

TRENDS + TENSIONS

DESIGNING FOR THE FUTURE: MEETING GENERATION ALPHA'S STUDENT LIFE NEEDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

It's no surprise that over the years, what students desire in the classroom, in residence halls, and in the time between the two (often referred to as "student life") has changed. Each generation of students brings shifting priorities, new technology, and fresh perspectives that impact the various experiences, activities, and responsibilities students engage in as they continue to develop their personal goals concurrent with their academic goals.

To better design higher education environments for students, BHDP created a predictive model for Generation Alpha's future higher education needs, specifically focusing on student life in a residential campus setting. We identified personality factors that shaped past generations and then applied them to predict key traits of Generation Alpha that will potentially shape and define their higher education experience.

As the oldest members of Generation Alpha prepare to enter high school and define their educational path, universities should start planning for this emerging generation—right now.

DEFINITIONS:

Academic Life: *The portion of time when a student is engaged in formal educational experiences and responsibilities undertaken directly relating to a course of study such as a class or laboratory.*

Residence Life: *The portion of time in which a student is engaged in meeting their basic human needs such as eating, sleeping, and bathing.*

Student Life: *The portion of time during which a student is not engaged in Academic or Residence Life functions. It encompasses the various experiences, activities, and responsibilities that students engage in such as sports, clubs, community organizations, Greek life, etc.*

Generation Alpha: *Often referred to simply as "Gen Alpha," the term used to describe the cohort of individuals born from the mid-2010s onwards.*



Student life is characterized by a range of activities and experiences that contribute to a well-rounded education and personal development.



Alejandro Medina and Justin Ferguson interviewed current middle-school and high-school students to collect qualitative data about their preferences and trends in education.

RESEARCH METHODS



BHDP took a two-phased approach to this research. First, we began with exploratory research since little has been covered regarding different generational needs and decision-making around higher education, specifically for newer generations. Second, we followed with an applied research approach, developing a predictive model from the first-phase research. Our exploratory research included the following methods:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Exploration of relevant literature and archival materials to develop an informed understanding of the topic and insights into the evolving landscape of student life in higher education.

INTERVIEWS

The research team interviewed K-12 teachers and experts from various higher education institutions to gather contextual information and methodologies essential for the research design.

SURVEY

BHDP created a comprehensive online survey—spanning four generations, from Baby Boomers to Generation Z—focused on participants' personal experiences in higher education and their decision-making processes regarding their children's education.

FOCUS GROUPS

BHDP conducted focus group discussions with current middle and high school students. These discussions were tailored to align with the personality factors and survey results, providing further insights into generational preferences and trends in education.



Like any student would, BHDP explored relevant literature and archival materials to gain familiarity with the topic of Generation Alpha's student life needs in higher education.

RESEARCH FINDINGS



Three overarching themes emerged from the research, highlighting the potential needs and desires of Generation Alpha. In some areas, there is an overlap with other aspects of the higher education experience. These themes are summarized as follows:

1. RESIDENCE AND STUDENT LIFE

Students are spending more time on Residence and Student Life activities. This underscores the growing importance of holistic health as generations have progressed and reinforces the need for institutions to invest in their residence halls and dining experiences. Interestingly, time in Academic Life has reduced as an upswing in Student Life activities is noted. While Academic Life activities still occupy most students' waking hours, the time spent on them has decreased over recent generations. This reinforces the notion that academics are still the primary reason for attending an institution, but the importance of student life continues to grow steadily. *(Figure 1 and 2)*

HOW MANY HOURS WITHIN A TYPICAL DAY (24 HOURS), DID YOU SPEND ON EACH OF THE FOLLOWING ACTIVITIES?

