



ECMC
Group

QUESTION THE QUO

Gen Z Teens Seek to Blaze Their
Own Education Path

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2020, ECMC Group, in partnership with its affiliates ECMC Education and ECMC Foundation, set out to gather insights from Generation Z high school students age 14-18 about how they were viewing their educational path after high school. National data collected through this effort would serve as the cornerstone of a national public awareness campaign that sought to empower students to take the career path that is right for them.

Shortly after fielding an initial survey of high schoolers, the COVID-19 pandemic began, disrupting the lives of these students as well as the world at large. It also created the need to gather additional data to ensure the premise uncovered from ECMC Group's initial survey held true in the new environment.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there was not a significant shift between the initial survey (conducted in February 2020) and the second survey (conducted in May 2020). Students remained confident in their future, intent on forging their own education path and maintained the understanding that postsecondary education provided advantageous benefits for their futures. At that point, 84% believed their job prospects were equal to or better than their parents' generation, and 87% defined success as having a job that matches their passions. At the same

time, more than half were open to something other than a four-year degree, and 70% were determined to follow their own educational path.

As the pandemic wore on and its impacts expanded, ECMC Group chose to survey high school students again in January 2021 after respondents had spent a full year in a "new normal" education environment and in September 2021 when students had returned to the classroom. The findings from the third and fourth surveys were more striking:

- Teens' likelihood of pursuing a four-year degree decreased 23 percentage points between May 2020 and September 2021, down to 48% from 71%.
- Almost one-third of high school students said the pandemic's financial impact made it less likely they will attend a four-year college.
- Nearly one-quarter said they were less likely to enroll in any postsecondary education.
- More than half were still open to something other than a four-year degree and believed they can achieve professional success with education attained in three years or less.

IN THE END, THE FINDINGS POINT TO A SHIFT IN MINDSET:

While the four-year college path has become the "status quo" for many, a majority of today's Gen Z teens are questioning this path and are looking to pursue more affordable education options that connect directly to careers.

GEN Z'S HIGHER EDUCATION OUTLOOK

The likelihood of pursuing a four-year degree for today's teens diminished substantially over an eight-month period, with only slightly more than half of Gen Z teens still considering it.

Percentage of Gen Z Teens Considering a Four-Year Degree

February 2020

65%

May 2020

71%

January 2021

53%

September 2021

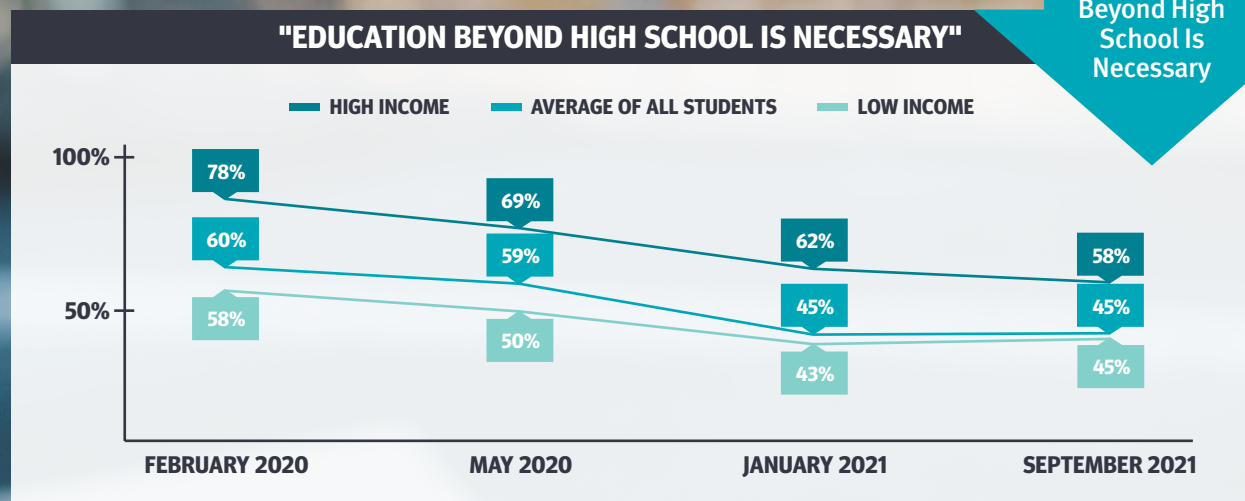
48%

-23%

FROM MAY 2020 TO
SEPTEMBER 2021

Uncertainty Around a Post-High School Education

The Percentage Who Believe Education Beyond High School Is Necessary



86%

FEEL PRESSURE
to pursue a
four-year degree

63%

**WANT MORE
INFORMATION**
on postsecondary
options available.

62%

WANT TO FORGE
their own
educational path.

