THIS IS GEN Z.
This is your Gen Z primer. It’s designed to help you understand what defines the members of this new generation: family life, entertainment, education, and everything in between. At the core of their world is technology. They’ve never known a life without constant access to search engines, social media, and texting.

These kids are more than just digital natives. In The Gen Z Effect, Tom Koulopoulos and Dan Keldsen call them “hyperconnected junkies whose expectations will radically change the face of business forever.” The authors go on: “For Gen Z, technology is invisible; it’s just part of the way the world behaves toward and interacts with them.” Persistent digital access to global information has expanded their perspectives, creating knowledgeable, worldly, diverse, and status-quo-challenging stances on everything from social issues to finances.

This means that change is coming. We must explore new ways of connecting with this cohort. They have a diversity of perspectives and voices, and a readiness to contribute and make a difference. To that end, throughout this piece, we offer some suggestions for how to engage tomorrow’s college students.

Ready to dive in?
We’re tomorrow’s college students.
We’re called Generation Z.
Like all generations, we’re defined by time.

Born 1996 and after
Where do we fit in?

2015

Silent Generation
(70–85 years old)

Baby Boomers
(51–69 years old)

Gen X
(36–50 years old)

Millennials
(20–35 years old)

Gen Z
(5–19 years old)
We’re young, powerful, and big.

- Millennials (current largest) 77mil
- Gen Z (on the rise) 68mil

Between 2015–2025 2%
We will change the world.

We believe it’s up to us.
"We're gonna be weird adults."
We defy and resent conventional labels that don’t fully capture who we really are. There is no “one size fits all” in our world. Because we don’t just accept differences in others—we celebrate them.

We’re more open than you were. We discuss and challenge gender roles and sexual identity openly.

Our perspective is global. Technology opens the window to international issues, values, and cultures.

We’re blended. Since 2000, the multiracial youth population has increased by 50%.

The world is smaller, and our views are bigger. We have a greater appreciation of differing views and perspectives than ever before in history.

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**Bottom Line**

Talk to us based on our mindset, not our demographic. This means spending time to understand us and what it takes to get—and keep—our interest.
Go to your room!

“You mean where my laptop, iPad, and phone are? OK.”
Sure, Millennials are tech-savvy, but we are the first true digital natives.

Technology is just a fluid, organic part of our daily lives. But, this doesn’t mean we’re analog-phobes. We love our “unplugged” time, despite FOMO (fear of missing out).

We communicate constantly.
Social media is the #1 reason we use the Internet, and we send more than 100 texts a day.

Our digital world is noisy.
Our attention span is 8 seconds, and we multi-task across five screens.

Digital connections with the world are essential.
73% of us are connected within an hour of waking up. We would give up new clothes, our allowance, or eating out, rather than give up our phones, texting, or WiFi.

We want a personal experience.
72% of us want to connect to personalized content across all devices.

Bottom Line
Connect the dots between digital and offline communications. Keep in mind that things like responsive websites are just table stakes now. We want to be wowed.
“You think I’m crazy? Wait until you meet my family!”
The idea of a “traditional” family structure is obsolete. (Think: *Modern Family* is the new norm.)

Our families are just more diverse—we have single parents and multiple generations in our homes. We also happen to be super close to our parents and feel comfortable talking about what was once taboo (thanks to TV programs like *Glee*).

**Family structures are changing.**
One-third of us live in a single-parent household.

**Our grandparents live with us.**
Multigenerational family households have doubled since 1980.

**My family’s different, deal with it.**
Our families are more diverse—ethnically, racially, and religiously—than half a generation ago.

**We have strong family values that mirror our parents’.**
88% of us are extremely close to our parents and even refer to them as our best friends.

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**Bottom Line**

Our support system helps us make big decisions, so engage us and them. Connect with our parents, guidance counselors, and friends, being mindful of the channels and messages that appeal most to each group.
“I act like I don’t care, but I do more than you think.”
On-demand access to information (thanks, interwebs) and a greater diversity all around us has expanded our worldview.

We grew up hearing about and talking about matters like marriage equality and global warming. We care about human rights, our impact on the planet, and helping change what we don’t like about the world.

