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W. KENT BARNDS

# Gen Z is Made for Lutheran Higher Education

I remember thinking to myself “we were made for this generation” the moment I saw the PowerPoint slide shared by the Education Advisory Board (EAB) highlighting Generation Z’s Defining Traits (see next page). These traits—socially responsible, purpose-driven, cost-conscious, culturally open, and tech-expectant—seemed to fit perfectly with the mission of Lutheran higher education today and gave me great hope about the promise of Lutheran higher education in the years ahead.

But perhaps it is more accurate to say Gen Z is made for Lutheran education?

## Beyond Messaging Mission

A review of the mission statements of the 27 NECU institutions reveals phrases and terms such as: thoughtful stewards, responsible citizens, rewarding lives of leadership and service, character and leadership development, purposeful people, acting in pursuit of human dignity and social justice, seeking truth, inspiring service, spiritual growth and service, lives of personal and professional fulfillment, socially responsible citizenship, the development of the whole person, the dignity of all people, personal faith, responsible leadership for service in the world, embracing diversity, discerning our callings, ethical and civil values, the Lutheran tradition, reflective practice,

spirited expression, and compassion and integrity.

Many of the terms and phrases used by Lutheran colleges to describe their various missions characterize what Jason Mahn, professor of religion and director of the Presidential Center for Faith and Learning here at Augustana College, describes as “the roots and shoots” —both the deeply Lutheran foundation and the inclusive, creative educational priorities that grow from them. While these foundations and priorities are needed to



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serve this new generation, messaging about mission won’t be sufficient in bringing Gen Z to Lutheran colleges in the first place.

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Lutheran colleges and universities need to dive deep into what we are learning about Generation Z, recognize how they are different from the previous generation of Millennials, and make the necessary changes to maximize the alignment of values between Gen Z and our Lutheran approach to higher education. We also need to develop language for our institutional values that Gen Z students will recognize as their own.

## Who is Gen Z?

It is generally accepted that the members of Generation Z were born between 1996 and 2010. They have also been referred to as digital natives, the Net Generation, and the iGeneration. They are the most racially diverse generation in history and will comprise nearly one-third of the population of the United States this year. Generation Z has been shaped significantly by the Great Recession. Their approach to life is more conservative and practical in some ways, having witnessed their Generation X parents' disappointments with jobs or finances.

Sharon Florentine cites Jason Nazar, founder and CEO of Comparably, who describes Gen Z as "the most confident, socially aware, and entrepreneurial generation of our time." In *Generation Z Goes to College*, Corey Seemiller finds that "Generation Z students are motivated by not wanting to let others down, advocating for something they

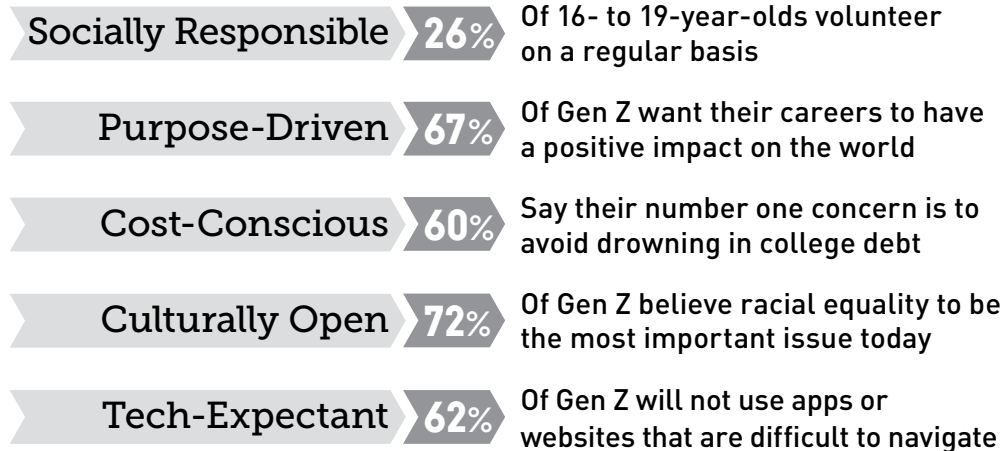
believe in, making a difference for someone else, having the opportunity for advancement, and earning credit toward something" (15). As for their learning style, they "want to be interactive and hands-on; they are curious and love challenges; and, they want to succeed (win) using strategies, practice and do-overs" (Roseberry-McGibbin).