1/2

**BELIEVE THEY CAN
BE SUCCESSFUL
WITHOUT A
4-YEAR DEGREE.**

HIGH SCHOOLERS WANT DIRECT PATHWAYS TO CAREERS

The Question The Quo survey in September 2021 uncovered that Gen Z teens are very focused on education directly connecting them to a job upon graduation.

A majority (63%) of teens wish their high school provided more information about the variety of postsecondary opportunities available. Most (89%) say higher education needs to make career preparedness changes. Following cost, the points below were the most common recommended changes:

32%

BETTER PREPARE ME FOR MULTIPLE JOB PATHS¹

27%

DIRECTLY CONNECT EDUCATION/FIELD OF STUDY TO A JOB¹

27%

PROVIDE MORE CLARITY ON THE JOBS AVAILABLE AFTER COMPLETING MY PROGRAM¹

26%

PROVIDE MORE ON-THE-JOB (I.E., INTERN/ APPRENTICESHIP) OPPORTUNITIES¹

25%

MAKE DEGREE TYPES AND LEVELS LESS IMPORTANT IN GETTING A JOB¹

62%

HAVE A CAREER IN MIND RIGHT NOW²

¹ Data collected from Survey 3 in January 2021

² Data collected from Survey 4 in September 2021



44%

listed not getting a job in their top three concerns.

40%

believe building connections to a future career is one of the most important parts of the college experience.

40%

listed not being prepared for a job after graduation in their top three concerns.

27%

would change the ability to directly connect education/field of study to a job.

**Connecting
College to
Career**



COST OF COLLEGE A CONCERN AS TEENS LOOK TO THE FUTURE

The number one thing Gen Z teens would change in higher education is the cost.



50%

are most concerned about graduating with a high amount of debt.



64%

say making higher education less expensive is the number one thing they want to change about higher education.



6/10

worry about how they will pay for college.



65%

said the amount of student loans is an important factor in their future education



66%

said the cost of tuition is an important factor



Gen Z Teens Believe Government and Employers Should Play a Role

47% believe the government should provide additional money to pay off student loans.

35% believe the government should subsidize/pay off debt.

39% believe the government should subsidize/pay for college.

38% believe companies should provide formal education.

34% believe companies should provide money to pay off student loans.



CAREER & TECHNICAL EDUCATION MEETS TEENS' NEEDS

Career and technical education (CTE) has gained traction as a viable path for students, but comprehension remains low.

- More than half of students don't understand what CTE is, but most of the career paths they'd like to follow have CTE on-ramps.
- One third of teens would consider attending a CTE school if it were considered as valuable to employers as a four-year degree, if there was a stronger guarantee of a job after graduation or if there was a guarantee that they would develop stronger career skills.
- More than half of teens say their post-high school education should last less than four years, and skills should be taught hands-on in small classes or through on-the-job opportunities.
- Half of students know someone who has enrolled in career and technical education, and of those, 47% say knowing that person has had a positive impact on their opinion of CTE and 44% are more open to following a CTE pathway.
- 57% said they would be more likely to attend a CTE college if it becomes tuition free.



High Schoolers Don't Just Want a Degree, They Want Skills for What's Next



22%

are more likely to attend a career and technical college because of the pandemic—up 10 points from May 2020.



58%

believe a skills-based education (e.g., trade skills, nursing, STEM, etc.) makes sense in today's world.

