This report reflects data from five national surveys.
INTRODUCTION
ECMC Group, in partnership with its affiliates ECMC Education and ECMC Foundation, launched the Question The Quo public awareness campaign in 2020 to gather insights from Generation Z high school students about their education and careers and to encourage them to follow the path that is right for them. Grounding the campaign in national survey data, ECMC Group sought to uncover teens’ awareness of their many education options.

ECMC Group began surveying high school students in February 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic, and continued collecting new data as students’ lives and education environments were impacted. In total, ECMC Group has conducted five national Question The Quo Education Pulse surveys: February 2020, May 2020, January 2021, September 2021 and January 2022. Each survey has revealed new and telling findings about how Gen Z is thinking about the future of their education and careers.

Despite having their lives continually changed, Gen Z’s confidence in themselves only dropped slightly from February 2020 to January 2022, although their confidence in the world was and remained considerably lower. Other areas were impacted more significantly. The number of students considering four-year college dropped 20 percentage points, and there was a nearly 10 percentage-point drop in those who believe any education beyond high school is necessary.

Despite these concerning numbers, several key tenets have continued to ring true and were echoed in the most recent data set:

• More than half of teens are open to something other than four-year college and nearly half believe they can achieve success with education attained in three years or less.
• Nearly one-third of teens would prefer their post-high school education to last two years or less.
• Most teens prefer learning hands-on skills either in a lab/classroom or through on-the-job experiences.
• More than three-quarters of teens feel pressure to pursue a four-year degree, despite many being open to other pathways.
• Most teens understand the importance of gaining marketable skills and learning throughout their lifetime.
• Teens have noted the current workforce shortages and many are already adapting their approach to their future career path.

THE FINDINGS POINT TO:
A possible “new normal” for education that requires shorter, less expensive, more direct-to-career pathways in high-demand industries.
The likelihood of teens pursuing a four-year degree has diminished substantially since early 2020, with only about half of Gen Z teens still considering it.

### Gen Z’s Higher Education Outlook

The percentage of Gen Z high school students considering a four-year degree has decreased significantly from February 2020 to January 2022. Here are the key changes:

- **February 2020:** 65%
- **May 2020:** 71%
- **January 2021:** 53%
- **September 2021:** 48%
- **January 2022:** 51%

### Majority of Teens Feel Pressure

- **85%** feel pressured to pursue a four-year degree.
- **62%** want more information on educational options.
- **63%** believe they can be successful without a four-year degree.
- **20 percentage points** decreased from February 2020 to January 2022.

### Education Beyond High School Is Necessary

- **High Income:**
  - February 2020: 75%
  - May 2020: 69%
  - January 2021: 62%
  - September 2021: 50%
  - January 2022: 45%

- **Average of All Students:**
  - February 2020: 69%
  - May 2020: 60%
  - January 2021: 40%
  - September 2021: 38%
  - January 2022: 50%

- **Low Income:**
  - February 2020: 64%
  - May 2020: 59%
  - January 2021: 46%
  - September 2021: 45%
  - January 2022: 50%
The Question The Quo surveys in September 2021 and January 2022 uncovered that Gen Z teens are very focused on education directly connecting them to a job after graduation and gaining skills throughout their lifetime.

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% believe building connections to a future career is one of the most important parts of the college experience.
- 44% listed not getting a job in their top three concerns.
- 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.
- 27% provide more on-the-job (i.e., intern/apprenticeship) opportunities.
- 26% make degree types and levels less important in getting a job.
- 25% provide more clarity on the jobs available after completing my program.
- 27% directly connect education/field of study to a job.
- 32% better prepare me for multiple job paths.

*Data collected from Survey 3 in January 2021*
DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR GEN Z

Today’s high school students are looking to their future education and career paths with a sense of purpose. According to ECMC Group’s January 2022 survey, students put skill growth, career focus, wealth potential and debt into their top decision criteria for what’s next.

