

Generations of Learners:

Understanding How to Market and Recruit All the Generations

July 23, 2025 9:45-10:45 EST

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Today's Expert



- Dr. Andrea Carroll-Glover brings nearly 30 years of experience serving in higher education leadership, education technology, and business roles. As vice president and senior consultant, Andrea advises RNL partners on how to solve their biggest challenges by leveraging market insights and data-informed industry best practices to shape sustainable institutional strategies and practices. Expertise in Higher Education leadership, [Enrollment Management](#), [Fundraising](#), [Graduate & Online Education](#), Operations, Market Research, and Academic Program innovation.

Session Overview

The online student audience has shifted from primarily GenX/Millennial to Millennial/GenZ, though over 20% are still GenX.

Nearly half of today's online students are Millennials, and nearly a third are GenZ.

The Key question: How can your marketing, messaging, and recruitment tactics reach and engage the widest possible audience?

RNL conducted a national study of over 1,500 prospective and enrolled online students, analyzing generational differences. This session will:

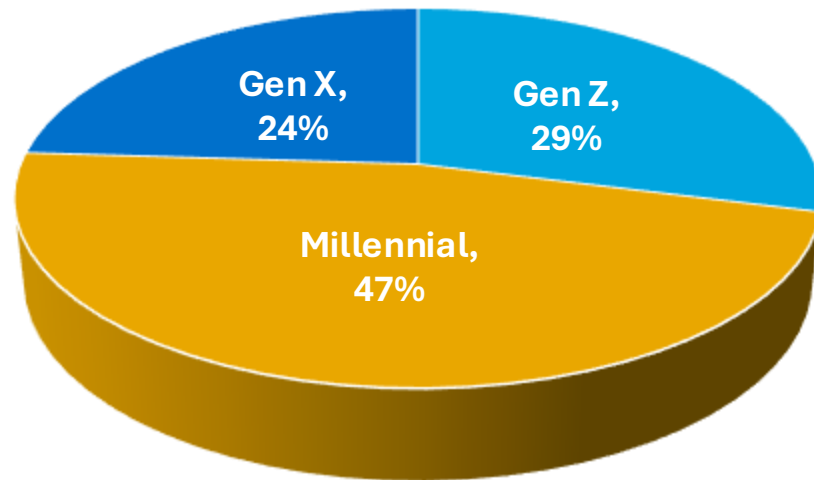
- Explore how generational expectations and preferences diverge and converge.
- Review data-driven insights on Millennial, GenZ, and GenX online students.
- Identify strategies to optimize marketing, recruitment, and retention for an age-diverse audience.
- Develop actionable steps to better serve today's online learners across generations.

The generations we are serving have shifted.

Do you know how their expectations and preferences have changed... or not changed?

The online education market has seen a shift from being dominated by a “Gen X/Millennial” audience to one that is now predominantly a “Millennial/Gen Z” audience.

Online Students by Generation



Similarities and Differences Across Generations

Ensuring that marketing, messaging, and programming connect with the right students and align with their expectations and preferences is essential to an online program growth strategy.

Why? Because there are too many options available today for an online student to “settle” for a program that does not resonate with their point of view or align with their needs (at the graduate level, on average, 320 new online programs* are being launched each year.)

Target personas for each online program are critical.

However, there are some ‘universals’ that are made clear in this generational analysis that can applied broadly to strategies. Two the most important consistencies across the three generations are:

Similarities and Differences Across Generations

Both Convergence and Divergence

- **Decision Making Priorities:** Online students of all generations prefer to enroll close to home but will opt for a more distant program if they can't find a program that meets their needs nearby. Across all three generations, they prioritize affordability, future job prospects, and convenience over reputation of the institution or location of the institution.
- **Primary Motivations:** Online students of all three generations are driven to enroll and complete their studies for career-related reasons. In fact, the largest proportions of all three generations are motivated to do so in order to advance their current career, while they differ in terms of what the next most likely motivations are (e.g.: Gen X to change careers and Gen Z to prep for their first career).