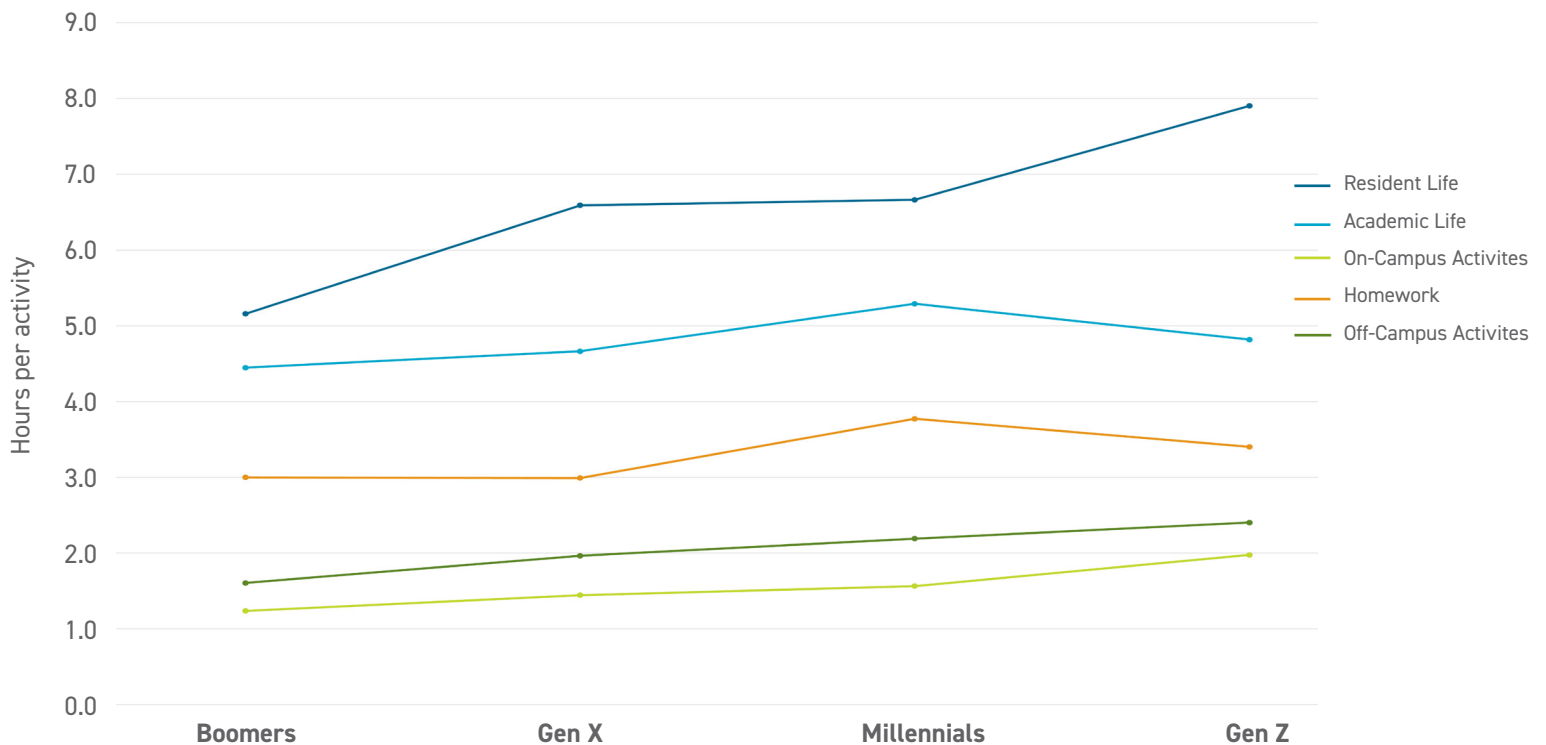


FIGURE 1

WHAT FACTORS PLAYED INTO YOUR DECISION IN SELECTING AN INSTITUTION?

