

How Gen Z Approaches Decision-Making: Education and Career

Top Seven Key Findings and Implications

INTRODUCTION

American Student Assistance (ASA) is the national nonprofit committed to helping today's teens and young adults make informed decisions about postsecondary education and career pathways.

This infographic is based on the ASA whitepaper, "How Gen Z Approaches Decision-Making: Education and Career" detailing research, beginning in mid-2020 and through April 2021. ASA conducted and commissioned (in collaboration with

YPulse and Hanover Research) this extensive research and gained valuable insights into the digital lives of Gen Z, their decision-making process about education and career, sources and resources for information (e.g., online research, parents, school-based experts, and social media), and the roles of influencers at various stages of their lives. In addition, the whitepaper includes detailed findings based on ASA's research comparing current high schoolers' education plans and motivations with those of high school graduates, as well as implications.

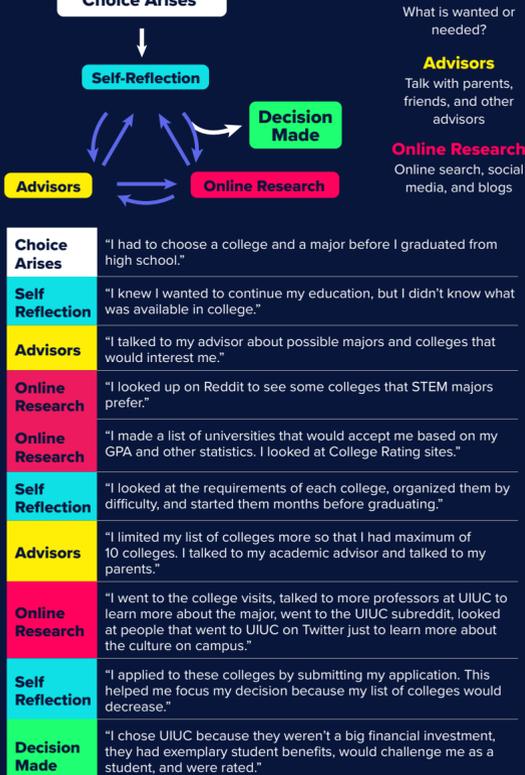
1 Gen Z's decision journey cycle (July 2020 research)

Gen Z's decision cycle starts and ends with self-reflection. Here's how their thought process works. A decision arises, and Gen Z moves to self-reflection wherein they think about what it is they want or need. After reflecting, they cycle through the following, drawing them in once they've started down a tentative path:

- Advisors (personal connections and experts)
- Online research (the internet and social media)
- Further self-reflection before they ultimately foreclose on a decision

While they are engaged in research online, their personal connections are consulted all the way through the decision-making journey.

Gen Z experiences feelings like anxiety, nervousness, and overwhelm around the decision-making process. "Education status/plan" was among the most-reported sources of stress reportedly felt by Gen Z, second only to the pandemic and family life.

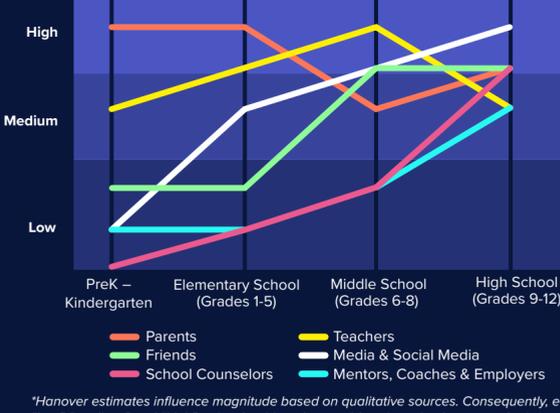


Self-Reflection
What is wanted or needed?

Advisors
Talk with parents, friends, and other advisors

Online Research
Online search, social media, and blogs

2 Influence over the Student Lifecycle (November 2020 research)



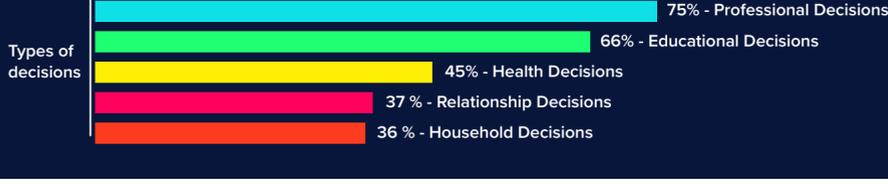
*Hanover estimates influence magnitude based on qualitative sources. Consequently, each "low," "medium," and "high" point should not be considered an absolute, quantitative reference.

2 Gen Z primary influencers along student lifecycle and how they change as the student life progresses (November 2020 research)

Parental influence decreases from elementary school to high school but increases towards the end of high school, as students consider their post-graduation plans. This reflects the influence of advisors/personal connections referenced above as part of the decision-making process.

3 Gen Z is making professional and educational decisions most of all (July 2020 research)

Seventy five percent are making professional decisions, 66 percent are making educational decisions, followed by health decisions at 45 percent, and relationship and household decisions at 37 percent and 36 percent, respectively.