7. Decision making priorities

Finding

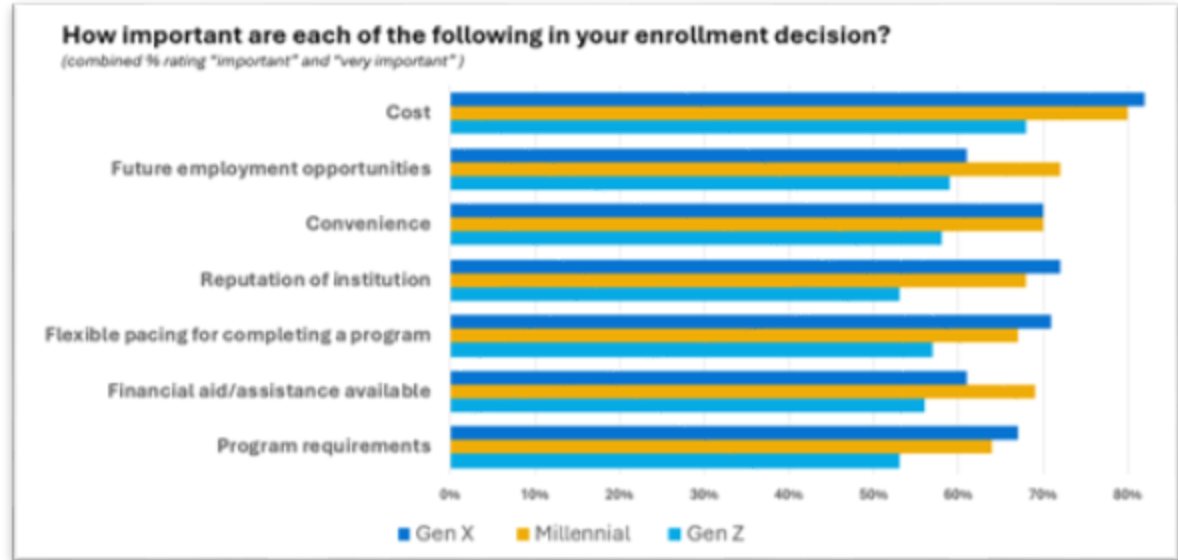
Online students of all ages most frequently cite cost of attendance as a factor in their enrollment decision, but other factors vary widely by generation.

Implication

Millennial decision-making priorities align more consistently with Gen X than with Gen Z. They are also considerably more concerned with future employment opportunities, which may reflect their documented concern about accumulated student debt.

Action

As online programs develop their messaging, affordability should lead, followed by documented employment potential, and then convenience indicators.



3. Motivation for Enrolling

Finding

Online students of all ages most frequently enroll to advance their careers, but other motivations are cited by considerable proportions of the various generations.



Implication

Gen Z are considerably more likely to enroll to prepare for a first career, while more Gen X and Millennials do so to change careers underscoring the importance of customizing outreach to meet the goals of each group.

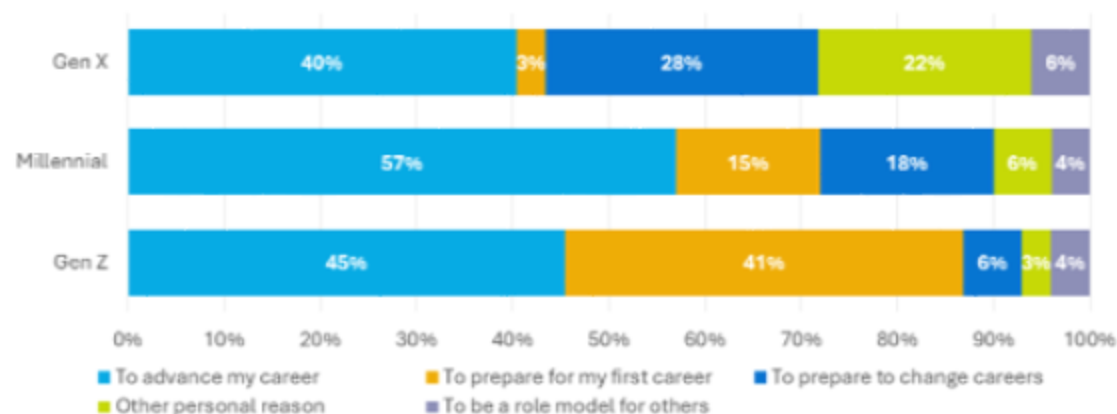


Action

Promotional and positioning language should lead with career preparation messaging, and curriculum should include skills prep, job simulations, and career planning content.