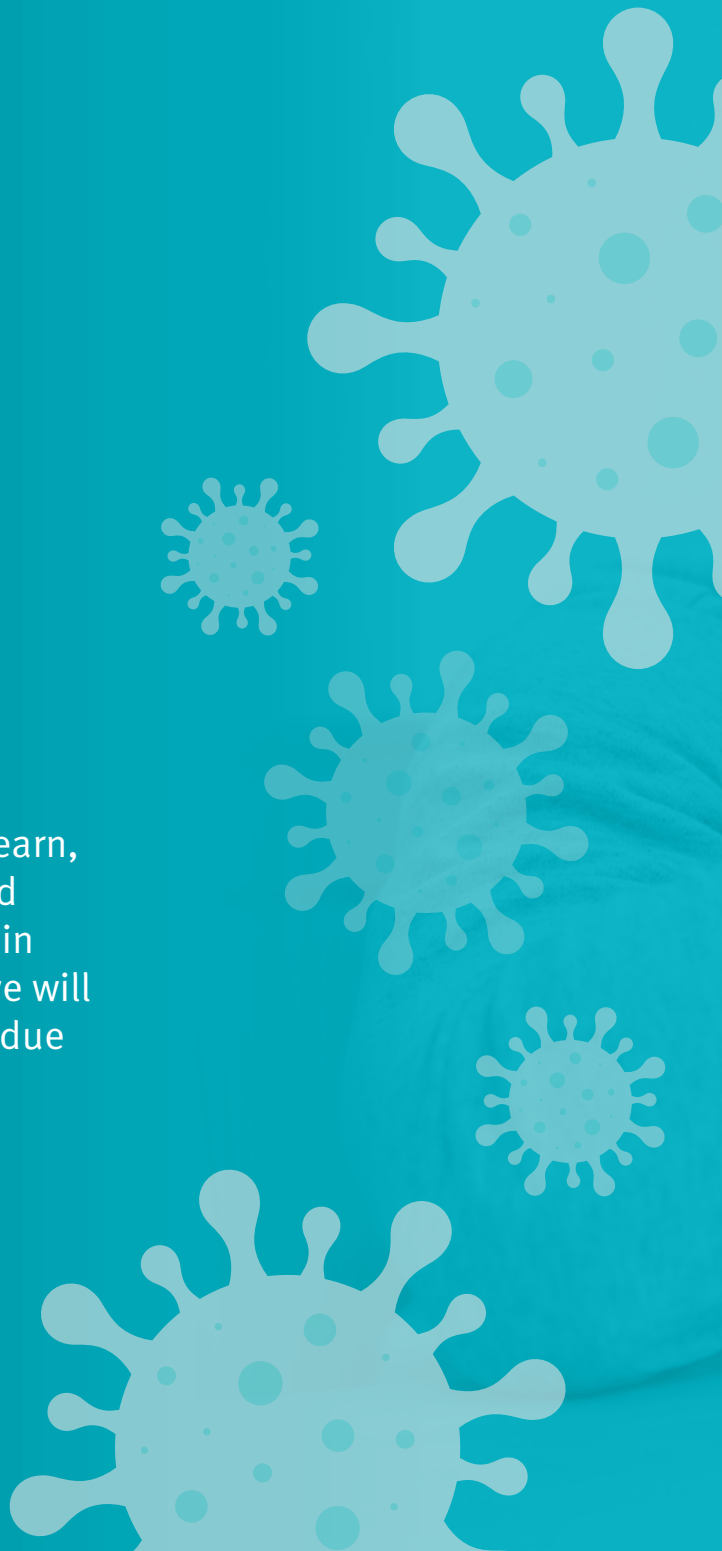


47%

agree that a program they can complete in a shorter period of time (within two years) makes sense.

EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON EDUCATION JOURNEY

When it comes to their future abilities to learn, by the end of 2020 most students believed education will suffer because of less time in the classroom. Half of respondents said we will see increased inequality among students due to lack of access to technology.





58%

of students believe education will suffer because of less time in the classroom.

40%

do not feel adequately prepared for the next grade level.

29%

said the pandemic's financial impact makes it less likely they will attend a four-year college.

24%

said the financial impact will make them less likely to pursue any education beyond high school.

27%

say they have or will change post-high school education plans because of COVID-19.

RECOMMENDATIONS & TAKEAWAYS

Educators, policymakers, employers and stakeholders play an integral role in developing the next generation of workers. Together, we must highlight all of the options available and encourage learners to question the status quo in higher education to make changes for the better of our learners and economy.



PROVIDE INFORMATION

Educators must actively provide information about the variety of postsecondary pathways and highlight the benefits for each.



SUPPORT LEARNERS

Actively disseminate information and resources and connect students with the help they need to understand and pursue their desired path.

Collectively We Should:



PRIORITIZE SKILLS OVER DEGREES

Employers must shift their mindset to better connect the skills learners have gained from their education with their future jobs rather than prioritizing degree attainment.