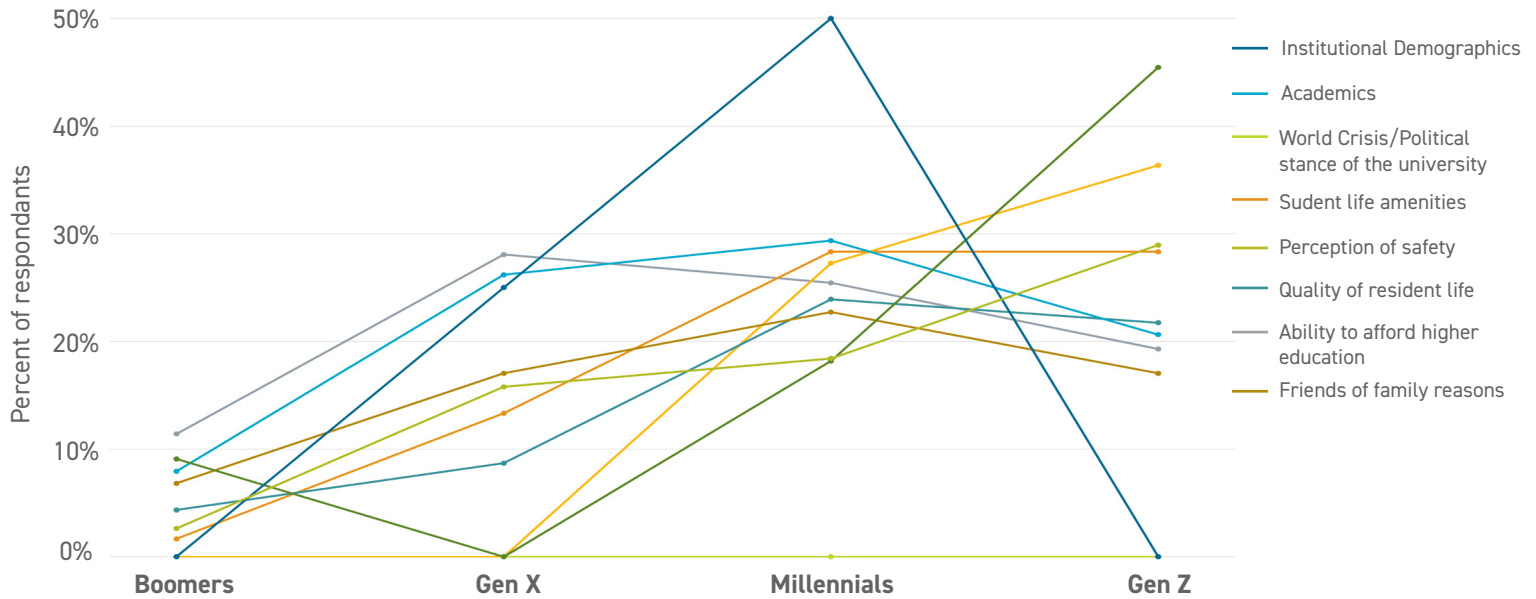


FIGURE 2

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Students' awareness of the political and social climate continues to rise largely due in part to social media and access to traditional media. Gender, reproductive, and social justice issues are on a sharp and significant rise. Meanwhile, world politics, the economy, and political stardom seem to be approaching the top of their bell curve. This would predict that social justice issues will likely peak in 1-2 generations but will continue to be an important source of infrastructure growth for institutions. (Figures 3 and 4). There has been approximately a 50% increase in the perceived effects of the political and social climate on higher education from baby boomers to Generation Z. This is in conjunction with a 51% growth in social justice and equity from baby boomers to Generation Z. (Figure 5).

RATE THE EFFECT OF POLITICAL EVENTS AND/OR THE SOCIAL CLIMATE PRESENT WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL

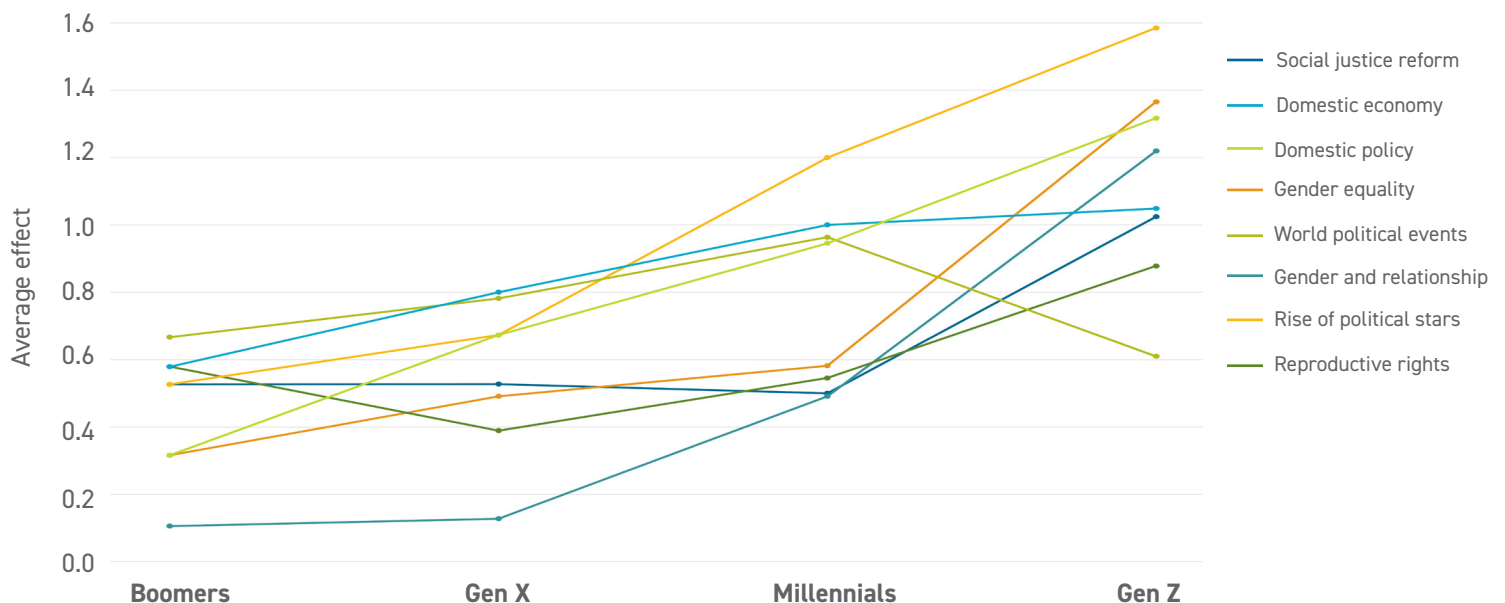


FIGURE 3

WHAT IMPACT DID THAT POLITICAL/SOCIAL CLIMATE HAVE ON YOUR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE?

