



How Gen Z Approaches Decision-Making

Education and Career

Contents

1.	Background	1
2.	Executive Summary	1
	a. Decision-making journey cycle	
	b. College and career plans and motivations	
	c. Primary influencers	
	d. Self-awareness	
3.	Detailed Findings	3
	a. Gen Z's decision journey cycle	
	b. Gen Z sources and resources for decision making	
	c. Role of influencers	
	d. Teacher involvement	
	e. Gen Z's anxiety at beginning of decision journeys	
	f. Gen Z is making professional and educational decisions	
	g. Gen Z's college and career plans and motivations	
	h. Gen Z knows what they care about but fewer have a concrete plan	
	i. Gen Z wishes they had had more career exploration opportunities	
	j. Gen Z thinks High Schools should encourage students to plan for their futures	
	k. How Gen Z defines success and happiness and influence on career choices	
4.	Implications	8
5.	Works Cited	9



Background and Objectives

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. Beginning in mid-2020 and through April 2021, ASA conducted and commissioned (in collaboration with YPulse and Hanover Research) 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, this 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.

Research Methodology

July 2020: ASA conducted a 10-minute online survey of a nationally representative sample (across region, gender, and race) of 1,000 (weighted) 13-25-year-olds. This research was conducted with YPulse.

November 2020: ASA conducted a 10-minute online survey of a nationally representative sample (across region, gender, and race) of 1,241 13-20-year-olds.

November 2020: ASA conducted an analysis and overview using statistics produced by other organizations and pollsters. This research was conducted with Hanover Research.

January 2021: ASA conducted a 10-minute online survey of a nationally-representative sample (across region, gender, and race) of 1,035 7th-12th grade students.

March 2021: ASA conducted a 10-minute online survey of a nationally representative sample (across region, gender, and race) of 1,022 Gen Z aged 18-25 who had graduated from high school between 2012 and 2018.

April 2021: ASA conducted a 10-minute online survey of a nationally representative sample (across region, gender, and race) of 611 Gen Z aged 13-18.

Executive Summary and Key Findings

Gen Z decision-making journey cycle

(July 2020 research)

Gen Z's decision-making journey cycle encompasses self-reflection, consultation with trusted advisors and personal connections, and online research including the internet and social media. 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.

Gen Z makes professional and educational decisions most often. Gen Z decision timelines vary by choice and demographics.

Gen Z self-awareness, anxiety about uncertainty, connection to social causes, and happiness

(July 2020-January 2021 research)

While members of Gen Z know themselves, they are less certain about knowing what their plan is and about what is realistic to expect from themselves.

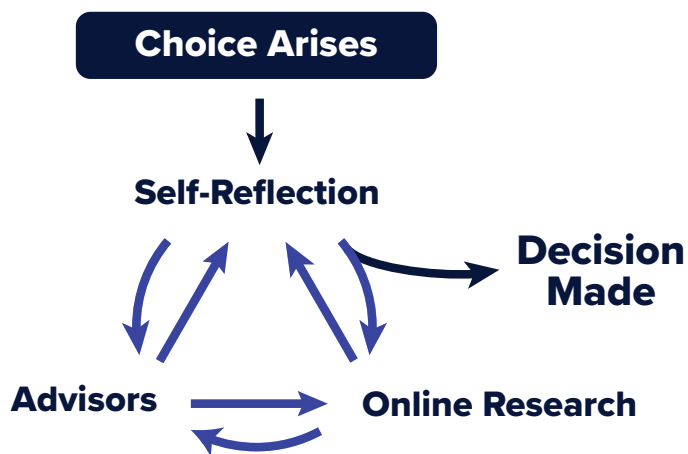
Gen Z is nervous and anxious due to uncertainty and fear of failure. They are experiencing uncertainty about the future due to COVID-19 and in general.

Not unlike previous generations, Gen Z is passionate about social causes and the environment. Their deep connection to social causes can also influence their career choices.

Fifty nine percent say a successful career is one that allows them to help others, and 50% say that the social causes they



Decision-Making Journey Cycle



When asked about a specific decision they made, online resources and specific experts become more prominent. As they describe what sources they use, they move in a circular path that starts with self reflection, bounces between online research (e.g., Google, forums, social media groups) and advisors (e.g., family, friends, and experts) as they weigh their options and goes back to self reflection. At that point, they may return to their sources or they may make their decision.

are passionate about influence their career choices (July 2020 research).

Gen Z's most important goal in life is to be happy, and having financial security is a component of that.

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.

By high school, social media becomes a major source of information about the world, with half of high school students using YouTube to learn about the news.

Gen Z high school students' college and career plans and motivations

(March 2021-April 2021 research)

Gen Z current high school students and graduates agree they would have benefited from more career exploration in middle or high school.

