

Generation Z: Life in the Covid Era

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A focus on mental health and wellbeing without stigma. A decent return on their investment. Robust technology. And generous outdoor spaces for socializing, studying and working and learning together.

As they are being welcomed back to campus for in-person learning and living after 18 to 24 months of pandemic-imposed remote experiences, today's college students are not shy about expressing their priorities for their campus experience. But they do face numerous challenges in the process.

The good news: colleges and universities are planning spaces, programming and support to help them thrive, according to a panel of higher education and Gen Z experts at a recent Knoll k. talk.

Author and generational researcher Meghan Grace shared insights that characterize the cohort born between 1995 to 2010, which includes many students currently on campus, with two campus planners, Erin Daley Gillespie, project manager, interior design planning, design and construction at Temple University; and Derrek Niec-Williams, executive director, campus planning, architecture and development at Howard University.

Following an overview of contextual factors that characterize Gen Zers by Grace, co-author of four books on Generation Z, conversation focused on how higher education institutions pivoted during the pandemic, and how that affected campus planning, pedagogy and student life, and what adaptations will likely be incorporated for the long term. Some challenges were particularly acute for panelists since both Temple and Howard universities are urban campuses with limited space for expansion.

Among the takeaways:

1. As a fiscally savvy cohort, Gen Zers seek return on their higher education investment

With many students holding on to memories of the 2008 recession and how it affected their family, Gen Zers want to not only learn when it comes to their postsecondary education experience, but also want to be prepared for the next steps post-graduation. They seek real world application from their classes, and also desire opportunities to create positive impact on others, whether it be in their local community or beyond, according to Grace, who has studied Gen Z since 2014.

2. Outdoor spaces are more important than ever

In addition to Covid safety protocols that affect planning and density within classrooms and across campus, the pandemic has also prompted universities to leverage previously underutilized spaces for both social and academic pursuits.

“The human connection to nature is something you can’t replicate on screen.”

DERREK NIEC-WILLIAMS



At Temple, numerous outdoor spaces are now used as learning spaces. Additionally, a terrace deck was created over two major buildings, adding 1.5 acres of space that is in near-constant use by both students and faculty, Gillespie related.

“Landscape has never been more important,” Gillespie noted. “Being an urban campus, we really have to capture as much outdoor as possible. The students crave it, even before Covid,



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MEGHAN GRACE



and now I feel it's even more important since we're using it as classroom space. It's also a place where people might be more comfortable eating and socializing with friends," she emphasized.

Likewise, Howard University recognizes the need for investment in landscapes within its urban setting, according to Niec-Williams. "The human connection to nature is something you can't replicate on a screen. We're making sure that we preserve heritage trees and things of that nature on our campus and continue to create green spaces as the campus grows and develops, to promote that sort of interaction," he added. "Those are really important factors."

"Landscape has never been more important."

ERIN DALEY GILLESPIE



Leveraging outdoor spaces also supports the priority today's students place on sustainability and the environment, according to Grace.

3. Hybrid learning is here to stay

Grace shared research that showed lecture-based instruction does not align with students' interests and preferred learning style.

"Our students are starting to say 'This is not exciting to me. Why would I go to a 45-minute lecture when I could watch a 15-minute YouTube?'" she related.

Instead, they desire a greater real-world connection that extends beyond the classroom, something that can be more readily achieved with modern educational methods accelerated in the Covid era.

The pandemic forced faculty members to learn new techniques to "shake things up" and build engagement when in-person learning was not an option, practices Grace expects to endure.

"I think that we're going to continue to see the flipped classroom model as well as growing demand for hybrid learning experiences," she stated, adding that we can expect universities to continue to grow their hybrid offerings as well.

Institutions are adapting their spaces to accommodate technology-based learning. At a new library at Temple completed pre-Covid, bookable huddle rooms were planned for small study groups or individual focus.

When Covid hit, Temple scaled the concept up to offer students who have a digital platform in their learning experience the ability to be on campus and still be connected and a part of the community, related Gillespie.

"We came up with designated Zoom rooms on campus which are typical classroom setups but also a space where a student can go and plug in, put on headphones and take the class virtually online." While they may be sitting next to somebody who's in a different class, they are still together, Gillespie added, noting the concept has been quite successful.

At Howard University, technology was incorporated into classrooms in Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall, an historic landmarked building, to support the asynchronous learning becoming increasingly standard for Gen Z. "The camera tracks the professor as they walk across the room and also captures the students, which is an important facet of the educational process," Niec-Williams added.



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Not all faculty are equally adept and comfortable using technology in their instruction, he noted, which means the university may also need to provide added support. Similarly, he warned that campuses must be prepared for the occasional outage in order to maintain hybrid learning as it becomes even more commonplace.