The bottom line is that Gen Z is different, which presents challenges and opportunities for Lutheran colleges and universities.

When it comes to religious affiliation and interests, Gen Z is a diverse and complex generation. By some reports, Gen Z appears to be more involved and interested in organized religion. Seemiller notes that 41 percent of Gen Z report attending a weekly religious service and 76 percent identify as religious (44). After a decade or more of downplaying participation in religion and building programming around the "nones," Lutheran higher education may be able to readjust to for Gen Z. What a tremendous opportunity for Lutheran colleges and universities across the country—but only if this is accurate.

Others, in fact, estimate that one third of those in Gen Z have no religion or are "nones." This is nearly the same proportion as Millennials—compared with 23 percent, 17 percent, and 11 percent among, respectively, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silent Generation, according to Pew Research (Lipka). What is more, members of Gen Z are

## Generation Z's Defining Traits



more likely than previous generations to identify as atheist or agnostic, and a majority see church attendance as unimportant, according to the Barna Group, a firm providing data to Christian organizations.

With competing findings, Lutheran colleges will need to continue on a path of emphasizing spiritual growth and interfaith dialog, while positioning resources for what may be a resurgence in traditional religious observance.

## Alignments of Aims and Ambitions

Generation Z and Lutheran institutions are a perfect match not because of who we are (Lutheran colleges and universities), and they are (Gen Z), but because of what we, and they, strive to accomplish. The match is more about ambitions than identity. This is not to diminish the importance of identity, but where we align more elegantly is related to our collective ambitions as colleges and how Gen Z hopes to impact the world.

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The collective endeavor of Lutheran colleges and universities to “educate for vocation” may be too jargony and vague for Gen Z and their parents, given their very practical approach to the world. At the same time, *how* Lutheran institutions educate for vocation has all the essential ingredients to attract this new generation of students in a way that other sectors do not.

First of all, our institutions’ commitment to social justice aligns well with Gen Z’s interest in social responsibility. This generation may be more interested in social change and expects action over task forces, think tanks, and ideas (think Greta Tunberg). Lutheran higher education’s historic emphasis on social justice in service to one’s neighbor provides an attractive platform to fulfill the new generation’s ambitions for change.

But Gen Z expects more than proclamations; they want visible signs of progress and will look for evidence that the college is doing what it promises. Seemiler, as cited by Eliana Loveland, describes this as a “thoughtful worldview” and suggests Gen Z wants to “engage in service that has a tangible and lasting impact on systemic and structural problems.”

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Second, Lutheran higher education’s historic commitment to vocation relates directly to the defining quality of a purpose-driven approach to the world. There is a practicality that Gen Z will bring to our campus. Students will be more curious about how a reading, task, or activity relates to what they view as their purpose. They will not have a lot of patience for something that requires making meaning from abstraction. This will challenge some of us to step back and rethink how to articulate the purpose behind assignments and activities. While this may be challenging for some, it presents an opportunity for Lutheran colleges and universities to make connections between general education and the major, and between career exploration and post-graduation planning. This generation may force us to make permeable those silos that have historically existed between the curricular and co-curricular, and between content and skill development. Gen Z might just be the catalyst we need to put it all together.

Third, our institutions’ leadership and ambitions in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion, through deep commitments to interfaith dialog, internationalization, and ensuring access to higher education for those historically left out, will resonate with this generation. Gen Z is culturally open. They are committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They can have no patience for structural racism and barriers. Gen Z will want visible proof of a commitment to diversity and equity. Plans, aspirations, and platitudes won’t be enough. They will demand that privilege

is addressed head-on and will make it uncomfortable for a campus that doesn't take and sustain concrete action.

Finally, Lutheran colleges and universities represent a tremendous value that, if stewarded and communicated effectively, can connect with Gen Z's cost-conscious approach to the world. While there is a wide range of prices and net-prices for the diverse network of Lutheran colleges and universities, there is an admirable record among NECU institutions in providing access to students from all socio-economic backgrounds. In fact, ELCA colleges and universities on average enroll a slightly higher percentage (32.5 percent) of Pell-eligible students than are enrolled nationwide (31 percent). Finlandia University, Augsburg University, Thiel College, and Lenoir-Rhyne University have new student enrollments of Pell-eligible students that exceed 50 percent, demonstrating an incredible commitment to access. Beyond the commitment to access, Lutheran institutions invest heavily in scholarship and financial aid, offsetting high published tuition and fees. As Jim Paterson observes, Gen Z students will "want to know that their specific choice will pay off, having witnessed a steady stream of very public discussion in the last decade about the high cost of college, student debt, and under- or unemployment."