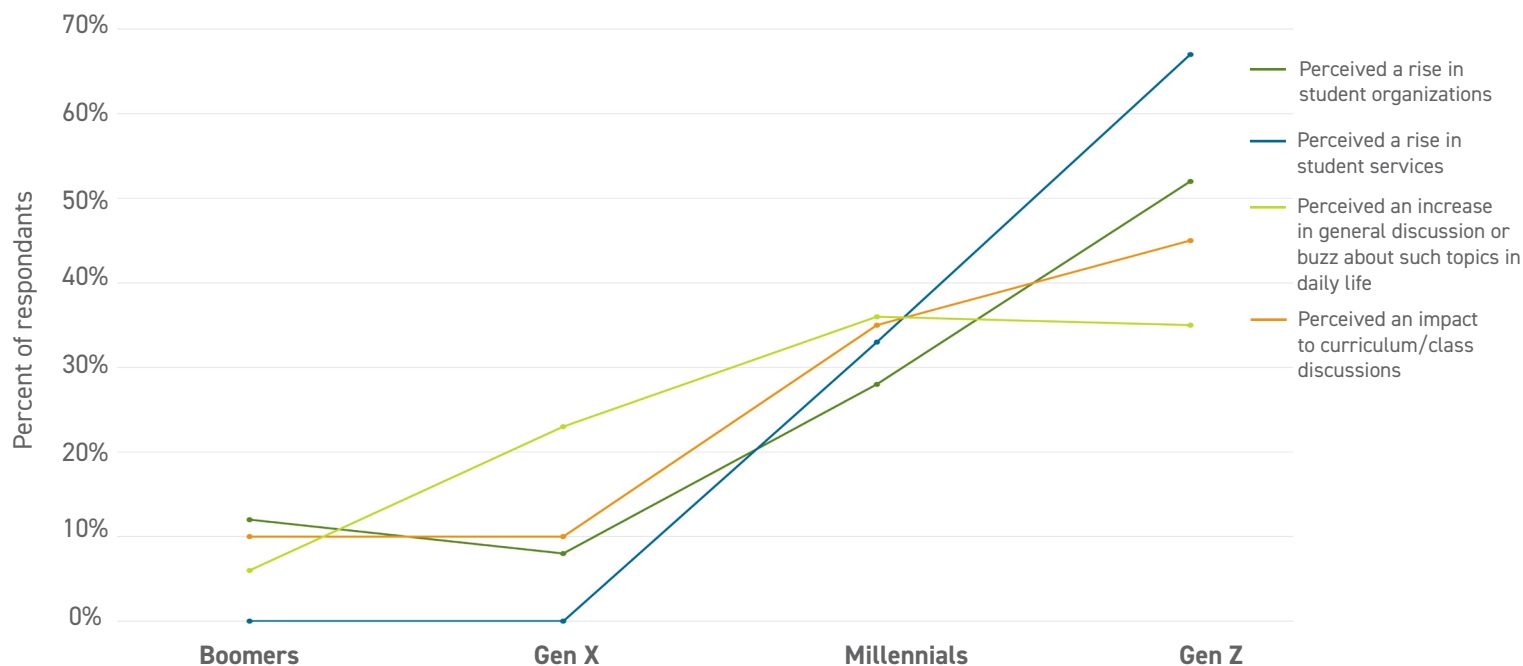


FIGURE 4

WHAT IMPACT DID THAT POLITICAL/SOCIAL CLIMATE HAVE ON YOUR HIGHER EDUCATION EXPERIENCE?