We believe marriage equality is a fundamental right. 80% of us supported legalizing it long before the government actually did.

We support sustainability and renewable energy. 76% are concerned about human impact on the planet.

We grew up watching international news. 78% worry about world hunger.

We care deeply about our world. 77% believe that businesses should make “doing good” central to their mission.

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**Bottom Line**

Invite us to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We jump at the chance to speak up or join a social cause.
“I want to do something today that my future self will thank me for.”
We may be young, but we’re already fiercely entrepreneurial and future focused. And we’re very realistic when it comes to working hard for success. A lot of our parents lost jobs during the recession, which makes us more inclined to consider self-employment.

Ultimately, we want what we do to mean something.

- We’re influenced to work hard and pursue a career early.  
  55% of us feel pressured by our parents to get early professional experience.

- We’re future focused, but we’re ready to start taking steps now.  
  77% are extremely interested in volunteering to gain work experience.

- We have more access to mentorships and training programs.  
  50% attend middle or high schools that offer classes in how to start and run a business.

- Many of our parents lost longstanding jobs during our childhood.  
  We question loyalty to any given employer, and 74% would rather work for ourselves.

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**Bottom Line**

Show us the tangible things we can achieve together. Job-oriented challenges—like real-life training or working directly with companies—should be woven into the fabric of our educational experiences.
“Homework. Because 7 hours of school wasn’t enough.”
Even though we’re already career-oriented, we want a college degree first.

We recognize that a college education is important, but we want a global education. Our learning experiences are no longer confined to school buildings or campuses. They’re increasingly self-directed and digital.

We just Google it. 85% of us do research online and 33% watch lessons online to educate ourselves.

Yes, we’re entrepreneurial. But we want the degree. Half of us will be university educated, compared to one-third of Millennials.

We’re under enormous pressure. 46% are more worried about our GPA than having friends, fitting in, being popular, or staying healthy.

We’re far savvier than you give us credit for. 64% consider earning an advanced degree as one of our life goals.

Bottom Line

Help us apply what we’re learning in real time. Don’t just teach us what to think—teach us how to think and how to make an impact.
"We always make sure we know where the exit door is in movie theaters."
We take privacy into our own hands. Only 18% of us share “a lot” online, and 1 in 4 left Facebook in 2014 for more private and controllable networks like Snapchat.

We're becoming more guarded. 42% of us are now sharing less than we did two years ago.

In fact, we're worried about both online and offline safety. Among students aged 12 to 18, there were 615,600 victims of theft and 749,200 victims of violence last year. More than 25% of us nationwide are the targets of bullying.

Oversharing is overrated. 81% of us think our peers share too much online.

Although we do feel compelled to post constantly on social media, we’re also increasingly sensitive to oversharing. We need to have control over exactly what we share, and when, where, and with whom. This goes hand in hand with our general safety—at school, in our communities, and in public places. We need to know that our worlds, online and off, are safe spaces for us.

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Bottom Line

We take an active role in securing our safety and privacy. Show us what you do to make your campus a comfortable and safe experience. (Our parents will appreciate this too.)
"I enjoy long, romantic walks to the fridge."
Look, we like to eat. But we’re becoming more aware of issues like obesity and animal cruelty.

Because of these factors, we’re more likely to try healthy options like a vegetarian lifestyle. We naturally identify with brands that advocate for organic, locally sourced, and farm-to-table methods, because they make us feel good, nutritionally and emotionally.

We spend the majority of our allowance on food. We get about $17 per week in allowance, or $44 billion a year total.

We spend more because we make healthier food choices. 58% of us are willing to pay more for organic and natural products, and sodas like Pepsi and Coke are down 40% in the last decade among the older part of our bracket.

We grew up in a health-crazed world. Awareness of animal cruelty means we’re more likely to try a vegetarian diet, and we’ve been influenced by nutrition-promoting public figures like Michelle Obama.

Yet we’re sedentary. We spend more than 7½ hours a day in front of a screen.

