

# The iGen Shift: Colleges Are Changing to Reach the Next Generation

The newest students are transforming the way schools serve and educate them, including sending presidents and deans to Instagram and Twitter.

By Laura Pappano

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They are, of course, super connected. But on their terms. Which is why college-bound iGens (Gen Zers, if you prefer) present a challenge to the grown-ups on campus eager to reach and teach them.

Consider orientation season. Katie Sermersheim, dean of students at Purdue University, has a mother lode of information and resources to share (including wellness initiatives and a new mindfulness room). But getting iGen's attention?

"It can be frustrating slash extra challenging to figure out how to get the word out, whatever that word is," Ms. Sermersheim said. "I do get discouraged."

A generation that rarely reads books or emails, breathes through social media, feels isolated and stressed but is crazy driven and wants to solve the world's problems (not just volunteer) is now on campus. Born from 1995 to 2012, its members are the most ethnically diverse generation in history, said Jean M. Twenge, psychology professor at San Diego State University.

They began arriving at colleges a few years ago, and now they are exerting their presence. They are driving shifts, subtle and not, in how colleges serve, guide and educate them, sending presidents and deans to Instagram and Twitter.

They are forcing course makeovers, spurring increased investments in mental health — from more counselors and wellness messages to campaigns drawing students to nature (hug a tree, take a break to look at insects) — and pushing academics to be more hands-on and job-relevant.

They are a frugal but ambitious lot, less excited by climbing walls and en suite kitchens than by career development.

Most critically, they expect to be treated as individuals. Students raised amid the tailored analytics of online retailers or college recruiters presume that anything put in front of them is customized for them, said Thomas C. Golden of Capture Higher Ed, a Lexington, Ky., data firm. He sees group designations evolving into "segments of one."



Ingrid Koester, 19, center, and other Princeton University students shooting a video, based on the Taylor Swift song "22," that welcomes the class of 2022. Orientation leaders and staff members from the office of the dean of undergraduate students were extras in the video. Mark Makela for The New York Times

Students want to navigate campus life, getting food or help, when it is convenient for them. And, yes, on their mobile devices or phones. "It's not really technology to them," said Cory Tressler, associate director of learning programs at Ohio State University, noting that the iPhone came out when most were in grade school.

It is why Ohio State this year, rather than battle device use, issued iPads to 11,000 incoming students. The school designated 42 fall courses "iPad required" (21 more will be added in the spring) and is building an app that in addition to maps and bus routes has a course planner, grades, schedules and a Get Involved feature displaying student organizations.

In the works is more customization, so when students open the app it knows which campus they are enrolled at, their major and which student groups they belong to.

Speaking to students on their terms just makes sense, said Nicole Kraft, a journalism professor at Ohio State who takes attendance via Twitter (she has separate hashtags for each of her three courses). She posts assignments on Slack, an app used in many workplaces. And she holds office hours at 10 p.m. via the video conference site Zoom, "because that is when they have questions."

Dr. Kraft does not use email for class, except to teach students how to write a “proper” one. “That is a skill they need to have,” she said.

While these students are called “digital natives,” they still must be taught how to use devices and apps for academic purposes, Dr. Kraft said. She’s had students not know that they could use Microsoft Word on an iPad. “We make a lot of assumptions about what they know how to do.”

Campuses also have been slow to recognize that this age group is not millennials, version 2.0.

“iGen has a different flavor,” said Dr. Twenge of San Diego State University and author of “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood — and What That Means for the Rest of Us.”

It is tricky to define a large part of the population. But Dr. Twenge said big data sets revealed broad psychological patterns shared by those coming of age amid defining social, cultural and economic events.

The difference between growing up in the prosperous 1990s versus seeing family members lose jobs and homes during the 2008 recession alters one’s perspective, she said. It is why iGens are so focused on debt and insist that they get skills and experiences that will lead to a career.

