively will make it easier to navigate future conflicts, at the individual and group level.

Student success isn't something you can set and forget

Certain variables will always be true, regardless of students' generation or the status of world affairs. Confronting new academic challenges, building social lives away from family, considering future career paths—these are timeless higher education milestones that institutions need to guide students through.

But that doesn't mean that the strategies and resources that sufficed five or 10 years ago will work now, let alone in the future. Today's students come into colleges and universities with distinct shared experiences and worldviews. They bring a new set of priorities and expectations to campus. It's up to us to find new ways to meet them where they are.



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