Four-year college is the primary path being considered by the largest number of current high schoolers and was attended by the largest number of high school graduates. This indicates a defaulting toward four-year college.

Current high schoolers and graduates finalized education goals before career goals.



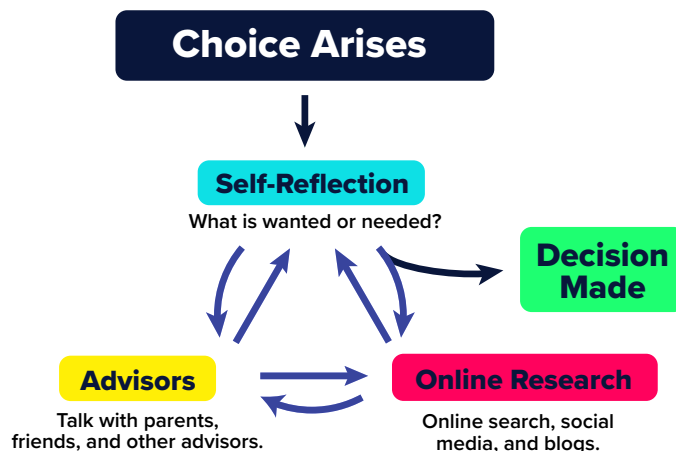
Detailed Findings

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



Gen Z is making professional and educational decisions most of all

(July 2020 research)

Seventy five percent are making professional decisions, 66% are making educational decisions, followed by health decisions at 45%, and relationship and household decisions at 37% and 36%, respectively. Below are examples of the types of decisions:

- **Professional:** Learning a new skill for professional development, changing jobs, applying for a new job/ internship.
- **Educational:** Applying to a 4-year college, pursuing trade/professional certifications, or choosing a major.
- **Health:** Focusing on mental health.
- **Relationship:** Starting/ending a relationship, getting married, having a baby.
- **Household:** Buying a home, moving to a new home, moving out of parents' home

Gen Z knows what they care about, but fewer have a concrete plan

(January 2021 research)

Close to three quarters of Gen Z (71%) either "somewhat" or "strongly" agree that they know what they care about. Just over half (52%) also feel they have a plan for their future. Therefore, while Gen Z feels they know what

Choice Arises	"I had to choose a college and a major before I graduated from high school."
Self Reflection	"I knew I wanted to continue my education, but I didn't know what was available in college."
Advisors	"I talked to my advisor about possible majors and colleges that would interest me."
Online Research	"I looked up on Reddit to see some colleges that STEM majors prefer."
Online Research	"I made a list of universities that would accept me based on my GPA and other statistics. I looked at College Rating sites."
Self Reflection	"I looked at the requirements of each college, organized them by difficulty, and started them months before graduating."
Advisors	"I limited my list of colleges more so that I had maximum of 10 colleges. I talked to my academic advisor and talked to my parents."
Online Research	"I went to the college visits, talked to more professors at UIUC to learn more about the major, went to the UIUC subreddit, looked at people that went to UIUC on Twitter just to learn more about the culture on campus."
Self Reflection	"I applied to these colleges by submitting my application. This helped me focus my decision because my list of colleges would decrease."
Decision Made	"I chose UIUC because they weren't a big financial investment, they had exemplary student benefits, would challenge me as a student, and were rated."



they care about, there is a bit of a disconnect between motivation and plan crystallization.

One of the things Gen Z cares about is meeting the expectations they set for themselves. **Gen Z is prioritizing meeting their expectations for themselves over the expectations of others.** Specifically, 70% of Gen Z says it is more important for them to meet their own expectations even if it's not what their family wants for them, while 67% say the same when the tradeoff is their friends' happiness.

Gen Z's anxiety at the beginning of their decision journeys is due to uncertainty and fear of failure

(July 2020 research)

Gen Z's uncertainty at the beginning of their decision journeys has to do with feeling like they were flying blind—they didn't know what their decisions would lead to or if they were making the right decisions. Fear of failure is more straightforward: their anxiety was the result of feeling like they may not reach their goals. Below are examples of quotes from survey respondents:

- "I was afraid things would go wrong and I wouldn't make it to any of my decisions." Female, 18-21, Northeast
- "I didn't know if I'd succeed." Female, 22-25, West
- "I didn't want to fail." Female, 22-25, Midwest
- "I wanted to apply to a poetry scholarship and put myself out there, but I doubted I was good enough to write because of hateful words." Female, 15 to 17, South
- "I did not know if my decision was right at the time." Female, 18-21, Midwest
- "...I didn't want to choose wrong." Female, 22-25, Midwest
- "I didn't know what I was doing." Female, 22-25, West
- "At the beginning of my decision journey, I felt unsure because I wasn't very confident about the impact of this decision." Male, 15 to 17, Northeast

Gen Z is feeling predominantly negative emotions before making decisions; specifically, over half of Gen Z are feeling anxious (60%), nervous (59%), and overwhelmed (51%) before making decisions, while about a third (36%)

feel scared. Fewer feel confused (29%), frustrated (27%), or dumb (14%).