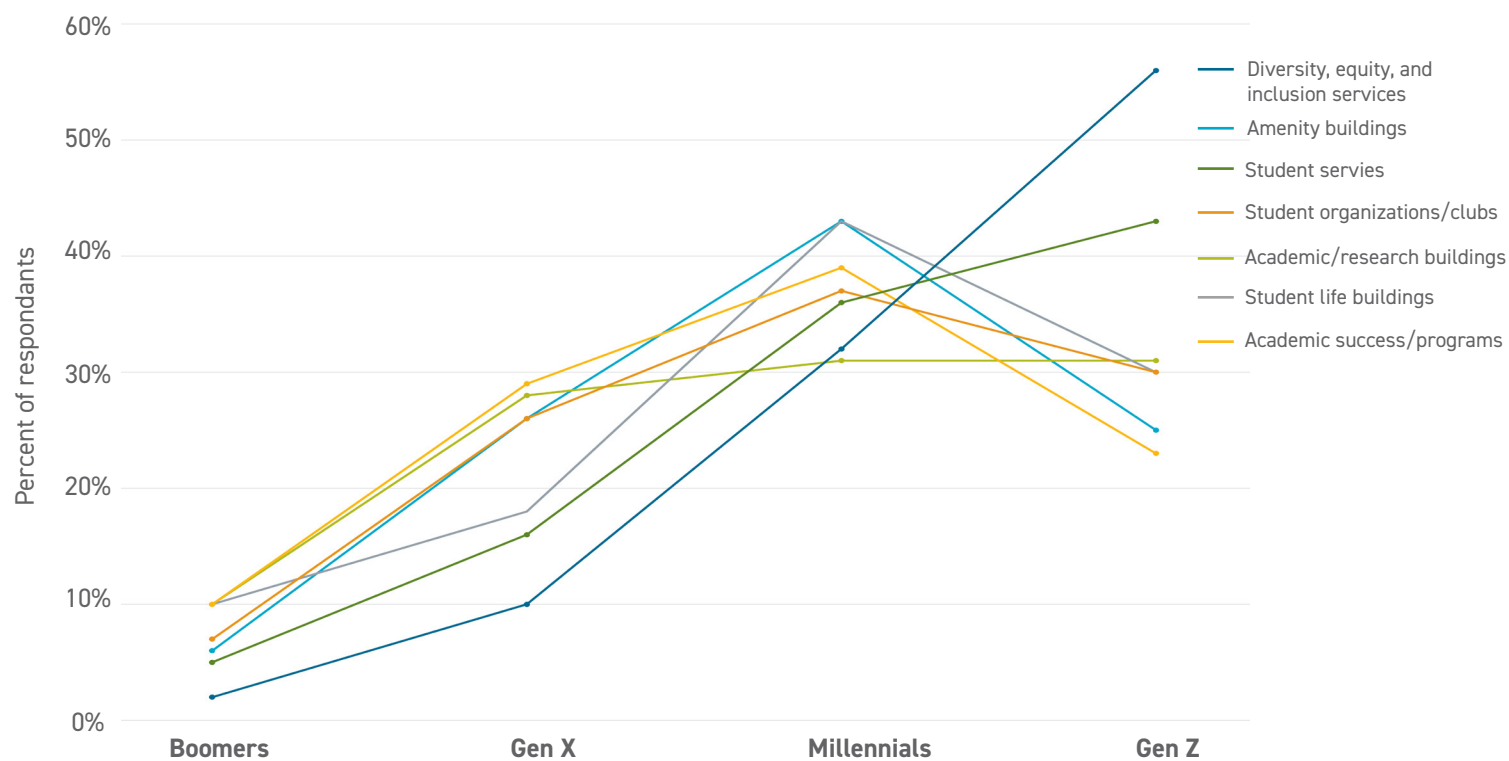


FIGURE 5

3. TECHNOLOGY

Technology has had a steady behavioral impact among respondents for two generations, maintaining an average 40% impact. However, 89% of Generation Z respondents say that technology is overwhelming compared to Millennials' 12%. (Figure 6).

