EVERFI

Gen Z and New Approaches to Mental Well-being
Insight Summary*

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Generation Z students have arrived; entering classrooms and residence halls across the United States, and institutions of higher education must consider reshaping their approaches to well-being. The post-Millennial generation exhibits some profound differences in the habits and behaviors of students. Planning for this transition means rethinking strategies and priorities to create an effective and safe educational experience for all students.

Who is Gen Z?

The second-largest generation alive, also known as "iGen," was born between 1995 and 2015. The first "digital natives," Gen Z grew up having access to technology from birth. Gen Z is also the most racially and ethnically diverse generation alive.[1] Gen Z'ers embrace intersectional identities and are more attentive to inclusion across various spectrums including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Within the next five years, they will become the fastest-growing generation in both the workplace and the marketplace.

The ubiquitous presence of tech and social media affects nearly every facet of their lives from healthcare and education to dating and shopping. Gen Z relies on their adept web-based research skills—frequently self-educating through online tutorials and forums.[2] However, while digitally more connected to others than any prior generation, Gen Z students often lack acute interpersonal skills. Although more attuned to accessing resources related to mental well-being, students report experiencing high rates of depression and anxiety.[3] EVERFI data suggests Gen Z students are compassionate and prepared to lend a helping hand, yet many students do not feel they know how to help someone who is in need. Despite this, Gen Z students are more likely to speak with a friend when experiencing a mental health challenge. With this in mind, Gen Z students will benefit from learning critical skills, like how to support peers.

More than Lazy Rivers

Gen Z is enrolling in college at a significantly higher rate than Millennials were at a comparable age.[4] Although Gen Z is more likely to pursue college (and less likely to be in the workforce[5]), they

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[1]**Resources & References**

Richard Fry & Kim Parker, *Early Benchmarks Show 'Post-Millennials' on Track to Be Most Diverse, Best-Educated Generation Yet*, PEW RES. CTR. (Nov. 15, 2019), https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2018/11/15/early-benchmarks-show-post-millennials-on-track-to-be-most-diverse-best-educated-generation-yet/.

[2] *Top 10 Gen Z Questions Answered*, CTR. FOR GENERATIONAL KINETICS, https://genhq.com/igen-gen-z-generation-z-centennials-info/ (last visited May 15, 2019).

[3] *National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2018*, AM. C. HEALTH ASS'N, https://https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_Spring_2018_Reference_Group_Executive_Summary.pdf (last visited May 5, 2019); *Anxiety and depression top list of problems teens see among their peers*, PEW RES. CTR.,https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/02/20/most-u-s-teens-see-anxiety-and-depression-as-a-major-problem-among-their-peers/psdt_02-20-19_teens-00-00/ (last visited May 15, 2019).

[4] *See,* FRY, *supra note 1.*

[5] *Id.*

worry about paying for higher education.[6] Like Millennials, this generation pays more attention to the financial cost of higher education.[7] Gen Z students grew up during the Great Recession and its aftermath. Consequently, they seek more value for the sticker price. For Gen Z students, value means less frills and more practical experience and support.

Well-being and the Law

Mandatory mental wellness training is a burgeoning trend across the United States. States such as Texas,[8] Ohio,[9] Virginia,[10] and West Virginia[11] have all passed legislation requiring wellness training for students. Still, the law tends to hyper-focus on suicidality; thus, training methods largely focus on reducing suicide attempts. Yet, Gen Z faces much broader issues. Seven percent of students report seriously considering suicide in the past year, whereas one in two students have felt overwhelming anxiety that has impacted their academics.[12] Many campuses are already experiencing the huge demand for access to counseling and other support services. Research and data suggest the need for more attention on topics such as loneliness, anxiety, depression, etc. Housing and food insecurity also require due consideration.