What was your primary motivation to earn a degree?



Similarities Across Generations



They all have come to expect a **timely response** within three hours – with not more than two percent differentiation among the generations.



They all agree that a slower than expected response signifies that **they are not important** to the program – with no more than a two percent difference.



They all have come to prefer being communicated with on **weekday mornings** – and afternoons. Pandemic era changes to work may have had a permanent impact.



They are uniform in expecting that their online coursework will include **career preparatory content** and activities.



They all agree that the **quality of their online program** was at least as good – if not better than – past classroom experiences.

Differences Across Generations



Gen X differs considerably in their general **use of AI** and the use of an AI-driven platform in their search – but among those who did use one, they were consistent with the other generations in their satisfaction.



The generations differ considerably in regard to their **primary concerns** with enrolling in online study.



Gen Z differs considerably in the **most important factors** in their enrollment decision making, while Millennials align with Gen X.



The three generations differ considerably on the **advertising that made the biggest impact** on their awareness of online programs, albeit with all three generations leading with search engines.

What Should I Do Now?

Recruitment...Here are a few things

- **Review your drip campaigns**

- Order of information
- Is there a way to segment out at app level by generation and message accordingly?
- Timing – are messages going out immediately after initial inquiry and is there personalized follow-up after the initial message

- **Website**

- Audit to ensure that areas that are of concern for students are addressed **and** *easy to find* on the website
- If you are driving traffic to your website via great SEO and digital advertising, is the RFI front and center (again, easy to find)

- **Training**

- Are you training your front-line staff and faculty so that they understand these differences when they are actively recruiting (on the road, in a 1-1 advisement situation, on the phone, etc.)

What Should I Do Now?

Marketing...Here are a few things

- **Traditional Marketing Messaging**

- Don't try to be everything to everyone all at once.
- Build your messaging based on your target audience's and persona's objectives/desires.
 - Undergrad Ex: Wow Factor, Cost, Student Life, Differentiators
- Adjust your narrative to fit your channel/medium.

- **Digital Advertising**

- This is a powerful tool for reaching your audience. However, this tactic can be costly, and each channel has a specific purpose and tactic. Don't try to be everything to everyone at once.
- Remember, your brand has the most impact with those who already know you. Don't go chasing waterfalls! Focus on nurturing the relationships you've already built.

- **SEO**

- Both traditional and digital advertising drive search, so it's crucial to keep SEO in mind at all times.
- Target both the content and technical structure of your site to ensure the best optimizations.

6. Distance from home

Finding

Online students of all ages are more likely than ever to want to enroll in programs close to home, however, older students are more likely to consider programs far away.



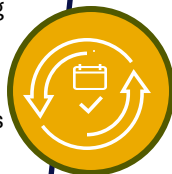
Implication

Millennial, and even more so Gen Z, students expect their local institutions to offer fully online programs. Gen X students, based on past experiences, are less likely to have this expectation.



Action

As online programs plan their marketing and positioning, they should focus on serving students in their communities, rather than a national audience – unless they offer a truly unique program with national draw.