4 Gen Z's college and career plans and motivations (November 2020-April 2021 research)

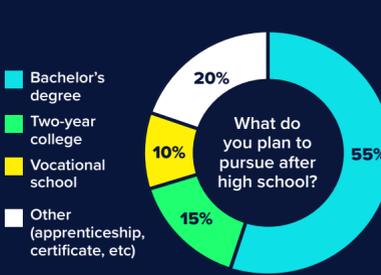
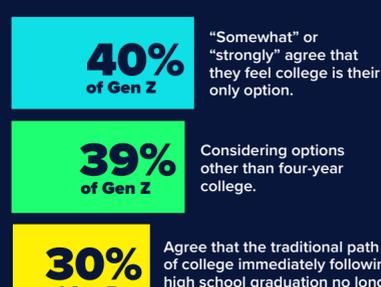
Gen Z's decision timelines vary by choice and demographics. The largest percentage of Gen Z, 25%, chose whether to continue their education prior to high school. A similar percentage, 24%, decided on their career path after graduation.

Nineteen percent of Gen Z decided what kind of education to pursue after graduation. Generally, the age/grade at which Gen Z says they plan or planned each step increases with Gen Z's reported age, meaning the age at which they decide matches their reported age/grade.

Gen Z is split between feeling college is their only option and considering alternatives. While Gen Z is experiencing some COVID-related uncertainty around the future, higher education and specifically college seems to be in the cards for a large portion of Gen Z.

Forty percent of Gen Z "somewhat" or "strongly" agree that they feel college is their only option, while 39% are considering options other than four-year college. Only 30% agree that the traditional education path of college immediately following high school graduation no longer makes sense.

When it comes to what they are most likely going to do, 55% of current high schoolers plan to pursue a bachelor's degree, followed by 15% who say two-year college, and 10% who say vocational school; fewer still plan to pursue an apprenticeship, a certificate, or another type of education.



5 Gen Z wishes they had had more career exploration opportunities (March 2021-April 2021 research)

Around two thirds of current high schoolers (69%) and graduates (66%) feel they would have benefited from more career exploration in middle or high school, while near the inverse claim they had enough access to exploration opportunities at that time. This indicates an amenability to career exploration while still in these grade levels.

6 Gen Z thinks that high schools should encourage students to plan for their futures (March 2021-April 2021 research)

Fully two in three members of current high schoolers agree that high schools should encourage students to develop a plan for their education (68%) and their career (66%), while nearer to three in four high school graduates feel the same way about education (70%) and career (73%). Nonetheless, both current high schoolers and graduates concur that high schools should encourage students to plan for both their education and career.

7 How Gen Z defines success and happiness and influence on career choices (November 2020-April 2021 research)

Gen Z tends to equate success with a career they love, and value long-term growth. They are more interested in long-term growth than gigging – and few think they'll change careers in the future.

- Sixty seven percent of Gen Z believes that true success is having a job that matches their passion, and 61% of Gen Z is interested in a career path with a clear way to long-term growth.
- Fifty nine percent of Gen Z wants a career that helps others, which connects up with their interest in social causes.

Many feel that starting their own business is a step to achieving happiness. In fact, 47% of the Gen-Z we surveyed say they would prefer to be an entrepreneur while 53% would prefer to work for an established company – an almost even division.



IMPLICATIONS

Decision Journey

While the decision-making cycle starts and ends as a self-directed process, Gen Z's personal connections and advisors play a crucial role by providing comfort, validation, and information. Given the negative emotions at the start of decision-making, the reinforcement offered by parents and friends and information provided by teachers and counselors are important resources to help Gen Z move through their feelings of overwhelm and anxiety to ultimately foreclose on important professional and educational decisions.

College/Career Plans and Motivations and Career Exploration

Gen Z makes future education and career decisions under a "college as default" mindset, leading to a disconnect between education and career planning. Specifically, Gen Z is deciding whether to continue their education before deciding on a career path, and the majority of Gen Z say they plan to pursue four-year college. Further still, most high schoolers feel they would have benefited from more career exploration while in the middle or high school grades. Together, this implies that Gen Z are defaulting to four-year college and are deciding to attend a four-year college without necessarily exploring or understanding fully:

- How the four-year degree connects to an intended career path
- The range of careers available to them

Moreover, providing students with access to career-connected learning opportunities early in their education journey and preparing them for success means that educators will also need to start planning ahead for the most effective ways to engage Generation Alpha. Born between 2010 and 2025, the oldest students in this generation will be highly advanced digital natives entering middle school.

Career Exploration and Planning for the Future

Gen Z feels that proactive career exploration and future planning is beneficial and something that they want. Three quarters of Gen Z feel they would have benefited from more career exploration, and two thirds feel that high schools should encourage students to develop plans for their education and careers. As such, Gen Z students show an amenability to planning and discovery as they plan their next steps after high school, which further implies that assistance in this area from schools, advisors, and personal connections would be welcomed.

Gen Z Success/Happiness

When it comes to what they want most in a career and in life, Gen Z demonstrates a balance between passion and pragmatism. The majority of Gen Z feel true success is a career matching their passion, while nearly the same number say they want a career path with a clear way to long term growth. Similarly, Gen Z's main goals in life are happiness followed by financial security. Therefore, Gen Z's motivations are a mix of following their dreams and having a stable financial future – evidence of a pragmatic but passionate mindset.