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Bottom Line

The experience in your dining and fitness facilities needs to be awesome. We’re not gonna lie: this is a huge evaluation point for us with colleges and universities. We want to feel supported in our healthy decision-making.
“Finishing a good movie, then having to face the reality of my boring life.”
When it comes to entertainment, we’re especially drawn to underdog characters that change the world against all odds. An everyday person overcoming adversity starts to feel like our own lives.

(Misfit is the new superhero. We connect with characters from *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Glee*, *The Maze Runner*, *The Hobbit*, and many more.)

We gravitate toward escapism. We’re into gaming, television, movies, books, music, role-playing games, and more.

We’re drawn to doomsday themes. We like movies that show youth rising above—*The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *War of the Worlds*, *World War Z*, and *The Day After Tomorrow*.

We escape the world out of worry or boredom, but we believe in our own power. 9 out of 10 of us feel optimistic about our own future.

(Lookin’ at you, Katniss.)

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**Bottom Line**

Our entertainment choices reflect our belief that an ordinary person can make a difference. Allow us—the ordinary individuals—to play an active role in your storytelling.
“It’s pretty annoying that all the things I want cost money.”
Our biggest worry about college is graduating with tons of debt. So we’re gonna grill you about the long-term value of your four-year degree.

We feel the residual emotional effects of the recession. 65% of us worry about the economy in general.

We grew up hearing about college debt. 57% of us would rather save money than spend it immediately.

We’re in control of our spending. One-third of us have an app for finance, budgeting, or banking on our smartphone.

We’re concerned about employability. We need to know that our investment in a four-year degree will begin to pay off immediately.

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Bottom Line

We’re already working on being responsible with our money. So help us understand how we’ll be better off by investing in our education.
“What do you stand for? Because it matters to me.”
Yes, we’re realistic and cautious, but we’re also optimistic about how we can shape the future.

Older generations can learn a lot from us, and they should take us more seriously. So should brands. Carefully crafted marketing messages may get our attention, but they won’t necessarily win our loyalty.

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**Outlook**

We’re sick of manufactured advertising.
$40 billion was spent on advertising and marketing in 2014.

We’re done with fake everything, really.
Give us natural, organic, and authentic; brands like Zappos and Chipotle have won our hearts.

We’re done with fake people.
We speak out against photoshopped models.

We are idealistic.
We believe it’s up to us to make the world a better place.

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**Bottom Line**

For us, #nofilter says it all. We prize transparency and authenticity. So be real. Be approachable. Have clear values that we can get behind, and then listen to what we have to say.
What do the next five years look like?
Technology will remain a dominant force in education.
Increased scrutiny of student data across social media, digital browsing, and other online touchpoints.

Top ed-tech companies boast that they’re collecting millions of unique data points on each child daily, and there’s no end in sight.

Data in exchange for ultra-personalized content and experiences.

Students’ walls around privacy will begin to crumble when they realize the value of exchanging their online behaviors for a more focused and relevant experience.

Crowd-sourced lesson plans, information fluency, and digital citizenship behavior.

Lectures and the one-size-fits-all approach to learning are out. New norms of appropriate, responsible behavior with regard to technology use are in.

The evolution and adoption of wearable technology.

Wearables can be important learning aids in and out of the classroom. They could also be a relevant part of the mobile campus ecosystem to provide students with ready access to campus information and services.

Digital’s role in physical environments and the convergence of a truly integrated experience.

Imagine campus tours and visitor’s centers where devices and online content can enhance the experience.
The Next Five Years

Population and enrollment will grow and diversify.

PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE

Both public and private institutions will see an 8% increase in enrollment.

The West Coast and Southwest should see the largest increases overall.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

A growing number of college attendees will be first-generation minority students.

Enrollment of Hispanic U.S. residents will increase 27%.

Minority students already account for nearly 40% of high-school graduates. By 2023, it will be about half.

STATUS

The traditional student population will grow, but in new ways.

Enrollment of full-time students will increase 12%.

Enrollment of male students will increase 9%.

Enrollment of 18- to 24-year-olds will increase 9%.

Enrollment of female students will increase 18%.

Over one-third of us will be bilingual, speaking Spanish and English.
This generation will change our world—for good.


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