“These factors are important in what I decide to do after high school.”
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.

- 91% believe the government should help by...  
  - Provided additional money to pay off student loans
  - Subsidizing/paying for education

- 90% worry about how they will pay for college.
- 90% 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.
- 63% said the amount of student loans is an important factor in their future education.
- 68% said the cost of tuition is an important factor.
- 86% believe businesses should help by...  
  - Providing formal education
  - Providing additional money to pay off student loans
Beyond a desire for education that leads directly to a career, teens are thinking about their path beyond high school with surprising frequency. However, most of them are not aware that the careers they want have on-ramps other than a four-year degree. Many jobs teens are considering have career and technical education (CTE) pathways, but only 20% believe CTE can lead to the career they want, illustrating a disconnect in their knowledge about options other than four-year college connecting to jobs.¹

51% THINK ABOUT THEIR EDUCATION AND CAREER PATHWAY¹
55% OF TEENS HAVE ALREADY BEGUN EXPLORING THEIR CAREER OPTIONS DURING HIGH SCHOOL¹
1/3 OF TEENS ARE MORE LIKELY TO PURSUE AN EDUCATION OR CAREER IN AN IMPACTED INDUSTRY¹
39% HAVE TAKEN CLASSES OR PARTICIPATED IN PROGRAMS TO EXPLORE CAREERS¹
74% SAY IT’S IMPORTANT TO HAVE A CAREER IN MIND BEFORE THEY GRADUATE FROM HIGH SCHOOL¹
75% HAVE HEARD ABOUT CURRENT WORKER SHORTAGES¹

¹ Question The Quo Education Pulse Survey in January 2022

60% of Teens Have Careers in Mind¹

¹ Based on more than 600 responses from survey participants
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.

• Nearly 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 CTE, 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.

22% are more likely to attend a career and technical college because of the pandemic—up 10 points from May 2020.

56% believe a skills-based education (e.g., trade skills, nursing, STEM, etc.) makes sense in today’s world.
EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON TEENS’ EDUCATION JOURNEY

When it comes to their future abilities to learn, most students believe education will suffer because of less time in the classroom.

- 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.

HOWEVER:

Because of the pandemic, nearly one-third of teens say they feel more comfortable following a path other than four-year college.
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 postsecondary education to make changes for the betterment of our learners and economy.

Collectively We Should:

- **Provide Information**
  - Educators must work to understand pathways other than four-year college and actively provide information to students about their many options, highlighting the benefits of each. The education industry and stakeholders must work together to make this information available to educators and counselors.

- **Prioritize Skills Over Degrees**
  - In an age where four-year degrees have become the status quo, employers must focus on skills rather than degrees, connecting the competencies learners have gained from their education to their future jobs. Businesses also should work directly with education institutions to develop effective curricula.

- **Invest in the Future**
  - The next generation of workers has made it clear that they expect involvement from employers in their future careers. Employers should consider providing upskilling opportunities, training or education cost reimbursement or assistance with the cost to gain new skills.

- **Legitize 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-skill careers available to graduates.

- **Support Learners**
  - Provide affirmation for students who are considering a variety of postsecondary education pathways, and actively disseminate information and resources while connecting students to the help they need to understand and pursue their desired path.

- **Provide Holistic Support**
  - Student success goes beyond the classroom, and learners need supports that address their basic needs, from food and transportation to mental wellbeing and technology—especially given the digital nature of today’s education and workforce.
ECMC Group, in partnership with VICE Media, conducted five online national surveys to understand high schoolers' perceptions of postsecondary education, the workforce and the impact of COVID-19 on the learning landscape.

**SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

5,317 people ages 14-18 were surveyed across five waves of research.
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 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 five national surveys of high school students as they considered their future paths. The online surveys were administered by VICE Media in February 2020, May 2020, January 2021, September 2021 and January 2022. The total sample size across five waves of research was 5,317 people ages 14-18 in the U.S.

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.