However, it's also noteworthy that **Gen Z's mental health improves after a decision is made.** For instance,

62% feel relieved, 41% feel excited, and 39% feel confident after a decision is made. With that said, some are still

nervous because they want to have made the right decision, and don't want to have made a mistake or to fail. For example, after making a decision, 27% remain anxious and 28% remain nervous.

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Gen Z's college and career plans and motivations

(November 2020-April 2021 research)

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

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.

Gen Z wishes they had had more career exploration opportunities

(March 2021-April 2021 research)

Around two thirds of current high schoolers (69%) and high school graduates (66%) feel they would have benefitted 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.

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.

How Gen Z defines success and happiness and influence on career choices

(July 2020-November 2020 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.

Over half of Gen Z place happiness in their top three goals, and fully one quarter list happiness as their top goal. The second most popular goal is financial security.

Gen Z notes that doing well in high school, meeting the right people, saving up money, and choosing the right career are very important to achieving their goals.

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

Gen Z tends to equate success with a career they love, and value long term growth.

Relatedly, just over a third of Gen Z surveyed bring an entrepreneurial mindset to their hobbies, with 39% wanting to make money from their hobbies while the remainder prefer to do their hobbies just for fun.

Gen Z sources and resources for decision-making

(July 2020-November 2020 research)

Gen Z uses internet search and social media to make decisions. Gen Z's online research process includes conventional search engines like Google, but also includes social media.

Specifically, 81% of Gen Z turns to some form of media – meaning some form of online research method or social media platform – to help them make decisions.

By high school, social media becomes a major source of information about the world, with half of high school students using YouTube to learn about the news.

As of 2019, 96% of Gen Z have a smartphone which they are actively using. Gen Z looks at their smartphones an average of 16 times/ hour, sending and receiving an average of 78 text/chat messages daily (Ypulse Mobile/App Behavior August 2020). This usage enables them to engage with their



Gen Z turns to resources when they've given a decision thought but are not ready to decide.

peers, influencers, and research opportunities quickly and easily on their own as decisions need to be made.

Gen Z's top resource is parents across all stages of planning a decision. Gen Z was asked who they choose to consult when making decisions

and overall, they turn to parents, friends, and online search.

Gen Z turns to resources when they've given a decision thought but are not ready to decide. Gen Z consults their personal resources – and even the internet – during this early stage of the decision-making process, but not before giving thought to the decision first (meaning they don't go to resources as soon as they know a decision has to be made, but rather after they've given a decision thought but still early in the process).

Thirty two percent of Gen Z consult parents, 29% consult friends, and 33% consult advisors early in the process, meaning after they've given a decision a bit of thought, but are nowhere near ready to make a decision.

Role of Influencers at various phases in the lives of Gen Z and how they affect career choices/paths

(November 2020 research)

As students become more autonomous, parents' influence over their children's behavior, preferences, and values give way to that of teachers, social media, and friends. As high school graduation nears, however, parents' have a large influence on whether students choose to go to college, where they go to college, and what they choose to study.

Parents remain a large influence, and possibly the largest influence, even in high school. **According to a Department of Education Study in which high school seniors identified the largest influence on their career choices, 41% identified "family members," which was second only to "myself."**

Parents are important to helping Gen Z make decisions, but they are less important as they get older. Teachers are the second most important resource for Gen Z in 7th, 8th, and 10th grade; they tie for second with friends in 9th and 11th grade, but friends are most important in 12th grade.

In the early years, when students have only one teacher, teachers are prominent authority figures in their students' lives and are very involved in shaping students' habits, understanding of life outside the home, and basic skills.

(November 2020 research)

Teachers become increasingly more important in middle school. This is when students start to separate from their parents and find some independence with friends and using social media. Then as students enter high school, they see several adults take on more important roles, i.e., guidance counselors, coaches, and then family comes back into the picture.

As with their personal connections, Gen Z consults experts after researching but before deciding, and after a decision is made when they need reassurance, implying that Gen Z invites their advisors into their decision-making process once they have done some self-reflecting and are beginning down a tentative path. This speaks to the importance of their school resources as important adults tied to their education lifecycle.