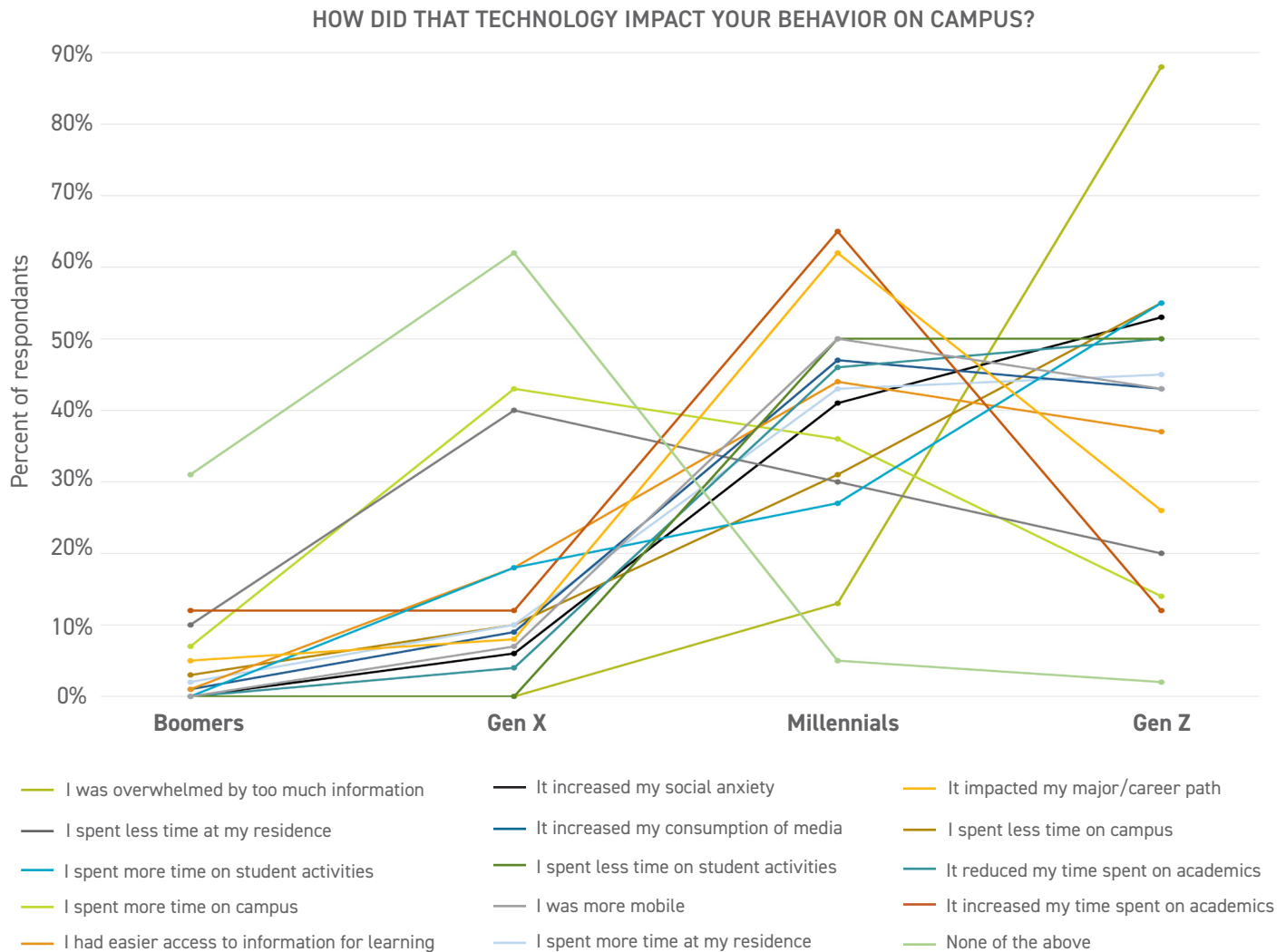


FIGURE 6

IMPLICATIONS FOR DESIGN



Based on our findings, BHDP's research team proposes the following predictions regarding Generation Alpha's key personality traits. For each, we have included design implications to consider in shaping the higher education campus to meet the needs of future students.

GENERATION ALPHA IS "TOGETHER ALONE"

Generation Alpha is predicted to be a more social cohort (compared to Generation Z) that focuses on their unique "tribe" or social circle. Their circles will be tightly knit communities that live, learn, and grow together. While they will not shy away from social gatherings, they are potentially fearful of large gathering spaces due to the health risks and violence this generation has had exposure to (i.e., COVID-19 and violence in public settings). Our research supports Generation Alpha being

classified as "together alone"—wanting to be in groups (together) but in small and distinct subsets from other groups (alone). This is in contrast to Generation Z's "alone together," which is defined as wanting to be by oneself (alone) but in a larger setting where you can see and be seen by peers (together), typically interacting by virtual means.

"Together alone" translates into spaces that promote participation in larger social behaviors and activities while allowing for self-regulation of exposure via smaller groups. Design implications include:



- Due to safety and health concerns, learning and collaboration spaces like the traditional library learning commons should have pockets of smaller spaces with more group study rooms or semi-enclosed areas adjacent to a larger commons space instead of everything within a large, wide-open space. This signifies a potential reversal of the open landscape traditionally used for these spaces.
- Large outdoor quads should be subdivided with outdoor furnishings.
- Instead of large, open cafeteria-style dining halls, smaller subdivided rooms, booths, and seating groups can reduce noise and safety concerns while providing a more intimate, hospitality-like experience.

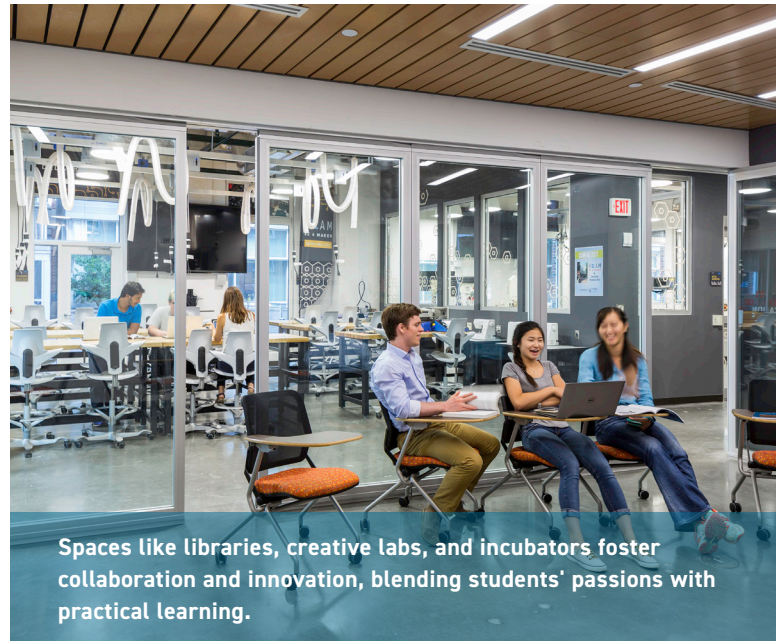


Institutions can offer additional, distinct areas for students to dine in a more intimate setting.

GENERATION ALPHA DESIRES A STUDY-LIFE BALANCE

Generation Alpha's lives will continue to focus on a work-life or study-life balance as their experiences outside the traditional classroom are growing in importance. Academics remain the single most important factor in pursuing higher education. However, its "market share" of importance is decreasing. This decrease can be perceived by the percentage ranking by survey respondents in why they select a particular higher education institution. Academics are still the number one reason, but its percentage margin ahead of other reasons is decreasing. In translating this to space, the emphasis on formal learning spaces is decreasing, and the need for informal study spaces is increasing. Generation Alpha will want to develop interpersonal skills, such as improving their social standing and soft skills through extra-curricular activities. This will begin to affect campuses in several different ways.