The prevalence of school shootings and domestic terrorism has also shaped them.

“This generation defies the stereotypes of young adults,” in terms of risk-taking, Dr. Twenge said. They are “more receptive to messages around safety” and less eager to get driver’s licenses, and they come to college “with much less experience with sex and alcohol.”

They are also more cautious when it comes to academics, fear failure and have learning preferences distinct from millennials, said Corey Seemiller, professor at Wright State University and co-author of “Generation Z Goes to College,” who queried 1,200 students on 50 campuses.

“They do not like to learn in groups,” favor videos over static content and like to think about information, then be walked through it to be certain they have it right.

“They want a model” and then to practice, said Dr. Seemiller, who posts samples when assigning a paper. “I’ll say, ‘Let’s look through them and see what works.’” Having grown up with public successes and failures online, she said, students are hungry to have a big impact, yet “worry they will not live up to that expectation.”

And despite their digital obsession, Dr. Seemiller’s research shows this generation favors visual, face-to-face communication over texting. They are not always good at live social interaction, but they crave it. “They want authenticity and transparency,” she said. “They like the idea of human beings being behind things.”

As a generation that “has been sold a lot of stuff,” said Dr. Seemiller, iGens are shrewd consumers of the tone and quality of communication. That’s pushing colleges to focus not only on what they say, but also how they say it.

Which is what orientation leaders and staffers in Princeton’s office of the dean of undergraduate students — known on social media as ODUS — have tried to master in the way they welcome the class of 2022.



Mayra Mateo of Columbus, Ohio, an incoming freshman at Ohio State University, working on the iPad given to her by the university, which issued the devices to 11,000 incoming students. The college designated many fall courses “iPad required.” Jessica Phelps for The New York Times

A brainstorming session in March generated what became a Princetified cover of Taylor Swift’s “22,” a video with orientation leaders and ODUS staff members as extras, a cappella groups singing the score and Nicolas Chae, a sophomore, directing.

Cody Babineaux, an incoming freshman from Lafayette, La., whose video of his acceptance to Princeton has 4.6 million Twitter views, appreciated it, especially the Harvard shirt sniffed and tossed out in the first 20 seconds. “It was hilarious,” he said. “It didn’t try too hard.”

Getting student attention and keeping it matters to administrators trying to build excitement for campus events, but also in prodding students about housing contracts and honor codes. “We are an office that enforces university standards. We can’t be firing off,” said Thomas Dunne, deputy dean of undergraduate students. “But you have to be animated and human-sounding. Our voice is very personal.”

ODUS has become an active presence on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Twitter with a vibe that winks, pokes, weaves in memes and slang terms like BAE (before anyone else) and on fleek (flawlessly styled), and applies hashtags with wit (a free ice cream for dropping by the ODUS office with dance moves worthy of Dean Dunne? #GetServed, #GameOfCones).

Mr. Dunne, whose Facebook page began as a student prank without his knowledge more than a decade ago, leans on staff members who include 20-somethings. One, Ian Deas, who favors Snapchat, identifies student “influencers,” following them on Facebook and Instagram.

In posts, he looks for “those trendy phrases that help us stay in the conversation.” When ODUS staff members respond to student posts, it amplifies their reach. “When we are being interactive, our stuff pops up in other people’s feeds” and drives curiosity about “who is behind the voice.”

Being social on social media attracts students who might tune out official communication. Mr. Babineaux said he and his friends noted when college posts sounded “goofy” or “like your grandfather trying to say swag.”

He also notices that his generation is criticized “because we are always on our phones,” which gets interpreted as being disconnected. In fact, he said, “we just have more connection with everyone all the time.”

It is also how students like Mr. Babineaux learn and get information.

“Social media has helped me get a lot more prepared for Princeton,” he said, adding that he has scrolled through old posts of campus (“I have never seen snow”) and watched videos, including of graduation. “I thought, ‘That will be on my Instagram page in four years.’”

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