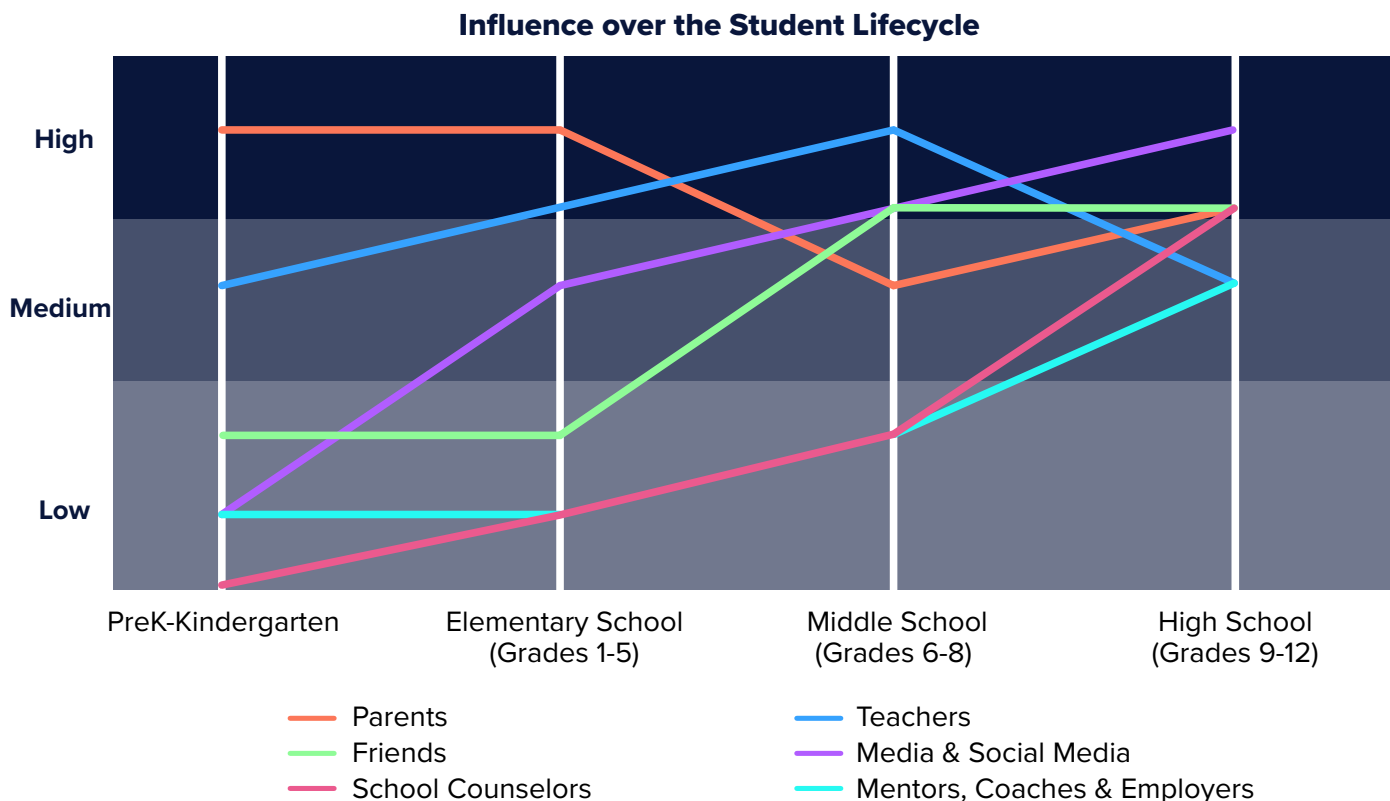
As with their personal connections, Gen Z consults experts after researching but before deciding, and after a decision is made when they need reassurance.

As students start having multiple teachers in middle school, individual teachers' influence wanes, although increasing



Understanding That Influence Is Not Linear

Parents initially exert the strongest influence over students, but their influence wanes after elementary school when students are exposed to other influencers. At the end of high school, parents' influence increases, along with the influence of mentors/employers/coaches, media/social media, school counselors, and friends.



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

faculty specialization could put some teachers in a better position to identify and evaluate students’ skills.

Prior to high school, counselors typically focus on the emotional well-being of a small subset of students. In contrast, high school guidance counselors help students develop high school graduation plans and explore colleges and career options.

The influence of coaches and employers peaks in high school. Federal law prohibits wage labor for children under 14 years old, so employer influence is zero prior to high

school, when approximately one-third of teenagers are part of the workforce.

Although youth participation in team sports declines starting late in elementary years, athletic competition—especially travel leagues—intensifies in teenage years, making coaches a larger influence on their players. Athletic participation in high school is strongly correlated with household income, indicating coaches’ impact may be mostly confined to more affluent students.



Implications

Decision-making 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 & 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 & 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.



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