- Increased participation in academic and professional organizations, study abroad programs, formal co-ops and internships, and service organizations may not require additional space, but it does underscore the need for these programs to be easily accessible and highlighted in the student experience. They must also integrate seamlessly with the formal academic program to offer a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to learning.
- Spaces that promote collaborative thought and the creation of new ideas, such as libraries, creative labs, and incubator spaces, allow students to blend their interests with the practical application of academic knowledge. Investing in these space types across campus will be beneficial for both attracting and retaining students.
- Students will want to participate more in activities that grow their interpersonal skills. This allows institutions to collaborate with the community and local businesses to expand their campus offerings and provide more trending services to students. For example, institutions could partner with the surrounding community to address the explosive popularity of pickleball. This partnership avoids the need for costly and permanent campus infrastructure changes and leverages the agility of external partners to meet the rapidly changing needs of students.
- As part of Generation Alpha's focus on holistic health, athletic and recreational activities will increase, suggesting that physical fitness spaces should be designed for all body types and skill levels—not just sports teams.



Spaces like libraries, creative labs, and incubators foster collaboration and innovation, blending students' passions with practical learning.

GENERATION ALPHA IS MORE SOCIALLY AWARE

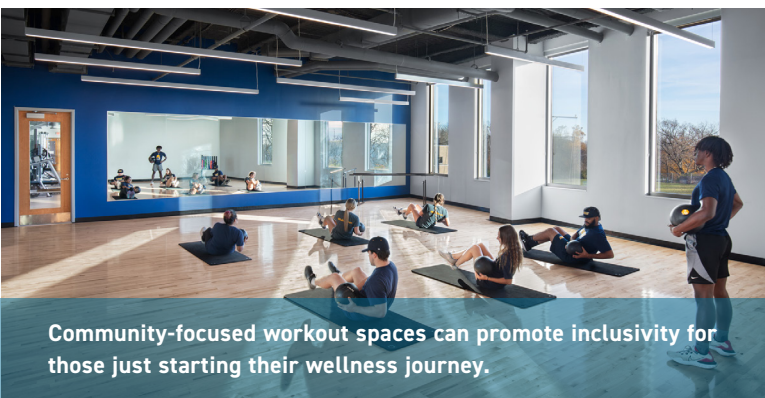
As Generation Alpha grows up in a world increasingly cognizant of DEI, gender issues, LGBTQIA+ rights, and reproductive rights, social justice and equality will become more normalized, with blended cultures and widespread acceptance. For higher education institutions, it will be critical to normalize inclusive student assistance services (like student disability services, financial services, etc.) and provide the infrastructure that reflects and supports the current cultural landscape. On campus, this may mean:

- Blending specialty spaces (e.g., multi-cultural centers, LGBTQIA+ centers) into equitable spaces that are universally accessible.
- Redesigning restroom and bathroom facilities to be inclusive and accessible for all genders and abilities.
- Formalizing safety protocols and building design that balances transparency with the need for safe shelter and privacy.

GENERATION ALPHA DESIRES HOLISTIC WELLNESS AND PERSONAL GROWTH

The “college experience” is one of personal transformation beyond the classroom. Generation Alpha views holistic wellness and personal growth as integral to becoming a well-rounded individual. As Generation Alpha seeks this growth, they will look to institutions to help them along their journey. This may be in the form of structured programs such as life coaching. Colleges that visibly and enthusiastically support an individual’s personal growth will likely attract this generation. These collegiate life coaches should be highly accessible and work with a team of people across the institution’s network to guide a student’s development. This can be encouraged through:

- Student services that offer integrated programs focusing on physical, mental, and emotional health. Recreational centers, mental health clinics, healthcare, and other services become integrated and centralized well-being centers.
- Mental health services provided in a welcoming environment that demonstrate its value to the campus community and aim to lessen associated stigmas.
- Increased food choices for diversified lifestyles. This goes beyond allergy-free and gluten-free options. It can include high-protein diets for weight loss or nutrition supplements, extended meal hours, etc. Students will also desire more food customization or opportunities to grow their own food in community gardens.
- Collaboration between faculty and staff members to create individualized learning plans and experiential learning that extends beyond the classroom. This will require space for students and staff to meet privately or in small groups along with environments that foster collaboration between colleagues to create new learning paths.



Community-focused workout spaces can promote inclusivity for those just starting their wellness journey.

- Enrichment classes that teach practical life applications not taught in typical academic courses. This can include navigating mortgages and health insurance, long-term personal investment strategies, or workplace business etiquette norms.

The student experience extends beyond the campus and its formal functions. Campus relationships with the surrounding community have never been more important. Institutions need to curate how the surrounding community supports a student's spiritual, social, and economic growth.