Supplying monitors and microphones are among the simpler modifications, panelists agreed. Upgrading overall IT requirements and providing sufficient power sources throughout are more complicated.

4. Kindergarten-style zones and adaptable, flexible furniture can help solve short-term planning constraints

While pandemic-based concern for distancing has upset the planning ratio in classrooms, it has also added to the complexity of planning. Specifically, additional challenges arise when institutions consider whether planning for lower densities should be a short-term effort, or something more enduring, as Gillespie related.

Fewer tablet armchairs and more partitions and furniture on casters are some ways Howard University is adapting classrooms to be multifaceted and flexible.

“We’re moving away from the concept of ‘teaching walls’ to more engaging environments not unlike kindergarten classrooms with different zones for different activities,” Niec-Williams said.

Providing elements of customization is exactly the type of support students seek, Grace noted.

“Every student experiences campus in a different way,” Grace said, adding that students thrive when furniture spaces allow them to “choose your own adventure and find your place on campus.”

5. A disconnected student body may need support in re-connecting

After close to two years of learning from home, students may need some assistance in socializing with each other, as well as acclimating to the physical campus setting.

From an institutional standpoint, investing in third places can be a partial solution.

At Howard University, an underutilized 20th century library stocked with research materials from the microfiche and Betamax eras was reimagined into a variety of space typologies befitting 21st learning and socializing, according to Niec-Williams.

“It was not serving the students properly,” Niec-Williams related. Today the 90,000 square-foot-building provides “a whole hierarchy of different types of spaces that students can use depending on their particular leaning: whether that be subject-based, personality-based or time-of-day based.”

A mix of spaces with design cues signal various options students can partake of depending on the particular “vibe” they want to experience, ranging from a loud, vibrant café-like environments

where some people thrive and find focus amidst interaction from others, to quiet spaces for those who do not, and everything in between, Niec-Williams said.

In many cases, spaces provide cues to support human connection in ways that programming may not, added Grace, admitting that assuming “if you build all the programs, they’re going to come and make all their best friends” does not always ring true. In fact, many times the physical environment can be the tool that helps build connection and relationships. “Sometimes it’s as simple as giving them the bench where they can meet their roommate to get coffee. And that is something that is critical to their campus experience.”

6. Students expect easy-to-access support for mental and physical well-being

A generation with well-documented levels of anxiety and depression is more likely than prior generations to take advantage of mental health and wellness services, panelists agreed.

To further support students, institutions can co-locate support services with other student services in a single building, making it more accessible and convenient to users as well, a strategy employed at Howard, which has made a significant overall investment in wellness.

Howard’s historic Harriet Tubman residence hall was recently renovated to include a counseling center, where design was approached with sensitivity and nuance, allowing for generous square footage to provide privacy and one-on-one meeting space, Niec-Williams explained.

Additionally, several correlated student programs—such as veterans support and violence prevention—are housed there as well, making it not only more convenient for students to access services previously distributed in multiple locations on campus, but reducing any perceived stigma of walking into a mental health facility. It’s consistent with Howard University’s philosophy and holistic approach to educating future health science professionals and the importance of interdisciplinary studies, he explained.

“The institution has greatly expanded the footprint based on demand for the counseling services by a student body that has an awareness of those services,” said Niec-Williams, a Howard alum, who welcomed that such conversations were much more commonplace today than they were while he was a student.

A new wellness and recreation building (with wellness intentionally listed first) will further support student health. The facility will include multiple functions as well as an academic infusion of the university’s health, human performance and leisure studies programs, maintaining Howard University’s long-time position as “a campus that really stands at the bastion of HBCUs in terms of health, wellness and health sciences,” according to Niec-Williams. “That’s something that’s really important to us overall.”

Similarly, a health and wellness facility at Temple was renovated recently with a holistic design approach including soft colors and


muted lighting to serve students who take advantage of its general counseling and other services.

Additionally, “we’ve bridged the gap with telehealth so students can access that type of care during Covid,” Gillespie stated. More recently a yoga studio was added to the health and science campus for anybody to “take a mental break and reconnect.”

Acknowledging the limitations of an urban campus footprint, Gillespie noted Temple is making efforts to sneak spaces in where feasible for opportunities for anyone to rejuvenate and reconnect, including wellness rooms to serve nursing mothers as well as “anyone to take a moment, or a phone call or a breather to center and go back out into the world.”

Looking Ahead

As the discussion revealed, the post-pandemic campus provided many new lessons for space and pedagogy that campus leaders will take under consideration for future planning.

For more insights on Generation Z and higher education trends, including research on [Embracing Generation Z](#) and [The Connected Campus](#) visit [Knoll.com/research](https://www.knoll.com/research). Replays of the panel are also available on [knoll.com](https://www.knoll.com). 

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