Consideration for Multicultural Communities

Wellness challenges impact everyone regardless of culture, race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Multicultural communities face different challenges to well-being.[13] These communities often have less access to health care and are less likely to seek treatment due to higher levels of stigma, language barriers, and a culturally insensitive health care system.[14] Disparities exist for the quality of and access to care.[15] When they do access care, many report experiencing racism, bias, homophobia, or discrimination in treatment settings. Multicultural communities have lower rates of health insurance and receive an inferior quality of care.[16]

While Gen Z is largely more diverse and inclusive, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual ("LGBTQIA") students still face barriers to wellness.[17] Social determinants affecting the health of LGBTQIA individuals are largely related to a history of systemic oppression and discrimination.[18] Transgender individuals report being denied care by mental health clinics

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[6] Higher Education Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles https://heri.ucla.edu/press-release/TFS-2016-Press-Release.pdf (last visited May 15, 2019).

[7] THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION, *The New Generation of Students Executive Summary*. (last visited May 15, 2019).

[8] Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 51.9194 (West 2015).

[9] Ohio Rev. Code Ann. § 3345.37 (LexisNexis 2015).

[10] Va. Code Ann. § 23.1-802 (2017).

[11] W. Va. Code § 18B-1B-7 (2019).

[12] MENTAL HEALTH BY THE NUMBERS, https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-By-the-Numbers. (last visited May 15, 2019).

[13] MULTICULTURAL MENTAL HEALTH FACTS, https://www.nami.org/NAMI/media/NAMI-Media/Infographics/MulticulturalMHFacts10-23-15.pdf (last visited May 15, 2019); *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health*, OFF. OF DISEASE PREVENTION AND HEALTH PROMOTION, https://www.healthypeople.gov/2020/topics-objectives/topic/lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender-health (last visited May 15, 2019).

[14] *See,* MULTICULTURAL MENTAL HEALTH FACTS, *supra note 13.*

[15] *Id.*

[16] *Id.*

[17] Jerome Hunt, *Why Gay and Transgender Population Experiences Higher Rates of Substance Use,* CTR. FOR AMERICAN PROGRESS (Mar. 9, 2012) https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/03/pdf/lgbt_substance_abuse.pdf; *Mental Health and the LGBTQ Community*, HUMAN RIGHTS CAMPAIGN FAMILY https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/LGBTQ_MentalHealth_OnePager.pdf (last visited May 15, 2019).

[18] *See,* LGB&T HEALTH, *supra note 13.*

due to bias and discrimination.[19] Members of the LGBTQIA community are two or more times more likely than straight peers to have a mental health condition.[20] LGBTQIA youth are more likely to attempt suicide than straight youth.[21] These statistics suggest wellness opportunities surrounding the LGBTQIA community. Knowing what is effective on your campus requires knowing who your students are.

Prioritize the Well-being of Students of Color

Students of color face unique challenges due to cultural variations and stigmas. Students of color are almost twice as likely not to seek care when they feel depressed or anxious compared to white students.[22] Additionally, students of color are significantly less likely to describe their campus as inclusive and are more likely to feel isolated.[23] The JED Foundation in partnership with The Steve Fund created the The Equity in Mental Health Framework as a model resource to guide academic institutions in developing, implementing, and refining on-campus programs to support the emotional well-being and mental health of students of color.[24] Prioritizing the well-being of students of color strengthens campuses and will reduce mental illness stigma, increase support and proactive responsiveness, improve campus climate, and provide system-wide opportunities to help all students to thrive.

A Bright Future Together

Campuses across the United States are more diverse than ever, and the need to manage more complex student populations is rising. The mission, vision statements, and goals of institutions of higher education should reflect an active commitment to student mental health and well-being with special attention to the needs of a diverse student body. Institutions must learn to tailor well-being initiatives to a diverse array of learners. EVERFI is here to help your campus move forward together. Find out more about EVERFI's new digital learning course *Mental Well-being for Students* here. *Mental Well-being for Students*, created in partnership with The JED Foundation, is a new digital learning course to equip undergraduates with essential skills and information to navigate the stressors and emotional challenges associated with college life

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[19] *See,* MULTICULTURAL MENTAL HEALTH FACTS, *supra note 13.*

[20] *Id.*

[21] *See,* LGB&T HEALTH, *supra note 13.*

[22] EQUITY IN MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK NEWS RELEASE, https://equityinmentalhealth.org/news/ (last visited May 15, 2019).

[23] *Id.*

[24] EQUITY IN MENTAL HEALTH FRAMEWORK https://equityinmentalhealth.org/ (last visited May 15, 2019).

This is intended as a helpful policy document and not as legal advice.