- Institutions should develop partnerships or agreements with local businesses for work programs, social scene curation, and even the correct balance of entertainment.
- Institutions should consider how relationships developed at off-campus establishments (i.e., bars, clubs, shops) can enhance an individual's life long-term through the bonds formed.



Institutions can enhance textbook learning by integrating real-world practical skills within academic environments.

GENERATION ALPHA DESIRES INDEPENDENT AND COMMUNAL RESIDENCE LIFE

Residence life remains an important and consistent factor for students and their parents when selecting an institution. These spaces should promote self-care and provide students with respite in terms of sleep and a mental break from the day's activities. All residence life activities need a carefully crafted home to enhance each aspect of a student's life. This should be balanced with the tendency for some students to become withdrawn. Students want and need the ability to retreat and be alone when needed but also have a communal space for "together-alone" small group gatherings. Creating forced interactions for basic services helps prevent students from completely withdrawing while respecting their privacy. The future of residence halls likely focuses on the following components, which build upon current evolving trends:

- Single-occupancy resident rooms that provide individual space for retreat and a place for personal care activities. This reduces the number of double occupancy rooms.
- Communal "living room pod" (i.e., suite), which provides small group space.
- Personal care services (i.e., hair salon) that are also a part of individual self-care routines.
- Communal Hall bathrooms that are un-gendered (individual compartments for showers and toilet functions), which provide purposeful community interactions.
- Mental self-care spaces for activities such as hobbies, reading, TV time, etc., which may require various settings and blend into recreational activities.

GENERATION ALPHA VIEWS TECHNOLOGY DIFFERENTLY THAN PREVIOUS GENERATIONS

Last but not least, technology is integral to all the prior predictions. A key part of any generation is its relationship with technology, both emerging and past. Generation Alpha has grown up seamlessly connected across multiple technologies and platforms—so much so that the term “connected” doesn’t mean anything to them as they do not truly know what being disconnected really means. While technology is integral to their lives, the responsible use of technology and its influence on their lives must be curated conscientiously.

For institutions of higher education, a certain baseline level of technology is now the “cost of entry” to being a potential landing spot post-high school. Unlike past generations, this generation is not very focused on the amount of technology offered at various higher education institutions. Technology has reached its pinnacle of importance to participants regarding the volume of technology. However, technology should still evolve and remain up-to-date (upgraded PCs, new laser projection technology utilizing motion-tracking mobile devices switched to HoloLens, etc.). Generation Alpha understands the value of technology but also the cost to their mental health, which they say manifests as anxiety. They will look to institutions to provide seamless and omnipresent technology, but in a way that they can tune out its negative effects.

- Since Generation Alpha is constantly connected, technology will play an outsized element in their experience of places across campus as well as their perceptions of these places, both as potential and matriculated students.
- In light of this, integrating technology into various spaces, such as classrooms, dorms, and social spaces, is critical for enabling students' higher education experience.
- Flexible and adaptable technology that can allow for scaling from individual to small group to large group is essential to daily activities and preparing for future endeavors.
- For Generation Alpha, technology is just expected to function. Technology needs to work seamlessly as students travel about campus. Academic Life activities may take place anywhere, quickly morphing into Student Life activities and then back.



Seamless technology in classrooms enables students to easily collaborate with peers.

CONCLUSION

In preparing for the next incoming wave of students, it will be imperative for institutional leaders to focus on incremental changes that address the key personality traits of Generation Alpha. There are many things that institutions are doing right, most notably academics and technology. How can colleges and universities support these incoming social and societal behaviors of Generation Alpha while addressing students' desire for holistic growth? Institutional leaders can stay ahead of the curve by thinking about how to:

- Support Generation Alpha's "together-alone" tribe mentality.
- Recognize the changing landscape of social justice and equality by providing the necessary physical and supportive infrastructure.
- Enable holistic wellness and personal growth in students as they embark on their transformative journeys.

Higher education institutions can ensure Generation Alpha experiences a vibrant, supportive, and enriching educational journey by making these incremental yet impactful changes. With its unique perspectives and values, this generation will bring renewed energy to campuses, reshaping the future of higher education in profound ways. As we prepare for this next transition, institutional leaders should remain adaptable, forward-thinking, and committed to fostering environments where every student can thrive.



With small changes, higher education institutions can create a vibrant, supportive, and enriching educational journey for Generation Alpha.

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[Beyond Academics: The Importance of Holistic Wellness and Personal Growth in Higher Education](#)

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ABOUT BHDP

BHDP, an award-winning international architectural firm, is recognized for innovative and inspiring solutions in architecture, planning, interior design, experiential graphic design, project management, and strategic consulting. BHDP serves seven markets: Workplace, Higher Education, Industrial, Discovery & Science, Healthcare, Government, and Retail from its offices in Cincinnati and Columbus, OH, and Charlotte and Raleigh, NC. For information, visit www.bhdp.com.