INVEST IN THE FUTURE

Gen Z has made it clear that they expect employers to have skin in the game, which could involve providing upskilling educational opportunities, tuition reimbursement or assistance.



PROVIDE HOLISTIC SUPPORT

To be successful, students need supports that are not only academic, but that also address their basic needs—food, transportation, mental wellbeing and technology—which has become invaluable in today's remote education environment.



LEGITIMIZE CREDENTIALS

Federal and state-level support for non-four-year pathways can help address Gen Z's desire for more focused, affordable education by expanding government support for these types of programs and improving public awareness of the middle-class careers available to graduates.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

ECMC Group, in partnership with VICE Media, conducted four online national surveys to understand high schoolers' perceptions of higher education, the workforce and the impact of COVID-19 on the learning landscape.

4,255

people ages 14-18
were surveyed across
four waves of research.



	FEBRUARY 2020 Higher Education Application Season			MARCH 2020 End of First School Year With Pandemic			JANUARY 2021 Higher Education Application Season			SEPTEMBER 2021 End of First School Year With Pandemic		
SAMPLE SIZE	1,177 High School Students			1,025 High School Students			1,001 High School Students			1,052 High School Students		
GENDER	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/ NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/ NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/ NA	MALE	FEMALE	NON-BINARY/NA
	49%	49%	2%	49%	49%	2%	48%	48%	4%	46%	46%	7%
RACE/ETHNICITY	WHITE/ CAUCASIAN	BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO	WHITE/ CAUCASIAN	BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO	WHITE/ CAUCASIAN	BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO	WHITE/ CAUCASIAN	BLACK/ AFRICAN AMERICAN	LATINX/ HISPANIC/ LATINO
	62%	18%	15%	50%	16%	23%	47%	28%	20%	50%	30%	16%
	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERICAN/ INDIGENOUS	OTHER	ASIAN	NATIVE AMERIYCAN/ INDIGENOUS	PACIFIC ISLANDER OTHER
	11%	4%	4%	15%	2%	4%	11%	4%	4%	10%	7%	1% 3%
LOCATION	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL	URBAN	SUBURBAN	RURAL
	28%	53%	19%	28%	57%	15%	28%	57%	15%	30%	51%	19%
REGION	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/ WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/ WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/ WEST	NORTHEAST	SOUTH	MIDWEST/ WEST
	29%	33%	38%	33%	31%	36%	31%	31%	38%	32%	32%	36%
SOCIOECONOMIC HOUSEHOLD INCOME/YEAR	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000- \$24,999	\$25,000- \$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000- \$24,999	\$25,000- \$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000- \$24,999	\$25,000- \$49,999	LESS THAN \$10,000	\$10,000- \$24,999	\$25,000-\$49,999
	9%	11%	16%	6%	6%	13%	18%	11%	12%	14%	15%	15%
	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/ DID NOT ANSWER	\$50,000- \$74,999	\$75,000+	DON'T KNOW/DID NOT ANSWER
	13%	24%	27%	11%	24%	40%	9%	15%	35%	9%	18%	29%

ABOUT ECMC GROUP & VICE MEDIA

ECMC Group is a nonprofit corporation focused on helping students succeed by creating, providing and investing in innovative educational opportunities. Headquartered in Minneapolis, ECMC Group and its family of companies are focused on advancing educational opportunities through financial tools and services; nonprofit career education and workforce training; and impactful and mission-aligned funding for innovative programs to help students achieve their academic and professional goals and to address the future of work.

VICE Media is the world's largest independent youth media company. ECMC Group partnered with VICE Media to conduct three nationally representative surveys of high school students as they considered their future paths. The online surveys were administered by VICE Media in February 2020, June 2020, January 2021 and September 2021. The total sample size across four waves of research was 4,255 people ages 14-18 in the U.S.



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VICE

ENCOURAGING TEENS TO QUESTION THE QUO

These surveys were conducted as part of ECMC Group's Question The Quo public awareness campaign, which empowers high school students and beyond to take the postsecondary education path that is right for them. ECMC Group developed the Question The Quo campaign to encourage learners to explore the various education options available and to help them understand there are many ways to achieve education and career success. Grounded in the results of these national surveys, Question The Quo encourages teens to evaluate education beyond high school while considering cost, parental and role model influences, and societal norms.



www.questionthequo.org



www.ecmcgroup.org

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