9. Most memorable early information source

Finding

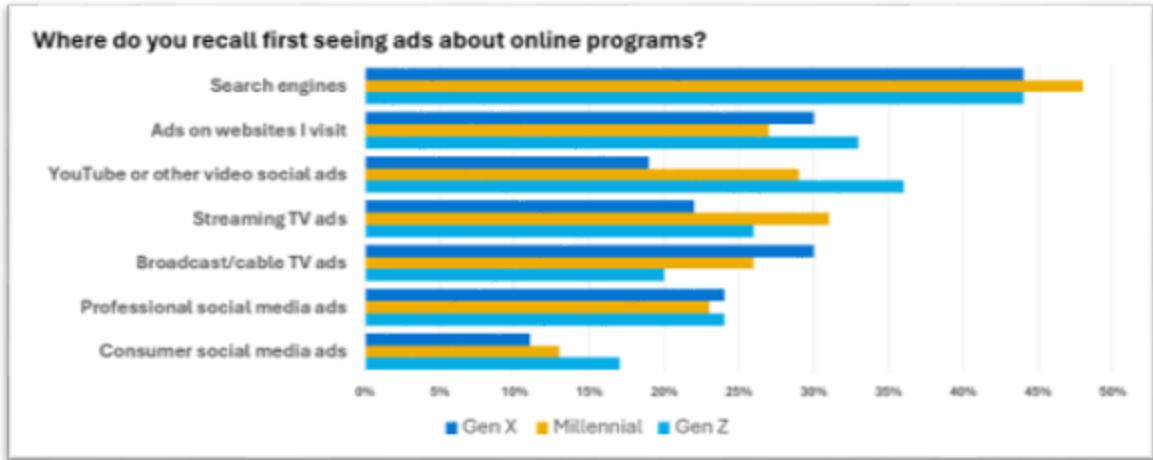
Online students of all ages indicate ads on search engines were the most memorable early information source. This aligns with the fact that 92 percent indicate that they did an online search as either their first or second step.

Implication

With the relative uniformity of search engines, website ads, and professional social media across the generations, these tactics can be used with maximum positive impact.

Action

Online programs should deploy tactics like YouTube ads, streaming TV, and even consumer social media strategically and aligned with the persona(s) for a given program.



10. Timing of response

Finding

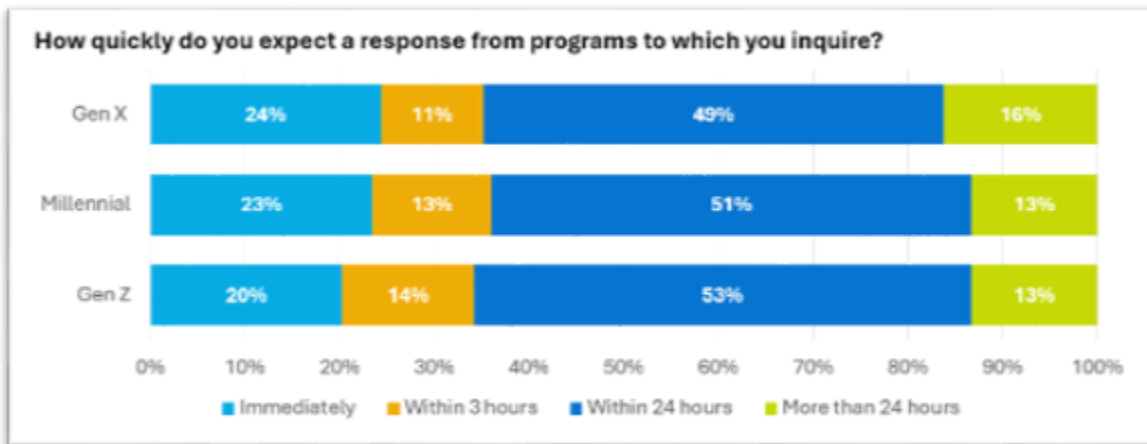
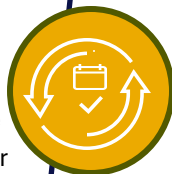
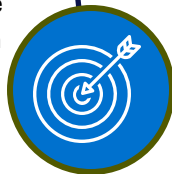
There is virtually no difference among the generations in the expectation of a speedy response – within minutes or hours rather than days.

Implication

These findings dispel the notion that the demand for a speedy response is driven by only the youngest online students and strengthen the case of the critical importance of timely response in enrollment success.

Action

Given the uniformity of expectations—and the dominance of Millennials and Gen Z—online programs must invest in the recruitment team to ensure they are capable of responding within minutes or hours.



Questions?
Thank You



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Keep the Conversation Going



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The 39th Annual National Higher Education Conference