But where the real value lies is in whole-person education, small classes, diverse majors, outstanding study-away options, competitive athletics, collaborative research opportunities, and a transformative education.

## Embracing and Serving Gen Z

Corey Seemiller and Megan Grace, in their book *Generation Z Goes to College*, have identified several characteristics related to colleges that will require some changes on most campuses. Drawing from their work and others cited below, I want to make some concrete suggestions for Lutheran colleges and universities:

### **Skills, skills, skills**

Generation Z may replace the dreaded question, "will this be on the exam?" with, "is this something that my future employer is looking for and will value?" Schwinger and Ladwig cite a survey in which 89 percent of Gen Z respondents would rather spend their free time devoted to

doing something productive and creative rather than just "hanging out" (47). Gen Z values skill-development above all and actively seeks ways to develop and apply practical skills that align with the pursuit of their goals. Successful colleges will do a more effective job of identifying which skills each course and experience develops.

### **Customize the college experience**

Gen Z has been customizing and curating their online and buying experience to make it more personal and they will expect the same from their college experience. Gen Z will expect much greater choice in curating their college experience. They will want more flexibility in general education and major requirements and will want to make connections that they see, rather than those identified by others. They will be less interested in following the exact pathway developed for them and will want to chart their own way. Seventy-two percent say they "want a more customized college experience in which colleges allow students to design their own course of study or major" (Loveland). And they have the confidence to do it on their own! Customized major and minors and lots of flexibility in the general education program will be expected.

### **Replace "vocation" with "purpose"**

Students who are part of Gen Z expect to live and act with purpose and Lutheran colleges and universities have an opportunity to co-opt the term to connect with them more effectively. We have infrastructure, through our historic emphasis on vocation and education-for-vocation, to serve students especially well in this area. But, the term "vocation" may not be straightforward for this generation of students. While this might be a tough sell on campus, "purpose" has equity with this generation of students, and that is important.

### **Emphasize equity always and everywhere**

Gen Z expects equity. They are not as inclined to buy into the old narrative of equal opportunity. They see inequities. They've been educated about privilege. They know that there are "haves" and "have-nots." They are not interested in whatever narrative explains systems of inequity. They don't want a lecture. They want equity for all.

### ***Give them credit for what they do***

I recall reading that Gen Z is less likely to be motivated to participate by a gift card and would prefer college credit or something that can go on their resume. Credit matters to this group and fits in with their focus on purpose and practicality. Gen Z is unlikely to jump at a new experience unless there is some kind of credit attached that has a very practical application. Important experiences, like advising appointments, lectures, cultural events, and participation in clubs and activities may need to have accompanying credit to capture the attention of Gen Z.

### ***Embrace their parents as co-pilots***

Gen Z's Gen X parents will be good co-pilots. They tend to be a tad more practical and will expect more from their children and perhaps less from the college. But, they will have more questions about value and promise fulfillment. They have high expectations of their student and of the college, but are also flexible and understanding of limits. Thinking of them as co-pilots for the journey rather than helicopter parents is a good start.

### ***Illustrate value and strengthen value proposition***

Because of the cost-consciousness of Gen Z, colleges and universities will need to do a much better job of illustrating the value of the experience offered. New efforts to be transparent about how resources are used, exercising restraint in increasing costs, and keeping student debt levels low will be more important than ever before.

### ***Relate learning to the real work from day one***

A career and career preparation are very important to Gen Z. They understand and appreciate that college is important preparation for a career, but they are also very practical. They will expect to know how a game theory activity, theoretical discussion, poem, or play relates to their career pathway. Gen Z will push us to connect what we do in the classroom, the residence hall, and throughout campus to their future career ambitions.

### ***Be entrepreneurial and lead by example***

Nearly half of Gen Z expects to be their own boss and many have already engaged in organizing an online fundraiser

or launched their own business. They will look to colleges to teach them how to go it alone. They will want to see practical examples on campus and will seek classroom and co-curricular experiences that prepare them to become entrepreneurs, when the time comes.

## **Conclusion**

Generation Z may be the next greatest generation in strengthening the missions of Lutheran colleges and universities. Working together, we might deepen our shared impact on the world. They are made for us. By strategically and consistently refining and living out our missions in appropriate ways, we can also make ourselves anew for them.

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